

The Monthly

Stretton's Shriek



Arthur Streeton, Cremorne Pastoral, 1895, oil on canvas, 91.5 cm x 137.2 cm. © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased 1895

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Alarming revelations about the great Australian painter

Arthur Streeton had many reasons to look back on his first decade as an artist with particular nostalgia. While living first in Melbourne and then Sydney, before sailing for England in 1897, Streeton painted such great pictures as *Golden Summer*, *Eaglemont* and *Fire's On*. He enjoyed intense camaraderie with other artists – especially Tom Roberts, Fred McCubbin and Charles Conder – which he never found again. He “had quite a little in the way of love affairs”, as he boasted to Roberts, though his familiarity with Conder’s experience of venereal disease and “painful recollection of his suffering” left him wary of sex. He prided himself on how, by sending a letter of protest to the press, he played a pivotal role in stopping a coalmine under Sydney Harbour.

Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Streeton recalled how, one day, at Bradleys Head, where the mining company had acquired a site to establish its colliery, “thousands of gum trees had been cut down”. So incensed was Streeton by this “shocking sight”, and the prospect that “all the loveliness of the harbour just inside the Heads was likely to become obliterated by a mass of coaling hulks and machinery”, that he sent a “rapidly written protest” to a Sydney newspaper. As Streeton remembered it, this letter – immediately dubbed “Streeton’s shriek” – aroused such “interest and alarm” that “people woke up and the infamous project came to an end”.

When I first wrote about this episode 20 years ago as part of my book *The Colonial Earth*, I looked for Streeton's letter – eager to discover what he actually wrote, rather than remembered. His later accounts suggested he had written this letter in 1895 when the controversy over the mine was intense. But that left me with a big field to search because Sydney was then blessed with more than half-a-dozen daily newspapers. To read them, I sometimes gained access to the original hard copies in big, bound, unwieldy volumes. More usually, I used microfilm that required repeated focusing to read just one page. While I searched again and again, I could not find “Streeton's shriek”.

This letter is now simple to locate due to the National Library's digitisation of most 19th-century Australian newspapers and creation of that spectacular search engine Trove. Prompted by the Art Gallery of New South Wales's current retrospective, the first major Streeton exhibition in almost 25 years – and having written for its catalogue about the artist's environmental concerns in the last 20 years of his life – I entered “Arthur Streeton”, “coal” and “Sydney” in Trove and there it was, third from the top. What hours of searching in the 1990s had failed to discover, a minute or two revealed: a letter headed “Picturesque Sydney and the Coal Bore”, signed Arthur Streeton, in *Sydney's Daily Telegraph*, published not in 1895 but in 1893 when the mine first provoked debate.

Curious about what else Streeton might have contributed to the press around this time, I tried other searches on Trove and found another letter by Streeton, from December 1895: about rural hawkers who included some usually identified as “Indian”, which generally meant Punjabi, and many more identified as “Syrian” or “Assyrian”, from what was then the Ottoman province of Syria, now Lebanon. As part of the larger racism of white Australia, the visits of these men to houses where women of British or Irish origin were often home alone engendered intense fear and scaremongering. Streeton's letter – undiscovered until now, despite the vast Streeton literature – reveals him to have been at the extreme end of prejudice.

Whereas Streeton's environmental concerns enhance his contemporary relevance and attractiveness, his letter about the hawkers is repugnant. Replete with racist epithets, written as if such language was a regular part of his vocabulary, it is a striking instance of how an enlightened concern for the environment has not always been paired with an enlightened attitude to other peoples; in fact, the converse has sometimes been and remains the case. Streeton, who was the first Australian artist to exercise his aesthetic authority when opposing a major resource development, wrote of the hawkers: “An effective way of dealing with the unclean devils would be to shoot them down like dogs wherever they are sufficiently offensive.”

A coalmine was already a possibility in 1892 when Streeton began living under canvas at the artists' camp at Little Sirius Cove on Sydney Harbour, dubbed the “Curlew Camp”. Eager to facilitate mining, the New South Wales government had provided a diamond drill – the best, most expensive technology – to search for coal under the harbour. A first bore from Cremorne failed to find valuable coal, but a second struck a good seam, more than 3 metres thick, at a depth of almost 1000 metres between Mosman and Neutral Bay.

When this news was announced in November 1893, *The Sydney Morning Herald* was among many enthusiasts, welcoming the prospect of Sydney becoming the only metropolis “in the whole world ... with a coal mine in operation, virtually within its town boundaries”. Others, led by the barrister A.B. Piddington, were horrified. In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph* written from his chambers in Sydney’s Phillip Street, Piddington warned that the mine would blight not just the harbour’s north shore but also its eastern and southern suburbs. More than that, he argued that Sydneysiders had a duty to look beyond their immediate interests as “the trustees for all Australia and for all time of that national heritage of beauty which gives to us pride of place amongst the capitals of this continent and endows these places with a reflected glory amongst the people of all nations who visit us”.

Streeton, who was in Melbourne when the mine first became a public issue, had a personal reason to join this debate on returning to Sydney. The mine would blacken the Curlew Camp and strip the adjoining reaches of the harbour of the magic that Streeton both captured in his paintings and evoked in letters to friends: the bay “all asleep and so very peaceful” with “picnic parties pulling about quietly through the rare phosphorescence”. In December 1893, he followed Piddington in writing to *The Daily Telegraph* about the mine but, contrary to his later accounts, this letter was a careful, considered piece, not a “shriek”.

Streeton argued that the harbour’s “varied beauty and attraction, belonging by right to the public”, formed “a great natural recreation and luxurious rest after the toil of the week”, making the lives of Sydneysiders “fuller and richer”. He declared it a “great sacrifice” if “charming Cremorne” were transformed into a “dismal eyesore”. He deplored “the triumph of money-getting over man’s feeling for beauty”, while questioning the mine’s economic rationale when coal from Newcastle was “plentiful and cheap to everyone”. Always given to quoting poetry, he invoked Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*:

Who buys a minute’s mirth to wail a week?
Or sells eternity to get a toy?
For one sweet grape who will the vine destroy?

That was not all. Confident of his aesthetic judgement not only when it came to art but also urban planning, Streeton lamented the government’s failure to provide adequate public space around Sydney’s newly completed General Post Office. Most likely, with his own experience of the city centre in mind – having shared a studio at the corner of Pitt and Hunter streets from 1892 with Tom Roberts – Streeton argued that the government should have created opportunities for outdoor eating so that Sydneysiders wishing to meet and talk would be freed from having to “enter the nearest hotel”. He thought the GPO should have been fronted by “a fine broad square, in the centre a well-designed café, low-roofed with bright-coloured awnings, wide-spreading trees, creepers, and vines, with lilies and staghorns flourishing all around a beautiful fountain”.

Three days later came a reply, as often, then as now, arguing that mining should trump everything. This anonymous correspondent was “sure” Streeton “must see” that, at a time of economic depression, with “hundreds of workless and almost starving men” in Sydney, the discovery of coal was “a veritable god-send” to the city. While acknowledging that “a squat and unsightly mining village” would replace the “delightful pleasure resort” at Cremorne, he declared such “desecration” inevitable. In

conclusion, he advised Streeton, “as one who admires his work, to stick to it, and not to give vent to utterly futile wails over a thing that must be done”.

“Utterly futile” such aesthetic arguments were not. A judgement of the NSW Land Appeal Court – one of the great environmental decisions reached by any Australian court – was pivotal in causing the company to abandon its mine near Little Sirius Cove (but not stopping the company altogether, as it later gained approval to proceed at Balmain). In recommending against the mine late in 1895, the court found that the beauty of the harbour was beyond monetary value. “No consideration in the nature of rent,” it declared, “could afford any compensation or consolation for the disfigurement of a harbour” that all Australians had “been taught to cherish as one of nature’s choicest masterpieces”.

Streeton’s biggest painting that year was *Cremorne Pastoral*, a view from Cremorne looking across the harbour to Rose Bay. When I discussed it in *The Colonial Earth* – and assumed from Streeton’s recollections that he had only joined the debate about the coalmine late in 1895 – I wrote as if he had painted *Cremorne Pastoral* devoid of any concern about what coalmining might do to his subject. The discovery that he had protested against the mine already in 1893 changes that, so *Cremorne Pastoral* can now be viewed as the first major Australian picture painted to celebrate a place at risk and, perhaps, contribute to its preservation.

When Streeton exhibited *Cremorne Pastoral* in September 1895, one critic recognised with good reason that it was “not as brilliant as some that Mr Streeton has flashed upon us in years past”, but still judged it “perhaps the best landscape ever painted in New South Wales” because of its “tenderness and strength and breadth of treatment in the most conspicuous degree”. Another critic recognised that *Cremorne Pastoral* should be understood in the light of the proposed mine, declaring that, were it to proceed at Cremorne, future generations would have to thank Streeton for preserving “a fair representation of the place as it existed before the invasion of the colliers”. The Art Gallery of NSW bought it immediately.

When Streeton wrote again to *The Daily Telegraph* that December, his standing in Sydney was greater than ever, as the Australian artist best represented in the Art Gallery of NSW, with three major paintings: *Still Glides the Stream*, *Fire’s On* and *Cremorne Pastoral*. Such was Streeton’s status that even his plans to visit Richmond on the Hawkesbury River were news. In the wake of “Banjo” Paterson establishing himself as Australia’s foremost bush balladist with the publication that October of *The Man from Snowy River*, one critic immediately paired Paterson and Streeton on account of their “luminous” rendering of the bush.

Streeton’s letter about hawkers was a result of encountering – or just hearing about the recent experience of – a young white woman living with two other white women but “no man about” on the Great Western Road to Bathurst. The young woman was all the more vulnerable because she was “recovering from rheumatic fever”. As recounted by Streeton, she opened her front door to find two “Assyrian or Indian” hawkers – with one “colored blackguard” immediately before her, and another “wretch of his color at the gate”. When the one at the door “instantly jambed his basket of rubbish”, the young woman got her bulldog from the yard without releasing it. “Like a woman,” Streeton

wrote, with more than usual sexism, she “stupidly held the willing defender, while the hawker fled with a ham and ... the convalescent retired and suffered violent hysterics and weeping”.

Streeton wrote this letter when there was widespread concern among European colonists about “foreign” hawkers, whom Europeans often lumped together. While the Syrians were predominantly Christian and their adoption of “English style” clothes meant that other colonists could “not always tell a Syrian from a European”, the Syrians excited particular antipathy as they arrived in Australia in small but increasing numbers in the 1890s. Their main destination was Sydney, especially Redfern, where some established shops and warehouses, and employed others as hawkers of haberdashery and other “fancy goods”. Their work was often lonely and sometimes dangerous, as they usually camped out and episodically got lost in the bush, encountered bushfires and floods, and were attacked by settlers. But they excited enmity for reasons both racist and economic as, by bringing their goods to the doors of customers, they took trade away from European shopkeepers.

Politicians were at the forefront of lambasting the new arrivals. As three Australian colonies enacted legislation introducing dictation tests to restrict immigration – a key feature of the White Australia Policy implemented by the new Commonwealth in 1901 – the NSW premier, George Dibbs, declared that “Syrians were not a desirable class of colonist” and he “would be very glad to keep them out of the country”. A delegation led by six members of parliament branded Syrian hawkers “a constant menace to the women in the country upon whom they called”. Sydney’s newspapers carried one article after another about the “Syrian nuisance” and “Syrian invasion”.

Several Sydney magistrates expressed similar antipathy when hawkers appeared before them seeking the licences they needed to trade lawfully. While the licensing legislation provided no basis for taking account of the applicant’s race, these magistrates explicitly did so – confident, as one contemporary critic observed, that “the Syrian hawker is not very likely to appeal to the Supreme Court”. One magistrate described the Syrians as “a lot of locusts in the country”. Another declared: “Our own people are starving – at least, many of them – and these people are brought in to enter into competition with them. Why, it’s monstrous.” A third maintained that “as a class they were the lowest type of humanity” who “terrorised and threatened unprotected women”. In granting 16 licences to British subjects and refusing 100 applications by Syrians, he called on other magistrates to join his attempt to “crush” the Syrian hawkers “out of existence”.

They did not. When the hawkers opted to reapply for licences rather than seek redress in a higher court, a specially convened bench of six magistrates with “large” metropolitan and rural experience declared they had “no knowledge” of Syrian hawkers intimidating European women. Rather, the Syrians had “the reputation of being more law-abiding and less trouble” to the colonial police “than Europeans of the same social standing”. The magistrates duly decided, as the legislation required, that “all applications by Asiatic aliens, whether by Chinese, Indians, or Syrians, should be dealt with on their merits, without any reference to racial distinction”, and they granted the licences.

While Streeton was one of many colonists who displayed an appetite for things Asian from the late 1880s, this enthusiasm for “exotic” objects often did not extend to their makers. In his letter about the hawkers, Streeton recognised, despite having not yet

ventured outside Australia, that “travelling in old Asia one must be impressed with the historic grandeur of the colored races”. With manifest reluctance, he conceded that, “in the interest of commercial exchange”, it was “necessary” that some Chinese and Japanese “reside in our midst”, which, at least in relation to the Japanese, was hardly of much moment since most were offshore in the pearling fleets.

Many of Streeton’s surviving letters to his friends and patrons from the 1880s and 1890s are highly poetical and evocative. At times, the word pictures he creates about the Australian landscape are at least as compelling as his paintings. His letters to the press, on the whole, are very different – written fast, in high dudgeon, whether to defend or to attack. His letter to *The Daily Telegraph* about the hawkers is most extreme. Contrary to what he remembered, this letter, not the one about the coalmine, is almost certainly the one that became known as “Streeton’s shriek”.

Hearsay was pivotal to it. Streeton wrote: “Repeatedly one hears in the country of ... [hawkers who] ... go to houses when the men are away at work, and demand food and money from lonely women, and frighten them horribly.” He continued: “One hears recently of a young wife in Sydney buying vegetables from a Chinese, who remarking something to her that was so unpleasant that she wouldn’t tell her loving husband, the wretch goes along as happily as ever, when he ought to have been beaten to a pulp or shot.” He was even vaguer about another case “related two days ago ... much too unpleasant too repeat”.

Streeton also displayed a profound misunderstanding of the law. Despite the many occasions when magistrates had refused to grant licences to hawkers because they were “Syrian” – and ignoring that few were naturalised – Streeton declared they “enjoyed all the freedom and protection dealt out to every subject of the British Empire”. He reckoned it “remarkable that we, a young nation with all our Anglo-Saxon instinct for liberty and justice, should allow these ugly parasites to bully and threaten our unprotected women and go unpunished”. Streeton thought these “scum of the earth” warranted shooting when “sufficiently offensive”.

As he embraced one cliché after another in this letter, “shoot them down like dogs” was Streeton’s key phrase. Settler Australians used it to describe what their fellow colonists did to Aboriginal peoples. Admirers of Ned Kelly used it to describe how the police went after the Kelly gang. But because of its extremity, those reported to have used it would often deny having done so, while those who put this phrase in print tended to do so anonymously. Streeton was exceptional in doing so under his own name. More than that, having invoked it against the hawkers, he emphasised its appropriateness. “To this good end,” he concluded, “let women in the country become familiar with and always keep a loaded revolver about the house or, failing that, a bulldog.”

Whereas Streeton’s letter about the proposed coalmine triggered an immediate rebuttal, no one responded to his letter calling for resort to the gun. This silence was not due to a lack of debate over the treatment of hawkers. When a columnist with *The Daily Telegraph* criticised the blanket rejection by magistrates of licence applications by Syrian hawkers, a reader decried this suggestion, arguing that the hawkers did not deserve licences because “we have not brought them here, and do not want such undesirable and impudent people”. That no one called out Streeton’s embrace of the most extreme vigilantism is a mark of much larger racism.

Streeton does not appear to have exploded in this fashion again. When he left for England in 1897, he opted to stay in Cairo for two months, much longer than he planned, because of what the art historian Emma Kindred has dubbed Streeton's "impassioned response". For all Streeton pictured the men and women of Cairo through a clichéd orientalist lens, depicting them "as generalised, decorative motifs within a picturesque urban landscape", he relished this encounter with another culture. "I bowed before the beauty of Grand Cairo," Streeton recalled. "I couldn't get away from it."

An obvious question is why Streeton displayed such enthusiasm, given his letter to *The Daily Telegraph* little over a year before he reached Cairo. One possible explanation is that, while Streeton thought "coloured" people alien to Australia and knew his patrons would not want paintings of them, he could appreciate them in their homelands and see a market for pictures of them. While the "foreign" hawkers have no place in his Australian paintings, he completed at least six pictures of Egyptian drink-sellers between 1897 and 1898.

Streeton also had an enduring appetite for artefacts from non-European countries which, as Wayne Tunncliffe of the AGNSW has observed, went far beyond that of "usual bourgeois taste in that period". After he returned to live in Melbourne in 1923, Streeton furnished "his houses with Japanese prints and objects, impressive embroideries and porcelain, Indian and Middle Eastern objects, and had books on art from these cultures and regions as well". Streeton also celebrated Chinoiserie in his art. One of his paintings, acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1925, was *The Chinese Screen*. Two of his pictures in his penultimate exhibition in 1940 were titled *Roses* and *Chinese Silk*.

During these last two decades of his life, Streeton's environmental concerns grew ever more prominent and passionate – especially for Victoria's forests of big, old eucalypts, fearing with good reason for their future. So great were his fears that, aged 73, as part of his 1940 exhibition, he provided a dystopic vision, projecting 60 years forward, of how Australians' disregard for the environment would see these forests devastated. *Sylvan Dam and Donna Buang, A.D. 2000*, a view of Melbourne's immediate environment from the Dandenong Ranges, was perhaps Streeton's most radical painting, showing how felling of these forests for paper pulp – woodchipping – would create a wasteland. Now part of the canon of Streeton's art, in 1940 it failed to sell.

Tim Bonyhady

Tim Bonyhady is an environmental and cultural historian. His latest book is The Enchantment of the Long-haired Rat: A Rodent History of Australia.