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Peck, Julia ORCID: 0000-0001-5134-2471 (2012) Thornthwaite: Joseph and Ernest Docker's melancholic wilderness. In: Imaging Nature II:, 20-22 June 2012, Tarraleah, Tasmania, Australia. (Unpublished)

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3291>

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Thornthwaite: Joseph and Ernest Docker's melancholic wilderness

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Joseph and Ernest Docker made photographs of their pastoral property, Thornthwaite, near Scone, between 1860 and 1869. Their small, delicate photographs are presented in album format and depict the homestead from different angles and from varying degrees of distance. The photographs show the cleared land, a garden, river scenery and the wider environment, including the Liverpool Ranges to the north. In addition to the circulatory pattern of photographing the homestead the album of photographs situates Thornthwaite within the wider Australian environment and wilderness scenery, especially from North America. This paper will argue that the album of photographs creates Thornthwaite as a wilderness, despite signs of settlement. The Dockers, moreover, choose a melancholic rather than optimistic tone for their photographs, further enhancing the perception of the land as isolated and empty. Disavowing the Indigenous understanding of the land (including their prior ownership, cultural interaction and continued presence within the landscape) the photographs create Thornthwaite as a romanticised, nostalgic and isolated wilderness space. Indeed, later in his life, Ernest Docker reproduced a photograph of a river scene taken on Thornthwaite with the title *Evenings Shadows*, a possible reference to Stephen Johnstone's painting. Although the paradigm of melancholia has been significant within Australian literature and painting it is subject to little commentary in relation to photographs. Using Ian McLean's proposition of melancholia as denial of Indigenous heritage, this paper will argue that the Dockers' photographs work to overcome the horror of dispossession. Whilst the photographs could be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of colonial guilt, Ernest Docker took a nostalgic pleasure in seeing Thornthwaite as melancholic, troubling a possible redemptive interpretation of the images.

Introduction

I should start by explaining that the photographs I will discuss today are photographs that I have written about before. In the past I have focused on how the images of Thornthwaite, a pastoral property, create geographical certainty and a sense of place. But I would like to take a different approach to the material with a view to developing a new analysis.

Joseph and Ernest Docker made photographs of their pastoral property, Thornthwaite, near Scone, between 1860 and 1869. Their small, delicate photographs are presented in album format and depict the homestead from different angles and from varying distances. The photographs show the cleared land, a garden, river scenery and the wider environment, including the Liverpool Ranges to the north. The photographs are remarkably devoid of people and other signs of productive activity, with the exception of a few gardening photographs. There are few attempts to show off the pastoral wealth of the land and the property is largely treated as an aesthetic object.

The photographs depict the property within the then prevailing landscape conventions; that is, as picturesque with melancholic overtones. In addition to the photographs of the homestead and the wider environment the album contains many photographs of wilderness scenery, especially from North America and New Zealand. Although in my past research I have been concerned with how the photographs of the property create a sense of place, given the broader context of the album, and the absence of clear markers of occupation and productivity, I would like to argue that the photographs of Thornthwaite are presented as images of the wilderness; indeed, the structure of the album suggests that Thornthwaite is comparable to other scenic wonders. Importantly, the melancholic tone of the photographs, created through the absence of people, the absence of productive signs of settlement, together with the general aesthetic of the images, prompts a discussion and analysis of melancholia. Using Ian McLean's proposition that melancholia was the 'organising trope' of settler violence (p. 18), I will argue that these images have an important relationship to Aboriginal dispossession. Indeed, Ernest Docker revisited his photographs of Thornthwaite later in his life, reinforcing the links to known landscape paintings engaging with this subject. This reinscription is troubling within Docker's photography as he sought to reinforce the melancholic overtones of his photographs; examining the material now raises questions about the interpretation of melancholia. For nineteenth-century viewers melancholia was, according to Ian McLean, a way of redeeming guilt. Yet although Melancholia offered a redemptive means of processing the guilt of ethnocide no such redemption can be assumed for viewers today and instead melancholia can be seen a tacit acknowledgement of colonial guilt.

The Dockers were significant settlers in mid-nineteenth-century Australia. Joseph Docker (b. 1802, d. 1884) arrived in Australia in 1834 and subsequently became a landowner and parliamentarian. Docker purchased Thornthwaite outright in 1835 and expanded when prices in land had dropped.ⁱ At Thornthwaite Docker raised a family of eight children and he also became a Justice of the Peace.ⁱⁱ However, Thornthwaite was difficult to make a going concern and Joseph Docker borrowed extensively to keep it afloat. By 1869, debts against Thornthwaite amounted to £16,000 and in 1870 the property was sold to George Finlay for £7500.ⁱⁱⁱ The debts against the property were annulled and Docker and his family moved to Sydney where he extended his political career. ~~Joseph Docker sat in the New South Wales Legislative Council for five years from 1856 and opposed the free selection bill in 1861.^{iv} He was involved with the planning of International Exhibitions as well as being involved with The Philosophical Society of New South Wales where he showed his photographs in~~

1856.* Although Joseph would have been travelling between Thornthwaite and Sydney for his public and familial duties, Joseph took up photography early in its history in Australia, and was practicing it at a considerable distance from Sydney where chemicals and other necessary equipment were procured.^{vi}

Ernest (b. 1842, d.1923), Joseph's eldest son from his second marriage, showed promise as a scholar, attended the University of Sydney, trained as a lawyer and became a Judge.^{vii} Ernest took a keen interest in photography from the early age of eight, assisting his father in the preparation and exposure of photographs and remained a keen photographer throughout his life. The photographs have been celebrated both for their documentary value and their aesthetic sensibility.^{viii} Many of the publicly available photographs of Thornthwaite are presented in one album titled *Album of views of "Thornthwaite", Dartbrook, N.S.W.*^{ix} Ernest Docker is thought to be the compiler of the *Album* although it probably contains photographs by him and his father.^x The album is beautiful and the photographs are remarkably well preserved. [show slide] The album also contains scenes from the Blue Mountains, Sydney Harbour, and other Sydney sights, photographs of the Nepean River, a few photographs from Adelaide, photographs of Yosemite Valley in North America and scenes from New Zealand. The album opens with photographs from Thornthwaite (eighteen photographs presented over thirteen pages), and the area around Thornthwaite reappears later in the album, but the bulk of the album features other views, many of them scenic. It is likely that the Dockers visited many of these locations, but it is not known whether they visited North America.^{xi}

Other wilderness sites and images

Situating Thornthwaite's images in close proximity to the other photographs suggests that the Dockers wanted to compare Thornthwaite with other areas known for their scenic beauty. The photographs of the Blue Mountains concentrate on Jamieson Valley and the famous waterfalls. Ernest Docker accompanied Eccleston du Faur's expedition to the Grose Valley in 1876, and made repeated visits to the area.^{xii} In 1908, Docker recalled photographing the area with his father in the 1870s,^{xiii} so the photographs in the album may be by them, however, the authorship of the photographs is uncertain and the album contains photographs made by the Burton Brothers based in New Zealand and the American photographs are also commercial productions. Both the American and New Zealand photographs depict locations well known for their scenic grandeur.

It has sometimes been lamented that Australian wilderness photographs do not match the grandeur of American landscape photographs, especially in relation to historical material, but perhaps Docker thought otherwise. In this particular album Thornthwaite is included within a narrative of wilderness although there are also photographs that represent the establishment of civic centres. Given that both Joseph and Ernest had to leave the property they both belonged to the substantial group of people who enjoyed the landscape as a leisure activity. Indeed Joseph Docker was adept at seeing the landscape as a cultural artefact as he had made some oil paintings in and around Thornthwaite.

As Paul Carter has noted, creating or being able to 'see' wilderness is part of the process of settlement. Indeed, he notes that settlers rarely write diaries during the process of settlement, and instead authors have created narrative accounts in hindsight. He claims, therefore, that the perception of wilderness is structurally associated with the creation of a spot from which to write.^{xiv} Although the photographs of Thornthwaite, then, predominantly show the house, garden and cleared lands, the uncleared lands that appear at the edges of the photographs and in the later parts of the sequence of images, creates Thornthwaite as situated within the wilderness: Thornthwaite is a 'place' *and* is isolated. Although the images predominantly belong to the picturesque and do not conform to the aesthetics of the sublime, the structural differences between settlement and unsettled lands is therefore important. Thornthwaite's relationship with the other wildernesses, then, is significant, not so much for aesthetic reasons, but because Thornthwaite's remoteness is important within the Dockers' narrative of isolation. Ernest Docker's account of his photographic activities also emphasised the remote location of his early photographic activities with his father and this fact has been emphasised by contemporary writers, almost to the point where their photographic production sounds apocryphal.^{xv}

Photographing Thornthwaite

Thornthwaite's homestead, surrounding paddocks and fields receive much attention and are photographed systematically. [Slide] The album opens with views of the homestead and its gardens and are accompanied by more remote views that depict the homestead as the centre of the property with the photographer exploring it in a circular motion: the photographs are labelled in relation to points on the compass (i.e. from the north, east, south and west).^{xvi} The homestead was recorded from an increasing distance: the views demanded by the points of the compass are retraced from further away from the homestead, the scale of the house looks smaller within the

landscape and the remoteness of the property becomes more evident.^{xvii} There are also images that situate the homestead and the boundaries of the property in relation to other geographical features, such as the Liverpool Ranges to the north.^{xviii} *Thornthwaite*, then, is visually constructed as a site of civilisation and settlement within a broader wilderness, with the central focus being on the homestead.

The garden at *Thornthwaite*, while planted and tended in some places, was more overgrown in others. *Thornthwaite* [Show slide] depicts the front of the homestead, the steps leading up to it and a gardener, and other features such as the urns on the terraces are just visible. As Robert Dixon has noted, it was common for representations of the country house landscapes to show the contrast between the wilderness and tended lands. The purpose of such country house representations, whether visual or written, was to create:

... symbols of that harmonious arrangement of use and beauty, nature and art, that constituted the proper use of wealth. They were visible proof that the progress of empire was controlled by individuals whose social virtues derived from nature and from God.^{xix}

Colonists were encouraged to devote “wealth, taste and influence” in the creation of a landscape from the wilderness with the aim of creating a “symbol of utility reconciled with beauty” that contributed to colonialism.^{xx} Colonists assumed that their perception of wilderness meant that the land was “empty of culture” and primordial,^{xxi} disavowing prior and continuing Aboriginal presence and use of land. The productivity of land, combined with the moral value of labour, justified, at least in the nineteenth century, the colonisation of land and the dispossession of Aboriginal people.^{xxii}

In *Thornthwaite*, the man kneeling in the foreground seems to be taking a particular interest in one plant; whether for purposes of tending to the plant or studying the plant is unclear. The posture of the man in the garden suggests care and attention to his activity. In the nineteenth century it was believed that the study of natural forms could lead to the growth of mind and contentment of spirit.^{xxiii} The garden is a site for the exploration of a variety of natural forms that exhibit good taste and which facilitate the development of the mind and character. The garden also signifies the gentry’s virtuous colonisation of space through the creation of cultured, cultivated and purposeful lands. However, this image also suggests melancholia and is not wholly celebratory of the efforts to colonise the land. My response to this image, I am sure, is partly informed by the aging of the photograph – it’s warm yellow tone and the fragility and foxing of the pages (it is likely that the

image would have looked quite different when it was originally made). But I note the gardener appears so much smaller than the surrounding plants and this particular view of the homestead suggests that either the house was built in a very small clearing or the plants have become established and unruly incredibly quickly. The image is in contrast to paintings of homesteads at the time, for example, Eugene von Guerard's *Mr Clarke's Station* (1867) [\[show slide\]](#). Like many other forms of pictorial representation in the nineteenth century, subjects in paintings were idealised (an effect harder to achieve in a photograph) but nonetheless the difference between the views of Thornthwaite and *Mr. Clarke's Station* are striking. But perhaps a photograph that shows a wider view of the station would make a better comparison.

In *Thornthwaite from the West* [\[show slide\]](#) Docker has depicted some outhouses and the homestead is visible just behind the central structures. The shape of the valley is visible, exposed rocks appear in the foreground and dark trees frame the scene on both sides. Hills, which have not been cleared, are visible in the distance. In *Thornthwaite from the East* [\[show slide\]](#), the homestead is barely visible, although a road can be discerned in the middle distance. This photograph depicts a wooded foreground with a dead tree just to the right of the scene (and dead gum trees were a common feature of Australian gothic stories). Although the image does show extensive clearing the practical use of the land remains unclear and it is not possible to discern any crops or even sheep. This particular image makes an interesting comparison to Von Guerard's painting [\[go back two slides\]](#). Von Guerard's painting suggests a vast sweep of open land, despite the hills and ravine to the left, productive crops and different types of lawn and garden space. A wilder foreground is provided, including bare rocks and a profusion of trees and shrubs, but in the far distance even the gum trees have thinned out and rolling pastoral land is depicted. The painting seems to suggest that the continued expansion of settlement is possible and likely given the apparently available space. Docker's images, whilst aesthetic and carefully framed, hint at some of the practical difficulties of settlement [\[go forward one slide\]](#). The density of trees and shrubs is that much greater and the taking of space feels provisional and much more home spun (buildings and other structures seem to be less confidently built and look somehow already temporary). Although this particular photograph hints at the extent of clearing the property is clearly remote and there is little sign of other dwellings. The hills covered with forest in the distance also create a different atmosphere – any expansion in these lands will be subject to hard work and do not suggest that the land is available for the easy taking. Altogether, the wider scenes of Thornthwaite feel much less bucolic than Von Guerard's painting and the sombre tones of the print fail to create an optimistic atmosphere. With the dark trees, dead gum trees and the fading nature of the prints (an admittedly contemporary

effect) the overall impression of Thornthwaite is melancholic and it is no surprise that the property did not flourish financially.

In 1908 Ernest Docker was interviewed for an article in *The Australian Photographic Journal*. The author, pennamed Valdon, recounts meeting Docker in his home. Docker reminisces about some of his photographic exploits, but the article focuses on the technical development of photography, rather than Docker's life. The article is also well illustrated, containing eleven images. Although Docker claims that stereo images are his favourite images, only two stereos are reproduced, and instead at least four of the images in the article were made in and around Thornthwaite (although some of the other river and bush scenes may also have been made in the vicinity of the property). Their function within the article enables the writer to applaud Ernest Docker's commitment to photography during the 1860s (an early period in the development of photography) and discuss how demanding the early processes were. Although it is not explicitly stated, the description of Docker's efforts obtain a heroic tinge of accomplishment for managing the processes so expertly. Valdon also notes that the negatives from this period are also remarkably well preserved; they not only have been cared for, but their longevity also indicates that they were also well made.

There is one image from this article that interests me in relation to notions of melancholia [show slide]. The third image, reproduced almost full page in the article, represents a river scene. The same image appears in the *Album of Views of Thornthwaite*, titled, *The Dartbrook or Wongamo*. In the published image, the title has clearly changed to *The Shades of Evening*. As noted in the caption information, a cloudy and dramatic sky has been added to the photograph (in the earlier image the sky is entirely blank, as was common for photographs in this period). The similarity in the titles suggest a link to Stephen Johnstone's painting *Evening Shadows: A Back Water of the Murray* (1880) [show slide]. Although there are differences between the two representations, and of course Johnstone's painting was made quite a bit later than Docker's photograph, I am proposing that Docker revisited his photographs of Thornthwaite and through changing the images' title, reinforced Thornthwaite as a melancholic space. This could be partly attributed to nostalgia: in the article Docker reportedly reminisces on his happy days at Thornthwaite and Valdon reports that

When he spoke to me of the happy days at Thornthwaite, the place of his birth and boyhood, the room disappeared, and the kindly face of the supposed stern Judge vanished in a mist and in their place fancy created a fine old fashioned bush homestead – there were several photographs of it on the table... (Valdon, 1908, p. 235).

Docker's photographs and account prompts a reverie on the part of Valdon, exploring the extent of the surrounding bush, and imagining photographic activities in the past. We hear surprisingly little from Docker himself but can assume, from this brief description, that Docker retained fond memories of his early home. He clearly retained a passion for exploring landscapes, as can be attested by the places he visited and photographed, reported on in this article. Docker's pleasure in the past, however, is surely disrupted by *Shades of Evening* [go back one slide]. Is this photograph a landscape of Docker's past, a melancholic memory of a place to which he cannot return, an accidental and unconscious reference to a famous painting? Whether conscious or not, the similarity between Johnstone's painting and the photograph suggests that Docker saw Thornthwaite as melancholic.

Melancholia was a significant theme within the representation of the Australian landscape.^{xxiv} Although melancholia can be linked to the European's discomfort at the unfamiliarity of the environment, Ian McLean has argued that melancholia operates dialectically with the grotesque as a redeeming ideology "that overcomes the horror" of the violence of Aboriginal dispossession.^{xxv} Although McLean's focus is on representations of Aboriginal subjects, he notes that the aesthetics and tone of both paintings and writing about the environment invoke horror of the settlers' surroundings and argues that many representations of Aboriginal subjects and of the landscape were grotesque in their character (pp. 29-31). Comparing this to the opinions and responses of educated men and women and their protest at the grotesque treatment of Aboriginal subjects (p. 31) McLean notes that they mourned the "noble fallen savage" through melancholy (p. 32). Melancholy became the triumphant trope over the grotesque, signifying redemption (p. 33) through Enlightenment values of rationality and order.

McLean's argument is compelling but what I would like to propose is that in addition to expressing the mourning of the "noble fallen savage" melancholia is also a tacit acknowledgement of the act of dispossession. This becomes particularly forceful in images where Aboriginal subjects are entirely absent – as in the photographs that Joseph and Ernest Docker made. The absence of Aboriginal activity – whether contributions to the life of the station or other Aboriginal cultural activity – is significant; the photographs depict their absence (their displacement) and the melancholic tone suggests guilt at having claimed the land as their own. Whilst the Dockers created a picturesque and established representation of their property, a note of regret appeared within their work. The melancholic overtone of the photographs could be seen as a wishful looking back on the idylls and elisions of the gentry's pastoral existence. And although these photographs could

represent a fragile and lonely settler experience, the photographs, by excluding both those who worked on the property and those who were dispossessed, evoke notable absences.

The melancholic landscape, then, disrupts the narrative of the successful establishment of settlement. What could be represented as a successful victory, a prosperous landscape, or at least hint at an optimistic future, is instead presented as a troubled present and to us now as a troubled past; comfort, belonging and a sense of home are made problematic. The absence of Aboriginal people from these photographs, and from the rest of the album, together with the melancholic tone of the photographs signifies Aboriginal dispossession. The absence of Aboriginal subjects from the photographs of Thornthwaite, whilst not performing grotesque representations of Aboriginality, nonetheless tacitly acknowledge dispossession and prior ownership through the use of melancholy. Although in the nineteenth century melancholia potentially performed a redeeming ideological function, for contemporary viewers melancholia becomes fails to perform redemption and is instead a tacit acknowledgement of Aboriginal dispossession. In a contemporary context melancholy fails to perform its dialectical work in relation to the grotesque and instead signifies the ambiguities and injustices of settlement.

Conclusion

Joseph and Ernest Docker were able to practice photography as an expression of their education and interest in science and the arts; this coincided with their interests in depicting the landscape. The melancholic tone of the photographs suggest that the Dockers already saw the pastoral idyll as created in their images as part of the past, or as unsustainable and suggest unacknowledged unease at the dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants. Yet they also saw Thornthwaite as dwelling in a remote wilderness, comparable with other notable wilderness areas in colonised countries.

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ⁱ E.W. Docker, *Joseph Docker of Thornthwaite*, 38.

ⁱⁱ E. Docker, "Docker, Joseph (1802 - 1884)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2006-. Accessed April 9, 2007. <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040076b.htm?hilite=Joseph%3BDocker>.

ⁱⁱⁱ E.W. Docker, *Joseph Docker of Thornthwaite*, 79.

^{iv} E. Docker, "Docker, Joseph (1802-1884)"; E.W. Docker, *Joseph Docker of Thornthwaite*, 46-48.

^v E.W. Docker, *Joseph Docker of Thornthwaite*, 51.

^{vi} Valdon, "Our artistic workers," 226-230.

^{vii} S. Woodman, "Docker, Ernest Brougham (1842 - 1923)".

^{viii} E.W. Docker, *Joseph Docker of Thornthwaite*, 52, Davies, *An Eye for Photography*, 14.

^{ix} Docker, *Album of Views of "Thornthwaite"*, Dartbrook, N.S.W. Alan Davies, *An Eye for Photography*, 31.

^x State Library of New South Wales, *Albums of View of "Thornthwaite"*, Dartbrook, N.S.W.

^{xi} Valdon, "Our artistic workers," 232-235.

^{xii} See his *British Journal of Photography* articles. See Valdon's article for hints that Docker went back.

^{xiii} Valdon, 1908, p. 232.

^{xiv} Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 150-151.

^{xv} Check Davies and Newton for references.

^{xvi} Ernest Brougham Docker, *Album of Views of "Thornthwaite,"* 1-11.

^{xvii} Ernest Brougham Docker, *Album of Views of "Thornthwaite,"* 8-11.

^{xviii} Ernest Brougham Docker, *Album of Views of "Thornthwaite,"* 9.

^{xix} Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire: Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales 1788-1860* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), 155.

^{xx} Dixon, *The Course of Empire*, 156.

^{xxi} D.B. Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), p. 17.

^{xxii} Hoorn, *Australian Pastoral*, 95.

^{xxiii} Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 91-92.

^{xxiv} Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 136-137, Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122-134, Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art Volume One: The Nineteenth century – Landscape, Colony, Nation* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002), 60-63.

^{xxv} Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25.