Conrad Martens and the Bush of South-East Queensland

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The work of colonial artists has provided precious insights into the nature of the Australian landscape as it was at the time immediately following white settlement. The works of Glover, Lewin and von Guérard, for example, have been employed by historical geographers and have fuelled some fascinating debates about the nature of the landscape as it was under Aboriginal management. Of course, the work of some of these artists forms more faithful historical documentation than that of others. The stylised works of J.S. Lycett, the emancipated convict turned painter, are almost certainly unreliable as accurate landscape documentation, as his criminal conviction for forgery may suggest (Plate 1). It is likely that Lycett never visited some of the locations he painted and much of his work was probably commissioned as immigration propaganda, intended to placate the fears of the Britons equivocating about a move to the awesome and intimidating southern land.

By contrast, the body of work from Conrad Martens’ time in south-east Queensland from the 1840s and 1850s suggests an artistic agenda that is pure to the subject of his landscapes. We can be fairly certain that Martens provided an accurate representation because in many cases it is possible to relocate the precise position where he set up his easel. The curve of the hills and shape of the horizon is almost as true as a photograph. The density and tone in his landscapes remain faithful to the Australian bush, whether his subject was rainforest or open woodland, and he was probably among the first to capture the distinctive form of its supreme icon, the eucalypt tree.

Martens’ works are valued as historical documents because of the accuracy of their depiction and because they are contemporaneous with the period of European settlement in south-east Queensland. The fledgling colony at Brisbane was only about 25 years old at the time of Martens’ visit and his time in the Darling Downs was little more than a decade after the Leslie brothers took up the first selection in the district. The paintings of Conrad Martens provide a benchmark for the landscapes that have been subject to dramatic development in the last 100 years. This is most obvious in his works of Brisbane depicting the open eucalypt forests, which, although undoubtedly thinned by timber cutters, were also making way for the burgeoning town. Of course houses have now inevitably replaced these forests,
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although the city is reasonably well endowed with bushland parks that preserve some remnants. Some of Martens’ paintings in and around Brisbane reveal vines and hoop pines (Araucaria cunninghamii), confirming rainforest elements on the steep rocky banks or in the side gullies feeding the Brisbane River.

Sometimes Martens’ paintings reveal that the landscape has changed in unexpected ways. Prominent bands of mangroves have appeared in the Brisbane River around the current city, where they were sparse or absent during the 1850s. The foreground of his painting of the granite tors within the current Girraween National Park reveals a far more open landscape than can be witnessed at this site today.

Martens’ work in the Darling Downs provides a particularly important testament to the nature of the original landscape. He entered the district on the track across the Great Dividing Range through Cunningham’s Gap. The range catches sufficient coastal rainfall to support well-developed rainforest that still exists today with essentially the same character as represented in Martens’ pictures. As he travelled west of the range, Martens entered the ‘Downs’ where the transformation to open woodlands and plains is dramatic and highlights the character of the country in the vast beyond of the interior. Martens’ pictures in the Darling Downs reveal relatively little clearance of the natural vegetation, although there is an occasional suggestion of tree cutting, probably for the timber fences used to keep stock out of house yards and gardens. Martens painted the home-paddock at ‘Goomburra’, which probably provided crops and animals for domestic use. In general there was little cause for extensive clearing as the naturally open character of the country abundant with native grasses provided excellent pasture for sheep.

The Darling Downs was, and still is, a pastoral and agricultural Eldorado, representing one of the most fertile districts in Australia. Given the natural wealth of the country, it is not surprising that the district was almost entirely occupied by the time of Martens’ visit. There was no effective government control on the frontier of settlement and the squatters claimed vast areas of country, such that by 1864 the entire district was represented by about 50 individual properties (Plate 2). After the extirpation of the original Aboriginal inhabitants, the disproportionately large size of the runs ensured that a place in the early settlement of the Darling Downs provided the opportunity for great prosperity.

Members of this newly formed squattocracy were Martens’ hosts and patrons during his time in the Darling Downs. From his bases at ‘Canning Downs’, ‘Cecil Plains’, ‘Goomburra’, ‘Rosalie Plains’ and ‘Talgai’ he completed his work. The classic topographic sequence in the Darling Downs is from wooded hills to more open and often clumped vegetation on the foot-slopes, opening out to virtually treeless plains on the broad flats of the valleys (Plate 3). Typically the dominant eucalypt of the hills is mountain coolibah (Eucalyptus orgadophila) and on the foot-slopes poplar box (Eucalyptus populnea), both species that are absent to the east of the Great Dividing Range that borders the district. This landscape sequence was obviously a favourite subject of Martens, as he repeated the general scene in many locations. Given the high fertility of the plains, their treeless character is curious and they are beautifully depicted in Martens’ whimsical but delightful sketch of a mirage (Plate 4). The treeless plains are dissected by streams such as the
Condamine River that are lined by a band of forest composed of majestic river red gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*).13

The original vegetation patterns in the Darling Downs have been pieced together with the aid of old survey plans14 and are visually represented by other colonial artists less accomplished than Martens, such as the Reverend Thomas Biddulph Hutton, John Andrew Bonar and J.G. Sawkins (in the 1850s), Henry Grant Lloyd (in the late 1860s and early 1870s) and W.G. Wilson (in the 1890s). Many of the original vegetation types have been reduced to sparse remnants and their natural sequence as depicted by Martens obliterated with clearing of the foot-slope woodlands and cultivation in the valleys. The vast grassland of the Condamine flood plain is a chequerboard of highly productive cultivation, yielding a range of both summer and winter crops in the same year, including cotton, sorghum and wheat. Conservation efforts seek to retain and provide appropriate management for the last remaining one percent of the grasslands where they exist on stock routes and occasional paddocks.

In some cases there were large grass trees on the plains. These plants, although not technically trees, were noted by Ludwig Leichhardt who visited the Darling Downs in 1843 before returning for the commencement of his extraordinary expedition to Cobourg Peninsula: ‘Here and there the grass tree is seen either single, or in groups and groves. It is one foot and more in diameter, and eight to ten feet high. Till then I had never seen the grass-tree in rich soil; on the contrary, it was the sign of the poorest sandstone rock and sand. Here the case is reversed, the grass-tree grows in the finest soil, and generally in plains.’15 The plains grass trees of the Darling Downs were almost certainly *Xanthorrhoea glauca* and they have been totally obliterated from the plains country, although a few individual specimens remain on Kings Creek near Clifton. They are still reasonably common in the hills and ranges in the district and are easily accessible on the Bunya Mountains. In *Near Pilton, Xanthorea or Grass trees. Dec. 24th 1851*, Martens provides a precious glimpse of the unusual plains dwelling grass trees and photographs (see Plate 5) testify to their persistence at least until the turn of the twentieth century.16

Martens was obviously captivated by the forms of the Australian plants. Not only did he produce a botanically precise image of the grass tree but also of the narrow-leaved bottle tree (*Brachychiton rupestris*) that has been extensively cleared from its natural habitat, although still planted as a street tree in many western Queensland towns.17 He also produced a study of the distinctive dome shaped crown of the Bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*), familiar to most Queenslanders and a favourite food source for Aboriginal people.18

Some of Martens’ images provide cause to rethink our existing paradigms of landscape patterns. Conventional wisdom has it that the broad river flats to the east of the Great Dividing Range were blue gum woodland and they have been mapped as such in the reconstructed ‘pre-clearing’ vegetation maps produced by the Queensland Herbarium. But Martens’ depictions of the flats at Franklyn Vale19 in the Lockyer Valley (Plate 6) and at Coochin Coochin20 near Boonah testify that treeless grassland also existed in these districts. It is possible that these open flats had been partially cleared by the time of Martens’ visit, but the irregular boundary
Plate I. Joseph Lycett (ca 1775-1828), (Aborigines Using Fire to Hunt Kangaroos), ca 1817, watercolour, accession no. 2962939, National Library of Australia. Reproduced with permission.

Plate 5. Headington Hill Station ca 1897. Photo courtesy of John Oxley Library.

Plate 6. Conrad Martens, (View of Glen Franklin Vale), 1853, Watercolour, 17.5 x 25.5 cm. Private collection. (Martens’ original spelling of Franklyn Vale is retained in the title.)
between the grasslands and woodlands confirms a natural landscape. The land
survey record should assist in determining the extent of these previously overlooked
open grasslands but it will be far more challenging to locate remnants of the
grasslands in this region, as they occur on prime agricultural soils.

Martens’ images remind us of our ignorance of the botanical culture of the
Indigenous peoples. It is a pointed coincidence that one of Martens’ images of
Aboriginal people is from Gladfield.21 Gladfield in the Darling Downs is the
northernmost location of the yam daisy (Microseris lanceolata) where it is only
known by a single collection from 1891.22 It would seem to have since disappeared,
having eluded extensive searches by local botanists. The yam daisy (Plate 7) was
excavated en masse by Aboriginal tribes on the grassy plains further to the south,
and Beth Gott has collated historical records to document its significance as a staple
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carbohydrate. Beth Gott has also described how variable the tubers are in size and palatability throughout the species range. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing the character of these tubers on the Darling Downs or their significance for its Indigenous inhabitants. Who knows, we may have been able to develop a subtropical tuber suitable for European palates from the Darling Downs yam daisy! Martens' works not only testify to the character of the landscapes at the time of settlement but also inspire inquiry. Certainly the range of historical sources from the nineteenth century provides fertile ground for a deeper understanding of our natural heritage.

Notes

3 Conrad Martens, Brisbane in 1852, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Plate 2; Conrad Martens, North and South Brisbane from the South Brisbane Rocks, 1851, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, in Steele, Figure 7; Conrad Martens, Part of Brisbane with Kangaroo Point, Queensland 1853, National Library of Australia, Canberra in Steele, Plate 3.
5 Conrad Martens, Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Plate 4; Conrad Martens, Kangaroo Point, Nov 1851, 1851, John Oxley Library, Brisbane, in Steele. Figure 15.
6 Conrad Martens, View of Brisbane (in 1851), 1862, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, in Steele, Figure 10; Conrad Martens, North and South Brisbane from the South Brisbane Rocks, 1851, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, in Steele, Figure 7; Conrad Martens, North and South Brisbane, Moreton Bay, New South Wales, c.1852, National Library of Australia, Canberra, in Steele, Figure 9.
7 Conrad Martens, Terrawambella on Nichol’s run, New England, March 19th 1852, 1852, Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 110; J.G. Steele, personal communication with the author, 11 Aug. 2001.
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12 Conrad Martens, *The Mirage on the Great Condamine Plain*, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 89.

13 Conrad Martens, Crossing Place, Canning Downs, 1854, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, in Ewington; Conrad Martens, Crossing Place. Condamine, *Canning Downs*, March 12th 1852, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 101; Conrad Martens, Warwick from the Right Bank of the "Condamine", March 12th 1852. 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele. Figure 102.


16 Conrad Martens, *Near Pilton, Xanthorea or Grass trees, Dec. 24th 1851*, 1851, Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 48.

17 Conrad Martens, Bottle Tree, Rosalie Plains — Ramsey Esq., Feb. 16th 1852, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 37.

18 Conrad Martens, *The Bunya Pine, Cooyar, Feb. 13th 1852*, 1852, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 80.


21 Conrad Martens, *Black's Camp at Gladfield, Dec. 29th 1851*, 1851, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, in Steele, Figure 54.

22 Beth Gott has misinterpreted this as a South Australian specimen. The collector is C.J. Gwyther and the Queensland Herbarium has 70 of his specimens from south-east Queensland. The 'Gladfield' location of this specimen is certainly the Darling Downs, Queensland. As noted by Gott, F.M. Bailey (Director, Queensland Herbarium) has made a note on the specimen: 'In the early days of S. Australia the colonists used to eat the fleshy roots of this plant — following the practice of the natives by whom it was largely used for food. I was fond of it as a boy its flavour was somewhat like a sweet nut.'