Conflicting Visions: The Life and Art of William George Wilson, Anglo-Australian Gentleman Painter

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Research for this paper was prompted by the appearance of a group of nine small landscape paintings of the Darling Downs area of Queensland, displayed in the Seeing the Collection exhibition at the University Art Museum (UAM), University of Queensland from 10 July 2004 until 23 January 2005. Relatively new to the collection (they were purchased in 2002), they are charming, small works, and are of interest principally because they are late-colonial depictions of an area that was of great significance in the history of Queensland.

However, very little was known about the painter, William George Wilson (1849-1924). Even his birth and death dates were merely conjectural (wrongly as it turned out). The only sources of knowledge were the scanty records in two dictionaries of art (based mainly on records of his exhibition activity as gleaned from catalogues), a brief biographical note in an early catalogue published by the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in 1908, and more recent records of sales of his paintings.1

Building on the suggestion (in the QAG catalogue) that he was a Queensland painter who was born on Pilton Station, I have been able to reconstruct something of his life. He was not born on Pilton Station (the family association with Pilton commenced later), but he was the son of a wealthy squatter, William Wilson, a Scotsman and one of the ‘pure Merinos’ who came to Queensland very early in the rush for land. He made a fortune that was sufficient for him and his family to retire to England and live there comfortably until their deaths. Although a typical example of the ‘gentlemanly squatter’ of the 1840s and 1850s,2 he is relatively unknown: he does not figure prominently in the records; his descendants do not live in Australia; and members of his family were not given to writing reminiscences of their colonial lives. However, W.G. Wilson’s life and paintings do tell something of his experiences as the son of a successful early squatter —experiences I want to examine in terms of a series of conflicting visions and shifting identities.

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I will begin by outlining Wilson’s family background, including his father’s achievements, in part to establish his social class, early experiences and education, but also in order to consider the sorts of family expectations and obligations he would have encountered — especially as they impacted upon his pursuit of an artistic career. This is followed by a discussion of his later life, his artistic output and its reception. Of particular interest is the contrast between pictures he drew and painted as an amateur in the 1870s when he was working for his father as superintendent at Pilton Station, and the pictures in the UAM plus four others in the Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery (TRAG) which were painted after he had trained at the Royal Academy Schools (commencing in 1884), when he returned to Queensland following his father’s death in 1887. Although the early pictures are more naïve in style, nevertheless they record a more intimate encounter with the land than the later, more accomplished works — aspects of the images that I relate to Wilson’s changing circumstances and developments in Queensland society and the wider art world. My argument is that there are conflicts between his family’s vision for his future as the eldest son and heir of a gentleman-squatter and his aim to become a professional artist, and also between the intimacy of his early works and the more distanced point of view adopted in the later paintings. Furthermore, additional constraints on his later approach arose from conflicts between the role of the landowner and that of the artist in late nineteenth century Australia.

Rediscovering William George Wilson

William George Wilson was the eldest child of William Wilson, a Scotsman born in Edinburgh in 1811, who came to Moreton Bay in 1843 with his brother Robert, as part of ‘the second wave of invasion of squatters’. Many of the early Queensland squatters were Scottish, with a similar background and good education, and they were often connected by social and family links.4 The Wilson brothers settled on land near Ipswich, establishing the Mt Flinders or Peak Mountain Station after previously taking up land near Bathurst. Because of sickness, Robert returned to Scotland in 1844, dying at an address in the Georgian New Town of Edinburgh in 1847, but William seems to have prospered in Moreton Bay. On 20 March 1844, a William Wilson purchased land on the eastern side of Kangaroo Point, selling it quickly after subdivision into 26 plots and presumably making a handsome profit. If this is the same man, this transaction perhaps enabled him to travel to Scotland in the late 1840s when his brother was dying. He was also married during this period, to Elizabeth Richardson Salmon in Edinburgh on 10 July 1848.5

The couple returned to Brisbane, and William George was born on 18 April 1849, either at Peak Mountain Station, or more probably in Brisbane. His birth date is recorded not only in official records, but also by Mrs Mary McConnel, wife of prominent early settler David McConnel, in her 1905 memoirs. She notes in her description of a trip to England undertaken in 1854 that her son and Willie, the son of their ‘friends, Mr and Mrs Wilson of Pilton’, shared a birthday on board ship with Willie being one year older. The Wilsons did not own Pilton at this date, but since Mary McConnel was writing about events that took place 60
years earlier it is not surprising that she associates them with the property that became an important part of their identity at a later stage (from 1869). As well, she misremembers the number of Wilson’s siblings, since he had two younger sisters at this time rather than the one she thinks she recalls, both of whom were born in Queensland. An alternative soubriquet is given to William Wilson by squatter, adventurer and explorer Henry Stuart Russell, in his *Genesis of Queensland* (1888), when he describes an unruly meeting that was held in Ipswich on 10 January 1850 to discuss the issue of the resumption of transportation. The squatters were in favour of this because they were desperate for cheap labour, but small business people and other free settlers vehemently opposed this idea and invaded the squatters’ meeting. Russell notes that ‘the chair was taken by Mr Wilson, squatter (usually called Peak Mountain Wilson)’. The following year the squatters selected Wilson, along with Henry Hughes of Gowrie Station, to contest (unsuccessfully) an election for representatives of the Moreton Bay area to sit in the New South Wales Legislative Council. They aimed to secure the formation of a separate Queensland colony, a development that they hoped would help with their quest to have transportation resumed.

Although it did not support the squatters, an editorial in the *Moreton Bay Courier* commented on Wilson’s character:

> As nothing is known of this gentleman’s intellectual powers, so nothing is known to their disparagement. He has been successful in his own affairs, and that circumstance may be taken into account in estimating his ability. Beyond this, and an irreproachable moral reputation, we are not aware of any further claims that can be adduced on the part of this candidate.

These events show that Wilson was held in high esteem by his fellow squatters, and it also suggests that he was a man of some authority and probity, but in general he seems to have led a quiet life, mainly concerned with his family and business interests. Indeed, these excursions into public life were undertaken in order to foster these interests, but they also suggest his accord with a certain vision of colonial society with a ruling landed elite.

Following the 1854 trip to Britain, some years were spent in Edinburgh where two more daughters and another son were born. Then, in the early 1860s, the Wilson family returned to Moreton Bay, residing at Kangaroo Point while a manager, Pollet Cardew, looked after the station. But the children were probably sent back to England or Scotland for their secondary education as was customary among this class. The younger son, Frederick James (1858–1926), received an engineering education in London at the Royal Indian Engineering College, Cooper’s Hill, in the late 1870s, and went on to have a distinguished career as an engineer working mainly in India, particularly in Madras where he was responsible for the artificial harbour constructed there (as his obituary, published in the London *Times*, details). It is also likely that his older brother was educated in Britain. Instruction in drawing and painting was usually part of such an education.
One of the early watercolour sketches by W.G. Wilson (State Library of NSW DG*D26 f.13) is a signed and dated depiction of an Italian mountain scene (it is unidentified, but unmistakably a European scene, with the cypresses suggesting that it is Italian). This places him in Italy in September 1870, perhaps finishing his education with a Grand Tour or just seeing a little of Europe on his way back to Queensland. By now in his twenties, he was certainly in Queensland in the 1870s, working on Pilton Station, which his father had leased in 1869 after selling the Peak Mountain Station to the partnership of William Kent and Edward Wienholt. His position is recorded as ‘superintendent’ in the Queensland Post Office Directory for 1874.10 Established in the 1840s, Pilton was by then a very large property with many buildings besides the owner’s house, and there is an interesting connection with the famous Queensland writer Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis), who was born nearby in 1868.

Rudd worked as a stockman on Pilton Station in the 1880s, and he wrote a description of the station house and surroundings as it was at that time in Green Grey Homestead (1934):

The old station was more like a rising township now than a squatter’s headquarters. It had a row of shingle-roofed huts, spacious stables, a carpenter’s shop, butcher’s shop, store, and blacksmith’s forge, where the best horse-shoeing was done for fifty miles around. The ‘big house’ of English architecture, built of red cedar from the ranges, stood in the center of a glorious garden where grapes, peaches, apricots, oranges, lemons and even bunya pines grew in profusion.11 It was destroyed by fire on 21 August 1928. The Davis family selection was nearby, but on difficult land without a good water supply.

Wilson was not only working as superintendent of Pilton in the 1870s, he was also painting and drawing scenes there in a striking, lively, but amateurish and slightly awkward linear style. The watercolour sketches depict not only the station house and its ‘glorious’ garden in great detail (see Figure 1), but also the surrounding countryside, or rather a way of life it afforded to a privileged few. Rudd writes (following on from the passage I have just quoted): ‘The Governor being English, an English oak was also growing there. Perhaps the oak was to remind him of home and hearten him under stress of the melancholy of the Australian bush.’ But there is no sense of melancholy in Wilson’s pictures. Rather, they depict ‘A Pastoral Arcadia’12 as experienced by a member of the colonial gentry.

One scene, titled On Clifton Plain Darling Downs Queensland (State Library of NSW DG*D26 f.4) is dated 15 June 1873 and has two figures in the left foreground, a squatter on horseback (Wilson himself?) talking to a swaggie with a dog and gesturing with a stick, perhaps giving directions. In another picture (Figure 2) his father is probably the bearded figure reclining on the verandah at Pilton, dog lying at his feet, relaxing and reading a newspaper with the cultivated garden before him and the wilder pastures beyond. Another interesting view from the verandah shows the front steps bathed in moonlight (State Library of NSW...
DG*D26 f.6). Overall, there is a sense of the pleasures of this way of life rather than its hardships, with Wilson often at the centre of these images. Art was presumably a leisure activity for him — an acceptable pastime for someone of his social background — and he records his recreational activities.

Interestingly, in light of the family connection, one picture (Figure 3) shows a hunter (again, probably the artist) and dog, shooting ducks at a lagoon with Mount Flinders depicted in the background. Here Wilson was perhaps influenced by a Conrad Martens watercolour, *Flinders Peak* (1854), probably owned by the family. Martens was sketching in the Flinders Peak area in 1851 and a painting of *Flinders Peak* was commissioned in 1854 by 'J. Wilson Esq.', perhaps a member of the family or perhaps a mistake in Martens' accounts book. It is noteworthy that it was at this time that the family sailed from Sydney to Scotland with their friends the McConnels, very active patrons of the artist, and it is likely that they wished to have a picture of their property that they could show to friends and family in Edinburgh. But in Wilson's pictures the figures are dominant, whereas any people in the Martens pictures of Queensland, completed during or after his trip there in 1851–52, are small, foreground staffage images. I will return to Wilson's early images later in this paper, but first I want to outline the rest of the family history that I have been able to discover.

While Wilson worked for his father, William Wilson Senior became a Member of the Queensland Legislative Council in January 1874, actively serving there for two years. Some time in the late 1870s, the family returned to Britain and by 1881 its members were residing in London at 5 Earls Court Square, South Kensington. Wilson was also living there when he enrolled at the Royal Academy Schools on 4 December 1884, giving his age as 34 when he was in fact 35, probably because of age restrictions. It is interesting that his mother died in the first half of 1883 (aged 62), suggesting that perhaps she was the reason he had not pursued professional art training earlier (possibly because she was ill or disapproved of such a venture). In any event, he had some success in his studies, winning a Silver Medal for the best copy of an Old Master, an Italian landscape by Richard Wilson in 1886. But he did not progress after three years in the Lower School to a further three years in the Upper School. This was probably because of the death of his father on 3 May 1887 and the need to become the head of the household, with four unmarried sisters.

His sisters must have been a continuing family responsibility since the older two never married, although the third sister died in Madras in 1893 only one year after her marriage to a British military officer who was based there. The fate of the youngest of the sisters (Louisa) is uncertain, but Frederick married in 1888, the first of the brothers to do so. William George married Georgieanna Margaret Wilson in London the following year on 26 September. Both men married the daughters of medical men who served in India, an indication of the type of circle they moved in, where notions of Empire, duty and status must have been strong. Wilson's career to this point indicates an unwillingness to rebel against the expectations of his family: fulfilment of family dues had taken precedence.
Figure 1: William George Wilson, *Pilton House, Darling Downs, Queensland*, c. 1870–1878. Watercolour on paper, 21.6 x 33 cm. Reproduced courtesy Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales.

Figure 2: William George Wilson, *On the Veranda, Pilton, Darling Downs, Queensland*, c. 1870–1878. Watercolour on paper, 20.6 x 34.2 cm. Reproduced courtesy Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales.
over his artistic ambitions.

However, when Wilson returned to Queensland with his new wife in 1890, he attempted to combine two roles. There were no doubt business matters to attend to (he mortgaged land to the AMP Society on 25 August 1890), but he also seems to have determined to try to be an artist in Colonial Queensland, whilst still being the proprietor of Pilton. He may have played an active role in running the property in 1890, but a manager was installed in 1891. However, when Wilson’s only child — a son — was born in Toowoomba on 23 February 1891, the proud and excited father not only announced the birth of the son of ‘Wm. Geo. Wilson of Pilton’ in local newspapers, but also christened him William Frederick Pilton Wilson. So the Pilton connection was still a very important one for the family and its sense of identity.¹⁶

**Being an Artist in Colonial Queensland**

The first records of Wilson’s exhibition activity date from this time. While there had been very little public artistic activity in Queensland in the 1870s, the situation had changed by the 1890s, with the Queensland Art Society (QAS) being formed in 1887 and professional art education becoming available with the appointment
of London-trained Godfrey Rivers (1859–1925) as Art Master at the Brisbane Technical College in 1890. These events coincided with a call for local subject-matter rather than copies of work by overseas artists. Toowoomba was a burgeoning township, with ‘scores of pretty drives’ nearby and ‘many “bits” which an artist would delight to transfer to canvas’.17

Wilson started exhibiting with the QAS in 1892, at the same time as Rivers, a man of similar social status with whom he seems to have formed a friendship. Nevertheless, the art world was a small one with restricted opportunities. His pictures received some attention in the press, albeit mixed. In 1892, The Queenslander commented: ‘Mr W.G. Wilson, of Toowoomba, is well represented, and most of his small landscapes are creditable works. No. 56, “The Edge of the Range near Toowoomba”, a large painting, is disappointing after an examination of some of his other work. The foreground is decidedly weak.’ In general, he had more critical success with the smaller scale.

In 1893 he was sharing a studio in Ruthven Street, Toowoomba with another artist, named as T.A. Lindsey in the 1893 QAS catalogue. The Queenslander reported an unusual event that took place on 26 July of that year:

Mr Wilson and Mr Lindsay [sic] invited a large number of their friends to an exhibition of paintings at their studio, Ruthven-street, on Tuesday. The principal pictures on view were ‘The Kangaroo Hunt,’ painted in collaboration by Mr Wilson and Mr Lindsay; the portrait of Miss Wilson, by Mr Wilson; and ‘The Buckjumper’ by Mr Lindsay. An exhibition of paintings is quite a novelty in Toowoomba, and with the aid of tea and delicious cake a most pleasant afternoon was spent.19

Identification of this artist is difficult because of confusion over his name, but a likely candidate is the English artist Samuel Arthur Lindsey (usually known as S. Arthur Lindsey) (c. 1859–1952), who would have been a young man around 24 years of age in 1893. He went on to have a successful career as a miniature artist in England, but two of his larger gouache pictures are held in the National Library Collection in Canberra. Both depict bush scenes in the Darling Downs and are dated to around 1894. Indeed, one scene (Kangaroo Sticking, Darling Downs, Queensland, signed and dated ‘Queensld. 94’) has a subject that is very similar to that of the large oil painted in collaboration with Wilson. Whether Lindsey met Wilson in London and joined him in Toowoomba for some antipodean adventures, or whether they met in Queensland, is unknown. At any rate, Lindsey’s time in Australia must have been limited since he only participated in the one exhibition in Queensland and his active exhibition career in England commenced in 1902.20

When exhibited with the QAS, The Kangaroo Hunt received another mixed review, with the Queenslander critic noting that it ‘has at all events the merit of evincing an appreciation of Australian scenery and of the picturesque side of

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Wilson's other paintings in the exhibition, eight solo works, received no mention. In other words, he does not seem to have taken the local art world by storm. While cake and pictures might meet with approval, the market for art was very small and already dominated by prominent local artists such as Rivers and Isaac Walter Jenner (1836–1902). The extremes of drought and flood experienced in the early 1890s were another likely disincentive for the artist. Wilson and his family were on their way back to England by 1894. They settled in Richmond, Surrey, but the link with Queensland was a strong one: he sent pictures of scenes from his travels — mainly Italian — to be exhibited with the QAS in 1894 and followed these with English landscape scenes or genre pieces up until 1913. He also donated works — mainly student copies after old masters — to the fledgling Queensland Art Gallery. He (and his siblings) probably held the lease on Pilton until 1910, and in general he was uneasily situated with regard to nationality and status, an Englishman in Queensland and an Australian in England.

One of the pictures sent from England in 1894 was soundly criticised: 'W.G. Wilson's “Fishing Boat on the Java Sea” (58) bears no trace of servile toil. It is a small picture, and hangs high, and we will hold it excused. In the Java Sea — who can say? It may be that water is no longer transparent.' Two fruit pictures sent to the 1897 International Exhibition excited no interest, but later critical comment was favourable. The Cradle of the Deep was praised in 1900 for its power in evoking emotions and described as ‘an admirable study of an angry sea, remarkable alike for the spontaneity and naturalness of its treatment’, while his other small pictures were included in general praise for ‘little bits of landscape — exceedingly pretty some of them’ which ‘lighten up the walls agreeably’. In 1905, A Bit of Old Hastings and Pond in Richmond Park were described as ‘charming little pictures’.

The charm continued in 1908 when the Queenslander critic wrote that his View on the Thames was ‘a small but very charming landscape. The colouring is soft and subdued, and the whole scene is treated in a picturesque manner, with considerable finish.’ Titles similar to those used in 1905 recur in 1913, but the pictures were posted to Brisbane in that year. Nonetheless, this suggests that Wilson was reworking traditional subjects.

Wilson also began to exhibit with the newly formed London Salon of the Allied Artists Association, beginning in their second year in 1909 and continuing to 1912. There was no selection committee, so all members were guaranteed to have up to five works hung. However, by 1912 more avant-garde artists were exhibiting with this group, and in 1913 Kandinsky was included amongst their number. Wilson’s small landscapes would have seemed exceedingly old-fashioned. The titles suggest some further travel (to Malta, the Torres Strait, the Red Sea) or perhaps again, reworking of old sketches. World War I marks the end of his active career, and he died aged 75 in 1924, still living in Richmond. As a member of London’s ‘legion of practising artists’, Wilson did not make an impact. Even in the small art world of late nineteenth century Queensland, where he received some attention, he was
nevertheless a minor (albeit competent) artist. However, his work is of interest because of his background, and because of the contrasting ways in which he depicted the Darling Downs landscape in the 1870s and early 1890s.  

**Pleasing Bits of Landscape**

Wilson’s professional training resulted in a dramatic increase in his skills in the handling of paint, composition and perspective, but most significant is a change in subject-matter and overall approach. While the 1870s small watercolour paintings and sketches concentrate on Pilton Station house and the achievement of its elaborate formal garden, plus his experiences in the landscape, riding or shooting, the later small oil pictures of the Darling Downs region that are now in the collections of the TRAG and the UAM focus on the landscape. But Wilson is not interested in painting the easily identifiable features of well-known picturesque sites in the manner of illustrations included in the *Queenslander* (Figure 4), but rather in capturing characteristic local scenes and recording their various moods by depicting different times of day, seasons and changing light effects. In other words, his later approach is a poetic one.

For example, in *Landscape Near Toowoomba, Darling Downs*, 1890 (Figure 5), there is a concentration on light effects that create a mood of melancholy (such as the blue-red hills, the gold-red sky with a silvery full moon), augmented by the dead tree and branch lying on the ground. All combine to suggest the passing of the day and the seasons. The capturing of the transparency of the trees

![Figure 4: “The Sanatorium of Queensland”, The Queenslander, 21 January 1893, p.](image-url)
Figure 5: William George Wilson, *Landscape near Toowoomba, Darling Downs*, 1890. Oil on board, 30.5 x 19 cm. Collection of The University of Queensland.
Figure 6: William George Wilson, *Darling Downs Landscape (Winter)*, 1893. Oil on board, 19 x 31.5 cm. Collection of the University of Queensland.

Figure 7: William George Wilson, *Untitled*, 1891–93. Oil on board, 19 x 30.5 cm. Collection of the University of Queensland.
and the variations in light are both very skilful in his winter landscape, *Darling Downs Landscape (Winter)*, 1893 (Figure 6). It is also a more enclosed view: the foreground is dark but it is possible to see through the trees to the sunny middle ground and the distant hills, purple on the left and red on the right.

Another picture depicts a house with extensive grounds: *Untitled*, 1891–93 (Figure 7). However, there is none of the specificity or detail of Wilson's earlier works of Pilton. One picture, titled *Pilton*, 1891 (TRAG), shows the Pilton Plain, dominated by two tall grass trees in the foreground rather than the station house. In 1851 Martens also depicted grass trees on the Pilton Plain, but his picture is a pencil sketch of a distinctive type of vegetation, not a finished painting. When Martens painted station houses they were usually part of a wider view, but always clearly visible. Martens always produced topographically precise works, albeit with some touches of picturesque romanticism. In contrast, Wilson’s small picture of *Toowoomba, Qld, 1891–93* (Figure 8) makes clear his lack of interest in descriptive topography: a topographical painter would have selected a viewpoint that enabled depiction of a wide view with the different features of the town clearly demarcated, but here we have a tree and bushes plus two cows as the most dominant objects in the mid-ground, obscuring the view of the distant town.

Another view of Toowoomba dating from 1891 (TRAG) is interesting because, although again he does not aim to give a detailed, informative description of the town (indeed the most prominent feature is the empty foreground with the red-dirt street passing obliquely across it), what is recognisable is the square tower of the post office in the distant middle ground and the row of telegraph poles climbing up the hill at the edge of the town, in the middle of the picture. These signs of modernity suggest that Toowoomba is a progressive town, one in contact with the rest of the world, rather than an isolated country village. Overall, his vision is not nostalgic, but it is highly selective.

Wilson brought to these works a trained eye, well versed in the classical landscape tradition (remember his silver medal for the copy of Richard Wilson), but also presumably a knowledge of current landscape developments in Britain. As well, he was possibly familiar with the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* held in Melbourne in 1889, and the sort of work it contained. His time at the Royal Academy Schools coincided with attendance by other Australian artists, notably Charles Richardson (1853–1932), who studied there between 1882 and 1886 and was a contributor to the *9 by 5 Exhibition*. Wilson's extant Queensland works are painted on small cedar panels that are all the same size and shape, perhaps manufactured for use in wall panels or for furniture. This may echo the Melbourne artists' use of cigar box lids, but it may also just reflect a common practice of the period. Certainly he is interested in the same sorts of light effects as the Heidelberg group, but his handling is tighter, adhering to a more academic approach rather than the freely executed square brush strokes characteristic of English and Australian *plein-air* painting.

Also different is the lack of people in Wilson’s later pictures: they are curiously unpopulated although the country scenes he chooses to paint are all of settled areas,
Figure 8: William George Wilson, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, 1891–93. Oil on board, 31.5 x 19 cm. Collection of the University of Queensland.
used for grazing. He depicts the landscape he knew well from his years working on Pilton Station, but he gives the viewer an outsider’s experience based on an aesthetic appreciation of the landscape and the delicacy of his handling of paint and hue in representing its warm, dry tones. No suggestions of disputes over land usage between graziers and small farmers on their selections or hardships due to the vagaries of the weather disturb the harmony of these small scenes. There are also no signs of the original inhabitants of the region, although the large grass trees of Pilton are suggestive. Henry Stuart Russell describes how he mistook grass trees for Aborigines when he first came to the Darling Downs in his *Genesis of Queensland*, and this was a common trope. Overall, there is a certain detachment that is not evident in his earlier works from the 1870s. Although the work of a less-skilled artist, the earlier sketches have a vibrancy and intimacy that is missing in the 1890s pictures. The later pictures lack this sense of being at home.

But most importantly, the lack of figures means that these pictures failed to answer contemporary calls for distinctively ‘Australian’ pictures of bush workers. Rivers had produced such a work with his *Woolshed*, exhibited at the Queensland National Association in 1891. Wilson’s one foray into this genre was the collaboration with Lindsey, and even here the subject was sporting (a kangaroo hunt) rather than hard work. It may be that Wilson had decided that figure painting was not his forte, with Lindsey perhaps supplying the figures in this scene. In any case, his own background as a landowner would complicate any identification with the hardships of the worker.

It is noteworthy that, beginning in the mid-1890s, this subject in this locality was treated with resounding success in the illustrated texts of Steele Rudd. First published as short stories in the *Bulletin* magazine and later republished by the Bookstall Company in the early 1900s, the texts were illustrated by numerous artists. For example, when the *Bulletin* published *On Our Selection* in book form in 1899, it included illustrations ‘from Drawings by A.J. Fischer, A.H. Fullwood, G.W. Lambert, Fred Leist, F.P. Mahony and Alf Vincent’. Later editions of Rudd’s works were illustrated by Lionel Lindsay, Norman Lindsay and Ruby Lindsay, among others. These artists helped to develop a cast of ‘typical’ Australian bush characters.

In contrast, any nationalist impulse on Wilson’s part is confined to the depiction of ‘Australian’ — or, more specifically, Queensland — landscapes. Seen in this light, it is significant that four of the landscapes were included in the *Exhibition of Australian Art* held in London at the Grafton Galleries in 1898 (see Figure 9 for one example), where ‘All the Pictures exhibited were painted in Australia by Australian artists’. When exhibited at the QAS exhibitions, his small local landscapes were not for sale, but their lack of topographical specificity would probably have impeded their success with local buyers.

As well, the selling of pictures locally meant negotiating social complexities. His social standing, marriage and age (he was now in his early to mid-forties) would all preclude adoption of the bohemian persona popular with slightly younger artists in Sydney and Melbourne at this time. Afternoon tea at the gallery is very genteel rather than bohemian. Furthermore, as an article in the *Brisbane Courier* argued...
with regard to 'the depressing insignificance of the colonial market for art':

It often happens that the productions of the artist, like the predictions of the prophet in old times, do not count for much in his own country if that be newly settled. Buyers of pictures are of two classes. There are those who love art and therefore are glad if circumstances allow them in greater or less degree to gratify their taste. They are not likely to be prejudiced against local productions. Because they love art they sympathise with artists. They are glad if it is in their power to beautify and enrich their homes, and at the same time help men and women whom they profoundly respect for art's sake. But there are others whose inclination to buy pictures is rooted in the vulgar desire to display their wealth, to whom art is mere furniture, and who either buy abroad because they imagine it enhances the reputation they are trying to establish, or buy at home because it enables them to patronise persons who in everything but the possession of money are far above themselves.

The 'courage and capacity for hard and persistent effort' were also needed for local success, according to this critic.22

Whereas his father had been able to achieve success in colonial Queensland due to a combination of fortunate timing, social contacts, astute business dealings and competent management of his land, Wilson's task was more difficult in the...
increasingly complex colonial environment of the late nineteenth century. Given his family background, success in his chosen field would have been important for him; perhaps part of the impetus for returning to Queensland was the idea that his talents would be more easily appreciated there than in England. In the event, as a member of the local gentry with an independent income, Wilson seems to have decided to avoid the sort of patronage outlined above. As well, perhaps his courage and persistence were also limited (here his relatively advanced age was probably a factor). Instead, he opted for the life of the English gentleman in Surrey with art pursued as a leisure activity, supplying the Queensland market with the occasional charming work depicting either an exotic foreign locale or a bit of English landscape catering to nostalgic ideas about ‘home’.

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Notes


5. For Mount Flinders and the Wilson brothers, see Angela Collyer, ‘The Process of Settlement: Land Occupation and Usage in Boonah 1842–1870s’ (MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1991), 36, 66–68, 89, 95, 127, 149, 157–58; and ‘Country Sketches. No. XIII. The Peak Mountain’, The Queensland Times, 27 October 1877, n.p. Although the latter suggests that Robert died in 1848, a will for Robert Wilson, ‘residing at Moreton Bay of New South Wales’, is recorded in the Edinburgh Sheriff Court Inventories with the date 29.9.1847 (Ref SC70/1/68); there is also a death notice: Sydney Morning Herald, 25 August 1847. The address given here

For the official record of W.G. Wilson's birth, see Archives Authority of New South Wales, 'Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1787-1856. Micofilm' (Sydney: Archives Authority of New South Wales, 1984). His father's address is given as Mount Flinders, County of Sunley, Moreton Bay, and his occupation as 'Settler'. William George was baptised in Sydney at the Scots Presbyterian Church on 14 May 1850. With regard to the likely birthplace, it is known that the family resided at Kangaroo Point in the early 1860s because of the isolation of living in the bush (see 'Country Sketches') and the second child, Mary Elizabeth Wilson, was born in Brisbane, at 'View Cliff Cottage' on 25 March 1851: Sydney Morning Herald, 8 April 1851. William is also described as a 'resident of Brisbane' when standing for election to the New South Wales Legislative Council in 1851: Moreton Bay Courier, 12 July 1851, n.p. See also Mary McConel, Memories of Days Long Gone by the Wife of an Australian Pioneer (Brisbane?: privately printed, 1905), 33 and 35. Mary's birth is noted above; Robina Jane Wilson (Father — William Wilson, Mother — Elizabeth) was born on 18 December 1852: Queensland Pioneers' Index. On David McConel, see Nehemiah Bartley, Australian Pioneers and Reminiscences: Together with Portraits of Some of the Founders of Australia, ed. J.J. Knight (Brisbane: Gordon and Gotch, 1896), 202-05.

Henry Stuart Russell, The Genesis of Queensland (Sydney: Turner & Henderson, 1888), 453. Also Moreton Bay Courier Extraordinary, 14 January 1850, 1-2. This special issue of the newspaper notes that the convener of the meeting, Dr Dorsey, 'proposed that William Wilson, Esq., should take the chair. The proposition was seconded by Pamck Leslie, Esq., and unanimously carried' (p. 1). Disagreements led to this meeting being dissolved and a new meeting was convened nearby, but William Wilson was again appointed as Chair. See also Moreton Bay Courier (MBC), 19 January 1850, 2. Russell and Wilson probably did not encounter each other again since the time they both spent later in Queensland did not coincide and therefore he probably did not associate Wilson with Pilton rather than Peak Mountain Station.


Birth details for the other children are as follows: Ann Salmond was born in 1855, Frederick James on 13 January 1858 and Louisa Rosabella on 26 December 1861: Familysearch. For the family's return to Queensland, see 'Country Sketches'. The article notes that a Mr Gammie rented the station for 'four or five years' while the Wilsons were away. For Pollet Loftus Cardew, see Matt J. Fox, The History of Queensland: Its People and Industries. An Historical and Commercial Review, Descriptive and Biographical Facts, Figures and Illustrations. An Epitome of Progress, three vols, vol. 1 (Brisbane: States Publishing Company, 1919), 467. For the educational practices of this class, see Mary Macleod Banks, Memories of Pioneer Days in Queensland (London: Heath Cranton, 1931), a book of reminiscences of life on the land by one of Mary McConel's daughters. On p. 52 she tells a tale that took place when her older siblings were away being educated in Britain. For the obituary, see 'Mr F.J. Wilson', The Times (London), 4 October 1926, 16.

Queensland Post Office Directory (Brisbane, 1874), 250. On the lease of Pilton, see Shirley Irene Murray, Pilton: Its History and Its Hall (Clifton: Shirley Irene Murray, 1995), 10. See also 'William Wilson — Papers' (1865-1890), Mitchell Library A5345, Sydney, which has a number of documents relating to Wilson's business dealings and various partnerships such as
his agreement with Henry Bates Fitz (1863–69). For the sale of Peak Mountain, see Collyer, 149. On pp.157–58, Collyer notes that this was the official sale date, but ‘that partnership had been transacting business for the run “on behalf of William Wilson” since early the previous year’.

11 Steele Rudd, Green Grey Homestead (Sydney: Macquarie Press; 1934), 127. For Rudd’s time on Pilton, see Eric Drayton Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, Creator of on Our Selection, Dad and Dave (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1976), 46.


13 For the information about Martens’ Flinders Peak, see J.G. Steele, Conrad Martens in Queensland: The Frontier Travels of a Colonial Artist (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 25, 119. Thanks also to John Steele for a personal communication on this topic. For Martens’ work in Queensland, see Steele; also the essays on this topic in Queensland Review 9(1) (2002).

14 Queensland Government Gazette 15 (1874), 4 records that ‘William Wilson, Esquire’ was ‘summoned to the Legislative Council’ on 2 January 1874. His address is listed as ‘Pilton, Darling Downs’. Thanks to Denver Beanland, 29 October 2004, personal communication, for help in finding this information. Note that the wrong William Wilson is identified as serving as a member of the Legislative Council between 1874 and 1878 (he was absent during the last two years) in D.B. Waterson, Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860–1929 (Second Revised Edition) with an Outline Atlas of Queensland Electorates 1860, 1872, 1878, 1887, 1910 & 1921 (Sydney: Casket Publications, 2001), 203. Waterson suggests that it is William Wilson (1832–1903), Brisbane mercantile agent, but the Queensland Government Gazette lists the member’s address as Pilton, Darling Downs throughout this period. Information from the 1881 British census shows the family at the Earls Court Square address along with three domestic servants: Familysearch. Information about Wilson’s studies at the Royal Academy was obtained from Andrew Potter, email, 8 December 2004 (Royal Academy Library). Elizabeth Wilson’s dates are 15 April 1821–27 May 1883 (information from tombstone at Kensal Green Cemetery). For William Wilson’s death notice, see The Queenslander, 18 June 1887, 961.

15 For W.G. Wilson’s marriage, see The Times, 28 September 1889, 1. Georgieanna was the ‘daughter of Thomas Watkins Wilson, MD, HM Ind Med Service, Bengal (ret.)’. Records of the sisters’ deaths were announced in The Times: 10 August 1934, 1 (Robina Jane Wilson died aged 81 on 8 August 1934); 8 November 1938, 1 (Mary Elizabeth Wilson, ‘eldest daughter of the late William Wilson Esq’ died aged 87 on 6 November 1938). The Times, 24 May 1892, 1 records that Annie Salmond Wilson married Lt-Colonel C.F. Thomas, Bengal Infantry, at St Cuthbert’s Church, South Kensington. Her death in Madras on 19 June 1893 is noted in The Times, 14 July 1893, 1. The entry states that she was the ‘third daughter of the late William Wilson Esq. of Pilton, Queensland’. F.J. Wilson’s obituary records his marriage in 1888 to Mary Phoebe Birch, ‘daughter of Colonel E.A. Birch, I.M.S., a well-known authority on health in the tropics’: ‘Mr F.J. Wilson’, 16.

16 For the birth announcements, see The Queenslander, 28 February 1891, 393; The Darling Downs Gazette and General Advertiser, 25 February 1891, 2. The birth took place at Kingston, a ‘first class boarding establishment’ (according to newspaper advertisements) in Russell Street, Toowoomba. The son’s name is recorded as part of the 1901 British census information, living with his father at 12 Dynevor Road, Richmond, Surrey (www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk). For the mortgage document, see ‘William Wilson — Papers’, A5345, No. 58. Information about the management of Pilton was obtained from the Clifton Divisional Board Valuation Records: personal communication from Shirley Murray, 21 February 2005. Many thanks to Mrs Murray for her help.

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18 The Queenslander, 13 August 1892, 310. For Brisbane society at this time, see Ronald Lawson, Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1973), especially 226-28. The fact that the address entry for Wilson in the 1902 QAS annual exhibition catalogue takes the form 'Geo. Wilson c/o R. G. Rivers' suggests continuing contact between the two men and thus the possibility of a friendship. Rivers had travelled to England in 1902 and must have returned to Brisbane with the pictures; Glenn R. Cooke, ‘Research Notes’. Queensland Heritage, January 2001 (manuscript held in QAG Library).


21 The Queenslander, 12 August 1893, 307.

22 See Brown and Maynard for details of pictures exhibited with the QAS; for his donations to the QAG, see Illustrated Catalogue 11, 13, 25, 27 and 28; and Cooke for a recent discussion of their present status.

23 The Queenslander, 11 August 1894, 261 (‘Java Sea’); Brown and Maynard 38: 45, 39: 116 (fruit pictures); The Queenslander, 22 September 1900, 639-40; The Queenslander, 21 October 1905, 8.

24 See ‘Minutes of Royal Queensland Art Society’, in Records 1901–1987 (Fryer Library, University of Queensland, St Lucia). Meeting held Tuesday, 19 August 1913, Correspondence: a letter had been received notifying the society ‘that a parcel of pictures from W.G. Wilson (England) was lying at the GPO, with £2 duty to pay thereon.’ For the review, see The Queenslanders, 10 October 1908, 357; for the 1913 pictures, see Brown and Maynard, 138: 32, 33.

25 For his London Salon works, see The London Salon of the Allied Artists’ Association, exhibition catalogues 1909–12 on microfiche, Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire: Chadwyck Healey; Teaneck, New Jersey: Somerset House, 1975–79. He did not ever exhibit with the Royal Academy, contrary to the suggestion in Johnson and Greutzner, 553. Although a William G. Wilson exhibited works at the RA in 1908, 1910 and 1914, he was an architect exhibiting architectural drawings. For Kandinsky, see The Times, 24 March 1908, 14. For the changing nature of the London Salon, see the reviews in the London Times between 1909 and 1913: 12 July 1909, 3; 11 July 1910, 16; 8 July 1911, 13; 30 July 1912, 8; 7 July 1913, 11. By 1913, the reviewer felt that the ‘effects of artistic freedom’ were valuable because of the experimentation it encouraged although the exhibition also included ‘pictures that one never sees elsewhere, except above the sideboard in sea-side lodgings’ For notice of Wilson’s death, see St Catherine’s House Index, July–September 1924, Vol 2a, 462. The final quotation comes from The Times, 13 July 1908, 10.

26 See Steele, Figure 48 (sketch of grass trees near Pilton) and Plates 11, 14 (station houses).

27 For developments in English landscape at this time, see Ysanne Holt, British Artists and the Modernist Landscape (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). A short biography of Richardson included in Jane Clark and Bridget Whitelaw, Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond (International Cultural Corporation of Australia in association with the National Gallery of Victoria, 1985), 24–25. For the Heidelberg approach, see Bonyhady, 135–54.

28 Russell, 200 mentions the grass trees; for background information on labour and land disputes,

On nationalism and bush workers, see Jane Clark, 'Naturalism and Nationalism', in Clark and Bridget, 128–49; for Rivers' painting, see Brown and Maynard, 28: 3165; and Bradbury and Cooke, 26.

For the quotation, see Arthur H. Davis ('Steele Rudd'), *On Our Selection* (Sydney: The Bulletin, 1899), title page; for more about Rudd's work and his illustrators, see www.courts.qld.gov.au/library/exhibition/rudd/life/text_01.htm (accessed 31 May 2005).
