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Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia

Harry Allen (Ed.)

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Wilhelm von Blandowski, anglicised in this book as William Blandowski, was born in 1822, the youngest son of 13 children whose parents were minor Polish aristocrats. His father died unwisely young, leaving his family unable to keep themselves in the style to which they had been accustomed (p. 4). Somehow you sense from Harry Allen's introduction to this book that all that followed for Wilhelm came from his family and class; his 'difficult' personality, a certain sense of entitlement perhaps and a grand vision of how to do things that finally, in his own lifetime, was bold and unsuccessful.

This 2010 publication, however, provides him with heroic and deserved redemption. It contains a reproduction of the plates for the book he planned — *Australia or Australia in 142 Photographic Illustrations From 10 Years Experience*. Then as now longevity of experience is a claim to knowledge and authenticity.

Taking the classic route of the youngest son he emigrated to Australia in his late twenties in 1849, a sea passage that was probably financed by Hamburg collectors' desire for Australian plant specimens. Blandowski travelled up and down the Murray River making drawings of what he saw. He unsuccessfully approached both the colonial secretary and the governor general for a position.

He did have better luck in Victoria. Drawn into the gold rush in the Victorian city of Castlemaine he became a member of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria that then transformed into the Royal Society of Victoria in 1859 (p. 5). Through good connections Blandowski was the first employee as curator and government zoologist of what became the Melbourne Museum. During the next few years he acquired photographic skills and made excursions to identify and acquire natural history and geological specimens.

It is his fourth most important expedition, a journey along the Murray, he makes camp for seven months at a place called Mondellmin (p. 6) and employs local Aboriginal people — Yerri Yerri men women and children — as collectors of natural history specimens. It is here that he records the daily lives of this society. This combination of records, both ecological and social, was valuable and rare notes, Allen, in a period of intense change, brought about by invasion and subsequent

colonisation (p. 6). Blandowski employed skilled draughts men and taxidermists to document the natural history specimens. But crucially he also documented local Yerri Yerri names for fish and animals. As distinguished linguist Luise Hercus notes in her short essay at the back of this book, the collection of these names at Mondellium provides a word list for a language now extinct, along with all the other languages of the peoples Blandowski visited on the Murray River and the Kulin languages of Victoria (p. 171).

It is also on this expedition that he leaves his Melbourne collecting camp and billets himself in more comfortable inns and homesteads. Although successfully received on his return to Melbourne Blandowski's grandiosity again lands him in trouble when he attempts to name in English the fresh water fish that he has documented on the expedition after members of the philosophical institute, attracting opprobrium and ridicule for his manner of so doing. He thus lost both the political and social capital he had established and the opportunity to be the first to name the fish in English.

After further fallings out with authority and his decision to keep for himself the materials he had gathered on the Murray expeditions he left for Hamburg in 1859 and despite much planning never returned to Australia. Here he lectured on his Australian travels to learned societies and lobbied Australian officials unsuccessfully for funds to publish his illustrations. Australia perhaps takes on a mythic lure for him, the land far far away, the land of his youth too.

Back in Gleiwitz Blandowski, where he is today seen as a pioneer of Polish photography, established a photographic studio. Allen notes the irony that Blandowski's photographs made in Gleiwitz (p. 14), many of local Jewish clients also recorded another world that is now lost, or was wiped away in 1938. After his death in his mid-50s one of Blandowski's sisters donated his sketch books and plates to the Royal Library in Berlin.

Subscribing to the 'dying race' idea about Aboriginal people (p. 8), Blandowski was also outspoken about their treatment, something that once again did him no favours socially among the colonists. In one plate showing the cluster of Aboriginal people with colonisers at a home-

stead he notes that the Aborigines are paid for their work with meager rations of flour.

Choosing a large format for this publication has not enabled correspondingly large scale reproductions of the plates. The decision to use a portrait format when mostly the plates are of landscape orientation, left me peering and squinting at the details in the distant landscape scenes especially. The plates are 'photographs' only in as much as Blandowski had his engravings photographed for reproduction. It is knowledge through visual images that *Australia* wished to convey. This was at a time when European collecting as a method for knowing the world was still in its heyday.

In some ways he was something of what we would now recognise as a conceptual artist. He knew what he wanted to achieve, he had creative ideas but did not produce the finished plates himself instead employing more accomplished artists to redraw his sketches so that the plates are collages. As one of these artists did the redrawing in Germany the results are sometimes inaccurate as Allen notes (p. 15); an illustration shows a kangaroo being cooked atop a fire not in an earth oven.

The portrait format enables Wilhelm's captions and Allen's notes to appear below each plate rather than say as an appendix like footnotes. Perhaps though this emphasis on text signals our lack of ease with knowledge as image or at least these antique plates as visual knowledge or encounter. I confess that I had trouble with them myself until I read the text fully. The world of the plates seemed at first strange and impenetrable.

The plates although beginning with natural history and landscape contain the presence of human figures sometimes in ways that, as the authors note, are reminiscent of classical European religious landscape art where a figure gestures as in plate 5 to the storm, to the lightning like some figure from Greek mythology. The country is peopled, there is a presence, little vestige of terra nullius here.

Allen writes clearly and accessibly situating Blandowski's observations of Aboriginal societies in the wider literature of cultural history and anthropology. Games, toys, hunting practices, men cutting bark from a tree for a canoe, women grinding seeds, mass dancing, 'tattoos' (cicatrice patterns) are all shown here in the plates. There is no sense of Aboriginal people as specimens, as themselves natural history. Rather they are almost always portrayed as socially engaged with one another or at least engaged with us the viewers. In a post script written by Blandowski himself re printed at the end of the plates he asks the reader (the German audience he had in mind); what of the Aborigines hitherto 'deemed unimportant' (p. 163).

Here in the plates are bough shelters, bark lean-tos, men sharpening their spears beside a boab tree, encounters between Blandowski (often heroically alone) and local people who offer him water, Yerri Yerri people in their bark canoes. Plate 22 is telling. Here is Blandowski, the tall be-hatted hero outside his tent with members of his collecting team receiving the evening visit of the Yerri Yerri laden with bush foods to trade for 'tobacco, clay pipes, flour sugar fish hooks and cord' (p. 41). There are a cornucopia of creatures — turtles, crabs, lizards, snakes and possums shown like a Dutch still life or perhaps a Goya painting of dead fish. The man with his back to us, a roo slung round his neck is, the notes tell the reader, copied from another illustration of 'Jimmy Bigfoot'. Elsewhere figures are apparently taken from other sources and collaged into larger scenes. Between these social scenes are drawn plates of birds or eggs or marsupials or fish imparting a sense of the total ecology of the country.

The first plate of *Australia* is a diagram of interlocking circles showing the connections between geology, geography, vegetation, animals, aborigines and paleontology. The book as a whole (i.e., with its accompanying essays) offers further interlocking realms. Blandowski's biography and the plates he created make possible a link for descendants of those Aboriginal people who are depicted hunting, playing, disposing of their dead as described in the rather poignant preface by archaeologist Mark Dugay-Grist of the Nyeri Nyeri (Yerri Yerri) people whose lands were among those Blandowski visited. Plate 26, which is redrawn from a photograph, shows what might be a Yerri Yerri family group of three women and two men looking out at us.

Blake Andrew's essay points to the wonder and the myth making capacities in these plates. There is both Blandowski's own sense of wonder at what he has seen, 'the unbelievably large' fishing nets used on the Murray darling confluence and Blake Andrew's own at this 'sci-fi tourist' (p. 168). In one plate showing a huge kangaroo Wilhelm notes state that such a roo might grab a person and drown him. In other illustrations on hunting emu they are so stupid that the hunter can sneak up on them carrying a branch in front of him as disguise. Scenes of nubile young women dancing in short grass skirts look like works of imagination. Andrews is especially intrigued by the plates showing death and burial architecture and uses them in his own art work; history as myth and myth as history. Where, he asks, are the large-scale history paintings of Australia — some of these composite plates of Blandowski hint at that. There are many layers in this publication, a book containing a book.