‘Victoria had now to guide her own destinies’: Good and bad government in Strutt’s Melbourne

Strutt’s memoirs of his life in Victoria fondly recall his years in ‘this noble and prosperous colony, with all its wealth and future possibilities’. But the colony was threatened by natural disaster, the social upheavals of the gold rush and crime. According to Strutt, ‘the floating wealth to be found almost anywhere in the Colony, consequent upon the discovery of gold ... stimulated the ticket-of-leave men [former convicts], only too loosely watched over, to commit terrible depredations, the Police Force, not being at this time sufficient organized or numerous to hold the well-known desperadoes in check’.

Newspaper reports of the ‘outrages’ on St Kilda Road expressed dismay that such a brazen theft could take place in broad daylight so close to the city. The Argus attributed these and other crimes to the ‘general mismanagement of the police’ by the superintendent, Mr Sturt, who had ‘allowed the whole police system of the Colony to crumble away into perfect disorganisation and inefficiency’.

Strutt’s painting, structured as a moral allegory in the manner of the Victorian era, uses a cast of social types to symbolically map the dilemma of the new colony. The representatives of civil society – a tradesman, a lawyer, prosperous businessmen and gentlemen – are contrasted with criminals revelling in their spoils while their leader surveys his prisoners. Centrally positioned, a young, white-clad woman representing the maiden Victoria is torn between the stability of good government and the perils of bad.
Daring depredations on the St Kilda and Brighton Road

In 1852, St Kilda Road was an unsealed track winding south-east from the city before connecting the developing communities of St Kilda and Brighton. On the afternoon of Saturday 16 October 1852, colonists travelling on this track near Little Brighton [Elsternwick] were bailed up by bushrangers. In all, between a dozen and twenty people were robbed in succession. The *Melbourne Morning Herald* marvelled at the systematic nature of the theft: ‘as fast as [the bushrangers] disposed of one they tied him up to their other victims, in order thereby to effectively guard against alarm or interruption; hiding them in a thicket, where they were ordered to sit down in a ring facing one another, while one fellow stood guard’.

With newspaper reports lamenting the lack of security on St Kilda Road, the police launched a prompt search for the gang variously dubbed the St Kilda or Brighton bushrangers. By the following Saturday, four suspects were in custody: a J Williams, James Lewis, James Ball and Alfred Pritchard. Firm identification had not been made but it was reported that ‘Ball is supposed to have been the chief director of the gang, who kept comparatively aloof, and studiously concealed a proportion of his face whilst the outrages were being perpetrated’. In the early hours of Wednesday 27 October, detectives Fleming and Murray captured John Williams and John Flannigan in Flinders Lane, and found upon them £102 cash along with other stolen property. Both were former convicts from Van Diemen’s Land. Positive identification followed, and the pair were tried, convicted and sentenced to thirty years hard labour. Williams was eventually executed for a later murder.
Infra-red technology and William Strutt’s *Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852*

William Strutt’s *Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852* was extensively altered by the artist as he worked towards a finished image.

Sean Loughrey (the University of Melbourne Conservation Service) completed a visual mapping of the surface of the painting, from the top paint layer through to the canvas layer using infra-red technology with photographic recording equipment. The infra-red mapping revealed a number of areas where changes had been made to the composition of the painting. Infra-red examination exposed a group of figures in the middle ground of the picture that was completely painted out and replaced by distant cattle and a cart. A standing figure (possibly a woman) in the left foreground was also discovered, as were changes to the triangular grouping of the bushrangers on the left side of the painting. Examination revealed a shadow to the right of the central bushranger’s head, changes to the composition of the horses, and the addition of various props including the rifle, trade tools and hats.

Add picture to this panel (file titled Strutt_.2); may be cropped slightly as necessary for aesthetic reasons.