Experimental Gentlemen go looking for a new world

Stepping ashore, the moist sand gives way gently underfoot, embracing the soles of your shoes. After nearly a year on ship, it is like a giddy caress to your weary sea legs. The shore is golden, reflecting the bright autumnal light with the sizzling clarity of finely wrought crystal. It catches your eye and you are briefly stunned. It is as though you have passed into a brand new world, a world of untamed novelty where every plant and animal seems to astonish and confound. Everything is different here. You have stepped into the Antipodes, where natural order is reversed and nothing is as it seems.

From the late seventeenth century, it became the grand mission of kings and empires to fill the last cartographic voids of the atlas. Under royal decree, the ships of the admiralty were dispatched to the unknown corners of the globe. Alongside sailors, marines and navigators, they carried a new breed of gentlemen—men like Joseph Banks, TH Huxley and Charles Darwin—ready to face the perils of a long voyage in order to bring the new world under scientific dominion.

The salty sea-dogs of the Royal Navy dubbed these new travellers 'experimental gentlemen.' But even they were unprepared for the shock of the Antipodes, where novelty was the natural condition and astonishment an almost permanent state of being. The sights of the new world were so challenging that they defied artistic description and sent seismic reverberations through the old world, challenging the way Europeans thought about art, life and their place in the universe.
Experimental Gentlemen have their first brush with the natives

It never gets this hot in Deptford. You can feel beads of sweat forming a sticky membrane between your neck and the collar of your thick, red, military issue coat. The sun is dizzying as your major reads an official decree of possession; its legalistic prose incongruent with this alien wilderness, so far from civilisation.

From the woodlands emerges a group of natives, done up in feathers and furs, their bodies glistening with primitive markings. They are the strangest men you have ever seen; you can barely believe they belong to the same species. You must look strange to them too, but they have had much more experience of visitors. First the Dutch, then the French, now the English.

One of their number approaches your party—their 'chief' you presume—and addresses you in a strange language you cannot understand. You will not note his words in your journal, and so, though he speaks, his voice will be lost to the annals of history.

He leans forward and presents you his hand. Unthinking, you grasp it and shake. It is only later you consider the peculiarity of this transaction. Is a handshake a universal salutation, handed down from our stone-age ancestors? Or is this just some form of mimicry, parroting the gestures of previous visitors? As he slips his hand into yours, you expect it to be cold, like the icy embrace of a fossilised man. But it is warm, human. It feels just like yours.

‘They are indeed a strange people. Without a history, they have no past; without a religion, they have no hope; and without habits of forethought or providence, they can have no future. Their doom is sealed, and all that the civilised man can do, now that the process of annihilation is so rapidly overtaking the Aborigines of Australia, is to take care that the closing hour shall not be hurried on by want, caused by culpable neglect on his part.’

JD Woods, 1879
Experimental Gentlemen in the pursuit of culture

‘On landing in Sydney at the close of the year 1840, my attention was naturally directed to the point of ascertaining to what extent a love and taste for matters connected with art, existed in this distant part of the globe; a subject of deep interest to me, considering how probable it was that, for some years to come, I should remain a resident there.

Much as I had delighted on my arrival in Port Jackson, with the varied beauty of the harbour, and the situation and unexpected extent of the city of Sydney, I must confess my surprise was increased when observing how considerable a taste for the elegancies of life was manifested in the furniture and fittings of the better class of residencies; the walls of many of which were hung with paintings varying in merit, but on the whole, just such as one would be likely to meet with in similar establishments in England.

These circumstances, as well as many others that might be named, will, I think at once show that a feeling for art is rapidly increasing in the Australian colonies, and when we consider their importance to Great Britain, and the character of the people by whom it were first colonised, and who still form a large portion of its population, the fact of its being so must be a matter of high gratification to all who would raise the tone of its society, and who cannot but feel how powerfully influential a taste for the Fine Arts must be in effecting that most desirable object.’

John Skinner Prout, Sydney Morning Herald, 4 May 1849
Sir Russell Grimwade: Experimental Gentleman

Sir Russell Grimwade (1879–1955) was the youngest son of Frederick Sheppard Grimwade who, along with Alfred Felton, founded Felton Grimwade and Company in 1867. In 1905, he completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne.

Born into one of Australia’s wealthiest industrial families, Sir Russell Grimwade was a man of varied passions, which included science, astronomy, automobiles, botany, environmentalism, art and history. On his death, he bequeathed his estate, including his home, Miegunyah, and his extensive collection of artworks and rare books to the University of Melbourne. According to Grimwade, the bequest was ‘an endeavour to express my gratitude to the country that has done me so well and made me so happy. I believe firmly in the principle succinctly expressed by Noblesse oblige’.

Grimwade’s collection of colonial Australiana reflected his interest in a pioneer history to which he felt closely connected. His version of Australian nationalism was not one of bushrangers and stockmen, but of explorers, pastoralists and industrialists—men like James Cook, John Batman, and his father Frederick Sheppard Grimwade. It was a fascination that culminated in 1934, when Russell Grimwade was able to arrange for the purchase and transportation of Cook’s Cottage from Yorkshire to Fitzroy Gardens in Melbourne.

We might now consider this to be an eccentric gesture, just as we might now see Grimwade’s version of Australian identity as quaintly antiquated. However, we should never forget that in donating his collection to the University of Melbourne, Sir Russell hoped that future generations of scholars would continue to engage with Australia’s colonial history, so that, in his own words, ‘the past may be reconstructed and the present understood’. While Grimwade may have disagreed with some of history’s more recent revisions, he would undoubtedly be pleased that his collection was still the source of exploration, engagement and debate.