Chevalier's work is in the picturesque neo-classical European tradition, which was accompanied in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the development of Romanticism in literature and art. The aesthetic categories of the sublime and picturesque encouraged a grandiose genre in landscape art, as seen with English painter J.M.W. Turner and the French artist Eugene Delacroix. Given this background, when Chevalier arrived to Australia in 1855: ‘he found enough in the way of lofty peaks, deep valleys, cascading waterfalls and impenetrable forests to satisfy artistic and public taste for dramatic landscape.’

Nicholas Chevalier was born in St. Petersburg the son of a Russian mother, Tatiana Onofriewna, and Swiss father, Louis Chevalier, who worked as overseer on the estate of an aide-de-camp to Czar Nicholas I, the Prince de Wittgenstein. Nicholas’s early interest in art was stimulated by visits to the Prince’s private collection and in the art collection of the Winter Palace. In 1846 he began studying art in Lausanne, under Jean Sampson Guignard, at the Musée Arlaud. He travelled to London in 1851 and worked as an engraver and lithographer, under Wilhelm Gruner, illustrating noted archaeologist Austen Layard’s 1853 publication, The Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon. Chevalier also exhibited at London’s Royal Academy in 1852 and studied art in Italy during 1853-1854.

Initially, Chevalier came to Australia to investigate his father’s investments on the goldfields. Discovering these ventures to be unsuccessful, he commenced work as an artist on Melbourne Punch. Readily accepted into the city’s art circles, he is recorded as a member of the Melbourne Garrick Club in 1856 with artist S.T. Gill and art critic James Smith. A report of his successful involvement in the Art Union of Victoria’s 1861 exhibition, praised the: ‘…indefatigable industry of Mr. Chevalier …’ In 1864 his oil The Buffalo Ranges, Victoria won the competition and prize of 200 pounds awarded by the Victorian National Gallery – the first Australian work to enter the collection.

In 1858 with natural scientist, Alfred William Howitt, he explored the Dandenong Ranges and Baw Baw Plateau. Howitt’s party set out for the Baw Baws from Ferntree Gully. The group had four members – Alfred, Mr. Bruyeres, who was associated with the Melbourne Museum, Nicholas Chevalier and Eugene von Guérard. Howitt wrote:


The influence behind Nicholas Chevalier’s Buffalo Range from the west is regarded as somewhat enigmatic. Over the years, disagreement has persisted why the artist chose the range as a subject. When studying the historical circumstances surrounding the work, three elements must be closely examined. Chevalier was the product of European art training and an art-orientated upbringing. Then, he journeyed with scientists and explorers on expeditions throughout Victoria, between 1858 and 1864, as an official artist. During this period, he also formed a close association with Austrian painter Eugene von Guérard whose work had a strong impact upon him.

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trousers … old lace up boots – excited, performing a pas seul (solo dance). Our procession seemed to excite no little curiosity as our destination was not very clear to anyone but ourselves…”10

Interestingly, von Guérard visited the Alpine country on a sketching tour with Alfred Howitt again in 1860.11 Howitt wrote: ‘At the top of the Dividing Range … imagine yourself … about twelve hundred feet above the rivers… I called the place …von Guérard’s Range as he was with me at the time’.12

Howitt’s 1858 expedition to the Baw Baws generated new material for both artists. Chevalier and von Guérard sketched in isolation, over many weeks, no doubt influencing each other. Chevalier may have used his material, from the 1858 expedition, to create Buffalo Range from the west. The influence of works by von Guérard, from his own trip to the Great Divide in 1860, must also be considered. Upon von Guérard’s return to Melbourne, Chevalier may have been privy to his friend’s drawings. In the panorama Howitt describes, the Buffalo Range is visible looking westward. This, in fact, could be the inspiration behind Chevalier’s 1862 painting of the range.

Later, Chevalier accompanied Bavarian scientist Professor Georg von Neumayer on two trips around Victoria in 1862 and 1863-64. It has been suggested that Buffalo Range from the west is a product of the 1862 expedition. This is unlikely. A report in the Argus welcoming the party home, clearly states locations visited. The expedition left Geelong, travelled along the coast, and crossed the Otway Ranges to Colac, trekking through Western Victoria to the Grampians. After traversing the Wimmera, they journeyed to Echuca. Eventually, returning south following the Campaspe River. The explorers arrived at Winchelsea in June, and were joined by von Guérard.13 These places are too far from Mount Buffalo for the range to have inspired Chevalier’s 1862 painting. It would appear more likely that Buffalo Range from the west is either the product of the Howitt expedition in 1858, or the influence of von Guérard’s 1860 trip upon Chevalier’s work.

Chevalier’s travels continued. He visited New Zealand three times between 1865 and 1869. In 1869 he was invited by the Duke of Edinburgh to join the royal tour, aboard HMS Galatea, visiting New Zealand, Tahiti, Hawaii, Japan, China and Ceylon. After returning to England in 1871, he was commissioned by Queen Victoria to paint several important royal and state occasions, including the marriage of the Duke of Edinburgh to the Grand Duchess Marie Alexandrovna of Russia at the Winter Palace, St Petersburg, in 1874. He exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1871-1895, dying in London on 15 March 1902.

Selected works by Nicholas Chevalier from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
– Cape Schank, Victoria, c.1860, engraving
– Melbourne from the Yarra, c.1864, engraving and watercolour
– Falls Lorne 1865, 1865, coloured lithograph
– Parker’s River waterfall, Cape Otway, 1865-1866, lithograph and watercolour
– Refuge Cove, Wilson’s Promontory, 1865-1866, lithograph and watercolour

Additional information available at www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Stephen Mead The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2003

9 Walker, p. 94.
10 Correspondence, Alfred Howitt to Anna Mary Howitt, 7 October 1858. Cited Walker, p. 95.
11 Walker, p. 114.
13 The Argus, 2 July 1862, p. 4.