

Alfred Sharpe's forest consciousness in New Zealand and Australia, 1859-1908

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ABSTRACT: In the nineteenth century, many Australasian settlers looked forwards to a time when forests had yielded to 'smiling farms' and bustling towns, when 'primeval' nature had disappeared and railways and roads criss-crossed a cultivated countryside. Not all settlers, however, shared this vision. The luminescent landscape art, and letters and romantic poetry, of Alfred Sharpe (1836-1908) evoke their creator's forest consciousness. They evoke his love of Australasia's forests and his dismay at their destruction, his promotion of tree planting and public parks in urban areas, and his faith in the improvement of nature. Sharpe avowed that forests and trees provided aesthetic enjoyment and conferred great health benefits. This applied particularly to city folk starved of the opportunity to visit the countryside. Central to Alfred Sharpe's forest consciousness was his romanticism. As other romantics, Sharpe celebrated direct experience of nature. He conveyed in poetry and painting the feelings that sprang from such encounters. As other romantics, Sharpe's worship of nature sprang from his belief that God had created the natural world and that knowing and experiencing environments led one closer to God. Conversely, destroying nature meant desecrating God. For Sharpe, the New Zealand bush he knew as a young man in the late 1850s seemed to be facing just as great and irrevocable change through acclimatization as Māori lifestyle was in the face of European culture. To Sharpe, deforestation around Newcastle, New South Wales, also indicated to him that the environment of Australia was facing similar changes. This paper highlights Sharpe's forest consciousness by looking at his campaigns for forest conservation, tree planting and park design in northern New Zealand and Newcastle, N.S.W.

1 INTRODUCTION

Alfred Sharpe (1836-1908), artist and environmentalist, poet and park designer, displayed a strong and enduring forest consciousness. For Sharpe, a forest consciousness meant conserving and planting trees, planning parks and preventing pollution. These activities not only provided an aesthetically pleasing and healthy environment; they also bestowed on later generations the benefits they enjoy today. Sharpe's forest consciousness thus was concerned both with preserving and improving the natural environment of his time as well as ensuring it passed onto future generations in a good state. Exploring Sharpe's forest consciousness complicates traditional portrayals of nineteenth century settlers as confident and arrogant agents of environmental transformation. By investigating the importance of local and global factors in Sharpe's environmental views and identity this article also draws the study of environmental history away from purely 'national' narratives. It recognises that experience of different local environments, combined with settlers'

cultural expectations about the natural world, shaped their views about nature. Focussing on urban environments, furthermore, investigates a neglected area of Australasian environmental history. This article demonstrates that urban areas have an important environmental history. Finally, by charting Sharpe's support both for introduced and 'indigenous' nature, 'wild' and created environments, it shows the complexity of settler ideas about the natural world. Using Sharpe's paintings in conjunction with his own prodigious outpouring of writings, I focus on four aspects of his forest consciousness: romanticism, urban environmentalism, ideas about nature and local environments.

2 SHARPE'S EARLY LIFE AND WORK

The second son of a wealthy Liverpool merchant, Sharpe enjoyed a privileged upbringing in Birkenhead, England, a restful and green contrast to the smoking industry of neighbouring Liverpool. During this formative period, Sharpe attended the Birkenhead School of Art and developed a keen interest in the Pre-Raphaelites. Initially identified by the enigmatic acronym 'P.R.B.', the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of young artists, formed in 1848, whose realistic or naturalistic style Sharpe's paintings also would follow. In 1859, Sharpe migrated to New Zealand. In 1866, he made his way to Auckland, where he tried to establish himself as a professional artist. He stayed in the colony until, in 1887, financial troubles forced him to join his younger brother in Newcastle, New South Wales. Continuing to paint and write, he also designed many of Newcastle's parks. He died in that same city, in 1908 (Blackley 1992).

In the 1870s, Sharpe began submitting letters, poetry and drawings to northern New Zealand newspapers. He wrote many under a variety of pseudonyms which he continued to use until his death. Under these, Sharpe ranted and raved about many people: lawyers, lovers and landsharks, judges, deforesters and acclimatisers, vandals, suffragettes and so on (Blackley 1992). These letters were sometimes vitriolic, usually eccentric, but invariably punctuated with a keen eye for detail and a sharp wit. Together with his paintings and poetry, they form an invaluable archive of his forest consciousness. Since Roger Blackley's 1993 exhibition of Sharpe's paintings, *Golden Evenings: The Art of Alfred Sharpe*, art historians have become interested in the significance of Sharpe as a colonial artist (on the growth of interest among art historians, see Blackley, 1977, 1978, 1993). The importance of Sharpe's environmental views, however, has not yet been fully recognised.

3 ROMANTICISM AND RELIGION

Romanticism and religion were central to Sharpe's forest consciousness. Like many romantics, Sharpe worshipped at the shrine of nature, extolling experience of the natural world as a means of knowing God. 'Trees', he declared in Newcastle, 'are the most beautiful and useful of God's creations' (Sharpe 1893b). The originality of the romantic message was not that experience of nature generated piety – this idea has a very long history in Christian thought – but that the observer made this connection with the divine through his or her own experience of and sensitivity to nature (Gay 1998). As Max Oelschlaeger (1991, 99) notes, romantics 'believed that God's presence was revealed through an aesthetic awareness of nature's beauty.' A few examples illustrate Sharpe's aesthetic awareness of nature's beauty. His poetry, for instance, often dwelt on the beauty and inspiration artists and poets could find in the natural world. Usually they were set in forests away from the hurly-burly of the city. In 'The Forest Temples of New Zealand' (1888b), Sharpe wrote that: 'He to forest temple goes ... gives God service there'. According to Sharpe, forests were the true places of worship since God alone had created them. A forest was holiest: 'Where man's foot hath seldom trod' (1888b). Such concern for what Sharpe regarded as untouched nature reflected the value romantics placed on the natural world as a retreat from the artificiality and corruption of urban living. In his poem, 'Earth is Fair' (1888a), Sharpe recognized that 'man, His creation, hath dimmed' the 'bright tone' of the natural world created by God, but

still that 'this bright earth' existed both for the enjoyment and uplift of humanity and as a 'shadowy type, of what heaven will be'.

Nostalgia and concern about environmental destruction are evident in Sharpe's view of the artist. As one of the earliest writers on watercolour technique in New Zealand, Sharpe echoed the recommendations of critic John Ruskin (1819-1900). Ruskin believed that artists should adopt a naturalistic style when painting nature (Landow 1982). He urged painters to 'break free from both the conventions on everyday seeing and those of artistic representation' (Landow 1982, 64). He also upheld the 'necessity, as well as the dignity, of an earnest, faithful, loving study of nature as she is' (quoted in Andrews 1999, 183). Sharpe's painting manual, 'Hints for Landscape Students in Water Colour' (1880d), was first published in New Zealand and later Australia. This advocated a new aesthetic for Australasian artists. In words strongly reminiscent of those of Ruskin quoted above, Sharpe wrote that since 'New Zealand is special and unique' artists should 'strive to reproduce Nature here as she is, ere her originality disappears before the combined effects of advancing civilization and imported vermin and vegetation' (quoted in Blackley 1992, 141).

Acutely aware of the environmental changes underway in New Zealand, Sharpe believed that the originality of the New Zealand bush was being corrupted by imported 'vermin and vegetation.' With this process in mind, he believed it was the duty of artists to record for posterity as accurately as possible this rapidly disappearing environment. Writing in 1884, for instance, Sharpe held that the 'main object' of the newly formed New Zealand Art Students' Association should be 'to preserve for posterity the features of the New Zealand bush, now rapidly disappearing before the cattle of the settler, the axe of the bushman, and the spread of imported vermin.' He also advocated painting as a way of 'preserving for posterity the features of the old picturesque Maori life, that are so rapidly passing away for evermore' (1884).

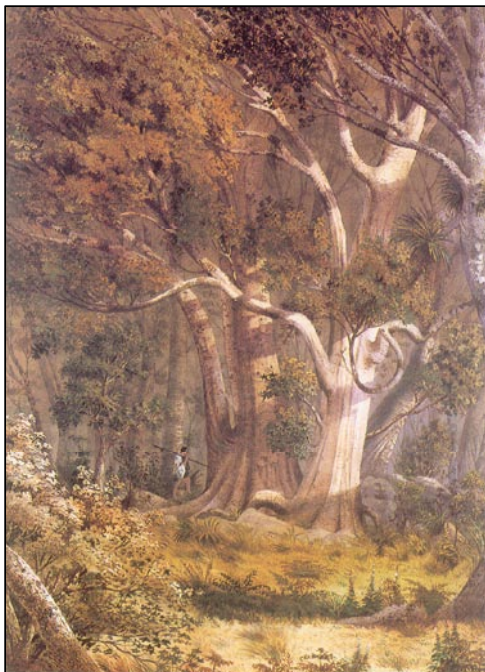


Figure 1. Alfred Sharpe, 'Burial Place of Hone Heke, Bay of Islands.' 1885. Watercolour. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. B. 041287, 1977-0027-1

Nostalgia, a sense of the loss of purity of the New Zealand bush, and concern with literal exactness of nature are evident in his *Burial Place of Hone Heke, Bay of Islands* (1888) (Figure 1). In this watercolour, a ghostly Māori figure clad in traditional pueru (cape) passes over the site of Heke's grave. In the foreground is a cleared area which, as Sharpe later described, 'had been exterminated by cattle' (1883). As Blackley (1992) observes, foxglove and possibly European grass grow in the foreground. It is likely that Sharpe deliberately painted these European plants both to show the environmental transition underway within the New Zealand environment and to emphasize that the nature he painted, quite literally, was changing before his very eyes. In this, Sharpe's intent differed significantly from that of other New Zealand colonial artists, who often produced commissioned work as migration propaganda (Minson 1997; Beattie 1999). Even artists such as George O'Brien, whose aim was not propaganda, painted idealised and celebratory views of a city's progress (Entwisle 1986).

Indeed, there were many ways of looking at nature. Although not necessarily promoting nature preservation, artists often advanced nationalistic sentiments. In the United States, many landscape painters, including Thomas Cole, whilst celebrating the transformation of 'virgin' landscapes with monumental works portraying

wild nature, also rejoiced in its domestication. Cole advanced his paintings of nature as free of the hackneyed conventions of European art. His attitude symbolised both America's different nature and its independence from Britain (Ott et al. 1991). Nor did exploring nature necessarily entail adopting a naturalistic artistic style as Cole and Sharpe had. In Australia, artists of the Heidelberg School, founded near Melbourne in the 1880s, responded to a specifically local environment by applying a European convention – Impressionism – to encourage interest in Australia's nature (Mulligan and Hill 2001). Stylistically, Sharpe's painting fell into the more traditional picturesque style. The picturesque accorded significance to the composition of a picture, particularly the use of framing trees, distinct plans and pastoral settings (Mulligan and Hill 2001; Andrews 1999).

There also were many ways of looking at deforestation. As Tim Bonyhady observes, Australian artists sometimes did not have a benign presence in landscapes. Some even destroyed bushland to create more aesthetically pleasing frames for their canvasses (Bonyhady 2002). Although there is no evidence that he actually participated in such destruction, Sharpe also accompanied timber cutters into forests in search of new scenes to paint. Rather than protesting against the event, deforestation in a painting often celebrated the march of progress, the making over of bush to pasture (Beattie 1999). Sharpe's portrayal of deforestation is not unique, but his intent in criticising it is unusual.

In Sharpe's *Burial Place of Hone Heke...*, the figure has double significance. Looking away from the viewer, it almost merges with the forest. This pose suggests an affinity between the native forest and the native person, a connection commonly made by settlers at the time (Bell 1992; Thomas 1999). Literally and metaphorically, the figure turns away not only from the European plants but also from the European viewer. (Sharpe exhibited *Burial Place of Hone Heke...* alongside two other works in the April exhibition of the Society of Arts. Potential buyers and art lovers who viewed his paintings would most probably have been European [Blackley 1992].) I interpret this painting as symbolic of the figure shunning the European plants and people. As Sharpe did, the person he depicted sought solace in the New Zealand bush.

Another example of Sharpe's artwork with a distinctly environmental message comes from perhaps his most devastating critique of environmental destruction; an illuminated address he prepared for the departing manager of the aluminium sulphide plant at Cockle Creek, Newcastle (Figure 2). This portrays an utterly desolate and despoiled landscape, the accuracy of which compares closely with contemporary photographs (Beattie 2004b). Dead, skeletal trees lie about the landscape, poisoned by the toxic fumes pouring out of the factory. Aside from solely using images, Sharpe sometimes combined word and picture to express a strong environmental message. He labeled his 1901 Australian watercolour, *The last dying remnant of the grand ti tree forests, between Adamstown and the Glebe*, as an area 'which should have been preserved and reserved as a fine park when the Government appropriated our 3,000 acre reserve.' (quoted in Blackley 1992, 116) At other times, Sharpe published letters imploring the need for forest conservation (1880c; 1886).

4 CONSERVING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Sharpe's forest consciousness also extended to city environments. They have received very little attention from New Zealand's environmental historians (Beattie 2004b). However, Sharpe's work shows that environmental history can (and should) deal with urban areas as well as rural ones. In 1876, he attacked 'the substitution of karaka trees for the fine old oaks so wantonly destroyed in Government House grounds', a decision he rued on aesthetic grounds. 'The oak', he wrote, 'is always picturesque, - whether in winter, with its gnarled and twisted branches; in spring, with its lovely green frontage; in summer, with its massive leafage and shade, and in autumn, with its rich colouring of russet and yellow. To compare that with the never varying, stiff, awkward looking,

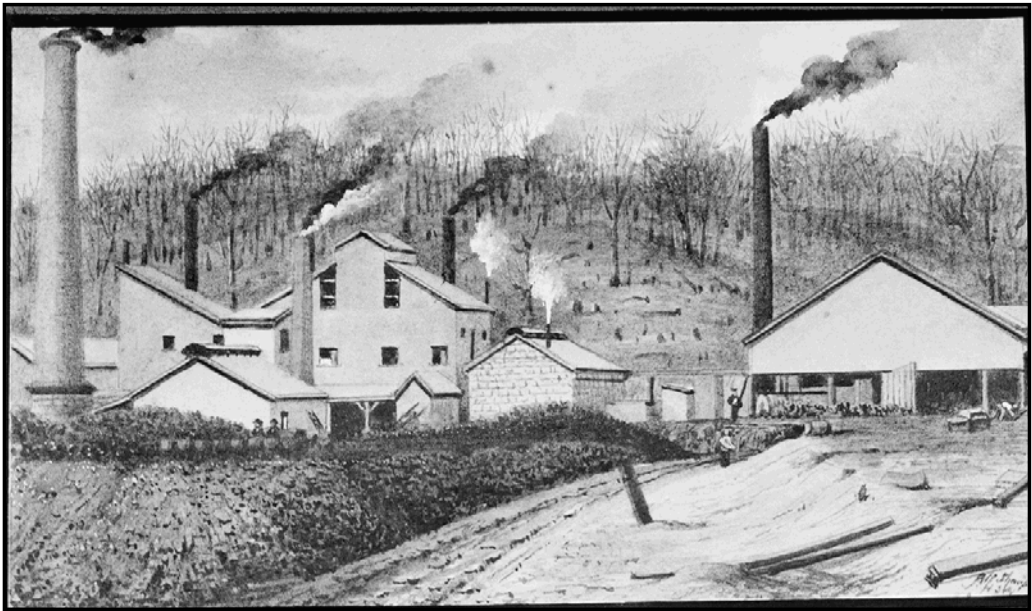


Figure 2. 'Near view of smelting works, with several men at work, 1902' from larger illuminated address, 1902, 'Lent for copying by Miss G. Savage, November 1977': Permission obtained from Miss Savage by author, Mitchell Library, PXB174, folio 4.

dark green karaka is an absurdity'. Oak trees, he continued, harboured strong memories 'endeared to us by old associations as reminiscences of old England'. What is more, they have 'taken 25 years to grow, and are unique in the colony and irreplaceable in our generation, while karakas ... can be seen by groves any day, in many parts of the country.' (Sharpe 1876) Sharpe measured the value of trees by their appearance and rarity and by the fact that they stood as living symbols of past memories. As Simon Schama and others have shown, for centuries within European culture trees, and particularly oaks, have been valued as important repositories of memory and meaning (Schama 1999; Daniels 1988). For Sharpe, this unique oak grove at Government House evoked thoughts of home and required preservation. In another example from Auckland, Sharpe assailed 'the monstrous vandalisms now being perpetrated in the Domain, under the name of arboriculture' (1880a). Subsequently listing a litany of arboreal misdeeds, he highlighted the cropping of 'hundreds of fine young oak trees into imitation cauliflowers, and generally ... [turning] the loveliest part of the [Auckland] Domain ... into the similitude of the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the Prophet' (1880b).

Sharpe brought his criticism of city deforestation from New Zealand to Australia (1891b). Assailing a new arboreal foe, in 1893 he railed against 'a horde of larrikins' who had destroyed the trees along Newcastle's Pacific Street (1893a). In Newcastle, in contrast to the reservation he expressed about the acclimatization of certain plants into New Zealand, Sharpe enthusiastically promoted the introduction of New Zealand trees, particularly the pohutakawa, karaka and puriri (12 August 1891). His support for acclimatization possibly indicated his own homesickness for the colony's forests. Evidence suggests that the first pohutakawa were planted around the time of Sharpe's arrival (1887-1889) (Sharpe 1889). Aside from their beauty, Sharpe promoted pohutakawa because of their hardiness (e.g., Sharpe 1890; 1893c). Acclimatization of New Zealand trees was easier because Sharpe redesigned or created many parks in and around Newcastle, and so

was able to recommend the trees he wanted planted (Beattie 2004b). Many in fact survive in Newcastle to this day.

Aside from conserving city trees, Sharpe promoted urban tree planting and parks for health and pleasure. He also campaigned against water and air pollution in Auckland and Newcastle (Beattie 2004b). In 1882, for instance, Sharpe penned a vicious parody of the ineffectual efforts of the various Auckland sanitary boards to improve the city's health (Sharpe 1882):

Flaunts Fever's scarlet banner
O'er Newton and Parnell.
The gutter whiffings fan her,
While "Boards" cry, "All is well."
The foul putrescence lieth
On each side of the street,
And, in each festering backyard,
Slops welter in the heat.
The cess-pits belch forth gases
On fever-laden air,
And fever-damp unrolleth
From sewer-gullies there.
Death grins, 'twixt each fence paling,
Upon each passer-by,
And the earthless privy boxes
Cry out, "Prepare to die."

5 SHARPE'S IDEAS ABOUT NATURE

Around the time of Sharpe's attempts, similar movements in Europe, North America and Australasia were forming with the aim of preserving aspects of the natural environment and creating parks (Ott et al. 1999; Bonyhady 2001). Sharpe's forest conservation took a broader form than many of these movements. Within these, a division often developed between the protection of native nature and the betterment of urban environments. Sharpe embraced both aims, suggestive of his belief that beauty both could be *derived* directly from nature and *contrived* by humans. Sharpe, for instance, promoted the construction of parks in Auckland and Newcastle as a means of improving nature. Sharpe also wanted to preserve certain native and introduced species that he considered important, such as old and special trees (Beattie 2004b).

Sharpe's views and conservation of urban landscapes complicate present understandings about early urban conservation. Paul Star and Lynne Lochhead's study of urban preservation societies in New Zealand, which emerged after 1888, places these groups as the pioneers of moves to conserve historical sites and indigenous forest (Star and Lochhead, 2002). However, Sharpe's endorsement of protection for both introduced and indigenous plants in the 1870s predates the formation of these groups. It also demonstrates that some settlers wanted to protect introduced as well as indigenous nature. Thomas Dunlap (1999) has written about the rise of nationalism and nature conservation in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. He argues that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, early settlers' actions of conquest and destruction were giving way to appreciation of native nature. Dunlap's suggestion of a sea-change around 1890 implies that, because earlier settlers were changing the environment, they did not appreciate the natural world. In fact, it was settlers' environmental transformation that fed anxieties about species and landscape loss (Beattie 2004b). Hence, environmental change often coexisted with appreciation, even from the early years of colonisation. From the 1840s, New Zealand's settlers often cut down forests to clear space for agriculture and to obtain building material and fuel, but also rued their passing as a sad but necessary stage of improvement (Beattie 1999).

6 LOCAL AND GLOBAL FACTORS

Sharpe's forest consciousness complicates understandings about settler identity and the role of nationalism in promoting conservation. His concerns reveal the importance of local and international factors in shaping his ideas about nature. They tie into and extend Rollo Arnold's idea of the village and the globe. Observing 1880s New Zealand, Arnold (1994, 118) noted that the 'settler community was essentially a village world, but a village world that was responding to ideas and influences that were global in the scope of their origins.' Like many Australasian settlers, experience of local environments shaped Sharpe's understanding of his world (Stewart 2004; Thomas 1999). Deforestation around Auckland and later Newcastle spurred Sharpe's concern with local nature. The other local world of his youth – Birkenhead and Liverpool – also had a lasting influence. Opening in 1847, Birkenhead Park, the first of its kind in England provided by a public authority, probably formed his enduring interest in parks and park design. Sharpe's naturalistic painting style was influenced by the Birkenhead School of Art and that town's strong association with the Pre-Raphaelites (Blackley 1992). Although Sharpe was not concerned with either global or even national forest issues, national and international ideas still influenced his outlook. As I have demonstrated, romanticism, and specifically the ideas of Ruskin, shaped Sharpe's appreciation of Auckland and Newcastle.

7 CONCLUSION

Alfred Sharpe displayed an enduring forest consciousness. The key to unlocking this lies, first, in his romanticism, which was strongly influenced by Ruskin. Second, Sharpe's belief in God guided his view of the natural world. Sharpe believed that, since God had created the world and had given it over to humans to steward, any destruction of it broke the sacred bond between God and humanity. As with many of his contemporaries concerned about future timber supplies, pending climatic change or even the development of industry and commerce, Sharpe also wanted to conserve nature for future generations (Beattie 2003). Yet, it was very much a local nature that he aspired to protect. Sharpe's views also add greatly to understandings about settler views of nature. As Ged Martin (1997) and Jonathan Lamb (1999; 2000) identify, many settlers imagined exciting utopias, from 'smiling farms' with swathes of green fields to built-up towns with teeming populations. Others have written about settlers' willful environmental destruction in their drive for prosperity (e.g. Park 1995; Grey 1994). Yet, Sharpe and those others who cautioned against deforestation sought material progress without wanton environmental destruction, beauty without ugliness, health without pollution. Ultimately, the importance Sharpe placed upon forest conservation expresses the strength of romanticism and religion in shaping his environmental beliefs. It also demonstrates the significant role both of local nature and urban environments in contributing to his forest consciousness.

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