

The Westall Pictures

Richard J. Westall traces the first sale of William Westall's paintings and drawings from his voyage to Australia aboard the *Investigator*

The bulk of the watercolour paintings and drawings completed by William Westall ARA (1781–1850) and arising from his voyage to Australia between 1801 and 1803 as landscape artist aboard the *Investigator*, captained by Matthew Flinders, were purchased by the National Library of Australia from the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) in 1958.

An account of the initial acquisition of the material from the Westall family in the late 19th century by the RCS's predecessor, the Royal Colonial Institute (RCI), appears in a book *Memory Serving* (1928), by the institute's former librarian, James R. Boosé. He writes that William Westall's watercolours and drawings of Australia are 'one of the most valuable of the many treasures in the Library'. The account describes how 'one day during the year 1889 a card was brought to me bearing the name "Mr William Westall"'. A 'venerable-looking gentleman' approached his table and informed him that he was



a grandson of William Westall, the artist: 'He told me that he and his sisters had in their possession a large number of their grandfather's drawings and were desirous of finding a permanent resting place for them ... I naturally enquired if the intention was to sell them or to give them, and received the reply that the family would be glad to give them if, in return, a donation was made to a local hospital'. Boosé convened a committee meeting during which he expected to be given permission to make an immediate acquisition of the material. He was disappointed, however, that two of the three committee members in attendance were representatives of Australia who insisted that the collection be offered to the Australian repositories first. In spite of this, the offer was refused and the drawings were eventually obtained for the library of the institute. Boosé claims that, on the news being made public, cables were received from Australia containing substantial offers for the collection.

above:
William Westall (1781–1850)
Self-portrait of William Westall
c.1820
oil on canvas; 24.1 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7692976

left:
J.C. Partridge
Rev. William Westall (1821–1901),
Son of the Artist William Westall
(1781–1850), and Family (Rev. and
Mrs Westall, seated centre) c.1890
Courtesy of Richard Westall



made a special proviso that they should be returned to him after the requirement of the Admiralty was fulfilled. The Authorities returned them accordingly and they remained in the possession of my Father up to the time of his death, when they became my property.

Robert Westall was indeed a beneficiary of his father's will but the exact wording: 'I give and bequeath to my son Robert all my steel and copper Engraved Plates together with all my Prints and Engravings of whatsoever nature or kind to and for his own use and benefit absolutely', might seem to lack clarity relating to the drawings that formed the Australian collection.

Robert's letter continued:

Although the pencil sketches in the Collection now under offer were rescued from the wreck of the *Porpoise* few show signs of injury. But I know that many Water Colour drawings which my father had executed on board the *Investigator* were seriously damaged. From such of these as he could preserve he afterwards painted numerous Oils and Water Colour pictures, nearly the whole of which were sold during his lifetime.

This disclosure may be some answer to those, including William's brother-in-law William Daniell, who considered Westall had completed a smaller quantity of drawings in Australia than might have been expected.

Robert then mentions the veracity attributed to William Westall's seascapes by describing a meeting at the Royal Geographical Society which was attended by his father. At that meeting, Captain Phillip Parker King described his involvement in the survey voyage of the *Adventure* and the *Beagle* (1826–1836). According to Robert, Captain King 'could not refrain from mentioning the great assistance that these engravings [after Westall's drawings of the coastline] were to the Expedition on several occasions, from their fidelity to Nature. On the first approach to Australia, in the neighbourhood of King George's Sound, during a heavy gale, they doubted whether they could venture to make the Harbour, but as they recognized the Entrance by aid of the illustration that they sailed strait [sic] in without hesitation'.

The Secretary of the RCI, O'Halloran, may have been sceptical about these suggestions and appears to have done some research

on the claims. He noted that King had been in command from 1826–30, which was when the ships travelled to South America and that it was Captain Robert Fitzroy who was in command from 1831–36, when the *Beagle* visited Australia. O'Halloran further noted that, while both Fitzroy and King paid tribute to Flinders' work in connection with his account of King George Sound, King had visited the Sound in 1818 and his address to the Royal Geographical Society related to South Australia, not Western Australia.

As a topographical artist and a landscape painter, William Westall always experienced tension between the need for accuracy and the desire to present picturesque views. He has been criticised for some inaccuracies in his work and, by referring to and possibly exaggerating the comments attributed to Captain King, his son and grandson may have been reflecting a family sensitivity on this point.

Another interesting item in Robert Westall's letter concerns William Westall's portraits of Aboriginal people:

I do not remember any incidents connected with the Natives whose portraits my Father took, except that the boy, a native of Port Jackson accompanied him on a trip to the Blue Mountains. He was nice looking and intelligent, but his capacity for feeding was so great that my Father one day told his servant that he might try if possible to satisfy his appetite.

The quantity of rice which the boy eat was so enormous that he became distended as shown in the drawing; afterwards he lay in a torpid state for many hours until the food was finally digested, & he seemed none the worse for his meal.

On 14 November, Robert Westall writes of his many thanks to 'the Council and yourself for so kindly sending me a cheque for £105' He also mentions that 'It will be a great pleasure to obtain any stray drawings of my Father's connection with Australia for your Institute, if I can trace

William Westall (1781–1850)
Port Jackson, a Native Boy 1802
pencil drawing; 25.1 x 17.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an4562747



top:
William Westall (1781–1850)
*Mount Westall, View North
across Strong Tide Passage and
Townshend Island* 1802
pencil drawing; 25.6 x 37.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an4564045

middle:
William Westall (1781–1850)
*Cape Townshend and the Islands
of Shoalwater Bay*
oil on canvas; 125.0 x 155.0 cm
Ministry of Defence Art
Collection, London
MOD4207

bottom:
Robert Westall (fl. 1845–1890)
*View from Summit of Mount
Westall near Port Bowen, NE
Coast of Australia* 1889
watercolour; 34.7 x 46.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6053427

them'. He describes seeing 'in the Picture galleries of the Kensington Museum a *Water Colour Painting* of my Father's marked "A view in India". It was however a mistake, for I enjoyed it as a *View of the Blue Mountains*, From the vicinity of Port Jackson'.

On 9 December, Robert writes that he has been through his brother's collection of their father's drawings but that he will need another visit to re-examine them, having been forced to curtail his visit due to ill health. A memo from O'Halloran, dated December 1889 recorded that: 'Mr Westall called, and stated that his brother possessed some of the original drawings and he would endeavour to have them added to the collection of the RCI'.

After confirmation from Robert that he had obtained the relevant drawings from his brother, describing them as 'few but important', and a further delay due to ill health, there is a final letter on 8 January 1890, which provides a list of the series of drawings Robert deposited the institute and giving detailed information on *View from the Summit of Mount Westall Northwards*, including a note 'An Oil Picture was painted this drawing by Mr Westall, order of the Admiralty & is in the rooms of the Admiralty'. Robert could have added that he had painted a watercolour copy of this picture.

The family retained some Australian pictures by William Westall but, over the years, many of them have found their way to Australia.

The papers of the Royal Commonwealth Society are now held in the South Asian Studies Centre Library and Archive, Cambridge University (<http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/>).



RICHARD J. WESTALL has been researching the lives of the artists Richard and William Westall—the latter his great-great-grandfather—for 30 years. His website www.bradonpace.com/westall/ provides information on the two artists and their works