

THE PUZZLING

BY IAN WARDEN

The first jigsaw puzzles (these harmless addictions that have even made an addict out of Her Majesty the Queen, a keen borrower from the British Jigsaw Puzzle Library) went on sale in 1766. They've been addictively popular ever since but they and their inventor, London mapmaker John Spilsbury (1739–1769), have been attracting special attention this year triggered by the publication of Dame Margaret Drabble's part-memoir, part-jigsaw history, *The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws*, which analyses the puzzling allure of jigsaws. (Did you know that they're especially popular in times of economic hardship and that six million jigsaws a week were sold in the United States of America in the 1930s?)

Dame Margaret reports that 'the ones that are the most fun have quite a lot going on in them' and so we can be sure she'd admire the busy *Sallis's Australia and Its Scenes* (1855?) and the eventful *The History of Prince Lee Boo* (1822) in the National Library of Australia's collection of early jigsaws.

Sallis's Australia and Its Scenes was sold, as the jigsaw's box says, as a pastime 'For Fireside Emigrants' (for Britons contemplating migration to Australia) and gives charming depictions of migrants' journeys and their varied fortunes on the Victorian goldfields.

In *The History of Prince Lee Boo*, there's a lot going on because it contains 12 scenes from the tragic and true (but embellished) story of the prince. Englishman Captain Wilson ran his merchant vessel aground in the Pelew Islands (now known as Palau) in

the West Pacific in August of 1783. He and his crew got on wonderfully with the naked, copper-skinned locals (who'd never seen white people before) and, when Wilson eventually sailed for home, he took with him Chief Abba Thule's 19-year-old son Prince Lee Boo.

The chief hoped that his beloved boy, enlightened by seeing

England, would come home and work wonders for his island people. But, after just five months in London as a kind of living curiosity, Lee Boo, famous for his possession of what one writer described as 'every gentle quality of the heart to make himself beloved', succumbed to smallpox on 27 December 1784. The tragedy of his death at 20 (one writer lamented that the prince had been 'cut off in the moment that his character began to blossom') added pathos to the already intense interest in him. That interest generated all sorts of printed Prince Lee Boo merchandise of which the Library has several items.

The 1822 jigsaw puzzle was made by the map and print seller, William Darton, of London, with the pieces constructed of hand-coloured paper pasted to wood and each of the 12 scenes detailed and exquisite. The jigsaw illustrates famous episodes of the prince's life including his 'rapture' as, 'absorbed in wonder', he saw his reflection in a full-length mirror, his attempt to feed an orange to the first horse he'd ever seen and his affecting deathbed message for his distant family as London's smallpox, a disease unknown in his idyllic homeland, carried him away.

With only 41 pieces, *The History of Prince Lee Boo* is not a very puzzling puzzle and may have been meant as a novelty for children. Little did the jigsaw's inventor, Spilsbury, know that, by the twenty-first century, jigsaws of 10 000 pieces would exist and that there'd be some so demanding (Dame Margaret says this is the case with the puzzle of Jackson Pollock's bewildering painting *Convergence*) as to be almost impossible to complete. ●

LEFT
Thomas Kirk (c.1765–1797) and Miss Keate
Prince Lee Boo, Second Son of Abba Thule 1789
stipple engraving; 10.0 x 7.0 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an9263654



ALLURE OF FIGSAWS

MAIN IMAGE TOP
Jigsaw puzzle entitled *Sallis's Australia and Its Scenes*
(London: W. Sallis, c.1855)
wood jigsaw; box size:
4.1 x 16.4 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7897646

MAIN IMAGE BOTTOM
Jigsaw puzzle entitled *The History of Prince Lee Boo, a Native of the Pelew Islands, Brought to England by Captain Wilson*
(London: William Darton, 1822)
paper on wood with hand-coloured engraving; 26.0 x 43.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23113107

