

*Ogilvie, Grimwade, Felton: Woodblocks in Flinders Lane*

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## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to re-examine the publication of Helen Ogilvie's woodblock prints in the 1947 text, *Flinders Lane*, an auto fictional account of Alfred Felton's life written by Russell Grimwade – patron of what is now the Miegunyah Collection at the University of Melbourne. It uses Ogilvie's illustrations to index a microhistorical analysis of the intergenerational relationship between Felton and Grimwade – two of Melbourne's most notable patrons of the arts. In doing so, this paper will thus also attempt to investigate a broader context of cultural production and patronage in early twentieth century Australia. By first considering the earlier (and more widely studied) example of Margaret Preston, we will establish an art historical framework through which to better understand Ogilvie's contribution to *Flinders Lane*. Namely, we will demonstrate how the woodblock functions within the historical imaginary of white settlement in Australia. We argue that Ogilvie's woodblocks are used as antiquated formal engrams not only to evoke, express or articulate the new cultural energies pursued by Grimwade, but in fact *produce* an authenticating national tradition which transforms the historical origins of Australian settlement, rendering them amenable with the idealistic visions of pre-and-post Federation cultural nationalists.

This paper is also adjacently interested in connections between the formation of a cultural imaginary and the routes of this imagination's potential institutionalisation. Grimwade and Felton were both deeply invested in the preservation of their personal legacies, respectively through involvement and bequests to (what are now) the Miegunyah Collection and the National Gallery of Victoria. Indeed, both figures perceived their individual legacies as no less than synecdochical of a youthful Australia's national culture. The context of British invasion and white settlement from 1788 is integral to understanding why Felton and Grimwade invested the transmission of their material and cultural wealth with the total fate of Australian national maturation and destiny. This paper will schematically constellate how in Australia's mid-twentieth century, the woodblock print becomes one mode through which these visions could be imagined and preserved.

## I. The Australian Woodblock & Margaret Preston's Imprint

Perhaps the most famous early practitioner of the woodblock print in Australia is Margaret Preston, making her a prime example to guide our following study of Ogilvie. As such, we will begin with a brief examination of Preston's use of the woodblock print. Penny Bailey has recently argued that the woodblock (specifically the techniques developed in the *ukiyo-e*, 'pictures of the floating world,' Japanese tradition) was integral to Preston's turn away from realism and other mimetic approaches to art, leading to her subsequent development of an Australian modernism.<sup>1</sup> Integrally, this modernism was inextricable from Preston's own cultural nationalism. Her turn to avant-gardism was motivated by her belief that the pastoral *plein-air* landscapes of the Heidelberg school were but French imitations that had failed to articulate the multitudinous nature of the Australian identity. For Bailey, 'the rhythmic designs, spatial voids, and geometrical forms of Preston's woodcuts [from the 1920s - 30s] became instantly recognizable as familiar motifs and landscapes embodying her nationalist aims.'<sup>2</sup> Although not examined in this article, Bailey's description seems particularly apt in describing Preston's *Black Swans* (1923). The black swan is, of course, the Antipodean anomaly *par excellence*. It is a symbol which moves from the beguiling primitivism of Romantic poet Robert Southey in his *Botany Bay Eclogues* (1794 - 98), to become the guiding the spirit of Australian post-modernity following the Ern Malley affair – 'I am still/ the black swan of trespass on alien waters' – and Humphry McQueen's subsequent revisionist treatise on Australian Modernism of the same name (1979).

In Preston's depiction of this national motif, the abstracted geometric impressions in the fore and background confuse the dimensionality of the print. They suggest that the perspective of the image can be perceived as simultaneously linear, the lines coiling around the bird's webbed feet as their profile silhouettes wade in shallow waters; *and* as topographical. Or rather, from a *birds-eye* view. That is, the undulating marks which curl together in the centre of the frame, unravelling as they expand outward, double as a topographical representation of an imagined landscape – one of rolling hills and plains like those so beloved by the Heidelberg pastoralists. That the front row of swans are at once bending down to drink from the water *and* swooping diagonally across the

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Bailey, 'Forging an Australian Artistic Modernity: How Japanese woodblock prints informed Margret Preston's early paintings and prints' in *Japan in Australia: Culture, Context and Connections* ed. David Chapman & Carol Hayes. (London: Routledge, 2019): 44

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, 'Forging an Australian Artistic Modernity', 55

mapped terrain only emphasises the double-vision of Preston's composition. As such, the savage anomaly of the black swan is either determining the compositional perspective of the image, or constituting the gradient of the landscape itself, as though Preston is punning on the *plein-air* claims to authenticity of the Heidelbergers. Her modern pastoral vision enclosed in the grain of the woodblock thus questions the legitimacy of an Australian landscape produced by what Preston takes to be a French model, without suggesting that the subject of that representation should actually be changed. This point is reinforced by the woodblock's severe gouges, a primitivist gesture which provokes the tacit suggestion that the Australian landscape has been domesticated by the Impressionist influence.<sup>3</sup> But this is a false antagonism between settler artists. As Bailey notes Preston was introduced to the woodcut method through the 'Japonism' craze and the English arts and crafts movement. An irony heightened by the Heidelberg school's seminal 'nine by five' cigar box show at the Buxton rooms in 1889, which was decorated around a 'Japonesque' style, including Japanese screens, umbrellas, and perfumed flowers. It is thus possible to parse here how a turn to the woodcut simultaneously allowed Preston to preserve the organic link between artistic representation, landscape, and national identity established by the earlier pastoral tradition, while defining her own practice in opposition to it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Preston's primitivism would evolve as her practice matured and she became increasingly preoccupied with the appropriation of Aboriginal symbols and artefactual lore, leading to her peripheral involvement with the infamous Jindyworobak movement. We hope our analysis of *Black Swans* gestures to the logic which would drive Preston to the Jindyworobak movement, but unfortunately a more detailed analysis is out of the essay's scope. For some good perspectives on Preston and the Jindys on totally different registers see; Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*. (California: Stanford UP, 2018). and Gordon Bennett, *Selected Writings* ed. Tim Riley Walsh & Angela Goddard. (Brisbane: Power Publications, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> It is not a coincidence that Kenneth Slessor's early poem, claimed by Philip Mead to inaugurate his modernist poetics, was 'Nuremburg' – a poem about Albrecht Durer. Or that as early as 1900 the *Bulletin* reproduced one of Lindsay's woodcut self-portraits with the description 'strangely resembling the early portraits of Albrecht Durer, Norman Lindsay is the very reincarnation of the ancient artist-craftsman'. See: Philip Mead, 'Kenneth Slessor: A Lyric Poet in the Era of Modernity' in *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings* ed. Philip Mead (St Lucia: Queensland UP, 1997): 111-132



Fig. 1. Margret Preston, *Black Swans Wallis Lake*, Woodcut in black ink, 1923

Preston's *Black Swans* articulates a key paradigm shift in twentieth century Australian art. The attempt to move away from the parochial 'bush' or 'pastoral' tradition and develop a more cosmopolitan, matured or indeed modernist nationalism was dialectically entwined with the contradiction that the parochial styles of the Heidelbergers were in fact cosmopolitan inheritances themselves (from French Impressionism, British Romanticism, and so forth).<sup>5</sup> Settler artists like Preston needed to claim that Australia had yet to be properly articulated in artistic representation, but also needed a tradition with which to effect a break. And so, the woodcuts tense around a deadlock: the twentieth century Australian artist had to turn to the antiquarian methods of the

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<sup>5</sup> This is a necessarily vulgar historicization, the move away from the 'bush' tradition can be loosely attributed to a post-Federation environment. The 'Red Page' literary section of the *Bulletin* edited by A.G. Stephens, which began to publish poets and critics directly engaged in European traditions of literature like Chris Brennan and Dowell O'Reilly (*pace* Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson) is emblematic of this shift. See: John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974)

woodblock to reconstitute the tradition (with which she was allegedly splitting) as a new cosmopolitan modernism.

## II. Helen Ogilvie Illustrates Australia's Patrons

The tensions constellated by Preston's *Black Swans* between artistic representation, national identity and historicity are immediately clarified as we turn to Russell Grimwade's 1947 book, *Flinders Lane*. Subtitled *Recollections of Alfred Felton*, the auto-fictional novel is structured around a double frame, moving from the perspective of the Federation-era businessman, bachelor and patron of the famous Felton Bequest to the mid-century context of its author. A series of accompanying woodcut prints by Helen Ogilvie bridge these two narratological frames. On the level of content, the woodblocks outwardly depict Felton's Melbourne of 1898 up until his death in 1904. However, under closer inspection it becomes clear that they evince a securely mid-century vision, only ratified by Ogilvie's masterful handling of the medium itself – her style and technique under the direct influence of earlier and contemporaneous modernists such as Preston, as well as the development of the linocut print (a technique which only emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century, after Felton's death).<sup>6</sup> Her woodblock prints therefore highlight a rhetorical tension in this book – Felton's novelistic 'recollections' on the future of a national culture from the coalface of Federation serve as an authenticating mouthpiece for Grimwade's own ambitions of patronage fifty years later. The controlling purpose of *Flinders Lane* is therefore framed as coming to terms with this impasse:

'The customs of the place are established on the behaviour of scores of generations who had lived in the same spot... a tradition... which refines the thoughts and stimulates cultural expression... Tradition [however] is born of history and Melbourne has no history as yet.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, she was guided by the 1927 text, *Lino-Cuts: A Handbook of Linoleum-Cut Colour Printing* by Claude Flight. The National Gallery of Australia has suggested that her linocut *Chooks in the Straw* (1923) was directly influenced by this book, with regard to the sinuous linework and solid planes of colour. While this influence is slightly less obvious in her woodblocks considering the deviation in form, it is important to note that the techniques proposed by Flight's handbook can also be traced, albeit less directly, in her later woodblock prints. See Claude Flight, *Lino-Cuts A Handbook Of Linoleum-Cut Colour Printing*, (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Ltd, 1927); "In the Japanese Manner," National Gallery of Australia, published 2011, <https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/in-the-japanese-manner/#Archive-Japanesemanneressay>.

<sup>7</sup> Russel Grimwade, *Flinders Lane: Recollections of Alfred Felton*. (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1947): 38

Indeed, by doubling between Felton's and his own historical contexts, Grimwade simulates the making of such a tradition, namely a national one, within his own literary imaginary.

Before dealing directly with the effects of Ogilvie's woodcuts within this context, it is necessary to briefly consider how the text itself links the visions of these two Australian patrons. Only a few pages prior to this passage, Grimwade presents a dialogue between his younger self and his father, Frederick Grimwade – Felton's long-term friend and business partner. 'Why did Mr. Felton come here at all?' (p. 33) asks a youthful Russell, prompting an extended biographical account of the patron's move to Australia from his home in Essex amid the mid-19th century Victorian gold rush. Unlike much of the book, wherein Grimwade purposefully blurs the narrative voice of himself and Felton to establish a shared perspective (take, for example, the passage above), here, Grimwade makes obvious the intergenerational split that separates them, only to cement a kind of genealogical lineage between the two men – which, for Grimwade, and presumably Felton also, is analogous to a developing national heritage. By having his biological father deliver this passage, Grimwade further invokes the paternalizing (and therefore inheritable) value in Felton's influence on himself and a broader Australian culture. An image he seeks to enhance through his own legacy.

That this lineage is materialised through their respective institutional bequests further bespeaks the figuration of individual legacy as constitutive of a broader Australian tradition. It is important to note here the fundamental difference between the two figure's bequests. Felton bestows half of his estate to Melbourne's library and gallery, which is intended to be handled by future generations for the 'purchase of articles that ... have artistic and educational value and be calculated to raise or improve public taste.' (p 103) On the other hand, Grimwade's bequest is made up of his own, pre-existing collection. Despite this crucial distinction, Grimwade's endowment remains, not least from his own perspective, inextricably tied to Felton's earlier contribution, as a further refinement of the Australian national tradition. Consider the ambiguous claim of the Preface: 'future people of my country will want to know something of the man whose name appears on so many pictures in the Melbourne Gallery.' To whom is Grimwade referring to here? The different nature of their respective public endowments supports the speculative assumption of progress between the two generations of settlers: first comes gold, then comes taste. Yet, by confusing Felton's legacy, which he claims to be recounting, with his own, which he uses *Flinders Lane* in no uncertain terms to

establish, Grimwade points to a communal tradition and ethos of Australian patronage and, in doing so, synthesises the two figures into a timeless institutional legacy.

With this in mind, we can now turn back to Ogilvie's woodcuts which – much like Preston's folkish *and* modernist primitivism – serve not only to authenticate the shared vision of these two patrons, but also generate a much deeper historicity, which stakes its claims well before Felton's *fin de siècle*. Beginning with the contextual note on the title page of *Flinders Street*, which reads:

‘The traditional wood for the wood-engraver's craft is Turkey Box. This not being available during the war years, recourse was had to Australian substitutes... blocks in this book have been cut on West Australian Sandal-wood and Tasmanian Huon Pine’<sup>8</sup>

This prefigures Ogilvie's woodcuts to be organic natural artefacts, yet the move to local Australian materials is framed by necessity, albeit overlaid with at least a hint of patriotic duty. In a series of interview that Ogilvie gave with gallerist Helen Maxwell, however, she notes that during the mid-1950s whilst working on a series of commissioned Christmas cards for himself and his wife, Mab, Russell Grimwade ‘collected so many pieces of timber for [her] ... he knew he could get [her] a selection to work [her] engravings on – hence the sandalwood.’<sup>9</sup> That Grimwade insisted on the continued use of Australian wood after the War highlights his cognizance to how the grain of the woodblock could function as a repository for the formation of a national historicity in what he naively calls in *Flinders Lane* the ‘joyful freedom of a life in an unpeopled land.’<sup>10</sup>

Aby Warburg's concept of ‘das Necleben der Antike’, awkwardly translated as ‘after-life-of-antiquity’, provides a generative way to begin unpacking the compressed historicity contained in Ogilvie's woodblocks – one that secures both Grimwade and Felton as icons of a deep national

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<sup>8</sup> Grimwade, *Flinders Lane*, 2

<sup>9</sup> Helen Ogilvie, *Wood Engravings*, ed. Helen Maxwell. (Canberra: Brindabella Press, 1995): 17

<sup>10</sup> Grimwade, *Flinders Lane*, 25; This comment is symptomatic of the general attitude towards Aboriginal priority in white Australia at the time. There is, however, an instance in *Flinders Lane* when Aboriginal presence is briefly recognized, lending this remark a particularly malevolent tone. Interestingly – and this essay would argue not coincidentally - this occurs precisely at the moment when the question of natural geography and specifically *woodcutting* is under consideration: ‘One the cutting face a gang of men with slashers and special sickles cut off branchlets. Many of the cutters were aboriginals of the district who still survived but have since passed to their alcheringa without descendants’ (75). As Lorenzo Veracini has noted ‘Geographical knowledge underpinned the pattern of expansion of both colonialism and settler colonialism; this point is now sustained by an extensive literature’. ‘The Imagined Geographies of Settler Colonialism’ in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua-Mar, Penelope Edmonds. (Basingstroke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010): 181



tradition.<sup>11</sup> The heading illustration for chapter ten is a good example. Both it and the chapter preceding contain the novel's most explicit references to 'the formulation of the Felton bequest in the mind of its founder' and 'the beginnings of a national feeling ... bringing the people of Melbourne to realize the value of civic improvement.' That is, they draw Felton and Grimwade's shared preoccupation with the link between cultural patronage and nation building to the forefront of the narrative. Another interesting feature of these chapters, however, is their vivid detailing of the rapid modernisation occurring in 1890s Australia, including Grimwade's father's tragic and luddite distrust of early automobile technology and Felton's struggle and almost naive wonder with the 'sweeping victory of the typewriter.'<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2. Helen Ogilvie, (*Royal Open Carriage with Two Passengers and Liveried Attendants*), illustration to Russel Grimwade, *Flinders Lane: Recollections of Alfred Felton*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947), 1947.

Ogilvie's accompanying woodcut allows us to parse the dynamic that Grimwade seems to be drawing here between, on the one hand, Felton's cultural legacy as a patron, and on the other, his increasingly archaic mannerisms. The print depicts a horse drawn carriage, although not the typical commuting carriages prevalent around Melbourne during the late-nineteenth century. The sharp edges of the woodcut gouges emphasise the erectness of the rider, and the flags that mark the top border of the print, combined with the fine scratching detail on the horses' bodies – suggestive of a decorative comparison – gives the tableau a distinctly mediaeval, carnivalesque style.

<sup>11</sup> See E.M. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, (London: The Warburg Institute, 1970): 18

<sup>12</sup> Grimwade, *Flinders Lane*, 67-72



Furthermore, the lack of depth renders the image particularly *scenic*. Unlike, say, the heading illustration for chapter one, which illustrates the mantelpiece in Felton's Flinders Street office, offering a more mimetic visual representation to accompany the chapter's extended written description of the hearth, the woodcut in question – only adjacently related to the content of the plot – seems to provide a discrete vision which crystallises the dynamics left unsaid in Grimwade's text. Indeed, as Juan Cirlot notes in his *Dictionary of Symbols*:

'In Antiquity, [horses have] often have been endowed with certain powers of divination.

In fable and legend, horses, being clairvoyant, are often assigned the task of giving a timely warning to their masters, as in the Grimms' fable, for example.'<sup>13</sup>

So, the syncretic function of the woodblock – its artefactual combination of the mediaeval and modern – allows Grimwade to simultaneously backdate Australian culture to an ambiguously mythic (and importantly ahistorical) origin, whilst tacitly interlacing this historicity with his own agenda. By creating a link between the onset of modernising technology, patronage, and nation building, Grimwade paints his father and Felton as two symbols of a foregone era.

And between these two figures we return to the very fissure in Australian culture's self-imagination that artists such as Ogilvie, and more notably Preston, sought to dialectically resolve through the modernist woodblock. Neither Frederick Grimwade's ethos of pastoralist nationalism, encapsulated in the Grimwade tradition of stripping down naked to swim in the sea during family holidays, nor Felton's attempt to embrace an emerging technophile cosmopolitanism through a faulty record player in his St Kilda rooms are, on their own, quite sufficient to the maturation of Australian culture. In *Flinders Lane*, Russell Grimwade not only recognises that they must be brought together, but offers, like a vision from the future, Ogilvie's woodblock prints as a premonition of their untroubled fusion. *Flinders Lane* was penned as a tribute to Felton, but in the grain of Ogilvie's modernist gouges, we can read his eulogy, which is also the legacy of the Miegunyah collection to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, (New York: NYRB Classics, 2020): 364

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