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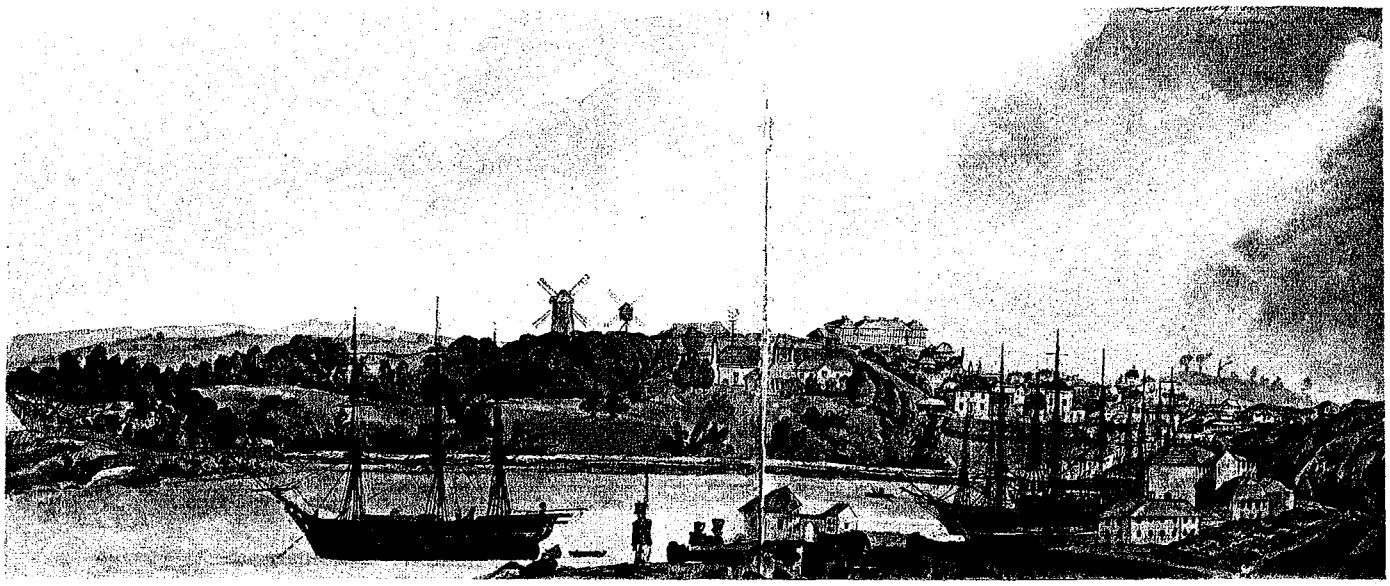

The Lady Vanishes
(or, An Adventure in conoisseurship)

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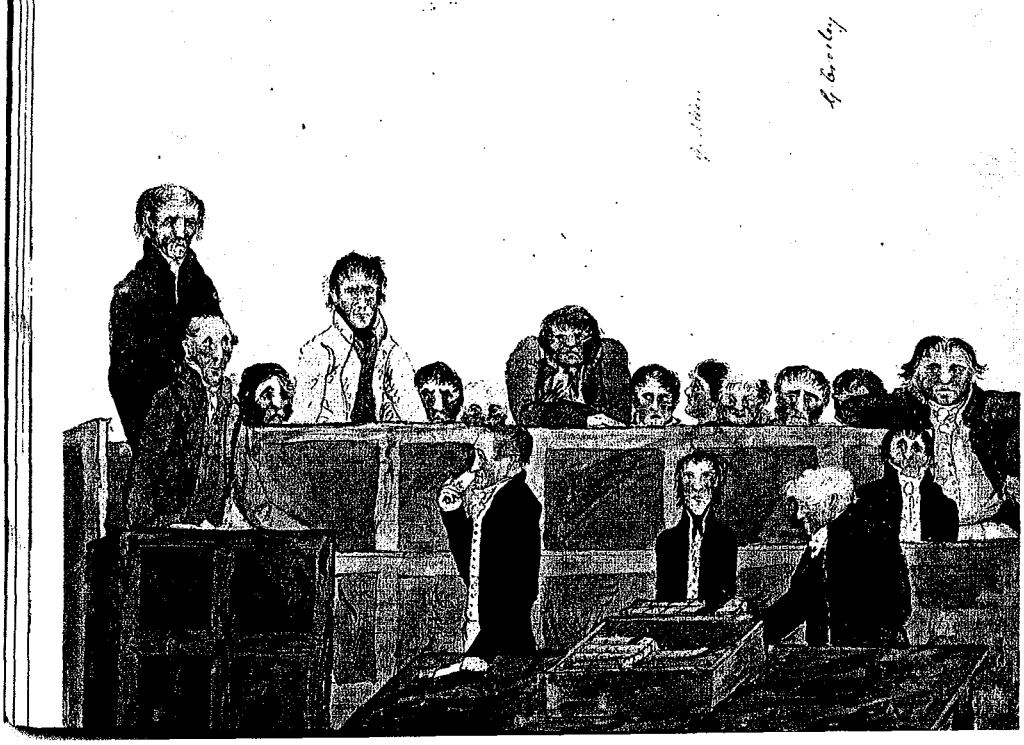
Matilda started it all. Towards the end of 2008, Sotheby's Australia's Sydney office had consigned for sale from the UK two quite extraordinary works of Australian colonial art: *Campbell's Wharf*, one of the very finest of Conrad Martens' harbour watercolours, and a late 1810s sketchbook by the pioneer woman artist Sophia Campbell. The sketchbook in particular was a real treat, and something of a gift for a hard-pressed auction house researcher; it (and a closely related sketchbook in the National Library of Australia) had been thoroughly documented in the early 1980s by the distinguished colonial art historian, Professor Joan Kerr, and now featured in numerous standard reference texts. It contained several quite widely known and historically important images: *The Costume of the Australasians*, for example, a rare view of convicts, soldiers and free settlers milling around together in a Sydney street; and the earliest image of New South Wales justice (appropriately enough, a libel matter): a sketch of the 'Philo Free' trial of 1817, in which the plaintiff was Reverend Samuel Marsden, the infamous 'flogging parson'. There were also carefully observed landscapes of Sydney, Newcastle, the Illawarra and the Hunter River, among the earliest known images of many of these places.

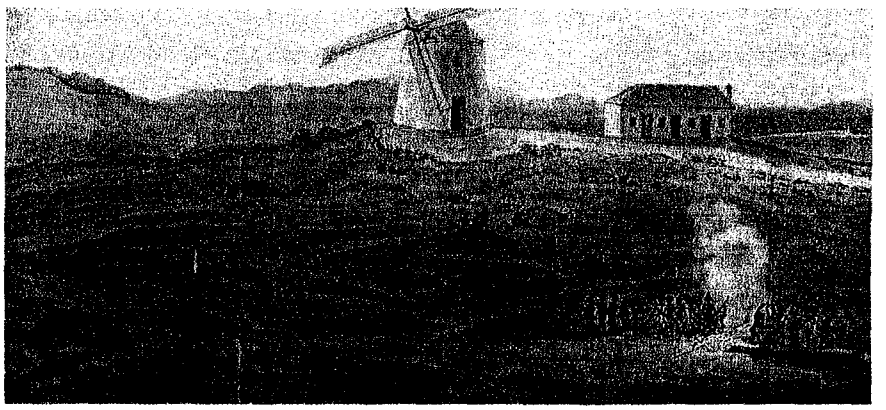
Too easy. Working from photographs and from the various previously published books and articles I had my catalogue entry drafted before the sketchbook even entered the country. When it finally hit my desk in February all I expected I'd have to do was registrar's duty, dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's, compiling the complete descriptive catalogue, detailing the number of pages, subjects, sketches, media, inscriptions, and so on. And that was where *Matilda* came in. The sketchbook's first folios featured detailed coastal profiles obviously drawn on the voyage out to New South Wales. There were views of several of the conventional ports of call for ships travelling the Great Circle: Madeira, what looked like Rio de Janeiro, the mid-Atlantic island of St Paul's, even a few of the bleak Bass Strait Kent and Curtis groups. The highly finished, double page panoramic view of Madeira was inscribed along its top right-hand edge as having been '...taken on board the *Matilda*'. And there she was again on the next folio: 'Basse's Straits Appearance of Sir Roger Curtis' Isle & peaks as passed at 10 am by *Mitilda* [*sic*].'

'Wait a minute', I thought. 'I don't remember the *Matilda* being mentioned in any of the accounts of Sophia Campbell's life.' I went back to my notes. Sophia and her merchant husband Robert had been in England from 1810 to 1815, having gone there to give evidence at the court martial of rum rebellion mutineer Major George Johnston.' The Campbells had arrived back in the colony on the *Sydney Packet* in March, 1815, yet the first few pages of Sophia's sketchbook featured a series of watercolours taken from a completely different vessel. Happily, thanks to the efforts of maritime and genealogical amateurs, those tireless foot soldiers – or rather militia – of historical research, it wasn't too hard to track down this *Matilda*. A 580-ton barque, the *Matilda* had made her first voyage to the antipodes in company with the *Lloyds* and the *Dick*, arriving in Sydney Cove on 3 August, 1817. So not only the wrong ship, but the wrong date.

To add to my growing confusion, the sketchbook showed the watermark of the London papermaker James Whatman, with the date 1816 transparently visible. Could it be that the books were wrong? The *Sydney Gazette* said only that 'Robert Campbell and family' had returned on the *Sydney Packet*. Was it possible that Sophia had come out by herself on a later ship? The *Matilda* would certainly have been a good choice for such a journey: on its 1817 voyage it brought out Lt-Col Erskine and a contingent of the 48th Northamptonshire regiment of foot – a highly respectable and responsible set of companions for a lady travelling alone.

Was that the 48th? I might not have remembered the *Matilda*, but the 48th definitely rang a bell. Yes, there it was in my Campbell family history notes: Sophia's niece and namesake, Sophia Susannah Palmer, had married one Edward Close, a lieutenant in the regiment. Not only that, but Edward's daughter, Marrianne





Collinson Close, had married her second cousin George, one of Sophia Campbell's younger sons. The families were obviously 'close', and in culture as much as in blood: Edward had his own couple of paragraphs as an amateur sketcher in the colonial art bible, the *Dictionary of Australian Artists*, while Marrianne was an accomplished botanical artist; she and her aunt/mother-in-law were the twin subjects of Hugh Falkus and Joan Kerr's *From Sydney Cove to Duntroon*.

At last things were beginning to make sense. Perhaps the sketchbook originally belonged to Edward Close, *who did a few watercolours on the voyage out before lending it or giving it to Sophia Campbell.*[2] *With this hypothesis I didn't have to put* Sophia on a logically necessary but totally undocumented separate voyage. What's more, an association with Edward Close would also explain a couple of landscape oddities near the front of the book: a view (after a William Hodges engraving) of the Katra Mosque at Murshidabad, India, and another of Catalan Bay on the island of Gibraltar. While these locations certainly didn't figure in the standard itinerary of a voyage to the South Seas, they did fit the story of Close's life. The son of an Indian trader, Close had been born in West Bengal, at Rangamati, in the Murshidabad district, and as a young infantry officer he had served in the Peninsular War, being stationed on Gibraltar for eight months in 1808-09. Similarly, the book contained a rough pencil sketch of a paddle steamer, river's edge and township, and this was clearly the preliminary study for a more finished work in the National Library's Campbell sketchbook, a watercolour inscribed 'Morpeth, from above the new Steam Co's Wharf'. Among the buildings identifiable in that view is the 1840 St James' Church of England, built by Edward Close in fulfilment of a vow made in Spain years before during a particularly hot battle. Sophia Campbell had died in 1833.

As so often happens with historical research, as one set of questions is answered, another is generated. Edward Close was clearly the artist responsible for the shipboard and Morpeth watercolours, but were they the only ones? Or to put it another way, now that the assumption of singular, 'Sophian' authorship had been punctured, was it possible to distinguish between her work and Edward's?

Looking through the pages again, there actually seemed to be several distinct artistic personalities at work. There was Close, the author of the *Matilda* subjects, a topographical draughtsman adept at the discipline of tracing coastal profiles. Close was also in all likelihood responsible for the Sydney views; as a military engineer he was someone well able to render architecture in correct perspective, to show the precise detail of ships' masts and rigging. Then there was another, somewhat less precise recorder of landscape, the author of several spatially ambiguous, even claustrophobic bush scenes. And finally there was the mordant observer of colonial society, the person responsible for the witty character portraits in *The Costume of the Australasians* and in the courtroom scene. Was there a third artist, or even more; other friends or family members who had also contributed their drawings to the sketchbook?

Attribution has always been a central focus of professional energy both for art historians and for art dealers. It is the magic of the trade, and while all the apparent hocus-pocus – the ritual peering and posturing and the arcane or flowery language – has been satirised mercilessly since the time of Hogarth, it remains an absolutely essential discipline. Without an authoritatively accredited and broadly-agreed body of work, we cannot make sense of an artist's *oeuvre*, cannot judge her achievement, cannot attribute aesthetic or monetary value. Yet not every object or maker is thoroughly documented. Many artists maintained extensive workshops or schools, and copying was formerly a central pillar of art education. How then do we determine what's what, and by whom? What are the precise differences between the hands of master and pupil, or between regional or period styles?

For some, the answer is found in specific identifiers or markers, the unconscious but particular habits of representation: the way an artist draws an ear or an eye or a hand. This was the 'scientific connoisseurship' famously pioneered by the 19th century physician and amateur Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), who, in the words of Edgar Wind, 'transformed attributions from inspired guesses into verifiable propositions', and who used the technique to clarify the canon of Italian Renaissance painting. For others, the question of attribution devolves more on the painting as a *gestalt*, on more overall pictorial traits or tendencies: in composition, in tonal and chromatic balances, in the fluency of lines or the weight of brush marks.

In practice, there is often a good deal of both. There is really no such thing as a 'good eye'. Connoisseurship is not a divine gift; it is not magic. It simply consists in spending a great deal of time looking at unquestionably authentic examples of a restricted class of objects, to the point where the green light signals of this artist, that period, or a particular style have been so thoroughly assimilated that they operate at a pre-conscious level. Thus it is that after fifteen years of regular exposure and extensive research and the compilation of a major exhibition, I can look at a painting and say immediately either 'Yes, this is by John Glover' or 'I'm so sorry, madam, but...', without even being sure how I have come to the conclusion.

Unfortunately, in this instance there was no body of work with which the two sketchbooks could be compared. As far as Sophia was concerned, this was it. But there were other drawings attributed to Edward Close, in the State Library of New South Wales' heritage collections in the Mitchell Library. Not only that, but the Mitchell's unrivalled holdings of Macquarie-era colonial paintings and drawings might offer other useful leads. And so, I headed to Sydney.

I didn't go alone. The community of early colonial Australian art historians is a small and enthusiastically curious one, and I had already discussed the problem of the sketchbook with a number of colleagues. Several were now able to join me for this informal symposium: Mary Eagle, formerly head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia; Richard Neville and his predecessor as Mitchell Librarian, Elizabeth Ellis, an acknowledged expert on the work of Conrad Martens; John McPhee, another senior curator both in Canberra and Melbourne and more recently author of a magisterial study of the convict artist Joseph

Lycett; and Michael Rosenthal, Professor of Art History at the University of Warwick.[3]

In the low-ceilinged, flouro-lit basement of the Library, Richard and his colleagues had brought out from their various solander boxes and plan press drawers a substantial array of comparative material, which we consulted as we turned the sketchbook pages.

To begin with there was the great panorama of Newcastle, a 3.5 metre watercolour on seven sheets of paper, showing the landscape, settlement and harbour of New South Wales' place of secondary punishment. This drawing was originally ascribed to Edward Close on the basis of an initialled signature, supported by the fact of his having been stationed there in 1821-22; under the command of Major James Morisset, he was responsible for much of the town's physical development, including the construction of the causeway-breakwater out to Nobby's Head (Coal Island).

More recently, this drawing had been reassigned to Sophia Campbell because of its close stylistic relationship to several of the sketchbook watercolours, and the drawing had in fact been included in a 1995 Mitchell Library exhibition of early colonial women artists. And this in spite of the inscription. Beneath a group of Aborigines in ceremonial body paint are the words: 'N.B. This Corrobory [*sic*] has no business here as it is never danced in the day-time. Taken at and finished in Newcastle on Hunter River. June 11th 1821. E. C. Close'. From the feminist-revisionist position, the signature was held to be somewhat ambiguous, a probable later addition, and the text a sniffy critique of the original artist's lack of anthropological understanding. But then (such are the shifting sands of attribution) Richard Neville had re-re-attributed the work to Close in the 2006 exhibition *An unbroken view: early nineteenth century panoramas*, once more on the grounds of the initials and the inscription (now held to be sardonic self-mockery), and of the additional fact that Close had written to Governor Macquarie from the Hunter the day before he signed it, asking for land.

Rather less equivocal was a group of three dozen works formerly bound together in a scrapbook which bore on its cover the legend: 'The Paintings and Sketches of Edward Charles Close Esqre. H M 48th Regt. his gift to his only daughter Marrianne Collinson Close Morpeth February 17th 1844.' Ah, there's nothing sweeter than a secure autograph text and a clear provenance. Amidst this curious miscellany – copies and picturesque 'fancies', landscapes from the Peninsular War and from the time Close was stationed in southern Ireland, sketches of brother officers, and a caricature of the colonial surgeon, magistrate and prominent landowner John Harris 'receiving company' with his hands tucked inside his flies – there were several which matched pages in our sketchbook both in subject and in style: views of the Five Islands and Tom Thumb's Lagoon (near present-day Wollongong), for example.

From these we moved to an examination of prints, drawings and watercolours by other contemporary artists, military men (Captain James Wallis and Major James Taylor of the 46th), civilians (G.W. Evans, J.R. Lewin and Richard Read), and convicts (Joseph Lycett and Walter Preston). We discussed patterns of patronage and distribution in early colonial art: the way officers and civil servants appropriated the work of convicts and subordinates as their own; the way images of newly discovered places and/or natural history specimens were copied and re-copied by other colonists; the way scruffy, 'on-the-spot' records were tidied up into detailed, finished watercolours or were translated into prints for the local or London markets. We calibrated historical factors: the topography and architecture of early Sydney and Newcastle; the chronology of exploration in the late 1810s and 1820s; the expansion of white settlement on the South Coast and up the Hunter River; and relations between the British and the Indigenous Australians. We considered aspects of style: the conventional training of British military draughtsmen at the Woolwich Academy; and the inconsistencies of manner inevitably found in the work of amateur artists.

By the time we had spent a couple of hours poring over the Mitchell's drawings we were all visually and intellectually exhausted, but very happy. Close was clearly emerging as a gifted and significant figure in Macquarie-era art. We still hadn't worked out precisely which sketches were his and which were Sophia's, but it now seemed highly likely that many, perhaps all of the landscapes at least, were by him.

The party broke up. Later that afternoon John McPhee rang me. 'I think they're all by

the one hand,' he said, simply. I knew he was right. Our reluctance to overturn twenty-five years of conventional wisdom, to reform the accepted canon, to correct numerous 'standard texts', to totally refute Joan Kerr, the late doyenne of colonial art studies and a scholar for whom we all shared great respect and affection, had prevented us from seeing straight. The reason we had been unable to distinguish between Edward's drawings and those of Sophia was that there was no distinction. To all intents and purposes, the question of authorship was now settled. The sketchbook and its companion volume were both by Edward Close.

Still, I had already arranged with the National Library of Australia to undertake a close comparison with its sketchbook, and so a few days later found myself in another electric-blue art store, this time with the NLA's Assistant Director-General (and another former Mitchell Librarian) Margy Burn, Picture Librarian Linda Groom, Mary Eagle and Michael Rosenthal (again – exemplars of that enthusiastic curiosity), and two other Canberra-based colonial scholars: Gordon Bull and Martin Terry. Although attribution was no longer a concern, we did much good art historical work that day, too: matching the Sydney views to early maps; identifying preliminary sketches in one book more fully finished in the other; establishing a relative chronology for the Newcastle subjects; confirming that the big Mitchell Library watercolour had been scaled up and finished on the basis of pencil sketches in the NLA book, and so on.

But for me the really significant moment of the Canberra trip occurred outside the Library. I had organised to meet with Deborah Clark, an old friend and colleague now working as Curator of Visual Art at the Canberra Museum and Gallery. When I called in to the Museum I was still buzzing with excitement about the whole business, and was more than pleased to pull out my files and photographs and run through the whole story of the reattribution. At one point an image of *The Costume of the Australasians* was sitting on top of the pile of papers when I introduced the Mitchell's Close scrapbook, with its quirky caricature of Dr Harris. And there, suddenly, I got my second epiphany. Harris's feet and shoes – short-ankled, snub-toed, rounded-heeled – were drawn in exactly the same way as those of the soldiers, settlers and convicts walking on the streets of Sydney.

Mille grazie, Dottore Morelli!

1. The Campbells were apparently quite close to Governor William Bligh; it is recorded that Sophia gave Bligh's daughter Mary Putland a shawl 'by way of a friendly present', and her husband was at dinner at Government House on the very night of the 1808 coup.
2. Such a drawing book (leather bound, from Rudolph Akermann's fashionable Repository of Arts in The Strand) would have been something of a rare luxury in the colony in 1817, and a welcome present. As demonstrated in Caroline Jordan's *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition* (2005), gifts, swaps and loans of sketchbooks and scrapbooks were an important part of the non-financial economy of polite society in early settler Australia.
3. Also in attendance were Louise Anemaat, the Mitchell's Head of Pictures, and its Head of Preservation, conservator Heather Mansell.

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P46: 1/ Edward Close (attrib.) *Sydney in all its Glory*, folio from late 1810s sketchbook. Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia.

2/ Edward Close (attrib.), *the 'Philo Free' trial of 1817, Sydney*, folio from late 1810s sketchbook. Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia.

P47: 1/ Edward Close (attrib.), *untitled*, folio from late 1810s sketchbook. Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia.

2/ Edward Close (attrib.), *Panorama of Newcastle* (detail), 1821, graphic materials. Collection: State Library of NSW.

P48: 1/ Edward Close, *Dr Harris receiving company*, pencil drawing on card, plate 30b from The Drawings of Edward Charles Close Esqre H.M. 48th Reg.t, c. 1820, box album containing 37 watercolour and pencil drawings, album 37.8 x 32.5 x 4cm. Collection: State Library of NSW.

2/ Edward Close (attrib.), *Costume of the Australasians*, folio from late 1810s sketchbook. Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia.