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George Taplin’s reconstruction of landscape on the Point McLeay Aboriginal Mission

Cathy Hayles

Introduction

The transformation of the Australian landscape caused by European settlement has been studied from a vast range of different perspectives. Bain Attwood, in the first chapter of The Making of the Aborigines, analyses the ways in which changes to the landscape during the establishment of the Ramahyuck Mission in Victoria appear to reflect the aims and ideologies of the missionaries who worked there.\(^1\) It is my aim here to attempt a similar analysis of George Taplin’s transformation of the landscape on the Pt McLeay Aboriginal Mission.

The landscape involved is the region of the Lower Murray River in South Australia, including Lakes Albert and Alexandrina, an area inhabited by the Ngarrindjeri people.\(^2\) Early European settlers described the climate as very variable, seeming to them extremely hot in summer, but also capable of sudden heavy rains and strong winds.\(^3\) Official colonists first landed in South Australia in 1836 and by the 1840s settlement had spread to the Lower Murray region. In 1841 Wellington was established and by 1843 two large pastoral stations were being run on the southern shores of Lake Alexandrina and around Lake Albert.\(^4\)

When the Aborigines’ Friends’ Association (AFA) was formed in 1858\(^5\) it was with the purpose of establishing an Aboriginal mission on the Lower Murray which would educate the local people in the teachings of Christianity and the ‘superiority’ of a European lifestyle. The intention seems to have been to transform ‘wild’, ‘brutal heathens’ into a civilised, God-fearing, hard-working sector of the new Australian society. The AFA engaged George Taplin, a
young schoolmaster, to lead the establishment and running of the institution. Taplin had been born at Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, in 1831, moved to Hampshire in 1845, and emigrated to Australia at the age of eighteen. His appointment led to the dramatic transformation of the landscape at Point McLeay. His choices and decisions in reconstructing this landscape can be seen as reflections of his understanding of the purpose of the mission, his role as its director, and his perception of the Aborigines with whom he worked.

Selecting The Site

The first of Taplin’s prerequisites when selecting the site for the station was that it should be a place where large numbers of Aborigines were already living or visiting frequently. No one was under the illusion that Aborigines would travel long distances in order to be ‘Christianised and civilised’, therefore missionaries would have to go to them. The main intention of the AFA in establishing Point McLeay appears to have been the starting of a school, the young being thought to be more impressionable than adults. After selecting the general Lake Albert area the AFA recommended that the site chosen should make use of the prominence of fishing to Aborigines in the region and be close to the points where people gathered for this purpose. In following this advice Taplin was both respecting the value of existing Aboriginal practices and serving his own interests. He saw that the site would provide food for himself and other whites on the mission and that a profitable fishing industry might be developed under his guidance and control. He describes the site as being in a good central position, a ‘great fishing place of natives’ and ‘near the boundary of the tribes’, meaning that the area covered the intersection of several groups.
Map 1. Showing the location of the Pt McLeay Mission (Raukkan) on the shore of Lake Alexandrina.
The second of the AFA’s recommendations was that the site should, if possible, provide plenty of food, water and building materials. Taplin’s farming endeavours show that he wanted the mission to be as close to self-sufficient as possible, so in choosing a site he looked for land that was ‘fertile’ according to the European understanding - that is, land that could be used for raising crops and grazing animals. He also particularly looked for good quality limestone for use in building.

The final major recommendation made by the AFA for the selection of the site was that it should not be too close to white settlements, so that Aborigines would not pick up the less desirable characteristics of white society. Taplin was more successful in this than perhaps he would have liked - the main route to and from Point McLeay involved crossing Lake Alexandrina, and Taplin had several near-disasters while sailing in rough water and often felt unable to attempt a crossing, the situation being just too dangerous. Nevertheless, he recorded in his journal that ‘I find that this place possesses every requisite for the institution’.

The Camps

When Taplin did set up the Point McLeay mission station he appears to have constructed it in such a way that it was made up of two distinct worlds, both spatially and culturally. The first was the Aboriginal camps on the station land, the second the mission institution itself. These two worlds were clearly separated from each other throughout the time Taplin was at Point McLeay and although there was considerable movement between the two Taplin never sought to assert his authority over the camps in the way that he did in the mission itself. At least initially, this was probably due to the Aborigines outnumbering the whites. Later, when around three quarters of the Aboriginal population were living in the mission settlement, he showed no inclination to force the rest to join them. Instead he tried to persuade the people in the camps that the right way to live was to follow Jesus and live ‘civilised’ lives, an
Figure 1. Rev. George Taplin. Photo: SA Museum.
important part of which involved living in houses, wearing clothes, and adopting the other accoutrements of a European lifestyle.

Although this understanding of the separateness of the camps remained static during Taplin's time at Point McLeay, in other ways his relationship with them changed over time. When he first settled at Point McLeay Taplin stayed with Aborigines in a camp for five months, while his house was built. After he moved into the mission house he frequently visited the camps to try to teach people about Christianity and to administer medical treatment. His journal records his frequent disillusion with his progress in converting people to Christianity. He wrote that when he talked to Aboriginal people about religion 'it is astonishing what dullness of perception and lack of interest is manifested'. Later, when the mission was more established, older boys and girls occasionally left the school and returned to live in the camps, as did adults from the cottages. Although Taplin tried to persuade them to stay, arguing that the eyes of God were upon them, he never detained them by force. This was seen by Taplin as losing them back to Aboriginal culture, and throughout his journals this battle for the souls of the Aboriginal people clearly shows the opposition and separateness Taplin felt existed between the camps and the mission.

In the camps the Aboriginal elders were the authorities, and although he tried to dissuade the people from engaging in traditional ceremonies and spiritual life, he did so from a distance. He seems to have felt that in moving spatially the Aborigines were also moving culturally, and his construction and use of station landscape reflects this view. Where the two worlds intersected it appears that concessions were made on both sides. Generally, Aboriginal elders turned a blind eye to Taplin's religious discussions in the camps. Similarly, Taplin sometimes constructed the settlement schedule around the Aborigines' seasonal movements. While Taplin's aim seems to have been to establish and maintain the separation between the two worlds, the inevitable degree of interconnection between them forced him to find a way of acting within these areas of contested space. In situations where his own authority
was in direct conflict with that of the Aboriginal elders, it appears he often chose to accede to Aboriginal law rather than force a confrontation. It seems he preferred not to risk losing the authority that he had already established.

Although Taplin did not interfere directly with the landscape of the camps he extended his influence as far as he could in other more subtle ways. One photograph shows an Aboriginal man standing beside his wurley, only a couple of metres in front of a fence.\textsuperscript{17} While not stating his intentions too obviously Taplin was not about to let the camp people forget his presence and purpose. Taplin also made a distinction between the people living in the camps and those living on the mission in terms of what food was appropriate for them. He helped the people in the camps get food by fishing and hunting with them\textsuperscript{18} and by asking neighbouring settlers for food on their behalf.\textsuperscript{19} He also ate with them both when he lived in the camps and when he visited them after moving into his house.\textsuperscript{20} However, he made a distinction between the kind of food that was appropriate for those living in the camps and those living in the mission. At a tea given to raise funds for furniture for the new schoolhouse he provided those who come to eat on the mission with an English-style afternoon tea, for which the women did the baking, but he also sent food down to the people in the camps - tea, sugar, and one pound of plum cake each.\textsuperscript{21} This distinction could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it could be attributed to Taplin's understanding of those living in the camps as inhabiting a world separate from that of the mission. Alternatively, he could have been using food as an enticement to 'camp Aborigines' to 'convert'.

\textit{The Mission House}

In Taplin's world, the world of the mission institution, the first building erected was his house, a two-roomed cottage with a lean-to.\textsuperscript{22} He wanted to create a setting in which a European culture and lifestyle could be created and did not bring his wife and children to Point McLeay until the house was built.\textsuperscript{23} He found a well and was determined to build the house 'within 10
chains of the well’ so as not to have to carry water over long distances. 24

As well as trying to create a ‘little piece of England’ at Point McLeay Taplin also immediately identified his house as part of the mission institution. The largest room in the house was used for conducting services before the chapel was built and Taplin seems to have used this practice to try to teach the European concept of time as well as to Christianise the local population. He experienced problems gathering the Aborigines together at his house punctually, so one day he rang the bell, waited ten minutes and then shut and locked the door and started the service with his family. 25 A remorseful crowd gathered outside and, when Taplin came out, begged him to begin the service again for them. However, as it was already lunch time, he told them to come back in the afternoon, which they did, and he noted with satisfaction their number and attentiveness at the service. 26 The ordering of time and punctuality were perceived as being very important concepts to European culture - they helped to provide a sense of control and project an image of self-discipline and superiority over nature. By making use of his house to assist him in teaching these constructs to Aborigines Taplin can be seen to have placed it firmly within the structure of the mission’s institutions, along with the school and the chapel, that were built for the purpose of educating the Aborigines. In this sense, it fully deserves the title of ‘mission house’.

A number of other incidents illustrate Taplin’s understanding of the mission house as one of the mission’s institutions rather than a family home. On one occasion, Taplin and visiting police officers, who had come to assist in breaking up a fight between a group of Aborigines, used the mission house as a substitute police station, retiring there to plan their course of action and call in help from nearby stations, and taking an Aboriginal man there who had been arrested. On another occasion, soon after he moved into the house, several Aboriginal women asked if their daughters could sleep in Taplin’s kitchen to avoid being given as wives to men in the camps. 27 He agreed, much to the annoyance of some of the Aboriginal elders, and the girls stayed there for a few nights but then went back to their camps. Similarly, a boy came to
Figure 3. A rough plan of the layout of buildings at the Pt McLeay Mission, c. 1869.
Taplin again wanting to sleep in the kitchen because he had refused to undergo initiation and was afraid of what the other members of the group might do to him. Again Taplin allowed him to do so. In the confined space of the house, at this stage still only three rooms, Taplin could hardly have offered them a room of their own, but the assumption of both the Aborigines and Taplin that the kitchen was the place for them to sleep is a reflection of the understanding of both parties of the status of ‘camp Aborigines’. The kitchen, in these small cottages, was used for eating, entertaining and performing household chores. It was the place where the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ met, where visitors moved in and out through the only doorway into the house. In contrast, the bedroom was connected to the kitchen, and could only be entered by someone already in the house. It was generally reserved for the privacy of the family.

In all these instances Taplin’s actions brought his authority into direct conflict with the authority of the Aboriginal elders for control of the young people, and once again brought the mission house into this conflict as a strategic resource for Taplin. In these situations he seems to have either conceded to Aboriginal wishes (allowing the girls and boy to stay for a while, and then letting them leave when pressured by Aboriginal elders), or brought in outside authority to share the responsibility for the outcome of situations in which he wished to assert his authority.

Later, when the school, chapel and cottages were built, Taplin also demonstrated his understanding of the mission house as being an integral part of the processes of civilisation and Christianisation of the mission by his choice of its placement in relation to other buildings. He erected the school and the church on either side of the mission house, showing the centrality of this building in his vision of the hierarchy and functioning of the mission. He had the Aboriginal cottages built in a row on the other side of the church, placing them on the perimeter of the settlement and separating their homes from his own. Photographs of the mission illustrate this; the missionary’s ‘domain’ - the mission house, school and chapel - was central in the landscape, while the Aboriginal residents were situated on the periphery.
The Schoolhouse

The second building at Point McLeay was the schoolhouse, constructed in 1860. It comprised a schoolroom and two dormitories, each measuring approximately 8.5m x 3m, a kitchen and a storeroom of 4.88m x 3.05m each. In 1863 the schoolroom was enlarged to approximately 8.5m x 9.7m and the old schoolroom divided into two smaller rooms. The school was, of course, a boarding school. Taplin’s view of the station as divided into the two worlds of the camps and the mission dictated that his authority over the children would be far greater when they were physically on the mission, so it was logical to conduct the school in a way that would maximise their time there. Once attending the school, the children were required to ask Taplin’s permission if they wanted to visit the camps or go hunting with their families. Most of the time this was granted, but sometimes when the request was from a girl to be married or a boy to attend initiation ceremonies it was denied on the grounds that such practices were not part of the Christian faith. The shortage of food in the camps and the lack of shelter also provided a pragmatic reason for Taplin to boast that he could have all the children within twenty miles attending his school if he could provide them with accommodation and a meal every day.

The schoolhouse dramatically increased Taplin’s control over the lives of the children who attended it, although he experienced some disciplinary trouble with some of the older boys. David Unaipon writes in his autobiography, My Life Story, that ‘Mr Taplin did not expect to change the lives of the older people, but he centred his activities upon the younger generation’. He appears to have immediately begun to use the structure of the schoolhouse to impose European values onto the children by separating the boys’ dormitory from the girls’. The windows had locked iron gratings on them and the doors were locked at night to prevent relatives of the children from coming and forcibly removing them from the school. A visitor to the station in 1879 was told that the children liked this arrangement, that they did not feel safe in
the rooms at night unless they were locked in and that if the windows were not locked they leant out of them and called for it to be done.\textsuperscript{40} Separation of the sexes in childhood was not a traditional Aboriginal practice and in the camps children mixed freely until puberty.\textsuperscript{41} Consistent with Attwood's findings regarding the Ramahyuck mission,\textsuperscript{42} we see that Taplin constructed the schoolhouse in a way that enabled him to impose European understandings of gender and identity upon the children who lived in it.

Taplin also used the increased authority that the schoolhouse provided to further educate the children in European concepts of time. He ran the school on a regimented timetable, in which every moment of the day was accounted for. Attwood also felt that routine and repetition were important elements in the strategies employed by the missionaries at Ramahyuck.\textsuperscript{43} The daily routine at Pt McLeay was as follows:

- 6 am (or 7am in Winter) - 7.30: Everyone rise, distribution of rations to the sick, infirm and aged, and the weighing out of rations for the schoolday.
- 8.30: children fed breakfast
- 9.15: morning prayer followed by school until 12.00pm.
- 1.00: lunch.
- 2.00 - 3.30: school.
- 3.30 - 5.30 (Winter) or 6.30 (Summer): children play, Taplin catches up on business and correspondence.
- 5.30/6.30: Supper, followed by evening prayer, children return to bedrooms and locked in.
- 9pm: lamps taken away and bed.\textsuperscript{44}

Saturday was washing day and European concepts of gender were again instilled with the boys spending the day working on the land and in the gardens.\textsuperscript{45} The order and routine of the school lifestyle is clearly evident in photographs showing the school building and the children.\textsuperscript{46} Often the children are posed standing in neat rows with the tidy schoolhouse garden prominently featured. A visitor notes, however, that it had been found
necessary to give the children a long holiday during the summer months, during which they went back to live in the camps, because the traditional practice of moving to new areas at this time tended to cause children to leave of their own accord. Again, when his interests came into direct conflict with Aboriginal traditions Taplin appears to have preferred to compromise, rather than force the issue.

The position of the schoolhouse in the layout of the mission shows Taplin's view of its role in his project of bringing Christianity and civilisation to the Aborigines. When the chapel, cottages and other buildings had been built and the mission house enlarged, the schoolhouse lay close to the mission house and the church, and on the opposite side of the settlement to the Aboriginal houses. Its size reflects its importance in the functioning of the mission, and in 1895 a new, larger schoolhouse was built on a more elevated site to further emphasise its role. Taplin took advantage of its space, centrality and status to hold large gatherings in it, such as the customary Christmas dinner. Buildings of this size provided him with the opportunity to foster a sense of community on the mission within the context of a European lifestyle.

The Chapel And Cottages

After the school was built no major building projects were undertaken for eight years until the chapel was built in 1868. The church became well known in the district and white settlers travelled long distances to attend its Sunday services. Its architecture and design were totally different to any of the other buildings on the station and it stood out amongst them. Taplin built the chapel in the style of an English country church, with a small spire and porch, and it also housed Taplin's study. Its prominence in the landscape is an indication of its significance. The placement of his study in the church rather than the mission house is another sign of his understanding of his identity in terms of his profession.
Figure 5. View of Pt McLeay in about 1890. Photo: SA Museum.
The chapel was placed between the mission house and the Aboriginal cottages, making it the first building the residents passed on their way to any meeting or business in the mission. Its proximity to them shows what significance Taplin felt this building had for the residents of the cottages - they certainly could not avoid attending service on the grounds that it was too far to walk. Taplin imposed the same organisation of time in the chapel as he had on services in his home and also promoted the special respect he felt was appropriate for a chapel and the function it performed by insisting that everyone be covered when they came to the services. Some people came with blankets wrapped around them in order to obey this rule.\(^{54}\)

The cottages were built at the same time as the chapel and by 1870 nine of them had been erected.\(^{55}\) Six years later this number had grown to fifteen.\(^{56}\) From photographs taken during the period they look very small and are designed in the same manner as European cottages of the same age - no verandahs or other adaptations had been made to suit the Australian environment. Tracks ran from each house directly to a path that ran along the front of the row, connecting them all.\(^{57}\) Early photographs show no gardens, but later ones depict small plots in front of the house neatly bordered by stones.\(^{58}\) In fact neatness is the overwhelming impression one gains of the cottages - their precise linear formation and their identical design all help to create the impression of order and control, concepts that Taplin was very keen to impart to their residents.\(^{59}\) This theme was also observed by Attwood in his analysis of Ramahyuck.

The design and placement of the cottages served a number of purposes in Taplin’s plan to civilise and Christianise the Aborigines. Their size and Taplin’s control over them had the effect of forcing groups into the nuclear family unit,\(^{60}\) as opposed to the traditional Aboriginal practice of the larger extended family group. As has already been noted, their location on the outer area of the mission settlement reflects Taplin’s understanding of the Aborigines’ status and identity. They are next to the church and to the pastoral
land where most of the men worked, linking them, like Taplin, to their occupation and so helping to impart European concepts of gender.

Apart from the settlement at Point McLeay Taplin also had a great impact on the landscape of the rest of the station. His plans for the mission included the hope that it would be able to supply most of its own food and to produce products that could be sold. Taplin was also very keen to teach Aborigines skills and trades that they would be able to use in the labour force, and for these reasons he constructed the station as a working farm. One visitor commented that it was ‘a curious combination of a squatter’s station with a missionary establishment’. His placement of fences is interesting - instead of putting them between houses and buildings to separate groups of people he left the area of the settlement fairly open, except for a fence around the mission house. Instead he placed fences along the divisions between different areas of land use, such as along the edge of roads and around gardens and orchards. The area around the buildings was cleared except for a few strategically placed trees, ‘civilising’ its appearance to fit the lifestyle he hoped to establish there.

In order to teach Aboriginal men the trades that Taplin thought appropriate for them, he altered the landscape considerably. Under Taplin men were taught to be bakers, butchers, fence-makers, stockmen, builders, shearers, woolwashers, bootmakers, carpenters, and horticulturalists in the orchards, vineyards, fields and gardens. The women became domestics, taught to cook, be nursemaids, to sew, clean and wash clothes. This gendering of tasks is another characteristic found by Attwood to be present at the Ramahyuck mission. The landscape of Point McLeay reflected this in that it was designed to be productive according to European definitions and processes, and Taplin’s journal is full of records of clearing, planting, surveying and fencing the land.
Conclusion

In Taplin’s two decades at the Point McLeay Aboriginal Mission, from 1859 to his death in 1879, the landscape of the area was transformed. The architecture reflects his European heritage and the connection he felt existed between this and his task as ‘civiliser’ of the Aborigines. The importance he saw in imparting Christianity and educating the young can be seen in the placement of the buildings and their relative sizes. His establishment of the mission as a working station illustrates his pragmatism and his emphasis on the development of a work ethic among Aboriginal people. The alternative lifestyle that he tried to create on the station settlement was enhanced by his efforts to keep the two spheres of the camps and the mission as separate as possible. He seems to have felt that this would be the most effective way of educating Aborigines for the role he felt they ought to play in Australian society - that of ‘cooperative, civilised, Christian labourers’.

Endnotes

3. ibid., p. 154.
4. ibid., p. 229.
7. ibid., p. 45.
9. ibid., 18 April 1859.
Taplin, Journal, 18 April 1859.

Bury, p. 45.


Taplin, Journal, 18 April 1859.


Taplin, Journal, 19 May 1859.

Photograph of ‘Aboriginal Camp’ in the Mortlock Library.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 72.

Bury, p. 103.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 73.

Taplin, Journal, 5 April 1869.

Rowe, p. 5.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 66.

Taplin, Journal, 30 June 1859.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 80.

ibid.

Taplin, Journal, 5 November 1859.

ibid., 4 January 1860.


Rowe, p. 6.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 85.

ibid.

Rowe, p. 6.


Bury, p. 97.

Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 103.


*SA Register*, 20 March 1879, p. 6.
ibid.

ibid.

Attwood, p. 18.

ibid.


Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 87.


Photographs in the Mortlock Library.

*SA Register*, 20 March 1879, p. 6.

Rowe, p. 6.


Attwood, p. 16.

Rowe, p. 7.

ibid. p. 8.


Taplin, *Native Tribes*, p. 80.

Rowe, p. 7.


Photograph B9799 in the Mortlock Library.

Rowe, between pages 6 & 7.

Attwood, p. 11.

Hemming, pp. 26-27.

*South Australian Register*, 20 March 1879, p. 6.

Photographs of Point McLeay in the Mortlock Library.

Rowe, p. 7 & Ingoldby, p. 2.

ibid.

Attwood, p. 20.