

About the Cover Art

Cover Essay: Fragile Abundance

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In establishing the Swan River Colony against considerable odds, Captain James Stirling might be regarded as the forerunner of a long line of Western Australian property developers. Having lost his commission, Stirling was in need of an income and succeeded in convincing both the authorities and enough private citizens to take the trip to the other side of the world. Stirling's fulsome praise for the prospects of the colony did little to prepare these adventurers for the realities of life in a harsh new world.

One of these brave souls was another James escaping financial difficulties, the Scottish botanist James Drummond. Along with a wife and six children, Drummond brought with him a variety of seeds and plants, including many important domesticated food species. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the plants and animals that accompanied colonisers all over the world. This "self-replicating and world-altering avalanche" as Alfred Crosby describes it, was as important to the success of the imperialist adventure as any armaments.

While the colony was fortunate to have this planting material available, growing enough food to feed the colony was a different matter. Despite the success of riverside market gardens, food was short, disease was rife and the colony was often in danger of collapse. Theft from these gardens was so common that a 10 pound reward was offered for information leading to a conviction.

Among the more hardy and adept colonists were Dom Salvado and his fellow Benedictine monks. Using some of

the plant material that Drummond brought to Perth, Salvado and the Benedictines established grapes, olives and vegetables at their farm overlooking Lake Monger. It is ironic that in establishing grapes and olives, the Benedictines grew two crops that were well suited to the local climate and soils, but which have not been planted on a significant scale here until recently.

Armed with faith and optimism, Salvado seemed to flourish in the challenges of the new world. He spent months at a time living in the bush with aboriginal guides, learning their language and developing a taste for lizard supper. In his memoirs, Dom Salvado displays his horticultural genius in "noting that the sandy area around Perth ... will grow plants just as well as the best European gardens ... and various fruit trees and plants, both native and foreign, strike root successfully."

Not all the colonists shared Salvado's enthusiasm, however; the historian F. K. Crowley writes that "most of the settlers agreed with their English plants that there was something wrong with this part of the Promised land." Some 150 years later many Perth gardeners would probably agree.

The colonists, their plants and technologies, came from a land of deep and fertile soils fresh from a bout of glaciation just 15,000 years earlier. Glaciers creep across the landscape like giant slugs, leaving a thick bed of mineral-rich rock dust in their wake. Together with volcanic eruptions and crust uplift, these are the processes that lay the foundations for the creation of young and fertile soils.

Here in the antipodes we have some of the oldest and most eroded soils in the world. NASA scientists come to

study our ancient rocks, as they are the nearest things on earth to the planet Mars, while the soils of the coastal plain have been described by one UN body as being among the poorest agricultural soils in the world. This is where we live.

The soil is the primary source of the nutrients that build and sustain our bodies and minds. All the plants and animals we consume are products of the soils in which they grew, or from which they were fed. When a soil displays nutritional deficiencies and imbalances, this is reflected in the food produced. The impact of our poor soils does not even stop at the coastline, with our near shore fisheries adversely affected by the lack of nutrient input from the land.

Our relative affluence means that we are able to escape the worst effects of living off our eroded continent. Most of us are able to eat plenty, even to excess, and to eat a wide variety of foods produced both locally and from interstate and overseas. We are backed up by a relatively strong health system and we consume large quantities of vitamins, minerals and other supplements.

To continue to produce fresh fruit and vegetables along the coastal plain, we draw on large quantities of underground water, losing significant amounts through evaporation in the battle to keep plants from wilting in high temperatures, in soil with little water holding capacity. Another portion of that water seeps below the root zone, carrying with it some of the large quantities of fertilisers and pesticides that are applied to maintain productivity in naturally infertile soils.

There is thus a cost to this high maintenance lifestyle we lead here on the coastal plain. The Aboriginal people living here at the time of Stirling's arrival understood the connectivity of the hundreds of water bodies which dotted the coastal plain, and relied on many of the plants and animals living in them. Since that time we have destroyed 80% of these lakes to build a modern, and for many, increasingly affluent city.

There are a number of herons and heron-like birds that can be characteristically seen in and around the wetlands of the coastal plain where I live. The most ubiquitous of these is the white-faced heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*), known to local Aborigines as Wy-an. I can remember these birds clearly from my childhood, no doubt first pointed out to me by my mother or father. From the car I marvelled at their stillness, their camouflage, and when they did take to the air, a take-off and flight by turns awkward and graceful.

As we continue our extravagant lifestyle we are beginning to count the cost in dwindling aquifers, stressed woodlands, and unquenchable fires burning through the rich organic sediments that accumulated over millennia in our now drying wetlands. The white-faced heron, too, will feel the pinch as its habitat is reduced; it may stand, one legged, as a symbol of the vulnerability of our affluent living.

While it is little surprise that the colonists struggled to come to terms with the local environment, it is clear that we are still struggling to find a way to live here without degrading the very soil and water that sustains us.

THE ARTIST

Ice Bear is a status member of the Chippewas of Nawash at Cape Croker on Georgian Bay in Ontario, Canada. For most of his childhood, he was in the care of Canada's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. He credits his art and the strength of the visions the Spirits and the Creator have always given him for his survival of those early years. Thanks to the foresight of an art teacher, and funding by Canada's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, he attended the Toronto Artist's Workshop, and later Sheridan College in Ontario. After college, he went to work in the advertising and communications industry, spending the next 25 years as designer and art director. With his arrival on the west coast of Canada, and his acclimatization to the west coast lifestyle, his early love for fine art has reasserted itself. Over the past decade, he has felt a growing need to follow his dreams, fulfill his "responsibilities" and give his visions the chance to materialize. He moved to Vancouver Island in the early 1990s, adopting the name Ice Bear for his art, and made a personal commitment to pursue his fine art career, accepting only a few, specialized commercial commissions.

The cover art, *Evening Heron*, was created by the artist as part of a series that was transitional between a long career in commercial art and design, and his refocusing on fine art. These works combined the graceful and elegant lines evident in much native Woodland art with the strong sense of design nurtured by his commercial graphic career. This particular work grew out of long evening walks with his dog along beaches on Canada's west coast. In Roberts Bay in Sidney on Vancouver Island, during the first years that the artist resided there, spring by the bay was a busy

time with dozens of great blue herons teaching their young how to fish. A few years later, the spring season brought only a few herons and even fewer young to stand watch in the once rich tidal flats. The bay became a much quieter and lonelier place.

Ice Bear's work reflects his beliefs about the necessity of understanding the natural world around us, and learning to respect both this Earth and all our fellow travelers on it. Other themes are related to these beliefs, reflecting his cultural heritage, the mythologies of aboriginal peoples, and the conundrum of being aboriginal in a technological world. More information about the artist and his work is available at <http://www.icebearstudio.com/>

Cover Art

Evening Heron by Ice Bear (serigraph with airbrushing on Arches 300 pound paper with deckled edge; 22 × 30 cm).

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