Glover’s paintings of Aborigines are among his most prized and highly valued. However, they comprise a small proportion of his oeuvre, and just a dozen or so survive. Considered as a separate genre, they are quite atypical of his practice, since Glover was predominantly a landscape painter. Only in the 1830s, near the end of his career, did he paint ambitious figure compositions that seem to aspire to the status of history painting. Why, and why our interest in them today?

The terrible fate of the Palawa (as the Tasmanian Aborigines now call themselves) occupied Glover’s thoughts. Indeed it scarred a generation of colonists and still unsettles the Australian consciousness. Today we are attracted to Glover’s paintings of Aborigines, singling them out as a distinct genre, because of what we want them to do for us. By presenting a positive view of the Aborigines as a peaceful, exuberant and exotic people, in contrast to the popular view of the time that they were vermin and a hindrance to colonial expansion, Glover’s paintings provide a convenient salve for our postcolonial guilt.

By depicting the Aborigines happily at home in their land, Glover also reminds us of whose land this is, thus countering the doctrine of terra nullius. This may be why the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre called on the Australian government to buy Glover’s The Bath of Diana, when it came onto the market in 1991. However Michael Mansell, spokesman for the Centre, suggested a more complex motive. The painting, he was reported as saying, “provides a rare insight into the minds of the generation which invaded our lands”.1 Like most of us today, Mansell saw The Bath of Diana as a history painting. He was interested in it as a colonial narrative rather than, for example, a landscape painting.

We must, however, be careful to distinguish our own motives from those of Glover and his time. Glover’s interest in the indigenous inhabitants is that of an Englishman nurtured by eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals, not that of a modern Australian trying to understand his heritage and the history of his country. The popularity of indigenous subjects in the early colonial period was the result of widespread ethnographic interest and of a general curiosity about exotic cultures, as is evident in the work of other artists in Tasmania at the time, such as Thomas Bock (1790–1855), Benjamin Law (1807–90) and Benjamin Duterrau (1767–1851).

Because of the ‘Black War’ and its aftermath, interest in the Aboriginal people was especially strong during the 1830s, when Glover completed most of his paintings of them.2 When Glover arrived in the colony in February 1831, martial law had been in force for more than two years, and was to remain so for one more. During the previous twelve months, roving parties had hunted Aborigines, after a bounty had been offered of £5 for each adult captured alive. Land grants had also been promised. While this “may have provided a stimulus to bring in the natives
alive”, says Brian Plomley, “it ... increased the likelihood that many would be killed in order to capture a few.” In fact, it was common practice to shoot at Aborigines on sight. The colony was divided between a few influential liberals who advocated conciliation, and the ‘extirpationists’ – the majority of colonists who considered the Aborigines dangerous pests, advocating their swift extermination. For some time the government had unsuccessfully sought to mediate. Then, quite suddenly, during Glover’s first years in the colony, what seemed to be a miracle occurred. The liberal conciliators prevailed, and the honour of the colonists appeared to be saved.

The saviour was George Augustus Robinson, who successfully negotiated the peaceful resettlement of the remaining Aborigines at Wybaleena on Flinders Island, which was to become one of the first internment camps in modern history. Robinson was the hero of the day. His accomplishment was celebrated overtly in Duterrau’s painting The Conciliation, but Robinson’s shadow hangs over all the paintings done of the Palawa in the 1830s. It is difficult to understand their contemporary significance unless we appreciate Robinson’s feat and what it stood for. If Glover’s paintings of Aborigines are a memorial, they commemorate Robinson and his liberal vision of conciliation.

Glover greatly admired Robinson. He witnessed the period of Robinson’s greatest triumph, between 1832 - when he peacefully delivered the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes to Hobart Town - and 1834, when the remnants of the Western tribes were brought in. Glover also had first hand knowledge of atrocities committed against the Aborigines, and there is every reason to believe that he was as appalled by them as Robinson was. Even before Glover’s arrival in Hobart, a group from the ship he was travelling on had been involved in a skirmish, on the banks of the Tamar River, “with a party of Natives, one of whom was shot at and knocked over”. Glover took a keen interest in similar skirmishes around his farm, and on one occasion showed Robinson where various killings had occurred. No doubt Glover was delighted with the spear given to him by Robinson as a token of their friendship. Glover’s personal involvement in such events provided the primary motive for his embarkation on a series of ambitious figure compositions, after a long and successful career as a landscape painter.

In his landscapes and figure compositions, Glover preferred to work from life. Because of the Black War, the only Aborigines he could hope to meet were either in prison or were aiding Robinson’s and John Batman’s efforts at conciliation. So it was probably in gaols that Glover first met and sketched Aborigines. In a letter written in August 1831, he mentions sketching three people in the Campbell Town prison. Towards the end of September of the same year he was sketching in the Launceston prison. During the Launceston visit he also made, on the same page, portraits of Robinson’s ‘faithful [Aboriginal] companions’, who happened to be in town with Robinson. It is likely that Glover first met Robinson at this time, and may even have come to Launceston especially for that purpose. Glover also had Robinson to thank for two other opportunities to sketch the Palawa, the first a few months later, when he made portraits of the Oyster Bay and Big River Tribes that Robinson had triumphantly brought to Hobart Town on January 7, 1832, and the second two years later, on January 5, 1834, when Robinson camped near Glover’s farm at Mills’ Plains with some of the Western tribes.
Unlike Bock, Dutterau and Law, Glover did not make formal studio-type portraits of Aborigines. His interests lay elsewhere. By nature gregarious and curious, he sought out and enjoyed the company of these people, and it is their gaiety and freedom that he always chose to depict. When Robinson was camping nearby with some of the Western tribes, Glover visited them after supper. No doubt he enjoyed watching their customary evening dancing and singing. He also invited them back to look at his paintings. According to Robinson, they were very interested in Glover's depictions of their brethren. On one occasion, probably when he was sketching the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes in Hobart Town, he asked them to dance and swim, and these were the activities he painted most frequently.

Glover's best opportunity to witness Aborigines hunting and dancing came in March 1832, when he took up his grant on Mills' Plains in the foothills of Ben Lomond. The first settlers had arrived in this area just six years earlier and it was still frontier country. Mills' Plains belonged to the Plendermairhemcner band of the Ben Lomond tribe, and had been made safe from their defensive forays only in the preceding year, largely through Robinson's efforts and those of Glover's neighbour, John Batman, who had been given permission to import mainland Aborigines to help with his attempts at conciliation. As well, Batman provided a sanctuary for Tasmanian Aborigines, though he is known to have killed at least two members of the Ben Lomond tribe. At various times, Batman had living with him at least ten 'Sydney natives' (as they were called) and several Tasmanian Aborigines. About half a dozen 'Sydney natives' and probably some Tasmanians were living with him in 1832, when Glover first got to know him. Several of them accompanied Glover and Batman on their ascent of Ben Lomond on January 26, 1833, which Glover recorded in series of sketches (in his sketchbook no. 97) and at least two (now lost) paintings. Several earlier studies in the same sketchbook, probably done in the second half of 1832, are also of the Aborigines who lived with Batman. They include two drawings done from life. The first shows seven men dancing, while the second is a portrait study of six Aborigines, one of them a boy. The most important drawing from the series depicts a moonlit corroboree. It is imaginative and dramatic and was done from memories of such events.

Glover made claims for the authenticity of what he depicted in his paintings, and this last mentioned drawing was intended to be used as reference. The headdresses and weapons identify the dancers as being from New South Wales and are similar to those in the nearby study from life of the seven dancers. At least one figure is based on the life study. The drawing is the most important of the 'Sydney natives' because of the unusual effort Glover put into it, and because it was used as the basis for a number of his paintings. These include one of his earliest paintings of Aborigines, A Corroboree of Natives near Mills' Plains (c.1832) and one of his last oil paintings, A Corroboree of Natives in Van Diemen's Land (1840).

Glover considered himself an artist of the highest order. He wanted to impress upon his audience a moral lesson, not just to make ethnographic illustrations. Unlike Bock, Dutterau and Law, he made only the most general references to the contemporary anthropological interest in physiognomy. However, as in his landscape paintings, Glover was careful to observe distinguishing local characteristics. His paintings were not just generalised representations of
the Rousseau-esque ‘noble savage’, but pictures of people and things he had seen in Tasmania. Tim Bonyhady has criticised Glover for taking ethnographic liberties, complaining that he mixed studies of ‘Sydney’ and Tasmanian Aborigines in a single painting, thus making it difficult to distinguish “the imaginative from the documentary aspects of Glover’s paintings”.28 However, leaving aside Glover’s deliberate aesthetic of grounding his imaginative powers in first-hand experiences (thus, to an extent, confusing the two), Bonyhady’s complaint does not hold up to scrutiny. Firstly, Glover was being true to his experiences in Tasmania. For some time Tasmanian Aborigines had been mixing with those from New South Wales. One of the most feared leaders of the Tasmanian resistance was a man from Broken Bay (north of Sydney), named Mosquito, who was hanged in 1825.29 As we have seen, Batman, a native of Sydney, brought at least ten Aborigines from New South Wales around the time Glover arrived in the colony, most of whom subsequently accompanied Robinson and his “faithful companions” in their reconciliation efforts. No culture is “pure” and, by the time Glover arrived, Aboriginals from Tasmania and New South Wales were already cohabiting, even though they retained their distinctive cultural practices.

Secondly, when Glover depicted Tasmanian and mainland Aboriginals dancing, he was sensitive to their different cultural practices. He made drawings of both groups, to be used as a basis for paintings. These drawings included the corroboree of ‘Sydney’ Aboriginals discussed above, and another of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. Both are highly worked, suggesting that they are imaginative reconstructions from memory. The Tasmanian corroboree is distinguished by a characteristic high jumping dance called Prac-ner,30 which Glover probably saw. The drawing, positioned between sketches of his expedition with Batman in January 1833 and the visit of Robinson one-year later, was most likely made in the Hobart area.31 It is tempting to think that he did it in October 1833, when Robinson was briefly in Hobart with members of the Western tribes. It is a study for The Western Tier of Mountains, and the dance appears in several other paintings depicting Tasmanian Aboriginals, including Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point ... and Aborigines Dancing at Brighton, Tasmania (which is inscribed “Natives at a Corrobory, under the wild woods of the Country River Jordan below Brighton, Tasmania”).32 Of his paintings depicting Aboriginal dances, those set in the Mills Plains area tend to show mainland practices, while those set in the Hobart area show Tasmanian ones. This is an accurate reflection of the time. This is not to claim an ethnographic sensibility for Glover, but a Pictwesque one that combined local knowledge and the eccentricities of place with aesthetic and dramatic effects.

While Glover’s paintings reflect some ethnographic knowledge, they are poor ethnographic documents. His intentions are artistic; he deliberately employed aesthetic and narrative strategies for moral and ideological effects. In short, Glover pictures a colonial history. The most obvious example is the clear distinction he made between his Aboriginal and his pastoral landscapes. This was first noticed by Bonyhady, who surmised that Glover was unable to resolve the contradiction between the two types of landscape, and at the same time was unable or unwilling to picture the war that was the outcome of this contradiction.27 It has also been argued28 that Glover’s pictorial apartheid provided a justification for colonisation by implicitly
pushing the Aborigines into the past, leaving the colonisers as the inheritors of the place.

While Glover’s separation of Aboriginal and pastoral landscapes is generally explicit, two qualifications should be noted. Firstly, it reflected the reality of Robinson’s achievement: the institution of an Aboriginal domain at Wybalenna and a pastoral one elsewhere. Secondly, Glover’s pictorial apartheid is not as rigorous as Bonyhady, Thomas and I have previously implied. He was not averse to juxtaposing Aboriginal and colonial subjects in the one picture. Four of the nine paintings depicting Aborigines listed in the 1835 catalogue also include signs of colonisation, although not necessarily pastoral ones. Two depict mainland Aborigines either with Batman or on his lands, one shows Aborigines camped on a hill overlooking a bay with sailing ships, and a fourth is of Tasmanians dancing and swimming on the banks of the Derwent River opposite Hobart Town.

However the last two paintings support claims that Glover’s paintings have the effect of legitimising colonialism, for they draw a sharp contrast between the Aboriginal and European worlds. In the latter, for example, Aborigines jump and frolic with gay abandon in dark shadow in the foreground. The perspective of the composition draws the viewer’s eye across the wide river to the ordered geometry of Hobart Town in the distance, which is nestled securely in the bosom of Mount Wellington and illuminated by the fresh early morning light. On close inspection, a regiment of soldiers can be seen stiffly parading in ranks near the far shore. Glover was clearly interested in the contrast between the two societies, and the pictorial metaphors he used show that he had no doubt where the future lay.

Glover’s depictions of Aboriginal and colonial landscapes exhibit distinct pictorial qualities. He always shows his new estate at Mills’ Plains in a sweet golden, sometimes glorious, light. By contrast, in many of his surviving paintings, scenes depicting Aborigines are cloaked in lugubrious dark tones that lend them a Gothic atmosphere. An exception is Mills Plains, Ben Lomond, Ben Loder and Ben Nevis in the distance. While long shadows snake across the foreground, the Aborigines bask in the last light of day. Glover even pictured the park-like plains that, as he knew, were there before he took up his grant, and which for a while at least, he kept largely intact. One might argue that this distant parkland represents his future prospects for a pastoral Arcadia, and the setting sun the last days of the Aboriginal one. However, atmospherically, this painting is very similar to two others he did of exactly the same site at a different time, both showing Glover’s new farm just a year or two after it had been established. Nevertheless, a pictorial apartheid is still apparent. These three paintings illustrate that with colonisation, the trees themselves were effected. When Glover depicts them in pre-colonial times, with Aborigines near or underneath them, the eucalypts have a sinuous, Gothic appearance, like ghostly guardians dancing their own more plaintive corroboree. After colonisation, the trees seem to stiffen and take a more dignified pose. Glover consistently translates history painting into a natural history.

Glover was very interested in trees, particularly those with unusual shapes. They are the principle subjects for his sketchbooks and play an important narrative role in his paintings. His first Aboriginal landscape may have been a now lost painting which was listed in the 1835
catalogue as Fern Trees, on the side of Mount Wellington, with Natives in the Shade. It probably derives from sketches he made shortly after arriving in Hobart. The association of Aborigines with ferns was common in colonial times. The ancient and exotic qualities of the fern were meant to be a symbol of Aboriginality. However Glover quickly developed his own association: that between the Aborigines and the eucalyptus tree. The first evidence of this is provided by his studies for A Corroboree of Natives near Mills’ Plains. They were probably made shortly after Glover arrived at Mills’ Plains in March 1832 to take up his land grant, and consist of two adjacent drawings among some sketches of his land as it appeared at the time. The first is a study of Aborigines under a partly fallen old tree, the second a careful reworking of the tree which draws from studies of similar trees on the same page. The Aborigines were probably living nearby with Batman, although Glover may have wanted to suggest a pre-colonial scene. In any case, Glover has, in sketch number 14, anthropomorphised the tree, imbuing its limbs with a Medusan quality so that they writhe like snakes. The finished painting includes a direct transcription of this tree, and serpentine branches became a distinguishing feature of his Aboriginal landscapes. Nicholas Thomas argues that the sinister quality of Glover’s sinuous trees is consistent with an intention to render the Aborigines “mysterious and savage”. Depicted in the “gloomy middle distance” in “curious postures associated with corroborees”, they are “simply too distant to figure as social beings”. They are a threatening horde rather than “pleasingly exotic”, and the evening settings of the pictures, he says, “suggests the twilight of the race”. Thomas, I think, goes too far. Twilight was a favourite time for Glover and his figures are always in the middle distance, whether Aboriginal or not. These are common features of the Picturesque aesthetic, and it is in relation to the Picturesque that Glover’s paintings of Aborigines are best explained. This is not to deny, however, the role of the Picturesque in the aesthetic justification of empire.

While Glover’s interest in depicting Aborigines resonates with his experiences in Tasmania, it is also consistent with his long career as a painter of Picturesque landscapes. Far from challenging his artistic habits, his experiences in Tasmania confirmed them. Aborigines and eucalyptus trees are examples of the “curiosities” that intrigued him, providing him with a distinctive sense of place. Glover’s sketchbooks often comment on unusual, bizarre, mysterious and extraordinary meteorological, geological or biological phenomena. They were part and parcel of his interest in the Picturesque. Such a predilection was not just Glover’s, but was characteristic of an eighteenth century European mindset that saw in nature – especially in natural wonders – something prodigious. We find evidence of it in Robinson’s diaries, where virtually every entry begins with a comment about the weather. Robinson is always alert to unusual natural phenomena. His last diary entry (August 2, 1834) strikes a suitably dramatic note for a man convinced of the divine nature of his mission: “Heavy rains accompanied by loud peals of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning”. He goes on to describe a tree torn to pieces by the lightning, “shivered into a thousand pieces and hurled to an incredible distance and in every possible direction”. Robinson’s diary is a natural history as much as a social one.

Likewise, Glover’s interest in the Palawa is that of a natural history painter, not a conventional history painter. He belonged to a generation of artists whose commitment to
A Corroboree of Natives near Mills' Plains, c.1832; Art Gallery of South Australia (cat. no. 67)
natural history effectively defeated the academic genre of history painting. Dutterau’s *The Conciliation* is a classic example of academic history painting. The figures are identifiable as individuals, yet strike dramatic classical poses. If, as John McPhee has suggested, Glover was spurred on by the popular interest in Dutertau’s work, he probably regarded Dutertau more as a rival than an inspiration. The painting Glover did for Robinson — *Aborigines Dancing at Brighton, Tasmania* — falls into the genre of landscape. It shows not the humanist triumph of Robinson that is the subject of *The Conciliation*, but the Palawa enjoying their natural abode.

While, to our eyes, Glover’s paintings of the Palawa might seem to aspire to being history paintings, they clearly do not fit the mould. Sometimes their titles describe only the site without referring to the Aborigines at all. Even those that contain large numbers of Aborigines are, I would maintain, also landscapes, or at least natural history paintings. The figures are always diminutive, and invariably the location is named. The portrait studies that Glover made, in which he sometimes named, are not used for the paintings except in the most general way. Typical is the painting Glover presented to Robinson in November 1835, of which he wrote: “The Figures are too small to give much likeness — my object was to give an idea of the gay happy life the Natives led before the White people came here and also to give an idea of the Scenery of the Country — the View is at the River Jordan just below Brighton.”

The exception that proves the rule — and the one work that might qualify as a history painting — is *The Bath of Diana*. It makes reference to classical mythology and the landscape setting is unspecified. Although a keen advocate of natural history, Glover was also an ambitious painter who sought to imbue his landscapes with the seriousness of seventeenth century works by masters such as Claude and Gaspar Poussin. Well acquainted with the myth of Diana and Actaeon, he readily adapts the fate of Actaeon to that of the Palawa. His Diana is an Aborigine, probably a member of the Big River tribe. The moral of the painting, however, is obscure. If Glover had made Actaeon a European, his message would have been quite obvious: the lost innocence of the Aboriginal Diana would eventually be avenged. For the fate of the hunter Actaeon, having spied Diana and her maidens bathing, is to be torn to death by his own hunting dogs. As is his practice, Glover shows the most benign moment of the story: Diana bathing. More importantly, for my argument, *The Bath of Diana* is a very contemporary interpretation of the myth. Glover has not classicised the scene, except to idealise the bodies to some degree. The landscape is unmistakably Tasmanian and Glover has clearly given it close attention. He has been careful to base it on actual places frequented by Aborigines.

Glover often uses his personal experiences as a starting point for his figure compositions. Indeed, the idea for this painting probably arose from a sketch he did of two hunters on the banks of the Jordan River (sketchbook 43, drawing 24), to which he later added the bathers. A few pages further on he reworked the drawing into a study for the painting (drawing 32). Even *The Bath of Diana* is a natural history painting.

Glover’s paintings of the Palawa are compatible with his ambitions as a landscape painter. They explain the world not in terms of human ideas and actions, nor of platonic forms and divine will, but of natural history. The humour and intimacy of Glover’s copious sketches and notes
reveal a man deeply absorbed in and sympathetic to the lives of both animals and the rural poor. He is drawn to bucolic scenes of cows sleeping, men idly fishing, shepherds daydreaming, women bathing and peasants dancing. Glover, like the Enlightenment philosophe, sought the natural life. Although, as Thomas implies, he pictures Aborigines as natural rather than cultural beings, this is also the way he usually depicted Europeans, including himself at Mills’ Plains. It was partly in this spirit, partly out of ethnographic curiosity, and partly from an ambition to paint natural history paintings that Glover embarked on his Aboriginal works. In these respects they represent the culmination of his career: a series of large oils in which he draws together the different threads of his art to depict a benign world of moral worth, despite the horrors of the Black War.

Glover’s nostalgia for a Georgic natural order is evident in the ways he depicts Aborigines in sketches and paintings, whether in pre-contact times, when they lived in peace with the world, or after the arrival of Europeans, when they appear untroubled by their imminent demise. Bonyhady accuses Glover of picturing Aborigines as “consistently cheerful”, and of ignoring “the Aborigine’s fate”. He points out, for example, that Glover’s study of Timbarina, Lunamen, and Montena (sketchbook no. 43, drawing 86) demonstrates indifference to their imprisonment at the time, by misleadingly picturing them in the bush. However Glover’s idealism was both empathetic with their desires and prophetic. Montena, or Mone. ne.boy. er.min.er as he was probably called, soon escaped into the bush, the mother became one of Robinson’s “faithful companions”, and the son made his home in Batman’s mountain refuge, where he was probably drawn by Glover the following year (see note 8). Significantly, when Glover does draw attention to the contrast between Aboriginal and European societies, as in Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point and A View between the Swan River and King George’s Sound, he does so from an Aboriginal perspective, situating himself and the viewer in the shadowy foreground with them.

Thomas also admonishes Glover for ignoring the fate of the Palawa and, more seriously, for justifying their genocide by implying that it “was a matter of destiny”. It is difficult to argue with this if we read Glover’s pictures as history rather than natural history paintings, as we generally do. Whatever Glover’s intentions, his pictures have been used by those who seek to whitewash this extraordinary moment in the history of the colony. Thomas gives an apt example in a recent critic’s description of “[Glover’s] remarkable and poignant images of the doomed Tasmanian Aborigines at their corroborees, innocents in an unspoiled light-filled paradise”.

There is also little doubt that Glover believed it was the Aborigines’ destiny to be “extirpated” (his word). Further, he fully supported Robinson’s project, which served the interests of the colonisers, including his own at Mills’ Plains. However Glover’s aim was not to whitewash colonial history. Rather, that history overtook him, primarily because the Picturesque project he was committed to ultimately affirmed pastoralism while denying its cruelties. We should remember that Glover painted these images in the 1830s, when the enormity of the crime was common knowledge and fresh in everyone’s memory. Yet he did not provide the colonists with any justification. On the contrary, he underscored what had been “extirpated”, seeing the Aborigines as living out the pastoral ideal he clearly empathised with – a happy people at one with nature who loved hunting, dancing, swimming and laughing, and who live here.
Aborigines Dancing at Brighton, Tasmania, 1835; Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (cat. no. 76)
The Last Master of the Tasmanian Aborigines at Risdon, 1836; Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (cat. no. 78)
p. 134: Mills' Plains, Ben Lomond, Ben Loder & Ben Nevis in the distance, 1836; Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (detail of cat. no. 77)