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Artist unsettled

Correcting earlier myths about Thomas Griffiths Wainewright

By David Hansen



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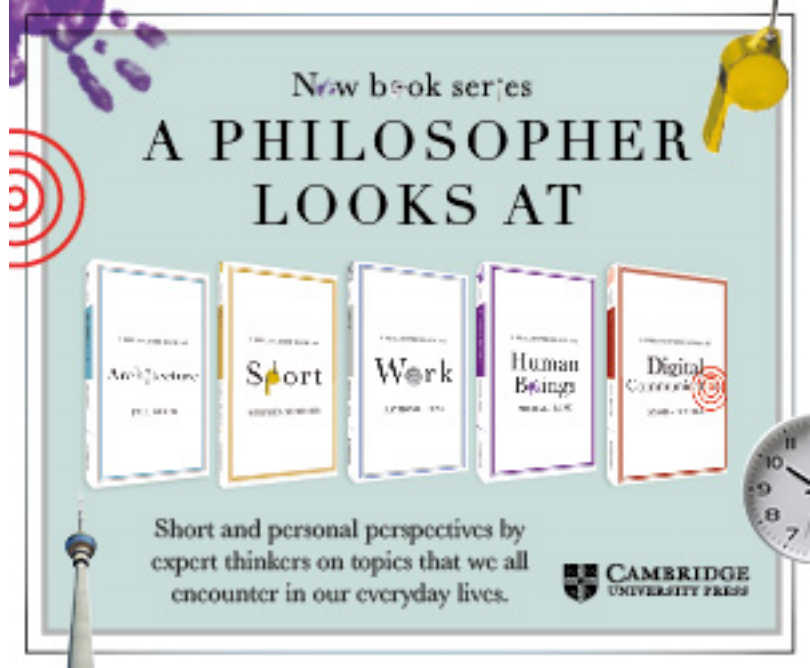


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PARADISE LOST
Thomas Griffiths Wainewright
200pp. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery,
AUS\$30.
Jane Stewart, with Peter Hughes
and Jacobus van Breda



On page 115 of this book, Jane Stewart quotes Thomas Griffiths Wainewright’s record of a conversation with Charles Lamb: “Elia complains that to him the merit of a MS poem is uncertain; - ‘print’, as he excellently says, ‘settles it’”. In this case, it doesn’t. With Wainewright, it never did. The crime of forgery, for which the Regency artist and critic was transported to Van Diemen’s land in 1837, echoes in over a dozen variously-embroidered accounts of his life: from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Lucretia* (1846) to Charles Dickens’s short story “Hunted Down” (1859), from Oscar Wilde’s essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison” (1885) to Andrew Motion’s “experimental biography” *Wainewright the Poisoner* (2000).



This handsome, generously- illustrated volume was produced to accompany an exhibition at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, and although Stewart’s researches were unfortunately curtailed by Covid-19, the book goes a long way towards correcting earlier myths. For example, one of the delightful aspects of the Wainewright story is his several delicious noms de plume: “Janus Weathercock”, “Cornelius Van Vinkbooms” and “Egomet Bonmot”. Here, we learn that the last actually belongs to Edward Gandy, forgotten author of such Romantic confections as *Caswallon, King of Britain: A tragedy* (1826) and *Lorenzo the Outcast Son: A tragic drama: Founded on The Robbers of Frederic Schiller* (1823). The accounts of Wainewright’s collecting mania and interior decoration are fascinating: he acquired antique cameos and intaglios, natural history specimens, even a terracotta supposed to be a study by Michelangelo for the Medici tombs: his library contained more than fifty early printed books, from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* to Holbein’s *Dance of Death*; he owned many hundreds of contemporary prints; and he was the greatest collector of the works of William Blake during the lifetime of the man he called “our great genius”. The contents and layout of his “boudoir” were described in sufficient detail in an essay for *The London Magazine* for a facsimile to have been constructed for the exhibition, “blue silk drapery”, “sweeping ottoman”, “marble-slabbed chiffonieres”, “glowing Persian carpet” and all.

Perhaps most importantly, the volume incorporates an ambitious *catalogue raisonné*, a timeline detailing key events in the life of the artist and a useful bibliography, though for some reason the listing is not chronological, there are careless cataloguing errors and some missing (though known) images, and the absence of an index or of any kind of pictorial finding aid is frustrating. It also has to be said that there are some very doubtful attributions: the portrait of “Edward Lord”, for example has been so over-restored that it could be ascribed to anyone, that of his daughter Emma matches the style of no known colonial artist, let alone Wainewright, while the curious “Italian banditti” is an unprovenanced orphan.

However useful an addition to the literature of British Regency and Australian colonial cultural history, the merits - in Charles Lamb’s terms - of *Paradise Lost: Thomas Griffiths Wainwright* remain uncertain, and those of the artist unsettled.

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