



# Conrad Martens and the Squatting Families of the Darling Downs

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Conrad Martens visited the Darling Downs during the summer of 1851–52, where a small group of squatting families played a crucial part in the success of his journey. In the short term, they provided him with hospitality as he moved from property to property; in the longer term, he hoped, they would become the main purchasers of his paintings. In this article I shall give a brief description of the Darling Downs pastoral élite, and look at the personal connections that existed between Martens and many of these people: connections that explain why Martens was received so hospitably during his travels, and why he had a reasonable expectation that they would patronize his work. In addition, though, there were also structural reasons relating to the changing economic and social climate of the early 1850s that help explain why these families subsequently bought his paintings.

The pastoral industry took off in New South Wales during the 1830s, when Governor Bourke introduced a licensing system that allowed men to squat on Crown Land. High wool prices encouraged speculative investment in sheep, and squatters fanned out with their flocks from the more closely settled districts near Sydney, driving south towards Port Phillip and north into the New England area. The size of their squatting runs, and the speed with which they claimed them, meant that within a few years squatters had to push further out, until by 1839 the first of them, Patrick Leslie, had reached the Darling Downs.

The first Europeans to settle permanently on the Darling Downs arrived in the early 1840s. These squatters arrived via New England, driving their sheep northwards along the route that Patrick Leslie had pioneered during 1839 and 1840. During the following decade, nearly all the land on the Downs had been taken up by a small, closely-knit group of young men. Meanwhile, the economic situation had turned against them. Wool prices fell in 1839, while interest rates were rising. As well, squatters who pushed out to the periphery of white settlement faced higher costs buying supplies, recruiting labour, and getting their wool to market.

The squatters of the Darling Downs therefore shared a common set of economic difficulties. A number of them were fairly recent emigrants from Britain, who had

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been attracted by the high profits that characterised the mid-1830s. Many of them came from an impoverished gentry class, seeking landed wealth at a time when the land holdings of Britain could no longer support the aspirations of a large family. By the time they reached the Downs, however, the early promise of easy wealth had temporarily disappeared.

It may be significant that a number of the squatters came from the less prosperous peripheral regions of the British Isles, far from the booming industrial areas. Amongst them were a number of Scots, including Patrick, Walter and George Leslie of Canning Downs and Goomburra; Edward Dalrymple of Goomburra; the Leith-Hay brothers of Toolburra and Strathmillar; and Robert MacKenzie of Clifton. Others were Anglo-Irish, such as the Gores of Yandilla, or English, like Arthur Hodgson of Eton Vale and Henry Stuart Russell of Cecil Plains. Nearly all of them were young, well-educated, and closely linked by marriage and by birth to the British gentry class, as well as to the élite of New South Wales. A few had aristocratic connections, like Robert MacKenzie, who was second in line to a baronetcy, but most of them came from gentry or professional families, rather than aristocrats, and were younger sons at that. They had no doubt, however, that they constituted an élite within a part of the colony that was blessedly free of convict taint.

In their isolation it was natural for the squatters to close ranks, and to try to create a community: partly for security, but largely for social interaction. Visitors were rare in the early years and were therefore all the more welcome, bringing news from the outside world as well as passing on gossip about the neighbours. They also provided an excuse for social gatherings. Archdeacon Glennie, for instance, made his first journey to the Downs in August and September 1848 and further visits in 1849 and 1850, when he held services at the major homesteads on his route. Christopher Rolleston, the Commissioner for Crown Lands, was another regular visitor whose professional work took him on regular journeys around the Downs. Under such circumstances a 'habit of hospitality' developed, with accommodation provided for regular visitors. At Canning Downs, for instance, when a new house was built in 1848, the old quarters were retained as sleeping quarters for visitors.<sup>1</sup> Martens' journeying fitted into this established pattern of accommodating visitors, who were welcomed to the homesteads as novelties in this isolated society.

The squatters' links were primarily with Sydney and the south, rather than with Moreton Bay and Brisbane. There were both personal and political reasons for this. For most of the Downs pastoralists, family links connected them to the south; although they increasingly used Brisbane and Ipswich to market their produce and to purchase their supplies, they kept in close contact with the south. The Darling Downs were still a part of New South Wales, with Sydney as the seat of government. One of the squatters, George Leslie, was one of the members for the Clarence/Darling Downs electorate in the New South Wales Legislative Council. As the name of the electorate suggests, the Darling Downs were contiguous, geographically and conceptually, with the Northern Rivers district. Moreover, the inland route to Sydney via New England remained a viable alternative to the coastal route via

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Moreton Bay, especially for the movement of stock — Conrad Martens took this route himself on his return to Sydney in 1852.

Ties of marriage and blood linked a number of the squatters. There were several sets of brothers, including the Leslies, the Hodgsons and the Gores. The Leslies were particularly closely tied to each other, and to the colonial authorities, through their connections with the family of Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur. Three brothers — Patrick, Walter and George — settled on the Darling Downs, first at Canning Downs, and then taking up further squatting runs at Goomburra and Toolburra. Two of them, Patrick and George, married sisters Catherine (Kate) and Emmeline Macarthur, the daughters of Hannibal Macarthur. A third Macarthur sister, Annie, married John Wickham, the Police Magistrate in Brisbane, while a brother, Charles Macarthur, was linked by marriage to the Gore family.<sup>2</sup> Their sister, Catherine Leslie, later married Christopher Rolleston, the Commissioner for Crown Lands on the Darling Downs.<sup>3</sup> Following his bankruptcy in 1848, their father in law, Hannibal Macarthur, was appointed Police Magistrate in Warwick.

Thus when Conrad Martens arrived on the Downs, he already had a number of places to visit where he could anticipate a welcome, because there were people there who knew him already and would, in turn, introduce him to their neighbours. He could tap into at least three networks of connections: the *Beagle* connection, the related Macarthur connection, and a more diffuse 'pupil-teacher-patron' connection.

Before arriving in New South Wales, Martens had been employed as an artist aboard HMS *Beagle*, until he left the ship in Rio de Janeiro. When he eventually reached Sydney he knew nobody, but he carried a letter of introduction from Captain Robert FitzRoy to Philip Parker King, a former captain of the *Beagle*. P.P. King was the son of a former New South Wales Governor, and was then employed as Superintendent of the Australian Agricultural Company, based at Port Stephens. King gave his patronage to the young artist, found him commissions, and introduced him to other patrons, including his brother-in-law Hannibal Macarthur who was married to his sister Anna Maria King.

Captain John Wickham, the Police Magistrate in Brisbane, was another ex-officer of the *Beagle*. He and Martens had been shipmates and when Martens arrived at Moreton Bay in 1851, Wickham offered him hospitality. Martens painted Wickham's home in Brisbane, Newstead House, which he had bought from the house's first owner, his brother-in-law, Patrick Leslie.<sup>4</sup>

The *Beagle* connection is linked to the Macarthur connection. Annie Wickham, Kate Leslie and Emmeline Leslie were sisters, all daughters of Hannibal Macarthur. In 1837 Martens painted *Vineyard*, the Macarthur home, when he must have met the daughters of the house. He also painted *Dunheved* (Plate 1), P.P. King's property, in 1835. Patrick Leslie had managed Dunheved for his wife's uncle, just before coming north to the Downs in 1839.

There was a third connection between Martens and the Downs squatters — painting! In Sydney, Martens had taught painting to Eliza Darling, who was now the wife of Arthur Hodgson of Eton Vale, and to Theresa Mort, sister-in-law of Henry Mort of Franklyn Vale. Another host, Robert MacKenzie of Clifton, had already

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**Plate 1.** Conrad Martens, *View of Dunheved*, 1837. Watercolour, 31 x 47 cm (sight). Unsigned, undated. Collection: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.



**Plate 2.** Conrad Martens, *Vineyard, Parramatta*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 43.5 x 63.5 cm, in contemporary gilded frame, 65.3 x 79.5 cm. Presented by E.H. Macarthur, Brisbane, 15 August 1945. Collection: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

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bought Martens's paintings during the 1830s. Thus, with all these friends and contacts from Sydney in the northern districts, Martens could be confident of obtaining commissions in Brisbane and the Darling Downs.

The question remains, though, why the squatters bought Martens' paintings, and why they did so at this particular moment. Conrad Martens himself, of course, had reasons for making the journey at this time, when the financial problems of the late 1840s had deprived him of his traditional patrons. By 1851, however, after ten years of mixed fortunes, the fortunes of the squatters of the Darling Downs were beginning to rise. This was a period of consolidation, with more economic security than ever before. Technically, too, they were no longer 'squatters'. Instead, they were becoming pastoralists, and a painting of their 'property' would mark the significance of this fact.

The first settlers arrived, from Patrick Leslie onwards, with the intention of taking up squatting runs on Crown Land. These squatters paid the government an annual licence of ten pounds for a squatting run of any size, together with a levy on each head of sheep, cattle and horses. The runs they claimed were at first both vague and vast, unsurveyed tracts which were usually described just in terms of notable features such as their miles of water frontage. In 1844, the Governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps, tried to bring in new regulations to encourage closer settlement and a more equitable distribution of pastoral land, as well as to raise more money from land sales. The size of a squatting run, for which a ten pound licence was paid, was to be limited to an area with a carrying capacity of 500 cattle or 4,000 sheep, and squatters would be encouraged to buy at least part of their runs as freehold, and to settle down on smaller blocks as secure and responsible landowners.<sup>5</sup>

This was not to be. The squatters of New South Wales opposed Gipps's plan, both because it would cost them a lot, and because they would have to purchase their land at a public auction and risk losing it to a higher bidder. They used their political and economic muscle, as well as their British connections, to lobby the British government for a new and more generous way of acquiring security of tenure on their land holdings. An Order in Council in March 1847, subsequently reinforced by the Waste Lands Act (1848), gave them what they wanted. In return for the purchase of a freehold block of 320 acres, before public auction, a squatter could convert his squatting run into pastoral lease, with security of tenure. In areas such as the Darling Downs, which were defined as 'unsettled', the leasehold was secure for fourteen years.

Unlike a squatting run, a lease was a form of real estate, which could be bought and sold, or mortgaged. The opportunity to convert a run into a more valuable, saleable asset represented a great windfall profit for the squatters as a class. With a freehold 'property' at the centre of the estate and a greater security of tenure over the whole estate, some pastoralists chose to spend more on building fine homesteads, and decorating them appropriately to mark their greater permanence and prosperity. At Canning Downs, for instance, George Leslie built a new, elegant home for his new bride Emmeline, who arrived in 1848 (see Plate 3). It replaced an old slab hut, which was now converted into visitors' quarters — ironically,



Plate 3. Conrad Martens, *The Homestead, Canning Downs*, 1852. Watercolour, 30.1 x 45.5 cm. Purchased 1998 with funds raised through The Conrad Martens Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Appeal and with the assistance of the Queensland Government's special Centenary Fund. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery.

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Conrad Martens probably slept there during his visit. New homes needed new decorations, so a visiting artist was most welcome.

Others took the first opportunity to sell out, once prices started to rise. For those who sold, as for those who stayed, Martens' paintings were a pictorial record of their achievements, a depiction of their 'property' — in both senses of the term. Many of the pastoralists relied on family contacts 'at home' for financial backing. This gave them another incentive to buy paintings to serve as a record of their property, and to send as gifts to absentee partners or patrons in Britain or Sydney. George Leslie, for instance, ordered his paintings from Martens in 1854, just as he was about to leave Australia to go home to Britain — as a memory for himself and Emmeline, and as a justification for the people back home, who had paid most of the bills to establish Canning Downs in the first place.

Martens's paintings on the Darling Downs were therefore images of a society in transition, a society with aspirations to become a new landed gentry. They were, in some cases, the younger generation of families for whom Martens had already worked, transplanted from the cultivation of Parramatta to a less cultivated frontier province (see Plate 2). In these estate portraits, the landscape looms large, still undomesticated, barely possessed. Yet for the people who commissioned them, possession was taking place at the very moment that Martens arrived.

### Notes

- 1 C.E.B. Barnes (Canning Downs), personal communication with the author, 25 Mar. 1995.
- 2 Charles Macarthur and Robert Gore married sisters: see Maurice French, *A Pastoral Romance: The Tribulation and Triumph of Squatterdom* (Toowoomba: USQ Press, 1990), 174.
- 3 Christopher Rolleston's marriage occurred after the Leslie brothers had left the Downs. However it illustrates the closeness of his association with the Leslies that he met Catherine Leslie during an invited visit to the Leslie family home in Scotland, while on leave in 1853–54.
- 4 Newstead House was built by Patrick Leslie, but held in the name of his father William Leslie Snr.
- 5 Ken Buckley, 'Gipps and the Graziers of New South Wales, 1841–6', parts 1 and 2, *Historical Studies* 6. 24 (1955): 396–412; *Historical Studies* 7. 26 (1956): 178–193 is the classic account of this tale. See also Maurice French, *A Pastoral Romance*, 15–19.