

MORE THAN A MEMORY

the art of
ELIZABETH
PARSONS

GEELONG GALLERY

More than a memory the art of Elizabeth Parsons

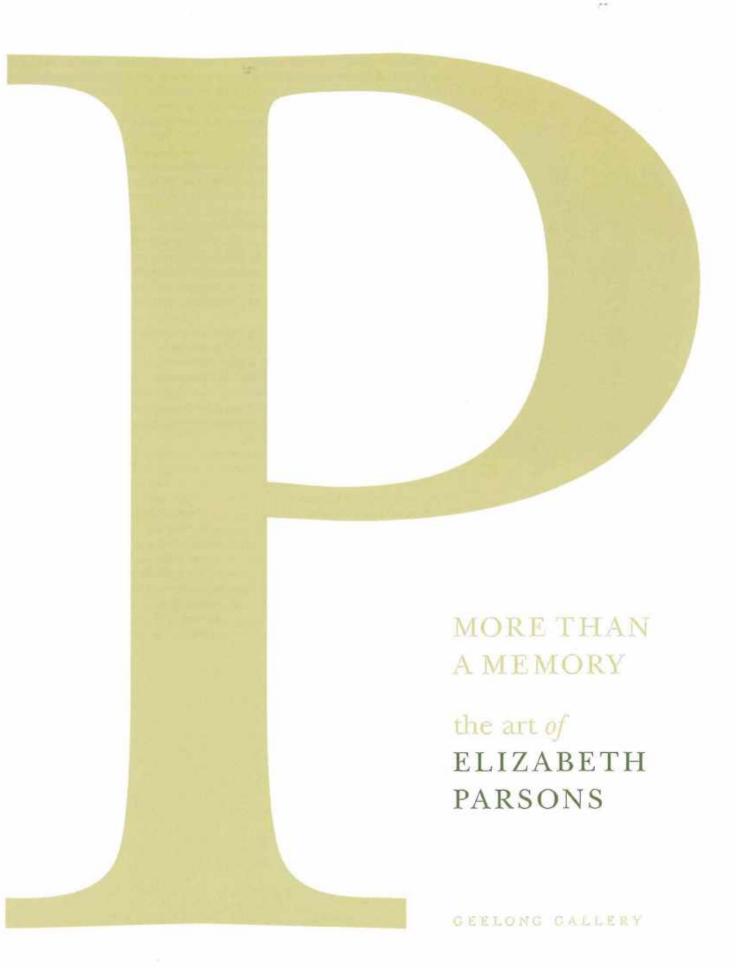
Geelong Gallery 10 April to 13 June 2004

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Front cover: Elizabeth Parsons The Gorge, Launceston (detail) c.1887 watercolour



FOREWORD

More than a normer – the art of Elizabath Parsons is the latest initiative in a series of exhibitions presented by the Geelong Gallery with the aim of documenting the work of various artists of Australia's colonial period. For the most part, these are artists with some connection to Ceelong or its wider region and whose achievements, for whatever reason, have not yet enjoyed the full recognition they deserve.

One such individual is the English-born Australian artist, Fazabeth Parsons (1891—97), who cause to Australia in 1870 and subsequently larged — against considerable odds as we read in Veronica Filmer's catalogue essay — a highly respectable career as a talented and determined painter, chiefly of landscapes, who played a lively role in the art community of her day. Her work was shown to acclain at prestigious venues and salons in Australia and abroad at the time.

This selection of watercolours and oil paintings is the first real overview of the initist's afe and work since the tra-sighted survey assembled in 1975 by Peter Perry, Director at the Castlemanic Art Gallery and Historical Museum. Here, I must record our thanks to Peter Perry for the assistance he has given to Veconica Filmer in researching the exhibition, and for his keen interest in the project all told.

Together with the accompanying exhibition catalogue, this selection of over fifty works — including watercolours, oil paintings, drawings and sketchbooks in addition to various support materials — provides a representative and engaging account of Elizabeth Parsons' achievement as an artist in a late-colonial milicut that was not always receptive to women artists on for that matter, to a woman with such clear aspirations to succeed professionally as an artist at the same time that she was a wife, mother and studious keeper of a busy and more than occasionally mobile household.

The extent of Elizabeth Parsons' travels in Victoria and elsewhere in Australia, not to mention overseas, is illustrated, simply enough, by the variety of landscape subjects included in this exhibition. These range from coastal subjects in the general variety of Geology to several views on the Mornington Pentinsula, and others in central Victoria as well as the more traditional vistas of her native England.

For her diligent research for the catalogue essay and for the great skill and sensitivity with which she has assembled this material for display. I warmly congratulate and sincerely thank my colleague, Veronica Filmer, who is Registrar of Collections or the Collery and curator of this exhibition. Thanks also for his invaluable support to Brian Hubber, especially in relation to the preparation of the cutalogue, in this respect, I am also happy to acknowledge the sensitivity and imagination that have been brought to bear in the design of this cutalogue for which, as on previous occasions, we express our sincere thanks to Damien Stanyer at GollingsPicigeon.

Prione collectors have lent the majority of works in this exhibition. To every one of these lenders we record our grateful thanks and appreciation for their enthusiastic co-aperation. Likewise, to the public and institutional lenders — namely the Gay of Port Phillip and the Baillien Library in the University of Melhourne — we also record out thanks and, in particular, we acknowledge the assistance of Dorela Gerardi at the City of Port Phillip and of fan Morelson at the Baillieu.

Once again, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the timely sponsorship of the prominent Gordong from People at Work, and in particular we register our appropriation of the personal interest taken in the Gallery's programs by Bernaderte Ozelac.

Finally, it is necessary to say that zone of this — exhibition or catalogue — would have been removely possible to present in the form we see today were it not for the extremely generous and unfailingly entiresiastic support of various members of the Patsons family. In particular, to Peter Patsons, our good friend and a longtime supporter of the Goodoog Gallets, and to his cousin Elizabeth Clark and nor interband John, we place on record our protound gratitude for their backing and encouragement.

In 1932, the painter and critic Alexander Colqubour wrote admiringly on the act of Fibribah Poisons while impenting the fact that, by then, her achievement scenned little more than a memory. In mounting this exhibition, Veronica Fibract takes up Colquboun's imaginary gauntler to ensure that this body of work, angether with the energetic and creative personality behind in is given rangible form and becomes, in the process, much more than a fleeting recollection.

Geoffrey Edwards oncieros



FIG. 1. Elizabeth Parsons c. 1860 Courtesy: Estate of George Parsons

So it will be seen that, though, like others who served in the burden and heat, her name has become little more than a memory she was not without honor in her day, and honor, fairly earned, is a thing that dies hard.

Alexander Colquhoun, The Age, 10 December 1932

Introduction

Elizabeth Parsons (1831-1897) was one of the first women to practise as a professional artist in Melbourne during the nineteenth century, Born and raised in London, she spent some years studying and painting, but did not seriously embark on her chosen career until almost forty years of age. When Elizabeth migrated to Australia in 1870, she promptly dedicated her working life to her art. She painted prolifically, mostly in watercolour; held private art lessons that were well attended; exhibited in all the major local exhibitions and many of the international ones; was the first woman elected to the Victorian Academy of Art council; and participated in various art societies. While there were other women who were well-respected as artists and earned an income from their art, Elizabeth stood out as the most influential. Through her efforts she broke into the male dominated art world of the 1870s and came to be regarded as equal in status to many of her male colleagues. Unfortunately, with the rise of a new generation of artists in the 1880s intent on creating a new Australian art through their work and through their writing, Elizabeth Parsons' achievements were passed over in favour of the emerging artists. After her death, memory of the artist herself also faded, as did that of so many of her colleagues. The present exhibition revisits the life and art of Elizabeth Parsons and, in so doing, seeks to re-establish her rightful place as one of Australia's pre-eminent women artists.

The early years

Filled with youthful exuberance and natural bonhomie, surveyor William Thomas Warren (1796—1851) leapt a garden wall and came face to face with 'quiet, serious, brown-eyed' Elizabeth Keens (1794—1867). William was the son of Jane Day and William Warren, a forester at Syon Manor, the property of the Duke of Northumberland, while Elizabeth was the daughter of Elizabeth Coleman and Michael Keens, one of London's leading market gardeners. Elizabeth and William were married in 1820 at St Thomas Le Apostle in London, after which they went to live on Michael Keens' sixty-acre property, Holly Lodge, in Worton Lane, Isleworth.

Elizabeth Warren had four sons before the couple's last child, Elizabeth, was born on 27 November 1831. Elizabeth and her brothers, Michael, William, George and Alfred, were raised at Holly Lodge where Elizabeth was to spend most of her time until her marriage in 1869.

Elizabeth was sent to boarding school where she was taught the usual genteel accomplishments of music, dancing, drawing and foreign languages. These refined activities were encouraged not only as eminently suitable pastimes for upper and middle class women who found themselves with increased leisure hours, but also to make them 'better' people. In 1777 Hannah More had written:

Yet, though well-bred young women should learn to dance, sing, recite and draw, the end of a good education is ... to make them good daughters, good wives, good mistresses, good members of society, and good Christians."

For some women, however, these first lessons marked the beginnings of a new passion, if not a vocation, for a particular branch of the arts. Indeed, it was probably at this time that Elizabeth Warren's dual enthusiasms for art and music were nurtured. While she retained her love of music and practised singing and piano playing at every opportunity, her primary interests were drawing and painting. It was not long before she took a sketchbook with her wherever she went.

Initially, however, any serious pursuit of her art was discouraged by her mother. Mrs Warren was an astute business woman who, following her husband's death in 1851, successfully managed the family's extensive market gardens. Yet she was opposed to her daughter considering a career away from the conventional paths deemed suitable for young women. Tensions rose between the strong-willed mother and her restless, energetic daughter until finally,

- This and other anecdotal material was provided by Elizabeth Parsons' daughter in her recollections of her parents: Adeline Parsons, The Parsons history, unpublished manuscript, c.1933 in a private collection and Adeline Parsons, History of the Warrens and Keens, unpublished manuscript, c.1948 in a private collection
- Hannah More, Essays on various subjects principally designed for young ladies 1777 in Caroline Jordan, 'Pilgrims of the picturesque': the amateur woman artist and British colonialism, circa 1750—1860, PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 1996, p.35

either of her own volition or through her mother's influence, Elizabeth found employment as governess to the family of stockbroker Augustus St Alphonse. Afterwards she worked as manager of a toy shop that her mother had acquired for Elizabeth's youngest brother, Alfred.³

Elizabeth may have held other such positions, but she remained true to her artistic inclinations. No doubt her cause was boosted with the formation in 1857 of the Society of Female Artists. Founded by Harriet Grote, the stated purpose of the society was to 'open a new field for the emulation of the female student, and also a wider channel of industrial occupation, thereby relieving part of the strain now bearing heavily on the few other profitable avocations open to educated women.'

Over the previous decade a sufficient number of women had been able to create a place for their work in the contemporary art market to make it possible for those with talent to consider a career in art as a viable alternative to the 'overcrowded and notoriously underpaid profession of governesses.' The Society's annual exhibitions provided an opportunity and a venue for women to show their works where they drew the attention of patrons keen to encourage the artists or attracted by the fact that their paintings were more affordable than those exhibited at the Royal Academy. 6

Influential drawing masters

By the end of the 1850s Elizabeth was looking for reputable drawing masters to foster her artistic talents and prepare her for a career in art. Living in London and having gained the support of her skeptical mother, Elizabeth finally had both the opportunity and the means to engage eminent teachers. While she always acknowledged two of her instructors — Thomas Miles Richardson (1813–90) and James Duffield Harding (1797–1863)—the existence of original drawings by Ramsay Richard Reinagle (1775-1862) in one of her surviving sketchbooks [CAT. NO. 58] indicates that this now largely forgotten artist was also an influence on Elizabeth's development. Reinagle, a member of the Royal Academy from the age of thirteen until 1848 and a member of the Royal Watercolour Society, was an experienced drawing master who counted John Constable among his earliest pupils. Reinagle was a painter of portraits and landscapes in the classical tradition, but the pencil sketches Elizabeth possessed were of simple landscapes with tree studies. These were probably acquired by Elizabeth for copying. As part of the tuition process, students were encouraged to copy from prints and photographs as well as the teacher's own original drawings: these were either given to the pupil or sometimes hired, loaned or sold.

There may have been a number of other unacknowledged teachers, but Elizabeth clearly considered Richardson and Harding to be the most prestigious and influential of her mentors. Richardson, an Associate of the Old Watercolourists Society, was an accomplished second generation Newcastle watercolourist who had moved to London in 1843. He was well known for his mountain scenery in Scotland and Northern England as well as the Swiss and Italian Alps. Although Richardson's dramatic, sublime style was later reflected in Elizabeth's paintings of Tasmanian and New Zealand mountain ranges, the greatest influence on her stylistic development was J. D. Harding.

A popular and dedicated drawing master who was much praised by a former pupil, the great critic, John Ruskin, the elderly Harding accepted Elizabeth as his last pupil. In addition to providing original drawings (also found in Elizabeth's sketchbooks), Harding directed his pupil to his own drawing manuals, a number of which were published in several editions. Amongst the most popular were Elementary Art, or the Use of the Lead Pencil (1834), The Park and the Forest (1841), Lessons on Art (1849) and Lessons on Trees (1852) [CAT. NO. 59]. Indeed, Ruskin, in his book, The elements of drawing, recommended the purchase of Lessons on Trees, stating that 'it will be serviceable to you in various ways.'9 According to

Ruskin, Harding's drawings 'are the only works by a modern draughtsman which express in any wise the energy of trees, and the laws of growth ... There are no lithographic sketches which, for truth of general character, obtained with little cost of time, at all rival Harding's.'10 There is little doubt that Elizabeth used one or more of these manuals that provided step-by-step illustrated instructions to take the pupil from a simple outline drawing through to colour and shading, accompanied by the injunction to practise each step 'over again and again, until the hand can produce the likeness to them with certainty and freedom.'11 Close and detailed observation of the form and texture of each tree species was also advocated by Harding, so that its essential characteristics were captured on paper. Elizabeth faithfully followed these precepts, as seen in her ability, almost a decade later, to depict the Australian gum tree without the awkwardness that is present in the work of many European-trained artists who came to Australia in the colonial period.

Harding's lessons are the foundation of Elizabeth's art. In the first instance, this is clearly seen in her drawings of trees, such as the pencil sketches of *Clovelly* c.1867 [CAT. NO. 5; FIG. 2], that depicts a copse of pollarded trees at water's edge, and *Study of trees* c.1869 [CAT. NO. 8; FIG. 3], that shows an open field with mature oaks, as it would appear. Two different tree species are captured in these studies, with attention paid to the shape of the trunks, branches and foliage. Although the leaves in *Clovelly* are more delineated than those of the other study, both works reflect the adept use of light and shade to create the impression of mass. Elizabeth echoed Harding's teachings when she wrote, 'Having the outline of forms satisfactory, we come to light and shade, which may be considered as a solidification of forms and the bringing out of one thing against another, by making it lighter or darker than the object behind it.' ¹²

The basic principles of compositional structure taught by each of Elizabeth's teachers were also clearly understood, absorbed and applied by Elizabeth who later wrote:

We all know that there are but three lines in Nature — the straight, the diagonal and the circle. These three forms, and the endless variety of which they are capable, are the basis of all design, and it is only when they are harmoniously blended and used in proper proportions that true beauty can be achieved. ¹⁵

These compositional elements are seen in the ambitious watercolour *The Thames at Isleworth* c.1864 [CAT. NO. 1; FIG. 4]. Here the strong diagonals formed by the banks of the river give the impression of distance as the Thames flows into the far horizon. This in turn is broken by the rounded silhouettes of tree clumps, the most dominant of which, depicting the Isleworth 'Ait', 'becomes the focal point of the composition. To the left, a soft diagonal is placed in the foreground both as a conventional framing device as well as to bring a greater sense of intimacy to the overall composition. Here the eye is drawn to the boats and the people on the banks, beyond which riverside buildings can be discerned.

A tighter structure can be seen in Elizabeth's *The old mill* 1868 [CAT. NO. 6; FIG. 5] in which diagonals intersect and lead the eye to the thatched cottage and mill in the centre of the picture. This was painted some years later than *The Thames at Isleworth* and shows the confidence and skill Elizabeth had acquired in the handling of more complex scenery. Harding advised,

It is always a good plan, when the subject appears difficult, to study the parts separately, before the whole is attempted; and then a slight sketch should be made of all the principle lines and features, taking those on the left hand, and having drawn first the nearest object correctly, the place and size of all others must be determined by comparison with that.¹⁵

3. Adeline, The History of the Warrens and Keens, op. cit.

4. 'The Society of Female Artists', *English Women's Journal I*, 1858, p.205 quoted in Paula Gillett, *The Victorian painter's world*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1990, p.134

5. Gillett, *op. cit.*, p.137

6. *ibid.*, p.134

7.
These two sketchbooks contain over 600 items comprising watercolours, drawings, prints, photographs, cartoons and newspaper cuttings. The majority of the watercolours and drawings are by Elizabeth Parsons and date from 1858. There are also prints by French painter, Gaspard Poussin, British landscape artist, Richard Wilson and animal painter Thomas Sydney Cooper as well as prints of the works of Old Masters

8. Houn L. Mallalieu, *The dictionary of British watercolour artists up to 1920*, Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge [England], c.1976—90, p.219

John Ruskin, *The elements of drawing*, Dover Publications, New York, 1971 (originally published by Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1857), p.112

1**●**. *ibid.*, p.113

J.D. Harding, *Lessons on Trees*, 13th edition, W. Kent & Co., London, edited and revised by William Walker, 1st published, 1852, p.5

12. Elizabeth Parsons, *Art*, unpublished manuscript read to the Australian Church Ladies' Reading Club, c.1890 in a private collection

13. *ibid*.

There are a number of small islands, or 'aits', located on the Thames, with that of Isleworth being, at ten acres, one of the longest

15. J.D Harding, op. cit. p.13



FIG. 2 Clovelly c.1867 pencil GAT. NO. 5

FIG. 3 Study of trees c.1869 pencil CAT. NO. 8





FIG. 4 The Thames at Isleworth c.1864 watercolour CAT. NO. 1



FIG. 5 The old watermill, Cornwall 1868 watercolour CAT. NO. 6



FIG. 6 St Mawgan, Cornwall 1868 watercolour CAT. NO. 7

FIG. 7 Clovelly, Devon c.1867 watercolour CAT. NO. 4



To create a successful and harmonious composition, every element in the landscape was important and should be carefully and assiduously studied until the student became proficient in the drawing of seemingly inconsequential objects such as rocks and water. The lesson was well learned from one who was considered by Ruskin to be not only — next to Turner — 'unquestionably the greatest masters of foliage in Europe'is but also 'nearly unequalled in the drawing of running water.'

Sketching excursions in England, Scotland and France

Elizabeth continued to make sketching expeditions with her pencil, paper and paints and reached a point where she no longer felt 'confused by the infinite variety of detail' found in sketching out of doors. Instead, she saw the scene before her as 'large forms or masses of light and shade, and, by a few touches, suggesting the detail to the imagination of the spectator.' Not only is this seen in other tightly structured compositions such as At Hambledon, Surrey 1866 [CAT. NO. 3] and St Mawgan, Cornwall 1868 [CAT. NO. 7; FIG. 6] but also in more open compositions including Arched bridge over the Thames (1865) [CAT. NO. 2] and Clovelly, Devon C.1867 [CAT. NO. 4; FIG. 7]. In these, Elizabeth reveals her aptitude at depicting all types of buildings. There is the thatched cottage in Hambledon, the more substantial stone house at St Mawgan and the two-storey stone building in the fishing village of Clovelly — which, incidentally, still stands. Elizabeth also painted the Duke of Northumberland's extensive Syon House and, further afield, the Chateau Fontainebleau in France.

Elizabeth travelled widely in search of picturesque locations for her pictures. Isleworth was the source of many of her subjects, as was nearby Hounslow, Richmond Park, Twickenham and the neighbouring shires of Surrey and Kent. She also went further afield, either on special sketching trips or on social visits that provided opportunities for sketching new material. There are several surviving drawings and watercolours in her sketchbooks depicting views in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Wales, Devon and Cornwall as well as at Strathclyde, Scotland. Her most exciting expedition, however, was undoubtedly that which took her to Fontainebleau in 1864.

It was during the 1830s and 40s that a group of French landscape and figurative artists, including Jean Francois Millais (1814–75). Théodore Rousseau (1812–67) and Díaz de la Pena (1807/8–76), had begun painting at the village of Barbizon, located some fifty kilometres from Paris at the edge of the Fontainebleau forest. Attracted by its rural simplicity, 'the calm, the silence, which are so delicious, both in the forest and in the cultivated fields,' these artists began painting landscape outdoors directly from nature, using intimate homely subjects and clear natural colours. It was here that the *plein air* movement had its origins. Although their paintings were slow to be accepted by the French critics and public, they were to profoundly influence the art and working methods of many of their contemporaries and of subsequent generations of artists.

Indeed, such was the impact of these artists and their paintings that, over the next three decades, 'men of all nationalities and of every degree of reputation, from the fore-most [sie] painters of the day down to the youngest student from London or Edinburgh, from New York or Boston, flocked to Barbizon each summer, attracted by the picturesque beauty of the forest and the free Bohemian life of the place.' While most artists tended to stay at Pére Ganne's hostelry or temporary lodgings in neighbouring barns and outhouses, those who had the means and the desire sought more formal accommodations, such as at the Chateau Fontainebleau itself.

Although she possessed an independent, adventurous spirit, Elizabeth is likely to have taken more conventional lodgings, appropriate to her social station and gender. She may also have travelled with a companion — possibly the Isabella Laing who features in one of Elizabeth's Fontainebleau sketches. A surviving watercolour shows that she stayed in a single room apartment, possibly at the Chateau, with an arched window looking onto trees and shrubs and beyond

6

John Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. 1, of general truths of general principles, 4th edition in small form, George Allen, London, 1903, p.327

17. ibid., p.371

18. Elizabeth Parsons, Art, op. cit.

19. Julia Cartwright, Jean Francois Millet: his life and letters, Swan Sonnenscheing and Co., London, 1910, p.163: quoted from a letter by Millet to his agent, Alfred Sensier, c.1849

20. ibid., pp.100—101 to glimpses of other stone buildings. The room contained only basic fornishings: a single iron bed, dressing table with mirror and stool, a small cupboard and a chair. Pegs on the wall held Elizabeth's satchel and hat.

From here Elizabeth was able to make excursions into the Fontainebleau forest where she made several pencil sketches of trees and intimate landscapes. She also painted accomplished watercolours of the Chateau and Palace of Fontainebleau as well as a view of the home of renowned French animal painter, Rosa Bonheur, who was considered 'perhaps the most admired woman artist in Victorian England from the mid-1850s." Elizabeth's stay at Barbizon reinforced the lessons provided by her totors and exposed her to new influences and a wider circle of artists, many of whom shared her devotion to picturesque art.

Marriage and departure for Australia

Elizabeth returned home to Isleworth filled with renewed enthusiasm for her chosen vocation. Over the following two years, however, life was overshadowed by her mother's illness. This strong willed woman, with whom Elizabeth was so often in conflict, had developed a liver complaint that eventually proved fatal. In 1865 Mrs Warren's condition was such that she composed her last Will and Testament and, accompanied by Elizabeth, travelled to the fashionable hydropathic establishments of Matlock in Derbyshire? seeking the recuperative benefits of its waters that were said to be 'particularly valuable as curaives in rheumatism, consumption, gout, and pulmonary and nervous disorders.\(^{100}\) Unfortunately, Mrs Warren's health continued to fail. Although Elizabeth still made occasional trips, much of her time was spent earing for her ailing mother.

Elizabeth Warren died on a 7 March 1867. In her Will she divided her estate among her four sons and daughters, leaving the market business to William. She also ensured that Elizabeth could remain in the house she occupied on the Worton property and would receive an annalty so long as she remained unmarried. Elizabeth also inherited her mother's 'wearing apparet, jewellery and trinkets and the sum of Egoo.' It is a testament to her independent spirit that she declined the well-intentioned offers of both her brother, William, and her New Zealand mode. George Warren, to join their households in what may have been a secure but somewhat constrained existence as a dependent adult woman. Instead, together with fellow artist Flora Davis, she travelled to Devon and then on to Cornwall on what appears to have been an extended sketching trip.

Unless Elizabeth and Flora made their way home for winter and returned by the following autumn, it seems that they spem several months in this part of fingland. It was not unusual for mattached women to remain as guests for long periods in the homes of family or friends. In this way they could become, if only temporarily, a member of the community and join in its activities. Thus, when Elizabeth went to the Cornwall's Lizard Peninsula around the middle of 1868, she found herselt in the same social circle as the manager of the Lizard Scrpentine Marble Works, George Parsons (1830—1920).

Their encounter, George later recalled, 'appeared to be destiny.'' George was himself a newcomer to the area. Trained in the building industry under London architect, Thomas Cobin (1788 – 1856). George had been employed as surveyor and works supervisor by Sussex builders, Lucas Bros, and then by London architects. Banks & Barry. In the course of his work he had been sent to sites all over England as well as in France. Around 1858, however, he married Isabella Dodd, whose frail health led him to seek employment that would keep him in London. He accepted a position in the London Office of the Serpentine Works as its secretary, accountant and traveller. Isabella gave birth to daughter Isabella, she died. Her daughter died soon after. Three years later, in 1867, George and his two young sons arrived in Poluscoe to take charge of the Serpentine Works — although he still listed his profession as surveyor."

George later stated that when he first saw Elizabeth, he 'neither knew [her]

Christian name or her age — We each knew our families and position in life as we both came from Isleworth. George's father, Jonathon Parsons, had been employed as architect to the Duke of Northumberland at Syon House and had worked there at the same time as Elizabeth's father. The Parsons family lived in Little Syon, a small mansion on the Syon estate, until around 1846. Although the Warrens owned much of their property, portions of it were 'copyhold of the Manor of Isleworth Syon.'* The Parsons and Warren boys were well acquainted with each other and often rowed together on the Thames. The two families also attended the same church. In later life Elizabeth recalled that 'as a romantic little girl ... in Church she used to see the Parsons boys come in but it was the feldest son Henry that took her fancy." And it was Henry who was 'very often at a Mr Altonse's [sic] house where she was governess.' It was also after Henry that George and Elizabeth's first son was named.

Elizabeth and George were immediately attracted to one another and, after a short courtship and engagement, they married at Isleworth on 28 October 1868." The newlywer's returned to George's home, Poltesko Cottage, where Elizabeth, now stepmether to two young boys of ten and eight, innucdiately fell pregnant with Adeline, who was born there in August 1869. For many women, marriage signalled the end of a career in art. It would have been understandable if Elizabeth, bearing the responsibility of a young family, had set aside her own ambitions, at least for a time. Yet, in the first year of marriage, in 1869, Elizabeth exhibited in her first major exhibition, sending seven works to the Society of Female Artists under the name of Mrs George Parsons."

Although Elizabeth may have exhibited in local exhibitions, there is no evidence that she contributed to London's most notable arnual shows, including those of the Royal Academy of Art or the Old Watercolourists Society. So why now, with the added burden of a new family, and living away from London's cultural centre, did she finally look toward establishing herself as a professional artist? Indeed, not only was she exhibiting, it was also around this time that she sent some pictures to the distinguished Scottish artist, Peter Graham (1836—1921), for his opinion. Graham, together with other leading Scottish artists, had formed a highly influential artistic and social circle in London. To Elizabeth's gratification, he regarded her work favourably: 'All the subjects are selected with great artistic taste, and the treatment shows a fine sense of atmospheric effect; there is much beauty in each of the drawings." With this glowing review Elizabeth began to promote herself as a serious artist producing works of a high standard.

Perhaps her changed circumstances prompted Elizabeth to move away from the study of art to the business of art. As a single woman of means living in the metropolis, she had the luxury of being able to wander about the country on sketching trips at her own leisure — and, for the time being at least, had been content to do little more than this. Family obligations took away much of this freedom, while fiving in a remote valley in Cornwall meant that she no longer had the social or cultural diversions that London offered.

Although she did participate in community life, playing the organ or harpsichord in the local church and at concerts, this well-travelled, energetic woman must have felt stifled by her new life. No doubt with her husband's support and encouragement, she redirected her energy and ambinous to exhibiting and selling her work. But there may have been another incentive—that of providing additional income for the family

By the time Elizabeth arrived in Cornwall, George's future at the Marble Works was uncertain. Implicit in George's account of his eventual dismissal as manager is that the Works, established before 1851, had begun showing signs of trouble. Members of the Serpentine Company's board listened to George's concern that the company would fail to prosper due to the intrinsic nature of the serpentine marble: it was expensive to mine and could only be retrieved in small slabs while working with the material involved a great deal of waste. Thus, there was no great profit margin. However, as George wrote, 'neither the Directors of Chairman agreed with my views, they therefore dispensed with my services.'

21. Gillett, *ab cit.*, p. 180

Surviving skerches show that Elizabeth bad visited Marlock in (86g and (86g. Although her mother's illness may have begun to mainfest itself as early as (80g. it appears that by (86g her condition and berome notably worse.)

28
Hewellyn Jewitt, Noole & Corners of
Derbyshinel quoted in The Androws Pages,
England', The Madock and Matlock
Bath, Derbyshine, viewed February 2004,
www.andrewspages.dial.pipex.com/
matlock/oacchom>

24. Ebzabeth Warren's will indicates that there were a number of buildings on the property. Elizabeth lived in one of these. The house that Mrs Warren occupied was left to William.

25. Adeline Parsons, The Parsons history, op. est.

 Cornish Ancestors, England, viewed February 2004. «Cornishaurestors.co.uk/Parish/Frites,/ Ruam@20Minot/bap K.W.hum»

27.
Adeline Parsons, The Pursons literary, op. cit.
provides the details of the families' connection

28. Mizaboth Warren, Last Will and Testament, (867 in a private collection

Adeline Parsons, The Paisons history of car.

30. Family history records the month as being November. However, marriage records sourced at Family Scarch Internet. The Church of Latter-day Saints, viewed February 2004, stewnlamilysearch.orgs. Stow that the mouth was October

33.
My thanks to Panicla Benderson, secretary of the Society of Women Actists, London, for this information.

32. *Tie* Age July 1890: clipping in Sketchbook (I

38. Adefine Parsons, The Parsons biology op. ed.

When George lost his position and the family was obliged to leave the manager's cottage, they moved to lodgings at Clapham Junction in London. It was here that George and Elizabeth decided to emigrate to Australia, a land that seemed to offer greater prospects. Both had some knowledge of Australia. Elizabeth's brother, Alfred, had apparently spent some time there, while George was one of a party of five, including his brother Henry, that sailed to Sydney in 1852, drawn by the prospect of gold. They met with modest success at the goldfields of Turon, Bathurst, Ophir and Adelong but returned to England alterabout a year due to Henry's ill health.¹¹

In spite of this familiarity, the idea of leaving London would not have been an easy one for Elizabeth who was just beginning to make her presence felt in the London art world. Equally, if not more importantly, it also meant leaving a wide circle of family and friends and the security and support they offered.

With excitement for some and trepidation for others, the Parsons family boarded the luxurious steamer, *SS Great Britain*, as second class passengers and, together with 773 other souls, left Liverpool on 19 March 1870. While the journey itself was a fairly uneventful one, it proved largely unpleasant for Elizabeth who not only had to contend with bouts of seasickness but also with morning sickness, as she was now pregnant with Henry. The ship, able to travel under sail or, in windless conditions, by its steam-powered engine, made good time, arriving at Sandridge on 20 May 1870. The Parsons and their luggage wer rowed ashore and, with no relatives or friends to greet them, a two-wheeled cab was hired to take them into Melbourne. For the next few days they stayed at the Post Office Hotel, then leased a furnished house in Nicholson Street in Carlton before moving to nearby Grattan Place, Keppel Street, Carlton.

The Melbourne art scene

Elizabeth came to Australia with the intention of resuming her career as an artise. Within a month, and even before the family had time to properly settle down, Elizabeth had approached Powl's Fine Art Gallery in Queen Street with a portfole of her drawings and watercolours and had invited the city's most influential art critic, James Smith, to view the works. As had been the case with Peter Graham, this was a bold and astute move. Smith was impressed and the first review of Elizabeth's work in Australia was largely favourable:

They are all views of English scenery, treated in a manner which indicates a considerable acquaintance and sympathy with nature ... all have a charming freshness and simple unconventional air of truth, and they are evidently chose by one who has a fine feeling for the picturesque. The work is very solid and free for a lady's hand, ... on the whole her productions do her very great credit. She deserves to take rank amongst the best of our amateurs, and she certainly excels some of those who call themselves professionals. To

Such praise augured well for Elizabeth's future. Moreover, it came at an opportune time. The newly-formed Victorian Academy of Art — founded with the aim of supporting and promoting the growing number of colonial artists as well as fostering friendly competition – was in the midst of organising its inaugural exhibition. This was an ideal forum for Elizabeth to display her work.

Opened in November 1870, the Academy's exhibition included some 230 works with an equal representation of oil paintings and watercolours. The quality of the works was variable, with entries by leading artists including Louis Buvelot and Eugéne von Guerard hung beside those of amateurs. While applauding the Academy's initiative, James Smith scathingly noted that the exhibition 'demonstrates the existence of a good deal of crude — some of it extremely crude — ability, and points to the necessity for the establishment of an institution of this kind, both for the purpose of instruction and of competition.' His assessment of Elizabeth Parsons' contribution was, however, full of praise:

In the water-colour department there are no better landscapes than those painted by Mrs Parsons. This lady ... has made the beautiful scenery of Devonshire her especial study, and the fidelity with which she portrays its leafy woods, its green valleys, its quaint old cottages and water-mills and the soft haze and tender blue of its summer skies, will be immediately recognised by people who know anything of the Tamar or the Tay. In her treatment of foliage Mrs Parsons is particularly skilful. There is definition of form and character, and at the same time plenty of breadth and freedom. Mrs Parsons has four water-colour drawings in the exhibition, any one of which may be cited as a good example for students in this branch of art. 'S

There was, in fact, only one watercolour of Devon in the exhibition. There were another four paintings that depicted views of Loch Lomond in Scotland and St Mawgan in Cornwall. Smith's sentiments, however, applied to them all. These works were not simply technically accomplished: their familiar subjects also had a strong nostalgic appeal to an audience that still regarded Britain as home.

The exhibition was not a financial success. It may have attracted public attention, but few were prepared to purchase the works on display. Melbourne was young, little more than 35 years old. It still retained the materialistic culture that had ensured its survival during the early years of settlement and saw emerge as the colony's pre-eminent city following the 1850s gold rush. Those who were prepared to decorate their homes with paintings and prints preferred European and British art, which was deemed to be superior to the colonial product.

Faced with such obstacles, the exhibition ran at a loss and the Victorian Academy of Art approached its artists to donate paintings toward a sale. Amongst those artists was Elizabeth who, while sympathetic, did not agree with its plan of action:

I regret that the exhibition for the Victorian Academy has not been successful either in the sale of pictures or in defraying expenses — but trust that with time a little more encouragement will be given to art and artists. A sale of pictures to raise money is I think rather derogatory — as they will evidently realise a mere trifle — I therefore prefer to subscribe £1 and tender my thanks to the Council for all their trouble and anxiety. 9

This is a well-phrased, succinct letter that reflects the forthright attitude with which Elizabeth approached the 'varied changes + anxieties + troubles of her life.' She had not allowed migration to a new country distract her from the ambitions. Furthermore, when the family again faced financial insecurity, he was able to intensify her efforts to earn additional income through her art.

The start of a new career

Throughout 1871, Elizabeth continued to develop her network of contacts in Melbourne's art world. There was little immediate need to do more. Shortly after his arrival in the city George Parsons had approached former fellow student and prospector, Alfred Smith, now of the architectural firm of Smith & Watts, for advice on employment prospects. Smith was able to provide an introduction engineer, Thomas Tozer, of the Atlas Company of Engineers. Ready to leave the Atlas Company, Tozer joined George in partnership to form Parsons & Tozer, fronfounders and engineers, operating from the Vulcan Foundry at 59 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne. The business union was not a successful one and after year the partnership was dissolved, with Tozer continuing to run the Vulcan Foundry on his own.

This left the family with an uncertain future. George was able to find a position 'selling books on commission,' but it was neither a long term nor

34- Adeline Parsons, *The Parsons history, op. cit.* The party included George, Henry, their cousin Robert Lee, Lee's cousin Tom Craig, boyhood friend James Pickering and fellow Cubitt's pupil Alfred L. Smith

SS Great Britain, Bristol, viewed November 2003, <www.ss-great-britain.com>. Launched in 1843, the Great Britain was the largest ship in the world. It was also the first screw propelled, ocean-going, wrought iron ship, designed initially for the Trans-Atlantic luxury passenger trade, and could carry 252 first and second class passengers and 130 crew. By 1852 she was rebuilt to take advantage of the upsurge in emigration to Australia, becoming a fast luxurious clipper able to carry 750 passengers. With a more powerful engine and more sail, she was able to power through the seas to reach Australia in an average of 60 days. Over the next two decades, most under the command of the popular Captain John Gray, she made 32 voyages to Australia and carried over 15,000 emigrants

36. *Argus*, 25 June 1870 clipping in Sketchbook II

37. *Argus*, 30 November 1870, p.7, c.1

38. *Argus*, 26 December 1870, p.6, c.4

39. Elizabeth Parsons, Letter to Victorian Academy of Art, 20 March 1871, State Library of Victoria, ms fs93, **B**ox 580/2(c)

40. Adeline Parsons, History of the Warrens and Keens, op. cit.

41. Adeline Parsons, *The Parsons history, op. cit.*

Advertisement in Sands & McDougall's Melbourne and Suburban Directory, Sands & McDougall, Melbourne, 1871



FIG. 8 Carlton Gardens in 1871 1871 pencil and wash CAT. NO. 9



FIG. 9
Untitled (Melbourne
University in 1871)
watercolour
Courtesy:
The University
of Melbourne
Art Collection



FIG. 10
A country lane,
Woodend
c.1875
watercolour
GAT. NO. 11

peninsulas. Some trips extended as far as Sydney and, with readily accessible sea transport, to Tasmania and New Zealand.

The year 1872 also saw the birth of the Parsons' next son, Warren. With the addition of another child, together with the pupils that Elizabeth tutored and the presence of George who was able to work more flexible hours, the house had become too small and crowded. By 1873 Elizabeth had found premises off Flinders Lane and opened her own studio. As well as painting and teaching there, the central location enabled her to socialise more readily with other artists as well as existing and potential patrons who worked in the city. This was an invaluable opportunity to promote herself and her work and was one that reaped great benefits by the end of the following year. Unfortunately, Elizabeth had to relinquish the studio when George's work for Henry Miller began to take him away from home. In 1874 Elizabeth was again working from Stephen Street but by October the family was able to move into larger premises in Neptune Street in the fashionable suburb of St Kilda.

Elizabeth sent eight pictures to the 1874 Victorian Academy of Art exhibition from this address, with four depicting scenes in Hambledon, Surrey and Clovelly in Devon. The previous year she had sent five landscapes comprising views of Woodend, Mt Macedon and Corio Bay, Geelong. The number of British subjects in the 1874 exhibition suggests that the Victorian landscapes did not sell as well as hoped. One work was purchased, although whether it was a British or Australia subject is not clear.⁴⁴

fucrative proposition. It was therefore imperative that an additional source of income was obtained. Elizabeth turned to teaching and, by 1872, was providing art lessons from the family's new home at 27 Stephen Street in South Melbourne. George was able to gain more steady employment in the following year. An introduction from Alfred Smith to financier and politician, Henry 'Money' Miller, saw him appointed as inspector and auditor over the Seymour to Avenal section of the North Eastern Line railway contract in January 1873. He appears to have worked in this capacity for some time on this and other lines, including the Gippsland Railway around 1878.

In spite of more regular income, Elizabeth continued to teach as well as exhibit her work. She showed with the Victorian Academy of Art's second exhibition in 1872, contributing ten paintings. The majority were again views in Scotland and Cornwall as well as Surrey, subjects that she knew would appeal and therefore be likely to sell. There were also three local views: On the Yarra, Near Melbourne and Carlton Gardens, Melbourne.

These were amongst her first attempts at depicting the Australian landscape. Both Carlton Gardens, Melbourne, properly titled Carlton Gardens in 1871 [CAT. NO. 9; FIG. 8], and another painting from the same year, Melbourne University [FIG. 9] are the result of Elizabeth's travels in and around Melbourne, painting equipment in hand. Each has an open composition with great expanses of empty foreground and sky. In the middle distance buildings are surrounded by trees. In Carlton Gardens this comprises mainly residential buildings in the centre, with more substantial structures to the right. In Melbourne University the large Gothic-style University building can be seen on the left and the National Museum on the right. Both introduced and native tree species are depicted: easily recognisable are the gum trees to the far right, reflecting Elizabeth's ability to quickly identify and capture the essential characteristics of these Australian plants. The deep foreground of Carlton Gardens is slightly relieved by the inclusion of people leisurely strolling through or resting in groups in the still rather bare gardens. Greater activity is seen in Melbourne University where a contingency of soldiers, probably from a volunteer corps such as the Carlton Rifle Company, parade before a scattering of interested spectators.

The panoramic aspects of these two pictures reflect the park-like nature of the landscapes. Yet they also reveal a sense of disconnectedness between the artist and the subject. There are no framing devices to contain the compositional elements and provide the sense of intimacy that is embodied in her English views and most of her later Australian paintings. In spite of the alacrity with which she had immersed herself in Melbourne society, Elizabeth was still a newcomer to the country who had yet to assimilate the various features of her new surroundings. Only when these became more familiar could she confidently focus on specific aspects and translate these into intimate, more accessible images such as the sun-dappled A country lane, Woodend c.1875 [CAT. NO. 11; FIG. 10].

Elizabeth sent another three Victorian scenes to the 1872 Melbourne International Exhibition, including View at Schnapper Point, View at Geelong and The wreck of the Sussex. The Parsons family evidently had the resources to venture on a holiday to Geelong over the 1871—72 summer period and were caught up in the excitement of the New Year's eve grounding of the Sussex just 200 metres off the beach near Barwon Heads Bluff.

This was the first of several family holidays in towns and resorts around Victoria, providing Elizabeth with new material for her paintings. As with many other Melbournians, Elizabeth and her family were eager to escape the stifling atmosphere of the city during the long, hot summers. This was made easier with growing improvements to rail, road and sea transport, which opened up many new areas. The family spent many summers in Berwick, where they had either leased or bought a small holiday house. From here Elizabeth could make sketching trips into the surrounding district. She also travelled further afield, and later works show her painting in popular tourist destinations in Melbourne's outer suburbs and inland country towns as well as on the Bellerine and Mornington

43Stephen Mead, 'The University of Melbourne
Art Collection in detail: Elizabeth Parsons,
Untitled (Melbourne University 1871)', Ian
Potter Museum of Art, 2003, viewed October
2003, www.artmuseum.unimelb.edu.au/
pdf/Parsons.pdf>. Information relating to
this watercolour is sourced from this article

The Victorian Academy of Art

By now, Elizabeth's standing in the art community was rapidly increasing.

Indeed, such was her influence that she was nominated and elected, in spite
of opposition, onto the Victorian Academy of Art council on 3rd December 1874.

Though voicing the restricted sentiment of the day, some of the sitting members strongly resented the intrusion of a female into their enclaves ... These found, however, that they had an advance representative of the Australian new woman to deal with, and the interloper was not long in consolidating her position and making her influence felt in the raising of the standard in local art. 40

Elizabeth had earned the distinction of being the first woman on a council of seventeen members. This position not only reflected the high personal regard in which she was held but, more importantly, it also acknowledged her status as a professional artist. Although the Victorian Academy of Art exhibitions drew criticism for the large number of works by amateur artists that were included, the council members themselves were well-respected artists, with Chester Earles (1821—1904) as president and Francis B. Gibbes (1815—1904) as secretary. In joining them, Elizabeth had finally realised her ambition of establishing an artistic career.

Strictly speaking, Elizabeth was not the first woman in Victoria to practise as an artist in a professional capacity. Julie Vieusseux — whose circumstances uncannily paralleled those of Elizabeth — had arrived in Melbourne in 1852. With the support of her Swiss-born architect husband, Vieusseux advertised her services as a portraitist to earn additional income when her husband's career failed to prosper:

Mrs Vieusseux has the honour to announce that she follows her profession as PORTRAIT PAINTER and in soliciting the patronage of all lovers of the Fine Arts she respectfully invites them to visit her studio, where several beautiful Oil Paintings, also specimens of her Likenesses, may be viewed.

As well as exhibiting with the Victorian Industrial Society in the 1850s and the Intercolonial Exhibition in 1866, Julie Vieusseux established the Vieusseux's Ladies College in 1857 where the daughters of many of Melbourne's leading families were sent. There were other talented women artists who established art schools. Jane Wilkinson ran the Academy of Drawing and Painting in Collins Street from 1859. Wilkinson's name appears consistently with Elizabeth Parsons in the artist's section of the Sands & McDougall trade directories. They were joined briefly in 1872 and 1873 by the Misses Barlow and Corbett and Madame von Reiche. From 1875 until 1884 Elizabeth and Jane Wilkinson were the only women listed among a growing number of male artists, reflecting the male domination of Melbourne's art society.

This is not to say that no other women artists were earning an income through their art. Emma Minnie Boyd (1858—1936), Louisa Anne Meredith (1812—95), Isabella Rielly (c.1855—96) and Ellis Rowan (1848—1922) are amongst those who were selling their paintings and taking commissions. It is not known whether Jane Wilkinson was doing the same. That she exhibited just one picture in only two Academy of Art exhibitions, those of 1874 and 1875, and three works that were copies after old masters in the Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society Exhibition of Art Treasures of Victoria, suggests that she worked primarily within her capacity as a teacher.

The majority of women artists painted subjects that were deemed suitable for their gender: flower-painting and miniatures. However exquisite their paintings and however highly skilled and competent they were at making them, such subject matter carried the stigma of being inferior and within the realm of the amateur. Historical, allegorical and religious figure painting was seen as the pre-eminent subject for paintings and considered beyond the capability of women artists. The efforts of those who attempted to paint them were not taken seriously.

44-Elizabeth Parsons, Letter to F.B. Gibbes, Victorian Academy of Art, 29 October 1874, State Library of Victoria, ms fs93, Box 580/2(c)

45Alexander Colquhoun, 'Australian artists of the past: Mrs Geo Parsons', The Age, to December 1932. Although the Victorian Academy of Art does not reflect the reservations with which Elizabeth Parsons' nomination was greeted, Colquhoun was well acquainted with Elizabeth, both having been members of the Buonarotti Club during the 1880s. His account of the affair would have been based on Elizabeth's own reminiscences

46.
Other members of the 1874 Victorian
Academy of Art council included
John Carter, William Ford, H.L. van den
Houten, H.J. Johnston, J.S. Mackennal,
Cyrus Mason, J.M. Nelson, Henry Rielly,
Andrew Robertson, James Scurry, Leonard
Terry and Thomas Wright

47:
Argus, 4 November, 1853 quoted in Brenda
Niall, Georgiana: A biography of Georgiana
McCrae, painter, diarist, pioneer, Melbourne
University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p.214



FIG. 12 Wilson lane, Berwick c.1876 oil on canvas CAT. NO. 12

FIG. 11 The first St Kilda Jetty and Kenny's Bathing Ship c.1875 oil on canvas GAT. NO. 10



The women who painted landscapes were subject to close critical scrutiny. Only Elizabeth's impeccable training predisposed her critics to look favourably upon her work. Yet even here a degree of discrimination could occasionally be observed. One Sydney reviewer, who considered Elizabeth's contributions to the 1874 Sydney Art Society Exhibition as 'successful' and 'cleverly painted,' felt compelled to add: 'In landscape the lady painters are not on a level with some of the male members; but the works of Mrs George Parsons are quite equal to the average.'

When Elizabeth began to 'tackle the professional domain of the male artist — large landscapes in oil' the response was swift and harsh. An oil painting included in the 1875 Victorian Academy of Art exhibition — her first vear as council member — elicited James Smith's comment that 'Mrs George Parsons, we are sorry to observe, is relinquishing water colour drawing, in which she excelled, for oil painting, in which her experiments are disappointing to others and ought to be discouraging to herself. His sentiment was later echoed by Sydney's art critic who expressed a 'preference for her water colour pictures.

As a medium that demanded slower, more considered application than watercolour, oil painting inevitably resulted in a change in style and technique. By its very nature, the quick-drying watercolour paints were applied rapidly and decisively, with little room for correction. Oil paints dried more slowly and often required a gradual build up if layers of colour were to be applied. The spontaneity of the watercolour was naturally lost, as seen in Elizabeth's paintings of *The first St Kilda Jetty and Kenny's Bathing Ship* c.1875 [CAT. NO. 10; FIG. 11] and *Wilson lane, Berwich* c.1876 [CAT. NO. 12; FIG. 12]. Elizabeth used a restricted tonal palette of blues, greens and browns for her painting of the St Kilda jetty, which was constructed in 1858 and turned into a resort area with the conversion of the wreck of Captain Kenny's ship, *Naney*, into a bathing ship. The careful use of broad brush strokes gives the painting a restrained, somewhat heavy-handed appearance. This is one of her earliest attempts at oil painting, and is reminiscent of some of R.R. Reinagle's paintings.

With the slightly later and more experimental, Wilson lane, Berwick — that of the back of the family's holiday home — Elizabeth lightened her palette and paint application This is a more intimate painting, seemingly not intended for public display, Elizabeth used shorter, more textured and impressionistic strokes in an attempt to create the play of light and shade in the composition. Elizabeth's watercolours achieved this more assuredly and successfully, a fact that the critics had rightly noted. That the oil paintings deserved the strafing given them by James Smith is questionable. Unfortunately, few are known to have survived and a more considered overview of Elizabeth's efforts in oil is therefore

The negative criticism did not deter Elizabeth from painting more oils and she continued to send them, together with her watercolours, to numerous exhibitions during the 1870s. These included the annual Victorian Academy of Art exhibitions, the 1875 Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition, the Philadelphia International Exhibition and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1876, as well as the exhibitions of the New South Wales Academy of Art from its inception in 1877. Most of these works were sent under the auspices of the Victorian Academy of Art, which forwarded a representative selection of its members' works to the exhibitions. Elizabeth was often the only female member to be included, reflecting the respect with which the artist and her works were considered.

Furthermore, Elizabeth's paintings in these exhibitions, notably her watercolours, elicited high praise. Her contribution to the Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition was noted in the official catalogue:

not possible at this time.™

Mrs George Parsons is a watercolourist of no mean merit. This lady possesses a boldness and dash of treatment, and it is quite refreshing to see the effects she brings out with her broad washes after the insignificant stippeling [sic] employed by the majority of artists. 10

48. Sydney Mail, 26 July 1884, p.158, c.1

Victoria Hammond, A century of women artists 1840s — 1940s, Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne, 1993, p.11

50. Azgus, 28 June 1875

51. Sydney Mail, 14 April 1877, p.455, c.4

The Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, the State Library of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria each have a painting by Elizabeth Parsons in their collections

53Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition, 1875,
preparatory to the Philadelphia Exhibition
1876, opened 2nd September, 1875, Official
catalogue of exhibitions, Melbourne, M'Carron,
Bird & Co., 1875, p.209

54. Sydney Mail, 7 April 1877, p.425, c.2

In the Sands & McDougall postal directories for these years only Elizabeth is listed as residing at Neptune Street, St Kilda. Presumably, George's work with the railways required him to stay in temporary lodgings closer to the work sites at the time these directories were compiled and Elizabeth, working from home, was deemed to be mistress of the household.

56. Art Union of Victoria, Annual Report, 1883, p6, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, msoo2o28

57.
Mary Holyoake, "Art Unions — catalysts of Australian art", Art & Australia, The Fine Art Press, Melbourne, 1978, vol. 15, no. 3, pp.289—96

58. Art Union of Victoria, Annual Report, 1881—82, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, msoo2o28 Reviewing the New South Wales Academy of Art's inaugural exhibition, the Sydney Mail's art critic deemed Elizabeth's watercolours to be, next to John Gully's Bush Gully, the best in that medium, noting that they showed 'the hand and the work of an artist. There is abundance of freedom and great power. Colour has been floated freely, but laid on with that decision and firmness which characterises careful work.⁷⁵⁴

Elizabeth remained a member of the Victorian Academy of Art council from 1875 to 1876, during which time she gave birth to two sons: Noel in January 1875 and Jonathon in August 1876. With George also increasingly absent for extended periods during these years, Elizabeth's family responsibilities became more insistent and time-consuming. This affected the level of her commitment to the council and, whether of her own volition or as the result of an election meeting she was no longer a council member in 1877. It was not until 1900, when the Academy had become the Victorian Artists Society, that the next woman, Jane Sutherland, was elected to council.

Selection for the Art Union of Victoria

In spite of the short two-year period on the council, Elizabeth's prestige within the art world grew. Without the commitment of council work and meetings, she was able to direct her attention to other avenues of art exposure. One of the more select methods was through the Art Union of Victoria.

The Art Union of Victoria was established in 1872 — the same year as the Victorian Academy of Art with which it had close ties — for the purpose of 'promoting a love of the Fine Arts in Australasian Colonies, for the purchase of meritorious Pictures, for the wide dissemination thereof, and generally for the Improvement of Art Culture. The Art Union committee would purchase paintings from artists that would then be made available in a lottery. An annual membership fee entitled an Art Union subscriber to a chance of winning a prize in the lottery drawn at the Union's yearly meeting. The first drawn had first choic and tickets were drawn until the last picture was selected. All subscribers received a print of a painting carefully selected by the committee from those on offer. The same year as the victorian describers are the purpose of 'promoting and the purpose of t

Elizabeth had two works in the 1879 Art Union: an oil painting, In the Harkaway Ranges, and a watercolour, Omnium Gatheram, both having been exhibited in the Victorian Academy of Art exhibition of that year. The paintings were won by Tasmanian subscribers, Mrs R. Crosy and the Ven. Archdeacon Davies and were sent via the Tamar to Hobart's J. Walch and Sons, importers, for collection. They were apparently held on display there and were noticed by the Hobart Mercury. The Mercury's reporter showed little reservation on the merits of the oil painting, pronouncing it to be 'a most artistic reproduction of a magnificent scene, the perspective and lighting of which are most admirable Similarly, the still life with fruit, Omnium Gatherum, was deemed a 'water-colour sketch of great excellence ... Nature and art have been imitated in an exceeding truthful style, and the effect of the weather upon the crowns of the pine apple and some of the other fruit have been portrayed with great distinctness.⁷⁸⁸

Elizabeth was the only woman among nine artists whose works were selected in the 1881 Art Union of Victoria, including Louis Buvelot, Henry Johnstone and John Mather. Unlike her previous offerings, the two watercolours in this lottery, Swan Bay, Queenseliff and On the Mitchell River, had not been exhibited in the Victorian Academy of Art's exhibition; they were presumably presented by Elizabeth to the committee for consideration. These went to L.Q. de Soyres of Carnal and G.H.W. Grano of Ararat respectively.

Inclusion in the Art Union of Victoria had resulted in greater exposure of Elizabeth's art. With the wide dispersal of these few paintings, Elizabeth's name became even more familiar to communities outside the Melbourne area. Elizabeth's greatest triumph, however, had taken place the previous year when she had been selected for the Art Union's publication, *Orara*.

Henry Kendall's Orara

As has been noted, the committee usually chose to reproduce, as the annual subscriber print, the work of one artist. For its 1880 production, however, it had a more ambitious project in mind: 'a series of wood engravings to illustrate an Australian poem, and to be published in book form.' It was decided that *The Glen of Arawata*, by leading poet, Henry Kendall (1839—82), would be the most appropriate. Kendall was asked to make some changes to the work that would facilitate translation into illustrative form. While Kendall added another stanza, he left the remainder of the poem untouched, and eschewed the provision of the 'happy ending' the committee sought. With the alterations, the poem was a named *Glen of Orara*. By the time of publication, it had become *Orara*—6 not to be confused with another poem by Kendall of that name.

The committee commissioned Louis Buvelot, John Gully, Julian Ashton and William Ford to provide designs. It also announced a competition for other artists to send in drawings for the thirteen engravings that were to illustrate specified passages in the poem. Louis Buvelot elected not to participate. The competition resulted in the selection of eight other artists' works, including Elizabeth Parsons' tranquil, rural image of peasants resting in a field dotted with haystacks [FIG. 13]

that was to accompany the verse:

But while the English autumn filled her lap With faded gold, and while the reapers cooled Their flame-red faces in the clover grass, They looked for him at home ...

Again, as the only woman represented in a field of men, Elizabeth's inclusion confirmed the regard with which her work was held. Her success in the competition earned her £5.5 and the opportunity to participate in a highly-cacclaimed publication. A First Class Order of Merit in the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition was awarded to Orara but then rescinded, as the book had arrived after the designated receiving date. To the hundreds of subscribers who received a copy of the publication, however, Elizabeth's name — or 'Eliza' as she was referred to in Orara's index — would become quite familiar.

59-

Art Union of Victoria, Minute book, 1 December 1879, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, msoo2o28.

Sec.

ibid. The committee wanted Kendall to add specific subjects to the poem that included: 'A sea scene - with a vessel, storm, &c'; 'A pastoral scene with cattle'; 'Some reference to New Zealand, with cold, cap't, snow cap' mountains'; 'Introducing in a dream, his love at home, looking wistfully for the hero's return'; 'A sea beach, with rock wreck &c'; and 'A convivial meeting — an interior — old men babbling at the hero's return, &c'

61.

Henry Kendall, 'Orara' an illustrated poem, Sands & McDougall, Melbourne, [1881]

62.

Including J.R. Ashton, Malcolm Campbell, J.W. Carse, J.W. Curtis, Chester Earles, William Ford, John Gully, J.D. Richardson, Henry Rielly and J. Roberts



FIG. 13
But while the
English Autumn
filled her lap... 1881
wood-engraving,
printed in black ink,
from one block
Courtesy:
National Gallery
of Australia





Fig. 15
At Berwick 1882
From Drawing
Book of Australian
Landscape, Part 1,
Buildings &c
lithograph

FIG. 14
Drawing Book of
Australian Landscape,
Part 1, Buildings &e
[1882]
book of eight
lithographs
GAT. NO. 56

Teaching and the Australian landscape drawing books
The publication of *Orara* marked the end of a decade in which Elizabeth successfully combined family and work life to forge a place for herself in Melbourne's art world. In the 1880s she consolidated that position.

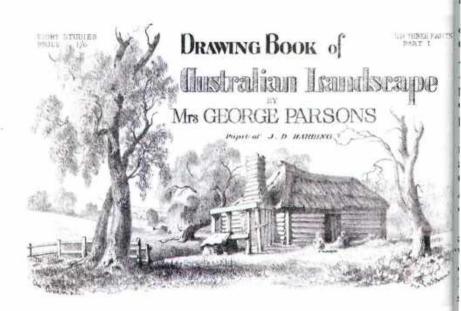
Although little is known of her activities as an art teacher, or of the students she taught, Elizabeth was now a popular choice as teacher, particularly amongst young women who, through her example, aspired to a career in art. Such was the interest taken in her classes that Elizabeth, now more familiar with the process of producing illustrated books following her involvement with *Orara*, decided to publish her own drawing books.

In so doing, Elizabeth was following in the footsteps of many of Britain's leading drawing masters, including J.D. Harding, John Ruskin and William Pyne. Unlike their publications, however, Elizabeth was not providing step-by-step instructions and philosophical discursions on art and the function of art. The drawing books she had in mind were illustrative aids for those interested in or taking up the art of landscape drawing and painting.

Elizabeth planned a series of three books titled *Drawing book of Australian landscape*, each looking at the different elements used to construct a successful picturesque image. The first in the series, *Buildings*, & [CAT. NO. 56; FIG. 14], was printed in 1882 and contained eight lithographs based on sketches made in Berwick [FIG. 15], Lilydale, Maffra, Sandridge and Woodend. The buildings included cottages, dilapidated sheds, a building on a pier and the All Saints belfin built into a tree trunk. The second book, *Trees* [CAT. NO. 57], was printed in 1883 and contained seven lithographs of a variety of trees, including gums, wattles, ti tree and peppermint trees. No trace has been found of the third book, *Landscapes*. (6)

The publication of the two drawing books, retailing at one shilling sixpence, show that Elizabeth approached her role as art teacher in as professional a manner as she did her own art work. If her art lecture to the Australian Church Ladies' Reading Club around 1890 is any indication, her lessons were thorough and well-structured, closely examining all aspects of form and colour. As her teachers had taught her, every small detail needed to be learned and understood in order to construct a landscape, and only then could the artist hope to capture its essential nature:

The rules of art are few and simple, but Nature is subtle and so infinitely various, and her effects so beyond the power of memory, that the artist should have constant recourse to the ever-changing beauties.⁶⁴



The optimism of the eighties

The 1880s was the decade of the Melbourne land boom; property prices soared, the economy grew and an air of optimism pervaded the city. This was reflected in the Parsons household. By 1880 the family had moved to their new home in Charnwood Road in St Kilda, which they named St Ruan after the Cornish district where they had lived in 1869. George was home more often and following a new career path that would see him become a successful architect.

Sadly, Elizabeth's last child was stillborn in August of that year. The other Parsons children, however, were getting older, with George and Cecil now young adults. Indeed, Cecil was to head out to South Gippsland around this time as one of its first settlers. The construction of the Gippsland Railway from Oakleigh to Sale, with which his father was associated, opened up the possibility of settlement in Gippsland, one that the enterprising Cecil was ready to explore. The Parsons family had travelled with George to Cippsland in 1878 and 1879 while the railway works were still in progress, as evidenced by Elizabeth's sketches of the area in those years. They returned again in 1881 and 1882 when Elizabeth did some more drawing and painting. It was during one of these visits that Elizabeth painted the tranquil waters of the North arm, Gippsland Lakes [CAT. NO. 15; FIG. 16]

During the 8os Elizabeth continued to paint prolifically and contribute to a variety of exhibitions. She was still sending paintings to the annual Victorian Academy of Art exhibitions. From at least 1882, these included a black and white component, initiated in response to the increasing popularity of the print medium as well as more traditional pencil and wash drawings. Elizabeth had two works in the 1882 show, including the highly finished wash drawing, A deserted gully, Spring Creek, near Daylesford [CAT. NO. 23; FIG. 17]. This ambitious landscape perfectly demonstrates Elizabeth's exquisite control in the representation of light and shade within the landscape. Layers of wash from dark to light were built up, finished with dashes of white highlight to give the impression of light streaming into the valley. The composition is tightly structured, with a controlled use of diagonals and curves to draw the eye into the middle distance. It is a highly accomplished work that evidently proved popular, as Elizabeth painted another version in watercolour [CAT. NO. 34]. It was common practice and made commercial sense for artists to make copies of images that appealed to the public. Other known paintings that Elizabeth copied included The Thames at Isleworth, At Hambledon, Surrey and St Mawgan, Cornwall.

As well as the Victorian Academy of Art exhibitions, Elizabeth exhibited in the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition and with the Sydney Art Society from its inaugural exhibition in that same year.

In the 1884 Sydney Art Society exhibition Elizabeth included several paintings of New Zealand scenery following a visit with her daughter Adeline to her uncle, George Warren, in Port Chalmers. One of these, Stormy weather around Mount Alfred, Lake Wakatipu, New Zealand - probably the watercolour, Mount Alfred, Head of Lake Wakatipu, New Zealand [CAT. NO. 33; FIG. 18] included in the present exhibition — was acknowledged as being 'appropriately sombre in its colouring and admirably drawn' by the Sydney Morning Herald.16 This and other paintings of the mountainous districts in New Zealand, such as Mitre Peak [CAT. NO. 32] and the North East Valley, Dunedin, by evening star [CAT. NO. 30; FIG. 19], have a sublime quality that reflects the awe with which Elizabeth gazed at these magnificent landscapes. Like her earlier paintings in Melbourne of the Carlton Gardens and Melbourne University, the scenery was quite unfamiliar. Attention was placed more on capturing the general view rather than focusing on one particular corner to give it an intimate, picturesque quality.

Elizabeth's work was also included in the Victorian Jubilee Exhibition of 1884 and the 1885 Bendigo Juvenile Exhibition in which she won a First Award in the Watercolour Landscape* section. Under the auspices of the Victorian Academy of Art ten works by Elizabeth were sent to the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition. Elizabeth was probably one of several artists who had previously opened their studios to the public for 'the inspection of paintings intended to be forwarded

To help offset the cost of printing, advertising space was provided on the back cover. Amongst those who advertised were J. & T. Thallon, carvers and gilders, C.J. Fox, mountcutter and T. Batten, engraver, printer and lithographer

Elizabeth Parsons, Art, op cit.

Adeline Parsons, History of the Warrens and Keens, op. cit. George Warren (1806-93) migrated with his young family to New Zealand aboard The Mary, arriving at Otago, Dunedin, on 11 April 1849. He established a farming property, Warrington, which he later sold. When Elizabeth and Adeline visited him, he was living in a 'neat little cottage' in Port Chalmers

Sydney Morning Herald, 11 April 1885, p.9, c.4



FIG. 16 North arm, Gippsland Lakes c.1879 watercolour CAT. NO. 15







FIG. 18 Mount Alfred, Head of Lake Wakatipu, New Zealand 1884 watercolour GAT. NO. 33



North East Valley, Dunedin, New Zealand, by evening star. c.1884 wash

home to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition' and may also have had some of these works in an earlier display at the Exhibition Buildings during the previous year. Elizabeth's works were well received in London. Respected art critic, R.A.M. Stevenson (1847—1900) identified her paintings in his review of the exhibition for the *Magazine of Art*. Her oil painting of *Red Bluff [St Kilda]* was one of three Australian paintings from the exhibition reproduced in the *Magazine*. Stevenson noted that it was 'another work inspired by study of good schools. It is composed and arranged with taste and method, and the colour is laid on in good broad washes. He also observed that Elizabeth's paintings, as well as those of John Ford Paterson and John Mather, represented 'the modern French departure, which has introduced a broad and atmospheric treatment of nature into the art of almost every country in the world."

The new generation of artists and Australian impressionism

R.A.M. Stevenson was referring to the growing influence that Barbizon painters, such as Jean Millet and Jules Bastien-Lepage, were having on the art of a new generation of artists yearning to break away from the stylistic conventions of the past. By the 1880s artists' colonies were appearing not only in Brittany but also in St Ives and Newlyn in Cornwall, England and in Glasgow in Scotland.

Melbourne, too, saw the formation of artists' camps, the most notable being those initiated by Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin at Box Hill and at Heidelberg. Here, and in coastal locations such as Mentone and Beaumauris, these artists and their followers spent hours painting in the open air, exploring new techniques and effects to capture the light and atmosphere of the Australian bush and sea.

Yet it was not only from France that they drew their inspiration. American impressionist, J.M. Whistler, was another influence, as was leading Melbourne artist Louis Buvelot (1814—88), whose broadly-painted, familiar, intimate landscapes appeared in strong contrast to the minute, detailed panoramic works by artists such as Eugéne von Guerard. Such was the impact that Buvelot's paintings and his teachings had on the members of the Heidelberg School that he was later acknowledged by them as the father of landscape painting.

There were, however, other artists, including Elizabeth, who travelled to picturesque sites and rendered their works with a sense of intimacy prized by the emerging artists. From the Parsons' Berwick home popular locations such as Harkaway and Koo-wee-rup were easily accessed. She had visited Heidelberg, Woodend, Mt Macedon and other rural areas since the 1870s, painting and sketching landscapes that reflected her training and long-held interest in capturing the various qualities of light seen under cloudy skies, on clear, sun-lit days or during the twilight hours. Elizabeth was already noted for her broad, impressionist brush-strokes, a technique that the new generation of artists developed and mad their own. Indeed, in the 1881 Art Society of New South Wales Exhibition, her Sketch at Lorne was referred to as 'a rough blot — a blot which is very telling whe it is looked at from a little distance.'30 Her painting of North arm, Gippsland Lakes [CAT. NO. 15; FIG. 16] also has a gentle, lyrical quality in its stillness that anticipate the poetic tendency of Melbourne landscape painting.⁷¹ While Buvelot may have been the most prominent local influence on the 'new' Australian art, there were other plein air artists such as Elizabeth Parsons whose works were as familiar but who, working on a less grand scale, attracted less attention.

Although Elizabeth was acquainted with many of the Heidelberg artists social or professionally, it is not known whether Elizabeth visited any of the artists' camps. Nor is it known whether she had any direct influence on their art. Elizabeth was, however, inspired by the work produced by the Heidelberg School and this is reflected in a number of her paintings. Watercolours such as Yarra River landscape c.1885 [CAT. NO. 36; FIG. 20] and Mentone Bay c.1896 [CAT. NO. 53; FIG. 21] are more high-keyed and loosely painted than many of her other works. The long, low compositions of sketches such as Landscape with mountain



vange c.1891 [CAT. NO. 49; FIG. 22] and Landscape with church 1891 [CAT. NO. 48] were painted after the notorious 9 x 5" exhibition held by artists including Conder, McCubbin, Roberts, and Streeton. Painted on small, wide surfaces such as cigar boxes, the intimate format of the works impressed Elizabeth, who experimented with similar shapes.

Elizabeth also made some figurative paintings, including two watercolours depicting a family picking hops at Myrtleford [CAT. NOS. 24 & 25; FIGS. 23 & 24]. Although Elizabeth had occasionally sketched figurative subjects, they were usually nformal full-length portraits. The figures seen in most of her works, usually women and children, were small and distant; they added a touch of domesticity to the scene, but remained incidental. The figures in *Hop picking at Myrtleford* tave more presence and reflected the growing interest in depicting people in work in the Australian landscape.

Many of Elizabeth's more impressionistic works have an air of experimentation about them. She did not radically depart from her own style, but was interested in developing her skills and techniques to keep pace with the new directions are as well as public taste, which grew to favour the paintings of the Australian impressionists. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth was able to adapt to the changing art scene.

This inevitably meant a drift away from the culture of art created by the Victorian Academy of Art. Elizabeth shared the concern of young artists it the preponderance of amateur art in the Academy's exhibitions, largely to the detriment of those who were looking at art as a serious, professional pursuit. In 1886, artists including Roberts, Streeton, Conder, John Mather and ohn Ford Paterson formed a new art society, the Australian Artists Association. Elizabeth became a founding member and contributed three watercolours to the Association's inaugural exhibition at Buxton's Gallery in September 1886. Interestingly, one was a view of the Thames while the other two were Victorian scenes: Red Bluff, St Kilda and Between sunshine and showers [Lilydale]. All received favourable comment in the press.

FIG. 20 Yarra River landscape c.1885 watercolour cat. No. 36

67.
 Once a month, 1 March 1886, p.264

 R.A.M. Stevenson, "Art in Australia", Mogazine of Art, London, 1886, p.399

69. ibid, p.399

Sydney Morning Herald, 5 October 1881,
 p.6, c.6

71.
Elizabeth Parsons, Art, op. cit. Elizabeth regarded the 'capacity of SEEING the beauty and the poetry in nature' as being a valuable gift [to the artist], and should be treasured and cultivated by all who possess it.'

FIG. 21 Mentone Bay c.1896 watercolour CAT. NO. 53





FIG. 22 Landscape with mountain range c.1891 watercolour cat. NO.49 In his review of the exhibition, James Smith commented:

It is interesting to note the general leaning of our young artists and art students towards the French methods of landscape painting; their avoidance of too much definition of form, and their disposition to secure striking effects by colour laid on in broad masses.

Elizabeth Parsons' paintings, whatever the subject, would not have looked ut of place even if, as it would appear, she was one of the few older established tists exhibiting.

Elizabeth again exhibited with the Association as well as with the Academy f Art the following year. While she may have been dismayed by the 'lamentable illures' of the Academy's exhibitions over recent years, 'b there was still some egree of loyalty and, while largely unsuccessful, the shows did provide some wel of exposure for her work. In 1888 the Victorian Academy of Art and the ustralian Artists Association merged to form the Victorian Artists Society. Itizabeth exhibited three works with the Society in that year. As well as showing our watercolours in the Victorian Loans Gallery at the 1888—89 Melbourne entennial International Exhibition, she was represented by two watercolours in the Victorian Artists Gallery, a section reserved for members of the society, the continued to exhibit with the Society until 1896, when she had just one oork included, Near Ferntree Gully.

he social clubs: the Buonarotti Club and Stray Leaves lizabeth's association with the breakaway artists' group demonstrated a desire keep in touch with new undercurrents in the Melbourne art scene. She chieved this not only through the formal art societies, but also through more ocial clubs such as the Buonarotti Club.

The Buonarotti Club was formed in 1883 by Cyrus Mason for those who esired 'something more than mere dilettante amusement' from the arts and ho were 'honestly anxious to succeed in their art.' Its purpose was to

advance and extend the appreciation of art in all its forms, and to give men of artistic, musical, or literary tastes, the opportunity of meeting together on the common ground of love of their work, and desire for its improvement and perfection. Members meet once a fortnight, when specimens of sketching, painting, engraving, and etching, are exhibited for comparison and suggestion, good vocal and instrumental music is rendered; and essays, poems and critiques are read, which are followed by keen discussion.

In spite of its serious aspirations, it was conceived as a social, semi-bohemian lub that alternated its meetings between the Coffee Palace, where women could tend, and different hotels, where the notorious 'Smoke Nights' were held, tended mainly by the men.

The majority of the club's members were 'young budding artists, mostly all athusiasm.' After the first year of its inception, a growing number of women ined the club, many either current or recently-graduated students from the National Gallery School, including Clara Southern and Jane Sutherland, member of the Heidelberg School. Alexander Colquhoun, John Mather, form Roberts, Tudor St George Tucker and Fred Williams were also amongst toose who enjoyed the convivial atmosphere of the club.

Elizabeth joined the Buonarotti Club in 1886 at the same time as J. Llewelyn nes, Aby Altson, Tom Roberts, Clara Southern, A.E. Oakley and J.J. Gibbes: the Committee having reported favourably of the qualifications of Mrs Parsons at all in the Artistic Section they were (after being individually put to the allot) unanimously elected Members. Elizabeth attended her first meeting February 1886, displaying a number of Tasmanian sketches. She continued is show her work at meetings throughout 1886 and 1887.

72.

Australian Artists' Association, Minutes of 14 October 1886 quoted in Christine Downer and Jennifer Phipps, Victorian vision: 1834 anwards: Images and records from the National Gallery of Victoria and the State Library of Victoria, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1985, p.46

73. Elizabeth Parsons, Letter to Victorian Academy of Art, 9 January 1883, State Library of Victoria, ms f893, Box 580/2(c)

74-Buonarotti Club, Minutes and papers 1883— 87, unpublished manuscript, State Library of Victoria, ms10977

75ibid.

76.
Edmund Gilks, An Antipodean club: an account of the Melbourne fine art club, called Buonarotti after Michel Angelo Buonarotti, unpublished manuscript, State Library of Victoria, ms10116

77-Buonarotti Club, op. cit., 23 January 1886



FIG. 23 Hop kiln at Myrtleford c.1883 watercolour CAT. NO. 24

FIG. 24 Hop picking at Myrtleford c.1883 watercolour CAT. NO. 25



Elizabeth found herself greatly stimulated by the social and intellectual atmosphere of the Buonarotti Club where she was surrounded by young artists eager to exchange ideas and philosophies about art. As a mature, established artist she was also greeted with a level of respect that must have been gratifying. Disappointed at the demise of the Club toward the end of 1887, Elizabeth started her own artistic and literary society shortly afterwards. Aptly named Stray Leaves', it was 'primarily designed to bring together and encourage young people interested in art.'28

Active around 1889 to 1892, Stray Leaves was a smaller, more intimate club han the Buonarotti and was usually held at Elizabeth's home, first at St Ruan and then, from 1890, the family's new home, Sah-Luma at 249 Carlisle Street n Balaclava. There is no clear identification of any of those who joined Stray Leaves. Contained in one of Elizabeth's sketchbooks are several small sketches by some members of the group. Unfortunately, the artists only initialled their pieces. It is, however, probable that two sketches signed 'CDR' and 'EMB' were made by Charles Douglas Richardson (1853-1932) and Emma Minnie Boyd, née a'Beckett (1858-1936). Elizabeth was now known to many younger artists and there are indications that she was well acquainted with Minnie Boyd, whose andscape paintings bear a stylistic similarity to those of Elizabeth.79 The a'Beckett family lived at The Grange in Harkaway, and led an active cultural and artistic existence that attracted many visiting artists to their doors. The Parsons, who were themselves socially active, spent a great deal of time at their home in neighbouring Berwick. Minnie Boyd had been exhibiting her work since 1875, often in company with Elizabeth and, by the mid 1880s, was also regarded as one of Victoria's pre-eminent artists." It is likely that both had formed a friendship and Elizabeth may well have become something of a mentor to the younger artist.

Retirement

Stray Leaves was formed at a time when Elizabeth had decided to retire from professional practice. From 1889, she no longer appears in the trade directories. Elizabeth may have been prompted into retirement by signs that the Melbourne land boom bubble was bursting. Land values were dropping rapidly following a long boom in the previous decade, and many of the city's wealthiest men lost thousands of pounds on their property investments. Banks were forced to close as customers hurried to withdraw their savings, justifiably concerned that their hard-earned cash had been lost on property. Perhaps the Parsons' own move to the Balaclava home in 1890 was prompted by the sudden decline in property values and the impact that the depressed economy had on George's work as an architect. In such a fearful atmosphere, there would have been little money to spare on art lessons for the city's aspiring artists.

Once the decision to retire had been made, Elizabeth sought to dispose of the collection of works she had amassed over twenty years of painting and drawing. While she had previously opened her studio to allow the public to view works painted for special occasions, her 1890 studio exhibition was more commercial in origin. She had hundreds of oils, watercolours and sketches, framed and unframed, that were no longer part of an active portfolio. She invited the public and media to view a selection of her work at Sah-Luma. Both the Age and the Sun sent representatives to review the display. While mainly descriptive, their comments acknowledged Elizabeth's skills: "The catalogue comprises no fewer than 90 works, many of them fresh, sparkling sketches, characterised by the lightness of touch and transparency of color that this medium demands." There were pictures of England and New Zealand as well as locations throughout Australia, the latter recognised as being 'eminently Australian in colour and form."

Despite the economic climate, Elizabeth may have achieved moderate success with the sale of works through the exhibition. In 1896, however, she made a more concerted effort to again dispose of ninety pictures, some held over from the 1890 sale. She held a brief preview at her home then forwarded them to the

Alexander Colquhoun, op. cit.

79.

My thanks to Jennifer Phipps, Curator of Australian Art (late Modernism),
National Gallery of Victoria, for alerting me to the possible connection between Elizabeth Parsons and Emma Minnie Boyd

Art Union of Victoria, Annual Report 1883, op. cit., p.6: 'The list of painters whose original works (or copies of them) have reached the public through the Art Union is one to which the Council can point with some pride, embracing, as it does, those of Mr Folingsby, M. Buvelot, Chester Earles, H.J. Johnstone, Gully, Ford, Curtis, J.R. Ashton, Murcott, E. A'Beckett [later Mrs Emma Minnie Boyd], Mrs Parsons, Piguenit, Mather, Hoyte, Thos Wright, and many others'

81. The Age, July 1890 clipping in Sketchbook II

The Sun, 17 July 1890 clipping in Sketchbook II



Fig. 25 Fern Tree Gully 1896 watercolour CAT. NO. 52

VIG. 26 Cloyne, St Kilda 1894 watercolour GAT. NO. 50



auction house, Gemmell, Tuckett & Co. in Collins Street, trusting that a more centralised, formal establishment would ensure a greater number of sales. Again, she was only moderately successful, and many works were returned to Elizabeth, remaining in the hands of her descendants and re-appearing in posthumous exhibitions and art auctions.

During this time, however, Elizabeth did continue to paint and exhibit, although without the intensity of previous years. She contributed twelve oils and watercolours to the 1894 New Melbourne Art Club. Most of the works, however, were from her existing collection and included pieces painted some two decades previously, such as *Melbourne University in 1871* and *Malvern in 1876*. She did send a new painting to the 1896 Victorian Artists Society exhibition — *Near Fern Tree Gully*, a watercolour that may be the *Fern Tree Gully* included in this exhibition [CAT. NO. 52, FIG. 25].

Epilogue

By the end of 1896, Elizabeth was beginning to show signs of a cancer-related illness. After eight months of suffering with breast cancer, which had spread to her vertebra, she died in her new home in Armadale on 28 May 1897,

at the age of 65.

Elizabeth left behind a large body of work that was handed down through the family. The paintings and drawings selected from family as well as public collections are testament to the prodigious talent of this dedicated artist. Her subject matter was extensive. The majority of it consisted of landscapes ranging from coastal scenery to inland bush and from flat plains to mountainous regions. Another favourite subject was that of buildings, and Elizabeth's works often depicted abandoned sheds, bush farms, country churches and opulent mansions—one of which was John Madden's substantial St Kilda residence, *Cloyne* 1894 [GAT. NO. 50; FIG. 27]. Not as frequently tackled by Elizabeth were still life paintings, figure paintings, interiors and portraiture. Her sketchbooks contain sketches covering these subjects, but they were areas that Elizabeth preferred to work in for her own interest and amusement.

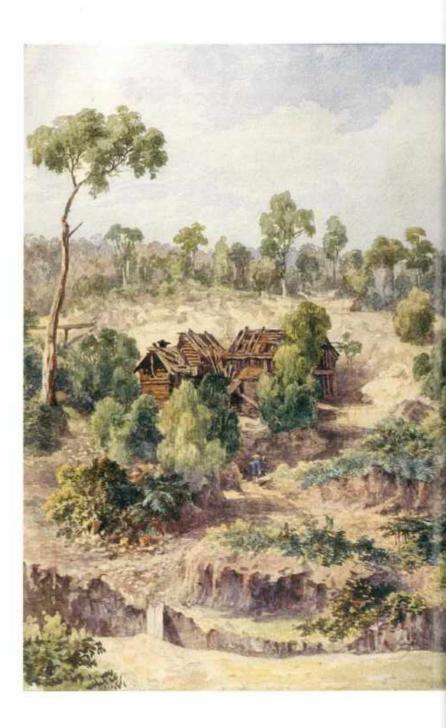
Following Elizabeth's death and that of George in 1920, Elizabeth's paintings and drawings were not put away and forgotten. Instead, they were periodically brought out into the public through a variety of exhibitions, largely through the efforts of her daughter, Adeline. In March 1920 a retrospective exhibition, complete with catalogue, was held at the Decoration Galleries at 28g Collins Street, Melbourne. The Exhibition of historical water color drawings of early Melbourne, etc by the late Elizabeth Parsons included 63 works that were for sale and was held for a period of five days. It received good press coverage that re-ignited interest in Elizabeth and her art:

Mrs. Parsons occupied a prominent place in Victorian Art during the seventies and eighties and her work was accepted not merely as that of a talented woman painter but as an equal of the leading professional Artists of her time and environment. Her manner of using watercolour was direct and forceful, free from trick or manipulation of any kind, and generally characterised by a uniform sincerity of purpose ... they form collectively or individually, an impressive record of the great changes which have taken place in Melbourne and its environs during the past forty years."

In 1932, Alexander Colquhoun, art critic for the Age and a fellow member of the Buonarotti Club, wrote on Elizabeth Parsons in his series 'Australian artists of the past.' Colquhoun showed enormous admiration for Elizabeth's accomplishments at a time when 'The woman who then sought to make art her vocation in life had many things to reckon with and overcome before attaining even a moderate degree of success, and only one of these was a popular conviction that her only credible sphere of action was in that shrine of early

83.
Argus, July 1896 clippings in Sketchbook II

7. The Herald, 15 March 1920



Chinaman's hut, Daylesford c.1880 watercolour Collection: Parsons family GAT. NO. 17



Victorian smugness — "the home." Solquhoun acknowledged Elizabeth's professionalism in her art and teaching that extended not only to compositional principles but also to the materials used:

One of her scrupulosities — which is worthy of imitation — was a rigid taboo of all impermanent colors, however brilliant, and as a result pictures painted by her party of fifty years ago still retain their freshness of yesterday, which is a matter for consideration by young artists with a possible fifty years of life still before them.⁵⁶

The interest generated by Colquhoun's article led to Elizabeth's inclusion in the Exhibition of oils and water-colours by leading Australian artists at the Sedon Galleries in August 1933. The Herald reviewer, Blamire Young, was particularly taken with Elizabeth's drawing books, by then deemed quite rare. The Sedon Galleries again included her work in an exhibition the following year, showing seventeen landscape drawings that were deemed 'of special interest as belonging to a by-gone period in Australian art, [and] show good observation and a sense of beauty.

In 1946, while residing in Castlemaine, Adeline successfully approached the Castlemaine Art Gallery to hold an exhibition of Elizabeth's work. This took place in October and the public was made aware of the artist 'whose enterprise, courage and sympathy greatly stimulated the art life of her period.' Castlemaine Art Gallery hosted another exhibition of Elizabeth's paintings in October 1975, this time with the assistance of her grandson, Arthur Parsons, who had inherited the bulk of her collection.

The present exhibition once again draws attention to the artistic and personal achievements of Elizabeth Parsons. Through persistence and hard work Elizabeth reached a prominent position in the Victorian art world and was an inspiration to many around her who aspired to do the same. The exhibition is an acknowledgement and a memorial to the life and work of Elizabeth Parsons.

FIG. 28 Near Briagalong 1879 watercolour CAT. NO. 14

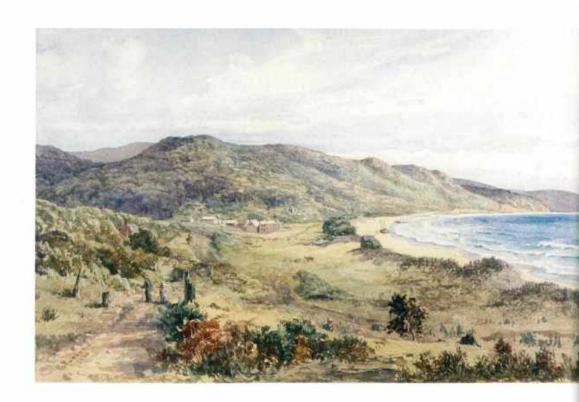
Alexander Colquhoun, op. cit.

86. ibid.

87. Blamire Young, 'Etchings and drawings. Three Christmas exhibitions — veteran painter,' *The Herald*, 1933, clipping in Sketchbook II

88. The Age, 1934 clipping in Sketchbook II

09. Castlemaine Mail, 12 October 1946



View across Loutit Bay 1880 watercolour CAT, NO. 18

FIG. 30 Schnapper Point, Mornington c.1880 watercolour CAT. NO. 19

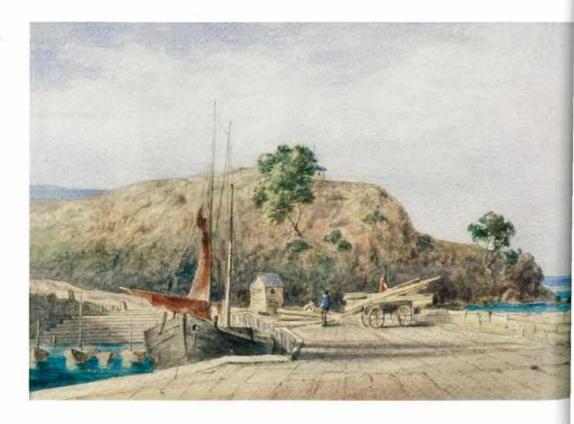






FIG. 31 Country house 1881 watercolour CAT. NO. 20



FIG. 32 Coastal mansion c.1881 watercolour CAT. NO. 21

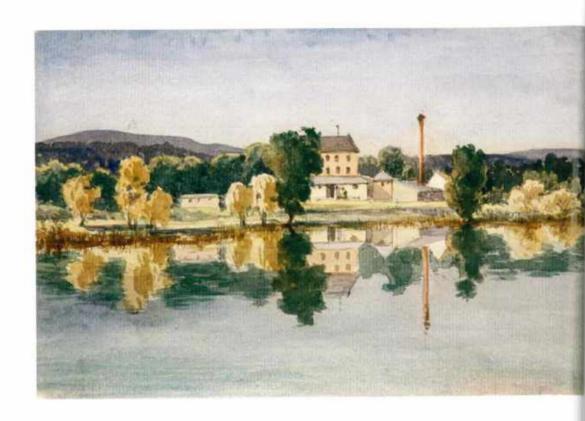


FIG. 33 Chiltern c.1884 watercolour on board CAT. NO. 27

FIG. 34 Mordialloc 1884 watercolour CAT. NO. 28





FIG. 35 Rickett's Point 1884 watercolour GAT. NO. 29



FIG. 36 River bank c.1885 watercolour CAT. NO. 37

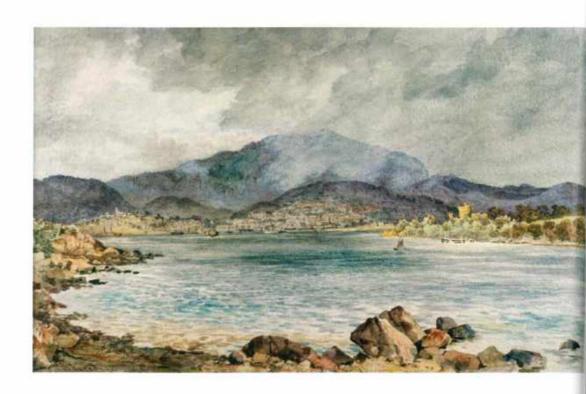
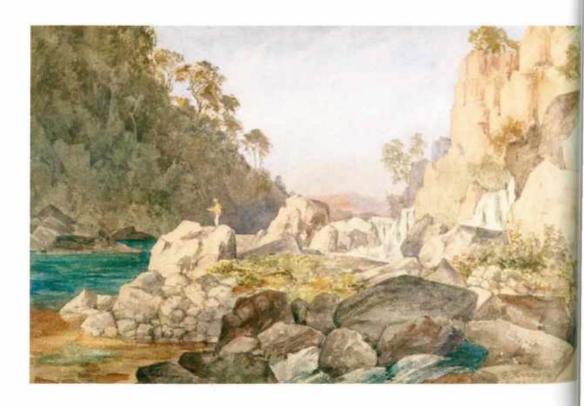
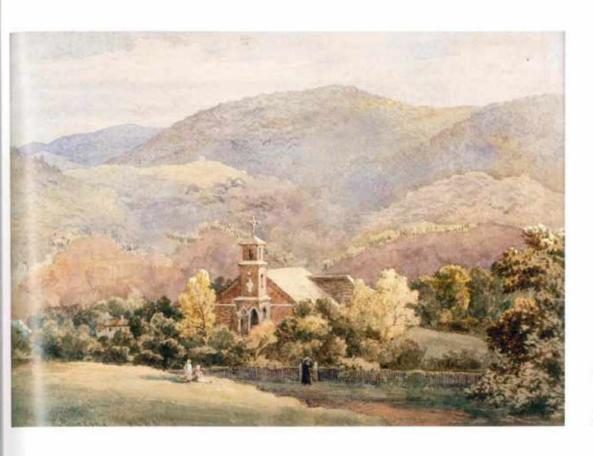


FIG. 37 Montagu Bay, Hobart 1887 watercolour GAT. NO. 41







The country church 1888 watercolour CAT. NO. 45



FIG. 40
Wind farm at
Western Port Bay
c.1896
watercolour
GAT. NO. 54

CATALOGUE

All works are by Elizabeth Pursons unless otherwise stated. All measurements are sight measurements unless otherwise stared.

CAE, NO. 1

The Thomes of Ideworth, c. (86)

watercolour

post x 67.6 cm

Signed J.c., paint "E Parsons". Not daired.

Collection: Parsons family

CAL NO. 2
Althod bridge over the Thames 1865
pericil
2445 N 35 5 000
Signed and dated Le, brown paint
"FW/1865"
Collection: Parsons Locally

CAT. NO. 3 At Hambledon, Nursey 1856 watercolour 80 5 X 28.5 cm Signed and dated LL, brown paint "F Warren/1866" Collection: Parsons landy

CAT, No. 4 Cloudly, Decor 1, 1867 watercolour 2005 X 90.2 cm Signed Lt., paint "E Passons". Not dated Collection: Parsons family

CAY, NO 5 Clearly c 0867 pencil 24-7 8 9,4 (100) Not signed. Not dated Inscribed I.e. pencil "Clovejly" Collection: Parsons Lamik

CAL NO. 6
The old nontermill. Commult. (2008)
watercolour
gru x 43.3 cm
Signed and dated Lr., brown paint
"E Parsons /1868"
Collection: Parsons family

(iv), 80, 7 St Mangan, Cormwill, 1868 watercofour 30,0 x 44,0 cm Signed and dated l.r., black paint "F Parsons" 1868"; signed l.l., brown paint "E Parsons" Collection: Estate of George Parsons CAT. NO. S

Study of trees 11.1869
pentil
sheet 25.2 x 40.7 cm
Signed I.L. brown ink "Mis Ceo Parsons".
Not dated
Collection: Parsons family

GAT. No. 11

Corline Gentens in 1871 (871)
pencil and wash
sheet 31 4 × 48.7 cm
Signed and dated LL, black paint
"E Parsons/1871"
Inscribed on original backing, pencil
"[Carlton Cardens in 1871 — crossed throught]/Exhibition Gardens in (871)"
Collection: Passons family

CAT. NO. 10 The first St Kilda fette and Kenny's Bathing Ship v. 1875 off on canvas gli.o x film cm Not signed. Not dated Post Phillip City Collection

CAT. NO. 11
A country lane, Woodend v.1875
watercolour
10.9 X v4.0 cm
Not signed. Not third
Collection: Parsons family

CAT. 80: 12
Wilson lane, Barwich C.1876
oil on capyas
17.1 X 27.2 cm
Not signed. Not dated
Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 13 Our house at Bernach 11.876 watercolour sheet 10.2 X 22.0 cm Not signed. Not dated Inscribed LL, pencil "our bouse at Berwick" Collection, Parsons family

CAT 80 1.]
Near Briagalong 4879
watercolour
31.0 x 40.6 cm
Signed and dated 12., brown paint
TE Parsons (879)
Collection: Parsons family

cert. No. 15 North arm, Gippsland Laker c. 1879 watercolour 17/2 N 24/2 CB Signed Le, blue paint "EP". Not dated

(affection: Parsons family

ea), No. 16 Owns was c.1879 watercolous 21.8 x 32.3 cm Not signed. Not dated Collection: Parsons Confly

cat. No. 17 Chineman's han, Daylesford | c.1886 nate: colour photograph cm Not again. Not dated Collection: Parsons family

CALLY OF US Process mass Loudit Buy (1886) water without 30.5 %, 47.7 cm Signed and dated LL, brown paint "E Process/(1886)" Coffee to on Parsons family

CM, No. 19 Schmitzer Point, Mornington C.1880 Batercolom 210 No. 1,100 cm Not sign ad. Not dated Collection: Parsons lamily

Cat. Not 20
Country tomor (88)
watercolout
2nd A page (10)
Signed and dated LL, green paint
The Page (18) (188)
Private officerion

Constal sections (188)

Satercolour

Biy x 25 bean

Not signed. Not dated

Collection Parsons family

CAT. NO 185

(1) 1 (1)

CAT. NO. 22

Bush Jane 1884
vertercolour
gt.o X (6.5 cm
Signed and dated La, brown paint
'Parsons,' (882)
Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 23
A deserted guily. Spring Creek,
none Dayboford. 1882
supia with white highlight
sheet gg.8 x pole cm.
Signed and dated lin, pencil *E. Parsons/
1882*. Inscribed reverse backing a.L.
brown ink "A descreed Gully/ Spring Creek/
nr Daylesford"; reverse backing a.c.,
brown ink "By "Worten"
Collection: Parsons family

GAL, NO. 24 Hop hila at Myrticleric C.1883 water colour 15.1 X 23.5 cm Not signed. Not dated Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 25 Hop picking of Myrtleford, 0.1883 water-culous 20.0 × 35.0 cm Signed Lt., howen paint, "E Paryons". Not detect Collection, Paysons family

CAT NO. 26 In the Guidens, Government House of 1889 water older Sheet (4.9 x 28.0 cm Not signed. Not clated Inscribed reverse mr., pencil "In the Gardens/ Covernment House" Collection: Parsons family

CAL NO. 27 Chillen C. 188.4 watercolour on boogd Sheet (5.1 X 22.9 cm Not signed. Not dated Inscribed reverse Le., pericil "Chiltere" Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 28

Mordiallo: 1584
WaterColout
22.2 X 33.2 cm
Signed and dated LE, brown paint
TF Parsons/1884
Collection: Parsons jamily

CAT. NO. 29

Rais II's Point (188.4)
watercolour
22.0 x 33.0 cm
Signed and dated LL, paint
Tt. Passons (188.4)
Collection: Parsons family

CAT. No. 30
North Fast Voltoy, Dunwith: New Zealand, hysoeneog star, c.(884) wash shoet 32.8 x 49.3 cm; image 25.6 x 38.4 cm; Norsignest, Nor dated Inscribed reverse backing u.c., pench "North Fast Vailley: Dunedin/ New Zealand/ By Exening Star"

CAT. 80. 3)
Port Chalmes, Dimedia 1884
watercolour
20.8 × 3) 7 cm
Signed and dated lin, brown point
"F. Parsons 1884"
Collection: Parsons family

Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 32 Mitte Peak. New Zealand. (SS.) watercolour. 46,6 x 3) o rm. Signed and dated LL, paint "EP 4884". Collection: Estate of George Parsons.

ONC. 80: 33

Mount Affred, Head of Lake Waharipa,
New Zealand (884
watercolour)
31.1 X 48.2 cm
Signed and dated Lt., pairs,
Pr. Parsons: (884)
Collection: Parsons family

CAT. NO. 34 Spring Gully, Digitesford (1883) server colour 14.2 x 68.0 cm Signed and duted i.r., brown point "F Parsons" (1885)" Collection, Victorian Artists Society Citr of Mr and Mrs Ocorge Parsons, 1980

CAT. NO. 35
By the rivid: (885)
waterrolous
25.7 N 35.3 CM
Signed and dated LL brown paint
"F. Parsons." (885)
Ladle thor: Estate of George Patsons

CAT. NO. 36
Yang River landscape (1.1885)
watercolour
20.1 K 31.4 CO
Signed Lr. brown paint "F Persons".
Not dated
Collection: Parsons landy

CAC NO. 87 River brack C.1865 watercolour 22.0 N 3475 cm Not signed. Not dated Collection: Patsons family

CX1, 80-38

Study of trees c 1885;
water-colour on paper on board
sheet (6.2 × 24.3 cm
Signed reverse backing c., pencil "F. Parsons" Collection: Parsons bandly

CVE. NO. 399
The Chairs River, man Harmbolls,
Mt Featherup in the distance C.(885)
water Coloni
2007 N. 33.7 CM
Not signed. Not dated
Collection: Parsons family

CXI, NO. 40
Hillside have c (88%)
watervalour
24.4 % 95.8 cm
Not signed. Not dated
Collection: Parsons family

CAL No. 41

Montage Roy, Hobari (887)

watervolour

91.5 x 48.8 (m)

Signed and dated M., Intown point

"E Parsons, 5887"

Collection: Parsons family

The Street of the same

CAU NO. 42
The Garge, Laurienton C.1887
statemedour
3230 N.4905 CD
Signed Li., point "F Paisons", Not dated
Collection: Estate of George Paisons

CAL NO. 45 See share 1888 watervolout 170 N 24.5 CO Signed and dated by Jacown paint "at 88" Collection: Estate of George Parsons CVI, 80, 44 Ween Fallock 1888 wherealour 4 (8 × 68)2 cm

Signed and tlated his brown point

*F Paisons / (888)

Collection: Parsons fautily

.0.V., NO. 45 The common st

The country clouds 3888 we revolved

22.7 X 32.2 Cm

Signed and dated LL brown point

E Parsons (888)

Lobection: Parsons family

000, 800, p6 Endocatage (888) gat po Boott 17.5 a 2.1-5 cm

Signs d and thired Lr., brosus paint 119.887

Collection: Estate of Recorge Paisons

ayt. NO. 45 Coconi varia (c.1890) waterrolean 5,6 x (6.2 cm Not segred. Not threed Coth (ion) Parsons family

GC, 50, 48

Landsonprovith church 1891

yaterestein gyg x −5 s cm

Signers and tlated for brown paint

"E Par ones qu"

Collections Parsons bundle

CAR NO EU

Tandy see with mountain range (380)

j**vater**osimer Gjøg vigler can

Not signed. Not cated

Collection Passons family

ÇAT. NO. gar

†**G**ogae ≥i Kjida (1894

jagiercology Pikō X (. . a) (a)

Signed and thated Lr., brown paint

Parsers of

Billection Issale of George Parsons

Sak No. ... Sak shew (Son Marrock) in Sah X no. 1 con

Spect and dailed LL green paint

Private Collection

6Ar. 80. 52

hera The Gully (1895) watercolour

249 X 17.0 (m.

Signed and dated Le. brown paint

"F Paisons/78pG"

Collection: Paysons family

CAP, NO. 53.

Mentione Bay CARGE

watecodour

 $11.2 \ \mathrm{X} \ \mathrm{M}.7 \ \mathrm{cm}$

Signed I.I. Dine paint "E.Phosons". Not dated

Collection: Passons family

CAT, NO. 54.

Wind town at Wastern Pari Bay, c. (Soft

waterculour
22.8 × 33.1 cm
Not signed. Not dated
Collection: Passons family

tisti 80. 33 Beaumaris (896 watercolon)

18.8 X 32.2 cm

Signed and dated by, blue point "EP-96"

Collection: Parsons family

CAL NO. 55

Drawing Book of Australian Landscope,

Fart 1, Bullings & [1882] book of eight fithographs Collection: Parsons landy

CAT. NO. 57

Drawing Book of Australian Landscope,

Prot 2, Tives [1889] book of seven liftingraphs Collection: Parsons family

c.ct. 80, 58

Transhechhoch: c1858—1856 from brooks containing watervolous; drawlogs, prints, photographs, curtoons and provipages cuttings Private cellection

CAT NO. 59

EARDING, james D. 1797 -- (863)

Tenants on Day

23th edn. W Kens & Co. London. [aid.]

breik

Collection: Architecture Library:

The University of Melbourne

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Veronica Filmer EXHIBITION CURATOR

Veronica Filmer is Registrar at the Geelong Gallery. She is a graduate of the University of Melbourne and has curated a number of exhibitions for the Geelong Gallery including Making their mark: colonial artists of the Western District (1996) and Travels with Charles Travers Mackin (2002).

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