

NOT THE LAST OF ENGLAND:  
THOMAS WOOLNER'S ANTIPODEAN ODYSSEY

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That night there was “a gorgeous lightning storm, thunder rolled round the night in hard, metallic crashes and rain fell and cooled the air.” Sparse raindrops caught in the lantern light shone like white streaks. Beyond the campsite, undeviating blackness stretched away, the surrounding forest eerily illuminated only by the waxing moon and the flickers of lightening. Above the sound of the rain, the echolocation calls of unseen Mastiff bats. Seeing his own mortality writ large upon the landscape of this wild, unfamiliar land, a young Englishman, Thomas Woolner, was momentarily overcome with melancholy. Writing the following night in his journal he continued: “Sometimes the thought comes in me like a death-chill, that I shall never see England again” (Woolner 26). But with his first foray into the Australian countryside drawing to its conclusion, he could not reflect that this melancholia had been all pervasive. Nor had it been bound up with his experience of the countryside itself.

The seat of Woolner's despair that night lay not solely in a fear of death in a foreign country, but more so in the prospect of not being able to return to England. This Australian landscape, when it was not threatening to devour him whole, threatened instead to seduce him or somehow hold him captive, perhaps with its beauty. Within the space of weeks he had readily grown accustomed to, and had perhaps even become fond of, many of the landscapes he had encountered, despite their apparent foreignness. It was only natural that when Woolner referred to the landscapes around him his descriptive powers would be shaped by the discourses of the day. Yet Woolner's meditations on place were ultimately tempered by his own experiences. Thus Thomas Woolner's response to the landscape of northeast Victoria, and his place in it, was ambiguous: complex, contradictory, and provocative.

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