

Dutch immigrants in Australia

Two commemorative medals¹

Geer Steyn

THIS CONCERNS the development of The Company Award, two medals dedicated to early Dutch emigration to Queensland, Australia: *Cattle Creek* and *The New Generation*.

First of all, though, some general statements about my beliefs and my work. A medal is the result of visual thinking. A medal is a homeless medium bravely looking for its own definition. A medal is a mentality, a nearly Darwinian voyage. The process of medal-making evokes one question: what makes form into a medal? My work is created directly in clay. It is sculptural, which means the right material must be in the right place. It is formed by hand and coloured by shoe polish.

THE EMIGRANTS

Around 1910, a group of young Dutch people born in the late nineteenth century began to hold meetings in the outer Amsterdam working-class area of Buiksloot, at which they discussed the possibilities of migration to Australia. They all had personal histories of hardship: meagre diets and premature family deaths through tuberculosis contracted from overcrowded, damp living conditions. Their families had moved from rural areas into the city as a result of economic depression in the agricultural sector. There they were caught up in the industrial unrest of the cities and high levels of unemployment.

This particular young group were committed socialists. They named themselves symbolically in English 'The Company' in preparation for a new life in British Australia. Many were under thirty, politically aware and with an adventurous attitude towards migration, but they were mostly ignorant of farming. Between 1912 and 1920, about eighty individuals, in a kind of chain organised by The Company, migrated to Queensland. They chose to settle in a semi-urban area around Brisbane and in the remote wilderness of Cattle Creek, four hundred miles north-west of Brisbane.

Their history has been written by my second cousin Diane Gabb,² and it was this that inspired

me to make the two medals – I would like to thank her very much for that. Each voyage took about eight weeks, during which men and women were segregated into separate third-class communal cabins. As it was 1914, there was considerable tension between the German and Dutch travellers in their shared cabins. The sudden declaration of war prohibited the ship from allowing passengers to go ashore at any foreign ports, and few fresh provisions were available during the voyage. Children died from contaminated ship's food.

Finally, they arrived in Australia and were united with the other members of the group. The more vulnerable people, mentally and physically, would decide to settle around Brisbane, whilst the more able and energetic would continue their travels over the four hundred miles into a remote and undeveloped country, where they planned to create a communal farm on uncleared land. From the last railway station they had to walk for seventy miles.

THE MEDALS

The starting point for *The New Generation* was a photograph of a family group taken on a Sunday morning in Brisbane (fig. 1). The photograph is serene, but the composition is too complex for a medal; too many figures in the shadow of a dark architecture. I had to reduce and simplify it in order to find my own artistic vision. Moreover, I wanted to avoid a straightforward reproduction of the photograph. How do you transform information into a medal? After a number of trials (fig. 2), I decided to transform the architecture from that of a house into that of a landscape. I also removed the older people in the shadow to emphasise the younger ones in the spotlight. On the photograph, the children are staring directly into the camera. In the modelling into the clay, I changed this slightly. I chose literally the next step, the next movement. Now they were communicating with each other. A connection was born, and so was the title of this medal: *The New Generation* (fig. 3). The reverse carries

1. *Family group, Brisbane, c.1910. The older people on the veranda were all members of The Company.*



2. Steyn: *Model for the obverse of The New Generation, 2016, clay, 80mm.*



3. Steyn: *The New Generation*, 2016, clay, 80mm.



4. *A settler in Australia*, c.1910.

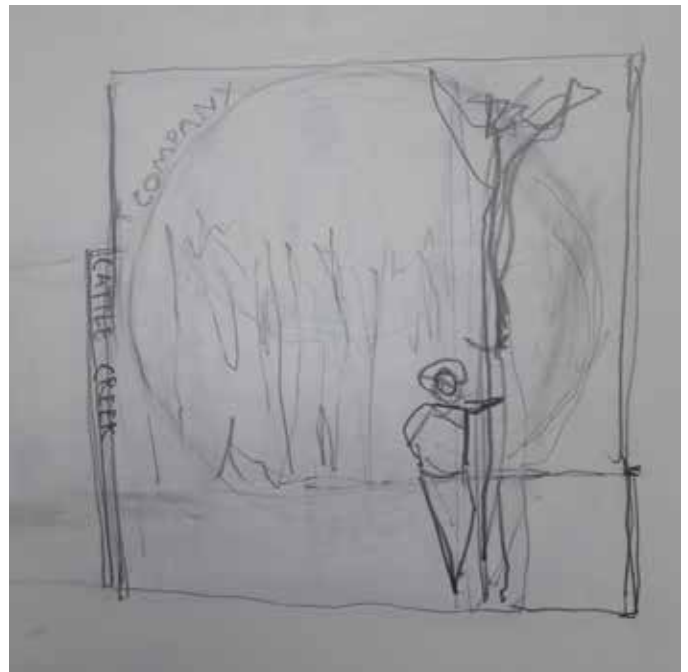
an echo of the map of Australia, with the very substantial stamp of The Company imprinted over the location of Brisbane.

The Company's intention to settle in the area of Cattle Creek was decided upon by selecting the land from a map; they had never seen it before. They were able to lease the land on condition that they eradicated the prickly pears, a weed that is extremely difficult to destroy. At that time, four hundred thousand hectares were covered by this cactus plant. A photograph shows an exhausted settler in a forest, leaning toward a cactus tree (fig. 4). This was the inspiration for my second medal, the *Cattle Creek* or

Prickly Pears medal (fig. 5). I made a drawing (fig. 6) and discovered an unexpected religious association: the human figure standing in the wilderness has been changed into an exhausted saint, leaning against a cross with a halo as a hat.

The obverse of the medal shows a human being as an integral part of the wilderness, surrounded by the threat of the prickly pears. The hat, tilted backwards, merges into the expression of a halo. Three clay sketches show the development of my ideas: text combined with imagery suggestive of wilderness (fig. 7); a figure as an entity within nature (fig. 8); and a

5. Steyn: *Cattle Creek*,
2016, clay, 85mm.



6. Steyn: *Sketch for the
obverse of Cattle Creek*,
2016, graphite, 75 x 75mm.



7. Steyn: *Model for the obverse of Cattle Creek*, 2016, clay, 75mm.



8. Steyn: *Model for the obverse of Cattle Creek*, 2016, clay, 75mm.

reverse inscription fitted into the rough contour of the medal (fig. 9). In the final version, of the figure in the wilderness, only some engraved lines give the illusion of a body, suggesting a kind of classical *contrapposto*.

A triangular thorn-like hole provides the entrance to the reverse. The strong impression of the stamp in the clay bears the text *DUTCH IMMIGRANTS 1908-1920*. The word *AVSTRALIA* is pushed against the irregular, rough edge of the medal. Having decided on this general format, I considered two other versions (figs 10, 11), but this was the most appropriate given the subject matter of the obverse.

THE MIGRATION OF THE MEDALS

The size of a medal is more than a question of inches. The medal is a gesture. To honour the efforts of the company members, it was obvious to me that I had not only to make the medals, but also to take them to Australia and donate them to a local museum near Cattle Creek. It proved to be a trip into the remote wilderness of more than three thousand miles. Our family expedition found the original wooden house built in the 1930s in Cattle Creek (fig. 12). Before then the immigrants were living in huts made of bark. Today it seems like a paradise, but it is still without a supply of water. The



9. Steyn: *Model for the reverse of Cattle Creek*, 2016, clay, 75mm.



10. Steyn: *Model for the reverse of Cattle Creek*, 2016, clay, 75mm.



11. Steyn: *Model for the reverse of Cattle Creek*, 2016, clay, 75mm.

12. *The 1930s house, Cattle Creek*, 2019.



prickly pears have reappeared everywhere.

The local museum in Munduberra did not specialise in art, nor was it interested. The medals would have been doomed to disappear. Therefore, I decided to abandon the idea of leaving the medals there. More attractive was the idea of creating an award – The Company Award – for those engaged in history, not only in the academic sphere but also through active participation. For the first year, therefore, I entrusted the medals in their specially designed box (fig. 13) to my cousin Keith Needham, a professor at an art academy in Sydney, who had organised all the practical details of the

expedition and been our companion during the three thousand miles. He is the first bearer of the award. After a year we have to find another candidate. I can imagine that it needs an institution, a university, to make the arrangements each year, to avoid it being too personal. I am open to ideas.

As mentioned at the beginning, making a medal involves an almost Darwinian process of selection. As a metaphor I will end with one example from my *Darwin* series, which comes in more than eighty variations: *The Beagle in Summertime* (fig. 14). ●



13. Steyn: *The Company Award*, 2019, bronze in a specially designed box, 200 x 200 x 15mm.



14. Steyn: *The Beagle in Summertime*, 2017, clay, 95mm.

NOTES

1. This is a version of a talk given at the BAMS conference in Rochester on 13 April 2019.
2. Diana Gabb, 'The promise of the Great South Land', in Nonja Peters, ed., *The Dutch down under 1606-2006* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006). Gabb is a psychologist and educator who has over thirty years' experience of teaching and counselling in cross-cultural settings, working with adolescent and adult immigrants in schools, universities, technical institutions and government agencies in both Australia and New Zealand.