

I know this is probably too late for the panel to consider but an important event, an exhibition opening at the National Gallery of Victoria this month, has a bearing on the wind farm question.

I had not made a submission previously as we are not directly affected by the windfarms - apart from being treated to the Waubra red light show pulsating on our northern horizon nightly from dusk to dawn. However at the Senate Hearing on Wind Farms at Ballarat University I realised then that the recent research I undertook at the University is perhaps relevant.

I am a landscape painter and I completed a Masters of Fine Art at the Arts Academy of Ballarat University last year. My research examined whether Western Victoria has a special “painted identity”, and investigated the effect of wind farms upon the landscape. My thesis, which included an exhibition showing my ambivalence towards the beautiful sculptural turbines themselves, was titled *Tilting at Windmills*.¹

Put simply the area of Western Victoria where the wind farm industry is most active happens to be unique.² Not only does the wide basalt plain dotted with volcanic remains and ringed with distant mountains lounging on the horizon have its own natural splendour, but this landscape possesses that rare quality: a *painted identity*. The region has inspired a host of artists since earliest European settlement - and one can only imagine what feelings the previous inhabitants had for their land. Such painters as Buvelot, Chevalier, Clarke, Cooper, Dowling, Streeton and, above all, the German Romantic Eugène von Guérard, contributed to the rich imagery of Mitchell’s *Australia Felix*. This identification with the landscape, it could be argued, is part of the Victorian, if not the Australian, psyche.

There are a few parts of the world that are famous for their landscapes because they have been painted by great artists to the extent that *we see them though their eyes*; there is a valid argument for putting the Western District on a par with such areas as say the Provence of van Gogh and Cezanne, or the East Anglia of Constable and the Norfolk School.

While this may seem an inflated claim, the interest in, and scholarship on, von Guérard, an artist who was ignored for the century after he left Australia in 1882, has been increasing to the extent that the NGV is celebrating its 150th anniversary with a major retrospective on von Guérard which is unveiled this week.³ As a foremost von Guérard

¹ Edward Coleridge, *Tilting at Windmills - an investigation into the real and painted landscape of Western Victoria and the aesthetic value of intrusions thereon*, Masters Thesis, University of Ballarat, 2010.

² This has in part been recognised with the establishment by UNESCO of the Kanawinka Geopark which extends across the southern half of the district from Colac to the Limestone Coast of South Australia.

³ *Eugène von Guérard: Nature Revealed* at NGV Federation Square, April 16 to August 7.

scholar and the curator of this exhibition, Dr Ruth Pullin, opened her original PhD thesis on him: “Von Guérard’s Australian landscapes have played a seminal role in the way this country has been understood by non-indigenous Australians.”⁴ This show will no doubt cement this theory, particularly for Western Victoria. Von Guérard executed some 40 canvases of the Western District alone, as well as published lithographs, finished presentation drawings and countless sketchbooks, a remarkable achievement given his meticulous painstaking style. Not only was he also an intrepid explorer but he was in touch with the leading intellectual and scientific ideas of the time.

So it is ironic that, as his reputation has revived, the landscape he immortalised is about to be overrun with some 1,500 vast turbines with another 1,000 in the planning.⁵ Few of his views are unaffected by the existing and proposed wind farms. My researches revealed that the Waubra Wind Farm intrudes on views he drew and painted, and turbines at Stockyard Hill will conceivably block the prospect of one of his key works, *Stoneleigh*. I also discovered the long-standing Challicum Hills Wind Farm actually fills the entire horizon of his *Yalla-y-Poorra*, arguably the most prominently displayed Australian painting in the NGV as it is the first landscape the visitor encounters in the permanent collection at Federation Square.

My thesis title, *Tilting at Windmills*, borrowed from Cervantes’ tale of the muddled Spanish knight was a reference to the fact that the largest wind farm in the southern hemisphere, at Waubra, is the creation of a Spanish company, Acciona. Apparently the Spanish countryside is littered with windfarms, which may reflect the Spanish attitude to landscape. Spain has produced 3 or 4 of the world’s greatest painters, but neither Velazquez, Goya, nor Picasso painted the landscape except as an incidental backdrop. In fact it has been said that Spain has no tradition of landscape painting. (The most famous Spanish landscape, El Greco’s *View of Toledo*, was of course painted by...a Greek.)

The contrast between Western Victoria’s “painted identity” and Acciona’s indifference to the antipodean landscape, and its inhabitants, is instructive. As Ruth Pullin is quoted in a recent article on the von Guérard exhibition, “One of the things I hope will come out of this show is the relevance of these works to our understanding of the environment.”⁶

One has to ask if the environmentalists championing this form of renewable energy understand this environment. Are the Friends of the Earth friends of the landscape?

Edward Coleridge

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⁴ Ruth Pullin, *Eugène von Guérard and the Science of Landscape Painting*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2001.

⁵ According to the figures in the DPI’s latest schedule.

⁶ Raymond Gill, *Eugène von Guérard, adventurer revealed anew*, *The Age*, 9th April 2011, Life and Style, p 22.