

Green Bay



'Looking East'

Ron Langman 2018

An essay by Dr. Kitty Magee with creative contributions by Ron Langman and Sonya Hender.
Green Bay Exhibition 2018 at the Strand Gallery in Pt. Elliot, South Australia



Photographer, Green Bay 1910
Positive (lantern slide); 8.3 cm x 8.3 cm
Original held at the State Library of South Australia

Green Bay has been a special place for myself and my husband, Ron Langman and we wanted to celebrate this beautiful spot on the Fleurieu Peninsula in an exhibition at the Strand Gallery. The concept started with historical research about artists, photographers and family experiences. We soon realised that Green Bay continues to inspire artists and we are proud to present new work by Christobel Kelly.

The exhibition has been a very much an 'in house' affair with photographs, paintings, prints and textiles by our friends closely associated with the Strand Gallery. We have especially appreciated the support and enthusiasm of Halinka Harrison. We think that we have only scratched the surface and that in the coming years, we will continue to build on our research and continue to provide opportunities for artists and curators to respond to the Pt. Elliot seascape.

For this essay, Kitty Magee has gathered an extensive range of material and her eloquent writing expresses the emotional and creative connections that many of us have with Green Bay.

Sonya Hender 2018

Green Bay has been seducing artists since settlement. Somewhere out there, scattered around our world, are thousands of paintings, sketches and photographs of this small and modest bay in Port Elliot. Some are by professional artists, housed in public and private collections. But many are by amateurs, hidden in sketchbooks and journals, tucked away in drawers and boxes. The urge to secrete art materials into a backpack on a visit to Green Bay is persuasive and seductive... What is it about this tiny cove that makes it one of the most painted seascapes in South Australia?

For thousands of years the natural landscape of the Fleurieu Peninsula inspired the Ngarrindjeri in their traditions of weaving and carving. Traditions that celebrated and reinforced millennia of spiritual and practical connections to the sea and land.

Much later, William Light (1786-1839), the great surveyor and designer of Adelaide, painted Encounter Bay and Cape Rosetta in 1837, not for their intrinsic beauty, but as the location of the South Australia Company's fishing station.¹

Light recorded the sites of colonisation, using topographical detail and visual information to assist in decision making about where to settle, where to fish and what to build... A practical and necessary kind of image making.

Later artists were lured by yearnings less easily defined. Hans Heysen (1877-1968) painted breakers crashing over 'Chiton Rocks', very near Port Elliot.² Heysen was a physically vigorous man who 'welcomed long hard days in the field'.³ His place was outdoors, in the full force of nature, ranging between the intense heat of the desert sun to the pounding winds of the Port Elliot coast. Can you picture him, on his folding stool, battling to steady his watercolour blocks on the beach just west of Green Bay? This 'small, thin, unostentatious man' peering through his horn-rimmed spectacles at the rips and rocks, just as the surfers do today, assessing the light as well as the break of the waves.⁴ Later, he worked up his paintings in oils back in his studio at the Cedars.⁵ Heysen had a 'pantheistic reverence for Nature... fascinated by the effects of light on land and sky, and on the apparent weight or weightlessness of natural objects under changing conditions of light, shadow, mist or sunshine'.⁶

Victor Harbor and Encounter Bay were among his favourite painting locations. In 1925 he sat on the grass of The Bluff at Rosetta Head painting *Petrel Cove* in watercolour and wrote ‘...You would love the grandeur of this coastline, could you but see it, with something barren and primitive in the contour of the land’.⁷ For Heysen it was all about the power of nature and the play of light across the landscape.

To this day, Green Bay is a tiny snapshot that encapsulates all the elements of this stretch of coast: calm, storm, revolving colours, changing light, rips, rocks, sanctuary and danger.

Heysen may be the most famous artist to have painted in the area, but many others have been unable to resist the magnetic pull of Green Bay over the years. Ruth Tuck and her husband Mervyn Smith painted Green Bay more than once, each in their distinct, but mutually influential styles. They responded to the extraordinary blues and greens of the sea in watercolour, but each expressing their visions so differently. Tuck (1914-2008) produced bright watercolours of the bay below, glimpsed from the coastal path, through the rocks and foliage.⁸

She was attracted to the flora of the coast, giving the rocks a bodily softness, and transmuting the distant waters of Green Bay to a gentle play of light and bright blues. Smith (1904-1994) took a more muscular approach, painting from the sands of the bay itself, with great daubs of intense, flowing watercolour, wielded like oil paint, hardly a drop of water on the brush. Smith’s brushstrokes were dynamic and vigorous. Tuck’s were gentle and considered. Painting together, one above and one within the bay, they responded so differently to their environs. Smith’s bay was passionate and dangerous. Tuck’s was a softer, safer place. Odd, to me, as I always experience the reverse on my visits: the bluster and tumble of the coastal path against the protection of the bay. Both artists broke through the constraints of conservatism in Australian art. Tuck’s influence as a teacher and a leader in the fight for the acceptance of modernism in Australian art was profound⁹, whilst Smith’s 1954 painting of Green Bay was a finalist for the Wynne Prize. The spontaneous power of Smith’s paintings is nowhere more evident than in *Coastal Scene, Green Bay*.¹⁰

Tuck was greatly influenced by Dorrit Black, another frequenter of the Fleurieu Peninsula and Green Bay. This 'plump, dignified, black haired and well-groomed' woman was something of a mother figure to younger artists.¹¹ Black travelled widely, studying in Sydney, London and Paris. However, it was the coast around Port Elliot and the Fleurieu that captivated her again and again; a landscape that was 'a source of beauty and of spiritual power' for her entire life.¹²

In the hills and coasts of the Fleurieu, Black observed sensuous female forms, rendered eloquently through the lens of her modernism. One of Black's most successful and dramatic paintings is *Rocks and waves, Green Bay, Port Elliot* (c1949).¹³ She responds emotionally to the bay, becoming spiritually absorbed into the rocky amphitheatre and its churning contents. It is a dark painting, responding (perhaps) to the danger of the bay. I think of the stories of people washed from the rocks on calm days, by unexpected, rogue waves that roar into the bay, fresh from Antarctica, even as the surrounding waters are peaceful and quiet. Black expresses the unpredictability of deep, channelled waters moving deceptively and unexpectedly.

Black was an enthusiastic motorist, tootling along the coast from one painting to another. However, for almost a century, 1884 to 1984, Adelaide artists travelled to Port Elliot by train. Many stayed for months, not days, during the drowsy, hot days of summer. Frequent visitors included Jeffrey Smart, William Donnithorne, W.E. Drewett, Rose Lowcay, John Giles, Richard Hayley Lever, and Emily Wilson. Some, like Lowcay, eventually moved there to live.

Many holidaying artists paint more at Port Elliot than at home. The natural beauty and the light of Port Elliot is captivating. But also, it is a holiday town with a feeling of freedom and separateness, looking-glass moments outside the rest of life. On a holiday, the world seems different, looks different, away from normal routines. We see more and reflect more. Holiday friendships and romances blossom. And where there are artists... there are often art communities. Which also means conversation, debate, parties and assignations... It's not all just beaches and glowing sunlight.

James Ashton (1859-1935) holidayed frequently in Port Elliot. More than once the Adelaide press joked that 'A clerk would stand aghast if it were suggested that he should take his ledgers on his vacation or a mechanic his tools but that is Mr. Ashton's idea of a sojourn "off duty"'.¹⁴

Ashton was a 'rubicund tubby figure with silver hair and waxed moustache, who usually wore a flower in his lapel'.¹⁵ He started painting between 6am and 7am every day and worked until dusk, becoming known as one of the most indefatigable and industrious Adelaide artists.¹⁶ On holiday, Ashton worked twice as hard as usual. On one trip to Victor Harbour and Port Elliot over Christmas 1892, he completed enough watercolours for an entire exhibition at Norwood Town Hall. With his passion for the sea, he was seduced by the remarkable changing colours of the waters around Green Bay. According to the *Evening Journal*, 'some critics might consider that his ocean effects are too cerulean in hue, but it has been noted that the sea on the south-eastern coast is 'deeply, darkly, beautifully blue' sometimes it is so much so that a sensitive artist would be almost afraid to follow its dark complexion too faithfully lest he might be charged with overstepping the bounds of nature'.¹⁷

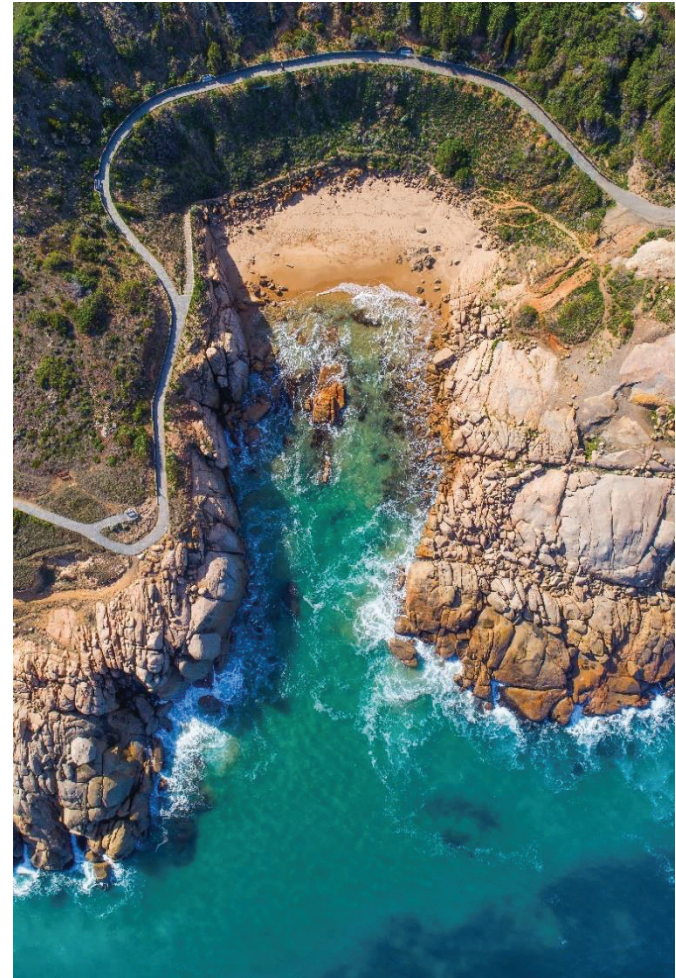
Ashton painted Green Bay many times; most successfully on a summer holiday in 1893, in a work that was praised as his best painting ever. The work was described in the papers:

*In the foreground, which is very cleverly treated, we have Green Bay, a small inlet between the rocks. The sand, the shingle, and the lazy-looking summer breakers are admirably done. On either hand are bold pieces of rock splendidly painted and looking between their shoulders you see the blue ocean, with The Bluff and a couple of small islands in the distance. The atmosphere is realistic in its truth to the Australian azure haze.*¹⁸

Ashton, like his student Hans Heysen, and the later modernists Dorrit Black, Ruth Tuck and Mervyn Smith, were all in thrall to the powers of the ocean, the coast and the forces of nature. For some, the pull was spiritual; for others, like Ashton, perhaps more sentimental. Green Bay encapsulated much of what lured these artists to the Fleurieu: the embrace of rocks creating a secluded sanctuary, free from the wind; the danger and unpredictability of the sea, with rips and tides that disobey the rules of the ocean.

Every artist plays with tensions: light and shade, push and pull. Green Bay presents us with the tension between wild sublimity and quiet seclusion. The extraordinary colours of the sea shift and kaleidoscope, daring anyone with a brush to capture them; the viewer to believe them. Artists return year after year to this singular and tiny site. It yields so many views, differing moment to moment. Quiet, calm seclusion juxtaposed with exposure and lashings of water; calm seas and buffeting winds; and the private intimacy of a solitary stroll with the meet-and-greet of friends walking their dogs...

Green Bay rewards solitary visitors with a powerful connection to land and ocean. It is the seduction of spiritual union and invigorating, overwhelming physicality. And always the compressed colours of the sea and sky, firmly embraced within the rocky arms of the bay.



Green Bay Topography

Jesse Ehlers 2018

¹ William Light (1786-1839), *View of the South Australian Company's fishing station and Cape Rosetta, Encounter Bay, 1837*, watercolour on paper, Art gallery of South Australia, 0.947.

² Hans Heysen, *Restless Shore, Chiton Rocks, Port Elliot, South Australia*, Oil on board, 23 x 30 cm, Elder Fine Art, Adelaide, <https://www.artrecord.com/index.cfm/artist/4852-heysen-hans/medium/1-paintings/?order=4&count=20&page=2>, accessed online 8 August 2018.

³ Colin Thiele, 'Heysen, Sir Wilhelm Ernst Hans (1877–1968)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/heysen-sir-wilhelm-ernst-hans-6657/text11473>, published first in hardcopy 1983, accessed online 8 August 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jane Hylton & John Neylon, *Hans Heysen into the light*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, SA, 2004, p.34.

⁶ Colin Thiele, op. cit.

⁷ It was a study for the oil painting *The South Coast*, 1926. Jane Hylton & John Neylon, op. cit.; Andrews, Rebecca. *Hans Heysen*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2008, p.74.

⁸ Ruth Tuck, *Green Bay - Victor Harbor*, Watercolour, 50 x 71.5 cm, 'Ruth Tuck, Watercolours & Drawings, Small & Whitfield Auctions, Adelaide', <https://www.artrecord.com/index.cfm/artist/10990-tuck-ruth/medium/2-works-on-paper/?order=5&io=1&count=20>, accessed online 8 August 2018; *View from Green Bay*, Watercolour, signed, 30 x 75.5 cm, Courtesy of Small & Whitfield Auctions © Ruth Tuck or assignee

<https://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/list-all-works/?concat=tuckruth&direction=0&order=1&start=101&show=50>, accessed online 8 August 2018.

⁹ Betty Snowden. 'Ruth Tuck', Design and Art Australia Online, 1995, <https://www.daao.org.au/bio/ruth-tuck/biography/>, accessed online 8 August 2018.

¹⁰ <http://www.carrickhill.sa.gov.au/the-story/artworks/australian-artists/mervyn-ashmore-smith-1904-1994>, accessed online 8 August 2018.

¹¹ Ian North, 'Black, Dorothea Foster (Dorrit) (1891–1951)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/black-dorothea-foster-dorrit-5249/text8843>, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed online 8 August 2018.

¹² Sasha Grishin, 'Dorrit Black review: a rare chance to see one of Australia's hidden art gems', Sydney Morning Herald, 16 June 2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/dorrit-black-review-a-rare-chance-to-see-one-of-australias-hidden-art-gems-20140620-zs9an.html>, accessed online 8 August 2018.

¹³ Sasha Grishin, op. cit.; *Rocks and waves, Green bay, Port Elliot*, c1949 South Australia, oil on canvas on composition board, 45.9 x 61.5cm private collection. ¹⁴ *Register*, 3 February 1915, p.6.

¹⁵ Allan Sierp, 'Ashton, James (1859–1935)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ashton-james-5068/text8451>, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed online 8 August 2018.

¹⁶ *Evening Journal*, 26 February 1892, p.3; *Advertiser*, 31 March 1926, p.16.

¹⁷ *Evening Journal*, 26 February 1892, p.3.

¹⁸ *Quiz and the Lantern*, 8 December 1893, p.12.