

Introduction

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William Blandowski lived in Australia for ten years between September 1849 and March 1859. His contribution to Australian science and natural history more than matched that of his contemporaries. However, his erratic behaviour and apparently difficult personality worked against him to the point that when he left Australia in 1859 his ambitions were in tatters and he took a significant record of Australian art, anthropology and natural history with him. At his best, Blandowski combined art and natural history to give us exquisite illustrations of Australian life, which have retained their ability to inform and impress. His own accounts depict a conflicted and contradictory individual. This mixed legacy has resulted in Blandowski's contribution to natural history, art and anthropology remaining almost unknown in Australia.

Blandowski's illustrated encyclopaedia provides a visual account of Australia's natural history and of its Aboriginal residents. It was printed in 1862 in the Upper Silesian town of Gleiwitz (then Prussia, but now Gliwice, Poland) under the title *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen nach zehnjährigen Erfahrungen* (*Australia in 142 photographic illustrations from 10 years' experience*). However, the term *photographischen* in the title is misleading: it refers to the process Blandowski used to reproduce his illustrations. Blandowski paid for the artwork and produced the albumen photographic images¹ and, having failed to secure the patronage he desired, he paid for its printing.

It is not known exactly how many copies of the encyclopaedia were produced but only one complete copy has survived in the collections of the State Library, Berlin. This copy has the prints bound in with Blandowski's printed pamphlet of the captions and his postscript. There is an incomplete copy with the prints only at the Haddon Library, Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Finally, there are two copies of Blandowski's printed pamphlet, minus the prints, at the Museum of Natural History, Berlin. The publication of *Australia* marked Blandowski's final attempt to rescue his career as an Australian natural historian. Sadly, it failed and it nearly bankrupted him. He gave up his Australian dreams and recreated himself as a studio photographer in Gleiwitz. Blandowski died at the Silesian Provincial Mental Asylum, Bunzlau² on 18 December 1878.

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Blandowski in Prussia and Germany

The youngest of thirteen children, Johan Wilhelm Theodor Ludwig von Blandowski was born in Gleiwitz on 21 January 1822. His parents, Johan Felix von Blandowski and Leopoldine Gottliebe von Woysch were members of the minor Polish aristocracy, the Herb Wieniawa. As a member of the Polish nobility, and the son of a high ranking and highly decorated officer in the Prussian army, Blandowski's beginnings were auspicious. However, the large family, his father's early death and poor investments meant that the family was not well off (Darragh 2009). Probably due to financial pressure, Blandowski left the Gymnasium in Lauban (an academic preparatory school) without gaining his Abitur certificate, the entry qualification for university and the public service. He subsequently studied as a mining apprentice and irregularly attended lectures at Berlin University. As part of his experience in the mines, he worked as a hauler on the coalface, and as a manager of a team of Polish workers. It was probably at this time that Blandowski learnt Polish in addition to his native German (Darragh 2009, Paszkowski 1967).

As a result of the political unrest across Germany and through intemperate statements made to the Directorate of the Silesian Mining Board, Blandowski was forced to resign his position as an assistant mine manager in 1848. He volunteered for service with the army during the Schleswig–Holstein war, but his appointment as a lieutenant was not confirmed. Blandowski resigned in December 1848, and along with many other young Germans, decided to emigrate. It is likely that his passage aboard the *Ocean*, which departed Hamburg on 5 May 1849, was financed through an agreement to collect Australian specimens for Hamburg collectors, probably Joachim Steetz. After his arrival in Adelaide, South Australia, four months later, Blandowski sent a collection of Australian plants to Steetz, which was subsequently purchased by the Victorian Government on behalf of the National Herbarium (Darragh 2009).

Blandowski in South Australia

Shortly after his arrival, Blandowski embarked on expeditions around Adelaide and along the Murray River. From our perspective, the most important ones were those he made to the Murray River and Guichen Bay, as these resulted in sketches that Blandowski later used in *Australia Terra Cognita* and in *Australia*. The first trip was February–May 1850, when Blandowski travelled up the Murray as far as Lake Bonney, near Barmera, and then down river to Encounter Bay. In January 1851, Blandowski again travelled down the Murray to Wellington and Goolwa, and then along the Coorong to the southeast, ending up at Robe on Guichen Bay (Darragh 2009). From there, Blandowski went to Mount Gambier. Between February and June, he was employed surveying pastoral runs in the southeast. During this time, Blandowski also approached the Colonial Secretary, Charles Sturt and the Governor of South Australia, Sir Henry Edward Fox Young, in unsuccessful attempts to gain official employment.³



Blandowski in Victoria

Sometime after October 1851, when the Mount Alexander goldfield near Castlemaine was discovered, Blandowski and a small party of South Australian Germans tried their luck there prospecting. Blandowski worked various localities until March 1853, when he sold his share of the claim and travelled to Melbourne to further his natural history aims. Blandowski arrived in Melbourne at an

opportune time, when the gold-enriched colony was in the process of setting up various institutions and learned societies (Darragh 2009). He was a foundation member of the short-lived Geological Society of Victoria, gave lectures at the Mechanics Institute and became a council member of the Philosophical Society of Victoria, when it formed in 1855. Later that year, this society merged with the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science to create the Philosophical Institute of Victoria with Blandowski continuing on its council. The Philosophical Institute of Victoria received royal consent in 1859 to become the Royal Society of Victoria (Allen 2009a, Darragh 2009, Pescott 1954, Paszkowski 1967). While these events were occurring, Blandowski came to the attention of Governor La Trobe, who invited him to submit his views on establishing a museum of natural history in Victoria. Shortly afterwards, following representations by Mark Nicholson, member of the Victorian Legislative Council, the Colonial Secretary directed that a museum of natural history be established under the control of the Surveyor-General's Department. Blandowski was appointed curator on 1 April 1854 being formally employed as a surveyor in the Surveyor-General's Department (Darragh 2009). So it might rightly be claimed that Blandowski was the first government zoologist appointed in Victoria and the first employee of the Melbourne Museum (Paszkowski 1967, Pescott 1954).

Blandowski enthusiastically took up his new duties. Between 27 June and the end of September 1854, he set out with two companions on a collecting expedition to Mount Macedon, Lancefield, Heathcote, Seymour and Euroa and then back along Sydney Road to Melbourne (Blandowski 1855, Darragh 2009). His second trip, from November 1854 to February 1855, was to the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port and then to Sandstone, Phillip, and French Islands (Blandowski 1855–6a, 1855–6b, Darragh 2009). On this trip, Blandowski was accompanied by James Manson, Spencer Deverell, Alfred Howitt and Edward La Trobe Bateman. By early 1855, the museum could boast geological, palaeontological and zoological specimens relating to more than 200 species and Blandowski's excursions provided valuable observations on the natural history of southern and central Victoria (Darragh 2009, Menkhorst 2009).

Later in 1855, Blandowski learnt photography from a Melbourne photographer named Brown (first name unknown), and he and Brown went on a photographic excursion to Mount Macedon and Kilmore. Blandowski exhibited the photographs from this expedition at the October 1855 meeting of the Philosophical Institute (Darragh 2009). Also during this period, Blandowski organised two exhibitions. The first, in October 1854, was of Victorian materials destined for the 1855 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. Blandowski showed geological and natural history specimens from the museum collections and received one of two silver medals awarded by the jury (*Argus*, 17 and 29 October 1854, Allen 2009a, Darragh 2009). Following his photographic excursion to Mount Macedon, Blandowski had his sketches, photographs and natural history specimens engraved by James Redaway and Sons for his unpublished portfolio *Australia Terra Cognita* (Blandowski, n.d.). These plates were exhibited at the 1856 exhibition of the Victoria Industrial Society, for which Blandowski received a gold medal (Darragh 2009).⁴

The years 1855–6 represented the high point of Blandowski's career. At 33-years-old, as a museum curator, he had the opportunity to demonstrate his abilities within the emerging scientific milieu of colonial Melbourne as a scientist and artist. He was also an advocate for Aboriginal people and gave lectures on them to the Mechanic's Institutes at Melbourne and suburban Prahran. However, Blandowski's luck was not to last. The year 1855 was also a period of government stringency in



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Victoria. Following the University of Melbourne's professor of natural science Frederick McCoy's suggestion that the University would look after the museum collections *free of charge*, Governor Sir Charles Hotham ordered their relocation (Wilkinson 1996). Despite the Philosophical Institute's spirited campaign of resistance, the collections were taken to the University at the end of July 1856 (Finney 1993, Wilkinson 1996).⁵ Not only did Blandowski become a curator without a collection, as far as the museum was concerned, McCoy became Blandowski's superior. McCoy was critical of Blandowski's lack of formal scientific training and was only willing to offer him a position as 'collector' (Darragh 2009, Pescott 1954, Wilkinson 1996). Blandowski made attempts to have his position clarified. The solution came after Blandowski suggested to the Surveyor-General that he engage in a further scientific expedition. Shortly afterwards, Blandowski received orders to,

...proceed to the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers, for the purpose of making investigations on the natural history of that district, and also, with a view of collecting as many specimens as possible for the National Museum, and marking the distribution of animal life along the route (quoted in Pescott 1954).

Blandowski's fourth Victorian expedition left Melbourne on 6 December 1856, and travelled to Gunbower Creek on the Murray River, via Lancefield, the Campaspe River and Echuca, arriving on 28 December (see map, p.vi). The expedition camped at Gunbower until 28 February 1857, making side excursions to nearby Mount Hope and Pyramid Hill (Allen 2009a). In early March, they proceeded along the Murray to Hugh and Busby Jamieson's Mildura Station, via Lake Boga, Swan Hill, Murrumbidgee Junction and Kulkyne. The expedition established their camp at Mondellimin (now Chaffey Landing, Merbein) on a slope looking directly onto the river. They stayed there from 7 April to the end of November 1857 (Allen 2009a, Kean 2009). Blandowski employed Aboriginal men, women and children as collectors and a succession of taxidermists to preserve the collections, while Gerard Krefft, second-in-command, managed the day-to-day business of the camp, and catalogued and illustrated the specimens. The zoological collections and illustrations, and the observations of Aboriginal life are both rare and valuable for the fact that they were made at a time of significant ecological and social change (Allen 2009b, Menkhorst 2009).

The expedition represented Blandowski's second chance. However, Blandowski's conduct indicates that unrealistically, he seemed to see himself more as a heroic explorer than as the leader of a collecting expedition. As a result, he had trouble settling into his role. On the journey towards Mondellimin he often left the party, staying at public houses and home stations while the others camped (Krefft n.d.). Going between Gunbower Creek and Mondellimin he rode on ahead, observing that, when Krefft and Manson arrived three weeks later, they were 'in a most deplorable condition' (Blandowski 1857). While the party was at Mondellimin, Blandowski was absent for lengthy periods. He rode to Moorindie in South Australia (away for three weeks in April) and the Jamieson's Mount Murchison Station on the Darling River (away for three and a half weeks in May). Also, while he was at Mondellimin, Blandowski approached the Victorian Government suggesting that the expedition leave the Murray and attempt to follow in Leichardt's footsteps (Bonyhady 1991). At the end of August 1857, Blandowski left Mondellimin and returned to Melbourne via Goolwa and Adelaide on the steamers *Albury* and *Havilah* (Blandowski 1857), while Krefft and Manson spent a further four months at Mondellimin (Allen 2009a, Blandowski 1857). We do not know why Blandowski left the expedition early. However, he was able to take a considerable number of specimens and sketches back to Melbourne and some of these were exhibited there.

Back in Melbourne Blandowski was all industry. Within three weeks of his return (2 September 1857), he read a preliminary account of the findings of the expedition and he was the recipient of a ‘complimentary dinner’ given by the Philosophical Institute at the Criterion Hotel, where Blandowski received a standing ovation (*Argus*, 4 September 1857, Paszkowski 1967). Over the next couple of months, Blandowski prepared his report for publication and employed Frederick Grosse and Nicholas Chevalier to create engraved plates from his field drawings of the fish.

However, again things began to go wrong. Blandowski attempted to emulate Ferdinand von Mueller’s success in naming floral genera after members of the Philosophical Institute (Orchard 1997). The attempt badly backfired when the Reverend John Bleasdale and Richard Eades, the Mayor of Melbourne, took great exception to the descriptions of fish attached to their names. This incident, which received a public lampooning (*Melbourne Punch*, 1 April 1858), destroyed Blandowski’s standing with influential members of the Philosophical Institute and his superior, Surveyor-General Andrew Clarke. As a result, the council ordered the offending pages be removed from the Philosophical Institute’s journal *Transactions*, where Blandowski had reported the results of the Murray expedition (Blandowski 1857). This effectively robbed Blandowski of priority in describing, naming and providing the first ecological information on some previously unknown freshwater fish species (Humphries 2003, 2009).⁶

Between March 1858 and Blandowski’s departure from Victoria in early 1859, he continued to collect specimens of Victorian natural history and to employ skilled draughtsmen to illustrate them. However, there was also a series of inquiries into his conduct, his failure to report back to the Surveyor-General’s Department, and his refusal to surrender the materials from the Murray River expedition to the government (Darragh 2009, Paszkowski 1967). While Blandowski received some financial compensation for his expenses, his Australian career was effectively over. He left Melbourne aboard the Prussian barque *Mathilde* on 17 March 1859, arriving at Hamburg in October 1859 (Darragh 2009).

Return to Germany and to Gleiwitz

Back in Germany, Blandowski gave lectures about his Australian explorations to academic societies, had his illustrations redrawn into a portfolio of plates by Gustav Mützel and attempted to gain support for his publishing ambitions (Allen 2009a, Darragh 2009, Landsberg and Landsberg 2009). He sent a copy of his portfolio of engraved and hand coloured plates, *Australia Terra Cognita* (Blandowski n.d.), to the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly, with a letter from Gleiwitz, dated 5 October 1869, stating that he had 200 similar plates ready to publish and asked for assistance⁷ (Allen 2006). Blandowski also attempted to use the booklet *The Opinion of Men of Science in London of Wilhelm von Blandowsky’s Ten Years Labour in Australia, 1849–1859* (Blandowski 1860) to appeal for support for the larger project. His efforts were unsuccessful (Darragh 2009).

When Blandowski returned to Gleiwitz, he took up residence at his mother’s house on Bankowa Street, where he set up a photographic studio and offered his services to Gleiwitz clientele (Jodliński 2009). His attempt to regain employment in the mining service was unsuccessful. He also spent a short time as an elected representative on the town council. Blandowski died on the 18 December 1878. After his death, one of Blandowski’s sisters, Clementine, offered his illustrations, collections and notebooks to the Royal Library in Berlin. These were received and catalogued in 1882 and a large portfolio of plates and sketches relating to Australian natural history were given to the Zoological Museum (now Museum of Natural History, Berlin) (Darragh 2009).



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