

# A Speculative History of the Fox Hunt

*This text was written on the unceded lands of the Gadigal and Ngunnawal people. The Australian settler state is prefaced, made, upheld and remade by violence. I acknowledge the incredible resistance - historic and continuing - of First Nations peoples to settler-colonial occupation. I pay my respects to elders, past and present. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.*

## 1.

Accounts of Blenheim House are repeated throughout archives and historical records. Council records, State and National libraries, all hold similar sections and passages, some repeated verbatim.<sup>1</sup> In all these histories, there is a single line.

*“Blenheim House was also the site of the last foxhunt in Sydney.”<sup>234</sup>*

*“it [Blenheim House] was also allegedly the site for the last foxhunt in Sydney.”<sup>5</sup>*

The line sits on the page alone, typeset with gaps either side, a throw-away fact tacked loosely onto the end of a paragraph or sentence. There is no date, no naming of associated hunting clubs and no stories to be found of the last fox hunt in Sydney. This fact/possibility presents itself as a dead end, hardly worth exploring.

The fox was first introduced into so-called “Australia” in the 1850s<sup>6</sup>, which coincides with Charles Augustus FitzRoy’s term as Governor of New South Wales (1846-55). FitzRoy is said to have either been a guest or a temporary resident of Blenheim House, a keen hunter, FitzRoy imported one of the first fox hunting packs to Sydney.<sup>7</sup> Blenheim House then seems to hold a close relationship to the fox hunt, possibly bookending the activity in Sydney.

The history of the fox hunt in Australia is recorded in the form of stray articles, brief references in adjacent histories or “about us” pages on outdated websites. It is riddled with voids and silences. It is entangled, doubles back and winds around itself. Drawing from what can be found, I come to three possibilities surrounding the last fox hunt in Sydney, it could have been for a fox, for a trained dingo or following a marked trail. This single line in the history of Blenheim House is a thread to be pulled on and I think about following the fox as it flees the hunt, ducks through fencing, snatches at throats, hides in bushes and crawls under beds.<sup>8</sup>



A fox looking towards me<sup>a</sup>

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1 These histories are from the settler’s perspective. It comes as no surprise that there is no mention of traditional ownership, colonial violence or Aboriginal histories. This text was written via the settler’s imaginary, while it is also through the scope of decolonisation, this is not an attempt to write an Aboriginal history around the fox and the fox hunt.

2 National Library of Australia (Trove)

3 Randwick City Library. 2021. *Blenheim House*. available at: [https://randwick.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en\\_US/randwickcitylibrary/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fSD\\_ASSET\\$002f0\\$002fSD\\_ASSET:15321/one/](https://randwick.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_US/randwickcitylibrary/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fSD_ASSET$002f0$002fSD_ASSET:15321/one/)

4 Randwick Council. 2022. *Blenheim House*. available at: <https://www.randwick.nsw.gov.au/about-us/history/historic-places/plaques/blenheim-house>

5 Dictionary of Sydney. 2021. *Blenheim House Randwick*. available at: [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/building/blenheim\\_house\\_randwick](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/building/blenheim_house_randwick)

6 From the 1850s there were multiple attempts to introduce foxes into Australia, however they were introduced fully via Victoria in the 1870s. It should also be noted that this “successful introduction” is accredited to the open pastures that had been established, a result of land clearance, as well as the earlier introduction of the rabbit, all contributing to a more “inhabitable” environment for the fox.

7 This pack also forms the lineage for most hunting packs in New South Wales today.

8 Here I’m thinking of Tom Melick, whose work heavily influenced this text, he speaks of following rats into history. (Melick, T. 2020. *A Little History of Fatigue*. Sydney: Rosa Press)

## 2.

The figure of the fox is seemingly rife with contradictions, especially when placed in the context of the Australian settler state. The fox is hunted. The fox is a fugitive. But first and foremost, the fox is a settler and invader. I feel a certain degree of empathy for the fox, but it is extremely important to not forget it as a predatory, invasive pest.<sup>9</sup> The fox, however, is not just a pest through the lens of decolonisation, it is also marked as such in the mind of the settler state.

The fox in Australia is defined by the settler through a contradictory logic: introduced to be eliminated via the hunt. Remembering the Fox's inherent Englishness, in the logic of the settler state, eliminating one who affirms the paternal culture of the settler seems counterproductive, if not counterintuitive.<sup>10</sup>

Against this slightly confounding framing of the fox hunt, I come to the characteristics of the fox itself, an animal that has been anthropomorphised throughout history and assigned a moral character. One of the most poignant memories of the fox in my mind is not of a real fox, but of Disney's 1973 *Robin Hood*.<sup>11</sup> I also come to think of *The Fox and the Hound*<sup>12</sup> made by Disney eight years later. *The Fox and the Hound* is set in an American context, however, alongside other representations of the fox, a character begins to emerge.

*The Fox and the Hound* tells the story of Todd the fox and Copper the hound. The main tension of the film is between Todd and Copper's friendship and their opposing positions in the state of 'nature'. As story progresses, Todd and Copper come to be figures of either order or disorder. Copper, the loyal companion, stays at the side of the hunter, bound to his role as a hunting dog. Todd on the other hand roams freely with a disrespect for the order of things, encouraging Copper to leave his owner's property to play. This same motif of disorder can be seen in Disney's *Robin Hood* and Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox*.<sup>13</sup> The fox becomes a rebel, a redistributor of wealth and a wily provider. The fox is cunning, elusive, charming, unkillable.



Illustrations of Reynard the Fox<sup>b,c</sup>

These traits attributed to the fox can be followed to an older cultural vein, particularly in the folktales of Reynard the Fox, which date back to the second half of the twelfth century.<sup>14 15</sup> Patterns can be found in the tales of Reynard, normally following the fox as he (possibly) wrongs someone, is placed on trial and escapes judgement. In these stories there is never a legitimate account of the accusations being made against Reynard, the truth is redacted from the reader's view. Reynard is the people's antihero, a sly underdog and trickster. However, in coming to these traits, there is an ambiguity cast over the fox's character.<sup>16 17</sup>

This moral ambiguity feels like something of a dead end. But I think some clarity can be found via the recurrences and repetitions in depictions of the fox. The fox is cunning and sly. They will double cross you at every turn, though may save you in your hour of need. The Fox is an avid sharer and provider for others, a staunch individualist driven by a desire for survival, and always sceptical of authority. The fox has an inherent disrespect for ownership and private property, they pass through land and beyond fences, they come at night to loot your stock. It seems that the fox, in its ambiguity, has a tendency to be in opposition to authority and order.



A Portrait of a Fox

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- 9 The introduction of the fox into Australia coincides with the demise of many native marsupial vertebrates. In 1999 the fox was recorded as a predator to at least half of the 84 vertebrate species listed as threatened under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. In more contemporary contexts, foxes have also been seen to drastically hinder "reintroduction" and "rehabilitation" programs for native species. Outside of this predation, the fox also increases competition for prey and carries a range of diseases, contributing to its impact on the native environment. (Saunders. G.R, Gentle. M.N, Dickman. C.R. 2010. *The Impacts and Management of Foxes Vulpes vulpes in Australia*. Mammal Review 40(3): p.181-211.)
  - 10 Here I am thinking of Patrick Wolfe's logic of elimination. The fox's introduction is possibly negated by its elimination. However, this is not a negation of settlement, since the fox is still very much a part of the structure of occupation, and thus the fox should not be placed alongside, or as a metaphor for, those who experience the ongoing violence of the settler state. I also come to think of Wolfe as he tells us that invasion is not an event, it is a structure. (Wolfe, P. 2006. *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*. Journal of Genocide Research 8(4): p.387-409.)
  - 11 This is also a pretty apparent indicator of my positionality.  
*Robin Hood* [Animation] Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Studios, USA, 1973.
  - 12 *The Fox and the Hound* [Animation] Directed by Richard Rich, Ted Berman, Art Stevens. Walt Disney Studios, USA, 1981.
  - 13 Dahl, R. 1970. *Fantastic Mr Fox*. London: Penguin Books.
  - 14 Reynard the Fox was also an initial inspiration for Disney's 1973 *Robin Hood*.
  - 15 The popularity of Reynard can be seen seeping from folklore into language, the French word for fox being *Renard/Renarde*. An alternative translation is also *le malin*, which is given other definitions such as evil, devil, wise man or slyboots.
  - 16 In thinking about the ambiguity of the fox's morality, Mary Douglas' description of dirt comes to mind: "We should now force ourselves to focus on dirt. Defined in this way it appears as a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications." (Douglas. 1966. p.45) I wonder if classifications of "feral" and "pest" run alongside or through Douglas' residual category of dirt. (Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge.)
  - 17 Another thread to take note of is Jordy Rosenberg's account of the term "fox": "eighteenth-century usage of "fox" indicated a man; now, of course, "fox" broadly denotes a fetching individual of whatever gender... Perhaps "fox" has emerged, ungendered, from the embrace of early modern rogues to signify simply an object of desire. An endearment. Rather: an enfokment" (Rosenberg. 2018. p.76). (Rosenberg, J. 2018. *Confessions of the Fox*. New York: Penguin Random House.)

The fox can be seen to fall into two main categories within the settler's imaginary, Fauna and invasive. This classification of invasive is widely held; however, I am doubtful that the settler's classification is the same as the perception of invasion in decolonial thinking. I come back to my initial question: If the fox is a symbol of Englishness, how can the settler view it as a pest? Taking notes from the character of the fox, the fox with its tendency for disorder and disrespect, is not invasive because of its incursion on so-called "Australia", but for its disruption of order and invasion of the settler's private property.<sup>18 19</sup>

Thinking back to the fox hunt, for the hunter, the fox maintains its prosthetic morals but is also always an animal. The fox's role of being hunted becomes the intended affirmation of the settler. The fox is hunted to reify ownership, private property and domination but is also "good sport".<sup>20</sup> The hunters with their guns, horses and hounds are able to outsmart the cunning and elusive Reynard, they chase him to exhaustion where the fox is mauled by dogs or shot.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.

Fox hunting in Sydney doesn't neatly align with the introduction of foxes into Australia. Governor FitzRoy is said to have hunted dingos in place of foxes; however, when the local population dwindled, dingos were captured and trained to then be set loose on the occasion of the hunt.

In Raymond Williams' book *The Country and the City*<sup>22</sup>, tracing representations of the country and the city through English literature, Williams' finds a thread running from the aesthetic alteration of landscape to the assertion of ownership.

*"It was that kind of confidence, to make Nature move to an arranged design, that was the real invention of the landlords. And we cannot then separate their decorative from their productive arts; this new self-conscious observer was very specifically the self-conscious owner"*<sup>23</sup>



of Reynard<sup>d</sup>

While Williams' thinking is in relation to the English landscape, the making of England is inseparable from settlement. In the context of Australia, the alteration of landscape takes its notes from the English landscape, pushed to mirror agricultural practices and aesthetic standards.<sup>24</sup>

Looking to the hunted dingo, its proxy status as the fox and its training can be read, alongside Williams, as part of the arrangement of the Australian landscape. Altering a landscape to be viewed is not only defined by how it is made and what it is informed by, but also why it is made. The viewer and "owner" make changes not only to affirm ownership, but as a way of extracting enjoyment and pleasure from the now aesthetically altered landscape. Extending the terms of aesthetic alteration to also encompass enjoyment, the dingo/fox hunt becomes part of the alteration of land to facilitate leisure for the settler and a means of projecting the English landscape upon settled land. The fox/dingo hunt is then a reminder of how the settler's leisure is entangled with their structures of occupation. The leisurely arts of the dingo/fox hunt are indistinguishable from the "productive arts" of settlement and occupation. This leisure is part of the settler's continual attempts to make "Australia" a "place", and more specifically a place that they own.<sup>25</sup>



Governor Charles Augustus FitzRoy<sup>e</sup>

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- 18 In a more contemporary context, the fox is hunted/killed for "environmental reasons" by the settler state. This motivation is still prefaced by a belief in ownership of land. While the fox is feral and non-native, it is ultimately a threat to the productivity of the land which the settler state falsely claims ownership over.
- 19 Through this characterisation of the fox by the settler, the fox is humanised, and I find myself empathising with the fox. It is easy to cast it as a victim of colonial violence. It is important to remember, however, that the prefacing fact for thinking about the fox in Australia is that it is a predatory settler and invader which is part of the structure of occupation.
- 20 It should be stressed that the fox hunt holds a very close relationship with the land it takes place upon. This is what the hunter/settler is attempting to dominate, conquer and supposedly assert as their own.
- 21 This action of domination is also an inflation of the settler's/hunter's ego.
- 22 Williams, R. 1973. *The County and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 23 Ibid. p.124
- 24 This alteration is also dependent upon the denial of sovereignty and ownership, which is founded upon the illegitimate claim of terra nullius.
- 25 The dingo/fox hunt also seems to place the hunt in a distinctly "Australian" setting. Alongside this, I think of Andrew Brooks' description of the carceral imagination, which underpins the settler state. Brooks describes a myth which "casts settlers as a bunch of resourceful larrikins, petty criminals and misfits that transformed a rugged frontier outpost into a profitable pastoral economy, all while maintaining a healthy scepticism of British pomposity". Brooks continues to stress the importance of this image/myth as it maintains "a connection to the British Empire while also providing a point of differentiation and distance" (Brooks, A, Lorange, A (Snack Syndicate). 2020. *Homework*. Melbourne: Discipline Press. p.90). Looking to accounts of fox hunting in Australia, there is an emphasis on the supposed enjoyment of "good sport", "mateship" and "equity" while hunting. The hunter becomes distinctly "Australian" as they track the dingo, remembering the fox hunt's role in the construction of settler occupation, Englishness is held tightly, with white knuckles, at arm's length. Here, the Australian fox hunt can be seen to entangle itself further with dynamics of class, leisure, and the construction of Australianness.



4.

A rag soaked in something such as aniseed or fish oil is dragged by a runner, marking a trail, to then be tracked and followed. The foxless fox hunt is a kind of stripped back event, where a phantom fox, reeking of fish or spices is pursued.



A Foxless Fox Hunt, Wilberforce NSW, 1956  
(left) The trail is marked<sup>d</sup> (right) The trail is retraced/followed<sup>e</sup>

I'm thinking of an album of photos taken in 1956 depicting a foxless fox hunt in Wilberforce NSW, about an hour's drive from here.<sup>26</sup> The hunters with their hats, ties and all, jump predetermined fences and cross agreed upon boundaries, following the scent of an oil-soaked rag, as a crowd watches on.<sup>27</sup> In this stripped back possibility, the fox hunt without the fox, becomes a performance. The hypothetical hunt is planned and choreographed. Thus, in the performance of the fox hunt, I think back to Williams, when he speaks of the dissolution of the barrier between decorative and productive arts (the decorative here can also be thought of as performative). The performance of the hunt is ceremonial and leisurely; however, it still holds a productive function of reaffirming a false conception of property and ownership.

The possibility of the foxless fox hunt can be read in another way. In the development of Sydney, whether it be agricultural, civic, residential or industrial, the fox becomes even more of an invasive pest in the mind of the settler and landlord. Despite this, the settler is bound by the structure of occupation they have created and seek to uphold. The fox hunt can no longer take place for fears of damaging planted fields or being led onto another's property.<sup>28</sup> The fox in its disorder and movement over land becomes impossible to hunt with dogs and horses. In its extension, the logic of private property and ownership disallows the hunt, and the fox is spared.

I imagine the fox, perched atop a fence post. It sits downwind so as to not arouse any suspicion. It's looking on as the hunt moves across the landscape and it too can smell aniseed as it seeps into the dirt. It watches as the line drawn in oil is traced by a dog's snout and horse hooves. The aniseed oil is churned through the dirt which will eventually disperse its mark, like ink bleeding into paper. I picture the rehearsal and performance of these hunts, in their repetition, making ditches carved out in the land specifically by and for the settler, and no one else.

5.

I suspect it is in the character of the fox that I will continue to try to pin down and work through the ideas and endless contradictions that the fox hunt is bound up with. The fox hunt is a show case of the contradiction within settlement and the irony of an invader, chasing an invader, eventually losing control over the structures that they seek to uphold. The fox runs through private property, ownership, structures of leisure and performances of occupation, all the while being more than implicit in the structure of invasion.

I imagine the hunter marking a trail in oil, spilling it on themselves and being chased through the landscape they try to shape. I imagine the fox doubling back on itself and running onto another plot of land, the tension of a fence being twanged as it brushes past wires and in between fence posts.



A fox passing by<sup>h</sup>

Images.

- a Thompson, L. 2019. *Fox at Coogee 1*. [photograph].
- b Schleich, A. Kaulbach, W. 1846. *Reynard the Fox at a crossroad being blessed by a sheep clergyman*. [print]. New York: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.
- c Schleich, A. Kaulbach, W. 1846. *Reynard the Fox preparing to attack a rabbit*. [print]. New York: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.
- d Anonymous. 1861. *Portrait of Reynard*. [print]. New York: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library
- e Smith, H.R. 1855. *Governor Charles Augustus FitzRoy*. [oil painting] Sydney: Mitchell Library State Library of New South Wales.
- f Lynch. 1956. *Fox hunt, Wilberforce, 11 August 1956*. [photograph]. Sydney: Mitchell Library State Library of New South Wales.
- g Lynch. 1956. *Fox hunt, Wilberforce, 11 August 1956*. [photograph]. Sydney: Mitchell Library State Library of New South Wales.
- h Thompson, L. 2019. *Fox at Coogee 2*. [photograph].

By Lachlan Thompson

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26 This hunt may have been the first regrouping of the Sydney Hunt Club since 1914.

27 The fox hunt as a public performance seems to sit in contrast to Governor FitzRoy's hunts 100 or so years before these photos were taken, where the hunt was a private event and a marker of class/social position.

28 Another reason given for following a trail is for the safety of the hunter. The "unpredictability" and "treacherousness" of the Australian landscape makes the hunt all the more dangerous for the hunter.