Jennifer M.T. Carter explores the background to a recent National Library acquisition

Late in June 2002 the National Library of Australia took possession of three watercolours sent from England. Two by Conrad Martens were of Sydney and the Blue Mountains in the 1850s; the third was of 'Charllan Station near Mount Remarkable, Adelaide, South Australia'. Dated 1848, the £4000 it fetched at auction in London reflects the obscurity of the subject, rather than that of its creator, S.T. Gill.

It could be called a 'typical' Gill of the period: a rudimentary homestead with outbuildings in the middle distance, trees indicating meandering creek beds beyond, with a nod to the local flora, this time in the shape of sheoaks (Allocasuarina verticillata) and various tussock grasses. The Aboriginal figures in the foreground are a frequent device used by Gill to create a modicum of human interest and there is nothing in the scene to indicate that its painter took part in a little known and ultimately tragic South Australian adventure.

Unlike its neighbours to the east, the province of South Australia was founded without the taint of convict labour. Many of the free settlers who came from Britain and various states of Europe, notably Prussia, were religious dissenters, among them the Rev. Samuel Gill, a Baptist minister from Somerset, southern England. The pastor arrived in Adelaide with his family in December 1839, and when his wife and daughter died the following year, moved to the Adelaide Hills. His elder son, Samuel Thomas, 21 years old and a draftsman and water colourist by training, remained in the city to earn a living. There, he dabbled in photography and took up portraiture, but customers were few. So he turned to depictions of the outback, and illustrated Edward John Eyre's Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, recreating the explorer's field sketches as detailed drawings. The work was published in two volumes in 1845 and may be consulted in the Library. The following year Gill himself was off travelling with John Ainsworth Horrocks, in search of viable pastoral land beyond Depot Creek (near Mount Arden, north of present day Quorn), a permanent spring discovered by Eyre in 1839, some 25 kilometres to the north of Spencer Gulf.

At 28, Horrocks was two months older than Gill and an enthusiastic explorer who had made several short journeys into the Flinders Ranges, earning him the sobriquet 'King of the North'. On 29 July 1846 he left his home at Penwortham in the Clare Valley on what was to prove his final expedition. With him were Gill, four other companions, a number of goats, and a recalcitrant camel rejoicing in—if rarely answering to—the name of Harry. The weather was appalling; Horrocks' diary tells of gales and steady rain, not to mention errant goats and early signs of the camel's vicious nature. When the party reached 'Mr. White's station' four days later, on 3 October 1846, they made free of a property watered...
by the Rocky River, and where, according to an early visitor, 'wild ducks abounded in the splendid water holes'. They stayed a week then headed north and west.

Eight of the paintings Gill produced as unpaid draftsman for this ill-starred venture are in the Pictures Section and were featured in Travellers Art, a recent National Library exhibition. Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film by Rosalynn D. Haynes (1998) and Arid Arcadia: Art of the Flinders Ranges by Alisa Bunbury (2002) both describe the expedition in some detail and again use paintings by Gill. Much has been made of the unfortunate outcome: how John Horrocks was shot to death by his camel, yet, notwithstanding this dubious distinction, there is no place for him in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. The White brothers, too, have been neglected. Thanks to the Library’s collection of books on local history, however—and these modest yet invaluable publications are so often overlooked by the researcher—I have been able to put the present painting into a wider context.

An inscription accompanying Gill’s watercolour clarifies it as a depiction of Charlton, not Charllan Station. According to Manning’s Place Names of South Australia (1990), the property was acquired by Samuel, Frederick and Edwin White in the Lower Flinders Ranges in 1844 and was named for their home village of Charlton Marshall in Dorset. It later became the site of the town of Wirrabara, but in the 1840s and 1850s it was a kind of roadhouse for the rare and welcome passer-by. Heather Sizer’s history of Wirrabara, Yet Still They Live (1974) gives a comprehensive picture of the area’s development, from the days when the White brothers took out their first occupational licence, up to the present day. In 1853, Samuel White brought home a bride to Charlton homestead whereupon his brothers, Frederick and Edwin, settled on other parts of the rapidly extending run. Soon after Samuel’s marriage, the original house and outbuildings were sold to the Australian Mining Company and when the Whites’ first
child, named Eliza after her mother, was born in July 1855 the family moved to a new residence that Samuel called grandly, White Park. Margaret and Samuel Jnr were born there in 1857 and 1859 respectively.

When I visited the area to research, quite literally, the background to S.T. Gill's painting, I was unable to find many physical reminders of the past; but I did receive valuable assistance from Mrs Shirley Walter of Wirrabara, Mrs Margaret McCallum of Melrose and Mrs Elsie Zwar and Mr Tim Zwar of Charlton.

The home built for Frederick White in 1853 can still be seen in a paddock south of Wirrabara, along with several sod-thatched barns. Made of stone, it is little more than a fortified hut, but when it became a staging post for Cobb and Co.'s Clare-Port Augusta run, and later gave its name to the township of Stone Hut, it achieved an unlikely immortality. The original Charlton and White Park homesteads no longer exist but it did prove possible to identify the approximate position where Gill sketched when travelling with John Horrocks.

The photograph of Charlton reproduced here was taken at a high point of the kind favoured by the artist. The fine brick chimney from the copper mine (1854-1858), and the modern buildings, are obvious additions; these aside, the similarities are striking. The contours of the hills opposite, both in the photograph and Gill's painting are identical. Mount Remarkable on the skyline to the left has a similar orientation while, given the lines of trees in the middle distance, the creeks appear to follow more or less their original course.

All the same, discovering Gill's viewpoint has created a small mystery of its own.

The photograph was taken on 3 October 2003; Gill's preliminary sketch would have been made between 3 and 6 August 1846. The winters of both these years were wet. As well as lamenting the boggy terrain due to flooding, Horrocks noted on Sunday, 2 August 1846 that the land en route for 'Mr. White's station' was 'fine grassy, hilly country'; indeed, words like 'grassy' and 'well-grassed' recur in his journal. In that case, we would expect Gill's August landscape to be as verdant as that of the October photograph. Instead, it bears all the hallmarks of a torrid South Australian summer.

Gill's accuracy was noted by his contemporaries: 'He [Gill] gives the true idea of South Australian scenery. Nothing is exaggerated nor any point lost', the South Australia Register recorded in 1845, so why the discrepancy here? To my mind, there is a possible explanation. S.T. Gill has left a lively record of the first years of European settlement in South Australia and his work provides the
sole artistic record of its early mines. In 1847, when he was raffling drawings of the Horrocks expedition to cover his expenses, he was commissioned to paint pictures of the Burra Burra Mine in the province's mid-north. Once abundantly covered with casuarinas of the kind Gill depicted at Charlton Station, the mine site had been in operation for two years and was now a man-made desert, requiring a palette of yellows and various shades of brown. Paint was expensive and hard to come by, so it is not impossible that the perpetually impoverished artist put aside the memory of a land alive with game and bird song and, for the sake of economy, deliberately turned bountiful winter into a brazen summer scene. With Horrocks in his grave at Penwortham, who would care about a falsified record, and would it matter if they did? Samuel White, anyway, must have been pleased enough with this permanent record to buy it, for the cloth backing sheet of 'Charlton Station' includes the annotation: 'Left by S. N. White their father to his eldest son or daughter'. When the Whites left Australia after the birth of their son in October 1859, the painting returned to the 'old country' with them—and now it has come home to the 'new'.

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