



Photo Penrith City Library

FIRE'S ON!

The circumstances surrounding the painting by Arthur Streeton of *Fire's On!* and the Lapstone Railway Tunnel Deviation of 1891

JEFF RIGBY'S admiration for Arthur Streeton's painting which hangs prominently in the Australian section of the Art Gallery of NSW led to an interest in the circumstances surrounding the making of the painting. So began a search for the original site in Glenbrook on the Blue Mountains which would become a rewarding journey of discovery.

Most of what we know about the painting of *Fire's On!* has come down to us in Arthur Streeton's correspondence, notably with Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin. Streeton met them in 1886 when he was only nineteen and both men quickly recognised the young man's extraordinary talent. Roberts had been given the nickname Bulldog because of his tenacity, the quieter, more philosophic McCubbin was named The Proff, while

Streeton became Smike after the young lad in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*. The three corresponded throughout their lives and often referred to each other using these names.

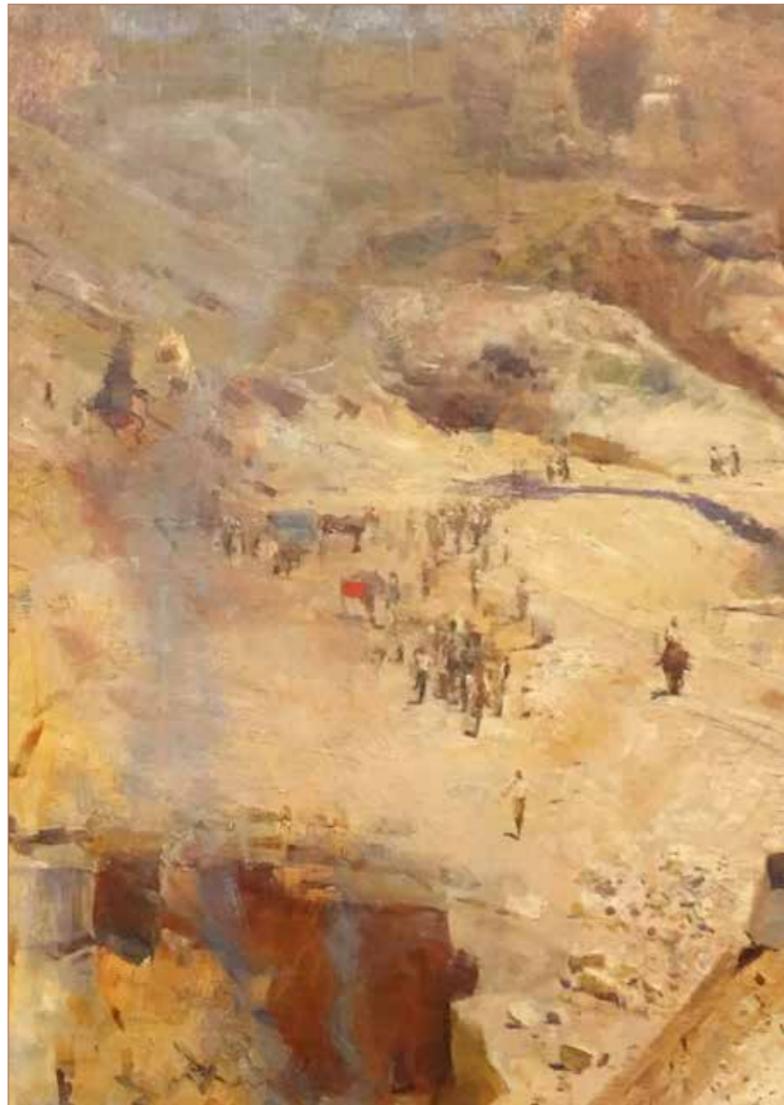
The correspondence was first published in *Smike to Bulldog* by R.H. Croll, published in 1946 and then in *Letters from Smike: The Letters of Arthur Streeton* edited by Anne Galbally and Anne Grey, 1989, while the letters themselves can be examined in the Mitchell Library. Their exact chronology is problematic because while Streeton usually provided the address, e.g. 'Daisy Cottage, Glenbrook', he rarely supplied the dates, only the month and the year. The content can sometimes be a guide and in some cases the accompanying envelope has been preserved and the date of the postmark pencilled at the top of the letter, probably by R.H. Croll.

The young Streeton was described by Julian Ashton as 'a slim debonair young man of about 24 years of age, with a little pointed beard and a fair complexion. When he wasn't painting, he was quoting Keats and Shelley'. His letters are expressive and poetic, seemingly as eloquent as his brush as it danced across the canvas. They are often lavishly illustrated with quick, humorous pen sketches, giving a sense of the youthful energy and enthusiasm with which he embraced life and art. His letters from the latter part of 1891 describe a great deal of what he saw at Lapstone and contain some clues as to how his ideas for *Fire's On!* developed over the time he worked there.

Streeton had lived in Melbourne and he had previously visited Sydney in 1890, returning there in September 1891. His sister and brother-in-law lived in Summer Hill and there was the glittering spectacle of the Harbour and the attractions of bohemian life at Curlew Camp in Little Sirius Cove. This was a semi-permanent arrangement, inhabited by a disparate group of artists, sportsmen and others, all seeking cheap accommodation

in a still largely unspoilt harbour environment. Its remains can still be seen today, with walls and terraces and a large stone with 'Curlew' carved on it. Photos from the time show interiors of tents, elaborately furnished and carpeted. There was even a cook and a general roustabout to do the chores. It is hard to imagine a more congenial, carefree existence for a group of hard living young men, all for £1 a week and relatively close to the city.

Right: Arthur Streeton (Australia; England; Australia, b.1867, d.1943)
Fire's On! 1891, oil on canvas, 183.8 x 122.5 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales Purchased 1893 Photo: AGNSW 832 Above: detail

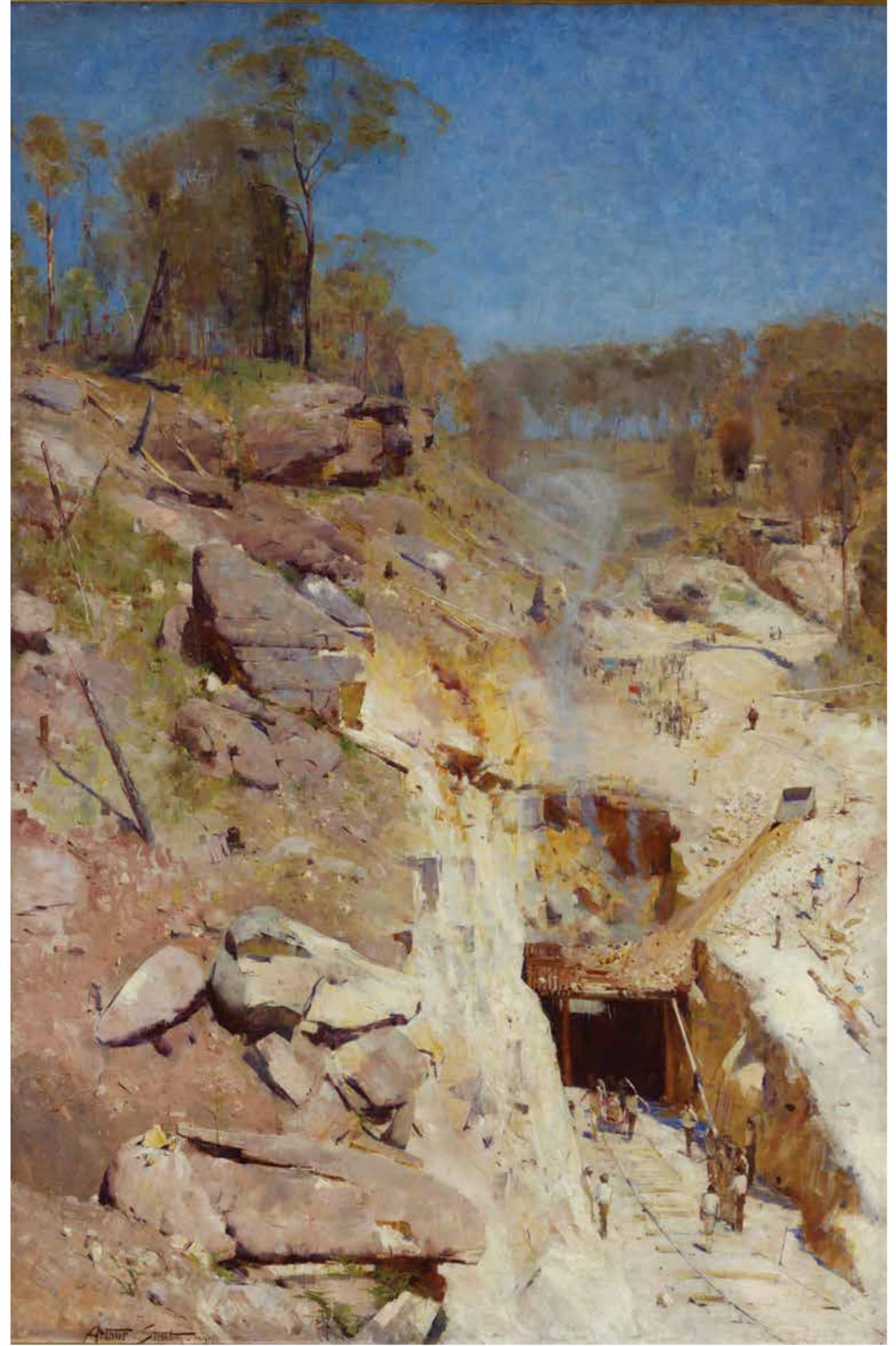


However, despite Sydney's attractions, by mid September Streeton was in the Blue Mountains. He wrote to Roberts on 18.9.1891 asking him to come to Penrith the next day on the 10 o'clock train and said: 'I ran up there today to Springwood, 1215' up, going up again tomorrow to find a small room...'. He gives us no indication of what he was looking for, but in a previous letter to Roberts he railed against his own inaction in Melbourne: 'I want to produce more ... I want to be painting every

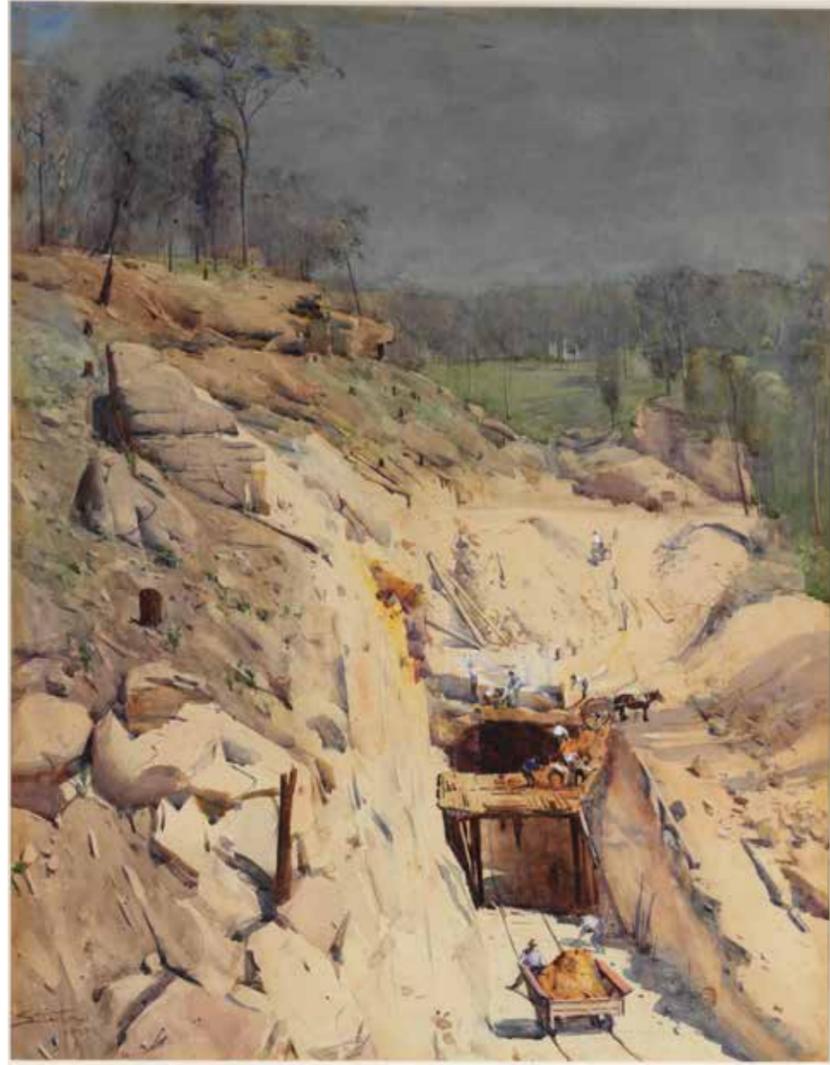
day and have the serious matter of art in front of me and not be mucking the time away... It's a sin. I don't perhaps express myself clearly, but somehow I want to be at it I fancy large canvases all glowing and moving in the happy light and others bright decorative and chalky and expressive of the hot trying winds and the slow immense summer...'. The letter is full of a young man's energy and impatience to get on with his dreams and resonates completely with *Fire's On!*.

In 1890, Tom Roberts had produced his very successful paintings *Shearing the Rams*

and *The Breakaway*. While we may now regard Roberts' landmark paintings as picturesque images of a romantic and idealised past, at the time they would have reflected the energy and promise of the young country and an unusual sense of the realities of rural life. If Streeton was searching for a similarly powerful subject, he certainly found one in the construction of the Lapstone Tunnel Deviation at the foot of the Blue Mountains.



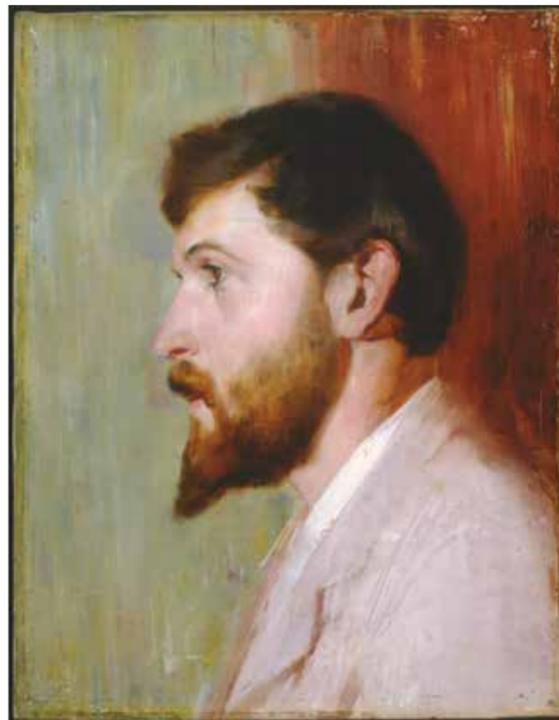
'I've past the west mouth and am now arrived at my subject, the other mouth, which gapes like a great dragon's mouth at the perfect flood of hot sunlight'. However, what he saw there, as will be seen, was not the eastern mouth of the tunnel but the cutting, which was to lead up to it.



Arthur Streeton (Australia; England; Australia, b.1867, d.1943) *Blue Mountain tunnel* incorrectly inscribed 1892 (1891), pencil, watercolour, Chinese white highlights on paper, 73.6 x 58.5 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales Gift of Howard Hinton 1937 Photo: AGNSW 6416

'a slim debonair young man of about 24 years of age, with a little pointed beard and a fair complexion. When he wasn't painting, he was quoting Keats and Shelley'
(Julian Ashton)

Tom Roberts (England; Australia, b.1856, d.1931) *Mike Streeton age 24 1891*, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 35.7 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales Purchased 1945 Photo: AGNSW 7442



'And there are about a hundred tents on all pretty close together (as a rule) big strong young chaps, some with wives and children. On one tent pole was fixed a beautiful waratah, on another a girl's great big yellow straw hat. A regular 'Roaring camp' splendid and they're cutting a tunnel out of the rock all yellow, and little machinery to help...'

The Western Railway had crossed the Blue Mountains to Bathurst between the years 1866 and 1876, now enabling Streeton to reach Springwood in only a few hours instead of a journey that could have taken days by road 30 years before. This had necessitated Zig Zag formations on both the eastern and western escarpments on which trains were worked, alternatively pushing and pulling to ascend and descend the grades. However, by the late 1880s, the Lapstone Zig Zag and the Great Zig Zag at Lithgow, initially one of the railway engineering wonders of the world, had become serious bottlenecks for the ever increasing traffic. In 1890 proposals were made for a deviation to bypass the Lapstone Zig Zag with a cutting and tunnel, while the Lithgow Zig Zag was modified but then was eventually replaced by the Ten Tunnels Deviation in 1910.

The contract for the Lapstone Hill Deviation was awarded to David Proudfoot in March 1891, at a cost of £43,090 and although Proudfoot died suddenly in the same month, the work commenced in April and was well advanced by late September when Arthur Streeton arrived. Track formation and tunnelling had started to the west of where the RAAF base stands at the summit of Lapstone Hill and on the eastern side, the rail cutting was being pushed up what is now known as Tunnel Gully, towards the site of the eastern entrance of the tunnel. This necessitated an excavation of some 10 to 15 metres deep in solid sandstone and the diversion of the creek to keep the formation relatively dry. Once the cutting had reached its designated location, the tunnel would be driven to meet the western end which was achieved on 11th May 1892. The deviation was finally open for traffic on 18th December 1892.

When Streeton arrived in late September 1891 he seems to have stayed in Penrith and travelled to Glenbrook to find his subjects. However, he found this situation uncongenial and probably inconvenient and he wrote to Roberts from "Daisy Cottage" Glenbrook dated December 1891 saying:

'I firmly believe I'm settled at last. This morning I left my cottage in Penrith and by the 11 train came up here...'

He rented the four room cottage for £1 a week, probably close to the first Glenbrook Station, now the site of the Caltex Service Station at Cross Street where the old Station Master's cottage still stands. He mentions a creek

close by: *'... a crystal virgin brook with a rocky bottom...'* most likely the upper reaches of Knapsack Creek, just to the north of what is now the Great Western Highway.

Later he wrote to Fred McCubbin providing another clue as to where his cottage was and a general description of the construction: *'... I follow the railway line for ¾ of a mile through a canyon or gully where the big brown men are toiling all the hot day excavating and making a tunnel ... I've past the west mouth and am now arrived at my subject, the other mouth, which gapes like a great dragon's mouth at the perfect flood of hot sunlight'*. However, what he saw there, as will be seen, was not the eastern mouth of the tunnel but the cutting, which was to lead up to it.

At that time there was no earthmoving machinery of any kind, necessitating the employment of a large workforce which lived in a nearby camp along with wives and children, in all perhaps two to three hundred people.

'And there are about a hundred tents on all pretty close together (as a rule) big strong young chaps, some with wives and children. On one tent pole was fixed a beautiful waratah, on another a girl's great big yellow straw hat. A regular 'Roaring camp' splendid and they're cutting a tunnel out of the rock all yellow, and little machinery to help...'

Streeton spent a lot of time in the camp yarning and smoking, getting to know the men and their families, many of whom he says, were English or Irish. He was pleasantly reminded of the various artists' camps he knew and to his surprise they took an intelligent interest in his work.

As befits a 'roaring camp' there was quite a bit of sly grog and the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 7.9.1891 reported a raid by Sergeant Thornton and two constables, armed with search warrants, seizing numerous casks of beer and whisky. Amazingly, casks of beer were found underground, beneath a dog kennel with a savage dog chained to it which the Sergeant 'after some little difficulty managed to pacify'. Thornton was obviously a very observant and resourceful servant of the Crown and worthy of his rank!

The principal tools were picks, shovels, crowbars, sledge hammers, hand drills, blocks and tackles and most

importantly, fuses, dynamite and blasting powder, without which the construction of railways around the world would have been impossible. Drilling for a blast was a laborious process in which one man held the drill while his mate struck it with a sledgehammer, the former turning it almost simultaneously for the next blow. Sometimes two men wielded hammers and teams of drillers would work together, maintaining a smooth even rhythm, born of long experience and perfect teamwork. When the required depth was reached, perhaps one or two metres, the charges were laid and fuses were lit. Then the ganger gave the warning cry: 'Fire, fire's on!' and all scrambled for safety.

After the blast, the rubble would be shovelled and manhandled into a railway truck and pushed away down the cutting on roughly laid rails. The ragged sides of the excavation would then be cut back to form a roughly uniform wall, such as we see in many cuttings along the Western Line. Even now, the telltale pick marks are visible as a testimony to the immense physical effort of construction, each one as personal and as immediate as a pencil mark on paper.

When the work began in May 1891, the weather was probably cool but at the time Streeton arrived later in the year the weather was fine and hot. Based on the daily weather reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for Mount Victoria, Katoomba and Sydney during the second week of December 1891, temperatures at Lapstone probably hovered around 95°F (or 35°C) moderating later in the week with a thunderstorm and some light rain followed by a cool SW change. This is the familiar weather pattern of an early Sydney summer and recognisable in the depiction of the dry heat and the deep blue skies in *Fire's On!* Life wasn't easy in the bush and in addition to the heat and physical discomfort, he writes to McCubbin that he had to give up painting one day because of a bout of diarrhoea. Most poetically he describes the attack: 'Soon a darkness fills my soul as the black demon approaches me

and grins as he tightens his grip on my poor stomach. He is called diarrhoea.'

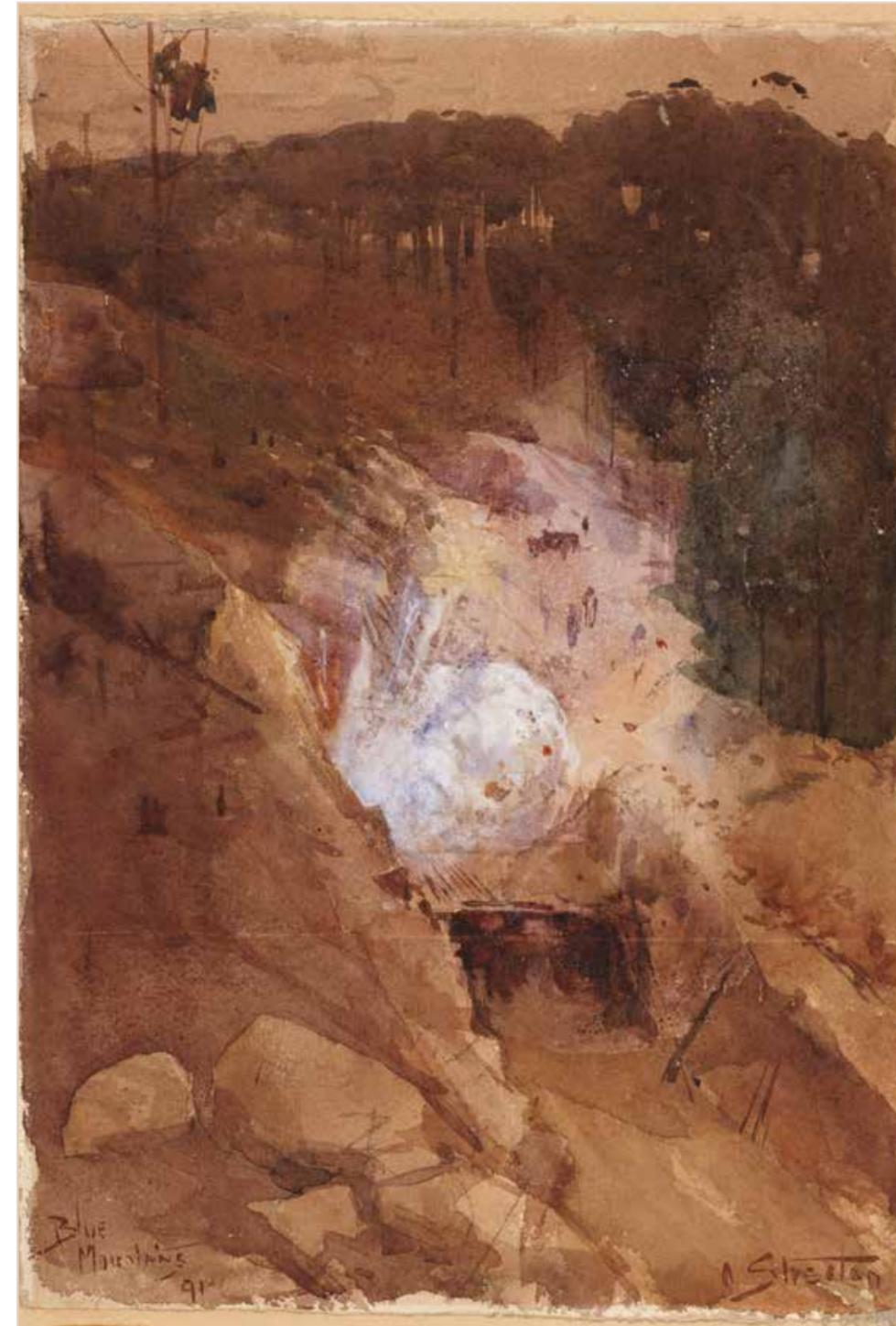
Soon after Streeton arrived he writes of making a watercolour from Lucasville, a small stop on the middle road of the Lapstone Zig Zag with a commanding view of the Cumberland Plain. He was new to the medium and while he expresses some dissatisfaction with it, he persevered. As time went by, he became more focused on the excavations of the Lapstone Hill Deviation, and in a letter to Frederick McCubbin, dated October 1891, Streeton describes the scene very much as we see it in *Fire's On!*

'There is a cutting through the vast hill of bright sandstone; the walls of rock run high up and are crowned with gums bronze green, and they look small being so high up, and the deep blue azure heaven where a crow sails along like a dot with its melancholy hopeless cry... long drawn like the breath of a dying sheep. Right below me the men work, some with shovels, others drilling for a blast. I work on the watercolour, drying too quickly and the ganger cries, 'Fire, fire's on!'; all the men drop their tools and scatter and I nimbly skip off my perch and hide behind a big safe rock. A deep hush is everywhere -- then 'holy smoke!', what a boom of thunder shakes the rock and me. It echoes through the hills and dies away 'mid the crashing of tons of rock; some lumps fly hundreds of feet sometimes and fall and fly everywhere among the trees; and then a thick cloud laden with fumes of the blasting powder. All at work once more --- more drills; the rock is a perfect blaze of white, orange, cream and blue streaks where the blast has worked its force. Work awhile then again 'Fire, fire's on!' and off we go and work again.'

In a letter to Theodore Finke, in which he does give the date, 14.10.1891, he included some little sketches of the camp and most importantly, the excavation of the cutting, which in a general way is very similar to the composition of *Fire's On!* Probably about that time he also made a watercolour of the same composition which was given the title of *Blue Mountain Tunnel* and it was exhibited at the NSW Art Gallery from 24.12.1891 to 1.1.1892. From this we can probably infer that, allowing for transport and framing, it would have been painted prior to the end of October 1891. Only very recently the Art Gallery of NSW acquired a watercolour titled *Blue Mountains* and annotated 'Sketch for *Fire's On!* Blasting on the Hill' and here we see the basic structure of the big painting becoming quite specific to the point of showing a blast, although still lacking the human drama of *Fire's On!*

In these three compositions we see Streeton searching for a narrative for his big work and in the first two he seems to have indulged in a little bit of invention. In

Blue Mountain Tunnel pen drawing contained in a letter to Theodore Finke Cat No MLA2478 Mitchell Library. The flower top left is actually printed onto the stationery as can be seen in other letters from Streeton held by the State Library.



A deep hush is everywhere — then 'holy smoke!'; what a boom of thunder shakes the rock and me. It echoes through the hills and dies away 'mid the crashing of tons of rock; some lumps fly hundreds of feet sometimes and fall and fly everywhere among the trees; and then a thick cloud laden with fumes of the blasting powder. All at work once more — more drills; the rock is a perfect blaze of white, orange, cream and blue streaks where the blast has worked its force. Work awhile then again 'Fire, fire's on!' and off we go and work again.'

Arthur Streeton (Australia; England; Australia, b.1867, d.1943) *Blue Mountains* 1891, watercolour, opaque white on ivory paper, 34.5 x 23.8 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales Purchased with funds provided by Don Mitchell Bequest Fund and the Australian Prints, Drawings and Watercolours Benefactors Fund 2014 Photo: AGNSW 99.2014

both the sketch in the letter to Finke and *Blue Mountain Tunnel*, he has clearly indicated the mouth of the tunnel as a dark arched shape in the foreground. Possibly he was anticipating that this was where the tunnel's mouth would be and as many residents of the Blue Mountains have found over the long years of the widening of the Great Western Highway, it is often difficult for the casual

observer to understand the sequences of construction in large engineering projects. This is a fairly minor point perhaps but the idea of the tunnel was obviously central to his concept of the picture when he first arrived and it seems that this initial confusion has led to a minor misunderstanding regarding the tunnel that exists to this day. In order to understand this, we should consider what

Blue Mountain and *Fire's On!* tells us about the process of construction of the Lapstone Hill Deviation.

We are looking down into a cutting of vivid white sandstone in which there is a black square of shadow under a stage and just beneath the stage is a little rectangle of light showing the space between the stage and the face of the cutting beyond. One then realises that this dark shadow cannot be the mouth of the tunnel, as has often been supposed, even though that is where Streeton had indicated it to be in *Blue Mountain Tunnel*. The stage is there so that the truckloads of spoil from the area in the background where the cutting will eventually be excavated and now being stripped of its overburden of vegetation and topsoil, can be shovelled or tipped into another truck waiting below the stage and then transported further down the cutting on roughly laid tracks.

Smoke is drifting skywards from a blast that has just brought down tons of rock as the cutting slowly advanced towards the surveyed location of the eastern portal of the tunnel in the background and so clearly the inclusion of the tunnel's mouth in the picture was not possible at that stage, as the cutting probably did not reach that position until the early part of 1892 when Streeton was back in Melbourne. Tellingly in *Blue Mountain*, unlike *Blue Mountain Tunnel* there is no tunnel but there is the stage and a depiction of the blast and in that respect it is much closer to *Fire's On!*, indeed it is annotated on the reverse as a sketch for it.

The picture is listed in the AGNSW website as *Fire's On! Lapstone Tunnel* but as we have seen, the painting speaks for itself. There is no tunnel as yet and the focus is on the four men carrying the dead or possibly injured man on a litter over the tracks, while a group of workers look on a little further down the cutting. Whether he was James Kipling, Edward Brown or 'Darkie' Wright or perhaps all three conflated in the painter's mind, we don't know. In the background, a mass of men, perhaps having heard the cry 'killed', are converging on the cutting, no doubt wondering which of their comrades is the victim.

Railway construction was undeniably dangerous and the possibility of death and injury was high and remained so for many years to come. Quite apart from the primitive technology of the day and unlike our own times when WH&S is an all-pervasive fact, there was a general acceptance that death and injury was the price of progress. With the title now taking the form of the ganger's warning, 'fire's on!', which Streeton would have heard several times a day for many weeks, there can be no doubt that he is drawing our attention to the constant companion of the workforce, sudden death or injury and it would seem that to emphasise the vulnerability of the

workers and their immense physical achievement, he dramatically increased the sense of scale of the cutting and the surrounding landscape.

In just three months to the end of December 1891, three men were killed and three were badly injured in the construction of the Lapstone Deviation. The deaths as reported in *The Nepean Times* were all the results of blasting accidents due to the unreliable nature of fuses and powder trails, the inherent dangers of working with explosives and the general lack of safety precautions as we would understand them today. About a month after Streeton's arrival, on 28.10.1891, James Kipling was killed in the cutting in Tunnel Gully when a charge unexpectedly exploded. There is no mention of this death in Streeton's letters, but less than three weeks later, in a letter to Roberts postmarked 17.12.91, he describes the death of Edward Brown, killed the day before when a charge exploded prematurely: '... and now I hear 'Fire, fire's on! ... BOOM and then rumbling of rock. The navy under the rock with me & watching says Man killed – He runs down the sheltered side & cries 'man killed!'; another takes it up & now it runs all over camp. More shots & crashing rock we peep over & he lies all hidden bar his legs...'

Then, two days later on Friday 18.12.1891, Edward or 'Darkie' Wright was badly injured in another blasting accident in the same cutting:

'One man blown to awful death here – few days ago – his funeral next day mid the terrific hail and purple striped thunder very sad - & next morning another man had lit two mines & he was retreating for safety, & a rock fell rolling on his legs pinned him to the earth & there he lay with the burning fuse on each side – his legs crushed and two ribs broken ... Darkie Wright – 7 bob a day – the hardest worker in the country for the money I'll bet – he may live yet – poor chap...'

Finally, after Streeton had left Glenbrook and was returning to Melbourne, Thomas Lawless was killed in a blasting accident inside the tunnel on 30.1.1892 while two more were injured. If Streeton wanted to make a statement about the supposed dignity of labour as Roberts had done with *Shearing the Rams* and *The Golden Fleece*, then here was a far more compelling and truthful image than perhaps he would have imagined when he first travelled to the Blue Mountains.

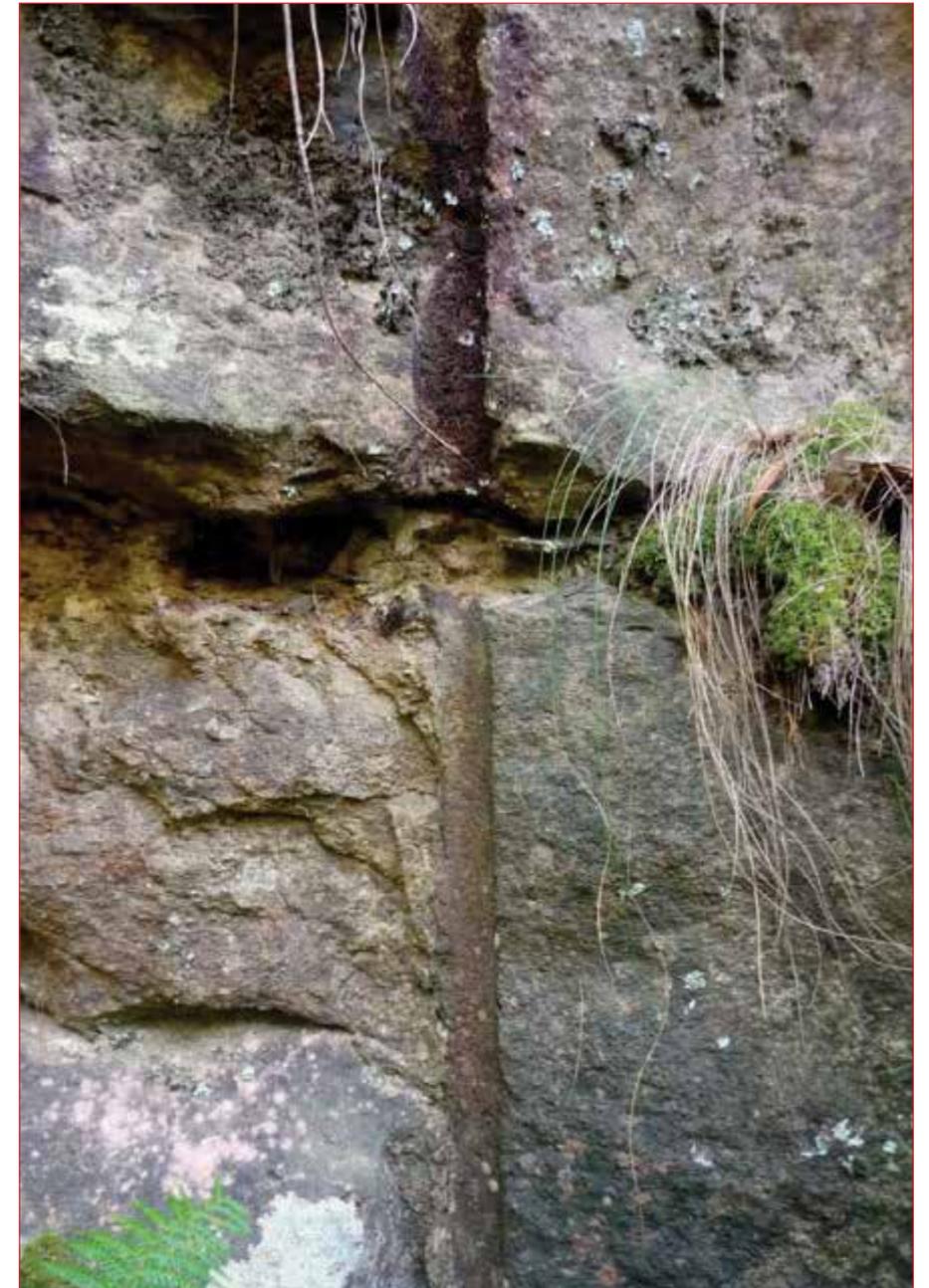
In addition to these occupational hazards, it seems that the contractors were also failing in their responsibilities in other ways. In *The Nepean Times* of Penrith, dated 14.11.1891, mention is made of 'large numbers of labouring men working on railway works who have been admitted to the Nepean Cottage Hospital' and goes on

to state that despite the fact that the contractors of the Lapstone Hill Deviation, Messrs. Proudfoot, had deducted sixpence a week from the men's wages to be placed in a general hospital fund, the injured men had received nothing and the contractors stood accused of pocketing the money when the men left their employ.

This was still the era of laissez faire capitalism and they were difficult and depressed times. Much later in mid 1892, long after Streeton had departed, Messrs. Proudfoot decided to reduce the wages of the remaining workers on site by the then considerable sum of one shilling per day and in consequence the workers went on strike. However, the men sent in to replace them were unable to perform the work and in the end the skilled men retained their old wages, although the unskilled labourers did not.

Through the letters we can trace the timeframe for the painting of *Fire's On!* and the preliminary works. In his letter of 14.10.1891 to Theodore Finke he says 'I must pull up my socks & paint a big 6' coloury gem "The Tunnel's Mouth" and includes a pen and ink sketch in which he is clearly still thinking of the tunnel as the main focus, so similar to the watercolour *Blue Mountain Tunnel* which, as we have seen, was possibly painted around the same time. In a letter dated 6.11.1891, referred to by R.H. Cross in *Tom Roberts: Father of Australian Landscape Painting*, Streeton tells Roberts: 'I've stretched my big canvas on a rock...'; further demonstrating his ultimate intention. Then in the letter dated 17.12.1891, in which he describes the death of Brown, he declares: 'I look up & down at my subject – is it worth painting? Why of course damn it all! – that is providing I'm capable of translating my impression to the canvas.' Finally, writing to Roberts some time in December he says: 'I've

Still visible on the sides of the cutting are the drill holes for blasting, leaving one to conjecture which of them caused the deaths of James Kipling, Edward Brown or the injury of 'Darkie' Wright.



..it was inclined to be wet and so locomotives climbing the grade under a heavy load ran the risk of slipping to a stand in the tunnel and the consequent danger of an engineman's worst nightmare, death by asphyxiation

started my big canvas 6' x 4' on a rock (like an eagle's eye), so it seems that *Fire's On!* was probably started around late November or early December and depicts the death of Edward Brown, the injury of 'Darkie' Wright or a combination of both. It is difficult to know exactly when Streeton left Glenbrook but it would appear that the painting was finished by the end of December or perhaps even in early January 1892, always with the possibility of further adjustments in the studio. He wrote to Roberts on 26.1.1892 from Sydney, saying that he was 'going up to the Mountains to collect my properties, then to Melbourne by steamer'. *Fire's On!* returned with him and was exhibited, as will be seen, in Melbourne in May 1892.

Fire's On! is one of those paintings that gathers meaning with the passage of time. In it we see an ancient landscape still new to Europeans, complete with tiny, delicate dots of blazing red Gynea Lilies, under the oppressive heat of a December day. The hill is brutally dissected by the great white gash of

the cutting and the tiny figures, together with the huge size of the canvas, enhances the sense of drama and devastation of the landscape.

Unlike Roberts' paintings of rural labour, *Fire's On!* is uncompromising and unsweetened by any sense of romance. It is very tempting to wonder if Streeton intended an element of political or social comment, but while hindsight more than a century later can be a very appealing exercise, it is difficult to know the truth. Clearly he was fascinated by the spectacular landscape of the new cutting and he admired the physical strength, skill and courage of the men. He enjoyed their company very much and he was certainly familiar with the harshness of their working conditions but any romantic notions of labour must surely have dispersed with the smoke of the blasts that caused the deaths and injury. Perhaps his final statement could be interpreted as a social progressive one. Later in life, even though he had become more artistically conservative, he was an early and very vocal environmental advocate, protesting against logging in the Dandenong Ranges where he lived until his death in 1943.

Perhaps the best interpretation of his intentions at Glenbrook can be found in a comment in *The Age*

on 27.5.1892 on the occasion of the Exhibition of the Victorian Artists' Society:

'A striking picture is that of Mr. Arthur Streeton's *Fire's On* – not merely on account of the light and force which characterises it, but because of its new world associations and the spirit of innovations it breathes ... such a subject of the blasting of a tunnel will strike many people as unpicturesque and inartistic, but it is only because they will not realise that in reflecting the contemporaneous life and activity of a new continent and a new race, Australian Art will most surely find its keynote...' No mention is made of the loss of life or injury in this review, but nevertheless it is clear that the sense of truth and reality that had so motivated Streeton ensured an enduring reputation for *Fire's On!* as one of the great Australian paintings.

Streeton returned to Melbourne in January 1892 but over the next five years before finally sailing to England in 1897 to further his career, he spent much of his time in Sydney and the Nepean region. *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might*, *The River*, *Grey Day on the Hawkesbury* together with *Fire's On!* are amongst his most evocative and popular works. *Fire's On!* was bought by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1893 for £150, a very considerable sum at the time, largely through the persuasive efforts of Gallery Trustee Julian Ashton. This was a great boost for Streeton in the depressed days of the 1890s and certainly helped to cement his reputation. In 1894 the Gallery acquired another, much smaller Streeton, *The Fireman's Funeral*, *George Street*, a sombre painting of a funeral procession moving past the Sydney Town Hall on a miserable grey, wet day. It is a very different picture to *Fire's On!* but perhaps there is some relationship between the two with the death of yet another worker.

As for the Lapstone Hill Deviation, it proved to be of limited success. Its tunnel was 693 yards (634 metres) in length and described a long S shape on the severe grade of 1:33', no easier than its predecessor, the old Lapstone Zig Zag. To make matters worse it was inclined to be wet and locomotives climbing the grade under a heavy load ran the risk of slipping to a stand in the tunnel and the consequent danger of an engineman's worst nightmare, death by asphyxiation. In cases when the train could not be restarted, it was backed down the grade, out of the tunnel and divided, so that the first section could be taken on to Glenbrook after which the locomotive would run back for the rear section, resulting in long delays. Over the years the Western Line was progressively realigned and converted to double track and by the early 1900s the remaining single track section between Emu Pains and Blaxland, together with the notorious Lapstone Tunnel, created a severe bottleneck for the ever-increasing passenger and goods traffic.

In July 1911 a workforce of fourteen hundred men with the aid of steam winches and a Ruston Steam Navy, the first of its kind in New South Wales, commenced work on the third railway route up the escarpment, the long, double tracked and very spectacular Glenbrook Gorge Deviation. It was an enormous undertaking that completely dwarfed the Lapstone Hill Deviation of 1891 and sadly, by the time it was opened for traffic on 11.5.1913, four more lives had been lost. While it added some distance to the climb from Emu Plains to Blaxland Station, it was on the very moderate grade of 1:60 and is in use today, although the Western line over the Blue Mountains still remains one of the steepest mainlines in the world. One wonders what Streeton would have made of the construction but by the time it was opened, he had been living in England for sixteen years, trying to come to grips with the soft tonality of the damp English atmosphere and its manicured countryside, so far removed from the vivid clarity of sunlight and the sense shadows of the Australian landscape.

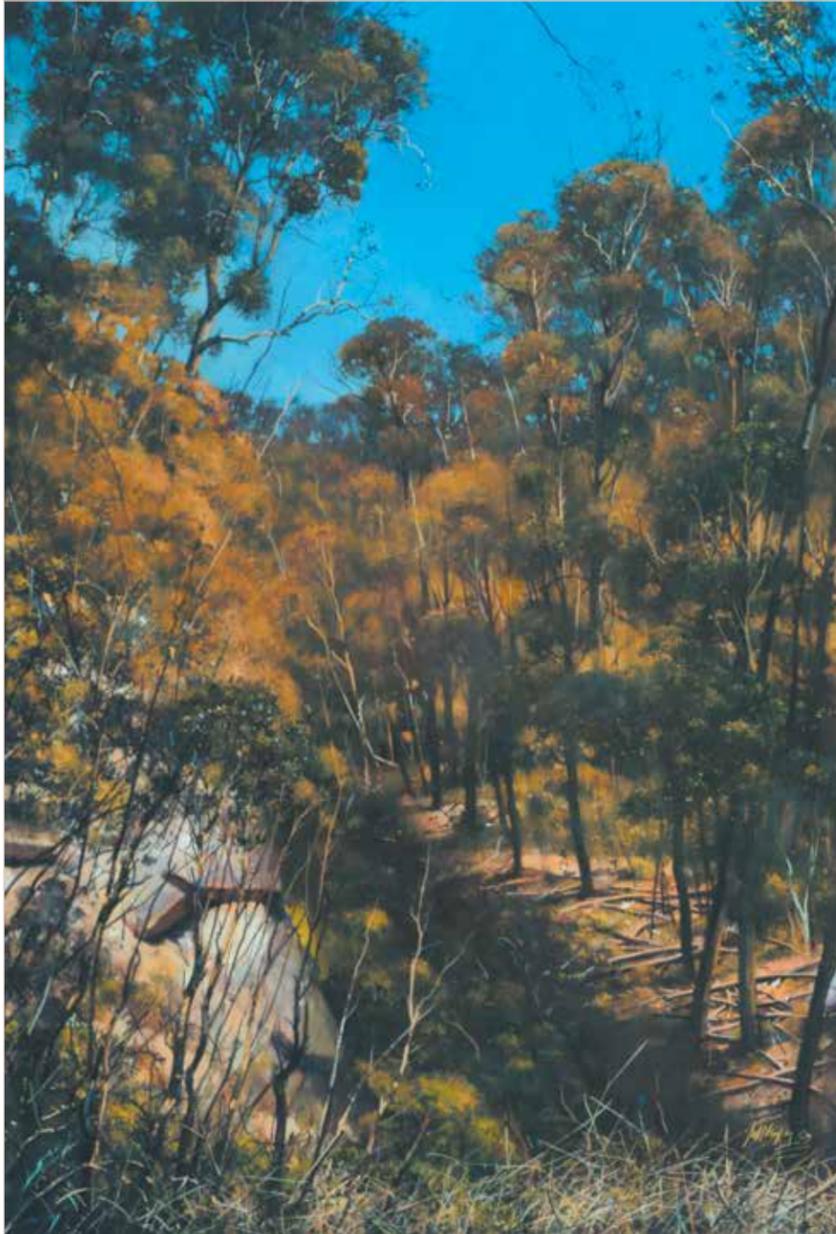
When the Glenbrook Gorge Deviation was finally opened in May 1913, silence descended on the Lapstone Tunnel cutting. The tracks were pulled up and if it was remembered at all, it was mainly because of Streeton's

great painting. The tunnel still had its uses though, first as a storage facility for chemical weapons during World War II and then as a mushroom farm until early 2016.

In 2004 I visited the old Lapstone cutting in order to locate the spot where Streeton had painted his picture. I first looked, as so many others had, in the immediate vicinity of the tunnel's entrance, thinking that it was the subject of the picture but it was immediately obvious that it was far too close to the top of the gully and nothing fitted Streeton's composition. Then, by referring to the painting and one of Streeton's letters, I found a spot about 100 metres from the tunnel's entrance where the side of the cutting dropped down to meet the rail bed opposite a small side gully.

Streeton wrote to Roberts, postmarked 17.12.1891: 'I descended and reascended the opposite side up to my shading, shelving sandstone rock, perched right up ... all is serene as I work and peg away; retiring under the rock a bit when they light any shots...' Looking up, I saw a prominent rock ledge and scrambled up to it. At first I had difficulty in reconciling the scene in front of me, but I soon realised that this was the correct location. While the scene was now filled with saplings and overgrown





Jeff Rigby: Tunnel Gully Creek, 2003,
gouache on Fabriano paper

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Land Out of Time, Carolynne Skinner, Oz Arts 2004
Conquering the Blue Mountains, Mark Langdon, Everleigh Press, 2006
Australian Impressionism, Terrance Lane, NGV, 2007
The Nepean Times, Trove, 31.10.1891, 19.12.1891 and 6.2.1892
Sydney Morning Herald, Trove 7.9.1891, December 1891
Letters A. Streeton to T. Roberts, The Mitchell Library, ML A2478
Blasting <http://www.theodora.com/encyclopedia/b2/blasting.html>

with lantana, I could see that the left hand side of the cutting and the rising bank of the little side gully coincided perfectly with the boulder-studded foreground of Streeton's picture. I could also clearly see the incline of the right hand side of the cutting, which is so prominent in the painting. It was an interesting experience to stand there and imagine the 24 year old Streeton, one hundred and thirteen years before, working on his 6' x 4' canvas in the heat of early summer. His immense talent was at its peak and no doubt like most young men of his age, he enjoyed a sense of confidence and invincibility.

Now, in 2016, the cutting is even more choked with vegetation than ever and on a recent visit I found no trace of Streeton's view from his rocky perch. As I walked up the cutting I sank into carpets of wandering jew, pools of rank water and deep, sucking mud. Still visible on the sides of the cutting are the drill holes for blasting, leaving one to conjecture which of them caused the deaths of James Kipling, Edward Brown or the injury of 'Darkie' Wright.

I had to push through great tangles of crofton weed, honeysuckle, banks of lantana and privet before I eventually came to the eastern portal of the tunnel. The elegant oval shaped entrance, now heavily graffitied, was bricked up long ago except for a door whose grille has been pushed aside. The floor of the tunnel is submerged in water, which recedes eerily into the blackness. With the incessant roar of the Great Western Highway overhead, the old cutting is a far cry from Streeton's heroic scene of heat and dust. Perhaps this is only to be expected now that Glenbrook is virtually a suburb of Sydney, not the isolated village of 1891 at the edge of a great wilderness.

The construction of the Western Railway over the Blue Mountains occasioned what would now be considered an unconscionable number of deaths and injuries. The Lapstone Hill Deviation was the scene of three of those deaths, which transformed the narrative for Arthur Streeton's great picture, *Fire's On!* One can only hope that efforts can be made to restore the site in recognition of this, to a state which Streeton might recognise and which the public could enjoy.

Jeff Rigby

Present day photographs Jeff Rigby

