

ELISABETH FINDLAY

A Colonial Conundrum: *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*

Abstract

This paper presents a detailed analysis of the perplexing painting *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. Unfortunately, there is little information on the provenance of the portrait, including the identity of the artist, sitter and patron. It will be argued that it is the work of Augustus Earle and that it is a portrait of Daniel Cooper II and was commissioned by his uncle, also named Daniel Cooper. The aim of this article is to start to unravel the ambiguities of the image, and I suggest that the painting is a strong statement on the rights of freed convicts in Australian colonial society.

Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo (Fig. 1) is a baffling painting. Odd and idiosyncratic, for many years it has been surrounded by conjecture and debate. This paper will attempt to explain some of the enigmatic qualities of *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* and demonstrate that even in a portrait as seemingly innocent as a boy feeding a bird we can detect references to the political disputes of the era. It will be argued that the painting is the work of the travel artist Augustus Earle, who arrived in Sydney in May 1825 and left over three years later in October 1828. During his sojourn, Earle gained a keen understanding of local politics; his paintings, drawings and engravings reveal that he was involved in a range of issues surrounding social and class divisions.¹ He was aware of the political manoeuvres in the fledgling colony and I will contend that this work was immersed in the power struggles taking place in Sydney.

At its simplest level, the painting depicts a boy holding a banana that he feeds to a sulphur-crested cockatoo, which sits on a perch on the far left. As was the custom at the time for young boys, he is wearing a dress and knickerbockers, indicating that he was aged between five and seven.² His dark clothes may indicate that he is in mourning and that there may have been a recent death in the family. In a somewhat awkward stance, the boy strides purposely over a large red cap on the floor (far too big to be his) and he peers out of the painting with a confident and self-possessed air. Even though he is young, he seems much more preoccupied with what is happening outside of the canvas than with feeding the bird. The backdrop is resolutely stark. The deep tonality allows for the walls and floors almost to merge and the interior firmly encloses the boy.

¹ Earle travelled to New Zealand from October 1827 to May 1828, as well as venturing to inland NSW during his stay. For an account of Earle's time in Australia see Hackforth-Jones, 1980, as well as Bowker, 2004, pp. 29-37 and 107-112; Buscombe, 1978, pp. 46-59; Butler, 2002, pp. 114-126; Hackforth-Jones and Kerr; Spencer, 1966; Thomas, 2008.

² [Victoria and Albert Museum], n.d.



Fig. 1 - Augustus Earle (attr.), *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*, c. 1828, oil on canvas, 90.3 x 69.0 cm, Adelaide, M. J. M. Carter Collection, Art Gallery of South Australia.

Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo only became widely known when sold at auction by George Cowlishaw at Sotheby's in Sydney, 1984.³ Unfortunately, it is not signed or dated and since the late 1980s, there has been considerable speculation over its patronage. When the painting arrived at the Art Gallery of South Australia on long-term loan in 1987, both the identity of the boy and the patron of the painting were still unknown. Ron Radford and Jane Hylton have attributed the work to John Lewin but there is little evidence to support this supposition.⁴ Lewin was amongst the first professional artists to arrive in Australia as a free-settler and he did advertise as a portrait painter and a miniaturist. He was, however, primarily a natural history painter and the vast majority of his surviving work depicts the flora and fauna of New South Wales. He produced some watercolour likenesses of Tahitians and Indigenous Australians but there is no proof of him actually working on portrait commissions or producing oil portraits such as *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. Moreover, and although there is evidence that Lewin was working in oils as early as 1812, the vast majority of his works are watercolours (it was only in the mid to late 1820s, after Lewin had died, that oil portraits start to proliferate in the colony). If *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* is by Lewin, it would be a striking exception to his oeuvre rather than in keeping with his other work. In a review published in *Art Monthly Australia* in 1995, Andrew Sayers also rejected the Lewin attribution, arguing that the painting was 'by a completely different hand' from that of Earle.⁵ Sayers' argument was based on stylistic comparisons with Earle's other works, although in this short article he did not pinpoint exactly what these stylistic differences are. Anita Callaway has also stated that the Earle attribution is 'surprising', but does not elaborate on why.⁶

Patricia McDonald and Barry Pearce were the first to propose that the painting is by Augustus Earle: an attribution that I argue is still the most convincing.⁷ There are several reasons to not dismiss the Earle attribution and revisit McDonald and Pearce's original proposition. Firstly, there are compelling historical and associational grounds for suggesting the image is by Earle. There is widespread agreement that the costume dates the work to no later than the 1820s. In the early years of settlement, there were very few portraitists working in Australia. There have been suggestions that it may not have been painted in Australia but the cockatoo seems to be a clear reference to Sydney, implying that it was painted here.⁸ The only other portraitists residing in Sydney at this time were John Lewin (discussed above), Richard Read Sr. and Richard Read Jr. Like Lewin, the Reads primarily worked in watercolour and also on a smaller scale than *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. Once again, such a painting would have been an exception for these artists rather than a continuation of their usual portrait productions.

Secondly, the work also exhibits certain stylistic affinities with Earle's other oil paintings. A comparison with key portraits such as that of *Ann Piper and her Children*

³ See Sotheby's, 1984.

⁴ Radford and Hylton, 1995, p. 28.

⁵ Sayers, 1995, pp. 29-30.

⁶ Callaway, 2000, p. 14.

⁷ McDonald and Pearce, 1988, p. 54.

⁸ It has been suggested that the portrait was not painted in Australia but this seems unlikely. As I demonstrate later in the article there is ample evidence that the patron came from Sydney.

([Fig. 2](#)) and *Sir Thomas Brisbane* ([Fig. 3](#)) reveals many similarities, including Earle's propensity to tilt the floor forward; his awkwardness in painting figures (the Piper children reveal the same diffident handling as in the cockatoo painting); and the dependence on items of red and yellow to lift the colour palette. One of the most striking parallels is Earle's penchant for arraying his sitters with very specific props and attributes. McDonald and Pearce convincingly suggest that Earle's portraits can be divided into two groups: the 'head and shoulders' likenesses against a plain background, and the full-length depictions that rely heavily on symbolism.⁹ *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* falls into the latter category. As we can see in *Ann Piper and her Children* ([Fig. 2](#)), the scene is full of books, furniture, musical instruments: the older boy even carries a bow as the group sit comfortably inside their home of Henrietta Villa. Governor Brisbane ([Fig. 3](#)) is also surrounded by all sorts of paraphernalia. This shows the influence of Earle's uncle, the American portraitist Ralph Earl (Augustus added the 'e' to his own name later). While Earle was born and trained in England, his work is arguably dominated by the influence of the American portraitists.¹⁰

Augustus and his uncle had much in common and we can see in his work that Augustus was emulating his quite famous uncle. For instance, a comparison of the full length portrait of *Captain John Piper* 1826 ([Fig. 4](#)) and Ralph Earl's *Daniel Boardman* 1789 ([Fig. 5](#)) reveals very similar compositions: both sitters are placed on the far right, both carry their hats in their left hand and present themselves with a sense of elongated arrogance. Ralph Earl was also recognised for producing portraits that included landscape settings that related specifically to the lives of his sitters; his interiors were decorated with furniture, professional attributes, books, and other possessions that helped to individualise his patrons' identities.¹¹ A similar individualisation marks *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. One of the most telling props used in *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* is the cap on the floor, which is almost a hallmark of Earle's work. The cap appears in other paintings by Earle, such as his self-portrait *Solitude, Watching the Horizon at Sun Set* 1824 ([Fig. 6](#)), in which Earle depicts himself in a similar cap, and in the shipping scene *Scudding before a Heavy Westerly off the Cape* ([Fig. 7](#)) 1824.

Overall, there are many stylistic and historical reasons for agreeing with McDonald and Pearce's attribution. However, the lack of documentation has not only created problems in identifying the artist but has also caused difficulty in interpreting the iconography and symbols in *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. The peeled banana (with the peel resting in the dish the boy holds) and the bird are unusual and puzzling. McDonald and Pearce have noted that the banana was seen as 'one of the noblest and most lovely of vegetable

⁹ McDonald and Pearce, p. 1988, p. 54.

¹⁰ As is often the case with Australian portraiture, the American influence is much more substantial than it is often recognised. Augustus Earle had many family connections with America. He was the son of an American portrait painter, James Earl, referred to as a portrait painter to the Loyalists who fled America after the revolution. Ralph Earl was an even more eminent portrait painter who traveled to London in 1783 and studied under Benjamin West. While his father died young and he never would have met Ralph Earl, Augustus had travelled to America and must have had a keen awareness of the work and success of such close relatives. For a brief discussion of these connections see Buscombe, 1978, pp. 56-57.

¹¹ See Kornhauser, 1991, pp. 10-15 for a discussion of Ralph Earl's work, where it is also argued that this attention to detail comes via John Singleton Copley.

productions' and the cockatoo is a clear reference to the colony of New South Wales, where the birds could frequently be found.¹² Both the banana and the bird have more generally been read as references to the exotic. However, and despite these explanations, the perplexing quality of the painting remains, suggesting a much more contrived and layered image than some critics have previously indicated.

Feeding a banana to a cockatoo is rather beguiling. As cockatoos do not eat bananas, it is unlikely that this scene actually took place: the composition can be understood as a kind of fancy. Indeed, it is strange to include a banana at all; there were no bananas grown in New South Wales in the 1820s and the Australian banana industry had not yet been founded. Bananas were also notoriously difficult to transport and so Earle may have based the image on his recollections from other travels. Moreover, at the time of painting, the banana had not yet taken on its 'noble' connotations as argued by McDonald and Pearce: their reference to von Humboldt's *Aspects of Nature* was published in 1849, some twenty years after the dating of this portrait.¹³ So why does a painting with such a strong Australian reference as a cockatoo also include, and indeed focus on, a banana? If Earle had wanted to create a sense of the exotic there was a plethora of Australian fauna and flora that he might have drawn upon to this end. So why choose a banana as the major motif?

It cannot be coincidental that around the same time that this image was painted, in the mid-to-late 1820s, banana plants were exported for the very first time from Southern China, via Mauritius, to England.¹⁴ The naturalist Charles Telfair had introduced the banana to Mauritius from southern China in 1826 and three years later sent plants to England where they were presented by a Mr Barclay of Burryhill to Lord Cavendish, the Duke of Devonshire (hence the Cavendish banana). The plants were successfully cultivated by Joseph Paxton, who was in charge of the Chatsworth greenhouses. These events open up numerous lines of enquiry. For example: is the banana a reference to the Cavendish family? A thorough search of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (where the patron of this work is most likely to be found), however, does not reveal anyone with connections to the Cavendish family living in Australia.¹⁵

McDonald and Pearce note that the Sydney of the mid-1820s was a 'very small, hermetic society' and it can be assumed that the boy belonged to a 'handful of well-connected

¹² McDonald and Pearce, p. 54.

¹³ See Smith, 1985, p. 212 for a discussion of von Humboldt's quote.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the banana transportation and history see Stover and Simmonds, 1987, pp. 114-116. I have been unable to find evidence of this story reported in either the *Sydney Gazette* or *The Australian* but this does not mean that news of the Cavendish banana did not reach Australia via other sources.

¹⁵ *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition* (<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/adbonline.htm>).

families'.¹⁶ Given this premise, it must be possible to identify who commissioned this work. Was the banana meant to conjure up associations with Mauritius? There were certainly many colonists who had traveled through or who had connections with this region. Or was the banana an oblique reference to the profession of the naturalist? Or perhaps it was intended to refer to the export trade and the success of exporters and importers in transporting such a fragile fruit as the Cavendish banana? It is this hypothesis - that the banana is a symbol of export - that opens up the most productive and plausible possibilities for interpretation.

Significantly, this reading is also supported and reinforced by Earle's inclusion of the cap on the floor underneath the boy. In Earle's work, this style of cap is very much associated with travel and shipping and in images such as *Scudding before a Heavy Westerly off the Cape* (Fig. 7) many of the travelers on deck wear similar caps. How might this relate to the patron of the work? Given that we know Earle tailored his portraits to his patrons, further investigation of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* reveals that there were many exporters living in Sydney in the 1820s who might have commissioned *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. Amongst them, only a small subset had children of the age of the boy in Earle's work. In narrowing down the group, the most likely patron of *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* is Daniel Cooper. He had the wealth, motive and opportunity to commission the portrait.¹⁷ While Cooper did not have children of his own, he did have a nephew in whom he vested a considerable amount of interest, funding his schooling in England and eventually leaving his fortune to him. The nephew was also called Daniel Cooper (Daniel Cooper II) and was born in July 1821, making him the right age for Earle's painting.

It can then be argued that Daniel Cooper II (later to be Sir Daniel Cooper) is the boy depicted in *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. What evidence do we have for Daniel Cooper being the patron? First of all, the Cooper estate was broken up in the late nineteenth century, and this would explain why the provenance of the picture has been lost.¹⁸ A comparison with a later photograph of Sir Daniel (Fig. 8) and a painting by Barrable (Fig. 9), while not providing resounding evidence that the boy is Daniel Cooper II, certainly leaves the possibility open. A comparison of the child in the painting and the man in the later works shows that they have common features: the large and high forehead, the close-set eyes, the wispy hair and pointed chin. Ultimately, however, my argument that the boy is Daniel Cooper II relies on fitting together a whole range of

¹⁶ McDonald and Pearce, 1988, p. 54. It has been suggested that the boy may be Alexander Septimus Piper, the son of Captain John Piper, see de Vries-Evans, 1988 (although according to the State Library of New South Wales catalogue Piper's son was named William Sloper Piper). There is no substantial reason for believing that this is who the boy is, apart from the fact that Earle did work for Piper. There are arguments, however, against this identification, not least why there is not the same documentation and provenance as the other Piper portraits. Also the restraint and lack of excess in *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* is not in keeping with the flamboyance and opulence of Piper's other commissions.

¹⁷ For information on the Cooper family see biographical cuttings on Daniel Cooper (NLA, Cooper) and Davidson, 1966 and Martin, 1969.

¹⁸ Daniel Cooper II left Sydney in 1861 and the estate was broken up later in the century – see NLA, Cooper.

pieces – an alignment of historical events, iconographic deductions and the right person being in the right place at the right time.

Daniel Cooper was a highly successful businessman who had formed a partnership with Solomon Levey. Their company of Cooper & Levey had a large shipping network and was involved in the trading of a wide variety of cargoes, everything from textiles to potatoes. As has been noted, this success was all the more spectacular because both Cooper and Levey had arrived in Australia as convicts.¹⁹ In 1815, Cooper had been convicted of stealing and was sentenced to transportation for life. Once settled in Australia, as well as becoming a successful businessman, Cooper was a very active member of colonial society and was particularly vocal in championing the rights of the freed convicts, the emancipists.

As an emancipist himself, Cooper had every reason to promote the rights of this group. The dividing lines and battles between the emancipists and the exclusionists (those who did not want to see emancipists admitted to society) were particularly intense in the 1820s and it is against this background that we can make sense of the commissioning of *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo*. When Brisbane arrived he was advised that he should make it as difficult for an emancipist to enter public office as a ‘camel to pass through an eye of a needle’.²⁰ The tension that existed around the issue of the emancipists continued into Governor Darling’s administration when he took over in 1825. The grievances of the emancipists were severely aggravated by the granting of a charter to Australian Agriculture Company in 1825. The company was given one million acres near Port Stephens and in return agreed to raise flocks of sheep and to introduce large capital and agricultural skills to the colony. The emancipists objected on the grounds that anti-emancipists such as Macarthur were behind the scheme and that the best land was taken over by the exclusionists.

Given the tenuous social position held by emancipists such as Daniel Cooper, the inclusion of the cockatoo may begin to make sense. The bird sits on a perch rather than within a cage. Is it significant that it is a free bird? Is the patron of the work making a statement about freed ex-convicts? If Cooper commissioned this work, the cockatoo may allude to his status as a freed man. Here, the banana may also double as not only a symbol of export but may be a subtle reference to the issue of slavery. In this reading I am grateful for Sarah Thomas’s suggestion that the banana may also allude to forced labour. In the 1820s, slavery was a pressing concern and one that Earle was well aware of from his stay in Brazil from 1820 to 1824. During this time Earle gained first hand experience and contact with African slaves working on banana and sugar plantations: an experience that and influenced his abolitionist stance. As Thomas has argued, in many of his works Earle made subtle comparisons between slavery and the convict system.²¹ It may be that the banana is acting as a call for freedom, just as freedom was being pursued in Brazil.

¹⁹ See Davidson for further details of the company.

²⁰ For an introduction to this historical background see Clark, pp. 53-69.

²¹ Thomas, 2008. Earle also depicted a Brazilian banana plantation in *The banana, Brazils, 1822*, watercolour, 18.4 x 12.7 cm, Canberra, National Library of Australia.

While *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* no doubt functioned as a sentimental piece for Cooper and he would have wanted an image of his nephew hanging in his home, it is also significant that he chose his nephew rather than himself to be depicted in this painting. The inclusion of the child, with all his references to the future, implies that the potential of Australia rests on the support and opportunities that should be given to the emancipists, just as the young Daniel Cooper II almost seems to stride up the bird perch as if it were a ladder.

To add another twist in this tale, it was Daniel Cooper who bought the estate of Captain Piper after he had fallen from grace and into bankruptcy in 1827.²² There can be little doubt that when acquiring the estate, that Cooper would have become aware of Earle's work, although in the small settlement of Sydney he had probably known of Earle well before then. There was considerable tension between Piper and Cooper; Piper had made his fortune through importers such as Cooper, as well as working to secure land for exclusionists, and Cooper bitterly criticised Piper's Chairmanship of the Bank of New South Wales. Further proof of Cooper's disdain for Piper emerges when we know that Cooper quickly stripped and auctioned off the contents of Piper's pride and joy, Henrietta Villa (the residence was eventually demolished by Daniel Cooper II and in 1856 he laid the foundations of his own Woollahra House). Within the context of this tension, it is tempting to read *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* as a statement of Cooper's victory and success as an emancipist, with the stripped down and stark interior a sober contrast to the flamboyant interior of *Ann Piper and Children* (Fig. 2) or the sweeping vistas in the grand full-scale portrait of Piper himself (Fig. 4).

In looking at Earle's part in this colonial intrigue, it can be argued that by 1827/28 Earle had every reason to produce a painting with an anti-exclusionist undertone. He had in the past worked for exclusionists²³ but in 1827 he himself had been refused a land grant.²⁴ He would have been able to empathise with the likes of Cooper. To add a final piece in this puzzle we have resounding evidence that Earle moved in the same circles as Cooper. He painted companion portraits of Barnett Levey and his wife (now in the Art Gallery of South Australia). Barnett Levey was the brother of Solomon Levey, with whom Cooper had formed Cooper & Levey and all of these men were closely inter-connected.²⁵ It is most likely that Earle entered this new group of patrons after returning from his visit to New Zealand in May 1828. It is possible that after his lucrative exclusionists commissions had dwindled, with Piper retiring to Bathurst in 1827, that he turned to the emancipists. If Earle only started working with the emancipist such as Levey and Cooper in 1828, this may be the most likely date for *Boy with Sulphur-Crest Cockatoo*.

²² See Barnard, 1967 for a discussion of Piper.

²³ Earle's patrons in Sydney came from diverse backgrounds. Another ex-convict he painted was Laurence Hynes Halloran. Another of his patrons, John Mackaness, was a supporter of the emancipists. Many others were exclusionists, including Blaxland, Brooks, Goulburn and Townson (many of whom were also members of the Benevolent Society and the Bible Society).

²⁴ Buscombe, 1978, p. 48.

²⁵ Bergman, 1967.

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In working through the conundrum of *Boy with Sulphur-Crest Cockatoo*, one mystery that remains is why Daniel Cooper II's appears to be in mourning dress. There simply is not enough biographical information on the Coopers to explain if someone may have died during this period and why he seems to be in mourning. Until further evidence come to light, *Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo* could be renamed *Portrait of Daniel Cooper II with a Banana* and, as McDonald and Pearce first proposed, should be attributed to Augustus Earle and be dated to about 1828. An interpretation of the banana in the boy's hand and the cap on the floor as symbols of export and shipping, leads to an identification of the young sitter as the nephew of the trader Daniel Cooper. The cockatoo sitting on the perch, not within a cage, is also highly emblematic and as argued here may allude to Daniel Cooper's status as an emancipist, a freed convict who believed strongly in his place in the future of Australia. The painting is redolent of the bitter battles taking place between the emancipists and the exclusionists in New South Wales in the 1820s. Through his nephew, Daniel Cooper may have made a defiant statement of his success as a freed convict and the rights of his heirs to their place in an expanding colonial society.

Dr Elisabeth Findlay is a lecturer in Art History at The Australian National University. She convenes a wide range of subjects, from Introduction to Art History through to The History of Portraiture, and in 2007 received a Carrick Award for excellence in teaching. Dr Findlay's main area of research is Australian colonial portraiture and she is currently working on a book on the history of portraiture in Australia from European settlement through to the end of the 19th century. She has published numerous articles on portraiture, as well as a monograph published by the National Library of Australia on the artist William Westall.

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