

John Gully

British/New Zealander, 1819 -1888

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On the Batton

1881, watercolour, 49.5x60.0 cm
Collection Christchurch Art Gallery Trust



About the work

The Batton River flows from the east side of the Batton Saddle, on the ridge of the Mt Arthur Range in the Nelson district, and flows into the Motueka River. The river was named after a runaway sailor boy, Batteyn Norton, who was employed to make a track through bush in this region. Over time his unusual Christian name underwent a change of spelling.

During the late 19th century colonial period, John Gully was one of New Zealand's foremost watercolour painters and he specialised in romantic and atmospheric scenes. This earned him the title of the 'New Zealand Turner', referring to the English artist, J.M.W. Turner (1775 -1851) who was famous for his atmospheric and romantic views of lofty mountains with mist-shrouded peaks. These were intended to evoke feelings of awe at the grandeur of nature.

Gully's work has often been called 'Romantic Realist'. He was particularly fond of mountain scenes and realistically captured New Zealand landforms and their particular geological features. His travels and work with the Lands and Survey department would probably have given him a deeper than usual understanding of their geomorphology. However, in the interests of the painting, these forms would be shifted, distances or heights exaggerated and a new foreground invented to suit his work.

The 19th century British watercolour landscape convention held that an artist should work from picturesque vantage

points in the natural scene but would then 'improve' and 'refine' them to make them suitable for a work of art. In *On the Batton Gully* has stressed the vast distance across the mountain valley and the majesty of the distant mountain range. He has used an aerial perspective, with the cooler blues of the far distance adding a note of remoteness and inaccessibility. Using very skilful, broad washes of colour, Gully has captured a sense of the clear bright light flooding the landscape.

This work was painted at a time when the 'empty' New Zealand landscape was being explored and surveyed for the purposes of European settlement. The small, unsheltered farmstead on the terraces in the middle distance enhances the sense of scale and distance. It also works as a symbol for the insignificance and fragility of man's presence in these isolated regions. The theme of the lonely life of the pioneer settler, struggling to create a farm in the wilderness, was a popular one in early New Zealand painting. The idea of the untamed land is here reinforced by the rough grazing and the cattle painted into the foreground.

Gully travelled extensively in New Zealand, sketching and painting scenes directly from nature, which he would then work into larger, more finished paintings back in his studio.

On The Batton was presented to the Canterbury Society of Arts in 1890 by Mrs Garcia, wife of the Society's first secretary, Captain Charles Garcia.

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About the artist

Gully was born in Bath, England, and was apprenticed in an iron foundry where he graduated to the design and drafting department. He also took private lessons in painting.

In 1852 Gully sailed for New Plymouth with his wife and children on the *John Phillips*. He farmed at Omata and worked as a clerk in New Plymouth and was also a volunteer in the Taranaki land war but was invalided out of the army. In 1858 Gully was advertising his availability to paint views of "properties" for sending overseas. His painting associate was fellow settler and amateur artist, J C Richmond (1822-1898).

In 1860 Gully moved to Nelson where he settled. He was Drawing Master at Nelson College until 1863 when he was appointed draughtsman at the Nelson Provincial Survey Office. He was encouraged by the noted geologist, Julius von Haast (1822-1887), who also commissioned Gully to complete 12 watercolours of Canterbury mountains and glaciers to illustrate a lecture given by Haast at the Royal Geographical Society, in London in 1864.

Gully exhibited at the 'India and Colonial Exhibition' in London in 1866, at the Royal Academy in 1871 and with the Society of British Watercolour Artists in London. As well, he exhibited at the 'Intercolonial Exhibition' in Melbourne, 1866/1867. Gully retired in 1878 to take up painting full-time. He was a very prolific artist with at least 700 works in his oeuvre and he exhibited widely in New Zealand and Australia. Gully died in 1888.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are six works by the artist in the Collection, including:

Lake Te Wharau

c. 1882, watercolour
Presented by the Canterbury Society of Arts 1932

Golden Bay

undated, watercolour
Donated by Mrs E.M. McIlraith 1971

Further reading

New Zealand's Romantic Landscape Paintings by John Gully, J. S. Gully, Millwood Press, Wellington, 1984.

Frames on the Land, F. Pound, Collins, Auckland, 1983.

'Twelve Watercolours of Glaciers in the Province of Canterbury', J. Paul, *Art New Zealand*, No. 8, 1977-78, pp. 56-59.

