

# Visualising Settler Emigration: The Question of Home

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## Introduction

During the nineteenth century hundreds of thousands of men, women and children moved away from Britain in search of better lives in the colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand and in North America. Emigrants wrote about their experiences in their diaries and letters. Their accounts were published in periodicals, memoirs and travel accounts, pamphlets and leaflets. Accounts of emigration circulating in print resounded with stories of success. Contrary to the popular stories of emigration as a successful move, narrative paintings of emigration stressed a different aesthetic: they focussed on the pain of departure, the temporality of never seeing one's home again and the uncertainties of remaking one's home in foreign places. This poster explores how three paintings probe into the connections between the far-flung places of the colonies, the 'heart' of the English countryside and the possibilities of recreating 'home' abroad.



**Richard Redgrave, *The Emigrant's Last Sight of Home* (1858)**

*Oil on canvas, 69.9x98.4 cm, Tate Britain, London*

Redgrave's painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition. In the Exhibition Catalogue accompanying the painting entry are two couplets from Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Traveller* (1764), reproduced on the left. Redgrave's choice of lines radically reshapes our understanding of his painting. The father of the emigrant family stands facing the rolling hills in front of him, his arms wide open in a last embrace. But rather than *choosing* to emigrate, this family has been 'forced from their home': the painting questions the relationship between the emigrant family and their home in the heart of the English countryside. The context of the gold rush in the 1850s suggests that the husband in the painting is moving with his family to dig for 'useless ore' in Australia. Emigration is portrayed not as a move that strengthens the nation, but as one that weakens it: it is an unequal exchange between 'useful sons' who could profit England by continuing to labour there and the 'useless ore' which cannot match their worth.

**Have we not seen, round Britain's peopled shore,  
Her useful sons exchanged for useless ore?  
Forced from their homes, a melancholy train,  
To traverse climes beyond the western main.  
Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller* (1764)**

In Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England*, the family sit on an emigrant ship with their backs resolutely turned on England. At the time of painting this, Brown was anxious about his financial situation, and scared that he was not held in high regard by the public. He toyed with the idea of emigrating to India and these anxieties in part shape the critique of emigration in this painting. The husband sits with furrowed brow, while the wife holds his hand in her right and her little baby's in her left. The family has been 'thrust out', 'forced to share rough cheer with rudely nurtured men'. This working class is represented by the motley of hands behind the couple: they are reduced to being a symbol of the hard work and labour that is needed in the colonies. The name of the ship, *Eldorado*, is either an indication of the success that is to come or a reminder that the search for gold overseas during the gold rush is a mythic ideal.

**Ford Madox Brown, *The Last of England* (1855)**

*Oil on panel, 82.5x75 cm, Birmingham City Art Gallery, Birmingham*



**"The last of England! o'er the sea, my dear,  
Our homes to seek amid Australian fields.  
Us, not the million-acred island yields  
The space to dwell in. Thrust out! Forced to hear  
Low ribaldry from sots, and share rough cheer  
With rudely nurtured men. The hope youth builds  
Of fair renown, bartered for that which shields  
Only the back, and half-formed lands that rear  
The dust-storm blistering up the grasses wild.  
There learning skills not, nor the poet's dream,  
Nor aught so loved as children shall we see".  
She grips his listless hand and clasps her child,  
Through rainbow-tears she sees a sunnier gleam,  
She cannot see a void, where he will be.  
Ford Madox Brown, *Sonnet* (1865)**



**Edward Hopley, *A Primrose from England* (1855)**

*Oil on canvas, 151.0x201.0 cm, Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria*

In Hopley's painting, the everyday primrose is elevated to a reified status in Australia. All eyes – including the dog's! – are drawn to it. The two women nearest the primrose are so overtaken, they swoon in delight. The painting suggests that the notion of 'home' is no longer localised to a particular place, but can be deterritorialised and travel. The setting of a colonial store layers this reading. Will the primrose be reduced to a mere commodity? Or is the affect of home it carries so powerful that it falls outside a cash nexus?

## Conclusion

Rather than presenting the possibility of making a home abroad as a given, narrative paintings of emigration probed this notion. They questioned what home meant and where it was. Did it lie in the rural landscape of England? Or was it an affect to be carried with emigrants to the colonies?