

# On seeing the big picture: A reply to Paddle (2008)

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Photographs are indeed seductive. In his landmark book *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The history and extinction of the thylacine* (2000), Robert Paddle maintains that Harry Burrell's photograph of a thylacine with a chicken, first published in *The Australian Museum Magazine* in 1921, was one of the chief causes of a "blossoming of the construction that the thylacine was a significant poultry predator". In other words, the photograph seduced viewers into believing that the species was a threat to domestic poultry although, as Paddle points out elsewhere in his book, there is little actual evidence to support this idea. Paddle's claim that this picture was so influential at a crucial time for the survival of the species was the incentive and driving force behind my investigation of Norman Laird's longstanding suggestion that the photograph was a hoax. Given that this picture has appeared in countless journals, magazines and books since its first publication, it seemed astonishing that not one of the many researchers (academic and otherwise) who accessed Laird's statement had bothered to mention his assertion or test his hypothesis. On the basis of all these factors then, Burrell's photograph was certainly worth more than a thousand words (Freeman 2005). Now, more have been added and a debate has been facilitated that is illuminating a number of issues regarding the history of the thylacine.

Paddle's article in this issue of *Australian Zoologist* is an interesting historical documentation and commentary on practices at Beaumaris Zoo in the early twentieth century and one of the species held there. However, I am unconvinced by his attempt to accommodate the series of five photographs by Burrell held in the Australian Museum Archives amongst the many taken of a male thylacine at the Zoo. The following reply to his article will deal with criticism of Laird, the analysis of the caged environment, the appearance of the large male thylacine held at Beaumaris Zoo, and the nature of historical research and value of scholarly debate. I will argue that a better understanding of these images requires further attention to the 'big picture', as well as fine detail. First, however, a point of clarification: I was indeed aware of Burrell's note about his visit to Mary Roberts' zoo,<sup>1</sup> but did not refer to it in my essay as the note made no reference to thylacines being photographed (with or without chickens) during his undated visit and, more importantly, because the image my original article discusses is of a different animal.

Paddle's response to *Is this picture worth a thousand words?* begins with an evaluation of Laird's comments (1933-1947). He deduces that, as Laird did not mention

that the photograph of the thylacine with a chicken was a hoax every time it occurs in his scrapbook, Laird believed it pictured a live animal even though he makes no statement to this effect. Paddle bases his conclusion on Laird's description of a print of the photograph as "rare and precious". However, as there are dozens of both still and moving images of live thylacines in existence and some show thylacines eating (as Paddle is at pains to point out) there would be little reason for Laird to label just another photo of the living species in such a way. Laird himself had in his possession dozens of photos of the thylacine, including a number of glass plate negatives taken at Beaumaris Zoo that were later donated to the State Archives of Tasmania and are now easily accessible (Laird 1945-1977). If he valued Burrell's print so highly, he surely would have identified and mentioned the location of the photograph. But if Burrell had confessed to Laird, a younger colleague, that the photograph was evidence of an elaborate hoax that had not been uncovered, this would justify the enigmatic description Laird gave it. As Paddle confirms, "all this distinction, description, still and moving photographs" over a picture of a thylacine eating is unlikely. But it is justified if the small photographic print was evidence of a hoax. In addition, the folder in which Laird's assertion is recorded was compiled over a number of years during which his inclination to announce the hoax may have changed.<sup>2</sup> As Paddle admits regarding Mary Roberts' visitors' book, personal records like scrapbooks are not scholarly or official: although orderly, this scrapbook's contents reflect changing conditions and must be interpreted using reason, insight and an eye for the big picture. Paddle is incorrect in stating that I date the photographs as being taken in 1921. That is Laird's statement and it is repeated on pages 87-88 of *The Last Tasmanian Tiger* (Paddle 2000). As for the location in which they were taken, this too cannot be known with any certainty from archival or pictorial sources.

Paddle's focus on the wiring and construction of the enclosure in the photographs of the thylacine with a chicken and "the thylacine cage in Beaumaris Zoo after the renovation of 28<sup>th</sup> August 1911" is ill advised. Lattice and chicken wire of various gauges were the most common materials used in the construction of the hen houses, aviaries, rabbit hutches, and many other domestic and wildlife enclosures frequently on Australian properties from the late nineteenth century to at least the 1950s. It is therefore necessary to be very careful in identifying the location of any specific structure. For instance, when closely examining

<sup>1</sup> Burrell's notes were sourced at the National Museum Library, Canberra on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed reading of references to the photograph in Laird's folder (1933-1977, NS1143/1) has already been given under the heading *Discovery* in the Archives (Freeman 2005, pp. 3-5).

the lattice using a digital graphics viewing application, it is apparent that there is large gauge chicken wire only on the lower section of the lattice in Burrell's photographs, while in what Paddle refers to as the "northern, latticed end" of the Beaumaris Zoo enclosure the wire covers the entire area of lattice (Paddle Figure 4). In addition, there is no evidence of the smaller gauge wire seen in the Beaumaris Zoo photographs (Paddle Figures 3 and 4) anywhere within or outside the enclosure in Burrell's photos. Therefore, as far as the configuration of wire and lattice goes, there is no proof that all these photographs show the same enclosure. Moreover, structures adjacent to the western side of the enclosure in the Beaumaris Zoo photos are not visible in Burrell's shots and the trees, although they have a similar appearance, seem to be further away. In addition, Paddle provides no explanation for the hessian and cut foliage that line the inside of the enclosure in the pictures of a thylacine with a chicken.

I disagree that the animal in Burrell's photos is the Tyenna male. Paddle's argument that it is revolves around the markings on this animal's large head and the configuration of stripes on his hindquarters. While the appearance of the head in Figures 2, 3 and 7 of Paddle's article is comparable, in the Burrell photographs the bifurcate stripe second from the point where the tail joins the body slopes toward the leg (see detail of left and right sides of the animal in Figure 1 and Figure 2 of this essay). But in the Beaumaris Zoo photos this stripe is shorter and curves toward the tail, while the third stripe is very long (see detail Figure 3 of this essay). Even given the slightly different position of the animals' legs, the long stripe would remain distinctive. Also, the third stripe from the junction of the tail on the right side of Burrell's thylacine has a distinguishing sub-stripe beneath it. All thylacines have very similar patterning of long, short and bifurcate stripes, so vague verbal descriptions of their configuration cannot constitute valid evidence. There is no proof that the animal in the Burrell photograph is the Tyenna male or any other thylacine at Beaumaris Zoo. In addition, the flanks of the living animal in Figure 3 show that a taut bulge of muscle was apparent even when a thylacine was thin. This is very different to the dull coat and flat appearance of the animal body in Burrell's photographs.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, since the essay *Is this picture worth a thousand words?* was published in 2005, feedback from the late Reinhold Rau (pers. comm. 16/9/05), former taxidermist at the Iziko South African Museum and instigator of the Quagga Project, suggests that the crack or join at the base of the tail of the thylacine in Burrell's photographs may just as easily be the demarcation between the cloacal mound and the tail of a live animal. However, Paddle's revelation that the skin of the Tyenna male is unaccounted for supports the contention that Burrell was in possession of a taxidermy specimen or skin. *The International Thylacine Specimen Database* compiled by Stephen Sleightholme (2006) lists the vast amount of thylacine material in Australia and overseas institutions in the early twentieth century and also reveals that it is not



Figure 1. Thylacine in Harry Burrell's photograph V8227, Australian Museum Archives: series 392. Detail of left side.



Figure 2. Thylacine in Harry Burrell's photograph V8221, Australian Museum Archive: series 392. Detail of right side.



Figure 3. Tyenna male at Beaumaris Zoo "probably taken by Tucker, 27th September 1911" (Figure 3, Paddle 2008). NS1377/57 Norman Laird Research Papers and Photographs, Archives Office of Tasmania. Detail from print of negative held in Laird collection.

<sup>3</sup> See page 7 of Freeman (2005) for a detailed consideration of the body of the animal in Burrell's photograph of the thylacine holding a chicken.

uncommon for records to be missing and for specimens to disappear from museums, as has occurred as recently as 2003 at the Australian Museum (ABC 2003). Indeed, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery hold such fears for these valuable items that almost all thylacine material has recently been removed from public display and access to stored items is limited to selected researchers. Restricting or discouraging access to material, of course, tends to compromise frequent and open investigations of the morphology, history and documentation of the species.

The date that Paddle now suggests the photographs were taken (1912) and his claim that Burrell's 1935 notes in the library of the National Museum verify they were taken at Beaumaris Zoo, are examples of a fallacy of presumption — a variation of *post hoc propter hoc*: since that event followed this one, that event must have been caused by this one. Because Burrell once visited Beaumaris Zoo and took photographs there, it cannot be presumed that he took his series of five images of a live thylacine eating a chicken at that location. I do not believe that Burrell visited Tasmania in 1912. He certainly does not mention the series of photographs, which by 1935 had been reproduced many times. In his book *The Platypus*, published in 1927, every reference to platypus in Tasmania is made in relation to the research of others. None of his remarks mention that he had any first-hand experience of the species in the State. As the platypus was a major subject of his research, this implies his visit took place after the publication of that book. In addition, if Burrell's photos of the thylacine were taken in 1912, why did he not mention them or make them available for publication until 1921?

Paddle goes on to defend Burrell's character on the basis of his contribution to Australian zoology, although his importance in terms of zoological studies was never an issue in my essay. Rather, I regarded his personality and actions with interest and considerable sympathy (Freeman 2005, p. 11-12). That said, there is ample evidence that Burrell suffered from the effects of discrimination, as I cite on page 12. In addition, the preface to his work, *The Platypus: Its discovery, zoological position, form and characteristics, habits, life history etc.*, begins with the statement:

*'This book is the result of nearly twenty years' personal observation of the platypus in its haunts, carried on while I was collecting specimens for the University of Sydney and the Commonwealth National Museum; but the limitations under which the work had to be carried on, and the impossibility of obtaining official sanction to work as a private collector, have prevented me from exploring certain branches of the subject and have brought my field-work practically to a stand-still. Earlier observers, working without restraint, had opportunities of discovering details which I have been debarred from studying; nevertheless, I have not hesitated to criticize their observations where they differ from my own, and I have ventured to suggest several directions in which scientific investigations may proceed.'*

Burrell goes on to mention that none of the photographs in the book "have been touched up in any way". My inclusion of this information is in no way a criticism; on the contrary, it indicates he experienced considerable frustration and had ample cause for resentment. It supports my close analysis of his photographs by providing a possible cause for his actions. The passage above also shows that Burrell had an admirable defiance and disinclination to be discouraged by the difficulties he encountered. But neither his character nor his contribution to Australian zoology is the subject of *Is this picture worth a thousand words?* Rather, the *ideas* put forward by published authors are the subjects that need to be constantly and carefully scrutinised in critical essays and debates such as this. For instance, Paddle's statement concerning the "envious [*sic*] conservation status enjoyed by Australia's mammalian species today" in his article above is uninformed and encourages complacency. Johnson's *Australia's Mammal Extinctions* (2006) states: "of the forty mammal species known to have vanished in the world in the last 200 years, almost half have been Australian". A report by Young et al. (1996) on the Australian Government website is more specific: "the rate of extinction in Australia in the two hundred years since European settlement has accelerated dramatically. During this time, Australia has established the highest known rate of extinction of mammal species in the world.<sup>4</sup> Of our 258 known species of mammals, 138 are either extinct, endangered or vulnerable". They add: "this poor record of biodiversity conservation is not merely a historical event. Half of all animal extinctions in Australia have occurred this century, with six species having become extinct in the last 50 years". This is hardly an enviable conservation record. Exacerbating these losses, 82% of Australian mammals are endemic (DEWHA1996).

One of the subtlest and most effective ways in which attempts at conservation from the early twentieth century until today have been undermined is through the negative representation of some species. For instance, the numerous reprintings of Le Souëf and Burrell's book *The Wild Animals of Australasia* included Burrell's photo of the thylacine with a chicken, which Paddle has proclaimed to be so influential. Furthermore, the photo is accompanied by a text that includes a disturbing anecdote about an altercation between a Marsupial Wolf and a dog: "finally, the dog came in close, and the wolf gave one sharp, fox-like bite, tearing a piece of the dog's skull clean off, and it fell with the brain protruding, dead". This entry for the thylacine finishes with the comment:

*'This animal is now getting rare in Tasmania. The inhabitants seem to have a superstitious dread of the 'hyæna', as they sometimes call it, and will kill the wolf whenever opportunity offers. Indeed, some will even smash the wolf to pulp afterward, thus depriving science of the skeleton and skin.'*

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that, while the United Nations Environment Program verifies the highest figures for mammal extinctions occur in the region of Asia and the Pacific, it is pointed out that "much of the relevant information on the status of species is qualitative or anecdotal, and it is therefore difficult to develop a quantitative overview of global trends... ideally, such indicators should be based on data sampled explicitly for this purpose. Few such monitoring programmes have yet been established" (United Nations Environment Program 2002).

As the “central, core text in Australian mammalogy” (Paddle 2008) — in fact, at that time one of very few books that dealt with Australian animals published in Australia<sup>5</sup> — the inclusion of this photograph and its text must have heavily prejudiced the policies adopted by Tasmanian institutions that had the capacity to protect the thylacine. The constant use of the image in conjunction with lack of action to save this unique species should not be ignored or forgotten, even if it dents the reputation of individuals, scientific institutions, or government bodies.

The value and responsibility of scholarly debate is to facilitate open questioning and rigorous examination of evidence. Insofar as they demonstrate or initiate a rethinking of assumptions, the responses of Paddle and others to my original article are gratifying. Where investigations of the past are concerned researchers are often constrained by lack of evidence, difficulty in accessing documents and records, and missing data. In the twenty-first century there are sophisticated technological tools for accessing, analysing and transforming information so interpretation of material must be undertaken from the perspective of wide research, effective approaches, and valid and sound arguments — as well as adherence to the topic under discussion. The subject of *Is this picture worth a thousand words?* is the representation of the thylacine and, by extension, the importance of images to any species’ extinction or survival. The essay also raises the question of how much we should rely on photographic evidence in any

sphere of life. In other words, while it is concerned with details it also considers a much bigger picture and raises issues that affect both human and animal lives. In an age of climate change and invasive species, accelerating loss of native animals and habitats, pollution and regional wars, the dissemination of visual images on a global level has the potential to change history for better or worse.

## Postscript

The purpose of the postscript to *Is this picture worth a thousand words?* was to clear up conflicting statements made by Paddle in his article on thylacines associated with the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales (1993) and in personal communications with me (5/1/04; 28/1/04) in regard to the thylacine in Taronga Zoo that had part of his or her tail bitten off by the puma in the cage next door. It is heartening to know that this matter has been resolved largely as a result of this debate. See Figure 4 of this essay, a photograph of that thylacine by G.B. Whitley that was considered by the photographer as “not suitable for reproduction” (Whitley 1973). Until recently, a cropped version of this picture appeared on the Australian Museum website and is now available on the National Library of Australia’s Pandora Web Archive. It is notable because it shows the unfortunate state of the animal and the extent of the injury to the tail. This photograph illustrates how ‘unsuitable’ pictures can often be the most moving and informative.



**Figure 4.** Thylacine at Taronga Zoo Sydney, 1922. Photographer G.P. Whitley. Australian Museum Archives: series I 39/4, item20.

<sup>5</sup> In 1922 the then president of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Society was so concerned about the lack of a “general zoological survey” of Australian fauna that he suggested the “discontinuance of the [Society’s major publication] *Australian Zoologist* ... and the allocation of the savings thus effected to the Handbook Fund” (Campbell 4).

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