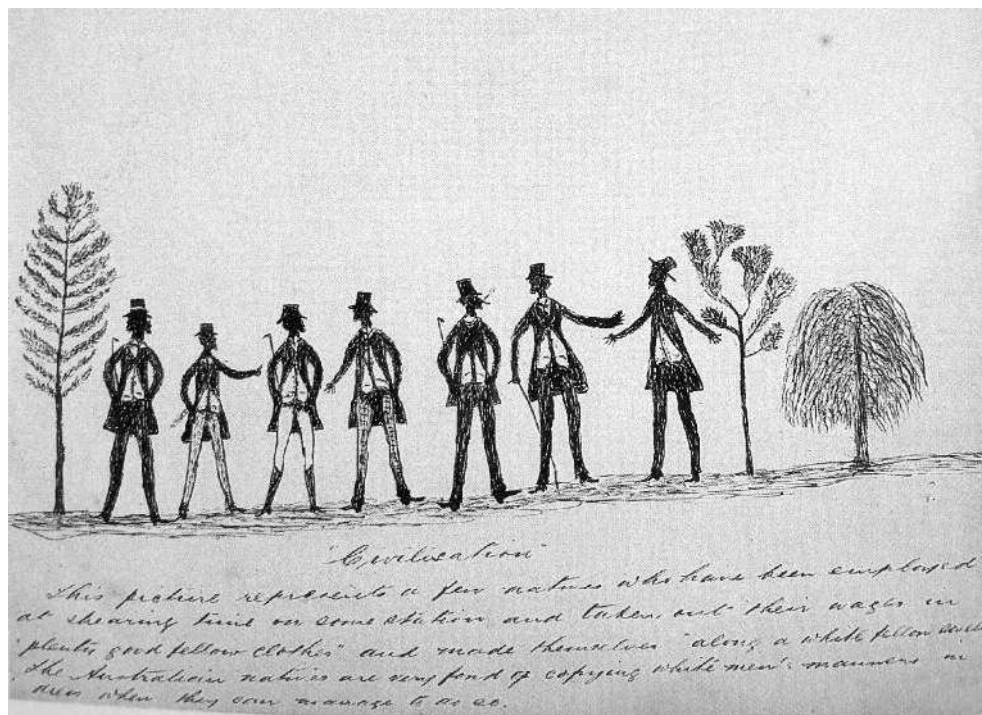


Picturing Civilisation

BRUCE PENNAY AND YALMAMBIRRA

A picture postcard from the Museum of Sydney shows seven silhouetted First Nations men, clad in tall hats, frock coats, waistcoats, boots or shoes and carrying riding switches. They stand tall. The way they hold their heads and their hand gestures suggest they are talking animatedly among themselves. Beneath the picture is a title 'Civilisation' with explanatory text which includes several phrases in inverted commas, suggesting they were supplied by the artist, a Wiradjuri man called Yakaduna but better known as Tommy McRae.



'Civilisation' by Tommy McRae (Yakaduna). 'This picture represents a few natives who have been employed at the shearing time on some stations and taken out their wages in 'plenty good fellow clothes' and made themselves 'along a white fellow swell'. The Australian natives are very fond of copying 'white men' manners and dress when they can manage to do so.'¹
(Museum of Sydney picture postcard, Moral permission Jean Morgan-Kelly.)

We claim this drawing from the 1860s is a key piece of visual evidence which prompts and guides thinking about the challenges faced by the colonised and by the colonists in negotiating coexistence. We begin with some interpretive possibilities, aligning this picture to similarly themed others. Then, we point to scholarly appraisals of Tommy McRae's body of work. In doing so, we draw attention to the importance First Nations scholars attach to visual storytelling, including that by Tommy McRae. Last, we look beyond scholarly reputation to popular regard. We establish something of popular representations of the life and work of Tommy McRae at Lake Moodemere, principally in newspaper reports, and we suggest shifts in popular memory of the man and place where he lived and worked. We explain how we intend to use the drawing in a history education digital resource.²

Interpretative possibilities

The picture is open to several interpretive possibilities. Two parallel interpretations are apparent at first sight: given the inscription, it appears to mock colonists' expectations of First Nations men's ambitions; and at the same time, it also points to the limited opportunities First Nations men had in the colonial economy. More broadly, given the title, it seems to provide a Wiradjuri artist's critique of the impact of colonisation on his people. Even more broadly, it prompts reflection on how the colonists and those who were colonised encountered each other in the early post-contact years and how they were beginning to find ways to live together and separately.³

For visual storytellers, this picture sits beside better-known pictures by non-Indigenous artists which either depict clothing as a marker of early colonial social relationships, or beside pictures which allude to First Nations workers engaging in the colonial economy.⁴ Two such pictures have received special notice, having been selected for the covers of two issues of *Australian Historical Studies*: Thomas Ham's portrait of 'Charles Never' (after William Strutt), 1867; and Samuel T. Gill's 'The Colonized', c.1860.⁵ Within those issues of the journal, historians Amanda Nettelbeck and Richard Broome have provided interpretations that explain the force of the cover pictures and other pictures in illustrating what the editors implicitly reckon as key aspects of early colonial interactions of interest to readers of *Australian Historical Studies*.

Nettelbeck saw William Strutt's pictures of the Native Police Corps as part of a popularly available visual narrative of nation-building. Within that police unit, treacherous savages had been transformed into disciplined upholders of law and order. Recruits were attracted by access to horses, guns, reliable rations and prestigious, smart uniforms. As the note added to McRae's 'Civilisation' explained: 'The Australian natives are very fond of copying "white men" manners and dress when they can manage to do so.' The formal studio portrait of Murrumwiller



*Thomas Ham's portrait of 'Charles Never' (after William Strutt), 1867.
(Illustrated Australian Magazine, 1851; NK 3429/1, National Library of Australia.)*



*S. T. Gill, 'The Colonized'. (Mitchell Library, 2 Pd 135m,
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.)*

(Charles Never), the tailor of the Native Police Corps, 'styled as a black gentleman' was a vain attempt to achieve an ambition of assimilation. For Nettelbeck, Indigenous people appear as partly assimilated yet also remained partly unassimilable. The picture points to the contemporary and ongoing tension between inclusion and exclusion of First Nations people within the nation, between living together and separately.

Broome uses Samuel T. Gill's picture of a First Nations man and child doing hard work for an apparently lazy settler and kindly wife to expand on the variety of work some Indigenous families found in the pastoral, agricultural and fishing industries.⁶ Further, Broome attempts to fathom the thinking of First Nations men and women about European work, which for them was often difficult to find, piecemeal, under rewarded and paid in kind rather than money. McRae's shearers, for example, were only a 'few' and they had 'taken their wages in "plenty good fellow clothes"'. But Broome insists that although many First Nations people sought subsistence in a European economy, they 'did not desire to assimilate in the deeper meanings and demands of that economy'. They shared with colonists the unresolved tensions between how far they were to live together with the colonists and separately from them.

Both Nettelbeck's and Broome's arguments parallel and reinforce the first-sight interpretations of McRae's 'Civilisation' advanced above. It is a pithy epigram produced by a Wiradjuri artist mocking accepted views of First Nations men's adaptative ambitions and points to their limited prospects of employment. McRae was subverting the notion that by bringing opportunities for his fellow countrymen to acquire European clothing, colonists were endowing them with something called 'civilisation'. The jaunty picture drawn to humour a European purchaser had challenging dark undertones.

McRae's 'Civilisation' sits beside other well-known pictures of First Nations people adopting European clothing and engaging in European work which have similarly captured the attention of historians exploring visual representations of early interactions. Such pictures, referenced here, have been reproduced, sourced and analysed in readily available books and journals. Publication constraints have meant we have been unable to reproduce them here.

So, for example, pictures relating to the adoption of European clothing include Augustus Earle's 'Portrait of Bungaree, a native of NSW', c.1826' and Samuel T. Gill's 'Native Dignity', 1860.⁷ Comic portrayals of 'dandy sensibilities' may be interpreted as 'weak acquiescence to the settler takeover of land';⁸ or countered as discomfiting assertions of the ongoing presence of conquered people yearning for clothing as for other necessities.⁹ They may indicate impoverishment in which mimicry of the trinkets of fashionable dress even suggest cultural annihilation. Alternatively, they may be interpreted as depicting something of the dynamics of

contact and negotiation in which Indigenous people tried to meet with the colonists on equal terms.¹⁰

Pictures relating to First Nations men undertaking European work include Samuel T. Gill, 'Going to Work', 185-.¹¹ Broome uses that picture to suggest the cross-cultural camaraderie of pastoral workers. Tim Rowse finds similar images and similar messages in the work of Darryl Lindsay and Russell Drysdale in later years.¹² Pictures of First Nations men in stockmen clothes may have symbolised shared pastoral station work. They draw readers into imagining First Nations men's work experiences and life chances.

Contemporary observers in the troubled frontier era, especially the Protectors, argued repeatedly that peaceful coexistence was best achieved by engaging Indigenous people in the economy. Employment would give them access to comforts such as clothing, flour, tea, tobacco and health care.¹³ Even Governor Gipps himself concluded that,

It is by the employment of the aborigines as labourers for wages, and the education of their children in establishments conducted by missionaries or official protectors, that I consider the civilization of the aborigines of this continent, must be worked out, if it were to be accomplished.¹⁴

In summary, this attempt to locate McRae's 'Civilisation' within scholarly conversations about other similar pictures shows something of the diligence scholars have given to using visual evidence to help explain early colonial interactions. We invite readers to look at this picture again because it, too, captures something of the feeling of disappearing times. But it is also distinctive in that it is penned by a Wiradjuri man. It gives a glimpse of the frontier from a Wiradjuri person's point-of-view.

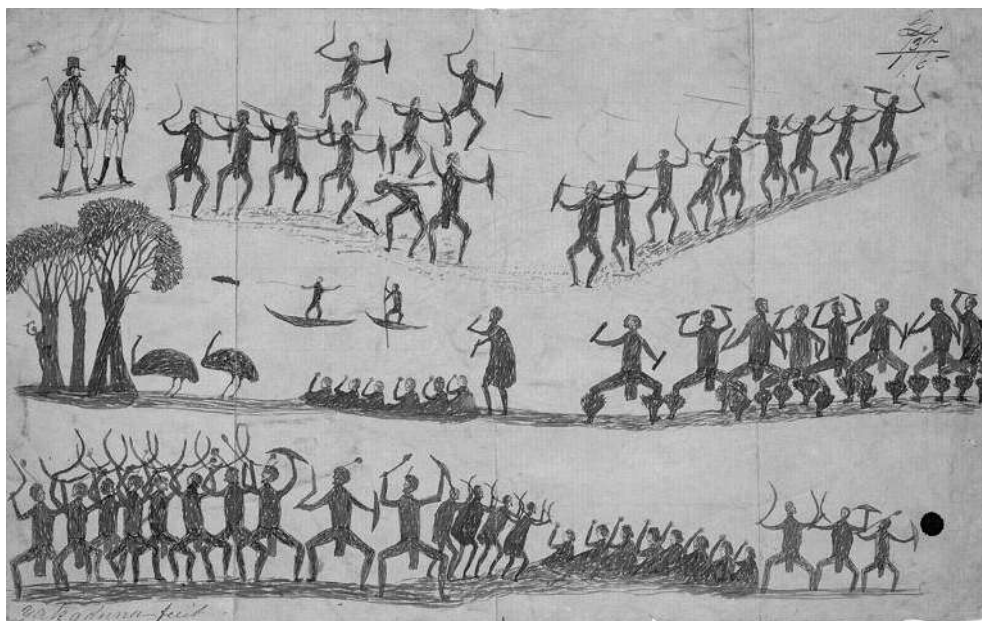
In probing and pondering the visibility of people in the contact zone, Jane Lydon has restored agency for First Nations people in her aptly named collaborative work *Calling the Shots*. She, with others, draws attention to the ways First Nations people themselves depicted early interactions with photographs.¹⁵ Along similar lines, McRae's 'Civilisation' is a powerful addition to the pictures reviewed above for it provides a Wiradjuri man's view on an impact of colonisation.

Scholarly reputation

It is probably even more important to locate this picture within the context of the body of work produced by Tommy McRae. That body of work has been deemed sufficiently important to prompt major national and state collecting agencies to acquire portions of it, even at considerable expense.¹⁶ McRae's work caught the attention of collecting agencies as early as the 1870s. By 1896 he had won some recognition outside Australia, and, in more recent times, his work has been selected for major exhibitions beyond Australia.¹⁷

McRae's body of work has attracted scholarly attention, initially prompted by Carol Cooper and Andrew Sayers, as art historians and museum curators.¹⁸ They tell how McRae produced many sketches, principally in pen and ink on paper. A quick online survey of the National Gallery or State Library of Victoria holdings shows that most of his drawings were of First Nations ceremony and life. McRae drew First Nations men dancing, hunting, fishing and fighting in what he called 'olden times'.¹⁹ His remembrances of traditional First Nations life appear to have been attempts to capture memory of ways of life being fast forgotten, to ensure that cultural traditions would endure.

McRae also drew pictures commenting on social relationships in his time: he made 'shrewd sketches of manners in the contact zone'.²⁰ Hilary Jankelson saw him as a 'highly perceptive man and a committed and accomplished artist' depicting the challenges faced by First Nations and non-Indigenous people relating to each other. For her, McRae became an emissary, an ambassador between two cultures.²¹ This picture, 'Civilisation', sits with that set of pictures. Most directly, it appears to be a reworking of two pictures depicting similar figures and it counterpoints his scene of drunken revelry.²²



Tommy McRae, 'Views of a corroboree and a battle'. McRae's pictures were sometimes composites including several apparently unrelated scenes. This was one of two drawings gifted to the Royal Geographical Society, London, by Theresa Poole (formerly Walker nee Chauncy), an early patron, resident in Barnawartha. It is described as created in 1864 by Yakaduna.

(Image courtesy SL NSW, FL3313 524. Moral permission Jean Morgan-Kelly.)

Commentators have admired the vitality of McRae's drawings. Within them, he mastered expressive gestures and created a sense of movement. So, for example, he shows a squatter upbraiding a stockman. He shows a branch falling from a tree. He captures the spirit of a corroboree, detailing body painting patterns on Wiradjuri and Waywurru kinsmen, which he witnessed in childhood and which he himself would continue to organise throughout his life.²³

Hilary Jankelson took up the challenge posed by Sayers to trace chronological developments in McRae's work.²⁴ That involved her in trying to date the production of the works and led her to consider, amongst other things, changes in his representations of trees that background many of his work.

Jankelson's is a meticulous study of the minutiae of more than 200 drawings 'to expand his narratives'. So, for example, she looks carefully at detail in this composite picture 'Views of a corroboree and a battle'. At the bottom left the interlacing of legs and boomerangs, clubs and shields 'suggest frenetic gyrations'. Above that are hunting scenes with a possum-hunting climber making a notch to climb further, and fishermen in canoes. Top left, squatters maintain western clothing standards. McRae, she notes, drew slits to detail flies on their trousers. Bottom right and mid-picture seated women make up the orchestra for corroborees in what she observes as one of McRae's rare depictions of women. Top right is a battle between First Nations groups, perhaps, she suggests staged for squatter spectators but also illustrative of common altercations between different Indigenous groups in the area.²⁵ It was such altercations that troubled George August Robinson, the Chief Protector. Robinson blamed inter-tribal warfare arising from 'petty feuds' as an occasional reason for the rapid decline in the Indigenous population by 1844.²⁶

Jankelson's methodology draws us to look yet again at 'Civilisation' and suggest a similar 'expansion of the narrative' of 'Civilisation' that underscores stories of Indigenous peoples' interactions not only with settlers but also with each other. In considering composition, Jankelson draws attention to the figure on the right, with splayed arms and hat sitting on the back of the head, to point out the individuality of each figure.²⁷ We draw attention to the figure on the left, standing with hands-on-hips, an impatient pose echoed by two other stern observer figures. We suggest their pose implies tension within the group.

To place McRae's work in an historical perspective, both Cooper and Sayers unravelled stories of his early life and outlined the economic and personal hardships McRae endured. They report one patron's explanation of how McRae worked, in his Lake Moodemere gunyah, 'stretching himself at full length on the ground and propped up on one elbow and drawing from memory'.²⁸ They described the impoverished, fringe, riverside encampment at Lake Moodemere where he lived from about 1860 to 1901. They explained that in two swoops on Lake Moodemere, the Victorian Aborigines Protection Board had taken his four children. On each

occasion McRae called on his art patrons to help him dispute his family's loss. Through all, however, McRae made his own way and retained 'a sense of dignity and ironic humour'.²⁹

Cooper notes that McRae 'was born into a First Nations world on the brink of great change'.³⁰ Both she and Sayers were writing at what Sayers acknowledged as a time when there was a search for voices from 'the other side of the visual encounter', and at a time when there was greater acceptance that First Nations people took up 'adaptive as well as resistant strategies in the face of colonialism'.³¹ For them McRae's life and achievement illustrated some of the complexity of Indigenous peoples' responses to colonisation. As Broome more generally observed, 'to see Aboriginal people simply as victims of colonisation is to miss their efforts to voyage, to survive, and indeed transform themselves in order to retain their Aboriginal identity in the new settler society'.³²

Both Cooper and Sayers picked out for special comment two recurring motifs in the works dealing with the first encounters of European colonisation. Cooper gave attention to McRae's many pictures of Chinese on the gold fields, particularly those with Indigenous warriors frightening them.³³ Sayers gave particular attention to McRae's drawings of William Buckley, the escaped convict who won acceptance into Indigenous society, living for 32 years with the Wathaurong tribe far away on the south coast of Victoria. For Sayers, William Buckley, with his hat, seemed to represent a reverse form of assimilation.³⁴

Nevertheless, both Cooper and Sayers advised caution in interpreting McRae's drawings.³⁵ It is, as Jankelson showed, difficult to determine the place and time of each drawing. Most of the inscriptions seem to have been derived from European patrons. There is no written evidence of the author's intentions. Further, cultural considerations render the works opaque. The interpretations that can be made are at best provisional and imprecise. First and foremost, McRae drew tourist art: he drew to sell his works to supplement his meagre income. Consequently, he drew what his customers wanted to buy. Pictures of the wild white man and scared Chinese by a primitive artist plainly sold well.

Biographers differ on explaining McRae's origins. They report a confusion of names, birthdates and place associations. He seems to have been born c.1835 as the first colonists took up runs along the Murray River. Recently scholars have claimed he was a Wiradjuri man.³⁶ 'His entire life was spent living and working either on or in proximity to his own country, along the Murray River between Albury and Corowa. As a young man he worked on Andrew Hume's Brocklesby Station, near Corowa. He also spent time at Barnawartha station, although it is unclear whether he was there to work, collect government rations or both.

Jones comments that endowed names, be they Tommy Barnes, Tommy McCrae or Tommy McRae, reflect the way First Nations people were treated as property by

their employers.³⁷ Jankelson suggests that several Wahgunyah associations with the name 'McRae', rather than a specific individual, settled the acceptability of that spelling.³⁸ In explaining the confusion of names Eagle, Jones and Durrant elaborate on and query the inscriptions added to his works by patrons who provided McRae with pens, ink and paper and gave him encouragement. The patrons made gifts of works they acquired from him to important people and institutions, thus helping him win wide recognition and consequently to ask a higher price for his work.³⁹

Other appraisals of McRae's work draw attention to the importance of visual evidence to First Nations people. Johnathan Jones claims inspiration in the work of both Tommy McRae of Lake Moodemere and William Barak of Coranderrk. Their artworks were created at a time 'when Indigenous people were often voiceless'.⁴⁰ Jones wrestled with the problem of establishing the artists' intentions. He sees McRae as a commentator on social change, depicting First Nations people adapting to survive the introduction of guns, alcohol and European clothes. With his line drawings McRae was making 'very clear statements about colonisation'. In parodying the self-satisfied, proprietorial squatters, McRae gently challenges the colonial power base. Gently, for McRae drew to sell his works and 'to amuse the invaders with images of yesteryear'.⁴¹

Still, Jones insists, McRae's 'key audience' was his descendants. Both he and Barak were dedicated men who valued their culture and wanted to see it continued. Their pictures burst with cultural knowledge, and through them they actively resisted colonisation and the annihilation of their cultural life. Their works are timeless – gifts for future generations – and depict the many losses that occurred in their lives. They continue to teach and lead the community.⁴²

Fran Edmonds expresses similar sentiments about the importance of First Nations art to First Nations people. In a wider study of First Nations-determined art exhibitions, she explains how First Nations artwork has been used to articulate culture and history. Some exhibitions contained what Mary Louise Pratt described as 'products of the contact zone', embodying legacies of resistance to subordination by way of parody critiques.⁴³ For Edmonds, the exhibitions protested not only against inequality and injustice, but also powerfully asserted the right to be different.⁴⁴ She hails McRae as one of the best known Victorian First Nations artists, who attempted to ensure that fragments of cultural knowledge were maintained for future generations'.⁴⁵

Wiradjuri historian Laurence Bamblett does not refer to McRae in his analysis of storytelling in the Erambie Wiradjuri community, near Cowra on the Lachlan River.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, even though Erambie and Lake Moodemere were not only distant but also quite different places, Bamblett draws conclusions which help explain McRae's legacy and point, by way of contrast, to the sense of community fragility at Lake Moodemere.

Bamblett emphasises the importance of visual storytelling in constructing community histories. Like the anthropologist Gaynor Macdonald, he has explained the high value Wiradjuri people at Erambie place on old photographs.⁴⁷ Photographs are like a book to be read by the young as well as the old, although, he notes, the stories are rarely told ‘in a straight line’ but diverge.

Visually prompted oral histories provide a sense of continuity to the community. Bamblett declares, ‘our stories are our survival’. ‘If we are to survive, beyond the physical sense as Wiradjuri, as Koori, as Indigenous people, we need our stories because they tell us who we are.’⁴⁸ He argues culture is dynamic and continuity is part of ‘the battle for control of identity’.⁴⁹ Continuity counters deficit thinking of Indigenous people as victims. Bamblett champions what he calls ‘Indigenous resurgence’.⁵⁰

Waywurru historian Megan Carter has visited and revisited Lake Moodemere to see ‘what the country my ancestors lived on once looked like before colonisation’.⁵¹ She describes and pictures a natural billabong, rich with native bird life, which served as an encampment area for many years. Indeed, Albury historian Arthur Andrews said Lake Moodemere was one of the four largest encampments in the Albury district at first contact.⁵² She marvels at the survival of the huge burnt-out trees, large enough to house at least four adults in poor weather.

Carter sees Lake Moodemere as a ‘refuge’, a ‘sanctuary’ – and as a space of dispossession. Lake Moodemere operated as an unofficial encampment. It served as a ration depot in the 1870s and was gazetted as a reserve as late as 1892. Residents preferred Lake Moodemere as a ‘less restrictive alternative to the oppressive yoke of the missions or reserves that were closely monitored by the Protection Board’.⁵³

Habitations were crude. The living conditions were graphically depicted in a photograph dated approximately 1908 but probably earlier.⁵⁴ In 1885 a petition for housing was unsuccessful. The encampment was conveniently placed for families to make cross-border escapes from the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines in Victoria rounding up children to be institutionalised. The last of the residents were eventually moved from Lake Moodemere to the reserves at Coranderrk, Lake Tyers and Cummeragunja.

Sharing her family connections with the place, Carter hunts down the names of the First Nations people who lived there. She shares joy in their resilience. She tells how residents, including McRae, eked out a living by selling curios, such as painted emu eggs and gum leaves and possum skin rugs made by the women in the camp. He also organised displays of singing, dancing and boomerang throwing to earn money to supplement the rations supplied from the police station. She tells how McRae was a leading spokesperson requesting the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines in Victoria to improve conditions at Lake Moodemere.

Carter has been clear eyed in depicting life at Lake Moodemere. She tells stories

of domestic violence and alcoholism. She uncovers demeaning images taken by an exploitive 'art photographer', Thomas Cleary.⁵⁵ She tells how McRae appeared alongside John Friday as plaintiffs, not as defendants, in the Corowa Small Debts Court trying unsuccessfully to recover a £10 fee Cleary promised to pay John Friday and Kitty Brangy for posing for his art works. She reproduces some of the photographs staged with the same two sitters in the photographer's studios earlier in Benalla and then in Corowa. One, 'Disowned' or 'Divorced' is described as:

Family group of five Aboriginals with very white child on 'lubra's' lap being pointed at as disowned by her husband (John Friday), the mother (Kate Friday) in defence pointing at a cake of Pears soap and declaring that its constant use washed the child white. Pears Soap box prominent in the foreground.⁵⁶

Carter expresses disquiet at these racist narratives.⁵⁷ Some of Cleary's posed photographs 'evoked voyeuristic pleasure at female nudity, presented as ethnographic realism at [the sitters'] expense'. By reproducing the photographs, she rescues an uncomfortable story from being forgotten: 'What we can do as descendants of the people depicted is reclaim these images as ones that we may have never had the opportunity to possess.'⁵⁸ Like Lydon, she can find neither indulgence nor humour in such images.⁵⁹ Carter protests the erasure of her people from the colonial past and wants such stories acknowledged.

Lake Moodemere and Tommy McRae appear in Jacqui Durrant's history unravelling the complex relationship between groups in North-East Victoria, such as the Waywurru and the Wiradjuri with each other, and with their neighbours, the Dhudhuroa, the Bangarang and the Taungurung. Her work is richly peopled and she untangles kinship patterns retained in a nicely pocketed geography of creek and river watersheds amidst mountain landmarks or on wide plains. She traces how groups readily accepted some but not others on their country. Lake Moodemere emerges as a pivotal place where the Wiradjuri and Waywurru shared country. Some people, she finds, opted to live in the primitive encampment rather than move to the Maloga Mission because they felt uncomfortable in a predominantly Bangarang community situated in Bangarang lands. They preferred, instead, their own country.⁶⁰

Durrant is focused on establishing McRae's cultural identity to further understand the Lake Moodemere community. She claims McRae as Wiradjuri by virtue of the Wiradjuri language vocabulary he supplied to a patron, combined with his connections to Wiradjuri country.

She dismisses Mary Eagle's claim of an early Yackandandah connection as unsupported and not fitting the kinship patterns she traced. For Durrant, McRae and his family emerge as influential in the small Waywurru-Wiradjuri shared Lake Moodemere community. Because of McRae's entrepreneurial activities she claims Lake Moodemere was 'virtually treated as a tourist destination' in the 1880s.⁶¹

This summary indicates ways some scholars continue to reflect on Tommy McRae's life and drawings, finding insights or even inspiration in his works. Their reflections also extend beyond art studies to place studies, as they try to unpick what Lake Moodemere meant then and now.

Newspaper representations of McRae and Lake Moodemere

Pointing to a Rutherglen hairdresser's shop window display of McRae's drawings in 1899, Mary Eagle proclaimed that, in his lifetime, McRae had become a prophet honoured in his own country.⁶² However, contemporary and later newspaper reports of his achievements were inclined to be circumspect. Some reports boasted of him as a good-humoured local artist whose work had been considered of sufficient merit to attract national recognition. Others made a begrudging acknowledgment of his achievement but smirked at what they saw as McRae's hunger for money. Racist assumptions belittled his achievement and riddled depictions of Lake Moodemere, where he lived and worked for nearly 40 years.

These newspaper representations match closely the representations Bamblett found at Erambie where journalists wrestled with the problem of representing the sporting prowess of exceptional Wiradjuri people. Gifted people did not conform to the accepted way Indigenous people behaved. Reports from Erambie revealed a 'need of the white man to keep the black man within bounds, where he belongs'.⁶³

In 1881 *Australian Town And Country Journal* described the unusual sight of Tommy McRae, a blackfellow, driving his family in his own American wagon at Wahgunyah. It explained they 'were all dressed in European clothes of quite as good a quality as the families of labouring men' and they lived in a 'semi-civilised fashion'. It reported this instance as one that 'shows that the native blacks are not incapable of civilisation, for this man has become an owner of property by his own unaided exertions'.⁶⁴

In 1886 *Corowa Free Press* published a visitor's impressions of the cross-river 'native encampment', occupied by 'semi-civilised beings', who all – especially Lilly (Tommy McRae's wife) surprisingly 'spoke tolerably good English'. The visitor noted that McRae's family lived no longer in 'mia-mia' habitations but in a bark hut. The camp had a common drawing room or parlour. Children, dogs, poultry and possum rugs were huddled up in this place and all seemed happy.

Tommy McRae is man of substance: it is said he has a banking account, and is the proud proprietor of a horse and buggy... [He is a teetotaler and temperance advocate]. He raises poultry, spears the Murray cod and manufactures possum rugs. Nor is he above accepting white money without working for it, while Lilly can beg admirably when visiting the townships, the clothing of herself and piccaninnies being thus obtained. Tommy is a bit of a genius in his way, and had he been educated would probably have made his mark. As it is, he is an astute financier, something of a wag and a draughtsman.⁶⁵

Albury Banner reporting McRae's death in 1901 described him as 'something of a self-taught artist' who was 'acquisitive beyond the traditions of his race': 'he was ... "well-in" for an aborigine'.⁶⁶ Old timers were to recall, 'He died in circumstances which were comfortable for an old aborigine'.⁶⁷ He was a 'good businessman who sold his black and white sketches well'.⁶⁸ Reporters seemed to have been unsettled that he 'prospered' selling his works to whites' for even as much as 10 shillings.⁶⁹ There were comic descriptions of how he hawked his curios of platypus skins, painted gum leaves and emu eggs in a horse-drawn carriage.⁷⁰ Exhibitions of dance and song, like those he arranged for fees as entertainments, were belittled as tame and 'antics'.⁷¹ He was 'somewhat of an artist'.⁷² His exceptionality was due to 'chance'.⁷³

Lake Moodemere, where McRae lived and worked, was an impoverished fringe encampment of 'black gins and mongrel dogs',⁷⁴ well deserving the charity provided by a Corowa congregation. As the out-of-town, cross-river Aboriginal encampment/reserve, it lingered into the early 20th century, still being used for the distribution of blankets in 1937, but fading from sight thereafter.

Newspaper reports of the deaths of four of McRae's contemporaries who lived at Lake Moodemere hailed each of them (Mary Jane Milawa, Lily Davis, Tommy Anthony and Neddy Wheeler) as 'the last survivor of an almost vanished people'.⁷⁵



'A group of Lake Moodemere Aborigines after their contact with white civilisation', Lake Moodemere family group, believed to be Tommy McCrae (back middle) and his wife Lilly (front left). (Brian Burton, 'Flow Gently Past', Corowa Shire Council, Corowa, 1973, fronting p 5.) The caption echoed the notion of McRae's 'Civilisation'.

The report of Neddy Wheeler's death drew on J. H. F. Mitchell's reminiscences to note 'the Wiradjuri did not give much trouble to even the first pioneers' and to ponder their linguistic legacy in Wiradjuri place names.⁷⁶ There is one report that the tin huts the last two residents lived in were sold and removed when they left.⁷⁷

Over 50 years have passed since Brian Burton produced a local history of Wahgunyah, relying heavily on the *Corowa Free Press*. Burton hailed McRae's exceptionality during times when the newspaper considered the Indigenous people 'a nuisance here and can well be dispensed with'.⁷⁸ It seemed to Burton that McRae was 'the last effort of Aboriginal people in this district to make a place for themselves in a new world.'

The photograph in Burton's book showed people at Lake Moodemere. They are all unsmilingly solemn. The men are beardless, have white shirts with high collars and hatted. The boy has a well-buttoned jacket. The women have neatly coiffed hair. One has a scalloped neckpiece, the other a pin-tucked blouse. The men carry carefully crafted boomerangs, presumably built for sale. A woman nurses a docile puppy. They may well have been members of the Indigenous choir which entertained a Corowa church congregation to raise funds for its Lake Moodemere charity work. The group had the means to acquire and maintain European clothing, thus showing how colonists had endowed them with civilisation.

More than 50 years ago, the people in the photograph were not given names. Since then, scholars have deduced that the man in the centre is Tommy McRae, the woman front left is his wife, correctly named Tilly. The woman holding the puppy is Dhurug woman Jenny Johnston (née Locke), wife of Waywurru man Paddy Swift. The insertion of names indicates modern day changes in respect and careful scholarship.⁷⁹ The names mean, in Megan Carter's term, the photograph can be 'reclaimed' by First Nations people, who see it as advancing their stories of the experiences of those who were colonised rather than the experiences of those who were colonisers.

Popular regard is built beyond newspaper reports. Nowadays industrious members of three local historical societies, two local museums and a local arts organisation hail Tommy McRae as a local prophet. There no longer seems to be shame attached to the way he took advantage of the art market.

A recently installed graveyard plaque hails him simply as an 'Aboriginal Artist'. A local vigneron uses McRae's works and story to acknowledge the presence of First Nations people.⁸⁰ One of the parts of the bridge across the Murray River is now named the 'Tommy McRae Causeway'. At the instigation of Alan Pleitner, the Wahgunyah Progress Association secured funding from the Public Records Office Victoria to construct a 'Tommy McRae Walking Track' by the river in 2013.⁸¹ Arts Rutherglen has organised the installation of a sculptural work at Lake King, 2km west.⁸² Newspapers tell of visits by McRae's direct descendants paying homage.⁸³

Carol Cooper attended a special Wahgunyah heritage exhibition of McRae's work in 2013. Sarah Morgan, his great-granddaughter said, 'Tommy was very well known and not just as an artist, but as a businessman and a leader. He did very well for himself, it would have been hard for him as a black man.'

We began this article with a museum postcard reproducing McRae's drawing with the endowed title 'Civilisation' and explanatory words associated with it. Visual studies scholars increasingly look to the uses made of images – how they are consumed as well as produced. Diverse contexts shape their meanings and impact.⁸⁴ The aura attached to the picture on becoming a piece of museum merchandise underscores our contention about McRae's scholarly repute at a national level. Indeed, one capital city museum has reproduced the item held by a national cultural institution in another capital city. The ready availability of a postcard reproduction signifies the popularity of his work. Museum marketers have anticipated that there may be sufficient visitor interest in buying the postcard for them to recover at least the production costs. McRae's work is used by scholars and used to attract popular attention.

We end with another use of the image, another context in which it will be viewed/consumed. We plan to use McRae's drawing 'Civilisation' as one of several investigation prompts in an online resource we are developing to help secondary school children in Corowa and the wider border region investigate local dimensions of the newly designated mandatory history topic, 'Aboriginal People's Experiences of Colonisation'.⁸⁵ We think the picture helps First Nations and non-Indigenous teachers and students to think about the challenges both the colonists and the colonisers faced in learning to live together.⁸⁶ Like the rest of McRae's work, the picture 'comes from the space of dispossession'.⁸⁷ It illustrates resilience, survival and cultural resistance. It triggers investigations of the reasons for the Lake Moodemere encampment/reserve 'and what this means/meant for Aboriginal people'.

One of the sets of investigations in our proposed resource suggests that schools inquire into the functions and forms of public memory places related to the interactions between colonists and the colonised, Australia-wide. We, then, suggest that they look to three places in their own region that might be similarly hailed as public memory places. One of those three is Lake Moodemere. The statement of significance in the current heritage overlay does not mention the Aboriginal encampment or Tommy McRae. It simply reads:

Lake Moodemere is a significant natural feature which has provided a recreational facility for district residents from the mid-19th century until the present time. The elm trees and refreshment booths which remain at the lake shore are historically significant as the location for regattas and social activities for the residents of the Rutherglen region from the mid-19th century to the present day. Local significance [Criteria A & G].⁸⁸

That statement is about to be reviewed, hopefully to include reference to the place's importance to First Nations people. We ask schools to ponder how and why the place might be remembered.

Given the curriculum's insistence on students asking the 'how do we know' question, we hope the picture 'Civilisation' prompts discussions of visual story telling.⁸⁹ It certainly opens school consultations with local First Nations people on 'how Aboriginal men, women and children were and continue to be impacted by colonisation'.⁹⁰

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Notes

1 The postcard dates the sketch as from the 1860s and provides its source as a sketchbook held by the National Museum of Australia, no date, M4, 9. See reproduction and source, Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal artists of the nineteenth century*, Oxford University Press in association with National Gallery of Australia, 1994, colour plate 13 between pp 58 and 59.

2 We thank Jacqui Durrant for her comments on a draft of this article.

3 Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation*, Routledge, 1992, pp 6-7.

4 As guest editor, Jane Lydon introduces several analyses of visual storytelling in the special issue of *Australian Historical Studies*: 'Picturing political community: from subjects to citizens', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 54, no 2, 2023, p 184.

5 Issues including Richard Broome, 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 26, no 103, 1994, pp 202-220; and Amanda Nettelbeck, 'Precarious subjects: picturing indigenous British subjecthood in mid-nineteenth century Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 54, no 2, 2023, pp 330-353.

6 For First Nations people integrating themselves into the regional economies see Alan Pope, 'Aboriginal adaptations to early colonial labour markets: the South Australian experience', *Labour History*, vol 54, no 1, 1988, pp 1-15; Mark Dunn, 'In the "contact zone": Aboriginal workers in colonial Newcastle and its hinterland', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol 19, 2017, pp 43-56; R. G. Castle and J. S. Hagan, 'Dependence and interdependence: Aboriginal Workers on the Far South Coast of NSW, 1920-75', *Labour History*, vol 58, 1978, pp 158-171.

7 See reproduction and source in Lynette Russell, "'Tikpen", BoroBoro": Aboriginal economic engagements in early Melbourne', in Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell (eds), *Settler colonial governance in nineteenth century Victoria*, ANU Press and Indigenous History, 2015, pp 29-30; and in Grace Karskens, 'Red coat, blue jacket, black skin: Aboriginal men and clothing in early New South Wales', *Aboriginal History*, vol 35, 2011, pp 1-36.

8 Ian McLean, 'Mysterious correspondences between Charles Baudelaire and Tommy McRae: reimagining modernism in Australia as a contact zone', *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol 13, no 1, 2013, p 82.

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- 19 See reproductions at National Gallery of Australia: 'Tommy McRae': <https://nga.gov.au/search/?query=McRae&category=works-of-art&page=1> and at State Library of Victoria: https://find.slv.vic.gov.au/discovery/search?query=any,contains,Tommy%20McRae&tab=searchProfile&search_scope=slv_local&vid=61SLV_INST:SLV&offset=0, both accessed 1 December 2024.
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