

TOMMY McRAE

Indigenous Artist



TOMMY McRAE - AN OVERVIEW

1835—1901

Tommy sketched his traditional experiences of hunting animals, corroboree and tribal goings on, as well as the arrival of white Europeans, and Chinese prospectors.

He was witness to the changes made by the settlement of Wahgunyah, Rutherglen & Wahgunyah North (now Corowa) due to gold mining, and vineyards.

A man who was well respected, not only by his own people, but by employers, colleagues and from all reports, all who knew him.

Interestingly, he was, and still remains, an artist who was quite ahead of his time. Often using his own image in the first person; this type of self awareness in indigenous art was quite unique, and this style was very untraditional.

He was an artist who's works sold for a very high price and he was in demand, a rarity for indigenous art in that era.

TOMMY McRAE - HISTORIC TIMELINE

1835 – Tommy McRae’s year of birth. His traditional names have been recorded as ‘Yackaduna’ or ‘Warra-euea’. (I)

Most likely from the Kwatkwat people, who’s country stretched along the South Murray River.

Raised traditionally, he would have been a young man by the time he first saw white man.

1845 - Pastoralists occupied Kwatkwat territory and introduced large herds of livestock. Gold miners dug up land around Ovens, destroying indigenous plants. (II)

1849 – 1857 - He reportedly worked as a stockman for various squatters on both sides of the Murray River. He reportedly worked for Andrew Hume. (III)

1860s - McRae met Roderick Kilborn, a Canadian Vigneron and telegraph master, who later became a patron and protector when the artist settled at Moodemere.

1861 – 1864 - His first formal gathering of works was headed by sculptor Theresa Walker at Barnawartha, described as “the works of Tommy Barnes” (possibly adopting that name from an employer; Wodonga pastoralist David Barnes).

1875 - The close association with his patron is revealed in Kilborn’s inscription on the inside back cover of the *Notebook*: ‘These sketches were drawn and presented to me by Tommy McRae, an Australian aboriginal of the Murray tribe near Wahgunyah on my leaving Wahgunyah in October 1875’.

(The *Notebook* also includes a glossary of common words used by Upper Murray Aborigines in Wiradjuri, the language of McRae’s wife, with English translations. Kilborn entered the glossary after the drawings in 1891, as evidenced by the inscription on the inside front cover: ‘Aust. Native words given to me by Tommy McRae, June 1891, Tribes on the Murray between Echuca and Albury, R. Kilborn’.) (III)

1880s - McRae made many books of drawings around this time and sold them , his pen-and-ink drawings were well sought after. There was reportedly a waitlist for his works around this time period.

1885 - Minutes of the Victorian Board for the protection of the Aborigines for 1885 listed McRae, wife Lily, four children and his brother and sister-in-law living at Moodemere.

An area was set aside between the Murray and Lake Moodemere, as an aboriginal reserve. Shelter was erected. His family group settled here, becoming less nomadic. The family group raised poultry, fished for Murray Cod, made and sold possum skin rugs. He was well admired by white men.

A dedicated non-drinker, and industrious man— he was able to save to buy a horse and buggy.

1890s - Purchase (from the artist) of sketches that chronicled the life of William Buckley, the 'wild white man'. McRae focused on the subject's integration into Aboriginal society rather than on the aspect that so captivated European artists—Buckley's emergence from years of living with indigenous people. (IV) date approximation (V) & (VI)

Between 1890 and 1897 – McRae's children were taken under government regulations and sent to various reserves in Victoria. He turned to Kilborn for help to prevent these seizures but without success.

1897 - McRae and another aboriginal man John Friday sued a photographer, Thomas Cleary, in Corowa court for failing to pay the 10 pounds promised if he were allowed to photograph the Aboriginal people at Lake Moodemere. Cleary claimed the photographs had not turned out, and the case was dismissed. Never the less, the action was evidence of McRae's strength of character.

1901 – Died 15th October. Funeral service at Lake Moodemere. Tommy McRae is buried in the Carlyle Cemetery. His beautiful stone marker and official memorial plaque are still on the spot where he was laid to rest.

Present Day - Works are held in National Museum of Australia, National Gallery of Australia; Canberra, state libraries in VIC, NSW and Melbourne Museum. Reproductions of sketches are held at Corowa Federation Museum.

Bibliography:

II: <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/archives/the-story-of-how-corroboree-by-indigenous-artist-tommy-mcrae-came-to-the-university-of-melbourne-archives/>

III: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcrae-tommy-13074> Supplementary Volume (MUP), 2005, by Andrew Sayers

IV National Gallery Victoria essay <http://ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/tommy-mcraes-sketchbooks-2/>

IV: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcrae-tommy-13074> Supplementary Volume (MUP), 2005, by Andrew Sayers

V: Culture Victoria website <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/william-buckley/buckley-with-a-group-of-aborigines/>

VI: <http://www.deutscherandhackett.com/auction/24-important-aboriginal-oceanic-art/lot/buckleys-escape-1890s>

For More Information:

Corowa Federation Museum : 56 Queen Street, Corowa , ph:02 6033 3221

Rutherglen Historical Society : Nyree Wiggins 0448 881 670

Rutherglen Wine Experience & Visitor Information Centre

57 Main Street Rutherglen VIC 3685

1800 622 871

www.explorerrutherglen.com.au

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We acknowledge the original custodians of these lands. The people of the rivers and the hills have walked these lands for thousands of years as well as today, and we pay respects to the elders of the past, present and emerging.