

# Silent as the grave



Frederick McCubbin, A Bush Burial, 1890

By **MATTHEW WESTWOOD**, ARTS CORRESPONDENT

12:38PM AUGUST 13, 2021 • 27 COMMENTS

Four people stand around an open grave in a bush clearing. The woman with a shawl draped across her shoulders is overcome with emotion, and clutches her hand to her mouth. She comforts a small girl, who buries her face in the woman's dress.

A man in working clothes, hat held in his hands, and a respectful dog at his side, looks into the pit. He may be the gravedigger; his mattock and shovel are on the stony ground.

An older man in city clobber reads from a Bible or prayer book. Behind them is a horse and dray, which has carried the coffin to the grave site. The grey-green curtain of bush surrounds them.

READ NEXT

Who are the mourners, and whom the mourned, in Frederick McCubbin's painting, A Bush Burial?

They may be grieving a child, the brother or sister of the little girl. Or is it the woman's husband, or another member of the family, who has departed this world?

The painting is a favourite with visitors to the Geelong Gallery and has long invited speculation. From the day the picture was first exhibited in 1890 at the Victorian Artists Society Winter Exhibition in Melbourne, people never could quite agree on the story it tells.



The critic for Table Talk magazine writes that the woman is newly widowed. In The Argus, she is the grief-stricken mother of a dead child. The exact relationship between the figures in the painting, and with the one in the ground, is tantalisingly ambiguous, and no doubt is part of the painting's enduring interest.

There is no mystery about the models McCubbin used in A Bush Burial, because they were real-life people. Visitors at the first exhibition quite possibly would have known them. Indeed, the models were probably there themselves, inspecting the freshly painted canvas and how McCubbin had captured their likeness.

The grieving woman is McCubbin's new wife, Annie. They married in 1889, the year before A Bush Burial was completed. What would she have made of the pit her husband dug in their backyard, to serve as the model for the painted grave?



McCubbin's Down on His Luck, with Louis Abrahams as the unlucky prospector

The younger man at the graveside is Louis Abrahams, McCubbin's friend since their days at art school together.

The young girl whose face is hidden from view is unknown, but Lisa Sullivan, senior curator at Geelong Gallery, says the old man has been identified by art historian Andrew Mackenzie.

"He was a gentleman called John Dunne, who apparently McCubbin ran into on Collins Street one day," she says. "He stopped him and said, 'You are the right look for the figure in this painting.' I speculate that John Dunne is an elder in the community who has been brought in to read the funeral service."

A Bush Burial and other paintings by McCubbin have inspired two new exhibitions at Geelong Gallery. In the first, Frederick McCubbin – Whisperings in Wattle Boughs, Sullivan has brought together major paintings by McCubbin that elaborate his theme of the nostalgia-tinged Australian pastoral. They include loans from the National Gallery of Victoria – notably, the large three-panel painting, The Pioneer – and, from the Art Gallery of WA, Down on his Luck, with Abrahams again the model for the unfortunate prospector or swagman.

The second exhibition, Exhume the Grave – McCubbin and Contemporary Art, comprises recent works by Juan Davila, Anne Zahalka, Christian Thompson and others that respond in different ways to McCubbin's paintings. Various, they bring migrant, feminist and First Nations perspectives to his popular but undeniably sentimental pictures.

The exhibitions coincide with the 125th anniversary of Geelong Gallery, and celebrate one of the most beloved paintings in its collection.

The exhibitions coincide with the 125th anniversary of Geelong Gallery, and celebrate one of the most beloved paintings in its collection.

The gallery was founded in 1896, although it was several years before it had a collection or a permanent home. In 1900 the gallery association began acquiring pictures, including *A Bush Burial*. Sullivan says records support her thesis that Abrahams sold the painting to the gallery and that McCubbin probably encouraged its acquisition.



Juan Davila, *A Bush Burial*, 2000

The picture, 122.5cm x 224.5cm, already had changed hands several times – raffled, auctioned and loaned – in the decade since its first showing. Reports at the time said it was offered to the Geelong Gallery for £105, with the vendor donating £15 towards the purchase. The larger part of the funds was raised by public subscription, and the painting was handed over to the gallery when it opened at the Free Library in December 1900. It was another 15 years before the gallery's permanent home, the neoclassical building in Johnstone Park, opened in 1915.

“For a fledgling regional gallery it was a very significant acquisition, and continues to be, of course,” Sullivan says. “It shows the people of Geelong really getting behind the establishment of the gallery.”

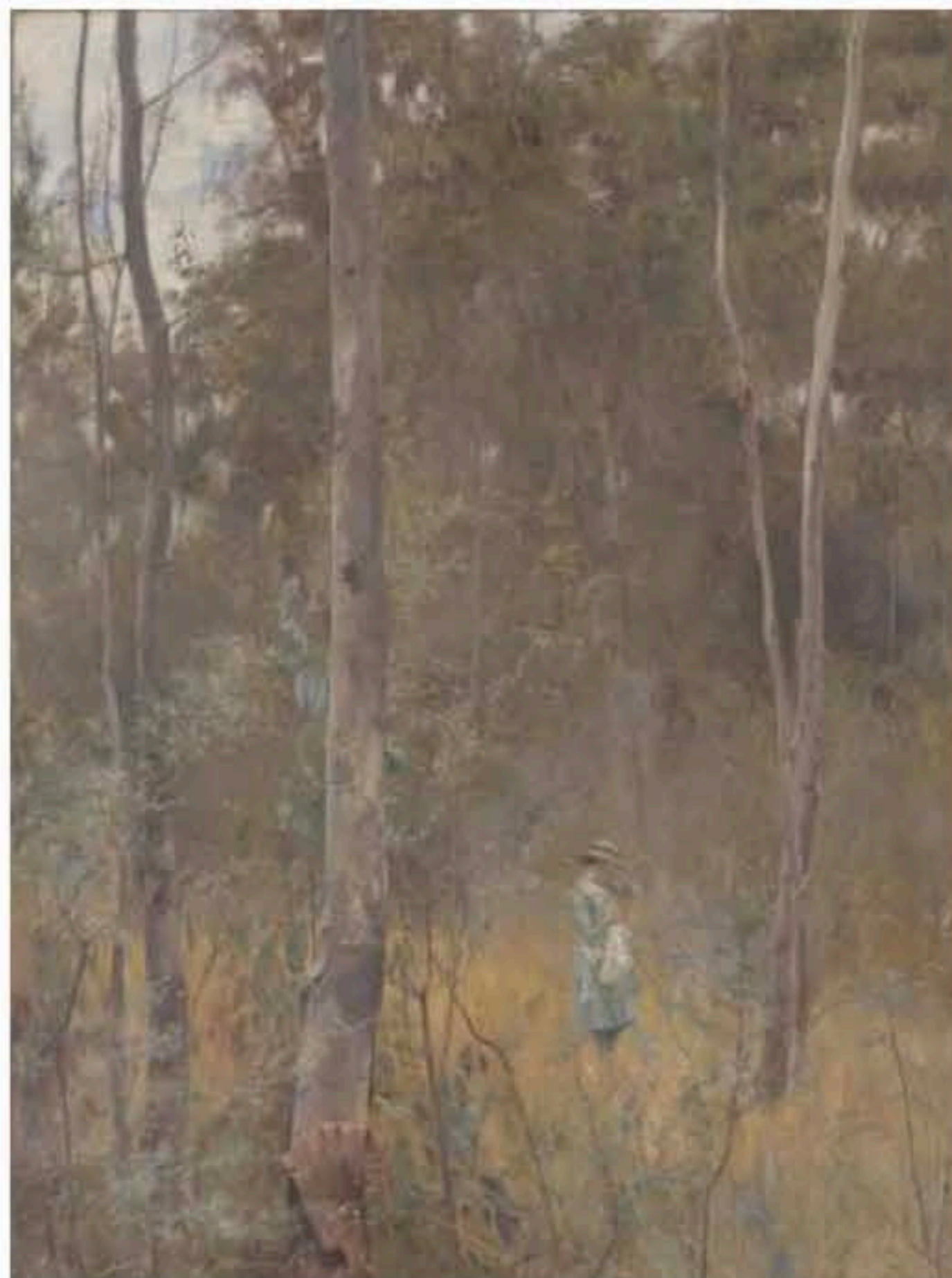
Geelong's was just one of several important acquisitions of McCubbin's work around the turn of the 20th century that anchored him in major public collections around the country. The AGWA acquired *Down on His Luck* in 1896. *On the Wallaby Track* was purchased by the Art Gallery of NSW in 1897, and *The Pioneer* entered the NGV in 1906.

Taken together, the pictures are like chapters from the saga of a settler family, so familiar do the settings and characters become. Annie McCubbin, for example, is the young wife with a baby in her lap in *On the Wallaby Track*.

McCubbin's vision of Australia was very different from that of his friends among the Australian Impressionists. Arthur Streeton was the dashing colourist whose landscapes sing blue and gold. Tom Roberts celebrated the industry and confidence of a newly emerging nation. McCubbin, whom they called the Prof, seems of a melancholy cast – or at least that's the



McCubbin's vision of Australia was very different from that of his friends among the Australian Impressionists. Arthur Streeton was the dashing colourist whose landscapes sing blue and gold. Tom Roberts celebrated the industry and confidence of a newly emerging nation. McCubbin, whom they called the Prof, seems of a melancholy cast – or at least that's the mood of his narrative pictures. Each of the characters in his paintings is alone or part of a small, isolated group. There is no sense of a supportive community, no social or familial threads to hold onto.



Frederick McCubbin, *Lost*, 1886

“They are important paintings of their time, without a doubt,” Sullivan says. “They became iconic – very much part of the Australian psyche and they tell a particular story about Australia. What’s important in the way we work with these paintings now is to acknowledge that there are other stories, and there have always been other stories, and that these are just one aspect of the Australian story.”

In the companion exhibition, Sullivan has brought together works by contemporary artists in the Geelong collection that respond to McCubbin's paintings. Zahalka, in her photomontage series, *The Landscape Re-presented*, 1983-85, inserts post-war European migrants in the places of McCubbin's Anglo-Celtic colonials. Davila's *A Bush Burial*, 2000, is part of a series of paintings about a migrant's arrival at an inhospitable border crossing.

Melbourne artist Jill Orr's response to *A Bush Burial* was a series of performance pieces she gave at Geelong Gallery in 1999. In them, she attempted to provide an answer, or at least some plausible speculations, for the painting's unspoken mystery: Who is in the grave?

She was drawn to an intriguing detail in McCubbin's picture. Draped over the back of the dray is a transparent cloth, like a veil or funeral pall. It suggested to Orr a ghostly presence, or a portal between the living and the dead, in keeping with McCubbin's interest in spiritualism. In her performances, captured in photographs by Bruce Parker and Joanne Haslam, Orr depicted five female characters: a farm worker, “Opium Lil”, a mother, a bride, and the spirit medium who channels them all.

A *Bush Burial* belongs to the tradition of Victorian-era genre painting but it

A Bush Burial belongs to the tradition of Victorian-era genre painting but it also hints at the much earlier tradition of memento mori. Like Dutch vanitas pictures of the 17th century – with their skulls and snuffed candles, and fruit and flowers past their use-by date – McCubbin is reminding the viewer of the inevitability of death. You can almost hear the words being read over the grave: “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”



Jill Orr, Exhume the Grave: Bride, 1999. Picture: Bruce Parker and Joanne Haslam for Jill Orr

“It is a very poignant painting in that respect,” Sullivan says. “We each have a potential reading of the narrative – to me, it is about the universality of death, and life’s trials and tribulations. At the end of the day, we all know that our time will come.”

*Exhume the Grave – McCubbin and Contemporary Art is at Geelong Gallery until November 28. Frederick McCubbin – Whisperings in Wattle Boughs opens on September 4.*

**MATTHEW WESTWOOD, ARTS CORRESPONDENT**

Arts correspondent Matthew Westwood has been writing about the performing and visual arts since he first joined the paper in 1990. As well as concerts, plays and exhibitions, he reports on arts policy and the c... [Read more](#)



**Share this article**



HERMÈS PARIS

TERRE D'HERMÈS

THE STRENGTH OF THE ORIGINS

> Discover

SPONSORED CONTENT

**How premierships are built over time**

Culture might seem like a buzzword, but AFL coaches insist building i...



SPONSORED

**How your Census data helps refugees**

This is how Census data helps newly arrived migrants and refugees ...



SPONSORED