Plate 1: Chinese sketch by Tommy McRae.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Victoria
ART, ABORIGINES AND CHINESE: A NINETEENTH CENTURY
DRAWING BY THE KWATKWAT ARTIST TOMMY McRAE.*

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The cover illustration to this issue, showing two Chinese men in flight, has been redrawn from a pen and ink sketch (Plate 1) by the Aboriginal artist Tommy McRae or McCrae. The original illustration, now in the National Museum of Victoria, has been reproduced before¹, but little attempt has been made to place the picture in historical perspective. This note provides a brief outline of the life and art of Tommy McRae, examines the subject matter of the upper tier of the drawing and relates it to historical events in southeastern Australia, and finally attempts to date the picture.

Tommy McRae died of 'old age' at the Lake Moodemere Aboriginal Reserve near Wahgunyah in northeastern Victoria in 1901. Estimates of his age at the time of his death suggest he was born about 1836. Evidence from a number of sources indicates that he belonged to a group called Kwatkwat by their Pangerang neighbours. Kwatkwat territory adjoined the easternmost Pangerang clan some twenty miles east of the junction of the Murray and Goulburn rivers and stretched along the Murray to Indigo Creek, west of present-day Barnawartha.

Kwatkwat society was disrupted soon after European penetration of their territory, which began at the time McRae was probably born. From 1838 onwards, Aborigines and squatters were involved in a number of violent confrontations in which Europeans and Aborigines were killed. By 1845 the Aborigines east of the Ovens River had been dispossessed by pastoralists and by large herds of introduced animals. No more than two hundred Aborigines remained alive.² In 1852 gold was discovered in the Ovens Mining District. The miners, at first European but later including large numbers of Chinese, flooded into the area and the landscape was soon devastated by their diggings and the countryside denuded of trees and vegetation. Officials prevented Aborigines from entering the goldfields.³ The few remaining Aborigines sought refuge at pastoral stations or towns on the margins of the mining district. By 1860 the surface gold deposits were worked out and the 26,000 miners who had gathered here were rapidly dispersing.

Tommy McRae either witnessed or knew about most of the events which occurred between 1840 and 1860, but we possess no clear details as to

* We acknowledge the assistance given by the following in the preparation of this paper: Dr Diane Barwick, Ms Margaret Calder of the Mitchell Library, Mrs H. Christensen, Mrs G. Leslie, Ms Gaye Sculthorpe of the National Museum of Victoria and Frank Strahan of Melbourne University Archives. We alone are responsible for the interpretation.

1 Barrett 1935: Plate V; Dutton 1974:137. Plate 100; Christie 1979: Plate IV.
2 Andrews 1920:100.
3 Legislative Council 1858:25-85.
his movements or his experiences during this period. Later records would indicate that he remained quite close to his clan territory in the Murray River area, working on pastoral stations. One account states he was involved in droving trips to Melbourne while working for Andrew Hume, owner of Brocklesby Station 1849-59, and that he saw the opening of the Hobson’s Bay railway in 1854.4

In 1858 the plight of the Aborigines forced the Victorian Parliament to appoint the first of two Select Committees whose reports resulted in the establishment of a Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in 1860. The Board provided relief for Aborigines and set up reserves but could achieve little given its paltry budget and the opposition of European vested interests. Documents in the Board’s files for the 1860s and 1870s suggest that the eighty-seven survivors in northeastern Victoria moved freely between the Tangambalanga reserve and camps at Wodonga and Wangaratta. They largely supported themselves by working for pastoralists and farmers or by selling fish, opposum-skin rugs and indigenous weapons. Many of the younger folk were attracted to Coranderrk Station near Melbourne or the Maloga Mission School in New South Wales but the old, including McRae, preferred their own territories. When his name first appeared in Board records in 1881 he had recently established a camp near Wahgunyah on Lake Moodemere with his second wife, Lilly, and other Aboriginal relatives. Apparently he worked occasionally on surrounding stations and sold fish and curios to local Europeans.

In 1885 an Aboriginal friend of the McRaes reported that the community at Wahgunyah and nearby Wangaratta needed housing but the Board refused. McRae, his wife and children, his younger brother and his wife, were listed with other Aborigines. After the last resident at Wangaratta died in 1888 the Board Secretary decided to move the ration depot to Wahgunyah. After a two-year struggle against local opposition an Aboriginal reserve was gazetted at Lake Moodemere in 1891.

By the 1880s, however, changes in government policy towards Aborigines began to have a profound effect on McRae’s community. New South Wales officials moved the Maloga community, with which McRae and his relatives at Wahgunyah had maintained close ties, to Cumeroogunga Aboriginal Station in 1888. The Victorian Board became increasingly paternalistic and in 1886 adopted an ‘absorption’ policy which forced young ‘half castes’ off the stations. In 1890 new regulations allowed the Board to commit children to institutions without their parents’ consent. From the time Rev. F.A. Hagenauer became secretary of the Victorian Board in 1889 the existence of the community at Wahgunyah was increasingly threatened. Tommy McRae appears in the records of the Board as a wily campaigner for his rights, appealing for travel passes and materials for buildings, utilising the assistance of sympathetic European neighbours and local members of Parliament. But McRae could not prevent the Board removing two of his children to institutions in 1891. To prevent the loss of his remaining children McRae and his wife began a series of moves to escape the jurisdiction of the Victorian Board. In 1893 they crossed to Corowa in New South Wales but when they returned

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later the same year another child was removed by police. The McRaes remained at Corowa until 1897. When they returned to Lake Moodemere the remaining children were seized. The years 1893-1897 were therefore a troubled time in which McRae attempted to maintain his independence, his community and his family in the face of official harassment. The fact that he succeeded for so long says a great deal about his ability. By 1897 he was in ill health and received Board rations until his death in 1901.

Nowhere in the records of the Board written during McRae's lifetime are there references to his art. The drawings which have survived from what may have been a large output cannot be accurately dated nor can their collectors or donors always be identified. Dates mentioned in the 1909, 1927, 1929 and 1935 descriptions of McRae's sketchbooks must be treated with caution as they are contradictory.5

What appear to be the earliest examples of McRae's drawings pose problems of attribution. In 1877 Phillip Chauncey described two 'hastily drawn' pen and ink sketches he had acquired in 1860 and 1862 from an artist he identified as 'an untaught Aboriginal lad of the Upper Murray', known as 'Tommy Barnes'. These drawings and another not attributed to Barnes were published by Smyth in 1878. The original of this third drawing, today in the Mitchell Library, bears a label declaring it the work of 'Yakaduna — Tommy McCrae Barnes, 1864'. This drawing is bound with an undated sketchbook by 'Tommy McCrae, chief of the Wahgunyah tribe' and other information on McRae.6 Another drawing attributed to Barnes is in the La Trobe Library, as are the originals of two pictures collected and published by Chauncey.7 Finally, a drawing by an unnamed Murray River Aboriginal who had been employed on a pastoral station 'forty' years before was published by its owner W.S. Murdoch of Wangaratta in 1900. This picture appears to be similar to the Barnes and McRae works.8

There are good reasons, given our knowledge of McRae's life and stylistic similarities, for believing that these early drawings attributed to Barnes were in fact drawn by McRae. The surname 'Barnes' may well have been derived from the publican Barnes who used the original Huon homestead at Wodonga for a hotel in the early 1860s. The name McRae may have come from another publican at McCrae's Inn or Mulwala, a township west of Wahgunyah founded in 1858.9

If Barnes and McRae are one and the same then Tommy McRae had been drawing pictures from 1860. There is, however, no evidence that he maintained a continuous output or if there were periods of intense activity. It is clear, however, that the reason why McRae's pictures have survived is because local Europeans encouraged him in his drawing and purchased his pictures. A number of patrons can be identified. From reminiscences we can provide a few tentative details as to his motives and methods as an artist.

5 Greig 1909; Anonymous 1927; Williams 1927; Cox 1929; Barrett 1935.
7 La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
8 Murdoch 1900: 22, 136, 188.
One of McRae's patrons was Roderick Kiborn who had married the daughter of the first squatter in the Wahgunyah district and who was a local postmaster and Justice of the Peace. At the time of McRae's death in 1901 Kilborn noted in his diary that he had known McRae since 1858. The children of Kilborn confirmed their father's association with McRae in undated letters published in a brief biography of McRae in 1935. Although written long after McRae's death on the basis of their father's diaries and their own memories, these letters provide us with some details of McRae's life. Kilborn's son George recalled that McRae had first produced drawings for his father in a pocketbook in 1865, but provides no details as to where he obtained this date and he does not quote from his father's diary on this point. If the date is correct then Kilborn may well have encouraged McRae's art from this early period though it does appear from other sources that McRae's drawings achieved a more general popularity in this neighbourhood in the 1880s and 1890s. Both Kilborn's son and daughter recalled how their father had given a book of McRae's drawings to the Governor of Victoria, Lord Hopetoun, just prior to his departure from the colony in 1895. This action had aroused public interest in McRae's art and other Europeans supplied him with art material and paid 10/- a book for his drawings. In 1927 George L. Williams recalled how he had provided McRae with materials to produce two books of drawings.

Another local collector was Dr W.H. Lang who had arrived as a medical practitioner in Corowa about 1885. Lang's brother Andrew Lang, the famous British man-of-letters, folklorist and anthropologist, used the drawings his brother collected 'some years before' to illustrate Mrs Langloh Parker's two books of Aboriginal stories published in 1896 and 1898. The artist was described as an Aboriginal but McRae was not mentioned by name although the pictures are clearly his. McRae's drawings collected by other Europeans living in the Wahgunyah/Corowa district, and whose locations are known today, include those which belonged to J.C. Leslie, editor of the Corowa Free Press from 1875, and to J.G. Gray, a pastoralist who owned properties near Corowa from 1876 but was reportedly in the district earlier.

A note dated 1902 by Roderick Kilborn on a sketchbook of eleven undated McRae drawings provides a brief description of McRae's methods: 'His peculiarity as an artist was that in all his sketches he commenced at the feet and worked upwards. These sketches were made in his gunyah'. Another account published in 1929, possibly from information by another of Kilborn's sons, described how when McRae worked he 'stretched himself at full length on the ground and propped up on one elbow made his pictures entirely from memory'. This account also noted his technique of drawing his subjects from the base upwards.

12 Anonymous 1927; Cox 1929; Barrett 1935.
13 Williams 1927.
14 Lang in Parker 1896:xvi; Parker 1898.
16 La Trobe Library Accession No. H 141226.
17 Cox 1929; see also Anonymous 1927 for similar details.
Some of McRae’s surviving pictures show composite scenes often drawn in two tiers. This structure may have been used as a means to separate discrete sets or scenes. Sequences of figures are shown in such a way that they suggest they were arranged to illustrate a particular event or to relate a story. Others undoubtedly were drawn to appeal to a European concern, though many exhibit the wry humour of a cartoonist who has carefully captured place and person and conveyed a sense of people’s mannerisms, both European and Aboriginal.

The majority of McRae’s surviving pictures show scenes of Aboriginal life as he perceived it had once existed or how he actually could recall it in his childhood. There are scenes of hunting and fishing, family groups, fights and dances. The latter illustrations are among the most striking of McRae’s sketches: decorated dancers are shown in lines, legs bent, arms out thrust, in positions which give an impressive sense of movement. The details of activities, dress, decoration and material culture are all meticulously depicted, including illustrations of some types of artefact peculiar to the Murray region.18 Details of subsistence activities such as hunters carrying dried opossums on sticks, and the decoration of dancers can be confirmed from early European accounts of Aborigines.

Not all of the pictures illustrate Aboriginal scenes. One of the Barnes drawings shows a group of squatters and stockmen and others clearly by McRae show similar scenes along with depictions of sailing ships. One of the most remarkable of these illustrations is one which shows Buckley’s escape. This appears to be an early painting similar in style to those of Barnes.19 Two other pictures published in 1929 which were alleged to have come from McRae’s first notebook collected by Kilborn in the 1870s have figures similar to the Buckley drawing.20 While these pictures are of considerable historical interest both in their content and style, they cannot be discussed in detail here. What is of interest are the pictures which include other non-Aboriginal themes, in particular pictures of Chinese.

A recent history of Victorian Aborigines in the nineteenth century reproduces the Chinese sketch with the caption ‘Aborigines chasing Chinese diggers’ as if the picture depicts an actual historical event.21 The evidence on the life and work of McRae so far presented proves this cannot be so. McRae drew his pictures from memory, often long after events and though he certainly saw Chinese miners there was never a time when Aborigines in the form he drew them attacked Chinese, even if by the time Chinese were in northeastern Victoria they had been in a position to do so.

Chinese miners first arrived in the Ovens Mining District in any considerable numbers only after 1855. Between 1853 and 1858 about 42,000 Chinese, mainly farmers, small traders and craftsmen from Kwangtung, migrated to work in Victoria. By 1861 many had left the colony for other areas of Australia or returned home.22 In 1853 A.W. Howitt and his father,
both working on the diggings, visited an Aboriginal camp near Wodonga. The elder Howitt's account presented a depressing picture of camp life with the men wearing shirts, jumpers and blankets and women in opposum-skin rugs. Though he reported a garbled version of Aboriginal/European conflict a decade earlier, he noted that local Europeans declared the Aborigines were now 'tame enough'. In 1854 he reported on the remnants of the 'Ovens tribe' near Wangaratta in much the same manner: stockmen sported European clothes but the population was ravaged by disease. All this hardly suggests a picture of vigorous Aboriginal warriors eager to threaten Chinese miners in the district.

Details of Aboriginal/Chinese relations in northeastern Victoria are totally lacking, but it unlikely that they were hostile. The real area of conflict was elsewhere, particularly between European miners and the Chinese. The Chinese were continuously harassed by Europeans jealous of their competition in the search for gold. There were many ugly incidents culminating in a riot and the death of Chinese at the Buckland Rivers diggings in 1857 when police had to restore order. Such conflicts could not have escaped the attention of Aborigines. The number of Chinese in northeastern Victoria declined rapidly after 1861 although a few probably remained near Wahgunyah as alluvial miners and vineyard labourers. European rhetoric against Asians, however, continued and intensified in later decades though it was directed more against Chinese in the urban areas of Victoria and in other colonies. McRae would undoubtedly have been aware of European attitudes to Chinese and probably he heard of reports of Chinese being attacked by Aborigines in other colonies such as Queensland in the 1870s. He may also have seen illustrations of Chinese in newspapers and magazines, which were often cut out and used to decorate Aboriginal huts at Coranderrk and Malaga in the 1860s and 1870s.

The actual drawing of the Chinese figures, however, is clearly based upon McRae's own memories of the Chinese he had seen in Victoria. His depiction of their dress and loads neatly fits a description of a group of Chinese making their way to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s:

They presented a curious appearance to European eyes when seen on the road; — their singular-looking garments hanging loosely upon them — slippers turned up at the toes — umbrella-like hats of basket-work — and long bamboos on their shoulders, from each end of which were suspended their goods and chattels, consisting of tent, blanket, rice bags, tin dishes, and, in some instances, a gold-washing cradle.

The picture does not depict a real event and it was probably not drawn near the period when Chinese miners were in northeastern Victoria. But when was the sketch drawn? The picture itself is undated and its collector and donor to the National Museum are not documented though it may have been

25 See Price 1974, especially Plate 2.
J.G. Gray. When Barrett first published the picture in 1935 he dated it as 1900, but no evidence is offered for this date.27

One way to establish relative dating is to consider the theme and style of the drawing against the corpus of surviving drawings. Two of Barnes’ early drawings and some of McRae’s which show a close affinity illustrate non-Aboriginal themes, whereas it could be argued that other apparently later drawings illustrate pristine Aboriginal culture, drawn in response perhaps to the tastes of his European patrons. But one could argue that a picture showing Chinese being attacked by Aborigines was also intended for a European audience. Three of the early Barnes drawings, and several of McRae’s, show tiered constructions similar to the Chinese sketch. But such tiered constructions should not necessarily be considered as diagnostic features of style or date as other factors, such as the size of the paper, may have influenced the composition. McRae’s drawing of figures, however, do show stylistic variation between pictures. Figures in the early Barnes drawings are somewhat stilted, though McRae’s eye for detail, especially in his close rendition of European dress and mannerisms, is remarkable.28 In what appear to be McRae’s later sketchbooks the lively silhouetted figures indicate a greater concern with internal patterning, as in the body paint decorations of dancers.29 The sketchbook figures are also imbued with a sense of movement, in spite of a tendency to follow an almost formularistic approach in the compositions.

Stylistically this Chinese sketch does not fit easily with the early Barnes drawings nor with the apparently later sketchbook style. With its caricaturing of the Chinese, attention to detail in the depiction of their dress and its sense of energy and movement, the picture contains elements of both early and late styles. It is therefore difficult to date this particular drawing with any confidence by conventions of style, as it is equally difficult to relate stylistic variations to any period of McRae’s life.

What we know of McRae’s life does suggest that his art may have played a crucial role in his activities during the 1890s although the evidence is circumstantial. Cox reported in 1929 that McRae had earned more as an artist and curio-maker than as a stockman, though the period this statement relates to is unclear.30 But the money from selling his drawings would have provided McRae with a welcome source of income during the troubled years of the 1890s. He was aged and ill and probably could no longer find work as drover or stock-rider. The situation was undoubtedly aggravated by the economic depression of the 1890s when all workers found difficulty obtaining employment. This was also the period when McRae was involved in his struggles with the Board and was forced to leave Lake Moodemere to seek refuge at Corowa. While in New South Wales the eight adults and seven children in McRae’s camp were not eligible for the rations issued by the Victorian Board. This does appear to have been an intensive period of

27 Barrett 1935:86 describes this picture together with another in the Museum, as ‘two of his latest drawings’.
28 The only other known McRae drawing of Chinese was reproduced by Greig 1909:44; the figures are less well drawn than in this Chinese sketch and lack its sense of movement.
29 See the pictures reproduced by Cooper 1981:111-113 though the dates ascribed to these paintings are possibly too early.
30 Cox 1929.
McRae's production, not only of sketchbooks but also of Aboriginal artefacts for sale to Europeans. But whether or not the Chinese sketch belongs to this later period is impossible to tell. On balance it is only possible to say that the drawing was produced sometime between 1870 and McRae's death in 1901.

This note, focussed on a single drawing, is a mere sketch of the life and artistic career of Tommy McRae, a man gifted with extraordinary talent who, in spite of a lifetime of great hardship which saw the destruction of his people and the separation of his family, maintained a sense of dignity and ironic humour which won the admiration of all who knew him, Aborigines and Europeans alike.

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