



ISSUE 22 - JUNE 2012



THE WAYFARER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE ADAM LINDSAY GORDON COMMEMORATIVE COMMITTEE INC.

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**WHISPERINGS IN
WATTLE-BOUGHS**

EVENTS

A bubble
Perfectly formed by nature's laws
Like Gordon
Extinguished at the height
Of brilliance



Photo by Pina Raiola



Piper John Houghton at a previous gathering . Photo by Andrew Lutz

The annual gathering at the Spring Street Melbourne Statue of Adam Lindsay Gordon which is situated in Gordon Reserve will take place on Saturday 23rd June at 11am. With our Patrons Professor Weston Bate and Janice
We will be meeting opposite, at the Cafe Excello 99 Spring Street, at 10.30am

Seniors Week Cemetery Tour Adam Lindsay Gordon; His Life and Beyond. Conducted by Travis M Sellers. This tour is popular with a limit of 25 Saturday 13 October at 10.30am. Meet at the main gates in North Road South Caulfield near the Hawthorn Rd corner. Cost \$10. Bookings essential. Ph.03 5261 2899 or <http://www.adamlindsaygordon.org/tours.htm>



Dr David Hansen has kindly provided to us his research notes into the background behind the early Australian painters and their connection with our Adam Lindsay Gordon.. Over the course of his career Dr David Hansen has curated or managed more than 80 exhibitions, including landmark projects such as John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque (2003), The Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial (1993) and The Face of Australia (1988). He has published essays, articles and reviews in books, journals, magazines and newspapers. David Hansen was a public gallery director and curator for 25 years at the Warrnambool Art Gallery, the Riddoch Art Gallery, Mt Gambier, the Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne, and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart. He currently works for Sotheby's Australia as Senior Researcher and Art Specialist. (Please see overleaf)

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**THE ADAM LINDSAY
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SOTHEBY'S CATALOGUE "IMPORTANT AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL ART"
SYDNEY 8 MAY 2012

Photo- Australia through a train window- Elrae Adams

<http://www.sothebysaustralia.com.au/> Frederick McCubbin's *Whisperings in Wattle Boughs* is a rare and exceptional example of the first flowering of that late 19th century landscape manner known variously as the Heidelberg School, Australian Impressionism or Australian Naturalism: the work of Tom Roberts and his close contemporary McCubbin, of the younger Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder, and of their numerous confederates and followers. Both in its evident warm embrace of the Australian bush setting and associated frontier *staffage* and in its progressive, *plein-air* realism, the painting typifies the work which this artistic coterie exhibited with the Australian Artists' Association in 1886 and 1887 and with the Victorian

Artist's Society in 1888, and which was to have its most celebrated outing in *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* in 1889.

Julian Ashton had brought Parisian *plein-air* ideas to Melbourne as early as 1878, but it was only with Roberts' return from London in 1885 that McCubbin was finally able to shake off the careful, even occasionally stilted academic manner of his National Gallery School teacher George Folingsby. Beginning in the summer of 1885-1886 at their camp on David Houston's bush block near Gardiner's Creek, Box Hill, Roberts and McCubbin developed a new language of Australian landscape painting, a new syntax of paint: of high-key, sunlit colour, of construction by tonal relations and gradations, of broad, airy pictorial spaces framed and articulated by 'vertical and horizontal tracery,'(1) by delicate or dashing brushwork. Ursula Hoff has described how these open-air studies (however much modified or finished in the studio) 'reveal the peculiar beauty of saplings, blue gum leaves ... they catch a momentary effect of light and convey in exquisitely sensitive paint-texture the familiar features of homely subjects.' (2)

Indeed, this first season in the bush was something of a watershed in Australian art history. Despite the fact that their camping ground was set amidst orchards and agricultural land in rapidly-developing outer-suburban Melbourne, an easy train ride and a short walk from the city, and despite their evident incompetence as bushmen - Humphrey McQueen points out that in Roberts's *The Artists' Camp* 'not only is the tent too close to the fire but also its open end is in line with the fire from which sparks could fly and ignite their possessions', and Roberts himself describes fellow camper Louis Abrahams falling into the creek in the dark, losing their bread and chops - the urban-bohemian Box Hill campers of 1885-1886 succeeded in establishing the landscape with figures at the heart of Australian artistic enterprise. '(3) Several works from that campaign have come to be regarded as icons of Australian painting, notably Roberts's *The Artists' Camp* (1886, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) and *A Summer Morning Tiff* (1886, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria), and McCubbin's *Lost* (1886, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).

Whisperings in Wattle Boughs is of comparable quality and significance. Shown at the inaugural Australian Artists' Association exhibition in September 1886, it attracted not just mention but particular comment from reviewers. James Smith in *The Argus* called it 'a remarkably clever picture, full of local colour, and very restful in sentiment', while the critic of *The Daily Telegraph* found it 'remarkable for a delicate purity of tone and for sternly true drawing. The accuracy of the student has been attained; the poetry of the artist has already its indications'(4) It is in fact this poetic element that holds the key to the identification of the picture, which is here reinstated with its original title and meaning after many decades.'(5) Melbourne painters of the late 19th century subscribed to an Aesthetic version of the classical doctrine of *Ut Pictura Poesis* ('As is painting, so is poetry'). Of course the Victorian middle classes in general read, memorised and quoted literary verse as our generation does pop song lyrics, advertising jingles and dialogue from *The Sopranos*, so it is hardly surprising to find the letters of the Australian naturalist painters full of references to poets: Addison, Browning, Carlyle, Herrick, Keats, Omar Khayyam, Shelley and Whitman. It is nevertheless significant that a column in *Table Talk* published a few years after the present work was painted declared: 'We are told by Horace that poetry, in one of its aspects, is like painting; it follows that painting, to reach the full measure of its influence, should have in it some elements of poetry.'(6)

In similar vein, in 1889 Henry Laurie, newspaper editor, litterateur, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne, major patron of Roberts and McCubbin and the original owner of the present work, presented a lecture to the Victorian Artists' Society which addressed what he called 'the close connection between the sister arts of poetry and painting.'(7) Accordingly, many relics of poetry can be excavated from the titles and epigrams of late 1880's Australian paintings, from Robert Herrick's *To Blossoms* (Charles Conder, *Herrick's Blossoms*, 1888-1889, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra) to John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* (Tom Roberts, *In the Forest Dim*, 1889, location unknown; from Robert Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (John Mather, *On the Upper Yarra*, 1888, private collection) to William Wordsworth's *After thought* (Streeton, *Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide*', 1890, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney).'(8) One of the most important of these literary inspirations was the work of colonial poet Adam Lindsay Gordon. Gordon enjoyed a particular vogue during the mid 1880s, as is testified by the fact of his collected works going through no fewer than 11 Australian editions and reprintings between 1877 and 1888, and by the publication of more than a dozen critical essays and biographical studies in the same period. '(9)

There is a direct connection between this literary enthusiasm and the paintings of McCubbin and Roberts. One of the poet's earliest and keenest apologists was the schoolmaster and journalist Alexander Sutherland, who wrote three articles on Gordon and his work between 1883 and 1885. Sutherland was the brother of painter Jane Sutherland, and both were members (with McCubbin and Roberts) of the progressive Melbourne literary and artistic society the Buonarrotti Club. It was Sutherland who proposed (with Roberts seconding) in June 1886 'that the 2nd Saturday in August be devoted to Adam Lindsay Gordon. Artistic, Musical and Literary members to contribute.' At this Special General Meeting, the Club's usual standing agenda item of the display of members' paintings and drawings was devoted entirely to 'studies ... illustrative of the works of Gordon ... The following artists exhibited: - Messrs Mather, Mason, McCubbin, Roberts, Colquhoun, Blanche and Cherry, Addison, Mrs Parsons, Misses Cherry, Brotherton, Clark, Baskerville, Messrs Tucker, Humphrey and Miss Sutherland. '(10) It is highly likely that both the present work and McCubbin's other Gordon-connected picture of the same time, *At the Failing of the Year* (1886, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, sold Sotheby's Australia, 26 November 2007, lot 13) were shown at the Buonarrotti Club, before being more formally exhibited with the Australian Artists' Association the following month. The latter was perhaps simply an on-the spot sketch accorded a Gordonian title by association; plein-airisme was in itself almost enough to summon the spirit of the late poet. At the Buonarrotti Club that night, Alice Brotherton even gave a paper on 'The Open Air Element in Gordon's Poems', in which she stated that of his 52 poems excluding "Ashtaroth", 45 represent events which take place in the open air and of the remaining 7 there is only one ... which does not contain at least one reference to some out of door scene ...'(11)

Whisperings in Wattle Boughs, on the other hand, is rather more likely to be, a conscious tribute. Gordon had been buried - in keeping with the wishes of his *Sick Stockrider* - 'where the wattle blossoms wave', and if may be that the black wattles of Box Hill provided McCubbin with his initial inspiration.'(12) Certainly the picture appears to illustrate Gordon's poem of the same title, not only in the motif of the speaker-subject reclining beneath the eponymous tree, but also in its overall mood of melancholy contemplation, which echoes the poem's explicit nostalgia and regret. The sense of sad nostalgia is further underscored by the billy at the boil, and by what was for the Victorians the quintessentially British ritual of tea. As one local writer put it a few years later:

'By-the-way, have you ever thought over that simple word "tea", and what a wealth of associations it brings with it. Does it not conjure up vivid pictures from our early youth ... How it reminds one of sweet afternoons in dear old English villages ... Old, old England, old England! No one appreciates your charms like the exile who is parted from you ... Thoughts of home and home folk come thronging through my brain. Here am I, thousands of miles from home and many miles from any human soul, an exile, and for my own senseless folly. God help me. Shall I ever see the dear old home; shall I ever again clasp those loving hands in mine and gaze into those eyes? Ah! who can tell ..'(13)



The present work certainly evinces a similar emotional register — *ut pictura poesis*. It seems to parallel Sutherland's judgement of Gordon: 'He has laid bare, as no one else has ever done in Australia, the secret workings of a rich and powerful soul, and he has set the picture in a framework of Australian scenery, his gloomy thoughts being all the more deepened by the brightness of the Nature that surrounds him.'(14)

It is both ironic and marvellous that in so directly addressing the nostalgia of the exiled Briton, the Melbourne-born McCubbin should so fluently articulate the pleasure and pride of native Australians in their local landscape and their fledgling nation. As Ann Galbally has noted, in this subtle, evocative painting, the form ... is no longer imposed artificially into the setting to suggest a story-line ... but seems to occur quite naturally.'(15) At once clear, descriptive and vernacular and shadowy, mysterious and poetic, *Whisperings in Wattle Boughs* heralds the particular poise of McCubbin's justly-acclaimed 'second manner.' (16)

Whisperings in Wattle Boughs was acquired by Professor Henry Laurie and Mrs Frances Laurie soon after it was completed. The Lauries were formative and ardent supporters of both McCubbin and Roberts and their collection was remarkable for its exceptional quality. It included McCubbin's *Lost* (1886, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), Roberts's *The Sunny South* (1887, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) and his *Blue Eyes and Brown* (1887, dated 1888, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). All four paintings were exhibited in the Australian Artists' Association exhibitions of 1886 and 1887.

Whisperings in Wattle Boughs has remained in the possession of the Laurie family for almost 130 years. It is the last McCubbin of its kind in private ownership.

We are particularly honoured to be entrusted with a work of such indelible historical and aesthetic significance and a masterpiece of early Australian Impressionism.

We gratefully acknowledge the kind assistance of Dr Leigh Astbury and Jane Clark in cataloguing this work.

ARTISTS AND AUTHORS

Geoff Dening

<http://www.starnow.co.uk/geoffdening>
 CD "The Ballad of Adam Lindsay Gordon"
 DVD Presentation "Champions" Racing Museum

Brenton Manser

<http://www.brentonmanser.com.au/admella.html>
 DVD "The Wreck of the Admella" 2009

The Torquay Froth and Bubble Literary Festival

<http://www.torquayfrothandbubbleliteraryfestival.com/>

Lorraine Day

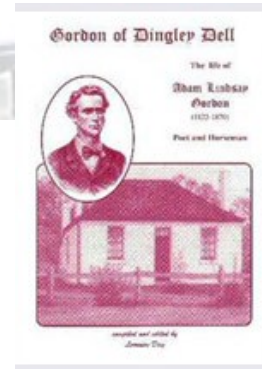
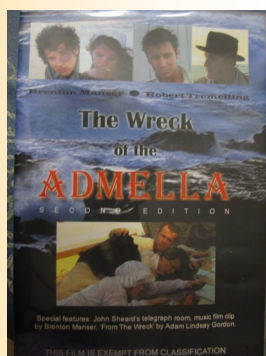
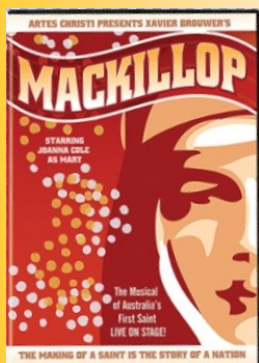
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 "Gordon of Dingley Dell": The Life of Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) Poet and Horseman
 "Reef of Despair." The wreck of the SS Admella – COMING SOON !

Michael Wilding

<http://www.scholarly.info/home/>
 "Marcus Clarke" Edited by Laurie Hergenhan, Ken Stewart and Michael Wilding
 "Wild Bleak Bohemia"; Marcus Clarke, Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kendall-OUT SOON !

Xavier Brouwer

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xavier_Brouwer
 "MacKillop" The Musical
 At present exploring the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon For "Sighs of Sorrow"



WHISPERINGS IN WATTLE—BOUGHS

OH, gaily sings the bird, and the wattle-boughs are stirr'd
 And rustled by the scented breath of spring ;
 Oh, the dreary, wistful longing ! Oh, the faces that are thronging ! Oh,
 the voices that are vaguely whispering !

Oh, tell me, father mine, ere the good ship cross'd the brine,
 On the gangway one mute hand-grip we exchanged,
 Do you, past the grave, employ, for your stubborn reckless boy,
 Those petitions that in life were ne'er estranged ?

Oh, tell me, sister dear, parting word and parting tear
 Never pass'd between us ;—let me bear the blame.
 Are you living, girl, or dead ? bitter tears since then I've shed
 For the lips that lisp'd with mine a mother's name.

Oh, tell me, ancient friend, ever ready to defend,
 In our boyhood, at the base of life's long hill,
 Are you waking yet, or sleeping ? have you left this vale of weeping?
 Or do you, like our comrade, linger still ?

Oh, whisper, buried love, is there rest and peace above ?—
 There is little hope or comfort here below ;—
 On your sweet face lies the mould, and your bed is strait and cold—
 Near the harbour where the sea-tides ebb and flow.

.

All silent—they are dumb—and the breezes go and come
 With an apathy that mocks at man's distress ;
 Laugh, scoffer, while you may ! I could bow me down and pray
 For an answer that might stay my bitterness.

Oh, harshly screams the bird ! and the wattle-bloom is stirr'd !
 There's a sullen weird-like whisper in the bough :
 'Aye, kneel, and pray, and weep, but HIS BELOVED SLEEP
 CAN NEVER BE DISTURB'D BY SUCH AS THOU !!'

Published in 'Sea Spray and Smoke Drift' (1867).

http://adamlindsaygordon.org/works_whisperingsinwattle.htm