



'Happy beyond measure':  
a life

Anne Gray



Frederick McCubbin was a son of Melbourne. He was born and brought up in working-class Melbourne, he trained and taught at the National Gallery of Victoria's art school, lived in Melbourne and its surrounds for his entire life (bar a few months), and made Melbourne the central subject of his art. No other Melbourne artist was better known than he during his lifetime.

From what others have said we can easily imagine McCubbin. He had a gentle presence, and the air of a poet and dreamer. He was kindly, sincere and single-minded in his outlook. He was energetic, fun, warm and gregarious—and would gesticulate freely with his arms and hands. He was a thinking man, and he liked to make others think and laugh; an extensive and discriminating reader, particularly of biography and high fiction, he enjoyed talking on a wide range of topics.<sup>1</sup> It was his habit to memorise what he read and to deliver it to the first receptive friend he came across—whether at the opening of an exhibition or at a chance meeting on a tram.<sup>2</sup>

### Childhood and young manhood (1855–85)

McCubbin's father, Alexander, was a master baker. He migrated to Australia from Girvan (Ayrshire, in south-west Scotland) in April 1852 at the height of the Australian gold rush,<sup>3</sup> having married Anne McWilliams in London in 1848.<sup>4</sup> He was a practical man, and seems to have been a proficient businessman, but according to his son was of a naturally restless temperament and liked to act without too much premeditation.<sup>5</sup>

Frederick's mother, Anne, was a different character. She was highly sensitive and was fond of music. Upon arrival in Melbourne she had begged her husband to take her home again. The couple stayed on, however, and when Alexander established his bakery at 165 King Street, Melbourne, things improved.

Frederick's parents had eight children, Frederick being their third child and third son, born on 25 February 1855 on the premises of the bakery. He had two elder brothers, William John (who became a flour miller) and James Alexander (who went to sea at an early age), as well as a younger brother, Robert. He had four sisters, Mary Anne (Dolly), Harriet (Polly), Wilhelmina (Minnie) and Helen (Nellie).<sup>6</sup> It was a busy, happy household, but one that was still coming to terms with life in their new country. As McCubbin later commented, the world that his parents had left behind was often at the forefront of their discussions:

Everybody who was grown up spoke of Home, the old Country—Memories of strings of immigrants—coming up from the wharves—talks of ships and the sea—boarding houses . . . innumerable boxes—with titles such as not wanted on the voyage—sailors—and the maid servants—who told us stories of old Ireland and sometimes Scotland, then people from Home staying with us each bringing their quota of romantic stories of the Old World.<sup>7</sup>

For these adults, including Frederick's parents, not only was there nostalgia for the place they called 'Home', but there was also a sense of discomfort about where they were now living. As McCubbin recollected:

people said this was a dreadful country and why did they ever come to such a dreary land—and then—the awful Hot Winds that blew in summer—and the fearful dust storms—and the dreary monotonous bush—all the same—no variety, so sad—and sombre—They were a Home sick people.<sup>8</sup>

This was an attitude that McCubbin visualised in his early paintings, with their monotonous colours, but it was one which he dramatically moved away from in his later work. In these last impressions he showed the beauty and variety of the country into which he had been born and he deliberately sought out the variety in the bush and the rich colours of the Australian land

(previous pages)  
cat 51 **Frederick McCubbin**  
*Afterglow (Summer evening)* 1912  
(detail)  
oil on canvas  
91.5 x 117 cm  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra, purchased 1970

(above left)  
**John Sommers**  
*Frederick McCubbin at the age of twenty-one* c1876  
pencil and charcoal on brown paper  
34 x 26.4 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne, gift of Mr Hugh  
McCubbin, 1962

**JMW Turner**  
*Scene on the Loire*  
steel engraving  
9.2 x 14.2 cm  
reproduced from Leitch Ritchie,  
*Wanderings by the Loire*, Longman,  
Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and  
Longman, London, 1833, p 172

and cityscape—painting places that he knew well and that he loved.

Frederick's mother encouraged her son's talent for art. She noticed his fondness for drawing and brought it to the attention of the local pastor, who invited Frederick to visit him and lent him a volume of *The lives of the most eminent British painters* by Allan Cunningham and gave him lithographs to copy.<sup>9</sup> Frederick also pored over prints and woodcuts in old magazines, which were inevitably British in origin. During his youth he discovered steel engravings of France by JMW Turner, published in *Wanderings by the Loire* (1833), which greatly interested him. When he was taken on a picnic to Studley Park one Sunday afternoon he recalled these engravings: 'I thought it a dream just like the engravings in Turner's *Wanderings on the Loire*.<sup>10</sup> Even as late as around 1910, when he wrote his 'Autobiographical reminiscences', he still thought the engravings 'looked beautiful'.<sup>11</sup>

When McCubbin was born, Melbourne was being rapidly transformed. Victoria had only just separated from New South Wales, and gold had only recently been discovered at Mount Alexander near Castlemaine, and was soon discovered at Ballarat and Bendigo.<sup>12</sup> Thousands had rushed to seek their fortunes in the goldfields, creating a massive social upheaval. Melbourne quickly became the largest and richest city in Australia. During this time of rapid settlement and commercial growth the University of Melbourne was established (1853), the Melbourne Public Library founded (1856) and the National Gallery of Victoria created (1861).<sup>13</sup>

During the 1860s, Frederick was educated at William Willmott's west Melbourne Common School and then at St Pauls School in Swanston Street, where he acquired the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic.<sup>14</sup> But school was never congenial to him.<sup>15</sup>



At about the age of 13, his father found Frederick work as a clerk in the office of Withers, solicitors (in Eden Chambers, Bank Place) in the hope that his son would become a lawyer. Frederick's job was to copy legal papers—tedious and unimaginative work. But he had abundant free time and spent some of it exploring his creative side, sketching and making model theatres out of cardboard and colouring the scenes with watercolour. He was inspired by the scene painting he had seen in the local theatres, and later recalled: 'What delight I had in those scenes remembered from the different plays I had been to.'<sup>16</sup> When he was caught doing this, however, he lost his job.

For the next three years his father employed him in the family bakery. Frederick started work early in the morning, delivering bread by horse and cart, travelling around the streets from the west Melbourne swamplands across the Yarra River at the Old Falls Bridge and on to Emerald Hill. He found 'the open air and variety of life had a charm', so long as he could believe that he might one day paint pictures.<sup>17</sup> He gained visual impressions that would later inspire his images of Melbourne and the Yarra. His contemporary, James MacDonald, noted that while sitting on the cart Frederick dreamt endlessly: 'He felt that if he could only paint pictures he would want nothing else'; 'a feeling of happiness began to creep over him'.<sup>18</sup> Frederick also enjoyed the waterside, and later remembered visiting the Yarra one Sunday when a lovely south wind was blowing and all the boats were decked with flags.<sup>19</sup> This was all formative subject matter for his art.

Although McCubbin enjoyed this life, his father thought his son could do better, and in 1871, without consulting him, he apprenticed Frederick to the coach painter and wheelwright firm of Stevenson and Elliott. For his father this was a recognition of Frederick's interest in art. He did not understand the tedium of this work—painting coloured lines on wagon and buggy shafts and the bodies of drays—and the great distance between this and his son's aspirations. As a way of escape, Frederick tried to qualify as a teacher of drawing in a state school, but was unsuccessful.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, he did come to appreciate the skills of his fellow workers and to value their craftsmanship,<sup>21</sup> developing an admiration for honest labour which he later conveyed in his art.



### Art student (1869–86)

While still working as a legal clerk, McCubbin began formal art studies by enrolling in evening classes at the Artisans' School of Design at Lygon Street, Carlton. Aged about 14 years old, he went there 'happy beyond measure',<sup>22</sup> feeling that he was on the highroad to Art.<sup>23</sup> His principal purpose was to learn how to draw figures. The classes were established in the English manner of teaching artisans, particularly in the art of drawing for a career in industrial design. Students spent much of their time copying ornaments, mouldings and suchlike, but were taught figure drawing and landscape as well. The teachers were Thomas Clark and the by then elderly artist, Louis Buvelot. Buvelot's honest approach to depicting the landscape, with a focus on 'light and tone', and the simple poetry of quiet places, stayed with McCubbin for life. He later remarked (without explicitly naming Buvelot) that Tom Roberts and he had an immense reverence for Buvelot's work:

he perhaps being the only man at that time who could give us a hint at all the beauties that were under our very eyes ... most of us owe it to him that slowly we were able to see the paintable qualities of that which lay immediately around us—The exquisite beauty of our lovely skies—the glorious colour and form of our gum trees—how cold and tame the deciduous trees are to us—after the beauty and warmth of our native land—but it took time.<sup>24</sup>

One day on the way to class, McCubbin saw a copy of Titian's *Flora* c 1520 through the first floor window of a hotel and was held spellbound by the 'gorgeous effects of colour'. The memory of this painting remained with him.<sup>25</sup> He later commented

that 'no picture I have ever seen since can equal the charms that picture was to me ... I walked on air'.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Clark moved to the recently founded art school at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1870, when he was appointed drawing master there. McCubbin soon moved there as well, studying in the evening classes from 1872.<sup>27</sup> Clark encouraged his students to adopt a range of approaches, including figure drawing and open-air sketching. Much of the time he left his students to their own devices, drawing from plaster casts of sculptures in the Gallery, such as the *Venus de Milo* and the Elgin marbles. Clark was partly paralysed, and could speak only in the faintest whisper, but his students valued his kindness and generosity of spirit.<sup>28</sup> On Clark's retirement, McCubbin became a student of Oswald Rose Campbell, who was appointed drawing master in 1876. By contrast with Clark, Campbell was inflexible and dictatorial, following strict academic lines, and was generally disliked.

Fellow students at the National Gallery's school included Tom Roberts, C Douglas Richardson and Bertram Mackennal, with whom McCubbin formed long-lasting friendships. He later described Roberts as one of the most earnest draughtsmen in the school, and as 'generous in his appreciation as he was thorough in his work'.<sup>29</sup> McCubbin also associated with Alexander Colquhoun, E Phillips Fox, John Longstaff, Jane Sutherland, Tudor St George Tucker and Walter Withers. The students gave McCubbin the nickname 'The Proff', because of his philosophising and desire to discuss art and theories.



(above)  
**Frederick McCubbin**  
*Girl with bird at the King Street bakery* 1886  
oil on canvas  
40.7 x 46 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Purchased 1969

(below)  
**Unknown photographer**  
Group of students, National Gallery Art School, Melbourne, 1887  
gelatin silver photograph  
14.1 x 19.7 cm  
(left to right), back row: John Longstaff, J Llewellyn Jones, Alexander Colquhoun, E Phillips Fox, Frederick McCubbin  
middle row: JJ Gibbs, David Davies, Frederick M Williams  
front row: Tudor St George Tucker, Aby Altson  
National Library of Australia, Canberra



Attending classes twice weekly at the School of Design, on Monday and Wednesday evenings, McCubbin worked assiduously. He sought a thorough artistic training, but instruction at the school was limited, and, to expand their knowledge beyond what they could gain from their teachers, or from copying Flaxman's outline engravings of Classical figures, he and Tom Roberts took it upon themselves to study and draw the skeleton at the Medical School at the University of Melbourne.<sup>30</sup> McCubbin also visited the Melbourne Agricultural Show to make animal drawings.<sup>31</sup> On Saturday afternoons he went sketching at the wharves, and on painting excursions with Roberts.<sup>32</sup>

Although much of the National Gallery of Victoria's collection at this time consisted of mediocre works, by now-forgotten artists—genre scenes or 'edifying' historical paintings—McCubbin came to admire Scottish artist Peter Graham's *Autumnal showers* 1869, pointed out to him by a friend. He saw 'its beauties in a way that made the picture a new vision of nature'.<sup>33</sup> John Ruskin too was influential in opening McCubbin's eyes to the beauties of the natural world. When he read Ruskin's *Modern painters* he was 'dazzled by his charm of writing', and Ruskin's enthusiasm for nature made him 'look [at] it with more reverence'.<sup>34</sup>

McCubbin began to study in the National Gallery's School of Painting from 1877, when Eugène von Guérard was the teacher, but only remained von Guérard's student for two years. He resumed his painting studies when GF Folingsby was appointed painting master on 1 June 1882 (after von Guérard had retired due to ill health). Folingsby became the first director of the National Gallery of Victoria, as well as master of the School of Art, and



(above)  
**GF Folingsby**  
*Kitchen of castle of Hohenaschau* 1860s  
oil on canvas on cardboard  
40.4 x 38 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased 1891

(right)  
**Peter Graham**  
*Autumnal showers* 1869  
oil on canvas 124.7 x 174.8 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased 1869

completely reorganised the art-teaching methods in Melbourne. He stopped students from copying pictures in the gallery, believing the practice was in no way beneficial to them, and had a 'pernicious and lowering effect on the public taste'.<sup>35</sup> Folingsby was an able and exacting teacher who taught the fundamentals of art, stressing good drawing and a broad and simple disciplined approach. His interest in history painting may have stimulated McCubbin's interest in national themes. McCubbin later wrote: 'The influence of Folingsby was a great stimulus to us all'; Alexander Colquhoun found Folingsby's attitude 'intimate and stimulating' and Rupert Bunny said he had to 'unlearn nothing'. Folingsby's advice to 'keep it broad and simple' remained with McCubbin to the end.<sup>36</sup>

Folingsby supported the students by encouraging the nude life class which they established in opposition to Oswald Rose Campbell (who only allowed a class with a draped model). In his report for 1882, Folingsby noted: the 'male students have formed an evening life class for study of the nude model on two evenings in the week, they paying the cost of the models'.<sup>37</sup> The students drew 'in a somewhat furtive and conscious fashion',<sup>38</sup> and funds became so short at one point that they decided to be models themselves, 'three nights each turn about'. It was a lesson in more ways than one. McCubbin admitted that 'since then I have had a good deal of sympathy for the models in our schools, how stiff we felt after it'.<sup>39</sup> Folingsby personally attended to the posing

of each new model and provided his advice to the students, believing that ‘nothing can be done in painting and sculpture without good drawing’ and that to obtain this it was essential to have a thorough knowledge of how to represent the human figure.<sup>40</sup>

Folingsby, however, was essentially a studio painter and although he didn’t prohibit *plein air* painting he was critical of it, and is said to have maintained that ‘the man who paints landscape in the open air is a fool’.<sup>41</sup> McCubbin, regardless, began to paint outdoors while a student, and continued to do so all his life—becoming gradually freer in his approach to working in front of the motif.

Folingsby initiated annual student exhibitions in November 1883, and McCubbin took full advantage of these. At the age of 28 he was awarded first prize of £30 in the inaugural *Annual exhibition of paintings by the students of the National Gallery*. At their second exhibition he achieved further success when awarded second prize of £20 for his painting *Home again* 1884 (NGV). His abilities were being noticed.

Despite the initiatives of Folingsby, McCubbin was often frustrated in his efforts to master the craft of drawing and painting. In his handwritten ‘Autobiographical reminiscences’ he made it clear that his journey to learn about painting was often a lonely one, and that he received more encouragement from his fellow students, and particularly from Tom Roberts, than from his teachers.

While still a student, McCubbin was employed to produce black and white illustrations for the *Australasian Sketcher* and *Illustrated Australian News*. It was a way of earning badly needed income to finance his more serious studies, but was not a means of employment in which he was seriously interested. (Once appointed drawing master at the National Gallery’s art school in 1886, he gave up this work.<sup>42</sup>)

McCubbin also looked outside the school, for opportunities to study and to show his work. The Victorian Academy of Arts was established by professional and amateur artists in 1870 for the purpose of teaching art and holding exhibitions, with the exalted aim of mirroring the Royal Academy in London. McCubbin attended classes there, and exhibited in their annual exhibitions from 1876. He sold his first painting, *View near Fisherman’s Bend* c 1880 (now University of Queensland) at



the age of 25, from the academy’s 1880 exhibition. And in 1882 he was awarded a silver medal in the academy’s life-class, and was elected an associate.

In the middle of his art training, on 2 May 1877, when he was only 22, tragedy had struck the McCubbin family with the unexpected death of Frederick’s father, Alexander, from severe apoplexy as a result of accidentally falling down a flight of stairs. Frederick’s eldest brother, William, was fully occupied as a miller, and the second eldest, James, had gone to sea—so the responsibility of looking after the family and the bakery fell to Frederick. He temporarily gave up his art to assist his mother in running the business, but, still determined to become a painter, eventually returned to the National Gallery’s school.<sup>43</sup> (The family seemed to be dogged with ill-fortune; four years later in 1881, William died from an industrial accident at his flour mill.<sup>44</sup>)

### Golden summers (1885–89)

One of the most significant aspects of McCubbin’s student years was his friendship with Tom Roberts, with whom he shared a serious approach to learning about and practising art. Roberts’s influence on McCubbin was personal as well as artistic, supportive and encouraging. Although one year younger than McCubbin, Roberts had the opportunity to travel overseas, and on his return in 1885 after four years studying at the Royal Academy Schools in England and looking at art in Europe, the two renewed their friendship. Roberts advocated truth to nature in art, tonal values, and confirmed the importance of painting outdoors.

**Frederick McCubbin**  
*View near Fisherman’s Bend* c 1880s  
oil on paper on cardboard  
19.6 x 31.5 cm  
University of Queensland art collection, Brisbane, gift of the Estate of Dr F Bage through her friend, Miss Hughes, 1971

Cover of catalogue of *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* 1889 (designed by Charles Conder) photo-lithograph and letterpress on handmade paper  
17.7 x 10.6 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased 2006

Together with Louis Abrahams, Roberts and McCubbin spent their weekends painting landscapes—initially close to the city around the Kew parklands, the farmlets at Merri Creek, the banks of Gardiner’s Creek, and the hills of Hawthorn. They then moved further afield and established an artists’ camp in a patch of wild bush on David Houston’s property at Box Hill, on the outskirts of Melbourne (readily accessible by rail). They pitched their tents beside the creek among tall young blue-gum saplings and wild grasses. They painted quickly, to capture an impression of the scene before the light changed the way the landscape appeared. It was a happy time, as Roberts later recalled: ‘You remember the evenings we sat at the Camp, the last light of the sun on the ti-tree in the creek—the smell of the chop—& the gum twigs—the mopoke. A happy time.’<sup>45</sup>

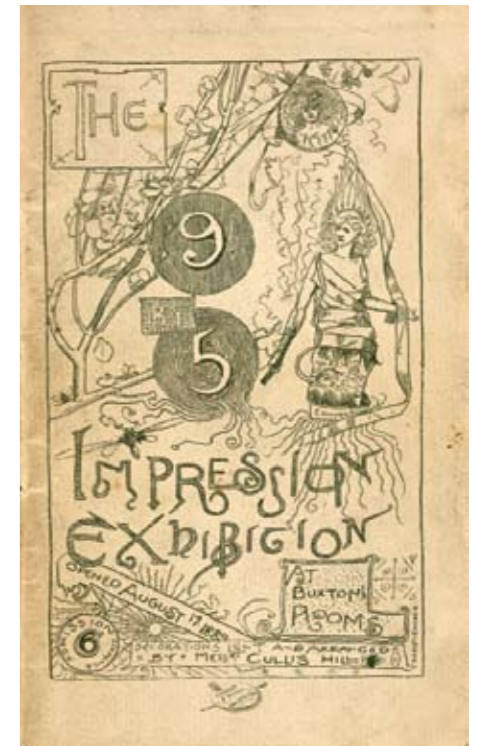
In the summer of 1886–87, McCubbin, Roberts and Abrahams rented a cottage at Mentone, a beachside suburb of Melbourne. Here and at nearby Beaumaris they again painted *en plein air*. They met the younger, less experienced artist Arthur Streeton sketching on the beach at Ricketts Point and he subsequently joined them in their painting expeditions, later recalling:

The first open-air picture I had seen of McCubbin’s was painted on these shores. A full expanse of pale blue lapping water, and the beach and fossil rocks for a foreground, and shed over the surface of everything was the warm air of December noon.<sup>46</sup>

Through working together with Roberts, Streeton and the young Charles Conder (who joined the Eaglemont camp in 1888), McCubbin became part of this legendary—and much discussed—period of Australian art. For McCubbin, however, it was working with Roberts that was most important. It was from Roberts that he learnt about ‘relative values’: about orchestrating his palette tonally with regard to low and high values to make an integrated whole. Painting together at Box Hill both artists made considerable advances in their approach to landscape. Telescoping in on a small segment of the bush, they depicted treescapes in which the sky is absent and in which the eucalypts are viewed in close focus—creating works which were radically different from the wide panoramic viewpoints of earlier Australian landscape painters.

In 1889, McCubbin joined with Roberts, Streeton, Conder and others in exhibiting work in the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* which opened at Buxton’s Rooms, Swanston Street, Melbourne, on 17 August. The title of the exhibition referred to the size of the 182 works on display, many of which had been painted on cedar cigar-box lids measuring nine by five inches (about 23 x 12.5 cm). The artists wanted to convey momentary impressions of colour and light, fleeting atmospheric effects, transient moods of nature. As they wrote in the exhibition catalogue: ‘An effect is only momentary ... Two half-hours are never alike ... it has been the object of the artists to render faithfully, and thus obtain the first record of effects widely differing, and often of very fleeting character’.<sup>47</sup> They regarded these rapidly painted ‘impressions’ as finished, independent pictures.

Probably the most famous display in Australian art, the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* was well appreciated by the members of Melbourne’s intellectual and social circles, who visited in large numbers. The show received controversial press coverage, with some reviewers suggesting that the impressions were not appropriate for display, as they were nothing more than slight preparatory studies executed in a ‘slap-dash’ manner. Others described it as an attractive display of clever sketches for an educated taste,



and declared that the exhibition was not to be missed. The pictures were affordable and sold well, and the exhibition helped establish the artists' reputations. McCubbin was just a minor player in this exhibition—contributing only five paintings against Roberts's 62, Conder's 46 and Streeton's 40—and he did not join Roberts, Streeton and Conder in signing a letter to the *Argus* in defence of the exhibition.<sup>48</sup> Although his participation demonstrates his support of their ideals, and of painting 'impressions', nonetheless as Ann Galbally has pointed out, 'at no stage did McCubbin see himself as part of a group or even holding an artistic ethos in common with other artists'.<sup>49</sup> He valued his friendship with Roberts, and working with him. He learnt from Roberts and found him a stimulating force, and he kept on exploring ways of capturing the fleeting effects of light and colour and the changing moods of nature. But in the 1890s Roberts and Streeton moved to New South Wales (and later travelled overseas), and Conder left for Europe, while McCubbin stayed on in Melbourne, developing his own art independently.

Although mixing with these artists, and particularly with Roberts, was important to McCubbin, his artistic friendships extended beyond this small group. He had a sunny nature which attracted other people and his household was always open to visitors. When living in New Street, Brighton, in the late 1890s for instance, his neighbours included Alexander Colquhoun, John Longstaff, John Mather and Tudor St George Tucker. According to Colquhoun, the McCubbin home was a lively place. It was:

a weatherboard house, set in an old orchard garden, which ran from the street to the railway line, the entire ménage being always more or less open to visitors. The garden made an ideal combination of painting ground and play place for children.<sup>50</sup>

The artist-neighbours often visited each other to discuss art and ideas—and Roberts and Streeton were also occasional visitors there, while living in Sydney.

McCubbin's friendship with E Phillips Fox and Tudor St George Tucker was important to the development of his art during his Brighton years. Fox and Tucker had returned from Europe in 1892 with new ideas which impressed McCubbin. James MacDonald noted that this led McCubbin 'to break



away largely from the usual style of work' he had been doing. Furthermore, MacDonald suggested that:

McCubbin had anticipated the refraction of colour theory brought back triumphantly from Paris by Fox and Tucker ... [Tucker] preached the gospel of broken colour with Monet as its prophet.<sup>51</sup>

McCubbin's association with Fox and Tucker in the late 1890s was highly significant in broadening his horizons and expanding his approach to his art—turning him towards more varied colour and more expressive paint handling. It was a major move towards his last impressions of 1907–17.

### Teacher (1886–1917)

At the age of 31, and after studying at the National Gallery's school for many years, McCubbin was appointed acting master and instructor in its School of Design in 1886; confirmed in 1888, at the salary of £300 a year.<sup>52</sup> This provided him with an assured income and gave him time to paint. McCubbin enjoyed teaching, and between 1886 and 1917 taught many artists who were to achieve significant reputations of their own. These included George Pitt Morrison, Arthur Streeton, James Quinn, Charles Conder, Hugh Ramsay, George Bell, Jessie Traill, Penleigh Boyd, Arnold Shore, Napier Waller, Clarice Beckett and Joan Lindsay.<sup>53</sup>

In the first year after McCubbin's appointment, Folingsby reported 'the Drawing Classes have increased in number, and are already showing satisfactory signs of improvement since the appointment of Mr. McCubbin as Acting-Master of the School of Design'.<sup>54</sup> This may well have been due to his kindly and helpful approach. He would look at his students' work and say 'just a little bit there', or, 'it would be better if you did it this way',

**E Phillips Fox**  
*Harvesting* c 1900  
oil on canvas  
49 x 120.7 cm  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra, purchased 2005

**Bernard Hall**  
*Self-portrait as a young man* c 1880  
oil on canvas  
112 x 63 cm  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra, purchased 1977

guiding them in the ways they could progress, and teaching them how to look. He was encouraging, and sought to find out what his students were interested in. And he was always gracious in manner. But, typical of the period, there was also a distance between master and pupils, with his students referring to him as 'McCubbin' or 'Old Mac'.<sup>55</sup>

James Quinn remembered McCubbin as 'warm and friendly, even when he was chastising our work'.<sup>56</sup> Others recalled him as a man of great enthusiasm, willing to share his ideas, to voice his opinions, to take notice of the suggestions of others and to help his fellow artists. He would also talk to his students about 'his philosophies and his experiences in life, and the people he had met'.<sup>57</sup>

The writer Joan Lindsay was one of McCubbin's students, and remembered him fondly:

My first sight of that sage and amiable head—often in winter covered by a tightly-fitting round black cap—was characteristic. I was forlornly waiting on the threshold of the Drawing School where I had just presented myself for enrolment, and glancing down the long vista of antique plaster casts I saw a close packed ring of students clustered like flies round a honey pot. It was eleven thirty and McCubbin was teaching. It was significant that an individual student receiving a lesson from the master automatically became the focal point for the class. Without compulsion students would put down their charcoal and gather around the old man to savour his wise and witty comments not only on the work in hand but on art, life, literature, music: anything and everything that would start our minds working for themselves. He never talked down to his students. The trend was always upwards. He treated us as adults and painters to be. In this lay much of his success as a teacher, for he *was* successful, if unconventional in his methods. Articulate in everything else, when it came to the practical assistance to a student fumbling with a charcoal fuzz of the *Discobolos* or Michelangelo's *Slave*, he would become almost embarrassed; a kindly man, he hated to hurt the sensitive feelings of the feeblest student. Standing before the easel for a moment of silence he would often come out with the never to be forgotten advice: 'Feel it ... just feel it ...' and walk rapidly away, his long coat flapping around his heels. We sometimes felt the need of more positive instruction but I can see now, that this, for McCubbin, was a perfectly logical, and even helpful approach to our problems.<sup>58</sup>



In traditional fashion, the students stood with their paper pinned onto an easel. In the first year they copied plaster fruits (apples and pears), then progressed to plaster casts of hands and feet, and then to torsos and heads. In the second year they drew from live models, draped and nude. They drew with outlines in charcoal, and then used bread rolled into a ball to rub into the charcoal to create shading.

McCubbin's director, Bernard Hall, provided a dramatic contrast to his colleague. He was tall and lean, handsome and faultlessly dressed; was essentially English and never settled into Australia. He was regarded as being 'rigid, cold and precise'<sup>59</sup>—often highly critical and with no compunction about telling his students they had 'got it wrong'.<sup>60</sup> Despite such differences however, and although many found Hall difficult and confrontational, McCubbin managed to get on with him.

McCubbin also encouraged the Gallery students to work on their landscape painting during vacations, and invited them to camp with their tents close to his home, 'Fontainebleau', on Mount Macedon.

## Marriage and family life

One afternoon in 1884 McCubbin joined an artists' picnic at Blackburn in outer Melbourne. There he met Annie Lucy Moriarty, who came from a large Irish family (from County Clare). Annie was 19, having been born at Hotham, Melbourne, on 25 August 1865.<sup>61</sup> She was a pretty young woman, with rounded features, soft smiling brown eyes and long dark brown hair which she often wore swept up into a bun. A photograph (below) of her taken in c 1910–13 by May and Minna Moore shows her with a contented, cheerful look, and slightly questioning eyes. Frederick and Annie continued to meet and four years later, on 5 March 1889, were married at the Jesuit church of St Ignatius in Richmond. The groom was 34 and the bride 10 years his junior. Tom Roberts was best man and as a wedding gift presented them with a Doulton flower bowl. McCubbin's students gave the couple a marble clock and mantel ornaments.

Annie was an ideal artist's wife, supportive and encouraging. She was a woman of character and talent, and a born organiser.<sup>62</sup> She was also frugal, and knew how to turn the parlour curtains into a dress when required.<sup>63</sup> Over the next 17 years Frederick and Annie had seven children: four boys, Louis, Alexander, Hugh and Sydney, born fairly close



together, and three girls, Mary, Sheila and Kathleen. (Their second child, Mary, died tragically in 1894, at the age of three, after accidentally falling from her pusher.<sup>64</sup>) When their last child, Kathleen, was born in 1906, Frederick was almost 50, and his eldest son Louis was already 18.

The McCubbins were, as Kathleen said, 'a lively and ebullient family', each one of them with their own distinct characters. Louis, the eldest, was 'conscientious and good natured', 'the most responsible member of the family'. Alexander was 'emotional and creative', with dark complexion and hair. Hugh was 'practical and serious', while Sydney was 'an inventor, with a head full of crazy ideas, who liked to laugh a lot' and was called 'Ginger' because of his hair. Sheila was 'sensitive, creative and kind hearted, an artist who did not always defend herself against the harshness of the world'.<sup>65</sup>

Frederick and Annie's married life began at 86 Rathmines Road, Hawthorn. By the time of their fourth child, Hugh, they needed to find a larger home, and by 1894 had moved to Wolseley Crescent, Blackburn, close to Box Hill. By the time of Sydney's birth in 1896 they had moved again, to New Street, Brighton. That year Streeton visited them in their new home:

I walked over to the Proff McCubbin's yesterday & had tea with him in his garden—Mrs Proff in a harmonious yellow gown—all the little Proffs buzzing round—the garden of fruit trees & the haystack—The Proff[f] is a married man very happily & securely married.<sup>66</sup>

The household tended towards the bohemian, with some flexibility in the domestic arrangements. Louis, the eldest son, would often cook breakfast for the family and, according to Kathleen, would

do more than his share around the house. Having risen early and milked the cow, he would then fill the bath with cold water in readiness for mother whose custom it was to have a cold bath every morning even if it was frosty. After cooking the breakfast he would do the washing-up and other chores before going off for painting lessons at the National Gallery.<sup>67</sup>

Louis would take over household duties when Annie was not well.<sup>68</sup> Frederick would also occasionally help around the house, doing the dusting if friends were coming.<sup>69</sup> They were often visited by artists, writers, musicians and actors, who 'enjoyed the wholehearted

**May and Mina Moore**  
Mrs McCubbin c 1910–13  
gelatin silver photograph  
19 x 12.3 cm  
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

hospitality of the very vital McCubbin family'.<sup>70</sup> The English actress Ellen Terry was a regular visitor when she was in Melbourne to perform. McCubbin wrote at the start of the First World War that 'her visits make us for a time forget our sad hearts'.<sup>71</sup> As Joan Lindsay reported, 'most of the interesting and intelligent people in Melbourne' came 'to partake of Mrs. McCubbin's delicious unconventional soups and salads'—for 'McCubbin was a magnet who drew towards him the finest and the best'.<sup>72</sup>

When McCubbin travelled overseas in 1907 he wrote every week to Annie, telling her of all his adventures, and his excitement in finally seeing some of the great works of art. Despite all the joys of this however, he missed her greatly and told her again and again, in different ways, how he counted the days until he saw her and the children again.<sup>73</sup> How he would give it all up to be at home with her,<sup>74</sup> and how his heart ached for the sight of her 'Bonny sweet face'.<sup>75</sup> People would tell him to go and see this or that, 'but all the time it's you and only you I want so much to see'.<sup>76</sup> The letters from his trip also reveal the couple's strong companionship through the way Frederick saw things through Annie's eyes, noting how she would 'go crazy to see the beauty of things', and 'would love this charming land' of France. His travel also made him appreciate 'the true nobleness' of her character, and hope he would never again vex her or wound her 'tender and loving heart' as he had done—though with a sense of humour, and an awareness of himself and their relationship '(Till the next time sayes you)'.<sup>77</sup>

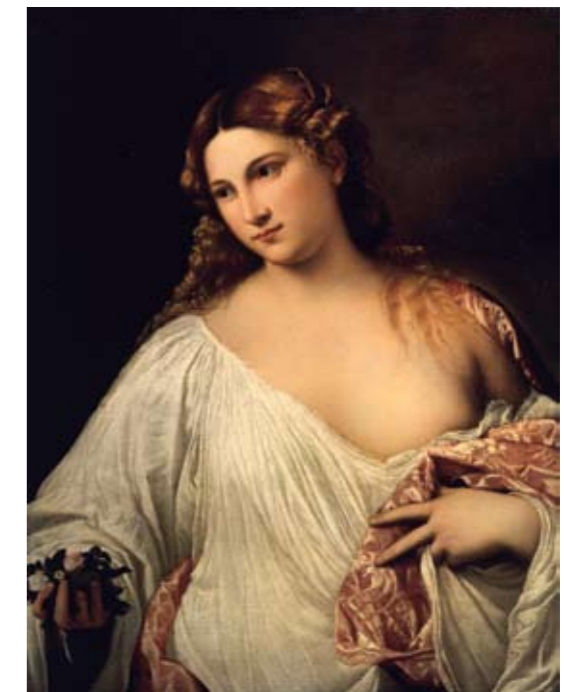
McCubbin's marriage came at the time when he was establishing himself as an artist. It is hard to say whether the marriage was a cause, or an effect, or both—'settling down' may have liberated the artist's abilities, or perhaps finding himself as a painter gave him the confidence to get married. Certainly his happiness in marriage contributed to his overall contentment, and to his joyous perception of nature and the world around him as expressed in his art. Unlike Lambert, who suggested that marriage for an artist was a compromise, for McCubbin his family life centred him and allowed him to focus on and develop his art.<sup>78</sup> (Though it was his work as a teacher at the Gallery school, rather than his prowess as a painter, or the sales of his work, which enabled him to marry and support a large family.)

## Travel (1907)

McCubbin had wanted to travel abroad for some time, but his obligations to care for his mother and sisters, as well as his own wife and children, had made this impossible. By 1907 however, he was able and ready to confront the 'old world' and to look at some of its greatest art. He was 52 years old.

He had been inspired by a copy of Titian's *Flora* c 1520 when he was a student. He had looked closely at Emile Michel's book on Rembrandt given to him by his students in 1906. His enthusiasm for the works of Turner, Constable and others had been kindled by images in books he had pored over since a child. He had looked at actual paintings by Corot in the National Gallery of Victoria's collection.<sup>79</sup> And he had read John Ruskin. Now was the time to view some of the great works of art in European museums.

He left Melbourne on 21 May, on board the *Prinz Heinrich*. His students showed their appreciation with a gift of £100 in sovereigns and an inscribed Gladstone bag. En route he visited Colombo, Aden, Port Said, Naples and Genoa. At Colombo he met with the Australian-born Scottish colourist artist, EA Hornel, who came down to the boat to meet him and took him to breakfast and dinner, as well as on a rickshaw ride around the town. (Later in London he saw Hornel's work at the Royal Academy and thought it 'one of the most brilliant



**Titian**  
*Flora* c 1520  
oil on canvas  
79.7 x 63.5 cm  
Uffizi, Florence, Italy



and charming masses of colour in the show'.<sup>80</sup>) McCubbin delighted in Colombo's 'soft warm air languorous with subtle colours'.<sup>81</sup> He thought Port Said a treat for 'its oriental splendour of colour', being quite a modern town with a mixed continental and oriental air about it.<sup>82</sup>

He arrived in England on 3 July. Almost immediately he visited the Victoria & Albert Museum at South Kensington, where he was enthralled by 'a room full of Constables', 'the great coloured Cartoons of Raphael' and 'four exquisite Turners'.<sup>83</sup> He found the National Gallery to be 'just like some grand Palace', and delighted in seeing works by Veronese, Titian, Rembrandt, Velasquez, Van Eyck, Gainsborough, Reynolds and Romney—but what excited him most of all were the works by Turner, which he found familiar after having looked at reproductions for many years. When he saw Turner's 'glorious' *St Benedetto, looking towards Fusina* c 1843 (then known as *Approach to Venice* and held by the National Gallery), McCubbin found it to be 'exactly as we thought it would look'.<sup>84</sup>

At the Tate he was again overwhelmed by the paintings of Turner, realising that most of the works on show were painted at the end of the artist's life, 'when he had realized the quality of light', and although 'they are most unfinished ... they are divine'. He admired Turner's adventurous use of colour and the way he was able to convey light and air: 'Such dreams of colour—a dozen of them are like pearls—no theatrical effect but mist and cloud and sea and land drenched in light'.<sup>85</sup> He also appreciated how Turner had painted at particular times of day, 'how he loved the dazzling brilliancy of morning or evening', and how he 'worked from darkness into light'.<sup>86</sup>

In London McCubbin met with Tom Roberts regularly and was welcomed into the group of

Australian artists there—George Coates, AH Fullwood, John Longstaff, Bertram Mackennal and James Quinn—dining with them in Soho.<sup>87</sup> In July he visited his brother James in Liverpool, but McCubbin found it to be 'a dull commercial town, a tremendous drop from London ... the people are very dull, respectable and dismal'.<sup>88</sup> His spirits were raised by a trip to Chester, which was 'a treat'. He thought the streets 'charming', with 'quaint gables projecting over the road, and the electric trams up the middle'. He gained a sense of history from the place and enjoyed the way in which 'everything is crooked, a little out of plumb, but dates like 1500 or 1600 soon make you feel that time wears things away'. He felt that if he stayed there he could paint for many days.<sup>89</sup>

In August McCubbin crossed to France and stayed with E Phillips Fox and his wife Ethel Carrick in Paris. He visited the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Panthéon and the Musée du Luxembourg, where he thought some of the Impressionists 'very fine, Manet and Monet, Sisley—very fine'.<sup>90</sup> He made a pilgrimage to Versailles and to Fontainebleau—'the charming country that Corot painted', and 'just like Macedon'.<sup>91</sup> Paris was what he expected, 'like a dream of delicate colour' and 'an ideal place to live with a nice little income'. He sometimes viewed the city through the eyes of the great painters, finding it to be 'just like Turner painted it' in the hot evening glow; and, taking a stroll on the boulevard one evening he recalled Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre, morning, cloudy weather* 1897, which the National Gallery of Victoria had purchased two years earlier, in 1905.<sup>92</sup>

McCubbin sailed home on the *Bremen*, departing Southampton on 6 October and arriving in



(above)  
**JMW Turner**  
*St Benedetto, looking towards Fusina* exhibited 1843  
oil on canvas  
62.2 x 92.7 cm  
Tate, London, accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest, 1856

(left)  
**Camille Pissarro**  
*Boulevard Montmartre, morning, cloudy weather* 1897  
oil on canvas  
73 x 92 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased through the Felton Bequest, 1905

**May and Mina Moore**  
Louis McCubbin in uniform  
c 1910–13  
gelatin silver photograph  
19.2 x 13.8 cm  
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

Melbourne on 18 November. His six-month trip to Europe had been a revelation of the glories of art, which he had hitherto known only through reproduction or written description. But the new experiences—and having to absorb so much, in such a short space of time—meant that at first he found it difficult to settle down on his return. Eventually however, the journey—and in particular the art he viewed—liberated McCubbin, and he began to paint with a new vigour, with greater freedom and more expressive brushwork—as well as with increased sensitivity to colour and light.

### The First World War (1915–17)

On 4 August 1914 German troops invaded Belgium, and Britain declared war on Germany. Automatically the British Dominions, including Australia, were at war. McCubbin was nearing 60, and significantly aging. His sons were of military age, and both Hugh and Louis enlisted in the army. (Alexander volunteered, but was not accepted.<sup>93</sup>) Annie McCubbin joined the former prime minister's wife, Mrs Alfred Deakin, in organising voluntary helpers to serve tea and buns to wounded and sick servicemen in a large marquee on the lawn at the military base hospital in St Kilda Road, Melbourne.

The Anzac troops landed on Gallipoli at dawn on 25 April 1915. They were intended to land on open country near the promontory of Gaba Tepe, but instead were confronted with steep, scrub-covered heights and had to climb up precipitous cliffs under Turkish gunfire. Hugh McCubbin was one of those who participated in the landing, and was one of about 2000 men wounded and evacuated on that day. It was a worrying time for his parents.

Less than two weeks later, on 7 May 1915, the British luxury ocean liner RMS *Lusitania* was torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland and sank in just 18 minutes. McCubbin's brother James, the ship's chief purser, was one of the 1198 people who lost their lives. James had left home to go to sea before their father died in 1877 and Frederick had only relatively recently met up with him during his 1907 trip to Britain and renewed their ties. The actress Hilda Spong, who had known James McCubbin for many years, told the *New York Times*:

He had spent all his life at sea working hard, and this was to have been his last voyage. Two days before the



*Lusitania* sailed he told me, with great joy, that he had purchased a small farm near Golders Green, about twenty miles from London. There he intended to spend the remainder of his days in peace.<sup>94</sup>

Frederick never really recovered from the shock of hearing the news of this brother's death. His health deteriorated, and he suffered what he called 'a bit of a breakdown'.

After the tragic news of the loss of James, and of the injuries received by Hugh, Annie and Frederick were even more determined to assist with the war effort in whatever ways they could. Annie continued in her efforts to care for injured soldiers. She also helped organise the street kiosks for the Anzac Appeal on Remembrance Day, 17 December 1915. As reported by the *Age*: 'Outside the Stock Exchange the Australian artists erected a stall at which Mrs. McCubbin presided'.<sup>95</sup> The stalls included hand-painted fans,<sup>96</sup> and McCubbin made his contribution to the fundraising drive by producing a number of these—in both watercolour and oil, on palette-shaped pieces of cardboard as well as on gum leaves (cats 70 A, B, C). Each work was attached at the base to a short stick of thin bamboo or something similar, to which were tied red, white and blue ribbons.

Louis enlisted in the Australian Army in May 1916, and in less than a month the family was informed he had been quarantined because of an outbreak of meningitis. There were constant reports of soldiers dying from the disease and his parents



were inevitably most concerned. Fortunately Louis survived, and from November 1917 was employed as a stretcher-bearer on the battlefields of France with the 10th Field Ambulance.<sup>97</sup>

One of the happier occurrences in the McCubbin family during the war was Frederick's purchase of a motor car in 1915—a Renault that was once a taxi-cab, and had been converted into a tourer. The family used it to go to the market, the movies, into the country or down to the beach. According to Kathleen, 'to father it was an everlasting joy'. Many of McCubbin's later outdoor paintings were produced from the Renault, dashed off in about an hour: 'He took delight in painting the growing city of Melbourne; Melbourne streets on a misty or sunny evening'.<sup>98</sup>

### Death and memory

McCubbin had only been able to contribute three small works to the Australian Art Association's annual exhibition in 1915, to which he had been a regular contributor since its formation in 1913. In truth he could not work because he was no longer in good health. He became seriously ill in 1916, suffering from severe attacks of asthma, and took six months leave of absence from teaching at the National Gallery's school. His bronchial infection caused lapses in his work but he continued to paint, albeit at a slower pace. In 1916 he was still showing his work, holding a joint exhibition with his son Louis at Melbourne's Athenaeum Gallery in July. It is said that *The lime tree* (cat 73), painted in 1917, was his last work.

One of his former students described the artist in his last years, telling how McCubbin would arrive at class 'wearing two overcoats' to keep out the cold.

'The top one was greenish with age, very thick with a velvet collar to it. He wore a little black velvet cap or beret on his head. And as I remember, his skin was olive, pale. He was a small man, balding as far as one could see, under the little cap.'<sup>99</sup>

Frederick McCubbin died of a heart attack at his home in South Yarra on 20 December 1917, leaving a wife, four sons and two daughters; he was only 62. It is thought that his asthma and a bout of pneumonia had weakened his heart. He was buried in the Roman Catholic division of the Brighton Cemetery the following day. Annie was devastated, after 28 years of a real partnership. 'She was pale and listless and sat around for a good part of the day, just staring into space.' She was truly lost without him.<sup>100</sup>

Newspaper tributes to the artist followed. The *Argus* observed that McCubbin 'was of a most genial and kindly disposition, and thoroughly absorbed in his art, and always ready with a kind word or shrewd advice to help any young student who sought his guidance'. Of his art it was noted that he 'showed remarkable skill in dealing with and realising the intricacies, colour, and atmosphere of the Australian bush; especially could he suggest the great spaces of the forest, the artistic tangle of the undergrowth, and the charm of solitude and silence'. The *Argus* concluded by commenting that 'many of his earlier pictures were executed at Box Hill, where with Tom Roberts and others, he joined in regular sketching excursions'.<sup>101</sup>

The *Age* suggested that with McCubbin's death, 'Victoria has lost a stalwart champion of Australian art, and one of her most celebrated painters'. Again, this writer contributed to the idea of a shared artistic ethos by linking McCubbin to Roberts and Streeton, and reinforced this idea of 'golden summers' by listing McCubbin's early 'national naturalist' narratives as his most notable works. The reviewer also remarked that 'Artists generally regarded him as a great painter, and members of the younger school profoundly admired and took pattern from his work'.<sup>102</sup>

McCubbin's friend and onetime neighbour Alexander Colquhoun recalled, soon after the artist's death: 'During a long knowledge of him I never heard him express any definite view on religious matters, yet his attitude in this respect did not fail in reverence or in a general trust in the ultimate larger hope.' He continued: 'My last

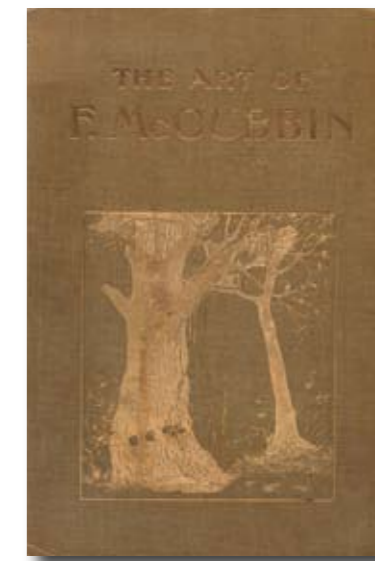
The family Renault, its body modified by Sydney McCubbin

Cover of James MacDonald's *The art of Frederick McCubbin*, 1916

memory of Fred McCubbin was an informal visit he paid me at my home one Sunday morning. We smoked a contemplative cigarette together, talking reminiscently over old times, and more intimately of the present, of the war and what it had meant for both of us.<sup>103</sup> It was a memory of quiet times, and of deep, human, shared experiences, mutual losses and reflections on their loved ones.

Shortly before he died, in May 1916, a large and lavish book about McCubbin's art had been published by the Lothian Book Publishing Company. *The art of Frederick McCubbin* was one of the first significant art books to be published in Australia. It appeared just two years after Frank Gibson's British publication on Charles Conder, the same year as the first book on JJ Hilder, two years before Ure Smith's first publication on an Australian artist (Hilder), three years before *Art in Australia* published a special number on Arthur Streeton, eight years before Ure Smith's major book on George Lambert, and 19 years before Robert Croll's biography of Tom Roberts.<sup>104</sup> It was an adventurous piece of publishing, recognising McCubbin as one of Australia's most important painters of that time. McCubbin had announced it in a typically humble manner to Roberts in 1914, as 'a brave attempt ... If it succeeds, it will be I think a good thing for Australian efforts generally'.<sup>105</sup>

The publisher, Thomas C Lothian, was a friend and patron of McCubbin. He owned *Winter sunlight* (cat 11) and *Williamstown* (cat 26), as well as the artist's last painting, *The lime tree (Yarra River from Kensington Road, South Yarra)* (cat 73). Lothian was, according to McCubbin's daughter Kathleen, 'a very interesting character who could be, on occasion, excessively mean or extremely generous. A man who had a thorough knowledge of the publishing world'.<sup>106</sup> McCubbin's son Alexander worked for the Lothian Book Publishing Company. So although McCubbin certainly merited such a publication, and was without doubt the best-known and most-loved artist in Melbourne at this time, there was an element of nepotism in the venture. Initially the text was to have been written by James MacDonald, but he left it incomplete when he enlisted in the AIF in September 1914 and Alexander McCubbin became responsible for the biographical section of the book. McCubbin's mother and sisters objected to mentions of their having been 'in trade'—to the artist's father



having owned a bakery business, and to his sisters' involvement in the hotel business—and asked for references to these to be removed from the book at galley-proof stage.<sup>107</sup>

*The art of Frederick McCubbin* was a large, folio-sized publication with 45 illustrations, of which 20 were in colour. It was published in a limited edition of 1000, each signed by McCubbin. It reproduced some of his 'national naturalist' narrative paintings, but also included a good number of his more recent works, such as *Winter sunlight* (cat 11), *Moonrise* (cat 20), *A frosty morning* (cat 33), *The cottage children (Rain and sunshine)* (cat 37), *Violet and gold* (cat 41), *Hauling timber, Macedon Heights* (cat 42), *The old stone crusher* (cat 45), *An interior* (cat 47), *Afterglow* (cat 51), *Golden sunlight* (cat 62) and *The old slip—Williamstown* (cat 69). A reviewer observed that 'this fine volume will help to convince the world of art that the modern developments of Australian painting are worth serious attention' and claimed that among the leaders of Australian painting 'none holds a place higher than Mr McCubbin'. Of McCubbin's work, the writer observed that he was 'a composer of much originality, with an extremely delicate sense of colour and value'.<sup>108</sup>

Following McCubbin's death his wife and sons became the caretakers of his art, holding sale exhibitions in 1921, 1924, 1941 and 1949, as well as a small exhibition at Joshua McClelland's Rooms in Melbourne in 1955. This effort was enhanced by the small book which Alexander published on his father in 1919, *Frederick McCubbin: a consideration*.





The selection of images for this book was more conservative than that of the earlier publication and reinforced the iconisation of McCubbin's nineteenth-century bush narratives, which had all been painted within a narrow span of 20 years: *Down on his luck* 1889 (AGWA), *A bush burial* 1890 (Geelong), *On the wallaby track* 1896 (AGNSW), and *The pioneer* 1904 (NGV). This was the last text to be devoted to the artist for 60 years—up until Ann Galbally's *Frederick McCubbin* was published in 1981.<sup>109</sup> During this intervening time there were a number of books published on his artist friends who outlived him—Roberts and Streeton—Roberts by 14 years, and Streeton by 26 years.<sup>110</sup>

When McCubbin died he was one of the best-known and most successful Melbourne artists of his time. Seven of his works were in public collections. In this McCubbin fared better than most of his colleagues. Indeed, comparatively he was extremely well regarded in his lifetime. By 1917 Tom Roberts only had five works in public collections and none in the National Gallery of Victoria, and there were only two works by Conder in any Australian public gallery. E Phillips Fox and Arthur Streeton fared a little better than McCubbin, with Fox having eight works acquired by public collections and Streeton having nine. However, those paintings by McCubbin that were acquired by galleries were mainly his 'national naturalist' narratives. Given this, it is hardly surprising that these have been the works which have been most reproduced, and on which his reputation has largely been based. His first painting to be purchased by a public gallery was *Feeding time* 1893 (now in the Wesfarmers collection, Perth), acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1894, and exchanged for *A winter evening* 1897 in 1900. In 1896 the Art Gallery of Western Australia purchased

*Down on his luck* 1889, and the following year the Art Gallery of New South Wales bought *On the wallaby track* 1896. *A bush burial* 1890 was acquired by public subscription for the Geelong Art Gallery in 1900, and that same year the Art Gallery of South Australia purchased *A ti-tree glade* 1897. In 1906 the National Gallery of Victoria purchased *The pioneer* 1904 through the Felton Bequest, for £175, much less than McCubbin's asking price of £525, and after considerable debate and unpleasantness. (Nonetheless the work was purchased and that sale provided much-needed funds for McCubbin's overseas trip.)

In 1912 his *Self-portrait* (cat 49) was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia for £105. (In November of that year McCubbin wrote to Tom Roberts in England that the Felton Bequest at the National Gallery of Victoria did 'nothing—much—except buy Dead Old Masters'.<sup>111</sup>) It was his first self-portrait to enter a public collection and an affirmation of his place in Australian art.

Despite this early recognition and acquisition of his work, it was to be some 40 years after McCubbin's death before a major retrospective exhibition was held by a public institution—at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1955, the centenary of his birth. The exhibition was the result of Louis McCubbin persuading Daryl Lindsay, the director of the gallery, that such an exhibition was due, and that the arrangements should be similar to those retrospectives that had already been given to Roberts and Streeton.<sup>112</sup> Louis would have been mindful that Roberts and Streeton both received a retrospective one year after their deaths. McCubbin was possibly disadvantaged in this by dying during the First World War, when people were preoccupied with other things, and before public galleries had begun to mount such exhibitions and historians had begun to write the history of Australian art. When Louis died in 1952, it fell to his brother Hugh to carry on the arrangements for this exhibition, and the championing of it via a media campaign, writing letters to the press, and again pointing out the imminent 100th anniversary of his father's birth. In doing so, he emphasised that McCubbin 'was the only notable artist of his time to spend the whole of his life in Victoria', and rightly linked him to Roberts—rather than Streeton—suggesting that 'in association with Tom Roberts [he] was a founder of the Australian School of Landscape Painting'.<sup>113</sup>

**Frederick McCubbin**  
*Down on his luck* 1889  
oil on canvas  
114.5 x 152.5 cm  
Art Gallery of Western Australia,  
Perth, purchased 1986

cat 69 **Frederick McCubbin**  
*The old slip, Williamstown* 1915  
oil on canvas  
92.5 x 117.5 cm  
private collection



When the retrospective eventually took place, it was accorded due respect by being opened by the prime minister, Robert Menzies. The *Age* critic observed that it was 'a display which all Australians should view with pride' and—as early as 1955—recognised that the works which McCubbin painted after his return from Europe 'represent the pinnacle of his achievement'. He applauded the way in which the artist depicted the Australian scene 'with the vision of a lyric poet'.<sup>114</sup> The *Sun's* reviewer was also perceptive, admiring McCubbin's late works, and in particular 'those agreeable, spontaneous sketches of Princes Bridge and Collins St'.<sup>115</sup>

Hugh McCubbin made a number of careful donations of his father's work to public collections about this time, including the gift of *Triumphal arch at Princes Bridge, Melbourne* (cat 1) to the commonwealth government, 'to mark the centenary of the birth of Frederick McCubbin'. He thanked the National Gallery of Victoria for putting on the exhibition by presenting them with a group of works including *Louis McCubbin (as a boy in fancy dress)* (cat 14) and *Portrait head of Alexander McCubbin* c 1908.

Under the auspices of Melbourne's Savage Club, in 1962 Hugh also organised a 'symposium or judicial enquiry' to debate whether Box Hill or Heidelberg had been the first *plein air* artists' camp in Australia, and the respective places of McCubbin and Streeton in Australian art.<sup>116</sup> This was, on the surface, a frivolous mock trial, but underneath it expressed a rumbling of discontent within McCubbin's family at the greater recognition that had by that time been accorded the longer-living Streeton.

In the test of time however, when we consider the art, it is not who was responsible for the first artists'

camp, or where it took place, or who was the most Australian of them all that is of significance. What matters is the quality of the art. From that vantage point, it is more than evident that although Streeton produced some truly remarkable work as a young man at Heidelberg (or Eaglemont) and around Sydney, much of his later painting is rhetorical and lacks the poetic lyricism of his youthful output. McCubbin may have been slower to advance his art, but over his lifetime it continued to get better to a point where he outreached his former colleagues. This was quickly recognised by many in his lifetime, by the reviewers of his retrospective exhibition, and has been equally acknowledged by more recent commentators.<sup>117</sup>

What is more, McCubbin had personal qualities which were highly treasured by all who knew him. He was much loved as an artist, as a teacher, and as a man. Indeed, as Arnold Shore commented:

'love' is the key to his whole life. He loved swearing (a dinkum Aussie), loved a good story, even against himself; made his students realise his love of art, and gain something of the same love themselves. He loved to talk about art as well as produce it.<sup>118</sup>

McCubbin's personality, his genial passion for life, did not just gain him friends and admirers; it was the energy behind his paintings. Often great artists have been ruthless, selfish, driven and sometimes downright difficult. McCubbin was, however, from all reports a genuinely warm and gregarious man; qualities which might have hampered his art—but he had more than sufficient determination and focus to pursue his ambition to become a significant artist. Moreover, for McCubbin his nature was central to what he painted and how he painted. First, he was happy to live in or near Melbourne all his life, and his subjects were the places he knew and loved best. In 1909 he told Tom Roberts: 'the older I get the wider my interest grows in all life colour—charm'.<sup>119</sup> He did not need to travel to find new scenes because he was content to depict the changing nuances of what was around him, to convey the variety of the colours and textures of his world 'at home'. Secondly, he was able to translate what he felt for these places into tough, expressive paint and intense, vivid colour—and to capture his deep personal response to the raw, vibrating, living presence of nature and the world around him.



## Notes

- Joan Lindsay, 'Frederick McCubbin 1855–1917', in *Quarterly Bulletin*, National Gallery of Victoria 1955, vol ix, no 2, np, and 'Recollections of Elizabeth Colquhoun', Mackenzie 1990, p 350.
- Colquhoun 1919, np.
- Shipping records for the *Maria Gardyne*, 19 June 1852, courtesy Penny McCole.
- Birth Certificate of Frederick McCubbin, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- MacDonald 1916, p 47.
- Family tree, attached to endpapers in Mackenzie 1990.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, pp 24–5. These 'Autobiographical reminiscences' have been dated by Andrew Mackenzie as having been written c 1910–11, on the basis that McCubbin began his studies under Thomas Clark in 1872, which the artist placed as being 38 to 39 years earlier (Mackenzie 1990, p 9).
- ibid, p 25.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 2.
- ibid, p 26.
- ibid, p 5.
- Victoria (Port Phillip District) separated from New South Wales in 1851 and that same year gold was discovered at Warrandyte and Castlemaine.
- www.onlymelbourne.com.au/melbourne, viewed March 2009.
- MacDonald 1916, p 37.
- MacDonald, p 38.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 13.
- ibid, p 22; see also ibid, p 14.
- MacDonald 1916, p 42.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 26.
- ibid, p 33.
- ibid, p 32.
- MacDonald 1916, p 45.
- Mackenzie 1990, p 10.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, pp 39–40.
- MacDonald 1916, p 46.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, pp 4–5.
- At this time McCubbin was an apprentice coach painter with Stevenson and Elliott, where he had little freedom and had to work indoors all day under the eye of his master.
- MacDonald 1916, p 51 and 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, pp 17 and 24.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 22.
- ibid, pp 21–2.
- MacDonald 1916, p 54.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 34.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 16.
- ibid, pp 23–4.
- Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria with the Reports of the Sectional Committees for the year 1882, Government Printer, Melbourne, [1883], p 34.
- Colquhoun 1919, np, and Ruth Zubans, 'George Frederick Folingsby', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol 4, Melbourne University Press, 1972, pp 193–4.
- Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria with the Reports of the Sectional Committees for the year 1882, Government Printer, Melbourne, [1883], p 35.
- Colquhoun 1919, np.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, pp 35–6.
- Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria with the Reports of the Sectional Committees for the year 1882, Government Printer, Melbourne, [1883], p 35.
- MacDonald 1916, p 56.
- For a discussion of McCubbin's illustrative work, see Galbally 1981, pp 29–34.
- 'Autobiographical reminiscences', SLV, p 40.
- Mackenzie 1990, p 2.
- Tom Roberts to Frederick McCubbin, 31 December 1914, Tom Roberts letters, ML.
- Foreword to *Catalogue of paintings by the late Frederick McCubbin*, Victorian Artists' Galleries, 27 September – 8 October 1921.
- 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* catalogue, Buxton's Rooms, Melbourne, opened 17 August 1889.
- Argus*, 3 September 1889.
- Ann Galbally, 'Mythmaking in Australian art', the *La Trobe Journal*, no 24, October 1979, p 66.
- AC, 'A Winter Evening by F McCubbin, 1855–1917', the *Age*, 6 March 1937.
- Leigh Astbury, 'The art of Frederick McCubbin and the impact of the First World War', the *La Trobe Journal*, no 24, October 1979, p 81, quoting James MacDonald's unpublished handwritten manuscript notes in Lothian papers Box 31, La Trobe Library.
- Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria to Frederick McCubbin, 26 January 1886, and letter from the same, 7 June 1888, McCubbin papers, SLV. With changes at the School, in 1902 he became drawing master rather than master of the School of Design.
- 'Register of students in Painting & Drawing Schools, National Gallery of Victoria, 1886–1917', Mackenzie 1990, pp 325–37.
- Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria with the Reports of the Sectional Committees for the year 1885, Government Printer, Melbourne, [1886], p 33.
- 'Recollections of Mrs Hope Bradford' and 'Recollections of Elizabeth Colquhoun', Mackenzie 1990, pp 338–9 and 350; and Arnold Shore, 'Artist, teacher and man: Australia's McCubbin', *Age*, 26 October 1957, p 18.
- David M Dow, *Melbourne Savages: a history of the first fifty years of the Melbourne Savage Club*, The Melbourne Savage Club, Melbourne, 1947, p 63.

## Walter Withers

*Fred McCubbin painting c 1910*  
pencil on cream paper  
32.3 x 26.2 cm  
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne,  
purchased 1992

- 'Recollections of Elizabeth Colquhoun', Mackenzie 1990, p 342.
- Joan Lindsay 1955, np.
- David M Dow 1947, p 63.
- 'Recollections of Mrs Hope Bradford', Mackenzie 1990, p 339.
- Family Data Sheet from Mrs Marjorie Johnstone, courtesy of Charles McCubbin
- Mangan 1988, p 67.
- Juliet Peers, *More than just gumtrees*, The Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, Melbourne, 1993, p 28.
- Mackenzie 1990, pp 3–5.
- Mangan 1988, pp 9, 130.
- Arthur Streeton to Tom Roberts, 18 December 1896, Letters from Arthur Streeton, ML A2478.
- Mangan 1988, p 130.
- ibid, pp 130–31.
- Peers 1993, p 28.
- David M Dow 1947, p 55.
- Frederick McCubbin to Tom Roberts, 9 September 1914, Tom Roberts letters, ML.
- Joan Lindsay 1955, np.
- Frederick McCubbin to Annie McCubbin, 24 June 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, mid July 1907, late August 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 25 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- ibid.
- FMc to AMc, 24 June 1907, 7 August 1907, 1 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- George Lambert to George Pitt-Rivers, 31 July 1929, ML MSS 97/10.
- Corot's *Sketch at Scheveningen* 1854 was purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria on the advice of George Clausen in 1906 and *The bent tree* was purchased by the Gallery, again on the advice of George Clausen, in 1907.
- FMc to AMc, 11 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 16 June 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 24 June 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 11 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- ibid.
- FMc to AMc, 19 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- ibid.
- ibid.
- FMc to AMc, 25 July 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, [late July 1907], McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 10 August 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 7 August 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- FMc to AMc, 7 and 10 August 1907, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- Frederick McCubbin to Tom Roberts, 9 September 1914, Tom Roberts letters, ML.
- 'Weep for the dead as bulletins go up', *New York Times*, 9 May 1915.
- 'Artists' procession', the *Age*, 18 December 1915, p 13.
- 'Remembrance Day', the *Argus*, 13 December 1915, p 8.
- Mangan 1988, p 131; and Anne Gray, 'McCubbin, Louis Frederick (1890–1952)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986, pp 243–4. (He was subsequently appointed an Australian Records Section artist, and after the war visited battlegrounds to collect visual ideas, and after the war visited dioramas for the proposed Australian War Memorial.)
- Mangan 1984, pp 62, 70.
- 'Recollections of Mrs Hope Bradford', Mackenzie 1990, p 338.
- Mangan 1984, p 70.
- 'Mr. F McCubbin. A distinguished artist', the *Argus*, 21 December 1917, p 11.
- 'Death of Mr. Frederick McCubbin', the *Age*, 21 December 1917, p 8.
- Colquhoun 1919, np.
- Frank Gibson, *Charles Conder: his life and works*, The Bodley Head, London, 1914; *The art of JJ Hilder*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1918; *The art of Arthur Streeton*, *Art in Australia* special number, 1919; *The art of George W Lambert ARA*, *Art in Australia*, Sydney, 1924; RH Croll, *Tom Roberts: father of Australian landscape painting*, Robertson & Mullens, Melbourne, 1935.
- Frederick McCubbin to Tom Roberts, 9 January 1914, Tom Roberts letters, ML.
- Mangan 1988, p 39.
- McCulloch 1969, pp 82, 148, quoting correspondence between Kathleen Mangan and the author.
- Unknown newspaper, 20 September 1917, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- Peter McNeil, 'Family ties; the creation of Frederick McCubbin's reputation 1920–60', *The La Trobe Journal*, no 50, Spring 1992, p 34.
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- Frederick McCubbin to Tom Roberts, November/December 1912, Tom Roberts letters, ML.
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- Hugh McCubbin to the *Bulletin*, 16 February 1955, McCubbin papers, SLV.
- The *Age*, 1955.
- The *Sun*, 5 November 1955.
- Peter McNeil 1992, pp 35–6.
- See 'Last impressions' chapter, this book, pp 41–59.
- Arnold Shore, 'Artist, teacher and man: Australia's McCubbin', the *Age*, 26 October 1957, p 18.
- Frederick McCubbin to Tom Roberts, 27 January 1909, Tom Roberts letters, ML.