



Above:

A Native Family of New South Wales
watercolour and bodycolour, laid down
28.0 x 39.0 cm
Kerry Stokes collection, Perth

Inside left page:

Magill c. 1819
watercolour and bodycolour, laid down
24.0 x 22.0 cm
Kerry Stokes collection, Perth

At least two other versions of this work are known; one inscribed *Magill Corroberee Dance*, and another inscribed *Magill* in the collection of the National Library of Australia.

Cover (left to right):
Coola-benn, Native Chief of Ashe Island
Hunters River, New South Wales 1820
watercolour and bodycolour on paper
31.0 x 22.0 cm
Purchased with assistance from Robert and
Lindy Henderson, Newcastle Art Gallery
Society, Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation
and the community 2010
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Cobbwonn Wogi, Native Chief of Ashe Island,
Hunters River, New South Wales 1820
watercolour on paper
33.0 x 27.0 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

List of works in the exhibition:

Newcastle Art Gallery collection
Coola-benn, Native Chief of Ashe Island
Hunters River, New South Wales
watercolour and bodycolour on paper
31.0 x 22.0 cm
Burgun 1820
watercolour and bodycolour on paper
30.5 x 22.0 cm

Kerry Stokes collection, Perth
Burgun c.1820
watercolour on paper
29.6 x 24.0 cm
Magill c.1819
watercolour and bodycolour, laid down
24.0 x 22.0 cm
Wambla c.1819
watercolour and bodycolour
29.0 x 22.0 cm

A Native Family of New South Wales
watercolour and bodycolour, laid down
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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers
are advised that this publication contains
images of people who have passed away.



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NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

Richard Browne

A Focus Exhibition

30 JUNE - 12 AUGUST 2012



NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY



Foreword

Newcastle Art Gallery has an important collection of colonial landscapes depicting the early settlement of this area. Works by Richard Browne, John Lewin, Joseph Lycett and Captain James Wallis depict natural land formations such as the ubiquitous Coal Island or Nobbys Head, and the early layout of streets and buildings such as the fort overlooking the entrance to the harbour and Christ Church on The Hill.

What has been sadly missing from the collection are images of the local people. When an auction in 2010 featured a number of rare watercolours by Richard Browne, the Gallery positioned itself to purchase at least one work thanks to the generous support of individuals, particularly Robert and Lindy Henderson, the Gallery's Society and Foundation and the City of Newcastle. After successfully purchasing two works related to original inhabitants of this region we have been able to start filling in the true and full picture of the early days in Newcastle.

The Gallery identified two private collections with work of particular relevance to those in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection. From a Melbourne collector there is almost the mirror image to our Coolla-benn, in the painting of Cobbwann Wogi both Native Chiefs of Ashe Island (sic). From the collection of Kerry Stokes is a work of the local identity Burgun which makes for an interesting comparison to the Newcastle work of the same individual.

We are very grateful to the lenders who enabled this focus exhibition of one of New South Wales' earliest convict artists.

Ron Ramsey
Director

A Focus Exhibition

It is easy to see Richard Browne's Aboriginal watercolours as exemplars of colonial attitudes to Indigenous people. When a twenty first century audience looks at their exaggerated features and bold designs they bring to them their understanding of the unfolding tragedy of European/Indigenous relations at the beginning of the nineteenth century. While Browne's prodigious output of watercolours – more than fifty portraits of Aboriginal people have survived – seemingly illustrate these tensions, there is more complexity to this story.

Richard Browne was born around 1776 in Ireland. Nothing is known of his background or training. In February 1810 he was tried in Dublin for an unspecified crime and sentenced to seven years transportation, arriving in New South Wales in July 1811. In October 1811 he was sent to Newcastle, a penal settlement for convicts who had committed further crimes in the colony. He stayed there until 1817.

It seems that Browne had some prior knowledge of watercolour painting, which was quickly identified by the commandant of Newcastle, Thomas Skottowe. Skottowe employed him to illustrate his manuscript *Select Specimens from Nature* (now in the Mitchell Library), an eccentric and enthusiastic compendium of Newcastle natural history. Browne's limitations as an artist are obvious. While he could successfully and accurately illustrate small or inanimate objects like fish, insects, or Aboriginal material culture, his depictions of birds and animals completely fail to capture lifelike body form and posture.

In 1817 Browne returned to Sydney. Again little is known of his activities, but he immediately began offering for sale a number of drawings of Aboriginal and natural history subjects. Multiple copies have survived of each one of his watercolours which

suggests he kept a set of stock images in his studio – about ten different Aboriginal subjects as well as familiar natural history subjects like kangaroos, emus and lyrebirds – from which selections could be made.

These watercolours were 'tourist' images, representations of the most exotic and curious aspects of the colony, which for Europeans included Aboriginal people as well as its natural history. This market was well understood by colonial artists who focused their efforts on land and townscapes, natural history and Aboriginal subjects rather than works of high art and design: fellow convict artist Richard Read Senior, for example, advertised in February 1821 to 'Captains of Ships, and other Gentleman, that he has on sale, some very superior Views of Various Parts of New Holland, together with Drawings of Birds, Flowers, Native Figures etc'.

Most of Browne's subjects came from the Newcastle district, which reflects his residence there, and indeed their dress and body paint seems to accord with what is known of Awabakal custom. Burgun, or Burigon was one of the best known and respected Aboriginal leaders of the Awabakal people. Captain James Wallis, Commandant of Newcastle in the late 1810s, described him as a 'brave expert fellow.' Burgun, who was also known as Long Jack, was killed in 1820 by an absconding convict who he had helped recapture. Coolla-benn was said to be a chief of Ashe Island (sic), in the Hunter River. Cobbwann Wogi was variously described by Browne as either a chief of Ash Island, or a chief of Port Stephens (and therefore a Worimi man). Wambla (on other versions of this image Browne spelt her name Wambella and Wambela) was Cobbwann Wogi's wife. Wambla also appears, unidentified, in a *Native Family of New South Wales*, although it is possible that this watercolour, cruder than the others in execution, is a contemporary copy.



Magill, or Biraban, was born around in 1800 near what is now the town of Belmont. He was brought up as a young boy in the Military Barracks in Sydney and although experienced in European ways and fluent in English, he refused - much to the incomprehension of colonists - to give up his connection to his tribal life. Magill is best known for his later work with Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld.

These images were very much shaped by the broad European interest in exotic and curious cultures and peoples. With their emphasis on apparently accurate delineation of body markings and material culture, and by the fact that they were often purchased as groups rather than singly, they function very like the then popular genre of published portraits of the 'picturesque costumes' of cultures and social classes from around the world.

A. Atkin of Blackburn, for instance, owned not only Wambla but seven other portraits by Browne, as well as an emu watercolour. In the comfort of a Blackburn armchair, in the midlands of England, Atkin would have scrutinized these portraits for what they said about Aboriginal culture, marvelled at their near naked contrast to polite English society, and taken comfort from the undoubted benefits that English civilisation would bring to their situation. It is not surprising that colonists preferred to purchase images of Aborigines immersed in tribal life, rather than the damaged community who actually lived around Sydney, because they could easily slot into the European eye for picturesque difference and exotic sensibility.

The issue of the capacity of Aboriginal people to be 'civilised' was a strong, if minority, undercurrent of colonial policy. Governor Macquarie, for example, noted in 1822 that as Europeans had occupied the 'best hunting grounds', he considered it an act of justice 'to at least make an attempt to ameliorate their condition and to endeavour to civilise' Aborigines.

Browne's watercolours illustrated this task perfectly: in 1823, for instance, Wesleyan missionary William Walker sent two of Browne's portraits – one of Wambela – describing them as 'the representation of female wretchedness', to his London colleagues as an argument for more missionary resources.

Similarly the profile portraits of Cobbwann Wogi and Coolla-benn do seem to verge into caricature, a cartoon-like representation of the primitive. In part this simply reflects Browne's lack of training as a figurative artist, but it was also an interpretation open to his contemporaries. When James Dixon used *Cobawn Wogy* as a frontispiece for his 1822 book *Narrative of a Voyage to New South Wales and Van Diemens Land*, he explained that the 'engraving accompanying the volume is an accurate likeness (and not a caricature, as one at first sight would be apt to imagine)'.

Browne's use of profile portraits allow Europeans to scrutinise the heads of these subjects with the dogma and principles of the then popular pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy, which argued that from the shape of the skull and the structure of the face respectively, a person's moral and intellectual capacity could be assessed. Both these portraits, when analysed by these formulas, proved the incapacity of Aboriginal people to be 'civilised'.

Browne's portraits occupy an ambivalent, but important place, in the colonial record. They can be read as condescending caricatures, as inexpertly executed likenesses of curiosities, or as proud portraits of significant Awabakal and Worimi people, whose descendants still occupy their land today.

Richard Neville
Mitchell Librarian, State Library of NSW



From far left to right:

Burgun c.1820
watercolour on paper
29.6 x 24.0 cm
Kerry Stokes collection, Perth
formerly Orica collection

Burgun 1820
watercolour and bodycolour
on paper
30.5 x 22.0 cm
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Wambla c. 1819
watercolour and bodycolour
29.0 x 22.0 cm
Kerry Stokes collection, Perth

A head study of the sitter is in the collection of the State Library of New South Wales. Another version of this work, entitled *Wambella*, is in the collection of the National Library of Australia.