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A Goat and a McCubbin in the State Library:

Frederick McCubbin's Melbourne Gaol in sunlight from the Public Library grounds

FREDERICK McCUBBIN'S PAINTING *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight from the Public Library grounds* has been on display in the Cowen Gallery, State Library of Victoria, since 2003.¹ While at first glance it appears somewhat unprepossessing, it represents not only a significant point in the artist's career, but also a largely forgotten slice of the history of Melbourne.

McCubbin (1855-1917) began his artistic training in 1869 when, at the age of fourteen he enrolled at the Artisans' School of Design in Carlton under Thomas Clark. In 1870, Clark was appointed Master of the School of Design at the newly established National Gallery Art School. McCubbin followed his teacher, enrolling in the National Gallery School in 1871 and remaining a student there until 1886. This lengthy period of training is testament both to McCubbin's status as a part-time student – he continued to work in the McCubbin family's King Street bakery for much of this time – and as Anne Galbally noted, his 'cautious and not especially confident artistic personality'.²

Despite admiring Thomas Clark's work as an artist, the students of the National Gallery School seem to have been universally disenchanted with the calibre of artistic training they received. Clark's instruction was uninspiring, while the Master of Painting, Eugene von Guerard, taught by simply getting his students to copy works in the Gallery's collection. In addition, painting classes were held during the day, making it impossible for working men to attend on a regular basis.³

McCubbin compensated to some degree for these educational shortcomings by also attending after-hours classes at the Victorian Academy of the Arts, and first exhibited with the Academy in 1876. Meanwhile at the National Gallery School, McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Charles Douglas Richardson banded together and led the other students in forming a life class of their own. This quickly became a bone of contention between students desperate to learn and a rigid administration. Various changes in the teaching staff failed to rectify the situation at the National Gallery School, and it was not until the 1882 appointment of George Folingsby as Director of the National Gallery and Master in the School of Painting that the students at last began to receive the training they so eagerly sought.⁴

George Folingsby (1828-1891) had a strong reputation as a history and portrait painter. Although his art was traditional in both subject and technique (the result of rigorous academic training in Britain and Europe) he quickly brought new life to the National Gallery School. Amongst the various changes he made to the School, Folingsby

united the Schools of Design and Painting under his singular control, ended the practice of copying paintings as a means of teaching, and established a legitimate life class. In 1883, he introduced the annual student exhibition and awards, and in 1887 established the Travelling Scholarship to foster overseas study by Australian artists.

It was in this revitalised creative milieu that Frederick McCubbin painted *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight*. Folingsby's influence is evident in this painting, although various authors concur that McCubbin was also inspired by the work of Abraham Louis Buvelot (1814-1888) and Julian Rossi Ashton (1851-1942). Although Buvelot was teaching landscape painting at the Artisans' School of Design in 1869, McCubbin was only enrolled in figure drawing and did not benefit directly from Buvelot's teaching. However, McCubbin later recalled admiring Buvelot's domesticated Australian landscapes, which owed something to the latter's familiarity with the European *plein air* artists of Barbizon and Fontainebleau. Meanwhile, Julian Ashton encouraged McCubbin away from classical subjects, opening his eyes to the wealth of material on the streets in and around Melbourne.

Painted in 1884, *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight* is one of McCubbin's most accomplished early images of Melbourne. The technique is crisp and meticulous and there is clear stylistic evidence of McCubbin's growing appreciation of the effects of natural sunlight. The viewer looks north from the library grounds toward the old Melbourne Gaol, across La Trobe Street (hidden behind the fence) and vacant land that a few years later became the site of the Working Men's College (now RMIT). In the foreground, a path leads to a closed gate while a goat grazes next to a post-and-rail fence on the left. The softening light and fall of the shadows suggests the afternoon drawing on. When reviewing the National Gallery students' exhibition, the critic from the *Age* remarked that this painting of McCubbin's was 'as clever as anything in the room'.⁵ It is interesting to consider that similar views do not appear more regularly amongst the output of the National Gallery School students, as Alexander Colquhoun recalled a large open area at the rear of the Galleries that was used as an outdoor painting ground with 'easels . . . dotted here and there among the shrubs, masonry and lumber that littered the place'.⁶

Several authors have commented on the apparent 'airless' quality of *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight*, attributing it to Folingsby's influence and in particular, the practice of sketching a landscape outdoors but completing the picture within the studio.⁷ However, this apparent stillness may perhaps be the product of the landscape itself and a number of factors – including Folingsby – that were influencing McCubbin's work at the time. In this painting, McCubbin has captured an almost bucolic corner of what was a busy part of a thriving metropolis. As Leigh Astbury has pointed out in relation to another work by McCubbin, it is almost as though the artist was seeking relief from the dynamism of the city and using a degree of artistic illusion to maintain 'an alternative urban ideal'.⁸ McCubbin also had a long-held fascination with theatre scenery, and as a young man created many small model theatres for his own amusement. It has been suggested that this youthful practice infused his personal sensibilities and artistic eye and helped to develop

McCubbin's spatial language.⁹ Certainly, *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight* has a theatrical quality, with the fence and gate separating the goat 'on stage' from the backdrop of the gaol and sky. It could also be argued that McCubbin has merely attempted to convey the languor of a warm Melbourne afternoon. Irrespective of the reason behind it, the stillness of the image should not be considered a negative, but rather an element of McCubbin's artistic development during this period.

There is no question that the technique evident in *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight* differs from the tonal values and freer handling of McCubbin's later, more accomplished works. While the different style and seemingly inconsequential subject matter has meant that the painting has received relatively little attention within McCubbin's oeuvre, *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight* could in some ways be considered a seminal work for both McCubbin and for Australian art, particularly the painters of the Heidelberg School.¹⁰ The defining moment is recounted in *The Art of Frederick McCubbin*:

Frederick McCubbin had just before Roberts's return painted a picture of Melbourne Gaol in the sunlight from the library gardens. He showed it to his friend. 'Yes,' commented Roberts, 'you have the drawing and colour, but you've got no values,' and he proceeded to explain this new thing to Frederick McCubbin, and so evidently impressed him, that Roberts, taking the tide at flood, was encouraged to preach the new doctrine to all the other young painters as well, and to demand their allegiance to it.¹¹

Thus, this was supposedly the moment when Roberts introduced the idea of relative values and tonal relationships to the artists of Melbourne, creating the seed that would burgeon into what is often referred to as Australian Impressionism. Roberts' discourse was subsequently put into action in the following years. Together with their close friend and colleague Louis Abrahams (1852-1903) the artists began making day trips, painting outdoors in semi-rural areas such as Hawthorn, Kew and Merri Creek. Short day trips gave rise to camping weekends in Box Hill – entirely rural and with far denser bushland. Throughout 1886 and in to 1887, the trio regularly camped and painted at Houston's Farm, Box Hill, and it was during this period that McCubbin consolidated his artistic style. Until this point, his output essentially consisted of interior subjects, rustic buildings and a few landscapes in low light and low tones.¹²

While *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight* is significant for its place in McCubbin's artistic history, it also provides an interesting snapshot of a perennial issue in nineteenth-century Melbourne: goats. Stray animals including cattle, horses and dogs were problematic in Melbourne from the mid-1800s forward, but it seems that goats were the most prolific – and the most troublesome. These goats were not necessarily all strays as we would consider them today, but were very often owned, yet simply permitted to wander at will, damaging public and private property alike. Used for milk and meat (as evidenced by the newspapers of the day) these animals were common domestic goats.

Overleaf: Frederick McCubbin, 'Melbourne Gaol in sunlight from the Public Library grounds', 1884.
Painting in oil, 81.5 x 121 cm





Domestic goats were not the only caprine type present in nineteenth century Melbourne. Commencing with the first importation in 1856, the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria had some success with the introduction of Angora goats to the colony of Victoria intending that 'at no distant day, Angora wool will be one of the staple exports of Victoria'.¹³ The first Angora goats were kept at Royal Park in Melbourne, but as the number of animals increased, the pick of the herd were moved to Mr Samuel Wilson's station, *Longerenong* in the Wimmera district while the remainder were sold or sent to the other colonies. Plans for selective breeding, the progressive expansion of the herd, exportation of mohair and ultimately, the replacement of 'the many thousands of valueless goats which are found scattered over the country and in every township' were somewhat thwarted by cross-breeding – both planned and unplanned – with the common goat.¹⁴

It was also the common goat that was such a problem in Melbourne. The *Argus* and local papers are filled with advertisements for found goats that will be returned once the owner has paid for damages, as well as vitriolic letters calling for council and government to act. However it is in the editorial content that the extent of the problem becomes evident.

Stiff fines applied for allowing livestock to wander, and the pound-keeper was kept busy rounding up stray goats. However, as the *Argus* of 1842 reported, rather than paying a fine, owners would remain anonymous and simply wait for the pound to release the animals for sale, buying them back far more cheaply.¹⁵ After a round-up, it was not uncommon for over one hundred animals to be up for sale on a Monday at the Melbourne city pound alone. By 1870, the problem appeared to be even worse, with goats causing such significant damage to young trees in St Kilda Park that permission was granted for the park's rangers to shoot all stray goats. Williamstown's Inspector of Nuisances was called on to deal with stray goats creating a problem at the North Williamstown railway station. However it was duly pointed out at a meeting of the Williamstown Borough Council that 'the employees on the railway were large proprietors of goat-flesh and some . . . had threatened the inspector if he interfered with their goats'.¹⁶

Attempts to control the goat problem seemed to have become more serious by the 1880s, when McCubbin painted *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight*. However, there is no indication that goat numbers declined. This was despite rewards for dobbing in the owners of stray animals, neighbour suing neighbour for the 'destruction of a number of choice pot plants' (the defendant denied ownership of the animals but was brought undone by witness accounts of his wife milking one of the said goats) a market gardener given authorisation to carry a rifle and shoot any goats on his property, and the police in suburbs such as Prahran being given the power to destroy all stray goats.¹⁷ Reports of stray goats in Melbourne and the nearby suburbs continued into the twentieth century.

Whether the goat in McCubbin's painting was actually in the State Library grounds and thus drawn from life or instead the product of artistic imagination, its inclusion is a comment on the city in the 1880s. In places, the humble and bucolic could be found



Photograph of a painting (original lost) by Charles Conder depicting a tethered goat.
Ursula Hoff Papers, MS 9678, State Library of Victoria

lurking just beneath the surface of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’.

Despite the abundance of wandering goats in and around the city, *Melbourne Gaol in sunlight from the Public Library grounds* represents one of the very few prominent inclusions of a goat in Australian art of the late nineteenth century. Certainly they appear in some rural landscapes and generic farmyard scenes, but rarely are they afforded star billing. Interestingly, another example was painted by Charles Conder, a close associate of McCubbin. The painting, known only through a black and white photograph, depicts a coastal scene framed by rocks and scrub. Topographically, it bears some resemblance to Conder’s paintings of Rickett’s Point, which would date the work to around 1890. The ocean appears calm and several figures stroll along the beach, separated from the foreground by tidal pools. In the lower right corner of the frame, a goat is tethered. The animal’s wide horns provide the reason for its lack of liberty, and it stares directly at the viewer – either belligerently or benevolently – with obvious interest.¹⁸

Melbourne Gaol in sunlight from the Public Library grounds is not one of the paintings that characterises McCubbin’s oeuvre or the style of painting – the so-called Australian impressionism – that defines this period in Australian art history. However its unique subject matter and the style of its execution captures a glimpse of a rapidly changing Melbourne and a moment of transition in the career of one of Australia’s pre-eminent artists.