

On absence, privilege and colonial hegemony:

A brief collection of thoughts in response to Matthew McAlpine's *Whitewash*

i

In March 2015, the High Court dismissed the Badimia Native Title claim on the grounds of “insufficient evidence” that the Badimia people maintained a significant connection to country throughout the region of their claim. The ruling wasn't handed down because there was a lack of evidence provided by the claimants per se, but rather because it conflicted with government records and early anthropological studies in the area. From this uncertainty, Justice Barker was ultimately too reluctant to grant the Badimia people native title to their land.

The decision¹ says a lot about the lack of standing oral history has against its written and institutionalised counterparts, and the difficulties native title advocates face in proving their cultural history to the standards of the federal legal system.

ii

In the southernmost region of Badimia land, you'll find the towns of Buntine and Wubin, where Matt and I respectively grew up and went to primary school. Both of our families have lived there for several generations. My family was among the first to settle in Wubin during the post-Federation years.

Coming from a pioneering family granted me a certain sense of status growing up, not that I really recognised it at the time. Farming families had a lot of wealth and influence, especially compared to the “townies”, often transient families from low socio-economic backgrounds. In retrospect I can see how this was echoed in the

classroom. On one occasion, when we were taught how difficult it was for the pioneers in the beginning, I was given the opportunity to show off a few photos of the mud brick house my great-great-grandparents built and lived in, imbuing me with a sense of pride that wasn't exactly shared among my classmates.

I think it's important to admit that while I was taught a localised (but fairly romanticised) version of early settler history, I didn't learn about the Aboriginal people who lived there first, or what happened to them. I didn't know about their physical and spiritual connection to the land I lived on. I've since learnt that what is now known as the Buntine Rocks was a sacred site for the Badimia people², and the name Wubin itself is derived from the Aboriginal word for a nearby water source, though its specific language remains disputed.

I think a lot of this comes down to what might be a general and largely unspoken sense of acceptance within the town - which may or may not be common across rural areas without an Indigenous population - that no Aboriginal people were significantly displaced upon settlement. This is essentially maintained by the absence of any widely recognised knowledge to suggest otherwise.

iii

In my grandparents' living room, above the fireplace, hung a wool tapestry of Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams*. It reminded me of our own shearing shed, all dusty wood and corrugated iron and raised rusty nails that would catch and tear your clothing (or skin) if you weren't careful. All the men in my family were shearers, so I assumed that's why it was there.

In my own house we had cork placemats covered in prints of Frederick McCubbin's *Down on His Luck*. I remember thinking that the sad subject was a farmer who was tired after a day of hard work, as my father often was. In an even less glorified position, *Bailed Up*, another Tom Roberts painting, graced the calendar in the toilet.

¹ The court documents can be found in their entirety at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/FCA/2015/204.html>.

² Thank you to Buntine resident Bev Slater, a Badimia woman and an active advocate for native title, for providing us with this information.

My point here is that although the Australian Impressionists had a fairly peripheral placement in the homes of my childhood - in the form of cheap reproductions, similar to those used by Matt here - their absorption by the domestic sphere as decorative objects, disconnected from the grandeur of colonial iconography and thus their original meaning, was perhaps precisely what rendered them apolitical.

iv

There's a few comments I'd like to make about the Tom Roberts retrospective currently showing at the National Gallery of Australia, or more specifically, about some of the promotional material surrounding the show.³

Firstly, as the summer's "blockbuster" exhibition, it was marketed as a show "for all Australians"⁴ - a well-meaning attempt at inclusivity that may have inadvertently denied the presence of identities at odds with whatever this general "Australian" is meant to be (or perhaps its lack of definition is what makes it inclusive; still, the equally malleable term "un-Australian" seems to exist. Is it therefore "un-Australian" to be unmoved by a Tom Roberts painting?).

Secondly, I haven't come across any mainstream media publications that were keen to associate Tom Roberts with the politics of colonial history. *The Australian*⁵, for example, mentioned his legacy, his leadership and camaraderie among his fellow Australian Impressionists, and the aesthetic qualities of his work. The risk of focusing on the latter revealed itself in the article's description of his Aboriginal portrait series as "lively studies of Indigenous Australians" - a statement which sidestepped the fact that Roberts himself acknowledged that these were "an interesting record of a passing race".⁶

Perhaps it's a little pointless to berate a promotional campaign for not countering its positives, though I think it raises some important questions concerning the demographic the NGA is hoping to attract, and for what reasons.

v

Although this show engages with the themes of standardised colonial history and whitewashing, it doesn't reiterate its principles. There's a crucial and intentional lack of clean resolution to Matt's work. I see it as a kind of grappling with Australia's history; a material process of confronting, from a privileged perspective, this lack of comfortable resolution, rather than an attempt to subdue or rewrite its conflicting narratives.

I've tried to write frankly about the dominance and depoliticisation of Australia's colonial history because I don't want to pretend that it wasn't the version I grew up with. It was integral to me recognising my white privilege as I got older, and I hope that it's given me a greater capacity to recognise and critique the systematic ways through which Aboriginal history is silenced.

Since both Matt and I are from non-Indigenous backgrounds, our commentary is problematically one-sided. Matt's work has the potential, though, to initiate discussion among more diverse voices, and I hope that the limitations of this essay have highlighted the importance of said discussion.

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February 2016

³ In other words, I haven't seen the show, so I can't make an informed judgement in that respect. I should also note that *Tom Roberts* is supported by the ongoing NGA Conversations series, where I imagine colonial history is being discussed with far more depth and sophistication than I can manage here.

⁴ An excerpt from the Ticketek page.

⁵ "Tom Roberts masterpieces on show at the National Gallery, Canberra", from November 21, 2015.

⁶ Quoted from a newspaper article Roberts kept in his 1920-1921 scrapbook. The belief among white Australians at the time was that Aboriginal people and their culture would eventually perish.