



*Theo Brooke Hansen was born in Melbourne in 1870 and entered the National Gallery school in 1888. His painting Love or duty places in colonial setting and a popular artistic genre one perennial dilemma of youth: the conflict between romantic desires and the demands of filial duty. Oil, 1891.*

BENDIGO ART GALLERY

# YOUTH

**W**HEN DID CHILDHOOD END and youth begin? Some youngsters of nine or ten had already left home and fended for themselves as street arabs or newsboys. By fourteen the vast majority of young people were at work in factories, in domestic service, in offices, in trades and on farms. Only a few went on to secondary schooling and fewer still entered one of the country's three universities at Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide. In all but the most privileged households young people, certainly from the age of fourteen and often earlier, were expected to contribute to the domestic economy. In the cities, this normally meant working for wages; in rural Australia it was more common to contribute labour to a family farm or small business.

The young were often compared to their English counterparts, and usually to their disadvantage. The standards of comparison were different for men and women. Through training and discipline, the male had to be led to an understanding that his instinctive urges were unacceptable in a civilised society. Women's instincts, if obeyed, led directly to motherhood and the preservation of the race, so people who thought about these matters concluded. The male was more a product of society and upon him, it was believed, depended the future and progress of the nation. Verses expressing different ideals for young females and young males appeared in the *Echo*, a Sydney evening paper, late in 1888.

THE GIRLS THAT ARE WANTED

The girls that are wanted are girls with hearts;  
They are wanted for mothers and wives;  
Wanted to cradle in loving arms  
The strongest and frailest lives.  
The clever, the witty, the brilliant girl,  
There are few who can understand;  
But, oh! for the wise loving home girls  
There's a constant, steady demand.



THE BOYS THAT ARE WANTED

The boys that are wanted are good boys,  
 Boys who know how to obey,  
 Thoughtful, sincere and reverent  
 In all that they do and say,  
 Boys who respect the aged  
 And abhor the low and profane,  
 Boys who are manly and upright  
 With sober and healthy brain.

Adults worried that youth was not living up to such expectations. Some of the indignation about modern youth arose from the fact that the older generation that imposed the ideal was made up of people who had lived through the gold rushes, when opportunities were great. Their children were born into a more complex world and the opportunities for self-advancement were fewer than elders commonly supposed. Some successful adults looked at the younger generation with distaste, even contempt, believing that they lacked drive. Others perceived that urbanisation, casual labour and declining social mobility all contributed to 'the youth question'.

People were frequently disappointed at the course of Australian development. They found it unnatural that cities should account for such a large percentage of the population, and that young Australians should gather in such morally dangerous places. Two types were singled out for special criticism, both symptomatic of the dangers of Australian city life: the larrikin and the clerk. The condemnation of city youth was persistent. In a novel by A.J. Vogan, a sub-inspector of city police declares:

We've got a larger percentage of youthful criminals amongst our bad classes than at home; and it's a growing percentage more's the pity . . . The Government will have to look after the young people altogether pretty soon, if we are not to have a nation of criminals growing up around us.

The Mount Rennie case seemed a terrible confirmation of how evil colonial city youth could be. In September 1886, a sixteen-year-old girl, an orphan new to Sydney and seeking work as a domestic servant, was waylaid by a cab driver. The girl's protests attracted a group of young men from a nearby industrial suburb, who took her to a small mound known as Mount Rennie in Moore Park, adjacent to Centennial Park, and raped her until she became unconscious. Eleven youths were put on trial before Mr Justice Windeyer, who condemned this outrage as the 'culminating atrocity' in a series of similar crimes. Nine were sentenced to hang. After immense press coverage, public agitation, executive council meetings of unprecedented length and deputations to the governor, Lord Carrington, who alone could exercise mercy, four youths were eventually hanged, clumsily and before a large crowd of officials, in January 1887. The seven remaining youths were sentenced to hard labour for life, the first three years in irons.

For Sir Henry Parkes, it was a tragedy that in the year before the centenary, New South Wales should be presented to the world in this ugly light. Yet newspapers supported the hanging, judging that the prisoners represented a growing larrikin class. Ned Kelly, the last of the bushrangers, had been hanged in 1880; now it seemed bushranging had been replaced by a new type of urban lawlessness. *The year book of Australia* for 1888 characterised larrikinism as 'a vein of evil' which had made statesmen and moralists wonder if 'life is not purer among savages than in civilised societies'.



*First plumbing class workshop,  
Working Men's College,  
Melbourne, 1888.*

ROYAL MELBOURNE  
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The statesmen and moralists who condemned the effects of city life seldom investigated the working and living conditions of young criminals. Melbourne's industrial suburb of Collingwood was seen as a source of larrikinism. It was also a major centre of industrial employment where young people often worked up to twelve hours a day in crowded boot and shoe factories. A report into local working conditions discovered 'a system of forced labour, repugnant to every sense of justice and humanity'.

Employers, whose views on the youth question tended to dominate the newspapers, put more blame on the state education system and the idleness of the young than on working conditions. Churchmen often added their own objections. The Reverend Dr James Jefferis, lecturing in Sydney at his Pitt Street Congregational church, blamed the school system for a workforce that had three times as many clerks as were needed, and 'a multitude of idle youths growing up into idle men'. In Australia, 'education ought to . . . prepare lads for their labour'. Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* carried the same lament: 'Too many clerks, too many men with



black coats on their backs, too many young loafers.' Australian cities seemed to be infested with young idlers swearing, spitting, leaning and leering. The *Echo* wrote that the state education system produced girls who were 'unable for their very lives to either boil a potato or grill a chop'. The paper endorsed a view common among English visitors that young people of the colonies had no respect for age and lacked obedience. The Brisbane *Courier* agreed: 'Neglect of discipline both as regards the family and the State was evident in every city and township of Australia.'

Idleness was not always the choice of the young. Moralists did not take into account the casual, seasonal nature of labour in port cities which served the pastoral industries, or the fluctuations in opportunity for work in the country. By 1888 the number of men employed on railway construction in New South Wales had almost halved from the number employed three years before. In February the colony's casual labour board reported an 'abundance of surplus labour' in every district, and Sydney's unemployed were warned not to look for work in the country.

Union officials were concerned at the decline of apprenticeships and the 'boy labour' problem. They believed that increases in the size of factories had eroded the old apprenticeship system and deprived youths of proper supervision, and that the increasing division of labour enabled fewer apprentices to become masters of their trade. They believed that factory owners were too willing to employ boys at cheap rates, and dismiss them when they were entitled to an adult wage. A representative of the Brisbane coachmakers' society complained that boys were employed in a 'loose and indiscriminate' way in his industry, and blamed this treatment for their bad language and smoking. Some people saw technical education as the solution. A digest of the findings of a British royal commission on the subject was published in Victoria in 1888, and supporters of technical education pointed to Germany's rise, made possible, they said, by an education system centred on discipline and technical knowledge. In New South Wales there were calls for the establishment of a technical university in close touch with the working people of the colony.

NSW STATE ARCHIVES





A standard remedy for idleness and indiscipline was military training. Sir Henry Parkes hoped that one day young men would feel unworthy if they did not belong to the defence force of their colony. Supporters of drilling attributed to it civil as well as military benefits: it could end bad associations and pernicious habits. But New South Wales had fewer cadets in 1888 than when the scheme commenced in the early 1870s, and they appeared not to enjoy universal respect among their peers. When Sydney Boys' High School's scarlet detachment of cadets marched from their cramped city school ground to Hyde Park to drill, street children followed their progress with raucous shouts of 'boiled lobster' and 'pigs in armour'.

## WORK

At ceremonial moments during the centennial year, working boys and girls were unusually visible. When it was decided to hold a centennial youth festival in Sydney for juvenile labourers under seventeen years of age, the organisers expected 2000 youths. Nearly three and a half thousand turned up, most of them employed in tobacco and other factories and in the milk and newsvending trades. The 'Centennial festival of the working girls of Sydney', though an afterthought, attracted 2000 working girls to the lawns of Government House. This, too, was a larger gathering than the organisers had anticipated, and it spurred the formation of a Working and Factory Girls' Club. Many girls believed that the factory and the shop offered employment preferable to domestic service, although it was not considered respectable to be a factory girl. In shops and factories, girls were ensured some hours of leisure, they could live at home, and they had company at work.

The largest field of employment for young girls remained domestic service. Domestic servants were commonly young girls from poorer families, who slept under their employer's roof in small, shabby rooms, and worked long hours in return for low wages. Time off and holidays were at the discretion of the mistress. Girls often worked from 6 am or 7 am to 10 pm or 11 pm with at most two evenings a week free. In journals read by the people for whom girls worked, 'the servant question' was a recurrent topic for articles and cartoons. Egalitarian Australia, they complained, had produced domestics who were not only incompetent but ungovernable. The mistress question was less often aired, but British visitors and colonial servants themselves sometimes thought that women who had risen from servantless homes were less efficient and less congenial employers than ladies to the manner born. In February 1888 Sydney registry offices reported that there were too few domestic servants to meet the demand. The shortage was said to be even worse in the country.

Even as independent wage earners, young people remained subject to the discipline of their elders and superiors. Young teachers, who began training at thirteen for girls and fourteen for boys, were bound by strict regulations that extended even to what clothes they wore and how they spent their leisure time. Other young people were governed by the restrictions of poverty. Fifteen-year-old James Swadling lived in Sydney's Woolloomooloo, a suburb described as a 'cesspool to intellectual health and capacity'. James sold the *Evening News* and the *Echo* six evenings a week, getting home between 9 pm and 10 pm. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday mornings he rose to sell the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* soon after 6 am. When he was not selling papers he got whatever work he could find running messages, cleaning offices, holding horses, and at home he was expected to help clean the house. Since leaving school at fourteen he had been to night school for three months and had worked briefly for a coach builder, dusting buggies and shoeing horses.



A young rabbit trapper.  
NATIONAL LIBRARY



*Boys tip and sort ore at McCulloch's shaft, BHP mine. Most boys worked above ground; those pictured sort silver ore from waste rock. They could earn up to 18s a week, while adults earned 40s. Most young workers were the sons of miners, contributing to the family income. Availability of work depended on the amount of ore mined.*

BHP ARCHIVES



In the country, many young people were ridden hard by poverty and parental discipline. William Stagg, born in 1867, was the older son in a family of two boys and seven girls whose parents' farm at Tarcowie, in northern South Australia, has already been described in chapter 9. The Staggs lived on the edge of poverty. In January 1887 they sold the last of their wheat for £80, all they had to live on. William noted:

You men who can't live on one pound ten shillings a week, just think that eighty pounds is all that resulted from a years labour of two hard-working men, with a farm to try to pay for, and nine mouths to feed.

While William described himself as a hard-working man, he was very conscious that he was painfully small, and that his father still called the tune about the farm. On his eighteenth birthday William wrote, 'I ain't very big for my age—have not a sign of whiskers or mustache so I am a boy still'; no mention of a birthday celebration or presents. In the morning it was ploughing as usual, until steady rain set in. He hoped for a half-day holiday but was out of luck, as a horse had to be shod. About his nineteenth birthday he was abrupt: 'Carting straw. This is my birthday. I am nineteen years old, and five feet high.' William attributed his stunted frame to 'draw-backs in the shape of chest weaknesses' and colds. Cod liver oil helped, but he could not always afford it.

He worked off the farm as well as on it, helping his father to do contract ploughing for a neighbour, chopping wood in town for the bank manager, carting sand and stones to local building sites. He hated the family's poverty and longed to go somewhere else, perhaps America, 'the favourite country of my visions'. He was frustrated in having to follow with filial obedience his father's archaic methods of agriculture. One day his rage and frustration boiled over and he thrashed one of the horses. Afterwards he brooded:

I ought not to have done it, a person in my position who has a class in the Sunday School. What would my scholars say had they seen me? I must try to keep the demon anger down.



Yet when he moved to his own small block of land, he was in for even more work, for the family still needed his help.

William rarely mentioned his brother and his sisters. Elizabeth and Ellen were both in their mid-twenties when they married. Ellen married her second cousin in Adelaide; 'she is the first of our family', William recorded, 'to change her name by engaging in wedlock'. A little over a year later a letter arrived announcing that Ellen had borne a son. 'I feel much older now. Last year I was simply William Stagg, but now I am Uncle Will.' Like her two older sisters Harriet, the third daughter, had been 'in service'. She might have worked in this capacity on nearby farms before being engaged by the local bank manager's wife. She was paid 6s a week, starting work at 7 am and being allowed home before sundown; a 70-hour week at around a penny an hour. After several changes of position, Hattie was sacked for cheekiness.

Country girls on poor farms worked as hard as their brothers. Kate Currie helped her father and brothers in the paddocks and her mother in the house. Rose Field, the eldest daughter of a farming family, took on the hard work of the household. From February Rose kept house for her bachelor brother Tom, who lived at a farm at Muckatah, not far from the Murray. She accepted that someone had to keep house for an unmarried man, though occasionally she resented it. On 8 March she wrote: 'I done the washing while all the other girls and boys at home are enjoying themselves at the Mooroopna sports', and on 12 March: 'Tom took last load of wheat in I felt very lonely all day.' After one brief absence she returned to find the place 'topsy-turvy', but next day she got the house 'straitened up' and had time to make the bread. Tom was soon to be married, and while he built on a new kitchen at the back of the house, put down oilcloth on the floor and bought a new kapok mattress, Rose made bed hangings and curtains.

## LEISURE

Fanny Barbour began to keep a diary in 1887, when she was twenty-two. After growing up on a property in Queensland, she had come to live in Melbourne. She considered herself a jolly person, capable of noise and willing to 'larrikinise', but only in the best of company. Her set were rich people who made regular visits 'home' and were received at Government House. She belonged in society. She visited her art teacher's 'little cottage' in Kew and noted: 'they are so poor they have no servants'.

Visiting and being visited filled her social life. There were extended skating parties, horserides, dances till dawn, long walks and rambles. There were complex undertakings, such as the picnic that Fanny organised with a friend. They borrowed a billy and cups, but had to hire plates, cutlery and a cab to transport their 'innumerable baskets' containing tongue, pie, sandwiches, fruit cake, biscuits and figs to the train where they met their twenty fellow picnickers and a chaperone. Fanny took a keen interest in courting, or 'mashing'—a word to describe any occasion on which a boy and girl confined their attentions to each other. Four couples did a 'great mash' with each other; the rest were unattached. They walked and recited and sang, with more singing on the train home. The picnic was a great success, although it put Fanny on the wrong side of the ledger, despite a £2 contribution from her aunts. (That would have been six and a half weeks' wages for Hattie Stagg.)

Fanny often found Melbourne 'wearisome' and longed for the country. At Easter she went to Ballarat, a 'fine clean town', where she stayed the night with friends. Next morning she viewed local scenic spots before embarking on a



*Fanny Barbour.*  
MRS M. PHILLIPS



combined train, coach and buggy trip to Blythvale, her pastoral destination. She arrived early in the evening, dined hastily and set off with her hosts for a dance: five in the buggy, three in the pony carriage. Two hours later they arrived at a splendid homestead. Sixty guests were present and the program had begun. Fanny and her party danced until four in the morning, and were served hot oyster soup to fortify them for the journey home. Later that morning Fanny was up and about, mixing with the guests, including Miss Willis, 'a stylish sort of girl' who had been 'home', and Mr Leroyd, 'a dapper little man' who went home every two years. Fanny thought he was an Englishman.

The cook could not be relied upon, so the girls set to work preparing cakes and little 'tiddlywinkins', or snacks. The 'fellows' marched around the property looking busy. Lunch had to be prepared for some 'biciclists' from town. The girls talked avidly with these splendid visitors, 'much to the disgust of the other fellows'. Later the girls went down to the gates and watched the cyclists 'gliding down the road with the sun shining on their silver spokes and green uniforms'.

The episode with the 'fellows' was part of the entertainment. The girls loved to bait them and chuckled over their successes. They had taken in all the men on April Fools' Day, including a conceited fellow none of them liked. Miss Willis declared that she loathed men and cats, but she was very jolly for all that. At afternoon tea the wit flew about and smart things were said. 'Lord preserve us', wrote Fanny—one of her few references to the deity. Miss Ritchie's great saying was 'Smartie, you do think yourself *some*', which caused merriment. By Wednesday this bubbly group of people had become a 'crew'. They turned down an invitation to a dance and spent an evening at home telling ghost stories.

A young woman of Fanny's class had to have an accomplishment. She took lessons in art from a rude foreign gentleman with an 'artistic temperament'. Tiny sketches, many with a comical turn, adorn her diary. She went to the opening of Tom Roberts' studio, but it was hard to see anything in the small, crowded room. Frederick McCubbin's landscapes pleased her, but she remarked: 'I don't think Tom Roberts has improved, he has such scarlet fever sort of sunsets.'

*During the 1880s cycling was becoming a popular pastime.*

OXLEY LIBRARY



*Summer walk, by Tom Humphrey. Fanny Barbour wrote of a picnic to Eaglemont in the spring: 'I didn't think there was a place about Melbourne so pretty. We bought a big scone and some biscuits in Heidelberg, then we started off up the road; a long dusty road through the green fields and hedges—quite English.' In summer, fields no longer looked so green and English. Oil, late 1880s.*

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA







*Young ladies at home.*  
BATTYE LIBRARY

Many young people who lived in cities would look back with nostalgia on the good times of their youth. By 1888 Fred Coneybeer was a respectable married man with a young daughter. Sometimes, however, he recalled with pleasure wilder days: life in a boarding house before he was married, Easter buns thrown from the balcony on Good Fridays, St Patrick's Day revels six years before:

We had some adventures that day and night ... the life at night around at Wakefield street when there was four couples all fighting at once and how the sarjent came up and told us to go back to the station and be locked up and other adventures too numerous to mention.

There had been innocent delights too: days at the beach, fishing parties, walks to the city with friends.

Such free and universal pleasures are not well documented, for few young working-class people kept diaries. Public documents reveal a more sombre aspect of city youth. Clubs and leisure activities for working youths were few, and rarely suited their requirements. Sydney had several small clubs, all for young men only. Boys came in as it suited them and played dominoes, read the illustrated papers or simply talked. Smoking was the rule rather than the exception, and was not forbidden. One reporter noted that the clergy were the least successful at running clubs in which working-class youths felt comfortable.

Twenty-four bars and casinos operated in Sydney and its suburbs, and were condemned by the Reverend Dr Jefferis as places to be avoided, especially by young women; health, temperance, modesty, purity and piety were all endangered there. Dancing saloons were also frowned on, though they were rarely open beyond 10 pm on week nights and 11 pm on Saturday. Men were charged 1s to enter and women could enter free. A police officer who reported on a dancing saloon with a 'notorious' reputation admitted that it was generally well-conducted. Crowds of young people were there at closing time, which enabled the sexes, he observed, to mingle unsupervised. When asked if adults attended the saloons he replied: 'Very seldom. The larrikin youth seems to knock off dancing when he gets to a certain age and marries.'





'Two stories without words.'  
Illustrated Sydney News,  
15 Sept 1887.

## SUPERVISION

Young people who wandered the streets without proper occupations could be apprehended and sent to institutions. For over thirty years a training ship named the *Vernon* had been anchored in Sydney Harbour. By 1888 it had deteriorated into a 'crazy old hulk ... past condemnation'. Between its patched and cobbled decks were packed more than three hundred youths, sent there to undergo severe training, some with the consent of parents, some without. Most were sent on to the country as farmhands, removed from families and friends.

A similar policy was followed by the New South Wales State Children's Relief Board. Of 343 youths serving apprenticeships in April 1888, 233 were apprenticed to farmers. The next-largest category, grooms, received only nine apprentices. Girls were 'placed at domestic service'. It was believed that youths should be taken from the backstreets of the city and sent to the purer air and society of the countryside. Parents might not be able to discover where their children had been despatched. Not knowing her son's whereabouts left one mother, Annie Foy, 'so prostrated with illness through anxiety of mind that sometimes I think I shall go insane'.

On board the *Vernon* all boys were put into uniform, had their hair cut short and were subject to regular inspections. Particulars were entered into a large leather-bound volume. John Henry was described as a 'big, sulky larrikin with whiskers', the son of a labourer earning 35s a week. The father was a drunkard, the mother a sickly woman with other children to care for. John Henry had been arrested while he slept under bags in an open paddock with two companions. This was not his first encounter with the law; he had been let off twice by magistrates, fined twice, and had 'done time' twice for riotous conduct and for 'shaking' (stealing) ducks. No one knew how old he was; this information was lacking about many *Vernon* boys. He was discharged when his keepers discovered that he had turned eighteen.

Records from the *Vernon* give family information on 112 of the 183 boys taken on board in 1888. Nearly half were from families in which one parent was dead,



and 8 per cent from families in which both parents were dead. In 15 per cent of cases the father was unemployed, in 9 per cent the mother had been deserted. In 13 per cent of cases one or both parents were judged to be of poor character, drunkenness being the most common explanation. For only 4 per cent of cases were both parents considered respectable. The parents of this group had more than six hundred children between them.

In 1888 the Parramatta training school received forty-one girls, most of whom were about fourteen years of age. The records, less full than for the *Vernon*, suggest that 30 per cent of inmates had experienced the death of one or both parents. For a further 22 per cent, the father's whereabouts was unknown. In one-third of the cases, living with prostitutes was offered as the justification for putting the girls in training school. While the *Vernon* boys were sent off to be farmhands, needlework and more needlework seems to have been the lot of the Parramatta inmates. In a typical week the superintendent reported that the ninety-four girls had completed thirteen nightgowns, thirty-six pillowcases, thirteen chemises, one hood, eight dresses and two pinafores, and had done one day's mending. The Parramatta girls were rewarded at the exhibition of women's industries with prizes for their needlework and cakes.

For the respectable poor, such institutions reinforced a determination to guard the reputation of their children. Mrs Sutton had been well off until her husband died. In January 1888, she applied for a remission of school fees to enable her daughter to stay at Sydney Girls' High School. She was anxious for the girl to gain the junior certificate necessary to become a teacher. A school inspector was sent to find out whether Mrs Sutton was as needy as she claimed. He found her renting a single room in 'a very unpretentious house' in a poor neighbourhood. Her income from needlework was small and precarious. A remission of fees was granted for six months, at the end of which she applied again and was again found to be in needy circumstances. Her request passed all but the last stage; she was refused by the minister. There were more letters, more inspections. At the end of November she



*Boys and officers on the  
Vernon, Sydney Harbour.*  
MITCHELL LIBRARY



learned that the fee of eight guineas a year had been remitted. The strain of this long struggle and the significance her mother attached to a certificate cannot have escaped Mrs Sutton's daughter.

Other young people had different worries about growing up. An increasing body of literature warned against sexual error in the young. Masturbation was commonly cited as a horrendous disorder, and was thought to be revealed by expressions and appearance of the face. William James Chidley, a determined masturbator in his twenties, wrote:

It must not be supposed that my appearance escaped notice . . . I grew stiff in the neck, my spine clogged . . . Even the picture of a healthy boy in the Gallery I could not look in the eyes—a strange thing.

Chidley spent hours in front of the mirror, and took photographs of himself in order to measure his degeneration over time.

For the general secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association in New South Wales, David Walker, masturbation was 'The Monster Temptation'. The authors of the crisply titled *The science of life; or, self-preservation; a guide to health, strength, and vigorous old age, and what to eat, drink and avoid: including the treatment of nervous and other disorders resulting from the loss of nervous and physical force*, reported that masturbation had wiped entire races and nations from the face of the earth. They believed that it also explained why there were many more male than female lunatics in asylums. Masturbation was not confined to men, but the loss of semen was. This was a vital fluid, the source of energy and 'nervous force'. Its loss during the growing time of a boy's life was believed to weaken the frame, render the body more susceptible to disease and affect the brain. Between January 1886 and December 1888, twenty-six people were admitted to Sydney's Callan Park asylum; their case papers reveal that masturbation was a prominent reason for their being there. All but two were males.

The fears surrounding masturbation generated a large avoidance industry. There were individual efforts. Chidley once whacked his penis with a piece of wood. It turned 'quite black', gave acute pain for a week, but continued to misbehave. There was a wide range of recommendations: stimulants were to be avoided and bedrooms well ventilated; exercise in moderation was recommended, as was military drill, prayer and the company of chaste women. Sliding down a banister in tight pants after a spicy meal combined three well known dangers. A New South Wales inquiry in 1887 found that of 193 unregistered medical practitioners, at least one-third claimed expertise in nervous disorders, which included masturbation.

A summer morning tiff, by  
Tom Roberts. Oil, 1886.

Only a word at the splitter's  
track,—  
A thoughtless blunder.  
She is fair and haughty,  
and answers back,  
So they part asunder.  
With a jerk he loosens the  
fastening rein—  
And she turns her back  
with a fine disdain,  
Ah me! sigh the saplings, in  
sad refrain,  
As she passes under.

Verse printed in the 1886  
exhibition catalogue

BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY



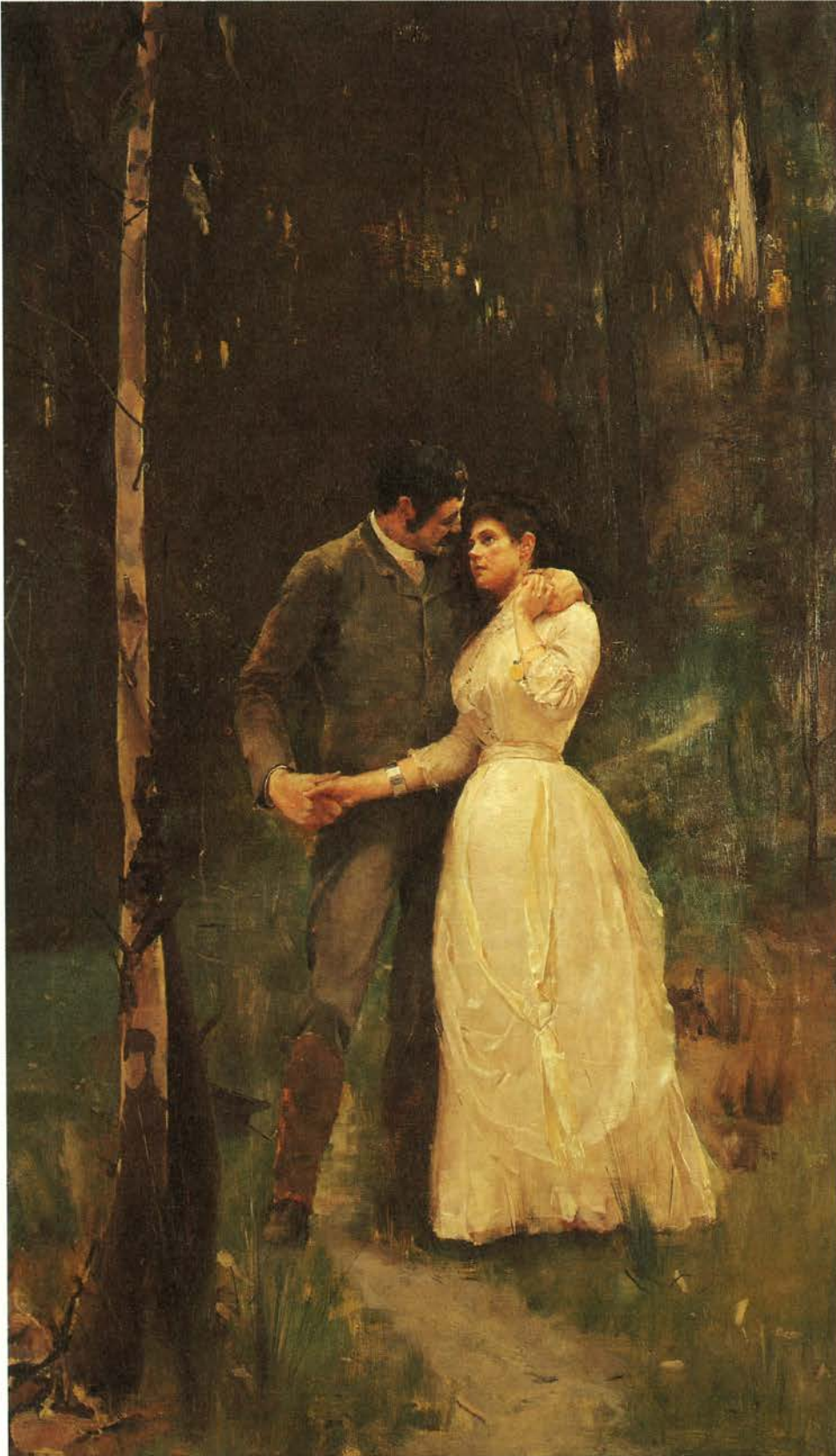
## COURTING

The manual *Australian etiquette* observed that, although English rules of courtship were not strictly followed in the Australian colonies, certain niceties of behaviour were still to be observed. Mothers should watch their daughters with 'jealous care' in case they found unworthy suitors. In this unhappy event, it was advisable to bring forward more suitable young men.

As soon, however, as a young gentleman neglects all others, to devote himself to a single lady, he gives that lady reason to suppose that he is particularly attracted to her, and may give her cause to believe that she is to become engaged to him, without telling her so.

The young John Monash, after a painful misunderstanding with a young lady and her mother, felt convinced that 'A true friendship, solely platonic, between





Reconciliation, by Tom Roberts. Oil, 1887. Roberts painted both *A summer morning tiff* and *Reconciliation at Houston's Farm, Box Hill*, and accompanied his paintings of romantic love with lines of verse. The poem accompanying *Reconciliation* in the catalogue was by Joan Torrance.

*Do the birds now sing more  
sweetly,  
Does the earth now seem  
more fair  
Is the question—who will  
answer?  
Why, those figures lingering  
there—  
Hush! the trees have heard  
their whispers  
And the vows so sweetly  
given  
Make the spot at once grow  
hallowed—  
Waft a story unto heaven.  
'Tis a glimpse of Eden's  
raptures,  
'Tis a taste of Eden's bliss,  
When all bitter thoughts  
will vanish  
At a touch and with a kiss.*

CASTLEMAINE ART GALLERY  
AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM



marriageable people is a thing not admissible in our present social system.' For much of 1888 Monash was enmeshed in a turbulent affair with Annie Gabriel, a married woman with a two-year-old son. It was a year of passionate letters, sudden misunderstandings, reconciliations, secret meetings, muddled promises and ugly scenes with a suspicious, sometimes violent husband. When Annie thought she was pregnant to her husband, Monash appeared with drugs, money and a resolution 'to be kind and tender—to help her over her trouble, and then—to put an end to all, on the excuse of what had happened'. There was no baby, and no excuse for a neat end to the affair.

Some young people experienced great difficulties in making their affections known. Henry Lawson's character Joe Wilson managed to meet Mary at the washing line. It proved to be a choked encounter, made all the more humiliating by Joe's later realisation that Mary had not wanted to talk to him beside the underwear hanging on the line; Joe, clumsy as ever, had misinterpreted her awkwardness. The shy might advertise. A farmer aged twenty having 'procured a considerable little farm and a nice cage' sought a 'suitable bird' to complete his happiness. A young lady, of 22 sought a 'fairly tall and bony' husband, affectionate and moral, with a good social position and a regular income. John Monash, also 22, was more assured.

I devote myself solely to the cultivation of the esteem, and, be it admitted, admiration of the lady guests . . . It is my aim to convince each in their turn of my own great personal importance, wonderful depth of knowledge and outstanding versatility of acquirements . . .

Working-class couples tended to marry young, since long engagements seldom saw an improvement in their financial prospects. Courtship rituals were more prolonged for the better off. The social round of balls, parties and picnics gave opportunities for young men and women to meet and for elders to assess the suitability of a match. Fanny Barbour recorded in her diary a stream of engagements and marriages. 'Everyone seems to be getting married', she noted. Fanny herself professed disdain for the married estate.

It's a rum go, I wonder what people want to get married for. If I was a man I'd never get married, I'd be a sour old bachelor like Mr Cheeks, and do nothing but ride and shoot. I'm getting that way now. Don't much care for anything.

She became engaged soon afterwards.

Tom Guest, eldest son of the biscuit manufacturer Thomas Guest, being groomed by his father to take over the family business, was 26 years old and visiting England when his parents learned of his love for Mary Aitken, daughter of their neighbour William Aitken, a retired flour miller. The affair had apparently blossomed in the weeks before Tom's departure and his letters had grown fonder during the months of separation. From the outset his father discouraged the match. He did not object, at least openly, to Mary's social status, even though the Aitkens were not as rich as the Guests. He said he 'admired Mr Aitken very much' and disavowed any intention of social climbing.

Neither [your mother] nor I ever wished you to choose a girl simply for her beautiful face, vivacious gushing manners and such like attractions, nor that she was of an aristocratic family and able to introduce you into good society etc., nor that she was possessed of a fortune of gold—no—none of these things would have pleased us unless in addition to beauty, gold etc. she was a good, amiable and sensible and loving girl domesticated and not too fond of pleasure.

*A valentine. On 14 February 1888, St Valentine's Day, many such tokens were exchanged.*

J.M. HUGHES PAPERS, LA TROBE LIBRARY







Mary, Guest admitted, may be 'a good and interesting girl and might make a good wife'. But was she the right wife for his son? The affair had developed too quickly: some of her relatives were suspiciously enthusiastic for the match. 'Always beware of scheming Mammias, Aunts and even brothers who will often feel anxious to run in an eligible young man irregardless of whether the partners operated upon are suitably matched', Guest warned.

At first the son seemed deaf to his father's counsel. Distance and the delays of the sea mail freed him temporarily from parental authority. Then an element of urgency entered their correspondence when Guest discovered that Mary Aitken had a mad sister and a mad aunt. Guest's dynastic ambitions were suddenly jeopardised by the threat of hereditary insanity. He urged his son to break off the correspondence without delay. Ten weeks later Guest was relieved to read that Tom had already ended the affair without any 'interference of parents or others'. Had he been five or six years younger, the patriarch explained, he should have been obliged 'to think for you in the matter and [assert] some authority' but since he was now old enough to decide for himself his parents had 'confined our attention to you being satisfied with all the surroundings'. But Tom was still strongly influenced by his father's wishes and opinions. He could not hope to be truly independent until he left his father's house to become the head of a family of his own. Marriage was the dividing line between youth and responsible adulthood.

*Thomas Guest, junior, and his sister Amy. In 1888 Tom had not yet found a suitable partner, but Amy was engaged to a young man of good prospects and fine connections.*

GUEST FAMILY