

# Keys to the collection— Stories

## Frederick McCubbin

“McCubbin was happy to live in or near Melbourne all his life and his subjects were the places he knew and loved best.”

—Anne Gray, *Happy beyond measure: a life*, 2009

Frederick McCubbin was born on 25 February 1855 in West Melbourne. In 1869 he enrolled at the Artisans' School of Design, Carlton, and later studied drawing at the School of Design, National Gallery of Victoria. In 1877 McCubbin returned to the same school to study painting.

When fellow artist, Tom Roberts, returned from overseas in 1885 he and McCubbin went on painting trips, they also painted and sketched at Houstens' farm at Box Hill, Mentone on Port Phillip Bay and later in the Heidelberg area on the outskirts of Melbourne. Here they were joined by Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder and other young artists. These first camps marked the beginning of a group more generally referred to as the Australian Impressionists.

In 1886 McCubbin was appointed drawing master of the School of Design and held this position for the rest of his life. He married Annie Lucy Moriarty in 1889 sharing the cottage named 'Fontainebleau' at Macedon, and later at Carlsburg, South Yarra. In 1916, owing to ill health, he took leave from the School of Design, and died of heart disease on 20 December 1917 at South Yarra.



### A bush burial—

Grave side or funeral scenes were popular subjects of the nineteenth century and McCubbin translates this melancholy subject into the local landscape. McCubbin's painting refers to the history and grand achievements of the pioneers in Australia, their loneliness and the hardship they experienced. Bush burials had been outlawed since 1871. The painting, once known as the *Last of the Pioneers*, depicts the artist's wife, Annie McCubbin, aged 25 years old as the bereaved mother and the artist's friend and fellow artist, Louis Abraham, as the younger man. John Dunn was the older man. He had been stopped by McCubbin in a Melbourne street and asked to model as the “venerable figure” for the painting.

The surrounding bush is muted and melancholy in sympathy with the nature of the funeral. The horse and face the setting sun, suggesting a journey towards another world and a elusive transparent shroud is draped over its tray.

To capture the light of the environment, McCubbin would have returned to the painting over many days, the figures being completed from models in his studio. *A Bush Burial* led the way towards the painting of large scale nationalistic works by McCubbin.

## Geelong Gallery

AusVELS level 7 to VCE

[geelonggallery.org.au/learn](http://geelonggallery.org.au/learn)

Frederick McCubbin  
*A bush burial* (detail) 1890  
oil on canvas  
Collection: Geelong Gallery

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## Frederick McCubbin

Australian 1855–1917

*A bush burial* 1890

oil on canvas

122.5 x 224.5 cm

Collection: Geelong Gallery

Purchased by public  
subscription, 1900

### Question

McCubbin's painting shows us an aspect of Australian life over 120 years ago. While life and customs have changed dramatically since then, we can still relate strongly to this painting. Explain why.

### Research

Access the internet to research Frederick McCubbin's *A bush burial*. What aspect of pioneering Australian life did McCubbin wish to illustrate? Justify your answer by discussing details of his painting that support your points.

Find two other paintings by McCubbin that have the same or similar basic narrative. Discuss how social, political, and cultural context contribute to meaning in these paintings.

### Activity

Reinterpret the narrative of this painting by writing a short story (approximately 500 words). Analyse details and visual features within the painting to guide your own composition.

Speculate on the following:

- The relationships between the people in the painting
- Who died? Who is the woman? Who is the elderly man?
- There are few mourners. Why?
- The location of the grave
- The placement of the grave tools
- The emotions displayed and how we relate to them
- What will life be like for these people when they go home?
- Where is 'home', for these people?

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