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Thomas Jeston Washbourne's photographs of Indigenous Australians

The author wishes to advise that this article contains both images of deceased Aboriginal people and historical descriptive terms that may be offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In 2012, Melbourne-based Douglas Stewart Fine Books obtained an album containing 14 photographs of Aboriginal Australians, 10 of which were taken by Thomas Jeston Washbourne (1832–1905). Douglas Stewart brought the album to the attention of the National Library of Australia, whose experts recognised the images' historical and cultural value and purchased it, whereupon it became known as 'the Washbourne album'.¹ For the last decade, a rough date of c. 1869 or c. 1870 has been attributed to Washbourne's images. Today, as descendants of those photographed by Washbourne use his images to reclaim their cultures and identities,² accurate details of names, locations and dates have become critical. When consulting with descendants of the people pictured and named in this article (including Megan Carter, a descendant of Billy Elengeit, and Vincent Peters, a descendant of Tattambo) and with State Library Victoria's Indigenous Research Centre, I found that the designated rough date given to the photographs has led to confusion as to the identity of some of those photographed. In this article I discuss the circumstances in which Washbourne took the photographs and identify a more accurate date. Historical documents from the 1860s and 1870s held by State Library Victoria have been critical to untangling the photographs' provenance.

The Wangaratta exhibition

Every few years in 19th-century Europe, international world fairs were held over a period of up to six months, at which exhibitions showcased the achievements of participating nations.³ In preparation for the Exposition Universelle in Paris from April to November 1867, the governor of Victoria Sir Charles Darling commissioned the *Intercolonial exhibition of Australasia*, to be held in Melbourne from October 1866 to February 1867. According to the official catalogue of the *Intercolonial exhibition* held by State Library Victoria, for the first time since settlement the Australian colonies and surrounding countries came together, to decide which exhibits would be displayed in Paris.⁴ In turn, local exhibitions were held to decide which exhibits should be displayed in Melbourne. One such exhibition took place at Wangaratta, and it is here that we meet Thomas Washbourne and several Aboriginal people from north-central and north-eastern Victoria.

Washbourne was born into a wealthy and influential family that had its roots in 12th-century England.⁵ He came from Corsham, Wiltshire, where his father, also Thomas Washbourne, was a surgeon. After a decade or more as a mariner, in September 1863 Second Mate Thomas Jeston Washbourne arrived in Sydney, where he jumped ship.⁶ After six months in Sydney,⁷ he travelled south to Victoria. Soon after Washbourne's arrival in Victoria, Governor Charles Darling announced the establishment of a royal commission 'for carrying out the arrangements for an Intercolonial Exhibition' in Melbourne.⁸ This must have been music to the ears of Washbourne, as here was a ready-made opportunity to launch a photographic career in Australia. It is not known if he carried a camera in his luggage from England or purchased one in Sydney, but sometime between mid-1864 and mid-1866 he arrived in north-eastern Victoria and began photographing.

The *Wangaratta local exhibition* commenced on 5 September 1866 at the Royal Victoria Theatre. The evening before, the local newspaper published a program for the opening procession,⁹ which was to feature 15 groups from Wangaratta society, including 'Aborigines'. In fact, only 13 groups participated, and the Aboriginal group was among the defaulters.¹⁰ However, they still featured in the exhibition itself. The newspaper reported that 'Mr Washbourne exhibit[ed] photographs taken at Wangaratta and neighbourhood' and that 'photographs, comprising views of the neighbourhood, and portraits of the aborigines' were entered by 'Mr Washbourne, Wangaratta'. He received a certificate for his efforts, although it was not recorded whether this was for the views or portraits.¹¹ These are the first known photographs by Washbourne placed on public display. Immediately after the exhibition, the

Wangaratta Borough Council received a letter 'from Thomas Washbourne, asking permission to erect a tent for photographic purposes',¹² which would have been necessary for portrait photography. It appears that some of the best photographs of Indigenous people from north-central and north-eastern Victoria that survive to this day were prize-winning images taken by Thomas Washbourne for the *Wangaratta local exhibition* and displayed in September 1866.

Corroborative evidence of the 1865-66 date

There are five further clues that address the question of when Washbourne took the photographs in the National Library's album. Three relate to the people he photographed and two to European engravings based on the photographs.

One of Washbourne's subjects was an elderly Indigenous man known as Charles Tattambo, who had links with at least two European institutions: the Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate, which operated between 1840 and 1853 at modern-day Murchison under the auspices of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate,¹³ and the Molka Station east of Murchison, held by squatter Peter Fryer between 1852 and 1872.¹⁴ Fryer regarded Tattambo so highly that he organised a breastplate for him bearing the inscription 'Tattambo King: Belonging to Mr. Fryer, Molka Station'.¹⁵ There are two extant photographs of Tattambo. One, held by the British Museum and attributed to 'T Washbourne', features him with dark hair and a grey beard, wearing possibly moleskins and a possum-skin cloak around his shoulders and holding a crooked stick in one hand and his 'King' plate in the other. But the inscription on the plate reads 'Tatambo King' and looks like it has been handwritten onto the image.¹⁶ Did Washbourne have difficulty photographing the detail on the 'King' plate due to the glare of the metal and resort to scratching the words on afterwards?

The second photograph of Tattambo is held by the Murchison and District Historical Society and is part of a trilogy of photographs of Tattambo, his wife Mary (sometimes referred to as Tattambo's daughter) and their daughter Jenny holding her daughter Lizzie.¹⁷ In the photograph, Tattambo is sporting a woven headband, wearing a possum-skin cloak around his chest and lower body, holding a straight stick or spear, and he looks older, having grey hair and a white beard. It must have been taken shortly before his death, which occurred on 1 January 1868.¹⁸ It is possible that Washbourne took the first photograph in 1865 or 1866 and that the second photograph was taken by an unknown photographer in late 1867.

The second person of interest is Tattambo's granddaughter Lizzie. The British Museum has a copy of the Murchison trilogy photograph of Jenny and Lizzie and notes that 'T. Washbourne' is written on the back of the mount.¹⁹ Lizzie also appears on a compilation of photographs made in 1866 by German-born Charles (Carl) Walter. A contemporary of Washbourne, Walter photographed 104 Indigenous people who were residents of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in Victoria and arranged the images in a single panel board that was displayed at the 1866–67 *Intercolonial exhibition*.²⁰ Lizzie is designated in the compilation as 'Burnie'. Apparently, when she arrived at Coranderrk, there were already several children there called Lizzie, so she became known as Goulburn Lizzie, which was then abbreviated to Burnie. Lizzie in the Washbourne photograph looks almost identical to Burnie in the compilation, albeit about 12 months younger. Historian Jane Lydon has documented a date of May–September 1866 for Walter's photographic work at Coranderrk.²¹ Lizzie must have been removed from her family in north-central Victoria to Coranderrk sometime in early 1866 in order to be photographed at Coranderrk in mid-1866.²² This implies that Washbourne photographed her in 1865 or early 1866.

Washbourne's portrait of Maggie Stone, which is in the State Library Victoria collection (see figure 1 image f), can be dated to around 1866. The photograph was reproduced in a book by Stone's descendants George and Robynne Nelson that detailed their Australian Indigenous and Indian ancestors.²³ Maggie's birth certificate documents that she was born on 15 February 1863, and the age of the girl in the portrait is about three or four years.²⁴

The first European to reproduce Washbourne's images as engravings was Frenchman Ludovic de Beauvoir, who visited Australia in 1866. On 11 August, at Gonn Station near present-day Barham, he met several members of Charles Tattambo's family and recorded his impressions of the encounter.²⁵ Before leaving Australia, de Beauvoir obtained copies of Washbourne's portraits of Tattambo and his wife and reproduced them as photographs in his 1869 memoir and as engravings in later editions.²⁶ The photographs must have been taken in 1866 or earlier in order for de Beauvoir to have access to them while visiting Australia.

Zoologist and anthropologist Enrico Hillyer Giglioli was another European who reproduced Washbourne's photographs. In 1867 he visited Melbourne wanting to locate some Indigenous Australians who would provide evidence for the theory of natural selection within the evolutionary framework published by Charles Darwin eight years previously,

in his *On the origin of species*. Giglioli was excited to locate some Aboriginal people living traditionally at Moira Lake, on the Murray River north-east of Echuca, whom he visited and described, along with their material effects. In May 1867, the Italian consul in Melbourne gave him at least four of Washbourne's photographs of Aboriginal people from north-eastern Victoria, which he subsequently published as engravings, although he gave an incorrect location for the images.²⁷ That these photographs represented people from north-eastern Victoria seemed immaterial to Giglioli, who incorrectly regarded the Aboriginal people to be homogenous. Giglioli used the images to advocate for social Darwinism and Indigenous peoples' adaptation to their environment, and Lydon argued that photographs such as these 'shaped policies, management procedures and legislation such as the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic)'.²⁸ In order for Giglioli to have acquired these photographs in May 1867, they must have been taken by Washbourne earlier than that date.

Copyright registration

It was probably due to the popularity of his portraits of Aboriginal Australians with the likes of de Beauvoir and Giglioli that Washbourne felt the need to register copyright on a selection of his works with the Victorian Patents Office Copyright Collection on 18 July 1870. Consequently, the date widely used to place Washbourne's images of Indigenous people has been c. 1869 or c. 1870. Copies held by other repositories, such as Museums Victoria, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the State Library of New South Wales, have likewise been attributed the 1870 date.²⁹ According to State Library Victoria's index for each of these photographs,

The files which now comprise the Victorian Patents Office Copyright Collection were begun by the Victorian Patents Office in 1870. In order to register copyright, a copy of the photograph, print or illustration was lodged with the Victorian Patents Office ... A number was assigned and the photographs were mounted in scrapbooks. The photographs were stamped with the date of registration but this ceased in 1873 ... The registers or indexes contain the following information: date of registration, name and address of proprietor or author, description of the work and date of first publication. Images were registered from 1870 until 1906. The collection was transferred to the Melbourne Public Library [now State Library Victoria] in 1908.³⁰

Once Washbourne had completed the copyright process, he included that information on subsequent prints. Examples of carte de visite images bearing



a



b



c



d



e



f

Figure 1 Carte de visite photographic portraits taken by Thomas Washbourne in 1865–66 that were copyright registered in 1870. Asterisks indicate images that appear in the Washbourne album. **a***, **b** and **c*** Neddy Mitchell, H96.160/1558, H96.160/1565, H96.160/1567 **d** King Billy Elengeit, father of Neddy Wheeler, H96.160/1568 **e*** Queen Mary, wife of Billy, H96.160/1563 **f** Maggie Stone, granddaughter of Billy and Mary, H96.160/1564



g



h



i



j



k

Figure 1 (cont.) g Aunt Sally, H96.160/1561 h Charlotte Wheeler and her child, H96.160/1559 i*, j and k Neddy Wheeler, husband of Charlotte and son of Billy Elengeit, H96.160/1560, H96.160/1562, H96.160/1566

the terms ‘copyright’, ‘Washbourne photo’ and ‘registered’ are found in the National Library of Australia and the British Museum.³¹ Interestingly, two of those National Library images were not registered or copyrighted with the Victorian Patents Office, suggesting Washbourne was not above stretching his copyright claims.³²

Photographic settings

Of the ten Washbourne photographs in the National Library’s album, four were and six were not copyright registered. Of the six images in figure 2, which appear in the Washbourne album but were not copyright registered, the National Library’s catalogue attributes three (a, b and c) to Washbourne. That images d, e and f were taken by Washbourne is further validated by examining the three photographic settings – the backdrops and props – Washbourne used in his images.

State Library Victoria holds two photographs depicting a trellis timber panel behind several seated Indigenous Australians claimed by the catalogue entries to belong to the ‘Molka tribe’ or ‘Malka tribe’, shown in figure 3. It seems they were from the same Country as Charles Tattambo, although Tattambo’s descendants cannot place them in their family tree.³³ One of the photographs has the inscription ‘Washbourne photo’, apparently signed by Washbourne himself: this signature is virtually identical to that on his marriage certificate.³⁴

The second photographic setting is a plain cloth background, sometimes featuring a twisted piece of timber. This setting occurs in images of Tattambo found in the British Museum, of his family and associates in figure 2 images a, b and c of Jenny and Lizzie in the Murchison trilogy; three of these include the piece of timber.

The photographs using the first two settings depict members of the same community of Molka, near modern-day Murchison. While the trellis photographs appear to have been taken spontaneously, those with the cloth-backed setting were likely an early attempt by Washbourne to use props and backdrops to enhance photographic outcomes. Possible locations where the photographs were taken include the site of the former Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate station at Murchison, Gonn Station, and Seymour, as anthropologist Aldo Massola claimed.³⁵

The third setting has a cloth background and foliage from two broad-leaved eucalypts. Several photographs with this setting also feature apparently the same possum-skin cloak, a floor of organic debris, a large log with jagged and sawn ends, a woven basket, spears, a boomerang and a shield. The setting



a



b



c



d



e



f

Figure 2 Photographic portraits taken by Thomas Washbourne in 1865–66 that appear in the Washbourne album but were not copyright registered. **a** Queen Mary, wife of Charles Tattambo **b** and **c** unidentified **d** Neddy Wheeler, son of Billy Elengeit **e** King Billy Elengeit **f** Queen Mary, wife of Billy. Album of photographic portraits of Australian Aboriginal men and women, 1 album (14 photographs), albumen, 15.2 × 10.5 cm or smaller, c. 1890, National Library of Australia, PIC/15590/1-14 LOC Album 1169

appears in all the images in figure 1 and in figure 2 images d, e and f; it seems they were taken at the same time and place. Most of the people depicted in these photographs came from one extended family group, comprising Billy Elengeit and his wife Mary, their son Neddy Wheeler and his wife Charlotte and child, and Billy's granddaughter Maggie Stone. The two additional people are Neddy Mitchell and Aunt Sally.

Where were the photographs using the third setting taken? The setting indicates a studio, but it can't have been Wangaratta, as Washbourne didn't establish his studio tent there until *after* the Wangaratta exhibition.³⁶ If Washbourne had been seeking a contact through whom he could access and photograph Indigenous Australians, an obvious person would have been Thomas Mitchell from Tangambalanga, south-east of Albury, an official appointed to 'watch over the interests of Aborigines' in north-eastern Victoria between 1862 and 1873.³⁷ Mitchell perhaps suggested Washbourne visit Tangambalanga when supplies were distributed to the region's Aboriginal people, which usually occurred in May. Did Washbourne set up a tent studio at Mitchell's Tangambalanga Station to capture the images that he subsequently entered in the *Wangaratta local exhibition*? Unfortunately, the historical archive has not provided answers to this question to date.

Washbourne copyright registered – and therefore received royalty payments for – the photographs using the third setting only. They certainly represent a greater level of planning and used more props than the images with the other settings. The props appear to have been deliberately chosen to replicate the natural world within a studio setting.

After the Wangaratta exhibition

Against expectations, Washbourne's photographs from the Wangaratta exhibition were not entered into the *Intercolonial exhibition of Australasia* in Melbourne.³⁸ In the years following the Wangaratta exhibition, Washbourne established a photographic studio base in Geelong and periodically visited other localities in south-eastern Australia where he set up temporary studios.³⁹ It was on a trip to Yackandandah in 1869⁴⁰ that Washbourne probably met the recently separated Maria Wilkinson (née Huggins), whom he subsequently partnered, taking her daughter Blanche as a stepdaughter. In 1873, Maria bore Washbourne a son who was named Harry Jeston Washbourne.

Thomas Washbourne was an active photographer in south-eastern Australia for at least two decades, until he suffered an accident that resulted in bankruptcy in 1883.⁴¹ Interestingly, most of the extant images captured by Washbourne after 1866 were of natural and cultural landscapes, some



Figure 3 Photographs by Thomas Washbourne depicting **a** ‘Tommy and Bidy Molka tribe’, c. 1870, and **b** ‘Aboriginal Australian family Malka tribe’, c. 1870, both H27573

taken with a stereoscopic camera, and many of which are held by State Library Victoria. It appears that Washbourne did not continue taking portrait photographs of Aboriginal Australians. Neither his son, Harry, nor his stepdaughter, Blanche, appears to have produced offspring. It is unknown what happened to Washbourne's photographic estate.

A final comment

It has been argued that when 19th-century Europeans like Washbourne took photographs of Aboriginal Australians they exerted control over their subjects, using photographs as tools of colonial surveillance.⁴² It seems there were two schools of thought that drove this photographic image-making. Firstly, social Darwinists argued that Indigenous Australians represented an early stage of human evolutionary development, and they sought out Aboriginal people seemingly untouched by 'civilised' European practices. This is probably why Giglioli was attracted to Washbourne's photographs using the third setting, as they depicted Aboriginal people devoid of European clothing, unlike most of the photographs with the first and second settings. Secondly, 'humanitarians such as missionaries sought to show Aboriginal people as essentially the same as Western observers, dressed elegantly with signs of literacy and Christianity such as the Bible'.⁴³ Many photographs of Aboriginal Australians taken at mission stations in the second half of the 19th century reflect this latter approach to imagery.

The interest in this debate across the wider community contributed to the popularity of images taken by Washbourne and others, as evidenced by the collection of Indigenous peoples' portraits by three separate artists in the Washbourne album. It is not known what stance Washbourne took in this debate, but it is noteworthy that there are no extant Washbourne portraits of Indigenous Australians taken after 1866. Today, descendants of the people photographed by Washbourne are using his images of their ancestors to build their own narratives to counter colonial conceptions of history.⁴⁴