



Top left: Unknown photographer, 'Hillcrest', Yarra Glen, Victoria, c. 1851–55, daguerreotype mounted in case. Pictures Collection, H89.217/1; LTM 41

Top right: Unknown photographer, Portrait of an unidentified woman, c. 1845–55, daguerreotype mounted in case. Pictures Collection, H89.217/2; LTM 42

Above: Unknown photographer, Portraits of an unidentified woman and man, c. 1840–50, daguerreotypes mounted in cases. Pictures Collection, H89.217/3 and H89.217/4; PCLTM 43 & 44

Daguerreotypes: 'Hillcrest' images and portrait of William Kerr

Pictures Collection H89.217/1-4 and H89.216

Acquired 1989 and 1988

The four images shown opposite are among the most interesting of a small collection of daguerreotypes held in the Pictures Collection of State Library Victoria. These portraits and the landscape view,¹ are all linked in some way to 'Hillcrest', a property in Yarra Glen, a rural township east of Melbourne.

The images were acquired in 1989 with funding provided by the Friends of the Library through the EM Borrow Trust. Provenance records show that when they were purchased the former owner requested that the portraits and the 'Hillcrest' view be kept together. There is an overarching sense of ambiguity to these four daguerreotypes: the landscape is generic to the geographical area; the portraits are unidentified and the photographer(s) unknown.

Amongst the photographic technologies of the day, the daguerreotype was a unique, precious and innately material photographic object.² The photographs required a protective housing consisting of a cover-glass, a matte, a preserver (frame) and a case to protect its fine and highly reflective silvered surface. These 'mirrors with memory' were imbued with social status and financial worth in their physical presentation and decoration. The viewer had an expressly tactile and private relationship with the photographic object, holding it in their hand and having to tilt it back and forth to see the image. Costing anywhere between 10/- and £2, daguerreotypes were usually requested by members of the landed gentry and professional classes.³

These three cased portraits are all housed together in another larger case. The portraits of the man and the woman in profile have the same backdrop, and if placed side by side appear to face each other, insinuating a possible loving connection; and the hinge on the case of this woman's portrait has lost its tension, suggesting that the portrait was repeatedly viewed. The absolute frontal pose of the woman in the bonnet is more than likely the photographer's response to the fact that the bonnet would have obscured the woman's face if she had been shot in profile.

This 'Hillcrest' landscape has intrinsic historical value in that it exposes a colonising view captured by the camera. The pastoral landscape is framed to show the fence, grazing cattle and the presence of the landowners in the homestead garden. The rolling hills and absence of Indigenous people project the myth of a timeless Anglo-Celtic presence in the landscape.⁴ This daguerreotype alerts us to the fact that photography creates, re-creates or supports a particular history in its recording of the 'real'.⁵

Continued

William Kerr (1812–59) was a Scottish immigrant recognised both for his journalistic and political activities. He was publisher of the first Melbourne almanac, founder of the *Argus* newspaper, city alderman and town clerk for the thriving city of Melbourne.⁶ Kerr was known for his acerbic wit, often-libellous comments regarding his peers, and his passionate views criticising the powerful interests of squatters.

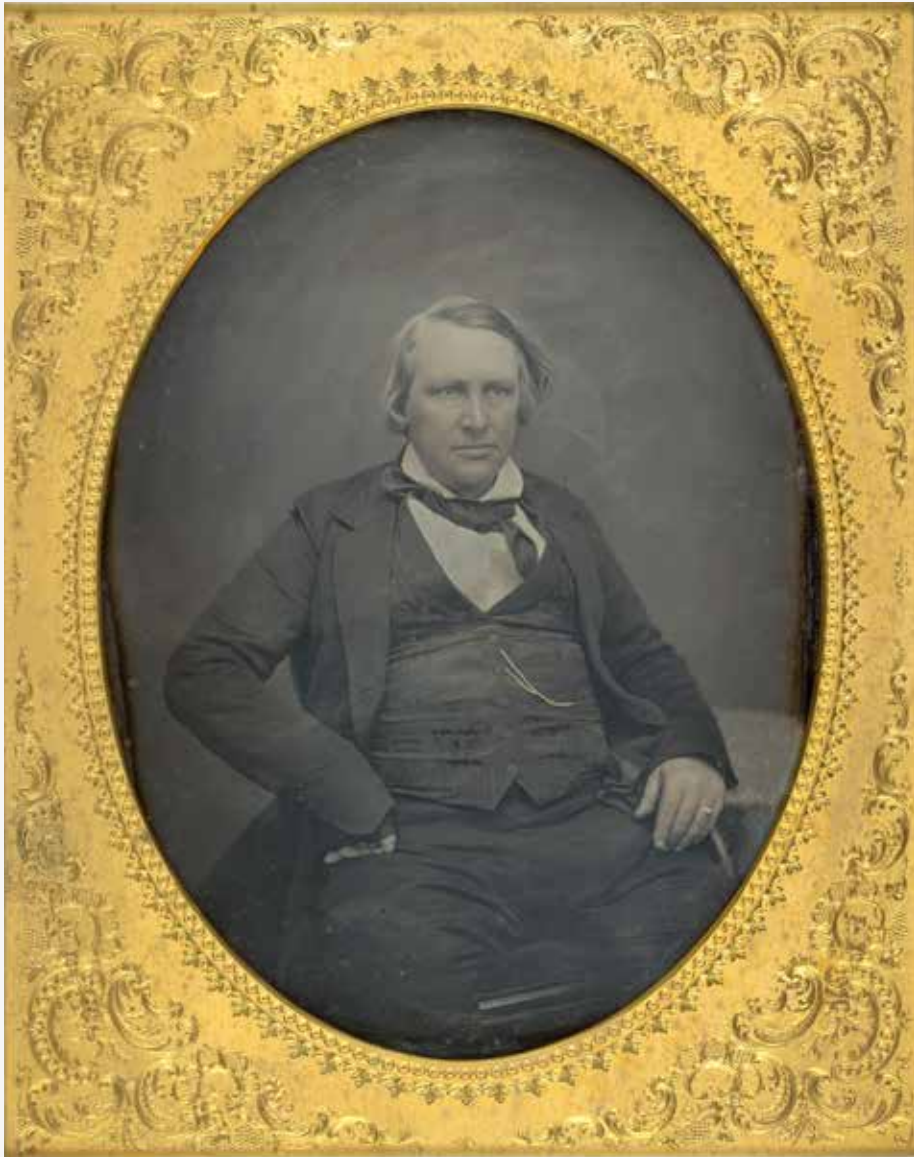
Yet, looking at this daguerreotype portrait of Kerr, one struggles to reconcile the soft portly features and calm demeanour with that of the irritating and ambitious bespectacled Kerr described in accounts of the day.⁷ This is particularly so when one considers that the main aim of the 19th-century photographic artist was to render a likeness of the sitter.

Regardless of the ‘truth’ imbued in the image, this is a significant and unusual photograph. Whole-plate daguerreotypes were not generally produced in Australia, and its size and weight, similar to that of contemporary tablet devices, suggest it was cut from a larger plate by the daguerreotypist.⁸ Named after its inventor, Louis Daguerre, in 1839, the daguerreotype is a unique photographic object, being a reverse image produced on a silver-coated copper plate. It has a magical mirror-like quality and is akin to holding a mirror to the sitter.

This portrait of Kerr has virtually no image grain, rendering a clarity to the eyes and fine facial detail that generate a strong sense of presence. Daguerreotypes were an expensive undertaking and the photograph’s gilt pinchbeck preserver (frame), the hand-coloured gold watch chain and the signet ring further highlight Kerr’s wealth and status.

Kerr’s family dearly valued this portrait, which was framed and placed on their living-room mantelpiece until acquired from Kerr’s great-granddaughter in 1988 with the assistance of the Friends of the State Library through the EM Borrow Trust. Copy prints were often made from original daguerreotypes, and this very portrait later featured in Thomas Chuck’s ‘The explorers and early colonists of Victoria, 1872’.⁹

Sitting for a daguerreotype was an uncomfortable experience. Illuminated solely by the sun streaming through a large skylight in the studio, the sitter would frequently have to hold a stiff pose for up to 30 seconds, without even blinking or breathing, often resulting in the appearance of a ‘far off gaze’. Kerr’s pose discretely disguises a ‘crippled arm’,¹⁰ and the absence of his spectacles perhaps exposes a side to him not previously portrayed – a private side of the public face?



Unknown photographer, Portrait of William Kerr, c. 1851–56, daguerreotype in original quatrefoil-shaped ebonised wooden frame. Pictures Collection, H89.216; LTM 40