



Unknown artist, *William Buckley*, c. 1890, oil on canvas. Pictures Collection, H30879

Portrait of William Buckley

Pictures Collection H30879

Acquired 1967

When Mark Twain characterised Australian history as sounding not like history but like ‘the most beautiful lies’, he could have been thinking of the story of William Buckley (1780–1856). Convicted in his native England of handling stolen goods and then transported to Australia in 1803, Buckley escaped from a short-lived settlement at Sorrento and spent the next 32 years living with the Wathaurong people, before making himself known to the first European settlers in the Port Phillip District in 1835.

The earliest depiction of Buckley, a sketch by John Helder Wedge made in 1835, suffers from Wedge’s limitations as an artist, but is probably the truest portrayal we have. Even by this time, Buckley has been tidied up, his beard shaved and his hair cut. When Buckley had been more fully reassimilated into settler society, he was depicted by an unknown artist in a lithograph frontispiece to John Morgan’s *Life and Adventures of William Buckley* (1852). Now in a coat, vest, starched shirt and black silk bow tie, he regards the viewer with a shrewd, guarded expression. There is enough sense of an inner life to suggest that this portrait was made directly from the subject.

A later illustrator for the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* (1888–89) relied purely on imagination to produce a patriarchally bearded figure in a kangaroo-skin cloak. The Indigenous artist Yackaduna (Tommy McRae), working many years later from oral tradition, drew Buckley in a combination of European and Indigenous dress, joyously dancing with his hosts in an endless corroboree.

Details about the creation of the State Library’s painted portrait of Buckley remain unknown. Based on the lithograph in Morgan’s *Life and Adventures*, it is not signed or dated, but is technically proficient and even painted with considerable bravura. The style of the brushwork dates the painting to the late 1880s to 1890s. Without the living model to work from, the artist has done their best to re-create a human presence, but this blue-eyed Buckley seems to recede into the blackness that surrounds him. The picture becomes more intriguing when we notice traces of an upside-down portrait of a woman in a dark bonnet ghosting out of Buckley’s vest-front. Such recycling of unsuccessful pictures to save canvas was common studio practice, but it has so far not helped us to identify the artist or the reason for making this picture.