

ROSS BOWDEN

James Miller Marshall: a Norwich School painter in late 19th-century Australia

A chance meeting

One summer day early in 1893 a youthful Norman Lindsay and several of his equally young friends were exploring a lane in Creswick, their hometown in the goldfields region of central Victoria, when they came across a burly figure painting in watercolours. Curious to know in more detail what he was doing, the boys gathered around him. The painting was a view of the lane looking north up a rise. On the left were the back fences of houses that faced on to Albert Street, the town's main thoroughfare, and on the right a derelict stable on the edge of fields that led down to Creswick Creek. At the top of the rise there was another stable and an assortment of buildings at the back of what was then, and still is, the American Hotel.

Being a member of an artistically gifted family and, despite his age, already an accomplished draughtsman, Norman felt sufficiently confident to give his companions a running commentary on the way the painter was mixing his colours to render both the intense summer light and the deep shadows cast by the buildings. The artist said nothing at first but, after a minute or two, he turned and fixed on Norman what he remembered as a 'ferocious scowl'. The boys decided that this might be a good time to move on.¹

In three unpublished letters written in 1961, in which he recalls this encounter, Norman does not indicate whether he knew at that time who the artist was. But he probably did, and might even have seen him a number



James Miller Marshall depicted in 1938 as the artist 'Bradley Mudgett' in Norman Lindsay's *Age of Consent*, p. 3. Reproduced with permission of H, C & A Glad

of times painting around town, either on his own or in the company of other artists, including Walter Withers and Norman's older brother Percy. But, whether or not he knew who he was, Norman writes that the artist's appearance made such an impression on him that, almost half-a-century later, he used him as the model, visually speaking, for the artist-hero, Bradley Mudgett, of his novel *Age of Consent*.² When that book was filmed in 1969, the English actors James Mason played the artist and Helen Mirren the love interest.

The painter who Norman and his friends stumbled across that day in Creswick was James Miller Marshall, an Englishman who spent roughly 18 months in Australia from early 1892 to late 1893. Little is known about his time in Australia or the artworks that he produced. But some of his paintings were purchased privately, since work by him periodically turns up in Australian auction houses,³ and several are in major public collections, including the National Library of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra, and the National Gallery of Victoria. Of Marshall himself, the written record includes only a brief online essay⁴ and notes in exhibition and auction catalogues.

Marshall was active as a professional artist for roughly five decades between the late 1870s and the 1920s. At the time of his visit to Australia he was a leading member of the Norwich Art Circle, a loose-knit group of professional and amateur landscape painters founded in the English city of Norwich in 1885. From 1888 to 1893 he was the group's vice-president. Marshall was not a conceptually or technically innovative artist, after the manner either of his great Norwich School predecessor John Sell Cotman⁵ or of Australian contemporaries such as Walter Withers, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. But, at his best, he was a skilled practitioner of the realistic form of landscape painting favoured by the Art Circle painters of his day. For this reason, and because of his encounters with some of Australia's most significant artists and writers, he deserves to be better known.

Background to this article

This article has its origins in research originally undertaken by my late father, Keith Macrae Bowden, a Melbourne medical practitioner who had a keen interest in Victorian history.⁶ During a visit to a London bookshop in 1959, Keith came across a bundle of 20 or so of Marshall's watercolours. Attracted by their Australian subjects, he bought the lot.

After returning to Australia later that year, Keith asked a Melbourne collector and gallery manager, George Page-Cooper, to appraise the works. Page-Cooper eventually acquired more than half of the set. I have no information as to the present whereabouts of the works that Page-Cooper acquired but, shortly after his death in 1967, a watercolour entitled *Princes Bridge, Swanston Street, 1892*, was included in a two-day auction of his private collection.⁷

My father always intended to write a short article about Marshall based on the seven works that he retained. This never eventuated but, at the beginning of 1961, as part of his research, he wrote to both Norman and Lionel Lindsay to see if they could tell him about one of the paintings that depicted a scene in Creswick, their hometown. He also sent Norman photographs of several of the watercolours. Norman wrote three letters in reply, and Lionel one. Norman's letters are undated but they were all written early in 1961.

Family and English background

Of Scottish origins on both sides of his family, Marshall had an impressive artistic pedigree. In his male line, his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all painters, the last two practising professionally in Edinburgh.⁸ His father, Peter Paul (1830–1900), was a friend of the artist and designer

William Morris and, in 1860, was one of the founders with Morris and others of the design firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.⁹ After moving to Norwich, Peter became a founding member of the Norwich Art Circle and a regular contributor to its annual exhibitions, including the first in 1885.¹⁰

James Marshall's mother, Augusta Buchanan Miller (1833–1915) – the source of the 'Miller' in the artist's name – was the daughter of John Miller (c. 1796–1876), an immensely wealthy Liverpool-based merchant of Scottish origin. There is no evidence that Miller was himself an artist, but he was a major collector of contemporary work by Liverpool-area and London painters and, from the middle of the century, he became an important patron of the Pre-Raphaelites.¹¹

Marshall's place of birth has yet to be determined, but his marriage certificate¹² indicates that he was 43 when he married, in Bristol, in 1900 and that he was born in 1857. There appears to be little information about his early life but, as a young man, he lived in London with his parents and siblings and, before 1877, attended the Royal Academy of Art's South Kensington School for a period.¹³ In 1877 he moved with his parents to Norwich where his father had been appointed city engineer and surveyor. In 1885 he, like his father, became one of the founding members of the Norwich Art Circle and, over the following 20 years, he actively contributed paintings to its annual exhibitions.¹⁴ He also had work accepted for display at the Royal Academy in London between 1886 and 1897.¹⁵

Artistically speaking, Marshall and the other members of the Art Circle were heirs of the earlier Norwich School of landscape painting. Dating from 1803, this school's two most famous members by far were its founder John Crome and the slightly younger John Sell Cotman. Like better known contemporaries, such as John Constable, JMW Turner and Thomas Girtin, the members of this earlier group are credited with helping transform watercolour painting at the turn of the 19th century from what had been seen primarily as an instrument for topographical sketching into a major art form in its own right.¹⁶

Marshall's visit to Australia

Marshall arrived in Australia on the *Buckingham* in early 1892.¹⁷ He was apparently drawn to Melbourne by his long-standing friendship with Walter Withers. Like Marshall, Withers was of British origin and Marshall evidently knew him from their time at the South Kensington School, where their student days overlapped. Withers attended the school intermittently between 1870 and 1882.

When Marshall arrived in Melbourne he set up a studio at 468 Collins Street,¹⁸ opposite Withers' studio at no. 463.¹⁹ Shortly after his arrival Marshall held an exhibition in his new studio of paintings that he had brought from England. The exhibition was reviewed in *Table Talk* on 24 June 1892.²⁰

The anonymous review, which states that Marshall had only 'recently' arrived from England, compliments his work but also notes that, as a relatively young man, he was still finding his feet as a painter. It reports that, following his brief time at the South Kensington School, as soon as 'he had acquired a sufficient grounding in the technical knowledge of drawing and painting, he followed the example of the great French and English artists of the new school, painting and studying direct from nature'. The review concludes by noting that the artist's present intention is 'to study Australian scenery with a view of making a collection of landscapes for exhibition in England'.

Marshall only ever signed his works 'J. Miller Marshall', but the review clearly identifies his first name as 'James'. I note this only because, in modern auction and exhibition catalogues and other literature, he is often mistakenly named John.²¹

Work done in and around Melbourne and the visit to Creswick

Apart from the exhibition that he held in his studio, little is known about Marshall's activities in Melbourne. He would have been in regular contact with Walter Withers, with whom Lionel Lindsay reports he was 'very friendly',²² and probably accompanied him on painting expeditions to scenic spots on the outskirts of the city.

One of the watercolours that Keith Bowden acquired in London was done at Black Rock, 18 kilometres south-east of the centre of Melbourne on the eastern side of Port Phillip. In the 1890s, this was a popular spot for the town's plein-air painters, including Withers. Titled *Red Bluff, 1892*, the painting shows the northern side of the bluff from the top of adjacent cliffs.

In January 1893, Marshall and Withers travelled to the goldmining town of Creswick, near Ballarat. Withers was living at Charterisville in Heidelberg, Melbourne, at the time and had recently begun teaching art at several schools.²³ The visit was arranged by Samuel A ('Sambo') Edmonds, the manager of the local branch of the Bank of Australasia and a keen amateur painter. Edmonds, a bachelor, enjoyed the company of artists and frequently hosted painters visiting from Melbourne. Withers and Marshall seem to have stayed with him for the duration of their time in Creswick.²⁴

The purpose of their visit was to conduct painting classes for interested Creswick residents: oil painting in Withers' case, and watercolour in

Marshall's. Students paid a fee to attend and the classes were apparently well patronised. In addition to giving painting classes during the day, both Marshall and Withers briefly taught at the Creswick School of Mines.²⁵ The school was established in 1891 in premises on Creswick's main street that were formerly occupied by the Commercial Bank. Percy Lindsay later used a spacious room at the back as a studio.²⁶

Edmonds knew the Lindsay family well and the five children who subsequently made names for themselves as artists (Percy, Lionel, Norman, Ruby and Daryl) were all in Creswick at the time. Although much older than Percy Lindsay, Edmonds was his friend and they periodically painted together in and around the town.²⁷ Percy participated actively in the classes that Edmonds had organised and, either as part of them or at other times, accompanied Withers and Marshall when they were painting *en plein air*.²⁸

Although Lionel Lindsay's contact with the two artists was more brief than Percy's, he did attend two of Marshall's classes and states in his autobiography that, for himself and Percy, the experience of meeting Withers and Marshall 'was all very exciting, and played a leading role in our destinies'. Percy had already decided on a career in art but, up to that time, Lionel had been determined to become an astronomer and had spent time learning the craft at the Melbourne Observatory. His lack of mathematical knowledge, however, had brought him back to Creswick for special coaching in the subject by one of the teachers at the Creswick Grammar School. Coincidentally he was in Creswick when Marshall and Withers visited.²⁹

In his letter to Keith Bowden of 25 February 1961, written shortly before his death in May of the same year, Lionel remembered Marshall as follows:

He came up to Creswick with Walter Withers, who conducted a painting class that my brother Percy attended; and I had two lessons in water colour painting from him. I liked him very much ... Like the artist Niet[z]sche preferred, he asked from life 'only his bread and his art', and at the end of a day's painting his pot of beer in an inn, and simple talk with the gaffers.³⁰

In the same letter, Lionel writes that one of Marshall's most characteristic sayings as a teacher was 'Plenty of water, always paint with a full brush!!'.³¹

Norman's encounter

Unlike his older brothers Percy and Lionel, Norman Lindsay, who was just short of 14 at the time, was too young to participate in the painting classes – as were his younger siblings Ruby (b. 1885) and Daryl (b. 1890). Nevertheless, it

was during this visit that Norman and a group of his young friends came face to face with Marshall in one of Creswick's back lanes.

In the first of the three letters that he sent to Keith Bowden, Norman recalls the occasion as follows:

The special memory I have of Marshall is one that presents me in the obnoxious character of a snooper, though at the same time, it allowed me to study Marshall's technical efficiency as a water colourist. He was painting a section of landscape which took in the back premises of the American Hotel, in which an old derelict stable figured in the foreground. I, and several other small boys, happened to be about our affairs in that locality, and so came and gathered behind Marshall to watch the progress of his painting. And as most of the members of our family dabbled in water colour painting from the days of infancy, I can recall explaining to my friends the various colour combinations Marshall was mixing on his palette – (I must have been an extremely bumptious lad to take over the function of instructor in the art of water colour at that age.) the effect of which was to bring Marshall's bearded countenance round to inspect me with a ferocious scowl. All snoopers are the Landscape painter's supreme pests, and I suspect Marshall's scowl was effective in telling us to get the hell out of it, but I still retain a very clear memory of that water colour, and the precision with which he suggested the rafters showing through the broken shingles on the old stable roof.

In his second letter, Norman indicates that the watercolour he saw Marshall painting was not the work in this article (see p. 65) but one painted from a position further along Exchange Lane to the north, either from a position in the gully that can be seen in the work crossing the lane in the middle distance, or from higher up the rise closer to the buildings that flank it. The lane is located at the southern end of the centre of the town close to the American Hotel and runs parallel both to Albert Street, about 100 metres to the west, and Creswick Creek, about 200 metres to the east.

On the basis of the photograph my father sent him of the watercolour, Norman gave the following response:

How good the painting is. Admirable from every aspect; harmonic colours, light, atmosphere and draughtsmanship. The handling of all those details in the foreground shadow is masterly. It astonishes, and gratifies, the memory I have retained of the excellence of his command over the medium of water colour, immature as my knowledge of the medium was at the time.³²



James Miller Marshall, *The township of Creswick, Victoria, 1893*, watercolour on paper, 52 x 36 cm. Private collection, Melbourne

The feature of the painting that particularly struck him, however, was the two figures standing in shadow in the lane in the middle distance. In his third letter he writes:

But the item which touches memory so clearly is the figure of the young girl talking to the woman in the lane. That lane has much to do with the embryonic [sic] amorous ardours of early adolescence. You may not have come across a little book I wrote under the title of 'Saturdee', which deals with the era of my small boy years, and small girls also have their place in it, and the place where we foregathered with them for dalliance and discourse was that back lane, for the fruit garden of one of the small girls abutted on it. She figures as Dolly Trimmer in 'Saturdee' and in Marshall's painting she might be the girl who has emerged ... from Dolly Trimmer's back gate, which was situated just where she is standing. Fond fantasy prefers to think so, anyway. Marshall, it is clear, must have taken another afternoon or two to finish off that painting, by the amount of careful detail in the foreground.³³

In his letters, Norman is at pains to point out that he never got to know Marshall personally and that his use of him as the model for Bradley Mudgett in *Age of Consent* was based purely on his appearance. In the first he writes:

I have to confess that the treacherous metier of the novelist induced me to lift Miller Marshall out of my memory cells into a novel which I called 'Age of Consent'. That bearded scowl of his; his big burly figure, his broad brimmed brigand's hat; and the forward lurch of his shoulders as he carried his painting traps, gave me all I needed for the landscape painter who is the central character of that novel. Its illustrations, if you ever happen to see them, will give you a fair notion of Marshall's appearance what time he sojourned on this Earth's crust.

Although Marshall was invited to Creswick to teach watercolour painting, he produced at least one painting in oil during the visit. Now in the National Gallery of Australia, this work shows two men fossicking for gold in a dry creek bed surrounded by regenerating forest.³⁴

Remarkably, Marshall's painting is almost identical in subject matter and composition to two other oils that are now in public collections in Australia, one by Walter Withers and one by Percy Lindsay. Withers' painting, *Two men fossicking*, is now in the National Gallery of Australia. The other is unsigned and undated and is now in the Castlemaine Art Museum, Victoria. All three were recently exhibited together at the National Gallery and are illustrated online.³⁵ In all three, the same two men are shown, one standing on the right with a shovel over his shoulder and the other seated on the left with his back to the viewer. Each painting shows the trunks of young yellow gums (*Eucalyptus leucoxylon*) on the left, and a spray of juvenile yellow gum leaves, with their characteristic grey/blue colour, in the foreground on the lower right.

Despite their overall similarities the paintings are sufficiently different to suggest that none was copied directly from one of the others. For instance, the relative positions of the two men differ significantly in the three works, as do the relative positions and shapes of the tree trunks on the left. This suggests that the paintings – or the sketches on which they were based – could have been produced on the same day in the same location, but from slightly different perspectives.

The Castlemaine Art Museum acquired its oil painting at auction in Melbourne in 2007. The catalogue³⁶ attributes it to James Marshall and suggests that it was probably a 'sketch' for the more finished work that is now in the National Gallery. Subsequent research by Peter Perry, then director of the Castlemaine gallery, however, led to him reattributing the sketch to Percy Lindsay. If so, Percy could well have produced the work, or a preliminary sketch for it, when he accompanied the two more senior artists on one of their painting expeditions into the goldfields around Creswick.



J Miller Marshall, *Fossicking for gold*, oil on canvas, 54.5 x 39 cm, 1893.
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of Jenny, David and Melissa Manton in
memory of Jack Manton, 2009

Charterisville in the Yarra Valley

Some time after leaving Creswick, James Marshall apparently visited Walter Withers and his family at Charterisville. The Charterisville estate was established around 1840 by David Charteris McArthur,³⁷ the manager of Melbourne's Bank of Australasia. The main house at Charterisville was located on the eastern side of a hill overlooking the Yarra River with the Dandenong Ranges in the distance. The river formed the eastern edge of the 68-hectare property.

Withers took a lease on half of the main house at Charterisville in 1890 following the break-up of the artists' camp that Arthur Streecon, Charles

Conder and Tom Roberts had established a year or so earlier nearby on today's Eaglemont, and at which Withers had spent the previous summer (1889–90) painting.³⁸

Marshall's likely visit (or visits) to Charterisville in 1893 probably took place towards the end of summer, in February or March. A watercolour that he produced at this time, dated 1893, has the title *The valley of the Yarra Yarra from Heidelberg, Victoria*.³⁹ This view looks north or north-east across open fields towards a set of buildings on the left that overlook the Yarra valley on the right. In the foreground on the left, sheep graze in long grass adjacent to a winding path. On the other side of the path there are several mature scotch thistle plants in flower – suggesting that the painting was produced in late summer.

Another of Marshall's watercolours painted in 1893, and probably set in the same general area, is entitled *On the wallaby: life in Australia*. This shows two men camping in bushland. On the left a man is seated, pipe in mouth, darning clothes and, on the right, the other man is oriented away from the first as he bends down to stoke a fire on which a billy is boiling. The men's shelter is provided by a sheet of canvas thrown over the stump of a giant upturned tree, the hollow under the short section of trunk providing them with their sleeping quarters. The title *On the wallaby* derives from an expression common in the day that referred to men travelling from place to place and living rough. It is also the title of one of Henry Lawson's poems,⁴⁰ in which a verse refers to a swagman lighting his campfire 'when the day has gone', boiling a billy, and deriving 'comfort and peace in the bowl of your clay' and the 'yarn of a mate who is tramping that way'. This could easily describe the scene depicted.

Sydney

Some time in 1893 James Marshall visited Sydney. It is not known how long he stayed but it is possible that the visit immediately preceded his return to England. Three of his Sydney paintings, all watercolours, are among those in this writer's possession. One, *The walk round the Domain, Sydney, 1893*, shows figures strolling along two paths on the edge of the Sydney Domain (or, more likely, the adjacent Royal Botanic Garden). The figures on the upper path are in deep shadow cast by a tall rock wall, the areas in shadow contrasting strikingly with those in bright sunlight. Marshall's skilful handling of shadows was one aspect of his work that especially impressed Norman Lindsay.

This painting is very similar in subject to a watercolour by Marshall in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.⁴¹ The latter, titled *Sydney Harbour from the Domain*, signed and dated 1893, shows several figures on the

left either walking along or sitting beside the same paths around the Sydney Domain at the point where they skirt the harbour. As in the first work, the figures on the upper path are in deep shadow cast by the high rock wall that overhangs it but, in this case, the scene is depicted from the opposite direction. Given their similarities, the two works could have been painted on the same day a few hours apart.

A second painting, *Sydney 1893*, is a view of the harbour looking east across the site where the Sydney Harbour Bridge is now located. Circular Quay is shown on the right. Although a watercolour, the outstanding feature of the work is the vividness of the detail in which the different buildings and vegetation are depicted – as in the picket fence and lacework around the Victorian-era house on the right.

The third painting, *Circular Quay, Sydney, from Daws Point, 1893*, is a view of the eastern side of Circular Quay. On the basis of the photograph sent by my father, Norman Lindsay states in his third letter that this painting vividly brought back his first impressions of Sydney when he moved there from Melbourne (in 1901) to take up a position as staff artist on the *Bulletin*. In 1900 the editor of the *Bulletin*, JF Archibald, and one of its leading writers, AG Stephens, had seen Norman's drawings of scenes in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Stephens described these in the *Bulletin* as 'the finest example of pen-draughtsmanship of their kind yet produced in this country'.⁴²

Of this watercolour Norman writes:

The painting of Circular Quay stirs another uprush of nostalgic memories in me. That is the Sydney I arrived in in the year 1900 [actually 1901], and the Duke of York had also arrived about the same time, and he put me to an immense amount of trouble rushing about Sydney trying to find some sort of accomodation [sic], as every pub and boarding house was crowded out by the rush of visitors to the city; the event being the opening of the first Federal Parliment [sic] by the Duke. At last I found a room in a boarding house at Daws Point, in a terrace of houses named Milton Terrace, now, I suppose, swept away in a rebuilt Sydney. When I awoke in the morning, my window gave me the view over Circular Quay precisely at the point painted by Miller Marshall, and precisely the same view that he had painted. Opposite it, across the harbour is the wharf where the P&O Liners docked, and the one in the painting is just getting up steam, with a couple of tugs already attached to take her down harbour. How careful Marshall was in recording such details. Lower down is the wharf where the intercolonial [i.e. interstate] steamers docked, and one of them is to be seen moored there.

I always took one in my visits to Victoria in preference to the train journey. I have a great love for the Sydney now packed away in my memory cells: the Sydney that Conrad and Stevenson knew and wrote about, and it warms my heart to have this delightful record of it from the brush of Miller Marshall.⁴³

The return to Britain

The 1890s were economically difficult in Australia and, like many other artists, James Marshall managed to sell only a few of his paintings. Lionel Lindsay mentions in his letter that he bumped into Marshall in Melbourne after his visit to Creswick and that Marshall told him 'he could do no good'. He 'looked very shabby', Lionel remembered, and 'went immediately to a pub to have a drink ...'. In addition, his father, to whom Marshall was evidently very close, was in failing health and had decided to resign from his position at Norwich and move to Teignmouth in Devon. Whatever his reasons, the painter returned to England late in 1893.

Marshall went back to Norwich, but soon decided to move with his parents to Devon. To this end, he and his father put up the contents of their two studios for sale in a joint exhibition in December of the same year. The sale was sponsored by the Norwich Art Circle and held in its rooms at the Old Bank of England Chambers. The catalogue indicates that none of Marshall's Australian paintings were included.⁴⁴

After living either with or near his parents in Teignmouth, Marshall moved in 1902 to Bristol, where he became an active member of a group of painters who founded the Bristol Savage Club in 1904.⁴⁵ From its inception the club, which still flourishes today, has held regular painting evenings when members who wish to participate are given two hours to produce a work on a theme announced, on the night, by the president. Marshall was a regular participant in these sessions and the club holds a number of his 'evening sketches', as they are called.⁴⁶

Marshall ceased to be a member of the Savage Club in 1915 when he moved to Minehead (Somerset) on the south coast of the Bristol Channel. He died there on 12 December 1935.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Although James Miller Marshall was only in Australia for approximately two years, he more than made his mark. He influenced Lionel and Norman Lindsay, mixed and painted with some of the key artists of the time and left a small but important body of work that deserves a wider audience.