

Cuthbert Clarke: a Biographical Note

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Cuthbert Charles Clarke is a minor figure in the early art history of Australia and New Zealand. He is a romantic character whose elusiveness has intrigued art historians, gallery staff and librarians in both countries. The discovery of a graceful sketch at a farm clearing sale in the Castlemaine area of Victoria, where Clarke lived from 1852 to 1861, prompted this research. At the beginning of the investigation I discovered that his mother had been looking for him in 1857. She wrote in a letter sent in despatches to Victoria in April 1857:

Sir, as I have a son Mr Cuthbert C. Clarke now supposed to be in Victoria, Australia, of whom I have been unable to gain information for several years, I beg leave to request that you will be pleased to cause enquiries to be made of the Colonial Government on the subject and relieve the anxiety of his mother who am a widow of an officer who served the Crown in both Naval and Civil capacity.

Jane Clarke goes on to say that she understands her son to have moved from New Zealand to Australia in 1852 or 1853, and

there obtained employment in the Police Department attached to the court of a Mr McLauchlan, a Police Magistrate or Gold Commissioner, that he has recently left that employment and got married and calls himself by the name Cuthbert only.¹

There is no evidence that Cuthbert ever called himself by his Christian name alone but this information, passed to Jane from people in New Zealand, possibly stems from the use by him of various ways of signing his work: C. Clarke, Cuthbert Clarke, Clarke, Clarke Ismir, C.C. Clarke Ismir, and C. Clarke Ismir, are all used from time to time. Ismir is a romantic touch by Cuthbert and recalls his association with Turkey, his birthplace, for which he retained an affection. One can understand someone remembering that Cuthbert used an odd form of his name but not recalling what it was. Jane Clarke's letter resulted in a notice in the *Victorian Government Gazette* of 28 July 1857 under Missing Persons, and a reply by the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly:

I now have the honour to report that he has been found to reside at Castlemaine in the colony earning his livelihood as an artist and that a copy of his mother's letter has been communicated to him.

That Cuthbert replied is improbable, for the will Jane Clarke made in 1854, leaving her estate divided between her four children, also bequeathed items to named English grandchildren. By the time of her death in November 1861 she had two Australian grandsons as well,