

# Keys to the collection— Faces

## Robert Dowling

“... he took cheerful views of life, looked on the bright side of human nature, and was somewhat of a laughing philosopher.”

—*The Argus*, Wednesday 14 July 1886.

Robert Hawker Dowling was born in Britain on 4 July 1827. In 1834 with his family, he migrated to Australia.

He completed an apprenticeship in saddlery in 1850, although he left this career almost immediately advertising his services as a professional portrait painter.

At the age of 27, married and with an infant daughter, Robert Dowling moved to Victoria to set up a practice in Geelong as proprietor of a commercial art gallery specialising in photography. He was responsible for painting oil portraits and tinting photographs. He secured commissions from Western District pastoralists and extended his portraiture to the Aborigines of the region, documenting their social interaction with European settlers.

Robert Dowling and his family left Australia for Britain in April 1857, to further his training and career as a painter. From the 1860's, he exhibited at the Royal Academy, London and with the Royal Society of British Artists. In 1884 he returned to Australia, settling in Melbourne where he opened a studio. In 1886 he returned to London once again and died three months later.



### Mrs Margaret McArthur of Meningoort—

Margaret McArthur was the wife of the Victorian pioneer and pastoralist Peter McArthur of 'Meningoort' station near Camperdown. She was a Scot, an upright woman of strong character. Reportedly with a good sense of humour. The couple was married in Geelong in 1856 and lived in Meningoort. Margaret McArthur gave birth to ten children in the years before her death in 1883.

Margaret McArthur may have sat for the portrait in Dowling's Geelong studio or it could have been painted from sketches made at 'Meningoort'. He certainly visited 'Meningoort' in 1856 and painted a small group portrait of the Aborigine 'King Tom' and his family, who were the last remnant of the local Mount Elephant clan, who lived not far from the homestead.

Margaret McArthur's portrait is in the grand manner and shows clearly Dowling's indebtedness to the style of the earlier Tasmanian portrait painter Henry Mundy. Executed in the mid 1850s, Dowling's painting of Margaret McArthur is one of the finest Victorian portraits from the colonial period.

**Geelong  
Gallery**

Victorian Curriculum level 7 to VCE  
[geelonggallery.org.au/learn](http://geelonggallery.org.au/learn)

Robert Dowling  
*Mrs Margaret McArthur  
of Meningoort (detail) 1856–57*  
oil on canvas  
Collection: Geelong Gallery

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### Robert Dowling

born United Kingdom 1827;  
worked in Australia 1834-57;  
died United Kingdom 1886

*Mrs Margaret McArthur  
of Meningoort* 1856-57  
oil on canvas

98.5 x 74.0 cm

Collection: Geelong Gallery  
Purchased with the generous  
assistance of the Trustees  
of the Howard Hitchcock  
Bequest and with additional  
support from the friends of  
the Geelong Gallery, 2001

#### Question

What do you think the person in this portrait wanted to communicate about herself and what elements or principles has the artist used to achieve this?

#### Research

Using Robert Dowling's images of the Indigenous people of Victoria and Tasmania in 1856-60, explore the narrative images of colonialism to understand cultural and historical inequities created by European settlement in Australia. What were Robert Dowling's beliefs and what are your own beliefs on how this contributes to the beliefs towards Aboriginal people of today?

#### Activity

Select a photograph of a local person (Geelong region) from the arts, sciences, sports or politics, as well as mums, dads or grandparents. Create a portrait of your chosen person (42.0 cm x 42.0 cm in size) and enter the Gallery's annual *Who's who portrait prize*.

You will need to consider the pose and gesture of the sitter, how you will create the feelings and emotions in the portrait, and which clues and objects (symbols) will be added to tell the viewer more about the sitter and their story.

For further details about this significant annual student exhibition, visit [geelonggallery.org.au](http://geelonggallery.org.au)