

# FORGET ME NOT

## A QUEER END TO THE BUSHRANGERS

DREW PETTIFER

Forget Me Not: A queer  
end to the bushrangers  
Drew Pettifer

Sarah Scout Presents  
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drewpettifer.com  
sarahscoutpresents.com

The artist acknowledges the  
Wurundjeri, Wiradjuri and Gadigal  
peoples as the traditional custodians  
of the lands on which this project was  
produced and pays respects to Elders,  
past and present. Always was,  
always will be.

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Lloyde ♡

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SARAH SCOUT PRESENTS

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# FORGET ME NOT: A QUEER END TO THE BUSHRANGERS

Dr Graham Willett

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It's hard to believe that there was a time when homosexuality was almost invisible. Today it is everywhere we look – we really are, as the old slogan had it, everywhere. And it exists in a previously unimaginable profusion: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, Sistergirls and Brotherboys, bears and twinks and lipstick lesbians. We are radical and moderate and apolitical. A diversity of sexes, genders and sexualities.

Governments, businesses, professionals and, above all, the public, think very differently about us, and act very differently towards us. All of this was a result of our work – decades of protesting and celebrating, publishing, broadcasting, graffitiing, holding hands in public, wearing badges, lobbying and lobbing eggs, living in couples and triples and collective households, dressing differently, telling our families and our friends and our workmates who we are . . . *demanding* change.

At the heart of these activities, and the social transformation that they brought about, was visibility, coming out, declaring that 'gay is good' – in our more euphoric moments, 'twice as good as straight'. We discovered how many of us there were, how diverse we were. We discovered that we had a history as well as a present and a future. We found heroes back then: the lesbian Anne Lister and her coded diaries; the habitués of molly houses in eighteenth century London; male and female convicts transported to Australia. And, among them, the bushranger Captain Moonlite and his beloved James Nesbitt.

Moonlite was never quite as famous as Ned Kelly, and still isn't – but his is a life worth telling; a process that started in the 1980s when historian Garry Wotherspoon found his death cell letters. We have been writing about him ever since. The story begins with Andrew George Scott, an adventurer (and perhaps a fabulist and certainly a conman) who found an eminently respectable post in Victoria as a lay preacher in Bacchus Marsh. Things went haywire after he was convicted of various crimes – at least some of which he probably committed – and, long story short, he ended up in Pentridge Gaol in Melbourne, where he met the love of his life, James Nesbitt. Scott seems to have been a remarkable public speaker, but as his chosen field was prison reform the authorities put every possible obstacle in his way. The life of a bushranger beckoned (as it does) and he and a gang of young companions set off for New South Wales.

The inevitable shootout with the cops and armed locals came at Wantabadgery Station, outside Gundagai. Two of the gang were shot dead, including Nesbitt. All the fight went out of Moonlite and he threw himself on the body of his mate, 'wept over him like a child, laid his head upon his breast and kissed him passionately'.

In Darlinghurst Gaol, awaiting his execution, Moonlite wore a ring on his finger braided from Nesbitt's hair. He wrote letters, most of them never delivered, which is a mercy for historians. In them he admitted to various crimes, denied others, reported on his persecution by the authorities. . . and poured out his heart on the subject of Nesbitt, mourning his young friend's death and remembering their love: 'My own dearest Jim', his 'kindest and truest friend' who had 'comforted me and supported me in sickness and sorrow'. The two of them were, he said, 'united in every tie that could unite human friendship, we were one in hopes, one in heart and soul and this unity lasted until he died in my arms'.

In his letters he asked that that they should be buried in the one grave. The authorities were having none of that and for a hundred years he rested (if rested he did) under the soil at Rockwood Cemetery in Sydney. That was until a group of women, touched by his story, set out, successfully, to agitate for his last request to be honoured. Nesbitt's grave was unmarked, but they are at least near each other now in the North Gundagai Cemetery.

It would make a great movie, in the right hands, except for – well, you know, the homosexuality. With Ned Kelly, writers and filmmakers have tended to invent a (heterosexual) love interest. Better a cop killer than a suspected sodomite, apparently. Until a producer summons up the courage, the scriptwriter and the actors for such an adventure, we make do with telling our stories with our resources.

And, denied the usual paths of story-telling, we have gone all creative. Captain Moonlite has been celebrated in a pub night, a musical, school plays, articles in newspapers, pub murals and historical markers. Artists have worked with his death mask.

Here, in Drew Pettifer's exhibition, artworks derived from episodes in Moonlite's life and times and legend animate his history in novel ways. Using an archival art methodology, Pettifer spent two years visiting sites and collections connected to Moonlite to create an artistic response to archival material. The final body of work includes photographs and video of the sites Moonlite visited, as well as works made in response to objects and documents he encountered at the State Library of Victoria, Public Records Office Victoria, the State Library of NSW, the NSW State Archives and the Australian Queer Archives. A bronze plaque reminds us of the text Moonlite wanted on his headstone, in contrast to the decidedly less queer wording he ended up with. A pink copy of Moonlite's death mask performs the opposite function, queering a macabre pseudoscientific tool. Hair rings, like the one of Nesbitt's hair that Moonlite wore when he was hanged, are cast in 18 carat gold and bronze. Neon text captures a homophobic term Moonlite and Nesbitt were called. A printed carpet maps the location where Moonlite was executed.

We are lucky that there is space for these creative endeavours, that the story has not been entirely captured by earnest, academic works, that there are still a myriad of ways to report on and celebrate his life. These rely on the work of historians, but they rely, too, on the ability of artists to make his life visible and something we can, even a century or more later, feel as real.



(1) *Untitled (Moonlite's grave #2)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (2) *Untitled (Tracing Moonlite)*, video still (detail), single channel HD video, 15 mins 10 secs, 2023; (3) *Untitled (Pentridge Prison clock tower)* (detail), chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (4) *Untitled (Moonlite's headstone)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (5) *Untitled (North Gundagai Cemetery)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (6) *Untitled (Moonlite's*

*grave #1)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (7) *L - Untitled (James)*, bronze, human hair, 19mm diameter, 2022, R - *Untitled (Andrew)*, 18CT gold, 18mm diameter, 2022; (8) *Untitled (Darlinghurst Gaol gallows courtyard)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (9) *Untitled (Moonlite plaque)*, bronze, 380 x 215mm, 2023; (10) *Untitled (Darlinghurst Gaol, 1887)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (11) *Untitled (McGlede's Hill)*, chromogenic

print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (12) *Untitled (Moonlite death mask)*, production image, painted bioplastic and mixed media, 240 x 160 x 220mm, 2023; (13) *Untitled (Nesbitt)*, chromogenic print, 600 x 400mm, 2023; (14) *Untitled (Forget me not)*, digital print on carpet, 1150 x 1800mm, 2023; (15) *Untitled (Tracing Moonlite)*, video still (detail), single channel HD video, 15 mins 10 secs, 2023; (16) *Untitled (Moonlite)*, chromogenic print, 600 x 400mm, 2023;

(17) *Untitled (Tracing Moonlite)*, video still (detail), single channel HD video, 15 mins 10 secs, 2023; (18) *Untitled (Moonlite's letter: headstone inscription)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023; (19) *Untitled (Pentridge Prison guard tower)*, chromogenic print, 276 x 382mm, 2023

