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James Coleman Queensland Artist

by Bill Lavarack

Many of the older families of Mooloolaba have a James Coleman painting hanging in pride of place on their wall. I can clearly remember my first meeting with a Coleman painting. It was in the 1950s or maybe 1960s, that my grandmother (Lady Sybil Lavarack, widow of the late State Governor Sir John Lavarack), living on Buderim at the time, purchased two paintings from an artist who knocked on her door. My parents, who were caring for her, were not happy, thinking she was wasting her money, but these paintings were to become an extraordinary part of my life when, years later, I inherited them.

That artist was James Carson Coleman (14/5/1920 to 23/2/1976) who lived for several months at Mooloolaba in the 1950s. Over the 1950s and 60s he travelled widely around Australia earning a living from painting local scenes and selling them door to door. He spent several months of his regrettably short life at Mooloolaba and Maroochydoore.



In the following pages I will be concentrating largely on Coleman's time on the Sunshine Coast. Therefore I would like to start this story with the painting that means so much to me (above). This is Mooloolaba beach in the late 1950s exactly as I remember it. Many exciting hours spent riding the infamous Mooloolaba dumpers!



James Coleman began his studies at the Sydney Art School in 1936. He studied landscapes with Will Ashton and James R Jackson and figure studies with Norman Lindsay. He became a member of the Royal Art Society in 1945 and is regarded as one of the foremost exponents of the Australian school of painting in landscape and still life.¹ He was a finalist in the Wynne Prize in 1953 with two works, one of Brooms Head and one of Yamba Headland.

A Coleman still life. 'Evening Bliss'

In the 1950s and 1960s James travelled widely in many far-flung places such as the coasts of New South Wales and Queensland, the Kimberleys the Grampians, the Flinders Ranges and the Blue Mountains. He lived out of a caravan with his wife and family of six children, visiting many Australian locations, painting the outback and the coast. From his caravan Coleman, equipped with brush and easel, would go on excursions to nature spots, while his wife visited local residents with a selection of paintings for sale. His paintings were sold at very reasonable prices and, while never wealthy, he made a good living from his art. This itinerant lifestyle left a legacy of paintings in private and public collections in many parts of Australia.

He developed a liking for the Queensland Sunshine Coast and later retired in Maroochydoore. In the 1950s he lived for several months at Mooloolaba and painted many local scenes, notably to my mind, the view of the beach on page 1 and that of the Mooloolah River on page 4. Many Mooloolaba families of that time such as the Bellottis, the Fowles and the Batts, have one or more Coleman paintings in their living rooms. During his stay in Mooloolaba in the 1950s Frank Nicklin (later Sir Francis), Premier of Queensland, presented a seascape by Coleman to the Queen Mother. Other notable owners of his works include Princess Alexandra and former English Prime Minister Harold McMillan.²



James Coleman pictured with some of his paintings in the mid 1970s.

He visited Europe as the *Nambour Chronicle* of 14 February 1958 on page 2 reported: 'Mr James Coleman, an artist, who has been staying at Mooloolaba for some months past left this week accompanied by his wife and daughter for Sydney en route to Italy. Many friends gave the Colemans a send-off last week end and made them a gift. Mr Coleman arranged a display of his paintings.'

In the late 1960s James was diagnosed with cancer and endured a prolonged period of ill health. He lived through a two year period of operations that left him in poor condition. Not surprisingly he fell into a deep depression and eventually committed himself into Lawson House, a Brisbane

¹ *Nambour Chronicle*, Wine, cheese, Art, 25 July, 1974, page 29.

² *Ibid. Nambour Chronicle*.

mental hospital. After 18 months of struggle and psychiatric help he was fit enough to return to Maroochydore where he resumed painting with renewed vigour. He then entered a short, but highly productive period, during which critics consider he produced some of his finest works.



Coleman painted this landscape from a Buderim lookout in about 1975. It shows the first high rise building at Mooloolaba on Parkyn Parade, known as '84 The Spit'. (Thanks to Sandy Fowles for providing this painting.)

Although memories are fading, James Coleman remains highly regarded as an Australian artist. The late Gordon D'Lisle, a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a prominent valuer of art works and owner of an art gallery at Montville, commented as follows in about 1975:

The man unequivocally is a towering talent, a totally mature traditional – a realist. His work is derivative of no-one, yet of everyone ... We had seen and wanted his work for years, but knew he wasn't painting and had grave health problems. We chose not to intrude.

Now he is back and sales from our gallery have sparked the greatest blaze of creativity I have ever seen and I've watched many of the great ones work. He's positively burning ... it's as though he is trying to cram the last third of his life into weeks. But it's all so sad ... Coleman knows and we all know that what he is painting are assurance policies for Margaret and their five children.¹

Another critic in the *Nambour Chronicle* wrote in 1976:

The Sydney born painter who chose Maroochydore to settle with his wife and family died recently after a prolonged illness. In the months prior to his death Coleman took a fervent approach to his work 'it's as though there's a force compelling me to paint' he remarked to a friend.

First and foremost an oil painter, Coleman seems to have concentrated on his two great loves, still life and landscape. Subtle tonal relief, an uncanny feeling for depth and obviously a great love for the Australian bush combine to give the artist's landscapes a warm feeling off déjà vu.²

James Carson Colman died in Brisbane on 24 February 1976 and, after a Requiem Mass at Stella Maris Church Maroochydore, he was buried at Buderim Lawn Cemetery.

¹ This quote is from a newspaper clipping in the possession of the author. Source unfortunately unknown.

² *Nambour Chronicle*, 16 December 1976, page 44, Coleman collection on display

Below: two examples of Coleman's Mooloolaba coastal scenes.



The rocks in front of the Mooloolaba Hotel. Held by Bill Lavarack, originally purchased by Lady Sybil Lavarack in the late 1950s

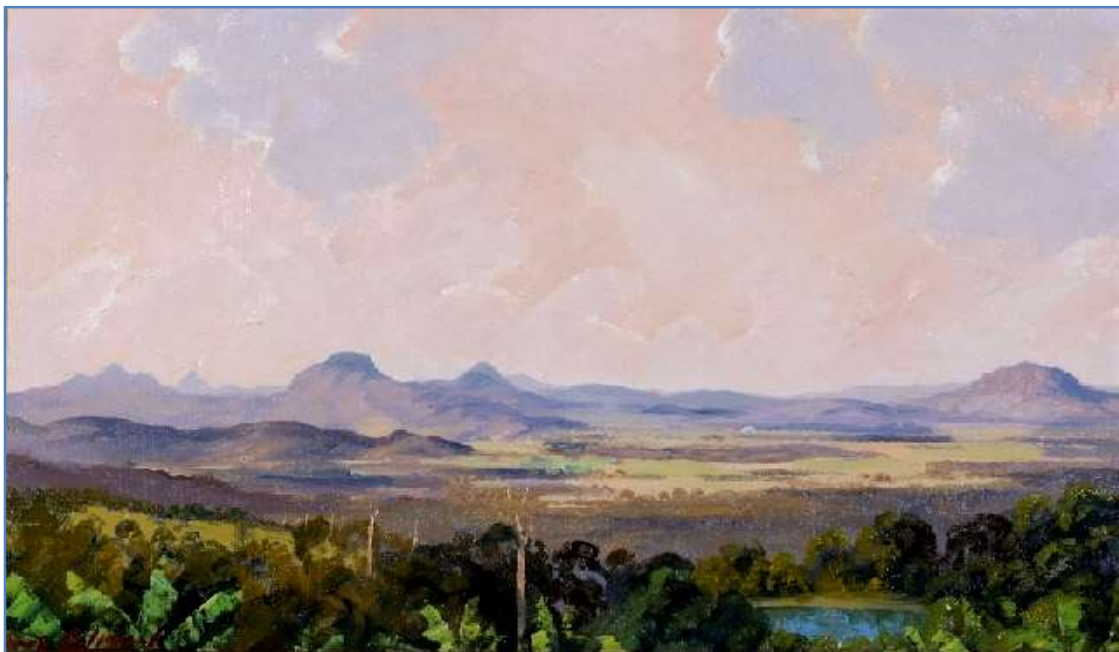


The Mooloolah River 1956 Thanks for providing this painting go to Steve Batts formerly of Mooloolaba, who reports that Coleman paid his father, Ced Batts, for petrol, with this painting.

Below: two Coleman landscapes.



Thanks for providing this painting go to Adrian Bellotti, formerly of Mooloolaba. Adrian reports that in the late 1950s, Coleman often paid local residents for goods and services with paintings such as this one.



A puzzle. This painting, taken from the internet, is labelled 'The Distant Grampians'. However it appears to be a view north from Buderim Mountain towards Mt Coolum, Mt Ninderry and Mt Cooroora. Note the banana trees in the foreground.