

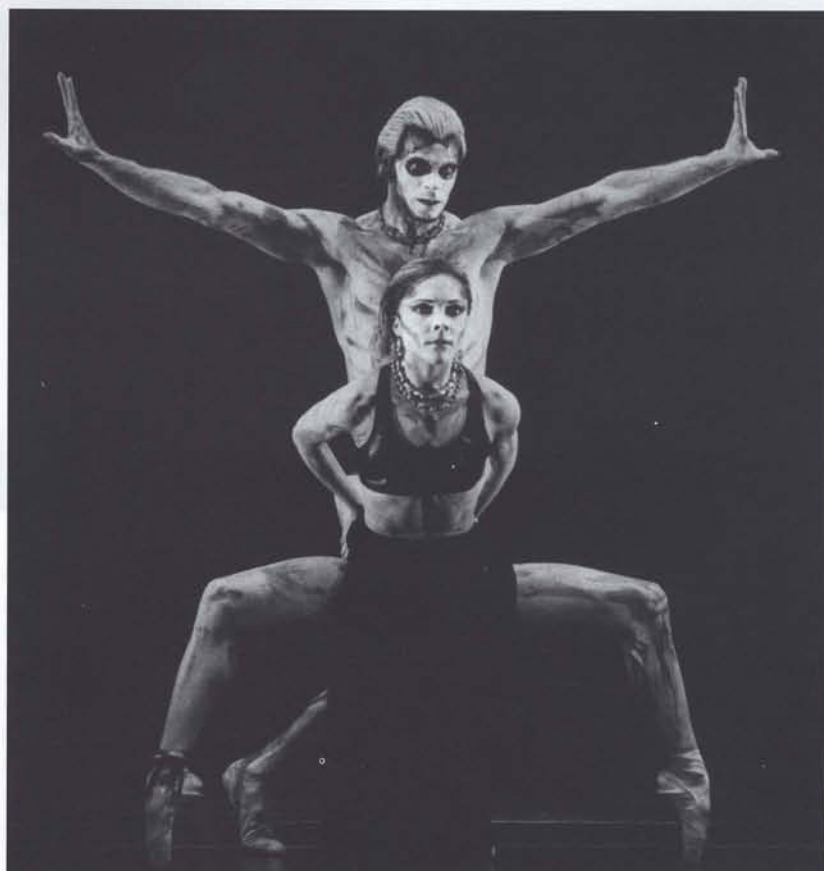
Corroboree

Researching the Library's extensive collection of dance materials, Michelle Potter analyses the success of the three danced interpretations of John Antill's musical composition *Corroboree*

John Antill completed his musical composition *Corroboree* in the mid-1940s. He had worked on this monumental piece over several years and had always intended that it be used for a ballet. His annotated score, held by the Library in its Manuscript section, contains detailed bar by bar instructions for the unfolding of a potential ballet. There is no implied narrative in these instructions, rather his notes suggest that he imagined it to be a kind of theatrical pageant. But his notes do include suggestions for 'characteristic movements' that might be used. He wrote for example:

Most actions swift and jerky.
Grotesque facial expressions. Swift turnings of the head. Always a high knee action. Much hip movement.
Quivering of head, hands and body.

Three different choreographers have created a ballet to the Antill score to date. Each of the three versions has had its admirers and detractors. *Corroboree*, in one or other of its manifestations, has been scorned by some as a reprehensible appropriation of Aboriginal traditions, but admired by others as a stage in the development of a distinctive Australian dance culture. The National Library of Australia has an extensive collection of materials relating to these danced versions of *Corroboree*, which allow us to build



up a picture of the work's genesis, public showings and reception.

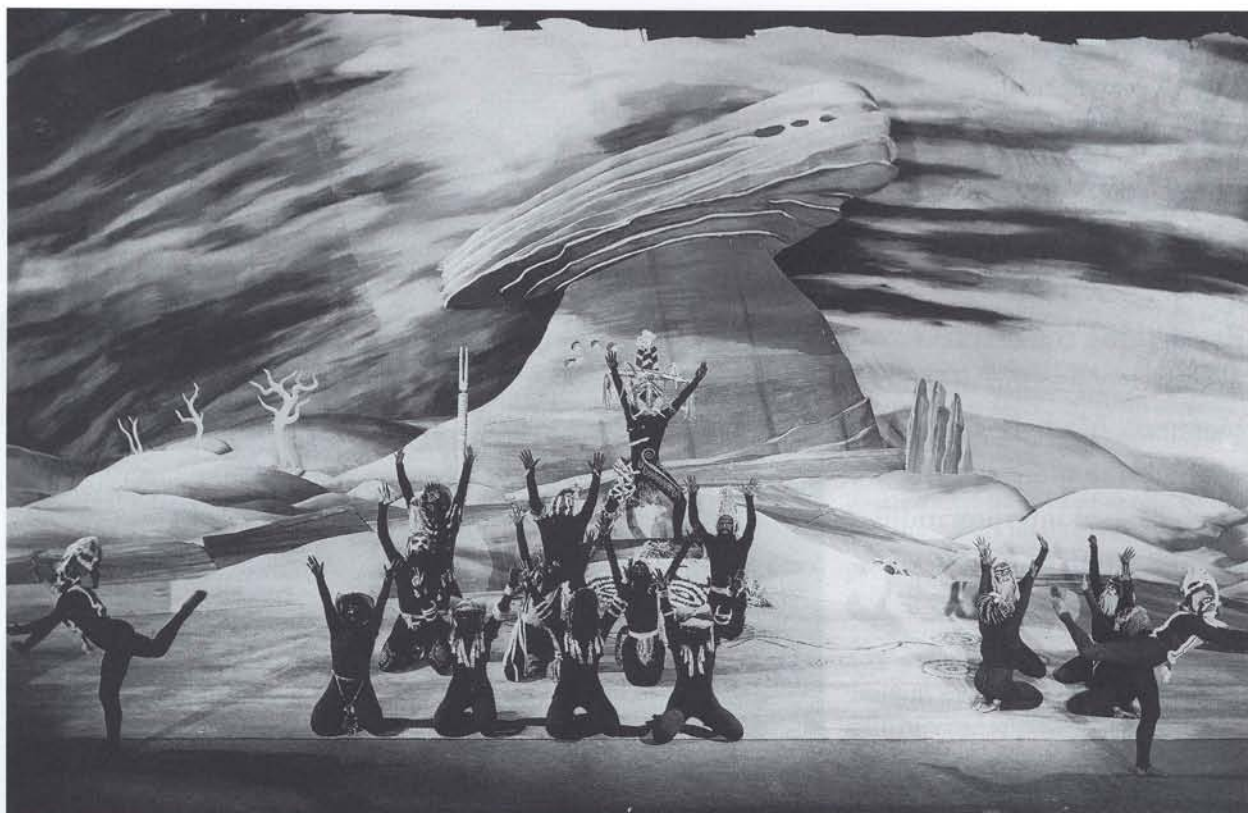
In the late 1940s, Dorothy Helmrich of the Arts Council of Australia approached two of the major names in Australian dance at the time, Edouard Borovansky and Gertrud Bodenwieser, and asked them to stage a ballet to the Antill music. Neither was able to take on the commission, which was eventually given to Rex Reid. Reid mounted his *Corroboree* with dancers of the Melbourne-based National Theatre Ballet and the work premiered in Sydney in July 1950 at the Empire Theatre. In an oral history interview recorded for the Library in 1982 Reid spoke of the 'sensational' opening night when there was a traffic jam outside the theatre, when gum leaves were burnt in the theatre foyer and

Marty Sohl (b.1947)
Steven Heathcote and Justine Summers in Stanton Welch's Corroboree
The Australian Ballet, 1995
gelatin silver photograph; 26.5 x 34 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23737348

when Sydney's department stores were decked out in 'corroboree colours'. Of the work's reception he said:

Suddenly the whole theatre went wild. They were screaming and shouting and stamping. It had to be the most colossal success. The most stunning press that anyone could want, Antill and myself.

His recollections are corroborated by press clippings in the papers of dancer Mary Duchesne. Duchesne was part of the original *Corroboree*



W. Brindle
 During the rain dance in *Corroboree*,
 the sky darkens, lightning flashes,
 thunder peels but, as so often happens in
 inland Australia, all this fury is followed
 by only a few drops of rain [1950]
 1 of 3 black & white photographs,
 22 x 17 cm. or smaller
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an14184683-2

cast and her clipping books, one of which is devoted entirely to *Corroboree*, are also held in the Library's Manuscript section. Clippings from various newspapers and magazines include headlines and comments such as: 'World premiere in Sydney of John Antill's Aboriginal ballet is a triumph', 'a landmark in our cultural growth', and 'it was completely impossible to book seats for any performance of *Corroboree*, and the only "seats" available were "standing" ones'.

Half a decade later the Reid *Corroboree* is, however, a theatrical curiosity and fits uneasily with current attitudes towards the ownership of cultural traditions. Reid, in his oral history, spoke of taking a 'middle course' with regard to the choreography—'I can't pretend to be an Aboriginal' he said. To help him

in his endeavour he consulted Charles Mountford, filmmaker and prolific writer on Aboriginal art and mythology. But Reid's choreography, with its hops, twirls, marching steps and waving of the arms, known from black and white film taken of the production, is not sophisticated. It produces in today's viewer the same discomfort as Antill's suggestion that the movement should include 'grotesque facial expressions'.

Moreover, both Antill and Robin Lovejoy, designer of costumes, head dresses and accessories for the 1950 *Corroboree*, appear to have appropriated Aboriginal totemic designs. Lovejoy's designs, some of which were recently acquired by the Library, and Antill's drawings on his score bear an uncanny resemblance to illustrations of ceremonial totems, now known to be secret or sacred items, in *The Arunta: A Study of Stone Age People*, written by Sir Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen and published in 1927.

A few years later Helmrich invited Beth Dean, an American dancer who had originally come to Australia in 1947 with a production of *Annie Get Your Gun*, to choreograph a new ballet to the Antill score. Unlike Reid,

who was very much in the mode of 'armchair anthropologist' when he created his *Corroboree*, Dean and her husband, Victor Carell, saw themselves as fieldworkers. Dean and Carell spent several months in various parts of Central and Northern Australia researching Aboriginal dance and movement patterns and Dean believed that her new version of *Corroboree* reflected more accurately the 'quality', as she put it, of Aboriginal life. Dean also added to her version a narrative line about a young boy's initiation and she danced the role of the Initiate herself. Dean's *Corroboree* premiered in February 1954 in Sydney at the Tivoli Theatre. It was danced by the Arts Council Ballet at a gala event in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II.

The Dean production, which was remounted during the 1970s for the Captain Cook Bicentenary when the Initiate was danced by a black American dancer, Ronne Arnold, appears never to have been filmed. But in the 1990s Dean, in her seventies, taught the work to students of the Australian Ballet School when a notated score, a copy of which is in the Library's collection, was produced, and when it was also



W. Brindle

Incantations to the morning star. The Kangaroo Men are here paying homage to the rising sun [1950]

1 of 3 black & white photographs,
22 x 17 cm. or smaller

Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an14184683-1

recorded on video. Dean has written in *Gentle Genius*, her biography of Antill, of 'the high knee action stamp' that she incorporated into the choreography. But watching the Australian Ballet School video it is apparent that a significant proportion of the individual steps Dean created for the dancers, and the way she used groups of dancers throughout the work, reflect the vocabulary and structures of ballet and modern dance. But, as happened with Reid in 1950, the Dean work was regarded as a major breakthrough in 1954. This time the success was related as much as anything to the fact that Dean had researched her topic in the field and had approached the creation of the work in what was seen as an enlightened manner.

A third ballet was created to the Antill score, or at least to a suite from it, in 1995. Choreographed by Stanton Welch for 10 dancers from the Australian Ballet, Welch's *Corroboree* was made for the United We Dance Festival held in San Francisco to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Charter. The Reid *Corroboree* was the first ballet Welch's mother, the dancer Marilyn Jones, ever saw as a child and she



Portrait of Beth Dean 1943

b&w photograph; 21.5 x 16.5 cm

Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24965899

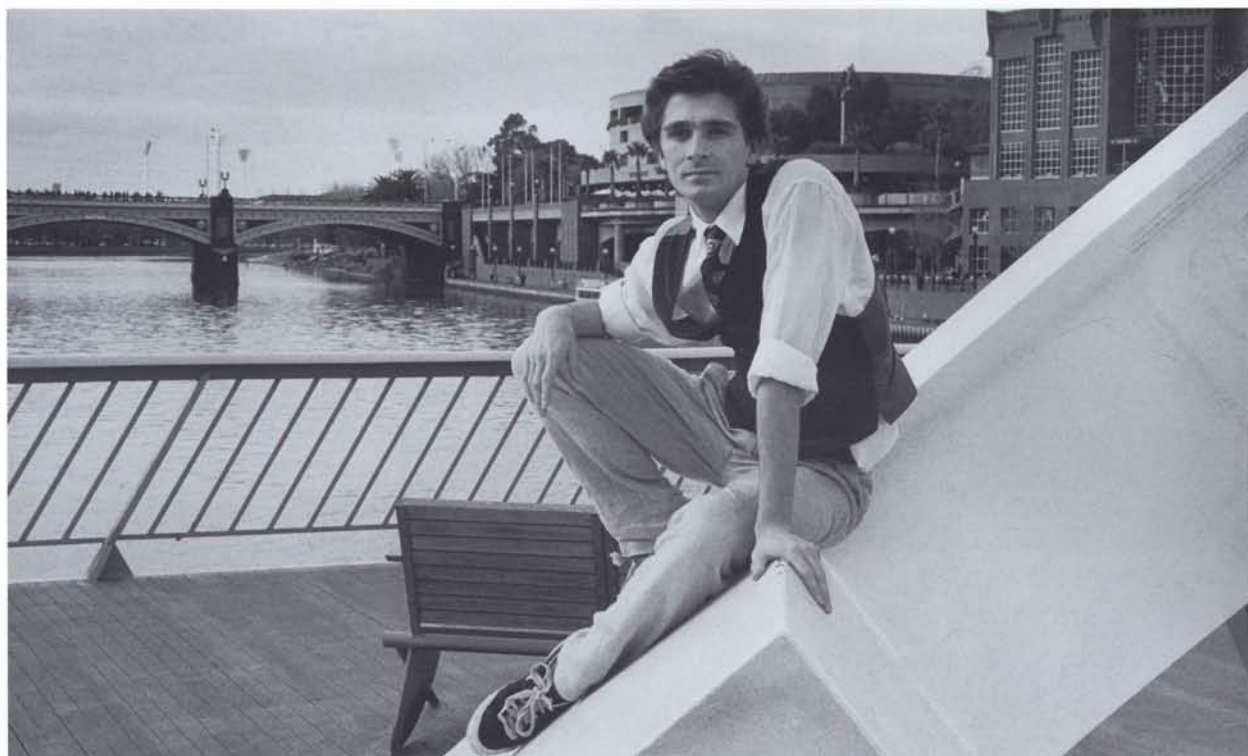


Marty Sohl (b.1947)

Steven Heathcote, Miranda Coney and Geon Van der Wyst in Stanton Welch's *Corroboree*
The Australian Ballet, 1995

gelatin silver photograph; 25.3 x 34.4 cm

Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23737336



often spoke to him about it. In an oral history recorded in 1996 Welch said:

I just wanted to play with [my mother's] ideas of what she imagined the ballet to have in it. I wanted to make my own version of that sort of myth. I wanted *Corroboree* to be like a pride of lions. There was the dominant male. [The males] had their pecking order, and the females had their pecking order. It was sort of like the struggle we all have inside ourselves.

Choreographically, Welch's work has no passages that imitate culturally specific aspects of Australian Aboriginal dance or life. It is a generalised ritual emerging from personal stories and memories. It is also sexually charged, post modern in its choreographic allusions and layers of references, and, as a small collection of photographs in the Library's Pictures section shows, distinctive and dramatic.

From a distance of some 50 years, the similarities between the Reid work of 1950 and the Dean version of 1954 seem greater than the differences. Both choreographers were concerned with what they saw as facts about Aboriginal life and customs, received from a distance by Reid, observed in close-up by Dean. But despite the honourable

Angela Lynkushka (b.1947)
Portrait of Stanton Welch 1995
b&w photograph; 32.1 x 49.4 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an25089674

intentions of both these choreographers it is impossible to look at their ballets today without seeing appropriation, and without the unease that inevitably accompanies the sight of non-Indigenous people dressing as Aborigines.

As for the Welch piece, it was probably an error of judgement to call the work *Corroboree*. Unsurprisingly, reviews of the Welch *Corroboree* questioned its relationship to the Aboriginal corroboree. 'The Australians gave us a very hot item indeed, masquerading as an aboriginal ritual' wrote one reviewer. But as the third in a line of interpretations of a powerfully rhythmic and dramatic score the Welch work avoids the problems that beset Reid and Dean as they attempted to accommodate Aboriginal traditions in Western theatrical dance practice. Welch in fact created a very personal choreographic interpretation of the Antill score. And, perhaps in answer to his critics, when Welch restaged his work for Atlanta Ballet in 2001 he renamed it *Wild Life*.



Portrait of John Antill 1958
gelatin silver photograph; 20.6 x 15.5 cm
Australian News and Information Bureau
photograph
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an22665443

Corroboree, the ballet to Antill's score, has had a chequered and controversial career. The Reid and the Dean versions remain curiosities and will probably never be mounted again. The Welch work has yet to be seen in Australia.

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