

Bucking horse, 1892-93, pencil on paper. Courtesy of the South Australian Museum



## ENDNOTES

- 1 *South Australian Register*, 17 July 1893, p. 6.
- 2 *Evening Journal*, 14 July 1893, p. 2.
- 3 *South Australian Register*, 15 July 1893, p. 4.
- 4 *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 24 Feb 1893, p. 4.
- 5 *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 10 Feb 1893, p. 3.
- 6 David Carment, Helen Wilson & Barbara James, *Territorian The Life and Work of John George Knight*. Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1993, p. 51.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Thomas Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufacturers, Works, Weapons, etc of the Aborigines of Australia*. Adelaide: C.E. Bristow Government Printer, 1897, p. 37.
- 9 *South Australian Register*, 17 July 1893, p. 6.

## COVER IMAGES

Top: *Horseman leaping from a cliff*, 1892, pencil on paper.  
Courtesy of the South Australian Museum.

Bottom: *Flannigan at Wyndham 2*, 1892-93, pencil on paper.  
Courtesy of the South Australian Museum

## A Little Bit of Justice - The Drawings of Charlie Flannigan

Library & Archives NT  
10 March – 27 June 2021

|                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Exhibition Curator:      | Don Christophersen |
| Project Manager:         | Brian Hubber       |
| Publication Coordinator: | Wendy Garden       |
| Designed and Printed by: | UniPrint, CDU      |

LANT acknowledges the generous assistance of the South Australian Museum.

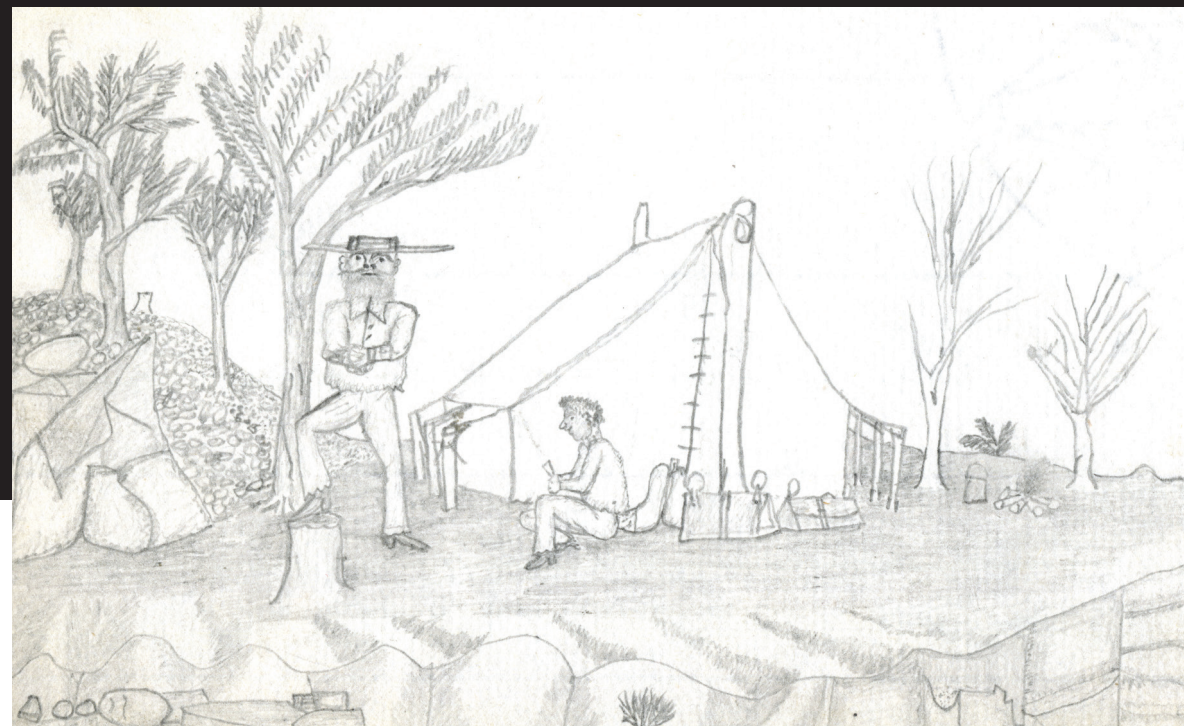
Library & Archives NT  
Parliament House  
Mitchell Street, Darwin

[www.ntl.nt.gov.au](http://www.ntl.nt.gov.au)

# A Little Bit of Justice

*The Drawings of Charlie Flannigan*

Library & Archives NT







Self-portrait, 1892-93, pencil on paper. Courtesy of the South Australian Museum

## Charlie Flannigan's Last Days

A *Little Bit of Justice* features the drawings of Charlie Flannigan, a nineteenth-century Aboriginal stockman who was incarcerated at Fannie Bay Gaol while awaiting trial for the murder of Sam Croker, a station manager at Auvergne in the Northern Territory. The first person to be hanged in the Territory, Flannigan became the centre of intense debate when George Page, a white man also sentenced to death for murder, had his sentence commuted to life in prison. Cries prevailed that Flannigan should be shown similar mercy. A large deputation argued in the South Australian Executive Council that “justice should be evenly dispensed without regard to race or colour”.<sup>1</sup> Despite protests the execution went ahead. Newspapers reported that this was a “scandalous shame”<sup>2</sup> arguing that “the public conscience has never before been so deeply stirred by a keen sense of injustice.”<sup>3</sup>

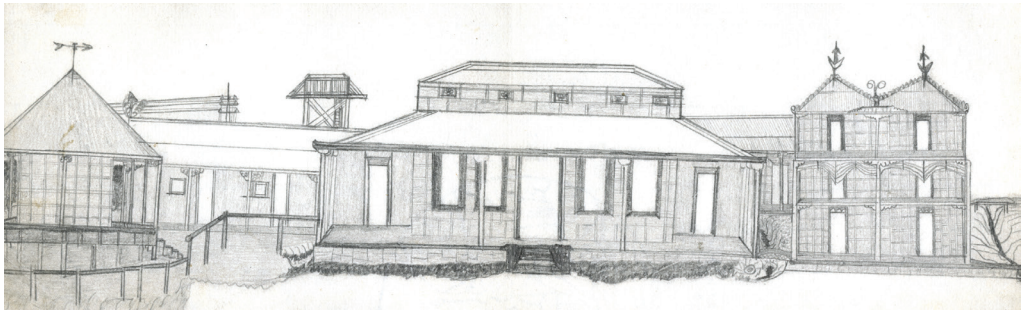
Flannigan pleaded not guilty at his trial offering no line of defence. The murder had taken place one night

while Flannigan was playing cards with Croker and two other men at the station. Responding to a taunt by Croker, Flannigan reportedly got up, left the room, returned with his rifle and fired two shots. While his motive was never made clear, there were suggestions that he had an “old sore” with Croker.<sup>4</sup> Witnesses reported Flannigan claiming that “Croker has carried a revolver for a fortnight for the purpose of killing me.”<sup>5</sup> Croker had already killed an Aboriginal man sometime before.

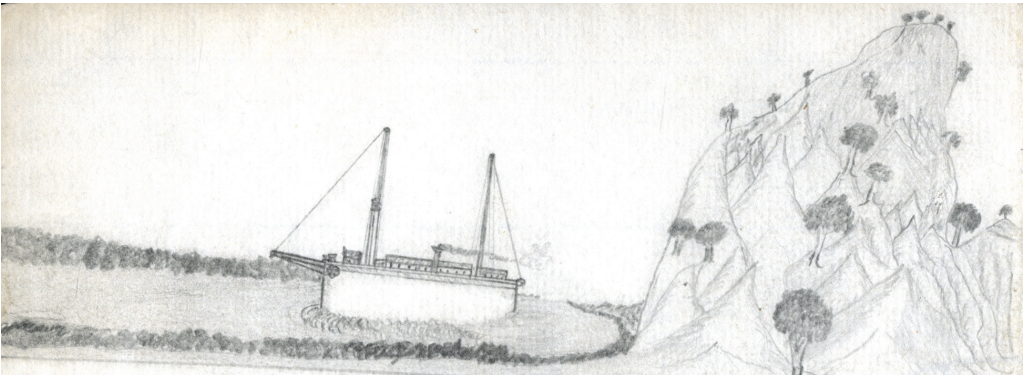
Charlie Flannigan was born between 1860 and 1867 at Marion Downs station in the Diamantina region in western Queensland. His mother was an Aboriginal woman from the area, possibly a Maiawali or Karuwali woman, and his father was an Irishman. As a young man Flannigan worked as a stockman droving for cattle stations in the Victoria River District. When pastoralist Nathaniel Buchanan brought the first herds of cattle from Queensland to the Territory in 1883, it is believed that a young Flannigan was one of the stockmen he employed.

Flannigan was a skilled horseman and won a number of races including the Palmerston Cup on a horse called Cygnet in 1887. Flannigan's love of horses and riding comes through in many of his drawings. Over a quarter of the drawings feature a horse, most of them with a rider either stationary or at full gallop, in some instances leaping from a cliff or bounding over gorges – the sense of freedom and joy is palpable.

Flannigan's horsemen are all depicted in profile. They are often placed in naturalistic landscapes rendered in confident lines that capture the specific features of the bush and surrounding terrain. A variety of mark making includes the use of hard lines, feathery strokes and infill to build tone and he often utilises single point perspective to create spatial depth. The competence of Flannigan's drawings suggests this may have been a familiar skill. It is likely the compositions were influenced by illustrated journals popular throughout the colonies in the nineteenth century. Indeed one drawing of elfin figures intertwined with letters of the alphabet, is very similar in style to the masthead of the journal *Punch*.



Darwin Streetscape, 1892-93, pencil on paper. Courtesy of the South Australian Museum



Rob Roy, 1892-93, pencil on paper. Courtesy of the South Australian Museum

Some of Flannigan's drawings are panoramas, while others depict the homesteads he worked at or encountered on his travels. A number of scenes appear to narrate the journey of his arrest and transportation to Fannie Bay Gaol. After burying Croker's body, Flannigan fled on horseback to Halls Gap in Western Australia where he gave himself up to police. He was taken to Wyndham where he was arrested by Mounted Constable Holdaway who accompanied him on his extradition to the Territory. The Boab Prison Tree near Wyndham, features in one of Flannigan's drawings and it is likely he was detained in it overnight. His extradition to the Territory included transportation on the *Rob Roy* steamer to Port Darwin and then incarceration at Fannie Bay Gaol where he awaited trial. It was here, shackled by iron manacles at his wrists and ankles, alone in solitary confinement, that Flannigan spent his days drawing remembered scenes from happier days.

That Flannigan was given sheets of South Australian government stationery and pencils, while in gaol, may seem somewhat extraordinary. However, Fannie Bay Gaol for many years was under the supervision of Deputy Sheriff John George Knight, an unusual personality in the harsh frontier town of Palmerston (Darwin). A successful architect before moving to the Territory in 1873, Knight had a particular interest in art and assisted with the organisation of the great intercolonial exhibitions popular in the late nineteenth century. Knight was known for acting “with far more humanity” than most settlers in the region.<sup>6</sup> He showed kindness and understanding to the prisoners under his control and had a special concern for Aboriginal prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Believing they needed reform not punishment, he encouraged the teaching of masonry and by 1888 they were drawing on paper, a number of which were displayed in the *Dawn of Art* exhibition, organised by Knight as part of the NT display at the Centennial Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1888. These were the first drawings by Aboriginal artists to be publicly displayed as art rather than ethnographic curios.

It is believed that Aboriginal prisoners were first supplied with paper and pencils after they were observed drawing on the walls of their cells.<sup>8</sup> With such a strong tradition of rock art and painting on bark shelters, drawing pictures of animals, birds, fish and ancestral beings on prison walls can be seen as a logical extension. Then, as now, solitary confinement was a severe punishment and many prisoners were terrified to be alone in the cramped, dimly lit cells. Drawing may have been deployed as an activity to help calm them through the day. The success of the *Dawn of Art* exhibition no doubt encouraged the continuation of drawing as an activity. By the time Flannigan arrived four years later in 1892, Knight had passed away, but the fact that Flannigan's drawings exist is an indication that the provision of pencils and paper to prisoners was maintained.

Flannigan was probably in his late twenties when he was executed at Fannie Bay Gaol. His death, described as “one of the gross mistakes that a Government could make,”<sup>9</sup> brought to the fore the prevalence of institutional racism. It also provided a platform for many enlightened citizens who were outraged that such blatant racial discrimination could take place. Flannigan's unwillingness to mount a defence at his trial was perhaps an indication that he accepted that crime required a punishment. Flannigan was denied a little bit of justice but his story lives on through his drawings, allowing us to know more of the life of Charlie Flannigan than merely the circumstances of his death.

Don Christophersen