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BRO. AUGUSTUS EARLE

ARTIST

(1793 – 1838)

Augustus Earle, who came by chance to Australia in 1825, was quite the most professional and versatile artist who had visited the colony to that date.

He was a skilled portrait painter and landscape artist, and he could turn his hand to natural history subjects if need be. But above all he was a compassionate observer of, and commentator on, the human condition and as a result he has left some invaluable pictorial records of how people in Australia looked and how they lived all those years ago.

Earle was born in London of American parents on 1 June 1793. Painting was in his blood, both his father, James Earle, and his uncle, Ralph Earle, had been well-known artists in the United States. He is said to have studied at the Royal Academy, and is listed as having exhibited six pictures there before 1815.

While still in his late teens he became an ardent traveller and remained so for the rest of his life. There were early visits to Malta, Sicily, Gibraltar and the North African coast. Two years in the United States were followed by four in South America, mostly in Brazil and Chile, during which time he paid his way by producing portraits of local prominent people and landscapes which he either sold on the spot or sent home for exhibition.

In February 1824 Earle sailed from Rio de Janeiro for India with a letter of introduction to the Governor-General, which he hoped would lead to profitable commissions from Englishmen living there. On its way his ship, *Duke of Gloucester*, put in at the tiny island of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic between South Africa and South America and Earle, who had gone ashore to do some sketching, was left behind when it sailed on.

Eight months later he was picked up by the *Admiral Cockburn* bound for Hobart Town. He looked a strange romantic, Robinson Crusoe-like figure, reduced to such rags, that the captain and passengers rallied round to equip him with a new set of clothing.

After a few months in Van Diemen's Land, where he painted a view of Hobart Town and other landscapes, Earle was able to raise his fare to Sydney which he reached in May, 1825.

Being a shrewd businessman, as well as an artist, Earle soon got to know someone in authority on *The Sydney Gazette* and received a generous Press coverage that it appeared he had taken the place by storm.

Probably as a result of this publicity, he was commissioned to decorate the dining room in which the colonists farewelled Governor Brisbane in November 1825. He was also commissioned, at a fee of fifty pounds, to paint the portrait of the departing Governor, which now hangs in Government House, Sydney.

Other portrait commissions followed.

His sitters included Governor Darling, Dr. Robert Townson, John Mackaness, Bros. James Dunlop, Captain John Piper and Mrs Blaxland, all leading social figures of their day in Sydney.

He acquired a gallery, the first of its kind in the colony, to exhibit his pictures and here also he took pupils and sold books, artists' materials and prints. In August 1826, having obtained a lithographic press, he began publishing a set of Australian views.

In the same year he visited the Blue Mountains, the Wellington Valley, the Hunter River, Port Stevens and Port Macquarie, returning with a bulging portfolio of landscapes and sketches of Aborigines. Early in 1827 he spent some time in the Illawarra district painting the thick brush country, grottoes and geological curiosities. Between these journeys he painted several views of Sydney, later exhibited in England as a single panorama.

His friend on the *Gazette* kept readers well informed of his activities and movements, writing of him as "the favourite artist of Australia."

Earle was as restless as ever. In October 1827 he sailed for New Zealand where he spent the best part of nine months. Then he returned briefly to Sydney, before leaving finally in October 1828 in the *Rainbow*, which sailed for England by way of the Caroline Islands, Gaum, Manilla, Singapore and Madras.

By 1830 he was back in England with a great mass of drawings and lithographs some of which were published in the same year under the title *Views in New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land*. Two years later he turned his hand to authorship with *A Narrative of a Nine Months' Residence in New Zealand in 1827*, which also gave an account of his enforced stay on Tristan da Cunha.

His old friends in Sydney may well have seen him again, for in October 1831 Earle was appointed official artist on *HMS Beagle*. The ship was assigned a full itinerary which included a call at Sydney and a marine survey of the north coast of Australia.

On board, Earle became friendly with the young Charles Darwin and the two shared a cottage for two months in a village outside Rio de Janeiro. But although only 39, Earle's health was already failing and he was obliged to leave the *Beagle* in Montevideo to return to London. His place was taken by a then unknown young artist named Conrad Martens, who eventually found his way to Sydney where he became Australia's leading landscape artist.

Exhibited at Royal Academy

Back in London in 1838 Earle exhibited at the Royal Academy an oil painting developed from one of his Illawarra sketches and titled *A Bivouac of Travellers in Australia in a Cabbage Tree Forest, Daybreak*. He also published a series of 10 coloured lithographs of scenery and Maori life in New Zealand. In December 1838 he died, aged 47, of "Asthma and general; debility."

Earle's watercolours, wash drawings and sketches, including many Australian subjects, were handed down through the family of his stepbrother, Admiral William Henry Smyth. In 1926 about 160 were offered at auction in London and bought by a dealer from whom the collector, Rex Nan Kivell, acquired them. Since 1959 they have been part of the Nan Kivell Collection in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, which also includes Earle's famous *Bivouac of Travellers*. The Mitchell Library, Sydney, has several of his portraits and drawings, and there are other works in private collections.

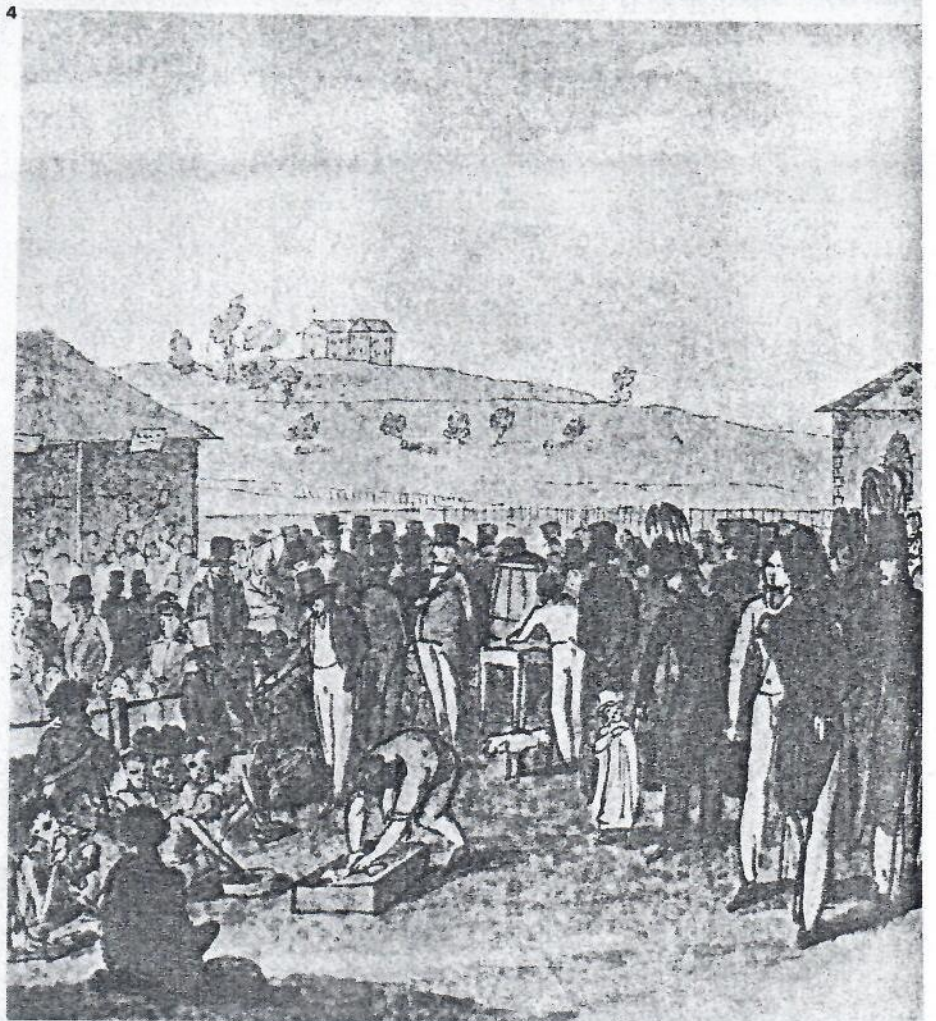
Bro. Augustus Earle was made a Mason during his time in Sydney in the Australian Social Lodge No. 260 , Irish Constitution. He was registered as a member by the Grand Lodge of Ireland, along with 18 other new members who included emancipist shop keepers Daniel Cooper and Lancelot Iredale, on 11 September 1828.

REFERENCES

- * Australian Encyclopedia
- * Australian Dictionary of Biography
- * Correspondence – Grand Lodge of Ireland



Nat. Lib. of Aust/Nan Kivell Coll



1 Earle's graphic watercolour of an Aboriginal camp near Port Stephens in NSW is packed with interesting detail, from the construction of the humpies to the expressions on the Aborigines faces

2 A close-up view of the faces of the mother and children huddled around the fire

3 One of Earle's best-known portraits is this painting of Captain John Piper, one of the leading social lights of the time in Sydney

4 Meeting of the native tribes at Parramatta, an annual event designed to improve relations between the races