

George Collingridge

By Tony Saunders

In our art gallery, we have a painting by George Collingridge – “Lane Cove River”

He was an amazing man. A book has been written about his life which made the short list in the Prime Ministers Literary award in 2013. Thomas Keneally wrote in the introduction, “the life of a man who is a fountain of energies and an Australian who must be remembered”. The review goes on to say “it is hard to understand why a man of such diverse qualities and energy and receiver of two knighthoods and three bravery medals has been overlooked for such a long time”. Further writings about George say “calling Collingridge a landscape painter is doing an injustice to a man who had many other talents. He was also an accomplished woodblock engraver, decorated Papal Zouave, multilingual historical cartographer, historian, successful activist, art teacher, photo engraver, language teacher, newspaper journal and magazine proprietor, author, editor, printer and publisher”

George was born in Oxfordshire 29 October 1842. He had two brothers and a sister. In 1853, the family moved to Paris. There he studied art and ended up as a pupil of the famous French painter Corot. It was Corot that taught George how to paint en plein air. He travelled and painted in Paris, London, Rome and Madrid. The family emigrated to Australia over various stages – George arriving in January 1859. He and his brother Arthur, also a well-known artist, initially worked for Illustrated Sydney News. George then taught art and French at Barker College for 25 years, art at Sydney Technical College for 10 years and Hornsby Technical College for 8 years. He also had a number of art showings and, specialising on Sydney Harbour scenes and the bush, won a gold medal at the 1879 show in Sydney. In 1886 he won a prize for painting in the Colonial Exhibition in London. George with his brother Arthur were instrumental in the forming of the Royal Art Society of NSW. George became internationally famous for his historical research and in 1895 wrote a 376-page Magnum Opus on “The Discovery of Australia” George claimed the Portuguese discovered Australia, not the Dutch or Captain Cook (this of course ignores the aboriginal connection). He was lauded by the Royal Geographical Society in London who called him a “genius” and was knighted by the King of Portugal and later by the King of Spain.

George married a lady from Hunters Hill in Villa Maria Church and lived for most of his time in Berowra/Hornsby. He built a house in Berowra on a 12-acre site, now known as Collingridge Point.

He is known as the Father of Berowra, agitated for a railway station and post office and for many other improvements in the area. Well known in Hornsby Shire, he later built a stone house which is now the chapel in Hornsby Hospital grounds. He published the first newspaper in the Hornsby area “The Progress” and was later involved in “The Star” which has now become the “Hornsby Advocate”

He could speak six languages and founded the Esperanto Society of Australia and wrote further books. Whilst he was doing all this, he continued to paint. His last exhibition of oils and water colours was in 1926 and the exhibition was opened by former Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

He died 1 June 1931 and is buried at Field of Mars cemetery. Georges paintings are in various State and fine art galleries.

What a life.