



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Art Treasures of the Squadron

'Eclipse racing in the 80th Anniversary Regatta, January 26, 1868 on Sydney Harbour'

Oil on canvas 33 x 52cm

By Oswald Brierly

Hangs in the Reception hallway



The painting 'The Yacht, *Eclipse* racing in the 80th Anniversary Regatta, January 26, 1868 on Sydney Harbour' illustrates a beautiful example of a 19th century gaff rigged cutter. She is sailing on a historic Sydney Harbour which looks a little unfamiliar to modern viewers, as the picture pre-dates the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House landmarks.

Eclipse was built in 1832 and was one of the first yachts to sail in the Sydney colony. She was jointly owned by three of the founding Members of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, She is pictured in 1868 – six years after the Club was established - sailing in an RSYs organised regatta held in honour of HRH Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh. The Duke, representing his mother Queen Victoria, was making the historic first Royal visit to Sydney to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the colony. This visit was notable for many reasons – not least for the assassination attempt made on the Prince's life during a picnic at Clontarf attended by the owners of *Eclipse*, as documented later in this article.



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The artwork is believed to have been painted from the point of view of the regatta flagship, the Merchantman *Sobraon*, a British clipper which was hosting the Royal entourage. Oswald Brierly was the Official Marine artist accompanying the Duke of Edinburgh on his round the world voyage on HMS *Galatée* that included the Prince's visit to Sydney.

HMS *Galatée* is depicted on the right side of *Eclipse* dressed in ceremonial flags for the occasion. The light falls on the main sail of *Eclipse* highlighting her sleek lines and elegant style, as she heads south on a port tack. Brierly highlights the waves, indicating the strength of the southeast winds and squally rain reported that day by the *Sydney Mail*.

The left-hand side of the painting shows Government House, Fort Macquarie and Farm Cove; the right-hand side depicts Admiralty House and Kirribilli House. The harbour looked very different then to how we know it today. Fort Macquarie was built in 1789 at Bennelong Point, now the site of the Sydney Opera House. It was demolished in 1901 to make way for the Fort Macquarie Tram Depot. You can see the British flag from its tower in the distance. Government House was completed in 1843 to house the Governor of NSW. It was set in five acres of gardens overlooking Bennelong Point and Farm Cove.

Admiralty House in Kirribilli was originally built as a private dwelling in 1843 by John Gibbes, Collector of Customs for NSW and a member of the NSW Legislative Council. The Government bought the house in 1885 and it has been used for the Governor General since 1913. Kirribilli House was built in 1854 by merchant Adolphus Frederick Feez. Billy Hughes, the Prime Minister of the day, adopted the property for government purposes in 1920, and in 1956 it became the residence for Australian Prime Ministers in Sydney.

Eclipse is placed at centre stage, looking west towards the present day site of the Harbour Bridge. It is a magnificent presentation of *Eclipse* at a significant moment in the new colony's history.

The atmosphere is celebratory, historic and formal. The colours highlight the huge, yellow cotton sails with the blue buffering *Eclipse* flag and Red Ensign very distinctly displayed. The white uniforms of five of the crew stand out against the dark tones of the hull.

Although it is unsigned, the painting is attributed to Brierly because of the elegant style, meticulous attention to technical detail and faithful attention to portraying the prevailing weather. The scene depicted certainly coincides with Brierly's visit to Sydney with the Duke of Edinburgh on the occasion of his round the world trip on the *Galatea* as the Official Marine Artist. Brierly also painted other artworks at that time including 'HMS *Galatea* anchored off Fort Macquarie' in water colour and pencil, so it is consistent with his activities. One can imagine him sketching at the time of the race and completing the painting in oils later, although he is known to have worked in water colours rather than oils more often than not.



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'HMS *Galatea* Anchored off Fort Macquarie' by Oswald Brierly

Sir Oswald Walters Brierly (1817 to 1894), marine painter, was born in Chester, UK on 19 May 1817 to Dr Thomas Brierly, himself an amateur artist. He studied at the art school in Bloomsbury Street, London, with Henry Sass, and in 1839, exhibited drawings at the Royal Academy of two men-of-war, *Pique* and *Gorgon*.

Brierly also studied naval architecture and possibly navigation at Plymouth. His interest in ships introduced him to Benjamin Boyd of the Royal Yacht Squadron, whom he joined on the yacht *Wanderer* on a voyage to Australia; they reached Sydney in July 1842. In New South Wales, Brierly acted as manager of Boyd's pastoral and whaling business, living at Twofold Bay where he was appointed a magistrate. In 1848 when Boyd's affairs were close to bankruptcy, Brierly accepted the invitation of Captain Owen Stanley to join him as his guest on HMS *Rattlesnake* on a survey of the Barrier Reef, the Louisiade Archipelago and part of the Papua New Guinea coast. While living in Sydney, Brierly painted on the walls of his host's house, *The Ranges*. This mural, of HMS *Rattlesnake* in a squall off the island of Timor, was probably the first mural painted in Australia. A small copy of it can be found in the Mitchell library.

On Stanley's death in Port Jackson in 1850, Brierly transferred to HMS *Meander*, as a guest of Commander Henry Keppel, and remained on her throughout her voyage across the Pacific. He sketched many of the ports visited, including New Zealand, the Friendly and Society Islands, Chile, Peru and Mexico, before returning to England via Cape Horn. In 1852 his narrative of the voyage titled 'Brief Geographical Sketch of the Friendly Islands, with the account of a visit of HMS *Meander* to the island of Tongatabu, June 1850' was printed in the Journal of the Royal Geographic Society.

Brierly took to sea again after the outbreak of the Crimean war in 1854, with Keppel now Captain, in an observational post on HMS *St John D'Acres* in the Baltic fleet. The *Illustrated London News*



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commissioned him to make sketches of the naval operations - perhaps the first time a newspaper had commissioned a war artist. In 1855 Brierly worked on several ships in the Black Sea and, though recording no actual engagements, became the British 'graphic naval historian' of the war. His portfolio of 'Marine and Coastal Sketches' (London, 1856) was published as the work of Mr William Brierly. At the end of the war, when Queen Victoria reviewed the Navy at Spithead, Brierly was asked to attend upon the *Royal Yacht Victoria and Albert* to take sketches. This, and perhaps Keppel's friendship with the Prince of Wales, brought him the patronage of the Royal Family for whom he executed several commissions.

Between 1863 and 1869 Brierly was associated with the Duke of Edinburgh on various cruises: first to Norway in the *Raccoon* and later in the *Galatea* to the Mediterranean and round the world visiting Lisbon, Madeira, Tristan Da Cunha, the Cape, Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney. Until... 'The gay receptions at all ports on the route, the balls, shooting parties and fetes of various kinds, ended with the picnic near Sydney whereat the miscreant O'Farrell made a dastardly attempt on the Duke's life.' In 1868 Brierly accompanied the Duke up the Nile, thence to Constantinople and the Crimea. In collaboration with Rev. John Milner, Brierly produced 'The Cruise of the HMS *Galatea*' (London, 1869).

Brierly became an associate of the Water-colour Society in 1872 and a member in 1880. In 1874 he was appointed marine painter to Queen Victoria and to the Royal Yacht Squadron. In 1881 he became curator of the Painted Hall at Greenwich and was knighted in 1885. In his later years, he exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and at the Royal Water-colour Society Annual Exhibitions. Examples of his work are in the Mitchell and Australian National Libraries, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Melbourne Club and the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The Mitchell Library holds his journal spanning 1846-49 which includes notes on sky, sea and atmosphere relevant to his marine painting.

Eclipse was launched about 1832 and was purchased by Andrew Fairfax of the Sydney Morning Herald in 1842, sold in 1855 to P.J. Thompson, and later to a consortium of Roxburgh, Freeman and Milford (the owners of *Eclipse* in 1868 and among the founding Members of the Squadron.) RSYS purchased the painting of *Eclipse* at auction on 23 July 1995. It came with the provenance that the painting was purchased in the early post-war years by the Fairfax family due to the family's connection with the subject. It was sold in 1975 in a disposal of the Fairfax family's effects to the Roxburgh, Freeman and Milford Foundation

Eclipse was owned by three RSYS Members: John P. Roxburgh, James Freeman and H. Milford. Many descendants of these pioneering yachtsmen continued active membership of the Squadron over the years. In fact, one of our current Members, Dr David Roxburgh, is a descendant of two founding Members: JP Roxburgh and Staunton Spain. (You will recall from previous essays, that in 1862, 19 signatories penned the Foundation document, including the name of their yacht, which hangs near the Members' Bar on level 3.) Other family members associated with our Club include Rose Roxburgh, an Intermediate Member, and Hazel Sullivan, an Affiliate Member. David kindly agreed to speak to me and provided me with a copy of his family's history which had been compiled by Rachel Roxburgh in 1990.



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JP Roxburgh



Staunton Spain

John Pirie Roxburgh was born in 1825 in Middlesex, UK. His father was Captain David Roxburgh, a shipmaster and trader who made a series of voyages commencing in 1832 to New South Wales and Tasmania. He encouraged his son John to migrate to Sydney. John Roxburgh was a solicitor and partner with Staunton Spain in the legal firm of Spain and Roxburgh. His wife was Spain's sister, Antilla.

Staunton Spain was part owner of the 12 ton deep-keel clipper yacht *Mischief* which had been bought from James Wilson. His father, William Spain, was an English lawyer who, in 1841, had been sent by the British Government to New Zealand as Chief Commissioner of Lands Claims. William Spain had settled in Sydney in 1851 as Inspector General for Police for one year, and then retired to practise as a solicitor.

Rachel Roxburgh's family history documents the story of Captain David Roxburgh, father of John P. Roxburgh, who conducted several voyages from England to Australia. Captain Roxburgh was known for the kindness and care with which he treated his emigrant passengers. In 1833 his passengers on *Enchantress* presented him with an expensive silver cup in gratitude.

On July 17, 1835, he was carrying a cargo of produce and was wrecked in the d'Entrecasteaux Channel, Tasmania. Two boats carrying passengers, Captain Roxburgh in one and Chief Officer Toby in the other, survived, but the longboat with the crew went down. To quote contemporary newspaper reports:

'The dark, the freezing cold, the great waves in which they rowed from about 10 o'clock at night until daylight - 6:30 am at the earliest; in the middle of winter when they managed to land at Partridge Island. The boats were nearly swamped and passengers were without sustenance for two days - except for some mussels which they cooked in a "tureen" when they landed on the island - the receptacle having been thoughtfully snatched up by one of the passengers as they embarked.'



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Mischief Winning from *Enchantress* at the Anniversary Day Regatta, 1856

In 1868 at the age of 65, William Spain, attended a picnic at Clontarf with JP Roxburgh. It was a large charity function held in honour of the visiting Prince Alfred. Lord Belmore, the new Governor had arrived that year and the Prince was his first visitor. This was the infamous occasion on which Prince Alfred was shot and wounded. According to the family history account:

‘Our forebears were near the Prince at the time and were among those to spring on the assassin. Young Lady Belmore (she was in her early 20s) was also quick off the mark. Going straight back to Government House by launch she sent for the new Nightingale nurses at Sydney Hospital and organised a bedroom on the ground floor. Fortunately, the Prince soon recovered and we have him to thank for the establishment of the Royal Prince Alfred hospital, built by subscriptions from the concerned populace.’

The Roxburgh and Spain family histories illustrate the courage and resilience of our early seafarers and the devotion of the early colonists to the ‘mother’ country.

The beautiful *Eclipse* painting attributed to the famous marine artist Oswald Brierly is a wonderful recording of the day the Duke of Edinburgh and Oswald Brierly visited the young colony and a magnificent link to one of the oldest families associated with the Squadron.

Robyn Coleman
Exhibiting Member Royal Art Society



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The Squadron Archives

RSYS Logbook Sesquicentenary Edition

The Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol 3, 1969 Sir Oswald Walters Brierly

Photographs:

Eclipse by Oswald Brierly Photo credit Eleanor Bull

HMS *Galatea* anchored off Fort Macquarie by Oswald Brierly Photo courtesy GFL Fine Art

J.P. Roxburgh and Staunton Spain Photo from the Squadron Archives

Anniversary Day Regatta, 1856 James Milson's *Mischief* Winning from *Enchantress* and *Challenger* with a primitive paddle-steamer carrying spectators (From a watercolour by an unidentified artist in the possession of the RSYS.) Sydney Sails - The Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron 1862 – 1962.