



# North Sydney Heritage Leaflet 10

## CONRAD MARTENS

**Conrad Martens, artist and librarian, lived for over 30 years on Sydney's lower North Shore. He made Sydney his home after arriving in Sydney in 1835, having served on *HMS Beagle* as the expedition's official artist. He contributed greatly to the quality, style and growth of art in the early days of the Colony and is particularly renowned for his magnificent watercolour and oil landscape paintings and sketches of the North Shore's foreshores and Sydney Harbour.**

Conrad Martens was born in London on 21 March 1801. Kentish-born Rebecca Turner married J. Christoph Heinrich Martens, a German-born consul for Austria, in 1789. They had three sons: Henry, John William and Conrad; and one daughter, Mary Ann.

After his father's death in 1816, Conrad studied art in London with Copley Fielding, a well-known art teacher of the day. However his lessons ceased in the early 1820s when he and his mother went to live in the West Country of England, near Exeter in Devon. Here he continued his artistic pursuits, sketching and painting scenes of the countryside of south Devon and Dorset.

In 1833 Conrad joined his friend Captain Blackwood on the *HMS Hyacinth* which was setting forth on a long tour of duty to the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. They arrived in Rio de Janeiro on July 4 where he left the ship in order to travel to Montevideo, Uruguay. Here he succeeded Augustus Earle as the artist on the *HMS Beagle* on the surveying voyage off South America, led by Captain Robert FitzRoy. On this voyage he travelled with naturalist Charles Darwin, who would later write his famous book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859).

Conrad served on the *Beagle* until November 1834 when Captain FitzRoy was forced by the Admiralty to sell the accompanying schooner *Adventure* and to reluctantly stop paying Conrad out of his own pocket. He left the *Beagle* at Valparaiso, later gaining passage to Tahiti, New Zealand and arriving in Sydney on 17 April 1835. In his diary he wrote of his arrival at Port Jackson:

*Having had a strong and fair wind the whole way. The appearance ...is that of a wild and iron bound coast and the entrance that of a gigantic gateway, but the scene changes immediately upon entering to the calm and beautiful islands, bays and headlands of no great highs [sic] but covered with wood present themselves in succession and after passing a point about 2 miles within the entrance, the town of Sydney is seen, tho' still at a distance of 5 or 6 miles and still further the faint outline of the blue mountains in the interior. (Elizabeth Ellis, Conrad Martens Life & Art, 1994)*

He carried with him to New South Wales a letter of introduction from Captain FitzRoy of the *Beagle* to Captain Phillip Parker King,

*He...is well liked by my shipmates and myself. He is a quiet, - industrious, - good fellow...He thinks of visiting and perhaps settling at Sydney...His profession is his maintenance.*

His original intention was to stay in Sydney for a few months only, but upon seeing Sydney and experiencing the beauty of its harbour he decided to settle permanently and set up his studio in Cumberland Street in The Rocks. Here he worked as an artist on commissioned works and taught the art of painting to students. His clients were landowners, senior government officials and merchants such as the Macarthur family, Sir George Gipps, Alexander Brodie Spark, George Macleay and G.W. Evans.

In the meantime the *Beagle* arrived in Sydney in January 1836 for a brief visit. He received a visit from his former shipmate Charles Darwin, who purchased two small watercolours of South American scenes.

On 9 March 1837 Conrad married Jane Brackenbury Carter at St James Church, Sydney. Jane was the only daughter of William and Jane Carter. Her father William emigrated in 1824 on the ship the *Prince Regent* to take up a position as Australia's first Master in Chancery of the Supreme Court of NSW and in 1843 he became the first Registrar General of the Colony.

Jane and Conrad's first child, a daughter, Rebecca was born on 30 January 1838 when they were then living in Bent Street with Jane's parents. Their second daughter, Elizabeth, was born on 23 August 1839. In the meantime, William Carter purchased five acres of land on the North Shore for £250 from Alexander Berry in October 1838 and which he promptly transferred to his daughter Jane. Conrad proceeded to design and build the family residence known as *Rockleigh Grange*.

In 1844 the home was completed and the Martens family moved to North Sydney. They enjoyed a quiet life here. Martens designed for the family a spacious and picturesque stone Victorian Rustic Gothic villa, and in the grounds he built himself a studio. Both he and his daughter Rebecca sketched *Rockleigh Grange* and the surrounding district. North Sydney was a small tightly knit community at this time. Adjoining the Martens' property were *The Priory*, the home of Colonel George Barney and his family, Alexander Berry's *Crows Nest House*, and *Waverton*, the home of solicitor William Carr. A short distance away was St Thomas' Church.

Martens was a devout Anglican and developed a close friendship with the first rector, Reverend William Branwhite Clarke. Martens was a churchwarden and was involved in the design of the first St Thomas' Church alongside James Hume. He carved the sandstone font which survives today and can be seen within the church.

In 1843 a decline in the Colonial economy had a serious impact on his income as many of his benefactors and clients were declared bankrupt and consequently his commissions declined markedly. His fortunes were boosted in the 1850s when the discovery of gold brought prosperity and wealth to the economy. In his later years, he took on the paid position of Assistant Parliamentary Librarian in 1863 on the recommendation of Alexander Berry

*I have known Mr. Martens for upwards of a quarter of a century, that he has been my neighbour for twenty years and I am decidedly of the opinion that if he obtains the appointment that he will perform the duties of the office in a zealous, efficient and satisfactory manner.*

Their son Conrad William was born at *Rockleigh Grange* on 11 May 1844 but died soon afterwards on 27 April. Conrad's daughters, Elizabeth and Rebecca, inherited their father's talents and they, too, painted and sketched many prominent buildings and sites in the North Sydney area. His younger daughter Elizabeth died in 1870 aged thirty-one. His other daughter Rebecca lived until 1909, but having never married, the Martens family line in Australia came to an end.

Conrad Martens died at *Rockleigh Grange* on 21 August 1878, aged 77 years. Obituaries appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* where he was described as *...an artist whose talents had won him a very solid reputation* and in the *Town and Country Journal* as *...the Sydney artist par excellence*. He is buried, along with his family, at St. Thomas' Cemetery in West Street, Crows Nest.

Martens left his entire estate in trust to his wife Jane, who was also named his executrix, to be divided in equal shares between herself and their only surviving child, Rebecca. Jane lived at neighbouring *Elizabeth Cottage* (38 Edward Street) until her death in 1894 and their daughter Rebecca continued to live there until her death in 1909. Jane sold the house to warehouse owner FB Larke in 1878 and he resold it to the Hon John Hughes MLC who altered it again and built tennis courts. When it was auctioned in 1913 Hardie and Gorman noted that the *'spacious grounds, situated in Edward Street North Sydney [made it] very convenient and suitable for a gentlemen-of-means, professional men, squatter and others'*. It forms part of the Australian Catholic University buildings in Edward Street.

#### North Sydney Heritage Centre

1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
Stanton Library  
234 Miller Street  
North Sydney NSW 2060

Phone: 02 99368400  
Fax: 02 99368440

Email: [infodesk@northsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:infodesk@northsydney.nsw.gov.au)  
[www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au](http://www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au)



North Sydney  
**Heritage Centre**