

Shades of Grey: the Colonial Wood Engraver, Edward Lee

by Margaret Coghlan

My great grandfather, Edward **Lee** (1840-1898), was a wood engraver. On the 24 August 1863 Edward sailed into Melbourne on the *Prince of Wales* as a 23 year old 'trader' from London. Unfortunately, family folklore reveals very little about Edward's working life in Australia – 'a wood engraver who worked for *The Argus*' was all that was known. It wasn't until I attended a talk in 2013 that I gained some insight into Edward's life.

On 6 July 2013, Peter **Dowling** presented a paper entitled, *Index to imagery in colonial Australian illustrated newspapers: its evolution and some reflections upon its completion*, to a meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers (ANZSI) at the State Library of Victoria (SLV). It was open to the public so I went along in the faint hope that I might learn something about Edward.

The speaker had compiled two volumes of information regarding the creators (illustrators, photographers, artists and/or engravers) and the subjects of over 12,000 illustrations that were printed in the main Australian colonial illustrated newspapers between 1853 and 1896.¹

Following the talk, I thumbed through the volume of creators and to my delight Edward **Lee** was listed. The author had included all the details of the editions and the captions of the illustrations for each creator. The talk turned out to be the entry point I needed to realize Edward **Lee**, the wood engraver.

History of 'modern' wood engraving

As the engravings by Edward were identified through the digitized newspapers of *Trove* and the online catalogues of the SLV and The National Library of Australia (NLA) using Dowling's index, I developed a great respect for the skill of the wood engravers and to better understand the craft I delved into its history.

Wood engraving, in general, is the process of cutting away the wood not drawn by the artist. The resulting relief print, that is, the transference

of ink from the surface of the wood to the paper rather than from the cuts, is a black and white image; the artist's lines being black and the surrounds white. This simple technique was used by the engravers of the older woodcuts.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Englishman, Thomas **Bewick** (1753-1828), known as the father of 'modern' wood engraving, introduced the practice of cutting into the end grain of hard wood instead of along the grain of softer wood as was used in the woodcuts. Using the harder substrate he was able to make finer cuts without splitting the wood. His technique became known as 'white line', referring to the engraver's ability to vary the line arrangements of the cuts by decreasing or increasing the width of the lines and/or their proximity to each other. In so doing the resulting print consists of a tonal range of greys instead of purely black and white. This technique gave the engraver some degree of poetic license to create a mood; a sense of atmosphere by casting shadows and spotlights over a scene.² 'The images that result from this process offer clarity and 'sparkle' unmatched in other media, the equivalent of "drawing with light"'.³

In 1883, Woodberry described the evolution of the art:

*The history of the art in the older time is concerned mainly with the designer and the ideas which he endeavored to convey, and only slightly with the engraver whom he employed for the mechanical work of cutting the block. In the modern art the engraver holds a more prominent position, because he is no longer restricted to a servile following of the designer's work, line for line, but has an opportunity to show his own artistic powers. This change was brought about by the invention of the white line...*³

Bewick's engravings were highly thought of and in 1847, Charlotte **Bronte**, wrote in *Jane Eyre* Jane's delight in looking at **Bewick's**, *History of British Birds*:

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