

Diggles, Silvester (1817-1880). pp 203-204 in Kerr, J. D. (ed.) Dictionary of Australian Artists. Working Paper Painters, photographers and engravers, 1770-1870 A-H. Power Inst. Fine Arts, Sydney.

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DIGGLES, SILVESTER (1817-1880), artist, musician and naturalist, was born

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on 24 January 1817, the eldest son of Edward Holt Diggles, ironmonger of Liverpool, England, and his wife Elizabeth nee Silvester. In May 1839 he married Eliza, daughter of John Bradley, tutor of Liverpool; they had two daughters and a son. In November 1853 Diggles and his family arrived in Sydney in the Willem Ernst. They moved to Brisbane in November 1854. His wife died in 1857 and in January 1858 Diggles married Albina, daughter of John and Sarah Birkett of Barnby in the Willows, Nottinghamshire; they had two sons.

Diggles practised as a piano tuner and and repairer of musical instruments. He taught art and music and was drawing master at Brisbane Grammar School in 1869-70 and All Hallows School in 1870; his professional card introduced him as "Miniature Painter".

He took an active part in the cultural life of Brisbane, helping to found its musical societies, its first scientific society (the Queensland Philosophical Society), and the Queensland Museum. His main scientific interests were ornithology and entomology.

He was specially skilled in life-like and accurate natural history illustrations. A sketch book includes birds and marine animals collected on the voyage to Australia and finely detailed watercolour drawings of moths and their caterpillars. A book of drawings of 126 Queensland butterflies and moths by Diggles and his niece Rowena Birkett cannot now be traced.

Diggles' outstanding artistic achievement was the completion of 325 pencil and water colour plates, illustrating 600 birds, for his Ornithology of Australia. The original plates (dated from 1863 to 1875) and manuscript text are now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. From 1865 to 1870 he issued to subscribers twenty-one parts, each with six hand-coloured lithographed plates imperial quarto size, illustrating in all 226 birds. Money was not available to print further parts.

In 1877 Diggles rearranged and published the remaining stock of printed text and plates as a two-volume Companion to Gould's Handbook; or synopsis of the birds of Australia.

Genial, friendly, enthusiastic and ever ready to share his knowledge or lend his talents, he was loved and respected by the citizens of Brisbane who generously supported a Grand Benefit Concert for him in 1877. Worry over the Ornithology contributed to the breakdown of his health. He suffered slight paralysis in 1876, and died at Kangaroo Point, Brisbane on 22 March 1880. His widow, two daughters, and the two sons of his second marriage survived him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: E. Marks, 'Silvester Diggles - a Queensland naturalist one hundred years ago', Queensland Naturalist, July 1963, and 'Notes on Diggles "Ornithology of Australia"', Queensland Naturalist, June 1965.

E.N. MARKS