PENNY WHITETWAY EXAMINES
THE EARLY LIFE OF ARTIST
ROBERT EMERSON CURTIS (1898-
1996), HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH
THE SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE
PROJECT, THE INFLUENCES AND
CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO HIS
DOCUMENTING THE BRIDGE, AND
HOW THIS PUBLICATION AFFECTED
THE REST OF HIS CAREER.
Make Big Plans: aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever growing insistency ...

Let your Watchword be Order and your Beacon Beauty.

With this quotation from architect and urban planner Daniel H Burnham, artist Robert Emerson Curtis opens his 1933 book Building the Bridge: twelve lithographs with introduction and supplement. While Burnham almost certainly wrote those words in the context of architecture, they apply equally to the artistic career of Curtis, which spanned more than 60 years.

This article examines Curtis’s early life, his involvement with the Sydney Harbour Bridge project, the influences and circumstances that led to his documenting the bridge, and how this publication affected the rest of his career.

Robert Emerson Curtis was born in Croydon, England, on 4 October 1898. He was educated in Chile from 1909 to 1912 (where his father, a banker, worked for an English bank at Valparaiso) and at Farnham Grammar School in England from 1912 to 1914.

In 1914, prior to the outbreak of war, Curtis emigrated to Sydney with his mother, father and two sisters. The family settled on a peach and apple farm in the Stanthorpe district where Curtis studied art by correspondence while working in the orchard. He left the farm for Brisbane in 1919, taking a job as a catalogue artist with Brisbane department store Allan & Stark before joining Brisbane’s Daily Mail newspaper in 1921. In April 1922, he boarded a ship to America—his cabin mate on the voyage was a friend he had made in Brisbane, film director Charles Chauvel.

In America, Curtis studied first at the Art Institute of San Francisco in California. During a stay with Chauvel in Hollywood, he met American Ruth Baldwin, whom he married before moving to Illinois to continue his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also worked for a publishing house. Daughter Robin was born while the couple lived in Chicago.

At some stage during his time in America, Curtis encountered the art and writings of American artist Joseph Pennell who ‘saw the picturesque in everything, especially in our modern life, of skyscrapers and steel mills, and he elevated that quality into enduring art’. In 1916 Joseph Pennell’s Pictures of the Wonder of Work was published, depicting a variety of industrial subjects in America and Europe, including buildings in Germany and France that would shortly be destroyed during the First World War. Curtis came to share Pennell’s vision of the built environment being worthy of artistic representation before returning to Australia with his wife and daughter in January 1928. He would later recount:

As a genial Customs officer checked our baggage, he mentioned that Sydney was getting on with the bridge. “What Bridge?” we asked. He seemed stunned by our ignorance. Hadn’t we heard that Sydney was building the greatest arch-bridge in the world? Not much to be seen yet, he added, but they were well ahead with the approaches. It was stirring news—a harbour bridge at last.2

I visualised the splendid subjects such a project would inspire. Years of work in America had nourished my admiration for the art and philosophy of Joseph Pennell and the way he recorded the industrial scene; including the steel mills, bridges, mines, and back in 1914, the building of the Panama Canal . . . These subjects were still vivid in my mind and I knew at once that I must somehow get involved with the building of this new Sydney Bridge.3

Curtis was to get his wish. After settling with his family into a house at Watson’s Bay (with attached artist’s studio), he approached the Chief Engineer on the bridge project for the New South Wales State Government, Dr John JC Bradfield.

Curtis described Bradfield as ‘a slight figure of medium height wearing a neat suit with an old-fashioned wing-collar and conservative tie’ with a ‘strikingly large head’ and ‘sizeable moustache’.4 (Bradfield would later be involved with engineering projects in his native Brisbane—he was consulting engineer for the Story Bridge, and helped to plan and design The University of Queensland’s St Lucia campus, for which the university would award him an ad eund. doctorate of engineering in 1935. He had previously been unsuccessful in his 1910 application for the position of foundation chair of engineering at the fledgling University.)

At first, Bradfield seemed doubtful about letting Curtis have access to the site in order to record an artist’s impression of the bridge’s construction, even after seeing a folio of his work. However, Bradfield introduced Curtis to one of the senior engineers, who in turn arranged for him to meet
the contractors. Curtis had gained the access he desired and, as he became a familiar sight, was left to his own devices by the workers—apart from an occasional warning to ‘shift [his] bloody carcass’. In 1930, Curtis made his first lithograph of the bridge—it depicted the first stage in the joining of the arch, (pictured at left) and was soon followed by a second showing the bridge deck nearing completion. Lithography was first developed in 1796, and its name was derived from the ancient Greek lithos, meaning stone, and grapho, ‘to write’, as polished limestone blocks were used in the process. Curtis used zinc plates for his lithographs.

Work as a freelance artist funded Emerson’s excursions to the bridge, and the rent on the house at Watson’s Bay. The stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression affected Curtis as it did many others—the freelance work dried up, and funds became scarce. At one stage, Curtis purchased a tent, packed up his family and moved to Stanthorpe where they worked at fruit picking while he also undertook some commissions, but the lure of the bridge was too much and he returned to Sydney after six months when a printer promised access to printing equipment to allow him to produce further lithographs.

Eventually, Curtis would present fourteen of those lithographs in Building the bridge: twelve lithographs with introduction and supplement, with a foreword written by Bradfield. One thousand copies of Building the bridge were produced—600 in folio and 400 in book form. The design of Curtis’s book owes much to Joseph Pennell’s Pictures of the Wonder of Work. In both publications the images are preceded by a page bearing only the title—the reader then turns the page to find the image on the right page with a small amount of explanatory text on the left.

After the publication of Building the bridge, Curtis was commissioned by BHP to document their Newcastle steel works—lithographs from this period (example at left) appeared in the BHP Review Jubilee issue of 1935. During the Second World War, Curtis contributed to the war effort in various ways, including spending time as a camouflage officer in New Guinea between 1941 and 1943, and as an official war artist documenting war work in Australia from 1943 to 1945. After the war he and wife Ruth travelled throughout Australia, regularly contributing to Walkabout magazine. In 1960, Curtis was invited to document the building of another Sydney landmark—the Sydney Opera House. The result of this project was the publication in 1967 of A Vision takes form: a graphic record of the building of the Sydney Opera House during stages one and two. Curtis would become friends with Danish architect Jørn Utzon while working on the project, and would visit him in Denmark while travelling with his second wife, artist Ellice Macoun, whom he had married after the death of Ruth in the late 1960s.

Throughout his career, Curtis documented industry and its workers—many of his illustrations in Building the bridge and A vision takes form included workmen going about their jobs and making their contribution to the engineering marvels being constructed.

In addition to his commissions for industry, he held several exhibitions including one in 1982 in Sydney where the original works that appeared in Building the bridge were displayed to mark the Bridge's 50th anniversary. The original publication would be reissued as Building the bridge: fourteen lithographs celebrating the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with an additional monochrome lithograph replacing the colour supplement from the original. Curtis also published The Bridge around this time, a more personal account of his observations and experiences during the project and including many more illustrations.

Curtis died in 1996 and was survived by Ellice and daughter Robin. He is represented in gallery and library collections throughout Australia. In addition to copies of both editions of Building the bridge and the later publication The bridge, Fryer Library holds a lithograph by Curtis of the bridge during construction. Like Joseph Pennell in America, Curtis documented the work of Australians on projects big and small, during war and peace, and left us with a rich and beautiful legacy.

References