Voyage of the Rattlesnake

The marine Hydrographers of the British Admiralty wanted desperately to chart a safe passage through the Great Barrier Reef and the gap between the northern tip of Australia and Papua New Guinea, which would open up the new colony to the East Indies trade.

They commissioned the Rattlesnake, a 28 gun frigate of the Royal Navy, whose captain was a keen amateur artist and whose name, Owen Stanley, was given to the mountain ranges of PNG.

After the passage out, Stanley brought aboard Oswald Brierly, later to be the marine painter to Queen Victoria, and together these men made two voyages through the Great Barrier Reef, painting and sketching all the while.

They produced an unparalleled visual record of 19th century contact between Europeans and the indigenous people of Northern Australia and New Guinea. The Mitchell library holds hundreds of images from the Rattlesnake's voyages.

A selection is below:

Voyage of the Rattlesnake

![a487004h.jpg](https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/a487004h.jpg) [1]
H.M.S. Rattlesnake, leaving Port Essington

1846-1849

Stanley, Owen
Coffee plantation, Rio Janeiro
Gum trees near Sydney

1846-1849
Stanley, Owen
Call # SAFE / PXC 281
Digital ID: a487049
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Crossing the line: scene on board ship

Stanley, Owen

Call # SAFE / PXC 281

1846-1849

Stanley, Owen
Figure head of a canoe, Coral Haven, Louisiade Archipelago

Voyage of the Rattlesnake
Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)
Upon a painted ocean

Sir Oswald Brierly, a young marine artist, arrived in Sydney in 1842 on the yacht Wanderer. He left us with an extraordinary visual and written record of early colonial Australia.

Settling at the whaling station of Boyd Town in Twofold Bay, he painted extensively and left a vivid account of the whaling life during the five years he spent there. However it was the open sea and adventure that lead Brierly to accept a position on the HMS Rattlesnake as shipboard artist.

Sailing in April 1848 under Captain Owen Stanley, the ship charted the Inner Passage of the Great Barrier Reef before returning to Sydney nine months later. Brierly remained with the ship and sailed on, this time to survey the southern coast of New Guinea and the Louisiade Archipelago.

Brierly was a prolific artist, confessing in his journal to ‘an irresistible urge to sketch’. On most mornings he could be found somewhere on deck well before dawn, sketchbook in hand as he captured the changing sea. He was intensely curious about all aspects of the survey, and among his works are detailed cloud studies, panoramas and coastal profiles, as well as drawings of ships, flora and fauna, shipboard incidents and Indigenous artefacts.

Bernard Smith succinctly summarised the nature of Brierly's art when he wrote that Brierly sought

‘... to represent the adventure and romance of life on the high seas. Yet ... the overriding consideration was the accuracy of the individual facts recorded.’
The late Sir Oswald Walters Brierly, R.W.S., Marine Painter to the Queen / [photographed by] Elliott & Fry [London]
Elliott and Fry (Photographers)

Call # ML 130 [21]

Digital ID: a128916
View collection item detail [22]

a128902r.jpg [23]
[Pinnace and boat firing on native canoes]
Brierly, Oswald W. B. (Oswald Walters B.)

Call # DGV* / Ship / 14  [27]

Digital ID: a128927

View collection item detail [28]

a128901h.jpg [29]
[Pinnace and boat firing on native canoes with figure studies]

Voyage of the Rattlesnake
Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)

ca. 1849
Call # SV* / NG-E / 4
Digital ID: a128901
View collection item detail

a128899r.jpg
Brierly, Oswald W. B. (Oswald Walters B.)

Digital ID: a128899

View collection item detail
Emigrant ship arriving off Sydney Heads

Voyage of the Rattlesnake
Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)
South Sea Whalers boiling blubber. / Boats preparing to get a Whale alongside

ca. 1876

Brierly, Oswald W. B. (Oswald Walters B.)

Digital ID: a128893

View collection item detail
Whales in Sight. / A shore whaling party coming out of Twofold Bay

1883
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