

A FORGER'S PROGRESS: THE LIFE OF FRANCIS GREENWAY



Sentenced to death for forgery, then granted an eleventh-hour reprieve, Greenway was transported to New South Wales in 1814. He was talented, versatile and well trained, confident in his own abilities; but he was also cocksure, hotheaded and tactless. He argued with his superiors and fostered his own inevitable and sad demise, yet within the space of a single eventful decade he etched an urbane face on prominent parts of early Sydney, helping to drag a ramshackle convict garrison out from the murky shadow of shame and banishment and into the gathering light of civic decorum. As Australia's first government architect he had dreamt of a city the equal of any in architectural beauty and refinement, a city of cathedrals and grand public buildings, broad avenues, generous squares and flowering gardens.

But for all his exertions, in the end he felt ridiculed and rejected, paid off with little more than a miserable scrap of land in the wilderness and a few cows. His final days were spent in miserable poverty and his passing at the age of 59 went unnoticed and unrecorded. If he was remembered at all at the time it might have been as the choleric associate of the former governor, Lachlan Macquarie, and for their short-lived collaboration in the pursuit of civic progress.

It was a bitterly sad end for a man who had dined at the governor's table and courted the favour of the English aristocracy. In his early life he had exhibited at London's Royal Academy and worked with John Nash, the most fashionable architect of his day. Yet he died disillusioned and embittered, obsessed with setting the record straight – according to his own lights – and righting the injustices an uncaring world had wrought upon him.

As much as Greenway's story is one of architecture, style, and fine buildings rising against the odds, it is far more a story of a man beset by contradictions and demons, a story of crime and self-destruction, punishment, redemption and decay. It is not a pretty story, but neither is it ugly. It is hauntingly sad, yet somehow ennobling. From beginning to end it is the story of the doomed hero, the one who despite an abundance of talent, squanders his life at the altar of conceit. Greenway's life might be described as a 'forger's progress', to borrow loosely from William Hogarth and the sad fate of the libertine Tom Rakewell.

Alasdair McGregor is a graduate in architecture from the University of New South Wales, but much of his career has been spent as a writer and painter. He is the author, co-author or editor of nine books, reflecting a broad range of interests covering natural history and the environment, biography, architecture and design, and the history of exploration. His books include: *Frank Hurley: A photographer's life* (2004), *Antarctica: that sweep of savage splendour* (2011) and *Grand Obsessions: The life and work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (2009). The latter won the National Biography Award in 2011. Alasdair's latest biography, *A forger's progress: The life of Francis Greenway*, will be published this November.

Members of the public are welcome!

Time & Date: Thursday 23 October 2014, 5.30pm for 6pm start

Cost: Members \$10, non-members \$15 payable at the door. Wine and nibbles will be provided.

Venue: GML Heritage, 78 George Street, Redfern

RSVP: Caitlin Dircks caitlind@gml.com.au or 02 9319 4811. Please note RSVP is essential as places are limited.