

ELIEZER MONTEFIORE

from Barbados to Sydney

Roslyn Russell looks at how Eliezer Montefiore's philanthropic activities made works of art accessible to the public

The name 'Montefiore' connoted great wealth in nineteenth-century England. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784–1885) had made a fortune as a stockbroker. When he retired in 1824, he became sheriff of London, was knighted in 1837 and became a baronet in 1846. He negotiated a better legal status for his fellow Jews in the Ottoman and Russian empires and in Morocco. An active philanthropist, he collected funds for famine relief in Syria and for Christian and Jewish refugees on Gibraltar. He also founded a girls' school and a hospital in Jerusalem. Sir Moses is commemorated in Sydney in the name of the Sir Moses Montefiore Jewish Home, which opened in 1889, and serves the Sydney Jewish Community to this day.

The Montefiore family's reputation for philanthropic service was not confined to Britain. Another nineteenth-century Montefiore also made his mark in this area, this time on the wider community of Sydney and, before that, of Melbourne. Eliezer Levi Montefiore came, not from London, where his distinguished relation Sir Moses lived, but

from Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, where his family was part of the Sephardic Jewish community. His mother Hanna, who had married a London merchant, Isaac Levi, was a cousin of Sir Moses Montefiore, and at his wish the members of the family took their mother's maiden name.

Sephardic Jews from Brazil fleeing the Inquisition had arrived in Barbados in 1654. They brought new methods of harvesting and processing sugar cane and constructing windmills, and became fundamental to the island's prosperity as a sugar producer. They were also traders, with many economic and communal ties to Britain and other parts of the world. For a time, Barbados became the richest of Britain's West Indian sugar-producing colonies; in the mid-eighteenth century, Bridgetown was the second largest city in the British Americas.

The growth and then decline of the Sephardic Jewish community paralleled the economic fortunes of Barbados. Many Jewish people began to leave the island in the mid-nineteenth century, as revenues from sugar plunged and, by 1925, the community had dwindled to one person, who sold the synagogue (rebuilt on the site of a previous one in 1833).

Those who departed the island left behind them also the graves of the dead of the Jewish community, among them those of individuals with the name of Montefiore.

Born in Bridgetown in 1820 and educated in England, Eliezer Montefiore emigrated to Australia in 1843, first to Adelaide, where he worked as a commission and shipping agent, marrying his cousin, Esther Hannah Barrow Montefiore, in 1848. The newlyweds moved to Melbourne the following year, where



above:
J.W. Lindt
The Late E.L. Montefiore
reproduced from *The Cosmos Magazine*, 30 November 1894
(Sydney: *Cosmos Magazine*, 1894)

below:
S.T. Gill (?)
E.L. Montefiore's house in Adelaide, 1840s
watercolour; 9.5 x 14.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2376960





E.L. Montefiore (1820–1894)
Landscape 1876
etching; 15.9 x 24.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9098830

Montefiore took charge of the Victorian branch of the company in which his uncle J.B. Montefiore was a partner. He moved from this into the insurance business, but his true intellectual loves were literature and the arts. At some point he also became a practising artist, and a skilled engraver.

The National Library holds several engravings by Eliezer Montefiore, as well as a copy of *Cosmos* magazine of 30 November 1894, containing a posthumous tribute and a portrait photograph. The Library also has an illustrated catalogue of works held in what was then called the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, which includes a photo of a marble portrait bust of Montefiore by sculptor Theodora Cowan.

Montefiore was a firm believer in the civilising influence of works of art, and in making these accessible to a wide public. In 1870, he became one of the founders of the Victorian Academy of Art, and a trustee of Melbourne's public library, museum and the National Art Gallery (now the State Library of Victoria, Museum Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria). He resigned in 1871 and went to Sydney to manage the Pacific Fire and Marine Insurance Company, but maintained his zeal for creating public

institutions 'to bring some beauty into the lives of the workers in the great cities'.

He was one of a group of leading Sydney businessmen who met in 1871 in the Sydney School of Arts and formed the New South Wales Academy of Art, whose purpose was to promote the cause of art in the community. In 1874, Montefiore became one of the trustees who took responsibility for administering the first government grant to purchase works to form the core of a National Art Gallery of New South Wales collection. They then leased temporary space to display works that are still on display in the gallery today—*The Widower, Wedded*, and *The Defence of Rorke's Drift* and many others—until the government built the permanent Art Gallery of New South Wales. Over the last decade of his life, Montefiore made etchings of the gallery's major works to illustrate its catalogues.

British historian James Anthony Froude visited the Art Gallery of New South Wales when he came to Australia in 1885, accompanied by Montefiore, and related that:

They have a picture gallery of considerable merit. Mr Montefiore, a relation of Sir Moses, took me to see it. There are many good watercolour



sketches of Australian scenery by Sydney artists, one or two fair oil landscapes, with an admirable collection of engravings and casts from the finest classical works. I especially admired a set of drawings which showed real genius. I inquired for the hand which had executed them, and I learnt, to my surprise, that it was Mr. Montefiore's own. He had been modestly silent about his own accomplishments, and only my accidental question had led him to speak of himself.

For Montefiore, the whole purpose of creating an art gallery was not to make the experience of viewing works of art an elite activity, but so that 'the public should be afforded every facility to avail themselves of the educational and civilising influence engendered by an exhibition of works of art, bought, moreover, at the public expense'. In 1882, to make this goal more achievable, he and his fellow trustees had opened the art gallery on Sunday afternoons from 2 pm to 5 pm. In an age when Sabbath observance was often cited as the reason for keeping public institutions closed, this was a bold move, but one vindicated by the results. Attendance figures soared to three times those recorded for weekdays, a trend that continued over the next decade.

Montefiore's faith in the civilising effects of art seemed to be demonstrated more potently on Sundays than on the other days of the week, as the Sunday crowd was 'of the most orderly and attentive description'.

Eliezer Montefiore had been president of the Trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales since 1889 and, in 1892, was appointed its first director. He died in 1894; the trustees did not appoint another director until 1912.

above:
E.L. Montefiore (1820–1894)
Melbourne from the Falls, 1837
etching; 15.8 x 24.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8630251

below:
Mrs Charles Bright's article about
Montefiore and 'the Sydney Art
Gallery'
reproduced from *The Cosmos
Magazine*, 30 November 1894
(Sydney: Cosmos Magazine,
1894)



Not long before he died, Montefiore had the satisfaction of seeing another of his plans for increasing public access to works of art come to fruition. He and his colleagues at the Art Gallery of New South Wales had devised a scheme whereby the art galleries of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney exchanged paintings on loan. Each gallery selected 12 pictures, which would be forwarded to the two other galleries in batches of six. The pictures went on display for six months, then were replaced by 12 others. In a tribute to Montefiore published in *Cosmos* magazine after his death on 22 October 1894, Mrs Charles Bright described the director's elation at the success of his scheme when, in early September that year, he viewed the pictures from the other two colonial galleries on display in the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

It was just at that time that I met him, for the last time, and with the apparent vigour and elasticity of youth he walked round the Gallery, showing the new treasures with great pride and satisfaction. He had undoubted cause for exultation. The public, whom he catered for and desired to benefit, responded by an attendance that eclipsed all previous records.

Montefiore saw a wider application for his picture loan scheme, and declared that 'Art is doing its best to federate the colonies and now it has been inaugurated, the system of exchanges will develop in various ways'.

He did not live to see the federation of the Australian colonies in January 1901, but was certainly active in promoting the federal ideal.

The Jewish community in Barbados was revived when European Jews, fleeing Nazi persecution, settled there from 1931 onwards. The synagogue was returned to the Jewish community by Barbados' prime minister, Tom Adams, in 1980, on condition that the building was restored, a task which was completed by 1987. The burial ground, including the Montefiore family graves, has been restored and a museum has opened recently that celebrates the two separate periods of Jewish community life in Barbados. The Montefiore name is also perpetuated in Bridgetown by the Montefiore fountain, named in honour of John Montefiore (1790–1854), a well-known merchant.

On the other side of the world, in Sydney, visitors to the Art Gallery of New South Wales can see, in the small vestibule that leads to the main entrance gallery, the bust of Eliezer Levi Montefiore sculpted by Theodora Cowan in 1898. His benign features gaze upon the thousands of people who pass by on their way into the art gallery that he helped to create for the public of New South Wales over a hundred years ago.

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below left:
Roslyn Russell
The Art Gallery of New South
Wales, Sydney
Courtesy Roslyn Russell

below right:
Theo Cowan (1868–1949)
E.L. Montefiore 1898
marble; 61.9 x 51.3 x 30.0 cm
purchased 1899
Collection: Art Gallery of New
South Wales

