

BY IAN WARDEN

Piping

THROUGH THE MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION

The paunchy and cunning Mayor and the Corporation of rat-infested Hamelin are just as loathsome as the town's lean and ruthless rats in Christopher Coveny's illustrations of Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper Of Hamelin*.

Coveny (1846–1941) was a gifted but little published Sydney illustrator and etcher. The National Library of Australia has a notebook-sized album of Coveny's pen-and-ink sketches illustrating Browning's verse version of the Hamelin legend. The illustrations, probably done in the 1880s, are clever, lively and satirical. Did Coveny, a barrister and

teacher but trying to become an artist, prepare the album to impress a publisher? If so, then he failed because apparently the only published book illustrated by him is *Twenty Scenes from the Works of Dickens* published in Sydney in 1883. The 20 etchings find Coveny favouring busy Dickensian scenes of often hundreds of people in states of eventful reverie and riot. His *Pied Piper* illustrations show the same preoccupation with frenzied excitement.

In Browning's version of the legend, the Piper offers, for 1000 guilders, to rid Hamelin of its terrific infestation of rats. The desperate and 'wondrous fat' Mayor and his Corporation cronies agree. The Piper drowns the rats by beguiling them down into the river with irresistible music trilled on his pipe. The Mayor insults the Piper by offering him just 50 guilders instead of the promised 1000. Outraged and vengeful, the Piper produces child-beguiling music on his pipe and leads the town's children away and through a magic door in a mountainside. They're never seen again and childless Hamelin grieves.

Coveny's illustrations are amusing and feverishly eventful and make some famous, published illustrations of the tale seem relatively tame. Kate Greenaway's illustrations (first published in 1888) are the best known but Coveny's maniacal, bedraggled, toweringly tall and twig-thin Piper, part clown and part spectre, is much more complex than Greenaway's immaculate, earnest young magician. Greenaway's cute rats are the kind some people have as pets but Coveny's are the black, vile, plague-carrying vermin of phobias and nightmares.

Coveny illustrates almost *everything* in the text and so, for example, when the Piper describes his delivery of the Nizam of Asia from 'a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats', we are given a witty sketch of the Nizam's terrified folk fleeing from vampyre-bats the size of pelicans. The imaginative Coveny has given each letter of the passage 'out came the children running' its own little pair of gambolling legs.



All illustrations by Christopher Coveny



Robert Browning (1812–1889)
The Pied Piper of Hamelin,
 handwritten and illustrated
 by Christopher Coveny 1880s
 Manuscripts Collection
 MS 9317



No version of these sketches has been published and Coveny seems to have been, generally, a thwarted man. He was not able to become an artist until after his father's death in 1878. Then, going back and forth between Britain and Australia, he was for many years incapacitated by illnesses. In old age, he resumed work and wrote a poem he illustrated with 27 watercolours. The paintings survive but the poem, which some think was called *The Bell of Dronedroon*, is lost. Coveny was 95 when he died in Dublin

