

# HORDERN HOUSE

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ADMIRAL SIR GEORGE FRANCIS SEYMOUR

Changing the course of the Pacific

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LUCAS, John Lindsay (1807-1874).

### Portrait of Admiral Sir George Seymour.

Signed and inscribed 'no 2 admiral/ Sir G.F. Seymour \*.\*./ John Lucas.' (on reverse); oil on canvas, unlined 1428 x 1118 mm. In the original gilt frame. Circa 1856-59.

#### A MAGNIFICENT PACIFIC PAINTING:

The imposing full-length portrait depicts George Francis Seymour, not long after he had served as commander-in-chief of the Pacific Station, at one of the high-points of his career, as commander-in-chief at Portsmouth. In the background his flagship HMS *Victory* rests at anchor, and Seymour proudly wears his naval uniform and all the regalia of his rank.

“An intelligent and resourceful officer, successful in all his commands” (ODNB), Seymour had first shipped as a 10-year-old in 1797 under the command of Edward Riou, who had himself served with Cook on the third voyage and been captain of the *Guardian* when it wrecked en route for Port Jackson in 1789.

After a brilliant naval career including some 20 years constant action against the French, Seymour became a key advisor to Parliament and King in the 1820s and 1830s, and a Lord of the Admiralty in 1840; frustrated by politics he was given another command when appointed to the 80-gun HMS *Collingwood* and sent to the Pacific to resolve a situation drifting towards open warfare with the French. During his command of the Pacific Station, and by insisting on diplomacy over armed conflict, Seymour would change the course of Pacific history with significant repercussions in Sydney and leading to substantial realignments within the broader Pacific region, and of the colonial relationship with Britain.

John Lindsay Lucas, a prominent society painter of the early Victorian era, painted portraits of notables ranging from the Duke of Wellington to Queen Adelaide, and from the Duchess of Kent to Albert, Prince Consort. His accomplished and frequently very large portraits were much sought after – he “caught likenesses cleverly” (ODNB) – and his magnificent depiction of the Admiral in all of his splendour must have greatly pleased his subject.

#### PROVENANCE

Commissioned by Admiral Seymour personally, given by him to his third daughter Emily Charlotte (1825-1892, who had sailed with her parents on the *Collingwood* to the Pacific). She married William Richard Ormsby-Gore (second Baron Harlech, 1819-1904) in 1850. The portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1860 (no. 203) but after this date remained in the private collection of the Harlechs, at the family seat Glyn Cywarch, near Talsarnau in Wales. The various successive Barons Harlech played significant roles in British politics with the sixth Lord Harlech the influential British ambassador to Washington during the Kennedy administration (an intimate friend of the president and his wife, he was later an unsuccessful suitor of Jacqueline Kennedy). The painting remained at Glyn Cywarch until 2017.

**\$58,000**

for details 



Detail showing Admiral Seymour's flagship HMS Victory at anchor,

## SIGNIFICANCE TO AUSTRALIA

Seymour's main task as defined in 1844 was to resolve the question of Tahiti and in particular the "Pritchard Affair", the tense stand-off between British and French naval officers about the colonial future of Tahiti. This had significant implications for "not merely Tahiti but the whole of the Pacific" (Bach, *The Australia Station*, p. 26). It is to be remembered that until the events which Seymour's careful diplomacy set in train, the Pacific Station was based in far-distant Valparaiso.

Apart from the obvious significance of the Pacific Station in general, the repercussions of Seymour's activities in the Pacific would reshape the geopolitics of the Pacific, and certainly caused significant consternation in New South Wales; the recognition of French sovereignty over Tahiti was found to be so alarming that serious petitions were sent to Whitehall begging the government to reconsider. At the same time Seymour's actions impacted on the strong trade that had existed between Sydney and Tahiti since the days of the First Fleet.

Seymour was seen as a masterful diplomat, and returned to England in something like glory. However, while a few in Britain felt that a wrong step had been taken, it was really only in the Pacific that his decisions continued to be questioned, and only in Sydney – where some local politicians and traders looking further into the future saw the likely impact of ceding Tahiti to the French – that there was a real reluctance to accept what was otherwise the *fait accompli*.

Seymour not only witnessed, he was in a sense the midwife to, the creation of French Polynesia. His carefully conceived decision not to aggressively protect Tahiti against the French appalled policy hawks in Sydney, who made a strong case for armed intervention, petitioning Queen Victoria directly. In doing so they continued to express their anxiety about the apparent turning away of the British government.

To the closest stakeholders in the Pritchard Affair and the situation in the South Pacific – the colonial government in New South Wales – British recognition of French authority in Tahiti was both alarming and even incomprehensible: the events provided an important catalyst towards self-government (the first Legislative Assembly was sworn in a decade later in 1856).

One of the most significant long-term effects was that canny politicians began to imagine a future in which Australia took the lead in the entire region, because they foresaw that by effectively cutting the southern Pacific in half, a major realignment would have to take place. The loss of Tahiti, and indeed the fading influence of Valparaiso as centre of command for the Pacific Station, left the field open for Sydney.

This may have been well understood by the Admiralty: in 1848 Sydney was upgraded to hosting an "Australian Division" of the East Indies Station (prior to that having been only a remote outpost of the East Indies Station). Just a decade later, in 1859 the Australia Station was inaugurated. The shape of the Pacific had changed.

From our perspective, the hold that Tahiti had over early colonial Australia owed something to the centrality of Captain Cook in the late 18th and early 19th-century imagining of the Pacific, and understanding this takes into account the ways in which maritime voyaging and trade infused every aspect of colonial society.

Literally since the time of the First Fleet, Tahiti had loomed large for the Australian colonies, and there was a constant parade of merchant voyagers, whale-ships captains,

traders seeking their fortune with pork and sandalwood, as well as numerous other entrepreneurs who saw Sydney and Papeete as two linked ports. A flow of goods, people and information went back and forth, not least because of the Missionaries, for whom Tahiti became the obvious first headquarters, initially to proselytise to the Tahitians themselves, and then as the base for further outreach in the Pacific.

The ramifications of Seymour's visit, the fate of Pomare, and the ignominy of French rule in Tahiti, were all discussed at tremendous length in all of the Australian colonies, as can be sensed from a survey of the newspapers of the day. There are distinct phases to the reports, beginning with white-hot indignation in the early days, a certain complacency as Seymour and his great battleship are daily expected, followed by almost universal horror at the Admiral's submissive policy, all of it infused with chagrin that decisions of such obvious significance to Australia were being made without any consideration for Australian opinion (one can't help being reminded of Curtin's dismay with the decisions made by Churchill in 1941 and 1942).

In short, the fate of the Society Islands was discussed in Australia with a special urgency that went beyond simple anti-French enmity or any more broad-based defence of religion. There were town meetings, fiery proclamations, sentimental poems, and endless published letters.

Doubtless one of the neatest examples of the pro-Tahiti position was an ardent editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of April 1844, which began with a review of the apparently broken promises of the British government, before leading to this rousing call-to-arms:

*And, we would ask, ought the people of New South Wales to be idle spectators of these French outrages upon our hapless neighbours? The colony has carried on a commercial intercourse with the Tahitians for some forty or fifty years, and it seems only reasonable and proper that we should not see them crushed by the iron heel of foreign despotism, without some demonstration of our sympathy for their sufferings, and our abhorrence of their oppressors ('French Outrages at Tahiti', SMH, 30 April 1844).*

Around the same time, John Dunmore Lang (it is assumed that it is Lang who signs himself "JDL") even penned a poem called 'Pomare's Lament' (*The Australian*, 23 May 1844) which described Pomare denouncing how "pirates stole my pretty flag away, / While Britain stood -- and wept -- yet saw it done!" Letting go of the islands, ceding them to the French, genuinely felt like a betrayal of a close ally: it was personal in Sydney in a way that they simply could not convey to their political masters in England. Indeed, the fate of Pomare and ambitions of France were, a contemporary editorial in *The Australian* confirmed, the "theme of animated discussion in every circle in Sydney" ('The Colonial Policy of France - Dethronement of Queen Pomare', *The Australian*, 1 May 1844).

No 2 Admiral.  
Sir G. F. Seymour R. C. B.  
John Lucas.

Verso: signature of the artist John Lindsay Lucas [1807-1874] with inscription

## THE IMPACT ON SYDNEY: THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS ON TAHITI & THE PRITCHARD AFFAIR

The following is a short survey of some of the more important notices printed in the Australian Press, listed chronologically. Although a great deal could be added (both in terms of printed but also manuscript material) this review does provide a useful overview of the amount of attention being devoted to Tahiti, to the way in which a peculiarly Australian response developed from initial outrage, through a complacent belief that the British government would intercede, to reasoned and almost seditious talk that the remoteness of Whitehall was endangering religious and political freedom in the Pacific.

The fervour peaked around mid-1844, at the very point when the news from Tahiti was at its most serious, and when Seymour and the Collingwood were not only expected, but when it was firmly believed that they came to depose the French authorities in Polynesia and reassert British control. For many in Sydney this was deeply felt, with figures as diverse as the politician Richard Windeyer, the fiery radical John Dunmore Lang, or the missionary Lancelot Threlkeld ranged themselves in support of Pomare's resistance to the French.

Moreover, as can also be glimpsed in this list, it was in New South Wales more than any other single location that the economic ramifications of ceding the Society Islands were most fully articulated, not least because several strong supporters of continued resistance to French rule could not help looking back, as one of them stated at the time, to "commercial intercourse with the Tahitians for some forty or fifty years".

One of the more surprising aspects of this review is the unanimity of opinion, and the almost universal belief that Pomare had to be supported. Only one journal, the Morning Chronicle, actively criticised the consensus, and even they, as they admitted in an editorial on 13 July 1844, lost subscribers as a result.

'Extraordinary Proceedings at Tahiti' (Sydney Monitor, 3 December 1838): "some most extraordinary proceedings there on the part of the French nation, which we think can scarcely be allowed to pass unnoticed by the British Government."

M.M., 'Stanzas In Celebration of the glorious and heroic achievement of Monsieur le Capitaine du Petit Thoire (sic.)' (Commercial Journal and Advertiser, 8 December 1838): mocking doggerel on the French attack on Pomare.

'Buccaneering Extraordinary at Tahiti (True Colonist, 21 December 1838): "one of the most unheard of aggressions -- disgraceful in the highest degree..."

'Audi Alteram Partem' (The Australian, 16 March 1839): printing translations of comments printed in a Lyons-published Catholic journal.

'The Queen of Otaheite' (Australasian Chronicle, 13 September 1839): notice of Pomare.

'Another Outrage on Tahiti by another French Capitaine de Fregate' (The Colonist, 18 September 1839): "malign oppression and tyranny... indelible infamy" of the French.

Editorial (Australasian Chronicle, 20 September 1839): anti-Pritchard piece.

'The French again at Tahiti' (The Sydney Monitor, 20 September 1839): printing private letters from Tahiti.

'The French at Tahiti' (Sydney Gazette, 21 September 1839): defending Pritchard and Pomare.

'The Chivalrous La Place and his Popish Crusade' (The Colonist, 9 November 1839): bitter attack on the French Navy, with reference to recent events in Hawaii.

"Castigator", To the Editor (Australasian Chronicle, 25 February 1840): claiming that Pomare is the scapegoat of the missionaries.

'France and the Queen of Otaheite' (Southern Australian, 22 December 1840): "the abominable tyranny on the part of the French government" and the conditions under which Pomare labours. "Now, we think it imperative upon the Protestant public of Great Britain to demonstrate their sense of indignation and disgust..."

'Tahiti' (Sydney Herald, 11 September 1841): printing the new port regulations at Tahiti, signed Pomare.

Galignani, 'Affairs in Tahiti' (SMH, 13 February 1842): on Toup Nicolas and his conduct in Tahiti (including a letter by Nicolas' brother).

'The French at Tahiti' (SMH, 21 October 1842): "we deeply sympathise" with Pomare, and printing a long letter signed "JGS" on recent events in Tahiti, and the proclamation of French rule.

'French Aggressions in Tahiti' (Colonial Observer, 22 October 1842): "the French squadron... have again commenced their outrages on the peaceful islanders of Tahiti."

'The French in the Pacific' (SMH, 2 December 1842): new reports via the Sarah Anne, regarding new French attempts to make Pomare little more than a puppet.

'Expedition of HMS Vindictive' (SMH, 17 January 1843): the expected arrival of Capt. Toup Nicolas, and the sanguine hopes that the British government means business, including printing the 1827 George Canning statement of support sent in reply to King Pomare and his 1825 appeal to George IV.

'South Sea Islands' (Colonial Observer, 11 February 1843): noting Pomare's appeal to both England the USA for support.

'Tahiti' (SMH, 12 May 1843): on the Vindictive refusing to salute the French flag, and insisting that Pomare's be raised instead.

'Tahiti' (SMH, 21 June 1843): including reprinting a letter sent by Capt. Toup Nicolas to a friend in Tasmania, and his confidence that the so-called treaty between the French and Pomare will be considered "null and void" when it comes to be reviewed. The Capt. had also been active in gathering reports from many of the local worthies, and that he had arranged for Pomare to send a letter to Queen Victoria.

'Tahiti' (SMH, 12 August 1843): with notice of Toup Nicolas in Tahiti, and the dinner he held on board Vindictive.

'Occupation of Tahiti and the Marquesas by the French troops (SMH, 15 August 1843): printing a private letter from Marseilles, "the merchants of this extensive and commercial city are quite in extacy at the acquisition Admiral Dupetit Thours (sic.) ... has made, by placing Tahiti, and the whole of the Society Islands, or, more properly speaking the vast archipelago of Polynesia, under the protectorship of France...".

'Quarter Deck Diplomacy' (Austral-Asiatic Review, 27 October 1843): putting the problems in Tahiti in the context of the situation in Hawaii.

'The Queen of Tahiti to the Queen of England' (The Australian, 19 December 1843): printing the letter sent by Pomare (and mocking it a little).

'Otaheite' (SMH, 20 February 1844): printing material from the French Journal des Debats.

'Intrigues and Encroachments of France in the South Sea Islands' (Melbourne Weekly Courier, 23 March 1844): reprinting a very long piece from the Leeds Mercury (UK).

'French Outrages at Tahiti' (SMH, 30 April 1844): news from the schooner Sultana is "distressing and disgusting".

"... our own Government have dishonourably shrunk from their duty, and broken the plighted faith of the British Crown."

"And, we would ask, ought the people of New South Wales to be idle spectators of these French outrages upon our hapless neighbours? The colony has carried on a commercial intercourse with the Tahitians for some forty or fifty years, and it seems only reasonable and proper that we should not see them crushed by the iron heel of foreign despotism, without some demonstration of our sympathy for their sufferings, and our abhorrence of their oppressors."

'Auxiliary Wesleyan Missionary Society. Twenty-third Anniversary' (SMH, 1 May 1844): with notice of events in Tahiti.

'The Colonial Policy of France - Dethronement of Queen Pomare' (The Australian, 1 May 1844): "at a moment when the dethronement of Queen Pomare is the theme of animated discussion in every circle in Sydney...".

'Tahiti' (The Colonial Observer, 23 May 1844): news brought on HMS Hazard hastily scanned.

J.D.L. 'Pomare's Lament' (The Australian, 23 May 1844): this must be John Dunmore Lang. "Come night, and never-ending darkness, come!"

"But pirates stole my pretty flag away, / While Britain stood -- and wept -- yet saw it done!" The poem walks pretty close to sedition ("Alas! e'en Britain's Queen forgets her friend").

'French Proceedings at Tahiti -- Public Meeting' (SMH, 8 June 1844): extremely long piece with mention of the speeches, and notice of the local dignitaries who gave speeches. Windeyer MLC (it would be impossible for the citizens of NSW to go to war with France, but clearly didn't shrink from such an outcome); Sydney Stephen; JD Lang MLC; Rev Ralph Mansfield; Rev LE Threlkeld; etc. etc. Draft a petition to Queen Victoria in which they demur from any colonial ambitions but press for armed British support.

'The French at Tahiti' (The Australian, 8 June 1844): the Australian's version of the meeting, "numerous and highly respectable". The audience were "reminded of the important naval and military stations that the Society Islands must become...".

'Tahiti Meeting' (Morning Chronicle, 8 June 1844): the meeting was only remarkable for its "impertinence".

'Public Meeting -- French at Tahiti' (The Australian, 10 June 1844): regarding the Society Islands "with whose inhabitants this colony has for many years maintained an advantageous commercial intercourse."

'Queen Pomare' (The Colonial Observer, 13 June 1844): several ladies of Sydney have expressed a wish of sending a message of support to the "injured" Queen Pomare.

'French Aggressions in Tahiti' (The Colonial Observer, 13 June 1844): "We know of nothing more honourable to our Colony than the public meeting held in the City Theatre on Friday last...". The actions of the British government "disreputable".

'The Meeting of the Saints -- Exeter Hall Australiensis' (Morning Chronicle, 19 June 1844): highly critical of the pro-Pomare meetings.

'The Aborigines -- Mr Windeyer's Lecture' (Morning Chronicle, 22 June 1844): report on a lecture given by Windeyer, using his new enthusiasm for the Tahitians to criticise his lack of support for the rights of the Aborigines. A genuinely intriguing piece.

'The Seizure and Restitution of Otaheite' (SMH, 25 June 1844): reprinting for the colonial audience the review of the situation as reported in the London Times.

'French Politics and Party' (SMH, 29 June 1844): "What has become of the French... the French Admiral and the French Consul with the barbarous name, Marenhout (sic.), who shook his fist in the face of the poor pregnant Queen Pomare, and bullied her into an abdication!"

Letter to the editor (Morning Chronicle, 13 July 1844): Letter from David Jones & Co rescinding their subscription in light of the paper's "slandering the private conduct of the Queen of Tahiti", with an editorial note that they are printing this letter to stand for the many such they have received.

'French Doings at Tahiti' (The Australian, 6 August 1844): arrival of the ship John Byng with the very latest on Tahiti.

'Rear-Admiral Dupetit Thouars to the Minister of the Marine' (SMH, 28 August 1844): long notice of a letter written by the Admiral on board the Reine Blanche.

'Tahiti' (SMH, 28 September 1844): more journals have arrived from France.

'The Missionary Ship John Williams' (Launceston Examiner, 19 October 1844): history of the LMS, with notice of Pomare. 'The French at Tahiti' (Hawkesbury Courier, 31 October 1844): detailed assessment of the comparative naval forces of France and Britain in the Pacific.

'The French protectorate of Tahiti' (Hawkesbury Courier, 12 December 1844): discussion of the recent French "outrages", and highly conscious of the difficulty in judging events at the "antipodes".

'The French in Tahiti' (SMH, 2 January 1845): a great deal on the latest news of Lord Aberdeen and how Tahiti is being discussed in the UK.

'Arrangement of the Tahiti Affair' (SMH, 18 January 1845): a cautious editorial on the ambitions of France in the region, and clearly looking over their shoulder to consider what impact the settlement of NZ had had, especially in terms of the race to beat Dumont d'Urville.

'Shipping Intelligence' (The Courier, 1 March 1845): with an expectant listing of both the French and English ships then in Tahitian waters.

'The French Still at Tahiti' (The Australian, 1 May 1845): news received by schooner Ann, first substantial news since the arrival of the Coquette in February. Gives a good sense of the scene in the islands, the tight restrictions the French were placing on free movement. "Pomare was living in a miserable hut at Raiatea... The Europeans are considerably harrassed by the French authorities...".

'Tahiti' (Morning Chronicle, 3 May 1845)

'Tahiti and the French (The Australian, 3 July 1845): "Of what avail have been the representations of those who commiserate the fate of Queen Pomare? From England, it would seem, no protection is to come...". Speculates that Seymour's orders will be infected with the "apathy" of those in Great Britain and that the French have "succeeded by a coup de main in securing a spot from which to annoy the English colonies." Followed by a long letter from Tahiti signed "Verax", with a sombre appraisal of the serious efforts being taken by the French to consolidate their position.

'Doings of the French at Tahiti' (The Australian, 11 November 1845): the best part of a full page of the paper with an exceptionally detailed –and anxious – account of the situation at mid-1845. Decidedly of the opinion that Tahitian sentiment still lay with the British, but that the continued lack of political will is causing problems. This was perhaps the first notice that Seymour had saluted the French flag, and is full of dire prognostications, quite apart from a sense that the letter-writer wanted to convey a sense that Seymour agreed with the French authorities in their defence of the town of Papeete "to protect the town from the natives coming to disturb them...". The letter also underscores that Seymour was playing his cards very close, and that none of the local gossips yet had a settled opinion on precisely his intentions. "An Englishman is now worse off than before...".

"Of late years the talk was, the English Admiral will be here and protect the Queen. He has been here, and now our eyes are open."

There is a definite sense in this piece that the letter-writer believed that the French and British, at the highest levels at least, were mostly concerned with keeping any incipient militant action by the "natives" at bay.

'Tahiti' (Colonial Times, 26 December 1845): news received from Samoa which "narrates the whole of the unhappy transactions at Tahiti, and concludes with an earnest appeal that her property and dominions may be restored to her." States the belief that Governor Bruat begged Seymour that he not bring the Collingwood into anchor before an arrangement made that "the Tahitians might not be excited." Highly critical of Seymour's "submissive policy".

The letter also includes notice of Pritchard's arrival in Samoa, which gives the writer the note with which to return to his belief that British subjects across the Pacific will have reason to dread the impact of the capitulation in Tahiti (and which hints, that is, that places closer to home might yet be affected).

'Tahiti' (The Australian, 1 January 1846): "The natives are all very quiet, but they are evidently in a state of suspense and anxiety, as to the steps the English Government intends to take with reference to their affairs." Still not aware of Seymour's actual instructions.

'The South Sea Islands' (SMH, 4 February 1846): a bitter appraisal of the English abandonment of Pomare, and of Seymour's complicity in offending both honour and business acumen, all the while suggesting that to be party to such an abandonment of the pro-English forces was breaking the Admiral's heart. One (unnamed) Lieutenant on the Collingwood, given the task of reporting his meeting with several ardent supporters, quoted as saying "I know not how I can deliver my message, it will break the poor Admiral's heart to hear of such a warm attachment."

"To see such a Commander on the station is the only feature which tends to redeem the lost honour of England in the Pacific."

'A Traveller', 'The South Sea Islands' (Melbourne Courier, 16 February 1846): a long and much reprinted letter, with notice as published by Admiral Seymour himself.

"B", 'The British Seaman Weeping Over Tahiti' (The Sentinel, 19 February 1846): sentimental poem, using some of the familiar anti-slavery motifs to implicitly criticise British subjection: "The honours of his flag were torn / Away, by a Submissive Policy, / And Britain is aw'd to France and Popery..."

'Tahiti and Huahine' (SMH, 9 April 1846): "The news from those islands is important, as bearing upon the intentions of France, and the probable future condition of the natives." Again, this series of printed letters and commentary takes the better part of a full page of the paper. The first letter sets the tone for what follows: dated from Tahiti on 2 February 1846, it opines that since Seymour has left "events have transpired which can only find a parallel in revolutionary France -- events as cowardly as they are mean and ferocious." The letters include descriptions of some of the destruction that has been wrought in the ensuing conflict in Huahine, sheeting home the blame to French rule. "Never was national disgrace so complete as that of France in Polynesia."

'The Navy' (SMH, 15 April 1846): run down of events in Tahiti.

'The French at Tahiti' (The Sentinel, 16 April 1846): "Can any one of common sense peruse the following narrative of the 'doings' of the cowardly and treacherous French, without feeling indignation and shame that Great Britain, claiming the ambition and hitherto undisputed title of 'Mistress of the Seas', should passively tolerate such disgraceful proceedings?" Follows an account of the French forces under Capt. Bonard (Uranie) landing at Raiatea, and making an armed attack that was repulsed by a body of natives with support from some "Anglo-Saxon" settlers.

'French Occupation of Tahiti' (SMH, 30 June 1846): good overview of the situation since the sailing of Capt. Toup Nicolas on the Vindictive.

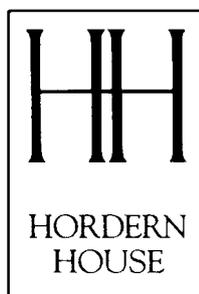
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## WEBSITES:

- [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#)
- [Colonial Secretary Papers \(NSW State Archives & Records\)](#)
- [Dictionary of Australian Artists Online](#)
- [history.state.gov](#) (especially the pages on "United States Maritime Expansion across the Pacific during the 19th Century")
- [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#) (especially the entries on the artists Lucas and Thomas, and the entry for Seymour himself)
- [Trove](#)





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