

C Y O'Connor, 1897



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph of Charles Yelverton O'Connor, originally taken in 1897 as a glass lantern slide by J A Clarke. It measures 17 cm x 22 cm. The photograph was taken in a studio and shows O'Connor in a posed position wearing his everyday working clothes and one of the hats that he commonly wore. He wears a black frock or morning coat (with tails), high necked shirt and tie, with a black vest (waistcoat) and light-coloured trousers. A fob watch chain is tied through a waistcoat buttonhole and leads into the waistcoat pocket where the watch sits.

Educational value

- This asset features Charles Yelverton O'Connor, Engineer-in-Chief of Western Australia from 1891 to 1902, a man of paintings and sculptures, than photographs of him - O'Connor and the state premier, Sir John Forrest, embarked on an ambitious program of public works during those years; John Forrest famously offered O'Connor the position with responsibility for 'Railways, harbours, everything'; O'Connor's term coincided with WA's gold boom and the infrastructure he established laid the foundations for today's modern state; he was responsible for the 560-km pipeline delivering water to Western Australia's parched eastern gold fields and for the construction of Fremantle Harbour, which are recognised as being the two most significant engineering works of the time.
- It is a photograph that was taken at the pinnacle of O'Connor's engineering profession - Irish-born O'Connor spent 26 years in New Zealand before accepting the position of Western Australia's chief engineer; born in 1843, O'Connor was articled to a leading railway engineer at the age of 17; the death of his parents coincided with an economic downturn in Ireland and in 1864 the young civil engineer left for better prospects in New Zealand; O'Connor's experience in New Zealand in building railways and harbours was to stand him in good stead in Western Australia.



Categories: Key Players

- It is one of very few photographs taken of Western Australia's most famous engineer - O'Connor did not seek publicity; there are no photographs of O'Connor with Premier John Forrest, for example, despite the significance of their partnership in developing Western Australia; they did, however, frequently appear together in newspaper cartoons lampooning the ambitious scheme to pump water from the coast to WA's arid interior; there are more images of O'Connor made after his death, in the film taken in life.
- It is the portrait of C Y O'Connor that accompanied his bibliographical details in 'Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia' - this 1901 encyclopaedic publication provided people overseas with information about the state; O'Connor features in an entry on the Public Works Department as the 'professional head of the Department'; 'Mr O'Connor will always be associated with two great public works in Western Australia [those being] the Fremantle Harbour Works, and the Coolgardie Water Scheme'; although O'Connor is credited with the planning of these works, he never claimed credit for the idea, stating he had examined several possibilities and only a pipeline was practicable.
- It is an image that fascinates and inspires writers and artists - this is possibly due to O'Connor's untimely death and the intrigue surrounding it; C Y O'Connor committed suicide on 10 March 1902, before his most famous engineering work, the 560-km water pipeline, was completed; writers have claimed O'Connor's eyes have a haunted look about them in this picture, and a song about him written by Bernard Carney is entitled 'The Eyes of the Engineer'; artists, including leading WA artist Robert Juniper, have reproduced this image in paintings; Robert Drewe has him as a character in his book 'The Drowner'.
- It shows the Engineer-in-Chief in his working clothes - a waistcoat and coat tails were expected in the rather formal times at the end of the Victorian era; O'Connor, however, usually preferred lighter, more dapper clothes than the black worn by the professional classes; typically he is wearing one of his wide felt hats, reportedly made for him in London to fit his larger than average head; a photograph taken in the same year shows C Y O'Connor in much more formal clothes, holding a tri-cornered hat, for his investiture in London as a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in recognition of his work.

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