**James John Gegan, 1821–1889**

A painter born in 1821 at Maidstone, Kent, as elder son of James Gegan (1784 –1872) and his wife Ann (*c.*1788–1835): he was baptised there on 29 June. His father was a carver, gilder, plumber, house and sign painter working at Rochester and Maidstone from 1806 and himself son of a John James Gegan (*c.*1751–1818). At the 1851 census James John was noted as ‘assistant’ to his widowed father and, with his younger brother George (a wood carver and cabinet maker, aged 28), was living with him in Bank Street. In 1861 he was still there but noted as an ‘Artist – landscape painter’.

The Maidstone family premises were also a frame-maker’s shop as well as being where one could find other decorating services. John James Gegan was noted as a Maidstone shopkeeper in 1789, but Gegan’s as a printseller and frame-maker at 75 Bank Street (which still stands in other use) is reported to have been started by son James in 1818 and became a principal one for prosperous residents in the area. In 1844, an article in the *Maidstone Journal* (13 February) shows that ‘Mr. Gegan’s, Bank-street’ was by then the local outlet for prints published by the Art Union of London and presumably others. It was still in business for art sales and framing in 1900, under William George Gegan, and a photo of it in that year is reproduced by Irene Hales in *Maidstone Through Time*, (2009, electronic ed. 2013).

By the early 1840s, and however trained, James John Gegan was a practised oil painter of local landscape subjects. Between 1844 and 1849 he exhibited one Kentish view a year at the Society of British Artists, of which only what may be the last – of ‘Eridge Park, Tunbridge Wells’ (54 x 76.8 cm) – has been recently seen at sale. Two more followed in 1859 and 1860, respectively a view on the Medway at Burham (priced at £20) and of Rochester Castle (£10). He was probably also the ‘F.J. Gegan’ who showed one of ‘Bidborough, Tonbridge’, at the RA in 1848 but the sole example on Art UK is a view of ‘Maidstone from the College Hop Garden’, dated 1860 and now in the Maidstone collection.

Some prints after him were also made: a wood-engraving of Maidstone Bridge has been sighted and a good lithograph (from ‘a large oil painting’) that formed the frontispiece to an 1861 Kent guide called *Round Bout Kit’s Coty House*, shows the wider setting of that megalithic structure. This may have been a picture (or a version) done earlier, since an article in the *Maidstone Journal* of 26 August 1851 lists a similar one then in his studio, among others then noted. They included ‘Allington Castle at sunset, Kit’s Coty House at sunset, Eridge Park, Rochester Bridge, a moonlight scene, and sundry other pieces which indicate talent, originality and careful study in the painter.’ The subjects suggest that some of these may have been his exhibited pieces.

Gegan’s most ambitious work was a large canvas called ‘A Dream of Human Life’, approximately 12 x 8 feet (so apparently portrait format). It took him a year to paint but reportedly as the outcome of many previous ones of thought, arising from inspiration in a ‘veritable dream’. It was first exhibited at Oxford, where he was then living, and a detailed description in the *Maidstone Journal* of 31 May 1869 shows it was a work of moral purpose. It comprised literally hundreds of figures of all ages, nations, occupations and sizes, in various hierarchies of religious, governmental, military, social, family and character order, and exhibiting both the virtue and vices of humanity, with the aim of encouraging the former. That suggests it both followed prior 19th-century ‘all-human-life-is-there’ views at various scales and the older practice (pioneered in the late-18th century by J.S. Copley) of commercially exhibiting dramatic large single paintings in tents or halls.

Whether Gegan’s was an entry-fee display is not clear and it may not have been, since by July 1870 his picture was in the Charles Museum, Maidstone, a forerunner of the present Maidstone Museum and Bentlif Art Gallery. The basis on which it went there is uncertain, and the last press mention of it yet produced is in 1882. While a catalogue record gives the exact dimensions as 146 x 88 inches it is ‘historically missing’, with no further details known.

In the first quarter of 1869 – the year he finished it, Gegan married in Hackney, east London, to Elizabeth Ann Cooper. The daughter of James Cooper, a tailor, and his wife Elizabeth (née Savage) she was born at Framlingham, Suffolk and baptised there on 23 January 1823. By 1861 she was working as a governess at Leeds, Kent. Given that it took Gegan a year to do his painting, and apparently in Oxford, he seems to have moved there before starting it and marrying. At the 1871 census he and Elizabeth were at 54 Kensington Gardens Square, London. In 1881 they were back in Maidstone (where his will, made in 1879, shows he had rented-out property interests) living at 30 King Street, with a lodger in the house. They later returned to Oxford where he died at 5 Hereford Terrace on the Iffley Road on 3 October 1889, leaving a probably deceptive ‘personal estate’ of only £37– 4 shillings at probate. They had no children so the W.G. Gegan still trading as a frame-maker at Bank Street, Maidstone, in 1900 was probably a nephew. Elizabeth subsequently lived with her widowed brother, James, in London and died in Hampstead on 7 November 1906.

One of the paintings that passed through W.G. Gegan’s hands – perhaps only for framing reasons – was George Stubbs’s ‘Portrait of a large dog [dingo]’, possibly with its more famous pair of a ‘Kongouroo’, though only the former bears his 75 Bank Street printed paper label on the back. Both were painted for Sir Joseph Banks after he accompanied Cook’s first Pacific voyage in the *Endeavour* (1768–71) and are now in the National Maritime Museum.

*Summarised from Art UK discussion of Gegan’s ‘Maidsstone from the College hop garden’ in Maidstone Museum and the Bentlif Art Gallery*

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