

# CRAZY—OR INSPIRED?

## *The "Problem" Paintings of William Dobell*

THE art storm which has been raging round William Dobell in Sydney has now reached New Zealand. Reproductions of the portrait which started the commotion have appeared in New Zealand newspapers, and correspondents have written asking why. "If that is art," one of them said, "save us from it," while another declared that "distortion in portraiture is a confession of incompetence," ranking with the oaths used by the vulgar who lack skill to express their feelings in good English.

Well, New Zealand has other reasons for being interested. If Dobell has not worked in New Zealand, he has worked for New Zealand, as the reproduction on this page of one of his murals indicates.

He has also worked with New Zealand. One of his fellow-students in London, where he spent four years, was the Wellingtonian, Fred Coventry, whose mother (Mrs. E. Coventry), told us when we called on her that "Fred valued Dobell both as a friend and as an honest and high-minded artist"; and the proof of the second statement is the fact that Dobell was invited to help Coventry with his New Zealand murals at the Centennial Exhibition, and would have done so had he not been pre-engaged for the Australian Court.

### **Influence of Orpen?**

Nor must those who think Dobell's recent portrait (shown on this page) freakish suppose that he has gone queer suddenly. The Australian judges did not think him queer, or they would not have given him a £500 prize; but queer or not queer, crazy or sane, he is to-day what he has been for several years, only more so. That will be plain to anyone who examines the "Portrait of a



The portrait (left) by William Dobell which, by being awarded the Archibald Prize of £500, has started such a controversy in art circles; and (right), the subject of the painting, Joshua Smith, a fellow artist



Strapper," which we reproduce from a 1942 issue of *Art in Australia*. The portrait of Joshua Smith, a fellow artist, is in the direct line of descent from several earlier portrait studies—and perhaps descends from Orpen himself (in his later phases), from whom Dobell had lessons in London.

Anyhow, Dobell can defend himself. Though he remained silent under criticism for a week or two, the attempt of a Melbourne group of objectors to secure an injunction against the handing over of the prize money brought him at last to the microphone. Speaking with some warmth from Station 2FC, Sydney, he rebuked what he called "his uninformed critics," and went on:

*"The comments on the picture are obviously from an average slice of the public, which resents anything new. The people who criticised it didn't wait to find out what I was trying to do. They must have noticed it differed from an actual photograph of Joshua Smith, and they objected. People of this type expect a portrait to be simply a coloured photograph, and they would restrict the artist to*

*painting things just as they would expect them to appear. I claim the right to paint things in my own way —If I didn't, the work would lack interest."*

### **Learnt in a Hard School**

Those who remember the storm aroused by Orpen's dead soldier will perhaps suspect that Dobell is a disciple as well as a pupil. He is certainly qualified by personal experience to take his own line and tell his own story. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he is the son of a Newcastle (New South Wales) bricklayer; he trained as an architect, and was employed as a draughtsman when he won the New South Wales Society of Artists' Travelling Scholarship in 1929. He studied at the Slade School in London, and won most of the prizes that could be won there. He was also privately tutored by Sir William Orpen, and made the scholarship money, calculated to last two years, spin out for four, during which he lived in a basement and illustrated love stories for magazines to help him continue his studies. He is 44, and is an official artist for the Allied Works Council.



Visitors to the Australian Court at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition will recall this mural, by Dobell and Kilgour



"Portrait of a Strapper," by Dobell: Reproduced from "Art in Australia,"