

# DISCOURAGEMENT IS BEST FOR THE ARTIST!

**"DISCOURAGEMENT** rather than encouragement is the best thing for the artist, I think. Just look at America. They stimulate and encourage art there as hard as they can—they do a tremendous lot of that sort of thing—but they don't produce any more artists."

The speaker was the New Zealander Roland Wakelin, honoured last year for his services to Australian art, who is home on a short visit after 35 years in Sydney, and he was answering *The Listener's* question: Can there be such a thing as killing art with kindness?

The occasion was a reunion of many of Wakelin's old friends at the studio of the Wellington artist "Barc." When *The Listener* arrived "Barc" was sitting in a chair by the window while Wakelin was standing in his shirt-sleeves before an easel, hard at work on a portrait of her. "This picture won't be for sale," he said, as he put his brushes away and scraped the paint from his palette. "It's just something between ourselves."

Wakelin is a fairly short, thick-set man with a domed forehead and swept-back grey hair. He was wearing a blue suit and you would say he looked more like a prosperous business man than a professional artist. As he offered cigarettes around he said, "I usually smoke a pipe myself, but I found I couldn't get any pipe tobacco here so I bought these—for half the price I would pay for them in Sydney." He went out to wash his hands and "Barc" showed us the pictures he had brought over with him. We remarked on the rich and warm tones of a portrait in oils. "Mr. Wakelin is known as Sydney's leading colourist," she said.

## An Ordinary Chap

When we asked the artist himself what it felt like to gain recognition after so many years of struggle, Wakelin said, "I really don't feel that I'm any of those things an artist ought to be. I mean, most people have a sort of idea

as to what artists should be like, but I still feel just an ordinary chap. You see, when I first left New Zealand I was a nobody. And for nearly 20 years after I arrived in Australia it was the same. No one would buy my pictures. Then I held a one-man exhibition—it was about 1934, I think—and I suddenly realised that I had 'arrived.' Nearly every picture was sold, and ever since then I seem to have had pretty general recognition over there. Last year I was awarded the Society of Artists' Medal for services to Australian art. I forget exactly how it was worded, but it was something like 'for his services in bringing the contemporary art movement to the notice of the Australian public.'"

"Are you considered a 'modernist' then?"

"Well, of course part of the trouble in my early days was that I had modelled myself on men like Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. I suppose I was considered a bit too advanced for Australian art in those days. Then, after many years, the public began to appreciate my work. Perhaps something of that idea was behind the award."

We were interrupted at this point by some more arrivals. Nugent Welch was the first, and he greeted Wakelin exuberantly. We discovered that they had been students together at the Wellington Technical College before the First World War. After Wakelin went to Sydney, Welch stayed on in New Zealand and eventually became the official war artist with the First N.Z.E.F. Among the others who arrived were H. H. Tombs, T. A. McCormack and Stewart MacLennan. Welch and Wakelin began to exchange reminiscences about their student days and mentioned how they had founded the old Sketch Club in a room above a bicycle shop in Lambton Quay. They discussed other artists who had gone over to Australia, among them Tom Smith, Linley Richardson, George Garland, and Maud Sherwood. Wakelin told how he had gone frequently to Maud Sherwood's studio in Sydney when she formed a sketch club for students. She would



Spencer Digby photograph

ROLAND WAKELIN—"I really don't feel that I'm any of those things an artist ought to be."

arrange for a model to be there and all those who came to sketch her would pay a bob in to cover the modelling fees.

Somebody asked him about the Dobell affair, when the 1944 prize-winning portrait of Joshua Smith was denounced by a section of the public.

"Well, the whole business was greatly exaggerated at the time, of course. Now it has died down and Dobell seems to be having quite an influence on younger artists. He still paints in the same distinctive style, though personally I don't think he is as modern as some people think. He seems rather to go back to Rembrandt."

"What would you say are the present trends of Australian art?"

"I think that soon there will be a genuine school of Australian painting with typical Australian characteristics. Just before the war many students came back from Europe bringing all the latest *avant garde* ideas—men like Eric Wilson and Dobell himself—and they caused much experimentation and helped to get Australian art out of the rut of conformity and tradition. They have had a kind of liberating influence, and though things are still a bit mixed at the moment there is a strong national movement. I think Russell Drysdale is doing some very important work. He has gone out into the country—into the backblocks and the desert—and has done many pictures of the results of erosion and such things. He has captured the atmosphere of terrible heat,

dust and wind that you get in those areas. It is something characteristically Australian."

"What do you think of the present tendency to use aboriginal motives in art? Is it just a fad, or something genuinely important?"

"Margaret Preston is about the only painter using aboriginal themes. Personally I don't agree with her ideas. She has merely got a new source of inspiration, and I don't think you can found an Australian school of art by going back to the past of the aboriginals."

Wakelin is at present staying with his brother in Upper Hutt and during his three weeks in New Zealand intends to get in as much painting as he can.

"That's one reason why I'm in Upper Hutt. There's some wonderful landscape out there. I was very thrilled when we came into Wellington harbour the other morning. It was early, with some mist about the hills, and it all seemed to me to make a magnificent picture. They say that Sydney has the harbour as far as picturesqueness goes, but I think Wellington's has its own kind of beauty, too. But the city itself seems a bit shabby after Sydney, as if it needed a coat of paint."

After renewing old acquaintances in Wellington, he hopes to make a short trip to Greytown, where he was born, and also show his wife—an Australian on her first visit to New Zealand—something of the South Island before their return to Australia in November.



MARGARET PRESTON—"She has merely got a new source of inspiration."