

ARTISTS LOOK AT WAR



AIR VICE-MARSHAL CONINGHAM
Pastel by Eric Kennington

ART happens, some one said, but taste grows. Unfortunately wars also happen, and when they do normally destroy art as well as artists, and confuse taste for two or three generations. But that is not the case with the present war, or with the work of the artists now on exhibition in the New Zealand National Gallery. Every picture in the collection is a picture of war. Every artist worked in an atmosphere of war, and in nearly all cases on war's actual field. The portraits are studies of airmen, of soldiers, or of sailors. The landscapes show battered buildings or battered cities; the seas are churned by racing warships or by high explosive; the skies are filled with bursting shrapnel or raked by searchlights. It is total war on canvas, on boards, and on paper. But as H. V. Morton points out in an eloquent foreword to the official catalogue, it is British art made suddenly real:

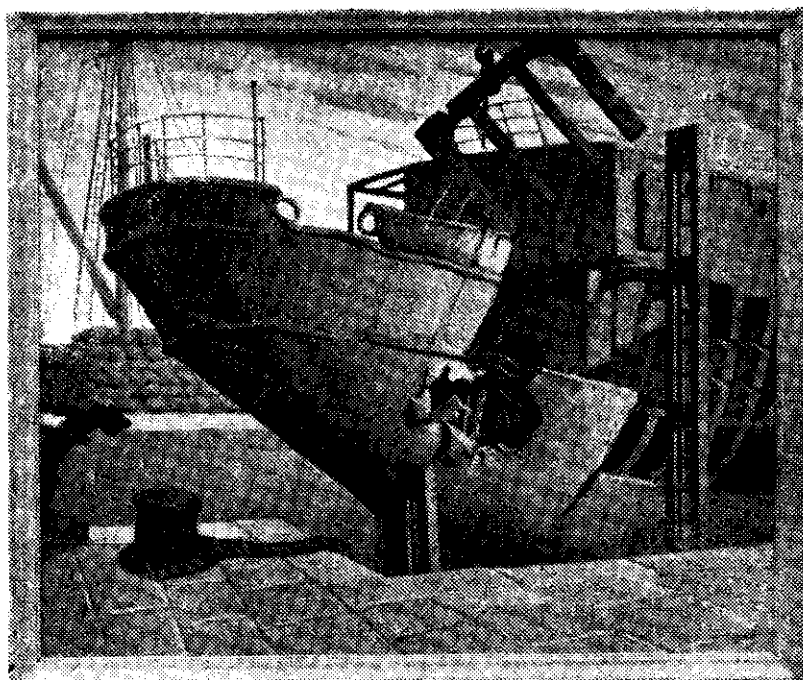
"For many years British artists have had nothing to paint. The walls of the Royal Academy were annually invaded by the same landscapes; the same unclothed maidens standing in the same pool; the same lobster on the same plate; the same flattered peeresses; and the same idealised peers. It was obvious that theme was secondary to technique. Now, for the first time for many a year, our artists have been plunged violently into life. These pictures are the first fruit of their experience. There is nothing fanciful about them, they are all the result of observation and of feeling. If it be true that the artist should be the son of his time, then our painters may be thought lucky in their generation, for their stern parent has provided a theme for their brushes and their pencils upon the earth."

Two New Zealanders

And what is true of Great Britain is true, though in a more restricted sense, of New Zealand. War has brought reality to our own artist as well as to artists overseas. Peter McIntyre, New Zealand

official war artist at present in the Middle East, is responsible for Numbers 98-107. Austin Deans, who would have been an official artist if he had not been wounded in Crete and taken prisoner the day his appointment went through orders, is responsible for Numbers 108-123. In both cases everything now on exhibition was done in the field among our own soldiers, and is in fact their story. To that extent therefore New Zealand art has escaped, just as Britain's has, from idealistic nonsense to the very stuff of life.

It would on the other hand be foolish to pretend that these two New Zealanders, working alone and in such difficulties, have produced any of the outstanding work in this outstanding collection. They have not. But they have produced competent work, work that is alive, that puts our soldiers on permanent record, and gets their background more vividly into our minds. A critic would say of McIntyre's work that it is too slick to be quite true, too much manner and not enough matter; magazine work rather than work that will last. He would say of Deans's that he stands up with difficulty to such a shattering test



THE BRITISH CHANCELLOR IN DRY DOCK
Oil painting by Harry Morley

as facing the Nash Brothers and Eric Kennington; that he is young, and has some distance yet to go. But he is a poor pedant who goes to this exhibition to criticise or air either his knowledge or his opinions. People with wholesome minds will go to see and to feel and to ponder, and because we are New Zealanders in New Zealand, and do think first of our own soldiers, most of us will get as much out of the New Zealand corner as out of any other; many of us more.

However, readers of *The Listener* know what Deans and McIntyre have done. They know what the subjects are, and they have seen reproductions of the picture that have most significance: "Parachutists Landing on Galatos," "Maadi Camp," "Alert at Dawn," and so on. Now they may see the originals.

But New Zealand has never seen such a collection as the hundred impressions now available to us of the war as it appears to Robert Austin and Muirhead Bone, to Roger Furse and Ethel Gabain, to Keith Henderson, Edmond Kapp, Eric Kennington, and a dozen others—John and Paul Nash, for example, Harry Morley, Roy Nickolds, Cuthbert Orde, R. V. Pitchforth, or the Pole, Feliks Topolski. We have never seen them because they were impossible even in Britain before the era of total war, and we shall not forget them because few, if any of us, have ever before seen work of this standard. Take, for example, the chalk and wash drawing on our cover: "The Return from Dunkirk," by Sir Muirhead Bone. We have been able to retain only a blurred impression of its poetry and power, but everybody after seeing the original will feel Dunkirk as he has never

(Continued on next page)



ST. ANNE'S, SOHO
Watercolour by R. V. Pitchforth