

To Live by Painting

ERIC LEE-JOHNSON, with a biographical introduction by E. H. McCormick, edited by Janet Paul; Paul's Book Arcade, Hamilton, 18/6. Published in Great Britain by Phoenix House, London.

(Reviewed by Helen Shaw)

THE story of the painter Eric Lee-Johnson, by E. H. McCormick, is a moving account of the artist's colonial lineage, New Zealand boyhood, study at the Elam School of Art, exacting years as a commercial artist in London, and return to New Zealand in 1938 to paint, aged thirty, and in poor health. It is the study of a struggle to live by painting alone, of a painter coming to terms with his very considerable talent and coming to terms with it not as an expatriate but in an equally hard way here in New Zealand, in the North—"the territory he has made so peculiarly his own."

After two years in a sanatorium Lee-Johnson took leave of the commercial art world and, living with his wife and children in primitive cottages at such places as Piha, Mahurangi and Rawene, began to create a stark and lonely landscape of omniscient, Blake-like mountain



"SUNDAY AFTERNOON," by Eric Lee-Johnson (1947)—water colour and ink

peaks, fantastic driftwood, derelict old wooden houses and tortured trees consumed by the destroyer fire. There are very few leaves on Lee-Johnson's trees. One is impressed by the awful yet stub-

born raffertiness of everything man-made in his paintings—the flimsy cottage, symbol of security, in the brutal picture *The Kindling*, the houses in *Foreshore, Rawene*, looking like some-

thing washed up by the sea, and the tumble-down bridge with its two eternally long wavy planks leading into the old wooden hotel in the line drawing *Opononi Hotel*, even the more solid looking sunlit verandah in *Hokianga Family*, where a very different technique has been used.

Others painting in the same genre have merely been intrigued by the pattern of decay, have seen in old New Zealand buildings only the decorative surface, but Lee-Johnson sees time actively working and in a picture like *Kohu Kohu* paints with such intensity as to suggest the ghost or spirit within. His best work, and he is a fine draughtsman, has something in it no school of art can teach, something only the Creator can put into a man. As Mr. McCormick says, "He paints from deep understanding and from love."

One of the five colour plates, *Seaworn Stone, Shell and Wood*, was reproduced more beautifully in the *Arts in New Zealand Year Book*, in 1946. However, this is a well-produced book, a valuable monograph, quite a landmark. Janet Paul, in a thoughtful Editor's Note, hopes, rightly, that it will be the first of a series.

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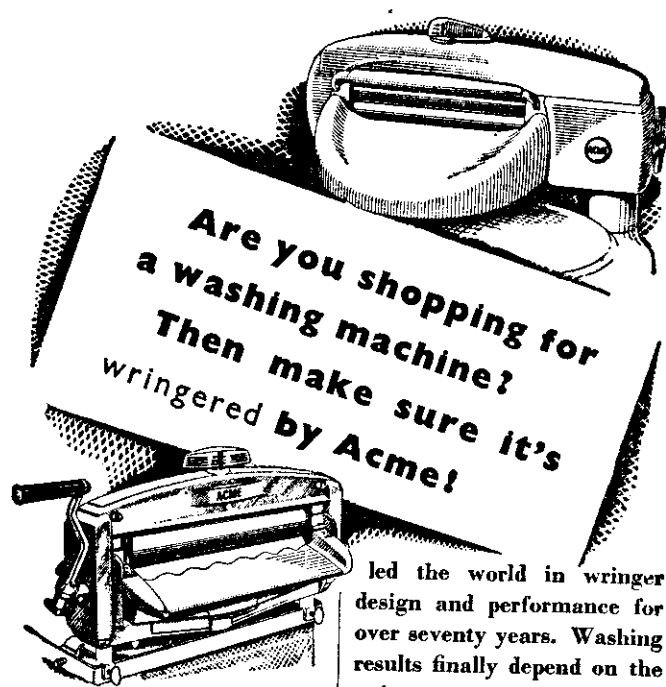
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