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## Books

# ENGLISH PAINTING

MODERN ENGLISH PAINTERS, by John Rothenstein; Eyre and Spottiswoode, English price 35/-.

(Reviewed by A. R. D. Fairburn)

As a chronicler, Sir John Rothenstein is a worthy son of his father, the indefatigable cuff-jotter of the Café Royal. It is evident from the first page onward that this book, like the preceding volume of 1952, is no afterthought of Sir John's career: one can see behind it the ubiquitous notebook in which every detail has been recorded for later use. For this conscientious exercise of the biographer's function we can feel nothing but gratitude. As we read onward we are made constantly aware how much that is of interest, casual or crucial, might have gone down the drain for ever if Sir John had not been around.

Most fortunately, again, our chronicler is a man fully qualified in every way for the task he has undertaken. His knowledge of art is deep and wide, his taste sound. It is not always that a fine sensibility is so firmly underpinned by common sense. Alongside of these qualities he possesses others that are useful, not the least of them being his ability to write interestingly without resorting to triviality. In revealing intimate details of the lives of his subjects he never becomes gossipy, and keeps his sense of proportion. In the end it is our understanding and appreciation of the work that matters more than our interest in the man: he uses the more narrowly biographical material to that end.

In looking at the names of the sixteen painters of this particular age-group that Sir John has chosen to discuss, one feels that another art historian



SIR JOHN ROTHENSTEIN

might have chosen differently—but not very differently. This book is not intended to be a history of the period. It is simply a collection of individual essays about sixteen modern English painters whose work, in the author's judgment, is of more than ephemeral interest. As such, it is certainly important documentation of the history of the period. The author has lost nothing by refraining from an attempt at a more closely-integrated treatment of his material. On the contrary, in this he shows his wisdom. It is too soon for the history of this period to be written, for we are still up to our waists in it.

It is good to see Wyndham Lewis and that fine but underrated painter Stanley Spencer given such full and sympathetic treatment. Good, too, to learn more about J. D. Innes. His life was unspectacular, and his death at twenty-seven, eighteen days after the outbreak of the 1914 war, was swallowed up in the larger catastrophe. Looking back from this distance we have a sharp sense of loss, a regret that he "died too early to infuse his own poetic spirit into English painting."

Sir John is not one of your mealy-mouthed recorders. He says what he thinks, not as an exercise in egotism, but in order to give shape and direction and firmness of outline to his criticism. For instance, on turning the first page of the book we witness a heavy artillery attack on "Bloomsbury." There can be little doubt that his accusations are well-founded. It was the effiteness of this group that helped to give English culture such an anaemic look between the wars. "Reputations are made, and to an extent far greater than the public appreciates, by members of gangs acting in close support of one another," he warns us, and it is important to keep in mind that this sort of gang activity still goes on. It is difficult to suspect Sir John of being mixed up in it when he includes such an essentially mediocre painter as Duncan Grant in his survey; thus, it may be suggested, laying himself open to the charge of leaning over backward too far to avoid being accused of prejudice.

His discussion of the limitations of abstract painting is refreshing, although in the course of demonstrating that Sir Herbert Read talks nonsense on occasion he appears to go too far towards a "non-metaphysical" view, and even to misunderstand the relationship of Plato's ideas to the classical aesthetic. But his essay on Ben Nicholson, in the course of which he deals with these matters, is full of horse sense. One must admire statements so tersely to the point as this: "Recognition of formal harmonies

and hard mathematical structure is a tool, no doubt the major tool, of the painter's craft. But we use tools to make things; it is not self-evident that their proper or their best use is to engrave statements about themselves, about what sorts of tools they are."

## FOOTSTEPS IN THE NORTH

TIDES OF HOKIANGA, by Cecil and Celia Manson; Wingfield Press, Wellington.

THIS is one of the growing number of books about New Zealand that presents life today in some particular region against a background of the past. There is no doubt about it, the Mansons convey the look and feel of modern Northland as readily as they uncover the romantic or tragic or humorous happenings of days before the dairy farms and butter factories. It is good that New Zealanders are becoming more and more interested in these aspects of our country and its history. And it is good that writers are giving time to research in order to portray the past truly.

Of a book so readable, and one that so surely brings the past to life, it is perhaps not quite fair to expect greater depth of focus in its picture of the present. The authors emphasise the peace and plenty of the present in contrast with the turbulence of the past. But what of the greater part of Hokianga's population—the Maori, those who came here because of Kupe's return? Many who live near to these people take a very dim view of policies that threaten to decimate old-established rural communities and pack off the surplus, young and old, to the towns. Is there some connection between this lack of land, this lack of work, this broken communal integrity, and the so-called "crime waves" around Hokianga's shores?

This book does not even hint at such problems. Perhaps it is enough that these river people should be so delightfully portrayed in the chapter about the cream launch, and that their nearness to the past should be shown so clearly in the simple remark of one old man speaking of Hokianga's sandhills: "I blame that chap Kupe, mind you. I reckon he's responsible. . . They say he burnt the forest and let the sand drift in."

And it's good, too, to find these writers devoting a page of appreciation to the beauty and the usefulness of the mangroves. How imagine Hokianga's tides without the mangroves?

—Roderick Finlayson

## WISH-FULFILMENTS

PIANISSIMO, by Francoise Faber; Hamish Hamilton, English price 11/6. THE PRINCE AND PETRONELLA, by John Brophy; Chatto and Windus, English price 8/6. UP HOME, by Ardyth Kennelly; Victor Gollancz, English price 15/-. THE CARDI COMES HOME, by Margot James; Jonathan Cape, English price 15/-.

WHEN the Mormon settlements abandoned polygamy they laid the seeds of Ardyth Kennelly's *Up Home*, a book which should succeed with those who care for stories of homebodies and their problems because they get twice the value for their money: two homes, one father. Since father and both his families are Mormons of the nineties the book should succeed with those who like stories of the American sub-cultures. It should appeal to the nostalgic I-Remember-Mama and Life-with-Father readers. It has tears and laughter and what is sometimes called rich characterisation. Entering a mild dissent I beg to say that I found this homely book heavy, formless, and dull.

Heaviness is not something to be charged to *The Prince and Petronella*, (continued on next page)

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