



POPULAR ART IN NEW ZEALAND

OVER the past ten years I have driven very often between Dunedin and Central Otago. On these lonely drives I found myself watching for, and counting the miles between, certain odd little examples of popular art that were to be seen along that road.

There was, for instance, a cottage chimney at East Taieri cheerily decorated with a large painted blue thistle. The saddler's shop at Lawrence was identified by a shop-sign—the model of a white horse. The door of an apple-packing shed near Ettrick was decorated with the half-length painting of a Maori chief surrounded by a wreath of leaves. Over the years I watched this figure slowly being rubbed out by the action of wind and rain. A poltergeist hand—painted in a curiously 19th century idiom—pointed the way from the main street of Roxburgh—"To the Baths." A mile or so further on, near Coal Creek, a fallen tree trunk had been enlivened by a face added to its rounded bole. Up in the high hills towards Alexandra a painted white swan swam happily upon a rock. When Alexandra was reached I was welcomed by an old-fashioned backdrop scene of an imaginary Central Otago Lake painted on the end wall of the butcher's shop. The same elderly itinerant artist, a Mr Arthur Rooney, had decorated the near-by milk-bar with a frieze of little logs spelling out the words—"Milk Shakes." On the other road to the coast, if I stopped at Macrae's Flat to eat an excellent lunch at Stanley's Hotel, I could see above the stone door-lintel an inn-sign, a crowing cock, with the cheerful caption—"While I live I'll crow." His rooster has out-lived Mr Stanley, who has been dead these many years.

By MARGARET M. DUNNINGHAM

These little signs and objects may be of slight importance and little artistic value, but I have always enjoyed seeing them because they have seemed to me to be evidence that New Zealand is not entirely without popular art. Central Otago has never forgotten the lively days of its gold-rush origins. The district has maintained a tradition of exuberance and *joie de vivre* in contrast to the Puritanical tradition of the coastal settlements. I doubt if a journey of 120 miles taken anywhere else in New Zealand would yield so good a crop of objects of popular art.

A week or so ago I made the journey to Alexandra again. I see that I am speaking of things that are past, or passing. Alas! There is no longer a Maori chieftain surrounded by a wreath of leaves. The apple-packing shed-door has finally been repainted. The poltergeist hand has been removed from the lamp-post in Roxburgh. The butcher's shop fresco and the milk-bar frieze in Alexandra still remain. I can hardly say that these paintings are of high artistic value, but they are not without the charm which belongs to genuine popular art. The elderly artist had obviously enjoyed doing them and had felt that he was sharing his enjoyment of the Southern Lakes with the people of Central Otago.

Popular art has been defined as "the art which ordinary people have introduced into their lives for their own pleasure." People usually create this kind of art for themselves, but sometimes they manage to impose their own

tastes on the products of the craftsman or the machine. True popular art is distinguished by its *vitality*, which makes up for imperfections of execution and even errors of taste. The popular or traditional artist has that "innocent eye" which has now become more and more rare. What is so engaging about these Central Otago examples is that they have a quality of 19th century *brio* and a sort of innocence.

They are relics of an age when people were less afraid to assert their individuality, when they made things for themselves. In the past it was easier for people to talk firmly to the machine. Today the machine talks to us and we don't answer back. We allow our tastes to be decided for us by mass production. The present-day counterpart of traditional popular art may be the pin-up girl above the bunk or the "cheese-cake" picture incongruously decorating the calendar advertising motor-parts in the garage workshop. But there is no individuality here. There may be interest for the sociologist (or the sexual psychologist), but hardly for the art historian.

The same reasons which explain the dearth of primitive paintings in New Zealand account for the scarcity of popular art. The country was colonised too late and by too homogeneous a population. The Yugoslav communities in the North, the Scandinavians in Hawke's Bay, and the French in Akaroa were too small. They were completely absorbed and did not maintain many of their traditional folk-ways.

Popular art is not a monopoly of peasant countries, although peasant art is a kind of popular art. England has,

through the centuries, maintained a flourishing tradition of popular art. The United States, in the 19th century, created her own lively popular art which drew its strength and variety from diverse national groups.

All the same, I am sure that New Zealand was not without popular art. Many interesting examples must have perished, like the wreathed Maori on the apple-packing shed, because they were exposed to the elements, or destroyed because they were not valued, or because they were executed in ephemeral materials. Dunedin once had some traditional shop signs and such things as cigar-store Indians in the American manner. Traces of this tradition survive into our neon-lighted age in the galloping horse and rider which is the shop-sign of one of the town's leading department stores, and the frieze of little piglets in neon-lighting which race round the top of the verandah of a butcher's shop. A local baker, who died a month or so ago, maintained the ancient craft of modelling with bread, producing baked images of birds and beasts and horns of plenty. Another little shop creates mice, and seals and penguins out of sugar. Popular art is not yet dead here.

A visit to the Early Settlers' Gallery in search of popular art, however, is not a very rewarding experience. One is forced to the conclusion that Captain Cargill's Presbyterian settlement did not have very high artistic standards. The Calvinist tradition did not encourage the production of painted baubles. The egg cups made from the pods of New Zealand flax, the object whittled from wood by the pioneer settler, the sampler laboriously stitched by his wife have little contemporary interest. A couple of ships' figureheads and the shop-sign of an early shipping company, adorned with furled cut-out wooden flags, are more interesting.

It is, I think, better to look for popular art in the second-hand shops. I have always liked to rummage there on Friday night. I still regret that I did not buy a tapestry picture worked in wool of a Maori chief complete with cloak of real bird feathers. I did, however, acquire for half a crown a framed copy of a chromo-lithograph entitled *New Zealand Wild Flowers* [see illustration], against a pale green background a flax basket contained a profusion of flowers—white clematis and convolvulus, pink bush lawyer and manuka, yellow kowhai and mountain buttercup, red kaha beak, flax and rata, blue veronica. I also found a companion-print of New Zealand berries.

I have said that popular art has sometimes been produced by the machine. From the days of the chap-books and ballad leaflets and valentines there has been a tradition of popular printing. The ships' figureheads to be found in New Zealand were made in countries across the seas. The inn-sign at Macrae's Flat is a memory of England. The Viking's house on Stewart Island, with its dragonhead roof, is a memory of Norway. Can we find a popular art which is New Zealand born?

I should like to nominate these New Zealand colour prints. They were once widely used as decorations in our colonial kitchens and parlours. Now they are rarely seen. The anonymous artist, with the aid of "the new science of chromo-lithography" has shared his pleasure in the flowers and fruit and birds of New Zealand with other New Zealanders.