

Early New Zealand Artists

[In a talk on early New Zealand art which was recently broadcast from 2YC in the series "New Zealand's Victorian Heritage," E. H. McCORMICK concentrated on three of our most original painters—Charles Heaphy, John Alexander Gilfillan, and Frances Hodgkins—whose work constitutes, he says, "a heritage that we have largely ignored and often neglected." An abridged version of this talk is printed below. Mr. McCormick started with a definition of Victorian art as essentially a later phase of Romantic painting, in which at its best one discerned "the mood of inspired discovery with which the artist had caught and expressed his vision." He then continued as follows:

THIS, then, was what was imported to New Zealand in the 19th Century—a heritage of Romantic painting in its decline.

But, to get the picture into its true perspective, we have to remember that the first settlers reached Port Nicholson eleven years before the death of Turner and that Canterbury was founded about the time the Pre-Raphaelites were painting some of their most remarkable works. This mere fact of chronology is one reason for the comparative excellence of much early New Zealand painting: the country was settled before the worst period of Victorianism. But there's another, perhaps more fundamental, reason, and here it's necessary to return to my original conception of Romantic art as one of inspired discovery. In coming to New Zealand, artists were discoverers in the literal sense of the word: they saw mountains, forest, lakes virtually unrecorded by Europeans and, besides this virgin landscape, a native people and a way of life more primitive than anything to be found in Europe. . .

The enlightened directors of the New Zealand Company had appointed an Official Artist, Charles Heaphy, and a surprising number of our first settlers found or made the time to record in water-colour sketch or pencil drawing their early impressions of New Zealand. The body of work produced by these people, small and scattered and varying in merit as it is, justifies us, I think, in saying that art flourished in the first few decades of our history as it has seldom done since. The flowering time was brief and the harvest, judged by European standards, meagre, but it is of intense interest to ourselves and should be better known than it is. Today, if you want to see the work of some of our most original painters, the first artists who made New Zealand their home, you will not often find it in art galleries; you will have to fossick it out in museums, libraries, and old colonists' collections or search for it in private houses. . .

Heaphy the Pioneer

. . . As far as I know, Heaphy was the first European to paint either a kauri forest or Mount Egmont, and there is no doubt that he was the first painter—and perhaps the first human being—to visit parts of the South. We would naturally expect, then, his work to be drenched in that mood of inspired discovery which is the hallmark of Romanticism. Some such feeling does come through his paintings of Mount Egmont and Cloudy Bay and some lesser landscapes, but, generally speaking, the emotional qualities are less noticeable in Heaphy than the intellectual. . . Close study of some of his work—notably his "Kauri Forest"—suggests that he was one of those artists interested in intricate problems of space and volume and

form. In fact, if we must attach a label to him we might conclude that he was either in advance of his time—or behind it—a somewhat lonely Classical artist.

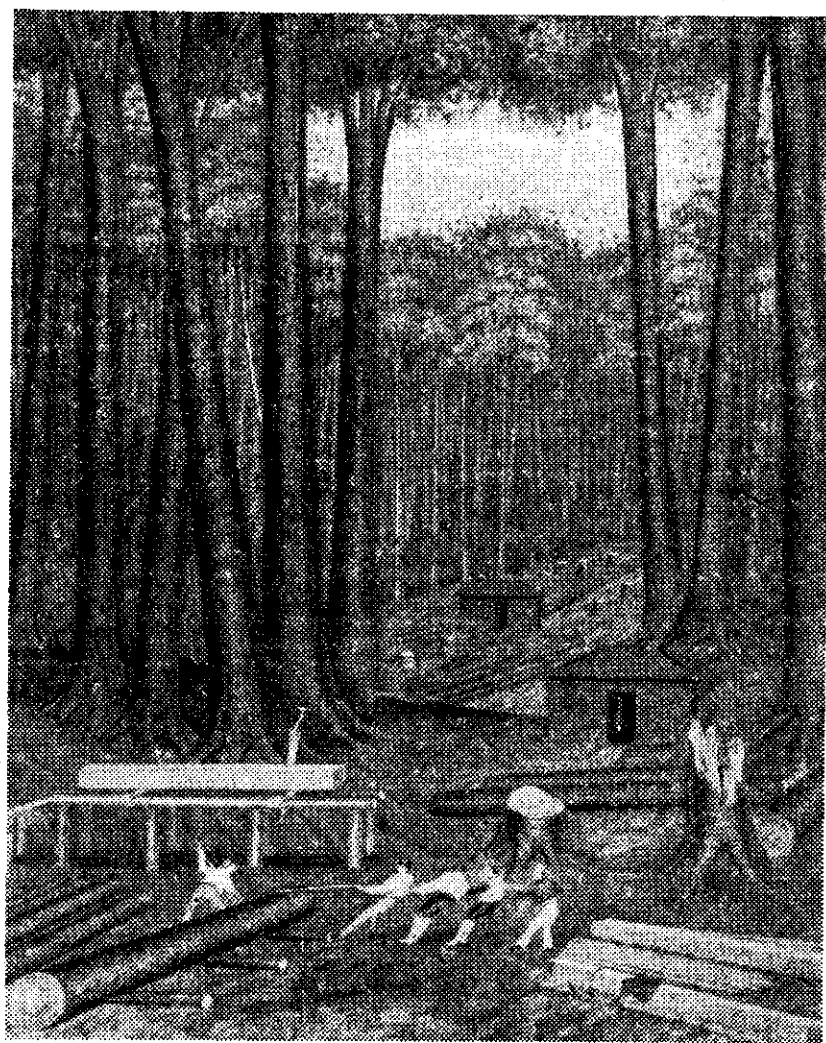
Gilfillan's Sketch-books

Paintings and sketches survive from the hands of many of Heaphy's contemporaries and colleagues—such men as Brees, Barnicoat, Fox, Domett, Shortland, Fitzgerald—some of them leading politicians and government officials of their day. But I must pass these men over to refer briefly to an artist, Gilfillan, who was almost as notable an innovator in his own field, as Heaphy was in landscape. . . In his most ambitious work, which now survives only in reproduction, he recorded unforgettably the close, warm, sociable community of a Maori pa in the years between the beginning of organised settlement and the outbreak of the Maori Wars.

Until Gilfillan's sketch-books were acquired for the Hocken Library, through the efforts of Dr. Skinner, they were almost unknown, their lessons for the historian and the artist locked away for nearly a hundred years. They are still less familiar than they should be, and the same is true of all the New Zealand painting I have so far discussed. In the art of the first two decades of our history we have a heritage from the Victorian age that we have largely ignored and have often neglected. Works of this period are still scattered in collections both here and overseas, sometimes unidentified and seldom properly recorded. They should now be added to New Zealand's pitifully meagre resources. First they must be expertly catalogued, then selected examples should be reproduced in colour by the most modern process and widely distributed. Only in this way shall we repossess ourselves of a neglected inheritance.

The work of the next twenty or thirty years—associated with the names of Gully, Richmond, [W. M.] Hodgkins and Barraud—is better known than that of their fore-runners. But even here there are dreadful gaps in our knowledge. These men painted for a lifetime, but how many of us could distinguish an early Gully from a late one? And are we certain that the best of their work is in public collections? . . .

Broadly speaking, though, it seems to me that the work of these years, from about 1860 until about 1890, shows a falling away from the promise of the first period of New Zealand painting. . . Some decline was perhaps inevitable: most of the painters of these years belonged to a rather later stream of migration and they may themselves have been affected by the decline of art in Victorian England. In any case, the excitement of first discovery was over, and all that remained, it seemed, was to undertake more and more sketching expeditions until the whole country—or at



KAURI FOREST, BY CHARLES HEAPHY
"Emotional qualities are less noticeable than the intellectual"

least all its beauty spots—should at length be covered. . .

In the two hundred or so paintings and sketches produced by Frances Hodgkins before she left New Zealand, there are traces of Victorianism in a bad sense—anecdotes in paint, over-colourful old men and women, languishing young ladies, and rather improbable goose-girls. She searches also for the ancient and the picturesque and finds it in dilapidated sheds and water-wheels and in Maoris. But in the best work of her New Zealand years you find her painting with the penetration and deep emotional excitement of the original Romantic artists. . .

Frances Hodgkins left New Zealand in the year of Queen Victoria's death. But Victorianism went on living in New Zealand art or, rather, the worst sort of Victorianism. And it's still alive today, as we saw in "The Pleasure Garden" incident. Apparently some artists and a large section of the public demand the kind of realism that we expect from the camera. They are not prepared to accept even the degree of distortion that you find in Blake and other artists. They must be blind to the subtler harmonies of colour and it's clear they have ceased to use their imaginations. In other words, they are living in a world of art that Europe left behind somewhere near the beginning of this century. Such people cannot prevent the practice and appreciation of 20th Century painting, even though their views seem to prevail for a time. But such views can be a nuisance; they form part of our Victorian heritage that we should discard.

And this introduces the note on which I should like to end. An inheritance of art or anything else is not something to be accepted passively and in bulk; it must be appraised and what is good must be sifted from the rest. As I've already said, there is much in our Victorian heritage of art that we have very largely ignored—the work of the first two or three decades—and we know less than we should about what followed. Then, on the other hand, there are the art galleries whose permanent collections are so largely built up from works of Victorian period or inspiration. "Burn the lot!" say some people—I seem to remember that George Bernard Shaw was one such. I don't suggest any such drastic solution. A Victorian collection has its historical interest, and it should be displayed occasionally—but not, of course, always. We can't expect intelligent understanding of art from a public that draws most of its ideas about painting from inferior works of an inferior period. Store them, then, and replace them by work of other periods—reproductions if we can't afford originals—and by examples of the many painters of talent and promise now working in New Zealand. That, I know, is what the more progressive galleries are doing, but one would like to see the tempo quickened, and the example followed in centres of darkness that make themselves ridiculous by attempting to exclude work by New Zealand's greatest artist.

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