

The Otago Art Society

The Pioneer Art Society of New Zealand

By SHONA MCFARLANE, *President.*

From the days of the first voyages of discovery, artists have sketched our landscape and recorded the life they found here. Those early painters, most of them Englishmen and Scotsmen and many of them surveyors, were amazed at the grandeur of the New Zealand countryside after the softer more mellow aspect of their homeland, and found the mountains and volcanic peaks so impressive that they greatly exaggerated their height. They also civilised our lonely lakes by adding boats or romantic sails where certainly no sail had ever billowed and these early New Zealand watercolours have as a result a particular charm and appeal today.

Dunedin has a valuable heritage of paintings for there were artists in Otago from the very first. The earliest known work, now among the prized possessions in the picture collection of the Hocken Library, is a watercolour of the Otago Harbour by L. Le Breton, a Frenchman who was draughtsman and artist with the D'Urville expedition. It is titled "Port Otago" and dated 1840 and shows some sailing ships, a few Maori whares and a group of sailors on shore.

Early surveyors like C. H. Kettle, John Buchanan and E. J. Abbott worked and painted in Otago. Kettle emigrated to New Zealand on the "Oriental Queen" in 1840 and came to Otago in 1846. He was head of the survey staff under the New Edinburgh scheme and laid out the first plans for the city of Dunedin. Buchanan, a Scot, came to Otago in the "Columbus" in 1849 and Edward Abbot who died in Dunedin in 1849 have all left us paintings and sketches of early Dunedin, and the province. There were many amateur artists too, like Kate Valpy whose exquisite pencil drawing "Dunedin from Hill Head on the Road to Forbury" (1849) and "Forbury Farm" (1857) are in the Otago Early Settlers' Association collection as are several marine paintings by Captain Thomas Robertson who portrayed many scenes of Otago harbour and shipping. One of his ships, the S.S. Pirate which he painted in 1865, is the subject of one of his best oils in the Early Settlers'.

There is however one regrettable gap in the painted record of our province, and at one of our most exciting periods. It would seem from the dearth of original sketches or paintings, that men were too busy digging for gold, and women too occupied with the hardships of daily living to bother about such unimportant things as painting and drawing during the gold rush days. Think what a wealth of interest an artist with a keen eye for the drama and adventure of the time, could have left us. Today no such thing would escape the artist.

It was not until 1876 that Otago artists were brought together as a group and exhibitions of their work arranged annually. This was done with the foundation of the Otago Art Society now in its 91st year, making it the pioneer art society in New Zealand. Our city and province has had a notable record in the history of art in New Zealand for not only was the Otago Art Society the first art society in New Zealand, but the Dunedin School of Art founded in 1870 was the first art school in the country. Dunedin therefore had a head start for many fine teachers came to the school, artists of the calibre of David Con Hutton the first principal of the school, R. H. Hawcridge who succeeded him, and A. H. O'Keefe who came to Dunedin in 1862 and taught in the Dunedin School of Art for 15 years. This in turn led to a high standard among the artist members of the Otago Art Society and to a solid foundation based on fine teaching which has added much to the reputation of the Society.

It was on the 4th of February, 1876, that the general meeting of the Otago Society of Artists, a name changed within the year to its present form, elected its first council. The patron was Mr. James Macandrew, the president Mr. John Irvine, vice-president Mr. W. M. Hodgkins and treasurer Mr. W. F. Browne. Mr. David Con Hutton (titled Provincial Drawing Master) was the secretary and on the committee were the Rt. Rev. Dr. Nevill, Mr. Justice Chapman, Professor Coughtrey, Dr. Hulme, and Messrs. Cargill, Welch, Bathgate, J. T. Thomson, G. O'Brien and W. Arthur. The president of the society, John Irvine, who was primarily a portrait painter, retired shortly afterwards and W. M. Hodgkins was elected president, a position he held for a record breaking 17 years until his death in 1898. He was both a capable artist who attained considerable eminence as a water colourist, and an inspiring president. He has another claim to fame for his daughter was Frances Hodgkins who of all Otago's artists, in fact of any New Zealand artist, has achieved the greatest fame overseas.

Frances Hodgkins who died in 1946, went to London and Paris in 1901 and sought self expression in the Impressionist schools of Paris and she exhibited extensively with both the

Royal Academy in London and the Paris Salon. She is still honoured in her own city and Dunedin takes pride in the fact that she was born here. The Dunedin Public Art Gallery has one of the finest public collections of her work from her early and very beautiful watercolours, to her most impressionistic painting. In 1966 her name was given, most appropriately, to the first art fellowship within New Zealand. Given by an anonymous Dunedin person the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship of the Otago University is given annually to a selected artist to live and work in Dunedin for one year and it is regarded as the most important and prestigious grant any New Zealand artist can receive within this country. But let us return to 1876 and the first officers of the Otago Art Society and to John Halliday Scott, secretary and organiser for 30 years, his term ending only with his death in 1913. He was Dean of the Medical Faculty and Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at Otago University from 1877 and was well known as a water colour artist. To him and W. M. Hodgkins goes much credit for the fine start which the society had. The first exhibition was held within the year—in November, 1876—and it was shown in what was then the Normal School in Moray Place. This was the first of the long line of annual exhibitions, 91 to date, which have continued to the present day. That first exhibition included work by David Con Hutton, J. C. Hoyte one of the finest water colour artists of the period and whose work today is fetching higher prices each year ; Mrs. John White who exhibited with the society for many years, and George O'Brien who has left us many finely detailed watercolours and oils of Dunedin in the sixties and seventies. There are several very good paintings by this artist in the Early Settlers' Museum, among them—"Dunedin from the Southern Cemetery" and "Brighton" both dated 1876, a very beautiful watercolour which shows his mastery of the technique ; "Port Chalmers from Lower Anchorage" 1863, and a meticulously drawn "View of Dunedin" 1888.

It is impossible to record the names of all the artists who have been members of the Otago Art Society but mention must be made of such artists as W. Allen Bollard, Fanny and Jenny Wimperis, Mabel Hill (mother of Sir Archibald McIndoe), and coming into more recent years, Kathleen Salmond, Dr. A. H. McLintock, Russell Clark, H. V. Miller, O. Gordon Cox, Frank Gross, Colin Wheeler, Eana B. Jeans, Myra Kirkpatrick, F. G. Shewell (head of the School of Art for many years), W. J. Reed (who is still teaching at the School of Art). Grete Graetzer who trained in Vienna, Roy Dickison and Peter McIntyre whose father, Peter McIntyre was also an artist and lithographer in Dunedin.

For a time the society was amalgamated with the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society which had been established in 1906. This however did not prove to be satisfactory and so in 1933 after 12 years of uneasy relationship the two went their separate ways but over the past three or four years there have been closer associations once more. Three years ago the Art Gallery sponsored an Otago Art Society exhibition in the Gallery and this proved to be most successful, and since then co-operation between the two has continued to grow as shown by the fact that at the present time the Director of the Art Gallery, Mr. J. D. Charlton Edgar, also serves on the council of the Otago Art Society.

The form established by the first council continues much the same today. The annual exhibition still takes place in May or early June and to this work may be submitted by artists from other societies of which there are now about 40 throughout the country, this giving the Dunedin public an opportunity to see what is being produced elsewhere. Two other exhibitions are held during the year, one in October formerly known as a "sketch" exhibition but now a full scale exhibition ; and the other, introduced 10 years ago is held during Festival Week. The society also sponsors an outdoor exhibition which is open to any person who paints whether he or she be a member of the society or not. As well as the exhibitions, meetings are held at which talks, demonstrations, films and so on are shown to members and friends thus bringing the world of art and artists to a wide section of the community. Over the past four years, under the chairmanship of Mr. F. A. O'Neill, a vice-president, these evening meetings have become so popular that the rooms which the society had acquired as their first permanent premises 15 years before (in Princes Street) became inadequate and meetings are now held in the Moran Building and exhibitions in the very excellent setting of the foyer of the Otago Museum. Membership of the society in its first year was 19. Today the number is well over 400, including both artist and non-artist membership, and seems likely to increase with the general heightening of interest through a wider section of the community than was the case in the earlier years.