

reference work containing biographical profiles of important New Zealand scientists. These works all serve as accessible introductions to New Zealand's scientific history for the general audience. While this publication successfully champions Hector's legacy and his importance to the establishment of New Zealand's scientific institutions, those already acquainted with Hector and his myriad accomplishments, looking for a work that reveals less about Hector's amazing legacy and more about his amazing life, may wish to wait for the publication of the more focussed biography of Hector that Simon Nathan is currently researching.

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NOTE

¹ C.A. Fleming, *Science, Settlers and Scholars: The Centennial History of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1987, p.11.

Rita Angus: An Artist's Life. By Jill Trevelyan. Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2008. xi + 420pp. NZ price: \$70.00. ISBN 978-1-877385-39-1.

LAST YEAR WAS THE YEAR OF RITA ANGUS (1908–1970), with an edited collection of her life and art,¹ a touring exhibition of her paintings organized by Te Papa and a major biography by Jill Trevelyan. Before writing this review of the biography, I made a visit to Rita Angus's house in Wellington — her final home, from 1955 — to find a heritage plaque on the gate. But the house itself is set back from the street and almost completely obscured by the two double-storied roadside dwellings on either side. To be sure, the light and colour of the city was one appeal in her decision to relocate to Wellington. But the house itself epitomizes its former occupant's somewhat inaccessible personality and desire for privacy, and Trevelyan is under no illusions that Angus would have resolutely opposed a biography during her lifetime. By the time Rita Angus moved to Wellington, she was recognized as one of New Zealand's foremost artists, along with Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon, and was much admired for her landscapes and portraits. She was part of a broad movement of artists, musicians and writers (including historians), dating from at least the 1930s through to the early 1960s, whose work reflected their country rather than replicating the cultural endeavour of the Old World.

One of the themes of Trevelyan's excellent and beautifully produced biography centres on the difficulties confronting a full-time artist in an environment with little tradition of professionalism or of state sponsorship for the arts generally. Earning a living and sometimes even making ends meet was fraught, and Trevelyan points out that Angus was fortunate in having understanding parents who provided emotional and financial help. She could not have pursued an artist's career otherwise. All the same, it was a frugal existence and, with a nod to her earlier socialist principles, Angus never owned a fridge, washing machine or vacuum cleaner, much less a car or a television set. Nor did it help that she was hopeless at self-promotion, and she added to her difficulties by so often refusing to sell her work. Rather, she would lend out a painting and frequently enough ask for it back to do further work on it. It was her misfortune, unlike McCahon and Woollaston, not to have had influential art critics to boost her work and reputation. At the same time, she tried to control the narrative of her life and fiercely guarded her reputation, often counter-productively inveighing against her critics.

All this reflects the difficult personality that she was, beginning as a rather indulged child with an unfortunate sense of her own self-importance: when she was 11 she refused

to take her baby brother for walks in the pram, considering this beneath her dignity. Some of Angus's strong will and determination was necessary in the circumstances of a generally discouraging environment toward a full-time female artist. One *had* to be tough to survive. But there is the definite sense that much of the ferocity unleashed on others was for its own sake, from someone quick to detect a slight when none was intended, and we have the paradox between Rita Angus the wartime pacifist and the Rita Angus who could be so abrasive in her personal relations and so possessive and suffocating with her friendships. There was a sometimes extraordinary inattentiveness to the feelings of others — and from someone who was very concerned about her own needs and sensibilities — to the point of self-obsession. The composer Douglas Lilburn, who himself could be very touchy, was one of the few who could tick Angus off for offending others, and then find himself having to constantly apologize for her behaviour.

Rita Angus was convinced that artistic talent is innate, not something that can be taught. The same applies to biography (which is not the monopoly of historians). One can either do it or one cannot. Added value can be imparted, but not the initial ability. So what makes Trevelyan's biography of Angus so impressive? There is Trevelyan's background as an art critic and her previous writings on Angus, which provide the foundation for a book that 'maps Rita's career, focussing above all on the integral connections between her life and art'. Then there is the survival of personal papers, especially Angus's 400 or so letters to Lilburn — although one profoundly regrets that the Angus family destroyed the letters that Lilburn wrote to her, in the supposed interest of protecting her privacy (that said, the family was subsequently helpful to Trevelyan). On a quite different plain is the clarity and precision of Trevelyan's prose. But it is the 'innate' that counts — that is to say, knowing beforehand what biography is about and requires, and being able to actually do it. At a technical level it is the ability to keep a balance between the life and the times. In the realm of the intangible is the ability to know how to strike the right tone. When writing about the pressures under which Angus worked, there is no particular censure, only the recognition that this was how things were, for better or for worse. Trevelyan successfully locates Angus in the context of her times, and she explains that context, so near yet so far away from contemporary sensibilities. The same non-judgmental approach applies to Rita Angus's course through life. Some rather disturbing episodes are mentioned, not least Angus's motivation for getting married to Arthur Cook, and then their parting of the ways. The distasteful social mores of the times are also fleshed out, again without being judgmental, but the reader is left in little doubt that this was a bleak period for the artistically inclined. Yet this is a revelatory biography. And when she speculates, Trevelyan unobtrusively signposts the fact. In all, Jill Trevelyan has accomplished an extraordinarily rich, textured and empathetic biography.

There have been some outstanding New Zealand biographies in recent years. There have also been some shockers. The first-rate biographies of those who contributed to New Zealand cultural life include Michael King's *Frame*, Rachel Barrowman's *Mason*, Philip Norman's *Lilburn* and Tim Beaglehole's *Beaglehole*. Jill Trevelyan's *Angus* is up there with the best of them.

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NOTE

1 William McAloon and Jill Trevelyan, eds, *Rita Angus: Life and Vision*, Wellington, 2008.