

Reviews

Augustus Earle in New Zealand. By Anthony Murray-Oliver. Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd., Christchurch, 1968. 167 pp. with 60 plates including frontispiece and map. N.Z. price: \$15.00.

WITH GOOD REASON, Augustus Earle has an irresistible appeal for New Zealanders who require an imaginative extension of the facts of this country's history. Romantic in every sense of the word, Earle provides the archetype for the kind of colonial figure we would most like to have sprung from. He was engaging, adventurous and, as something of a rebel, provided a counter image to the more puritanical ancestor figures supplied by the Church Missionary Society. He painted with a degree of accomplishment which, for the cultural egalitarianism of the New Zealander, is just the right side of professionalism and he was the possessor of a racy and fluent literary style. But perhaps most important of all, Augustus Earle was undeniably a gentleman. As Earle himself seems to have first reported and as some of his biographers feel compelled to repeat 'the artist was . . . *persona grata* in official circles and among the top levels of colonial society'.

In short, Augustus Earle readily abounds in all the qualities most acceptable in a candidate for elevation to the New Zealand Pantheon. Having the right character references for installation alongside New Zealand's nineteenth century heroes, however, is one thing, actually carrying the ceremony out is obviously another. New Zealand's exclusive claim to Augustus Earle is very slim indeed and as Mr Murray-Oliver points out, Brazil and Australia have adopted him too.

Obviously it does not really matter to whom Earle 'belongs', his contribution to our imaginative tradition can be measured for itself. Either his thirty-five New Zealand watercolours, his two New Zealand oils and his published narrative of six months residence here, matter to us or they do not. Their value is in no way diminished by his contribution to the nineteenth century image of two other countries (excluding, of course, Tristan da Cunha, which might not need one).

Mr Murray-Oliver apparently does not see it this way. He takes great pains to claim Earle exclusively as our own and he regards the New Zealand paintings as 'overall the most valuable, largely because they provide so unique a contribution to our history, to our ethnic studies and — we too may venture to claim — to our national art'. Regrettably no Brazilian or Tristan da Cunha works and only one Australian piece are reproduced, so we have no means within the book to test the author's claim.

Reproductions elsewhere of the Tristan da Cunha and Australian watercolours do not suggest that they lack any of the qualities or facility obvious in Augustus Earle's New Zealand works. Certainly the oil, *Waterfall in Australia* (pl. 1) compares favourably with the New Zealand oil *The Meeting of the Artist with the Wounded Chief Hongi* (pl. 26). Even allowing for its unrestored condition the oil *Te Rangituke, Chief of Kawa-*

kawa (pl. 58) in the Turnbull collection and *A Maori Being Tattooed* (pl. 28) from the Nan Kivell collection of the National Library of Australia, are markedly inferior in technique and composition to the Australian piece.

Mr Murray-Oliver's biographical presentation of Augustus Earle is outside the competence of this reviewer. However, it is apparent that the author has drawn substantially on the work of previous biographers of the artist and he offers little new material. The introduction is more of a biographical anthology than anything else and even many of the quotes from original sources seem to have been gleaned from other biographers. This method of working has led to a number of curious contradictions in the text. For instance, the author is happily in agreement with David Jones who says that Earle was 'neither hindered nor restrained by neo-classic concepts' and with E. H. McCormick who has Earle seeing the Maori 'as beings of an earlier heroic age', and A. H. McLintock, who describes Earle as being 'steeped in the classicism of the age'. Not that one opinion is entirely exclusive of the others, but there is at least room for some clarification, which the author does not offer.

Less acceptable is the extensive quote from A. H. McLintock's introduction to the catalogue of the Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art (reprinted some twenty-five years later as the first section of the *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand's* inept coverage of the subject). According to Dr McLintock, Earle 'was unable to resist the attraction of the magnificent kauri forests and many of his best sketches, later lithographed, depict these superbly'. Mr Murray-Oliver is content to perpetuate the comment, while the existence of only one depiction of a kauri forest in the entire New Zealand *oeuvre* of the artist, makes the statement superfluous. However well trodden the biographical path followed by Mr Murray-Oliver, his work would have had some considerable point if it had offered an extensive treatment of Augustus Earle the artist, rather than Earle the historical figure. Earle's work is certainly worthy of serious treatment in this way and his reputation as an 'unique' contributor to 'our national art', deserves some examination or support. Unhappily, the author has avoided this aspect of Earle and has, for the most part, been content to accept the widely varied assessment of others.

This book offers the largest selection of reproductions of any nineteenth century New Zealand painter and, at least in terms of the book's format, Earle has been treated as a major artist. Nowhere in the text does the author attempt to come to terms with this view of Earle. Instead, we are offered this curious opinion in the foreword: 'It was immediately evident [to the author] that Earle is one of our most important artists, taking his place beside Sir William Fox and Charles Heaphy, V.C. These three are the finest New Zealand painters of last century and, in my opinion, have since been surpassed only by Frances Hodgkins'. One would like to know in what way these three artistic 'giants' were surpassed by Frances Hodgkins and how, in fact, Mr Murray-Oliver can draw any comparison at all between three nineteenth century topographical painters and the more or less sophisticated product of a colonial nostalgia for the art of Europe.

Elsewhere in the text, the author refers again to some comparison he has made between the watercolour technique of Augustus Earle, as described by Bernard Smith in *European Vision and the South Pacific* (not as Mr Murray-Oliver gives it, in *Australian Painting, 1788-1960*) and that

'adopted, apparently quite independently, by Sir William Fox. . . .' The author sees significance in this apparent relationship in technique. However, the method of working described by Bernard Smith, is largely the traditional device of early English topographical painters for rendering the proper sequence of tonal values from foreground to remote distance. The employment of this method by both Earle and Fox, at a time when it had been practically discarded by the most important of their contemporaries, suggests nothing more than the fact that technical innovation was not among their accomplishments.

Mr Murray-Oliver believes that Earle and Fox, 'like Hodges before them, rose to their greatest heights when faced with landscapes and situations quite divorced from the European traditions in which they had been accustomed to work in their younger days'. Since nothing at all is known of the pre-New Zealand painting of William Fox it is difficult to know what the author means in his case. Both William Hodges and Augustus Earle, however, were led by the 'European traditions' of their 'younger days' to their quest for exotic subjects and their interest in natural phenomena.

For the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century English Romantic, the strange and unfamiliar was as traditional a turn on, as the domestic scene became for the Victorian painters who followed them. In addition to their subject matter and their attitudes towards it, Hodges and Earle have strong stylistic affinities with the tradition from which they came. The simple comparison of Hodges' *A View of Cape Stephens (New Zealand with Waterspouts)* 1776 and the oil *Ceyx and Alcyone* 1768 by his master Richard Wilson, or between Earle's *Wounded Chief Hongi* and Robert Smirke's *The Cession of Matavai* 1799, provides ample evidence of this. Earle's watercolours fit unexceptionally into the English topographical tradition and no case can justly be made for them exhibiting any particularly 'pungent and vigorous style' or 'freedom of artistic expression, so individual and so unrestrained'. Likewise it is difficult to see the New Zealand works as having any particular 'social significance', at least in the sense of exhibiting 'a robust and vital element of satire'.

Earle's importance to the study of New Zealand painting does not rely on any particular genius on his part. As a painter, by comparison with his contemporaries, his talent is about average. In style, he has close affinities with a generation of English watercolour painters before his own and his work does not represent any extension of the topographical tradition.

In this sense there is little basis for any meaningful comparison between William Hodges and Earle. Hodges has, in fact, some claim to singularity on his own account, and his work made a small but significant contribution to the painting of landscape. Earle makes no comparable contribution and in the context of nineteenth century English painting he is a relatively insignificant figure.

In the narrower context of New Zealand painting, however, Augustus Earle makes an important contribution. He was the first of the nineteenth century painters to reveal in his work something of the distinctive vocabulary of landscape forms peculiar to New Zealand painting. They are particularly evident in works of the quality of *Entrance of the Hokianga Harbour* (pl. 3) and, *Fortified Village, Rangihoua* (pl. 33).

These peculiar hill and headland forms with their sharp and linear relationship with the sky occur constantly in New Zealand painting. Quite obviously, they have their origin in the landscape itself, but there is some-

thing about this particular configuration that identifies immediately with some classic Romantic notions about the relationship of men and nature. There are passages in the journals of early travellers in New Zealand which suggest much the same kind of response. One recalls Herbert Meade's description of the stillness of the New Zealand bush as being '... the silence of death, or more properly the stillness of the yet unborn,' and William Colenso's account of his response to the immense and empty Rangitaiki Plain in 1842.

This kind of attitude towards the New Zealand landscape is by no means confined to the nineteenth century. It can be found well into the twentieth century in writers like Holcroft and Cresswell and in painters like Colin McCahon. We look at the watercolours of Augustus Earle across nearly a century and a half of this kind of imagery in literature, poetry and painting and it is not surprising that we find it reflected there also. It may be that we ourselves are responsible for much of what we find in Earle. This does not matter in the slightest, so long as we acknowledge what is going on and do not, as Mr Murray-Oliver has been tempted to do, make more of the real Augustus Earle than his painting would justify.

The value of this book is that it handsomely gathers together some key images in our imaginative tradition. It is particularly valuable in that the New Zealand paintings of Augustus Earle are not accessible to us, due to a quite characteristic tightfistedness on the part of the New Zealand Government. In the main the reproductions do the original watercolours justice. In some of the plates, however, most noticeably the drawings and plates 6, 8, 25, 30, 32 and 34, the reproductions are grossly larger than actual size. This has produced a false coarseness of technique and crudity of drawing which does not do credit to Earle's ability as a watercolourist and draughtsman.

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The Legacy of Guilt. A Life of Thomas Kendall. By Judith Binney. Published for the University of Auckland by the Oxford University Press, 1968. xv, 220 pp. N.Z. price: \$5.80.

MRS BINNEY, who once wrote a brilliant doctoral thesis on Thomas Kendall and absent-mindedly submitted it for an M.A. degree, has now produced her book, which is not only a biography but also a study of the missionary role in New Zealand. Its most notable feature is the quality of the underlying research. Where there were gaps she showed imagination and pertinacity in digging out the answer; where there was a technical problem she mastered the new skill or chose her specialist adviser well. It is the work of a perfectionist and in many ways an object lesson to be studied by any future thesis writer in New Zealand history.

This side of her work is unlikely to be challenged. On questions of judgement and interpretation there may well be differences. The basic problem of any study of Kendall is to explain the evolution of his personality: from the gentle London schoolmaster described by Marsden as 'very mild in his manners — kind, tender and affectionate', to the man who was to break every commandment he initially believed; and who 'oscillated between the extremities of profound humility and acrimonious arrogance' (p. 46). There are many early missionaries in the South Pacific