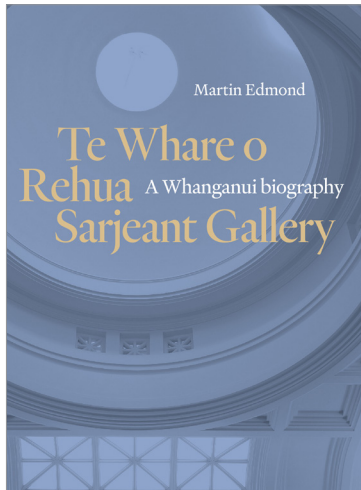


Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery

A Whanganui biography

MARTIN EDMOND



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THE HISTORY OF ONE OF NEW ZEALAND'S MOST IMPORTANT ART GALLERIES

2024 is a huge year for Whanganui's century-old Sarjeant Gallery, which has been closed for many years for the earthquake strengthening of its handsome heritage building on the maunga Pukemanu above the CBD and the construction of the glamorous new wing behind it. Its reopening sets the Sarjeant up to once again be the cultural force it was for so many years under legendary director Bill Milbank.

This lively history of the gallery, by the award-winning writer Martin Edmond, tracks through the Sarjeant's fascinating history and its complex engagement with the city and the district, including the dark years when mayor Michael Laws attempted to close it down.

Richly illustrated with historic and more recent photographs as well as with many of the key works from the Sarjeant's rich, varied and important collection.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Edmond is an award-winning writer, screenwriter and poet. His books are *Streets of Music; Houses, Days, Skies; The Autobiography of My Father; The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont; Fenua Imi: the Pacific in History and Imaginary; Chronicle of the Unsung; Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia; Dark Night: Walking With McCahon; Barefoot Years;* and *Bus Stops on the Moon: Red Mole Days 1974–1980*. Edmond received a Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in 2013. He lives in Australia and Japan.

SALES POINTS

- First ever history of one of New Zealand's most important cultural institutions
- Handsomely designed by Alan Deare
- Offers a taster of the Sarjeant's magnificent collection

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This proposal was given further support by the visit to the city by one of the London directors of the E.A.L.C.S., the Chairman, also the General Committee of the E.A.L.C.S., alongside representatives of the Tate Gallery, the Imperial War Museum, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Gallery of Scotland, was Harry Newrick's former office, Lord Dunsay.

Robertson's call for guarantees was successful and the first E.A.L.C.S. exhibition of Contemporary British art opened at the Sargeant Gallery in September 1984, at the tail end of its tour of New Zealand cities, with the governor general, Lord Hilditch, doing the honours. It included works by Max Beebe, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Mark Gertler, Eric Gill, Augustus John, Paul and John Nash, Lucien Pissarro, John Singer Sargent, Walter Sickert, Stanley Spencer, James McNeill Whistler and many others. It was much more successful than anyone had predicted. Over 5000 people visited, some coming on excursion trains from as far away as Wellington and New Plymouth. Over the guarantee period they made a profit of £20.

Although the show was essentially a survey, assembled from private collections of British painting of the previous 70 years, the *Wingspan* Herald nevertheless used it as an opportunity to publish a series of, curiously enough, articles under the title "The Modern trend: What is it?" The anonymous reviewer examined the roots of Modernism, especially in European painting, by tracing a line of development from Gustave Courbet through Impressionism to Paul Cézanne and thence to the Futurists and the Cubists.

Some of the commentary was gossamer. "The first phase of Cubism was had enough because it resulted in faces looking like a warty alcoholic nightmare. But the second phase was even worse. There were not only set up new geometric forms but each of them was now shaffled about so the picture resembled a jigsaw puzzle!"

The *News* were very in town, making their final visit to Whangarei. John Neeson addressed a meeting of the Rotary Club, defending Modernist painting in terms of the artist's technical ability rather than their formal innovations or their subject matter. "If art is a mere appearance of Modernist painting," he said, "and a painter will sometimes distort the drawing or coloring of certain forms so that in certain paintings the distortion is more noticeable than the pattern itself." This effort on his part does not seem to have led to any radical transformation in public taste. There were no other major international touring exhibitions at the Sargeant until 1997 and, while the E.A.L.C.S. exhibition included works from the National and the Tate galleries, it was much more conservative in its selections. John Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, J. M. W. Turner, John Constable and J. E. Millais were all represented.



Alison Straining, 1982. A set of six color photographs showing a view of a residential area from an elevated position. The houses are in various colors, and the overall scene is vibrant and colorful.

to Whangarei early in 1978 on our *Great Air Zealand* tour.

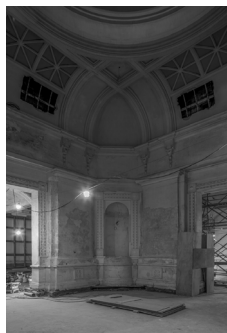
We stayed in a small hotel at Cavendish and planned to pack houses at the Four Seasons Theatre on Pukaki Drive in Pukaki. Our contact was a fellow called Gareth Jones, who drove around town to provide their sports car with the wags. Four Seasons had been set up in 1970 by David Smith, who was from Pukekohe, and it continued as a professional theatre, mostly doing musicals, for 30 years.

I received Whangarei several times in the course of researching my 1999 book *The Reconstruction of Whangarei*. His retrospective was carried out of the Sargeant in 1980. On one occasion I searched a rented advertising agency Park, where my father, a private in the army, was stationed in 1941. One of the friends he lost in the war, Harold Mackenzie, was from Pukekohe. They were at Teachers' Training College in Wellington together for three years, and it was in Pukekohe when a German shell hit the villa where he and others were preparing for a party at the HQ of the 2nd Battalion in January 1945.

After the war my father helped Pat wife, Marie, re-establish herself, and to leave her the large school at Stambledon on the river and move to Wellington. As Marie Bell, she became an educator and a tireless campaigner for the rights of both children and parents.

The first time I visited Whangarei on a research trip, Philip Chapman's mother, Theodora, was coming home to Maxwell Avenue on Dore Hill and I went up there to meet her. Another time, the 8th year was in Hamilton, where Phil lived at the Flying Head in 1981/82. I stopped off for a night at the Grand Hotel in Hill Street, even though there were a few doors on the upper floor. There were my first visits, under a roof, to the Sargeant Gallery itself. Nothing therein contradicted my childhood idea that it was a kind of temple in its own right, had the bare elegance that implies nothing even now, even now. When Michael Dunn and I carried a small exhibition, *Michael's Art in Puke*, consisting of 10 works with Philip Chapman, Tony Fontaine and Alton Mackintosh, at the Hawke's Bay Exhibition Centre in Hastings in 2004, it was also shown at the Sargeant, to my great regret I was not able to see it there.

★ In 2018, out of the blue, I received an invitation to write a book about the Sargeant Gallery. It was by Richard Whangarei. I went back to the gallery's relationship with Pukekohe, without explaining that I did not live in Antarctica or New Zealand but in Sydney, Australia, perhaps there had been some misunderstanding. No, the book, it was not a mistake and I should take the offer seriously. I had posted the book as the biography of a building rather



Alison Neeson, 1982. A photograph of a gallery space with a large painting on the wall. The painting is a landscape scene with a building and a figure.



Alison Neeson, 1982. A large landscape painting showing a coastal town with many small houses and a harbor. The scene is detailed and colorful.



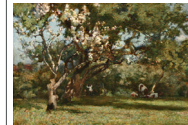
Opposite: An early sketch of a figure, possibly a woman, standing in a long dress. The drawing is simple and appears to be a preliminary study for a larger work.



English, an early sketch of a figure, possibly a woman, standing in a long dress. The drawing is simple and appears to be a preliminary study for a larger work.

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The competition was advertised widely in Australia and New Zealand. 23 international submissions were received. By June 1916, four of which had been short-listed and their architects asked to draw up detailed plans. In October the Sargeant Committee voted the second list No. 16, by Edmund Anson, of Dunedin, had been chosen, and recommended that he be appointed architect for the building.

Anson was the son of a carpenter and apprenticed in the same trade. In 1888, aged 14, he visited the Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne, an experience which gave him a life-long interest in the design of international exhibitions. From 1901, supporting himself as a builder, he studied in the United States, and in 1904 worked on the construction of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also known as the St. Louis World's Fair, in Missouri. He returned to Dunedin in 1907 and there won a competition to design the School of Mines at the University of Otago. He was subsequently appointed an architect at the University Council, a position he held until 1920. The five university buildings he designed conformed in style to the two originally made by Maxwell Barry. The seven buildings constituted a master example of interwar and early twentieth century Gothic in New Zealand. Edmund Anson was a content and controversial, and indeed fierce, voice in a building world that was largely unrepresented in the country. The design throughout is characterized by a studied simplicity, where there is a well-understood disregard as to the cost of the material and the construction. There was a delay in finalizing the contract and calling for tenders, a complication had arisen. After Wellington's *Evening Star*, in November 1916, published an article expressing surprise at the lack of progress, Mackay wrote a letter of explanation. "It is quite true that the Hon. Sargeant decided in favour of design 16," he said, "but unfortunately after investigating the matter he has also decided that the design is not that of Mr. Anson but of the people Mr. Hoare."

Donald Hoare, one of Anson's article's clerks, was the youngest of nine children of a Scots family from Central Otago. He lived in Dunedin, Dunedin. "Very tall and handsome" he was just 17 years old when he drew the design for the Sargeant, allegedly sketching it on the back of a napkin while dining with friends in a restaurant. He had, while with Anson, been two previous architectural competitors – the first for a public building and the second for an unusual dwelling. There is one other candidate work designed by him in Dunedin, the Hawater Company building opposite the railway station, which Sargeant looked at when he went down there in October 1916 to interview both Anson and Hoare. He noted that it was a fine work, with definite similarities to the design for the Sargeant.

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