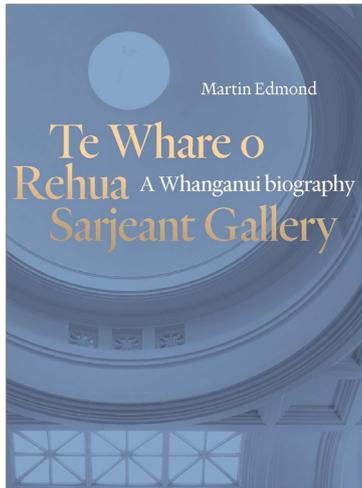




Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery

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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Massey University Press

Albany Campus, Private Bag 102904,
North Shore 0745, Auckland, New Zealand

Email editor@massey.ac.nz

Phone +64 9 213 6886

www.masseypress.ac.nz

Media contact

Rebecca Simpson, Fantail Communications

Email rebecca@fantailcommunications.co.nz

Phone 021 955 942



This proposal was given further support by the visit to the city by one of the London directors of the E.A.L.S.C., Mr. Chiswick. Also on the General Committee of the E.A.L.S.C. 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 client, Lord Dunsay.

Robertson's call for guarantees was successful and the first E.A.L.S.C. exhibition of Contemporary British Art opened at the Sargent Gallery in September 1934, at the tail end of its tour of New Zealand cities, with the governor general, Lord Bledisloe, among the honorees. It included works by Max Beecham, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Mark Gertler, Eric Gill, Augustus John, Paul and Helen Nash, Francis Townes, 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. Once the guarantees were their money back, the Sargent Gallery made a profit of £20.

Although he does not mention it, the exhibition was assembled from private collections of British painting of the previous 70 years, the *Wingman's* *Journal* 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 Gauguin and then to the Futurists and the Cubists.

Some of the commentary was provocative: "The first phase of Cubism was had enough because it resulted in faces looking like a rusty alcoholic nightmare. But the second phase was even worse. There were not only set-up art galleries, but each of them was now shunned about as the poet would shun a gigolo party!"

The *Newnes* were in town, making their final visit to Whangarei. John Newnes 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 I paint in one apparent direction of Modernist painting," he said, "and a painter will sometimes distort the drawing or coloring of certain features 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 reflection in public taste. There were no other major international touring exhibitions at the Sargent until 1937 and, while the E.A.L.S.C. exhibition included works from the National and the Tate galleries, it was much more conservative in its selections. Indeed, Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, J. M. W. Turner, John Constable and J. E. Millais were all represented.



Abbott, *Seaside, 1922*. Oil on canvas. 100 x 140 cm. The artist's use of color and composition is a key feature of the painting.

in Whangarei early in 1938 on our *Centennial* tour.

We spent in a small hut at Cavendish and played to packed houses at the Four Seasons Theatre on Pukaki Drive in Pukaki. Our contract was a fifteen called *Centennial* tour, who drove around twice to provide their sports car with the top down. Four Seasons had been set up in 1930 by David Smith, who was from Pukaki, 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 Sargent in 1982. On one occasion I searched a rented adjoining cottage Park, where my father, a private in the army, was stationed in 1914. One of the friends he lost in the war, Harold Mackenzie, was from Pukaki. They were in a Teachers' Training College in Wellington together for about a month in 1914 when a German ship was in the area where he and others were preparing for a party at the HQ of the 2nd Battalion in January 1914.

After the war my father helped Pat wife, Marie, re-establish herself, she had to leave her child school as a kindergarten teacher and move to Wellington. As Marie fell, she became an educator and a tireless campaigner for the rights of both children and parents.

The film crew involved Whangarei on a recording of the *Centennial* mother, Thebes, was coming to see in Maxwell Avenue on the Hill and I went up there to see the *Centennial* film. The film was in the *Centennial*, where Phil lived at the Flying Head in 1981/82. I snipped off for a night at the Grand Hotel in Hill Street. Even though these days it is a 4th domain on its own, I have stayed there more times since.

There were my first visits, under a roof, to the Sargent Gallery itself. Nothing therein contradicted my childhood idea that it was a kind of temple to the arts, where the best of the best were shown, and where, even now, when Michael Dunn and I carried a small exhibition, *Millers' Art in the Bay*, consisting of 10 works with Philip Claxton, Tony Fontaine and Alton Mackillop, at the Harker's Bay Exhibition Centre in Hastings in 2004, it was also shown at the Sargent, to my great regret I was not able to see it there.



Abbott, *Seaside, 1922*. Oil on canvas. 100 x 140 cm. The artist's use of color and composition is a key feature of the painting.

in 2018, out of the blue, I received an invitation to write a book about the Sargent Gallery. It was by Richard Whangarei. I went back to the gallery's *Centennial* history, but when explaining that I did not live in Australia 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



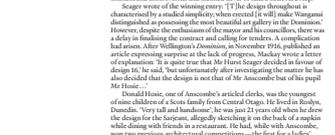
Abbott, *Seaside, 1922*. Oil on canvas. 100 x 140 cm. The artist's use of color and composition is a key feature of the painting.



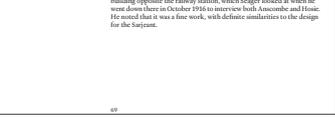
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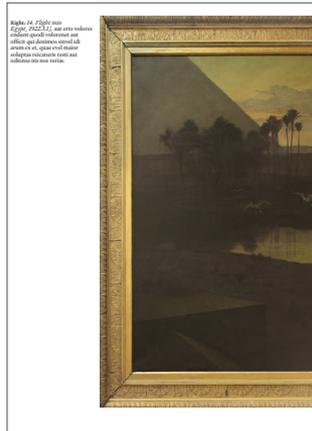
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