

Hi Pat, Today , before introducing my lecture , I would like to draw your attention to an article which appeared in the London Daily Mail . It was written by Art Critic Giles Coran, who had just read about the Australian Cricket team being beaten by the English Cricket team.

*During the past 20 odd years of almost total Australian Cricket domination, I have longed to turn over the World Order and smash them to pieces but now that we have done it I feel like a parent who has taken a toy away from a noisy child out of pure irritation and now looks down on the poor, witless, noisy blob and feels guilty, what does Australia have left, they have no Art or Literature worthy speaking of.*

Well written Giles and all in one sentence as well.

This brings me into my subject; ART.

LITERATURE another day.

*Sir William Dobell.*

*1899-1970.*

*Part 1.*

Today I will not talk about Politicians, Wars and Conflict.

Well, maybe a bit of Conflict.

I must give some time to tell you about some of the beautiful things that take place in our Nation.

Such things do happen, you know.

Maybe the Australian Press does not think that such items are worth reporting.

They still manage to find conflict in Art.

Today I will tell you about a shy, quiet man who managed to produce some of the finest paintings that our Nation has ever seen.

Today I will tell you about Sir William Dobell.

He was known as Bill, to his mates, who could be found in all walks of life.

The Australian Press tried to destroy him but he rose above them all and will always be regarded as one of Australia's greatest portrait painters.

In 1944 I was privileged to see the Archibald Prize paintings hung in the NSW Art Gallery. The painting by William Dobell of fellow artist, Joshua Smith, was one of the only paintings there for me. It glowed with colour and I stood before it in awe.

This is my story.

William Dobell was a World famous artist who has been named as Australia' greatest portrait painter who won many awards, including the Archibald Prize, three times. He also won the Wynne Prize for landscape painting .

His paintings can be found in many collections in Art Galleries all around the World.

Dobell became a household name in 1943 when he won the Archibald Prize with a portrait of fellow artist Joshua Smith. There was a famous Court case in 1944 when several unsuccessful artists said that the painting was not a portrait but a caricature.

This event would affect Bill Dobell for the rest of his life.

Bill Dobell had many friends and they included his neighbours and his drinking mates at the Wangi Wangi pub. Also on his list were the Duke of Edinburgh and Lord and Lady Casey as well as a lot of politicians, writers, actors, doctors and lawyers.

They were all made welcome when they dropped in to visit him at his home at Wangi Wangi on the banks of Lake Macquarie in NSW.

When famous friends were visiting, any of his mates who happened to drop in were always invited to stay.

He was shy, friendly, open, generous and unassuming and would paint Xmas Cards for his friends who sometimes received them at Easter,

He remained a bachelor all his life and he lived with his sister, Alice and his spaniels. He was very close to his large family and his nieces and nephews would often spend their school holidays with him at Wangi. All would receive paintings of themselves and other familiar places.

He would leave his entire Estate to the *Sir William Dobell Art Foundation* to further Art and Artists in Australia.

His comfortable home, at Wangi Wangi, where some of the greatest works of art were created, is now a Museum and is a lasting memorial to a great and humble Australian.

William Dobell was born on the 24 September 1899 in a terrace house in Bull St. Cook's Hill in Newcastle NSW to parents Margaret and Robert Dobell. He was the youngest of six surviving children, three boys and three girls.

Robert was a hard working bricklayer and plasterer who would become a building contractor. Margaret was busy at home looking after the large family. There was always plenty of work as Newcastle was a fast growing city until the Depression years. Despite the ups and downs of Australia at this time, the family was always close and happy.

The Dobell family were members of the Presbyterian Church at Cook's Hill and all the children attended Sunday School there.

They all loved music and William was the Sunday School pianist when he was aged 12. His love of music would stay with him for all of his life and at Wangi he enjoyed playing the piano and reading when he was not painting. His Brinsmead Grand Piano is still in fine working condition in the Museum to this day.

Today, Cook's Hill is a popular, expensive, slightly upper-class suburb but in Bill Dobell's day it was a typical working-class area with terrace houses and tiny back yards where women gossiped over back fences as their children played in the back lanes. He loved to draw these women as they gossiped.

Bill always loved to draw and was encouraged by his grandfather who was a train driver. Bill wrote:

*Grandfather kept a slate hanging on a hook on the back door. On one side he wrote his grocery order and on the other side he showed me how to draw a horse. He had a beautiful line. That pure line haunted me. I came across the works of Ingres, the French painter, who is my favourite draughtsman. I saw the similarity of what I memorized of my grandfather's drawing of a horse. Without any attempt at shade he could express the form.*

Bill attended Cook's Hill Superior Public School and his artistic talent began to show as he was encouraged by a good Arts Teacher, John Walker.

In his later life he would say that children should never be taught to copy when being taught Art. They should be allowed to fully express themselves at all times. He always read the Sunday papers of his day where there were prizes for drawings by children. He wrote:

*I saw one entry last Sunday by a five year old called "bubble bath". It was just a head in a bath and a brush with bubbles all around. It was done with heavy brush strokes and no attempt at detail. Everything else on the page looked silly.*

Today, the *Sir William Dobell Art Foundation* sponsors an annual exhibition of *High School Certificate Artwork* that tours NSW. It is a fitting tribute to Bill's interest in young people and their Art.

Bill did as most boys did and left school at 14. He would then attend the local Technical College for three nights each week where he was taught freehand drawing.

He had several day jobs and one of these was as a *Dog Walloper* .This was a boy who kept dogs from fouling the displays by shops on the footpath. A job with a future, you may say.

In 1916 Bill was encouraged by his father to follow his brothers into the building trade and he gained an apprenticeship with Newcastle Architect Wallace Porter. He worked there for eight years and enjoyed the drawing aspect of the work but he was not good at maths.

He worked on the design of many buildings in Newcastle including several hotels and two WW1 Memorials.

In 1923, Bill's father purchased a block of land at Wangi Wangi and Bill designed a ;

*Two-roomed concrete cottage as a holiday home. It was quite a charming place.*

They named the cottage *ALLAWAH* an Aboriginal name meaning, *To Camp*.

In 1924 Bill moved to Sydney and went to work at *Wunderlich Pty. Ltd.* Here, he designed the pressed metal ceilings and his talent was soon noticed and he was moved into the Advertising Department.

William now attended the *Julian Ashton Art School* and went to classes three nights each week where he was taught by Henry Gibbons.His work was noticed by Julian Ashton and he was encouraged to paint. He wrote;

*Julian said to me; Mr. Dobell, do not hang onto your easel as though you were Jesus and it is your cross. Stand back from it , I have remembered this and have done it all my life.*

The year 1929 was a memorable year for William. He won third prize of 100 guineas in the Australian Art Quest. He also won first prize of £500

in the *Society of Artists Travelling Scholarship*. This was to be paid for two years.

William would now have the opportunity to go overseas and study in Europe. He would have access to all the famous Art Galleries in England and in Europe. He would be able to study the works of great painters, modern and impressionists whose works had been kept out of Australia by traditionally thinking academics.

At the age of 29, William Dobell left Sydney and sailed for England aboard the *S.S Esperance Bay*. He had his savings, his prize-money and a cheque for £50 from Wunderlich P/l. This was a lot of money at this time.

He arrived in England in October 1929 and enrolled in *the Slade School* in London. He was taught drawing by Professor Tonks and was noticed by the painter Sir William Orpen who offered to teach him to paint and gave him the use of his studios.

William enjoyed a good social life with the other artists, musicians, singers and writers and he worked hard at his lessons. He was a regular visitor at the many Art Galleries in London and he studied the works of Rembrandt, Renoir, Goya, Turner and Corot.

In 1930, William won the Slade Schools first prize with a painting of a female nude entitled, *Slade Nude*. He also won second prize for draughtsmanship

The same year was also a sad one for William as his mother, Margaret, died in Newcastle. His father, Robert, moved into the house at Wangi Wangi where he was cared for by his daughter, Alice.

William finished his first year at the Slade School with honours and accepted the offer by a fellow student, Rient van Santen, to stay with his

family in Holland for the summer holidays. He was taken to see the Van Gogh exhibition and was overwhelmed by the brilliance and the simplicity of the Masters' works. He was to stand for over an hour in front of *Sunflowers* and would say that no other painting could ever capture the beauty and quality of this work.

After Holland he would spend a week in Paris where he saw works by Monet, Renoir and Soutine.

He then move on to Belgium and visited Museums with paintings by the Flemish Masters. He ate with artists at waterfront cafes and painted outdoors. He said that this was the happiest time of his life.

William took a passionate interest in people and loved to sketch them whenever possible. He filled notebooks with drawings and liked to paint them in his studio.

On a visit to the London Zoo he sketched a sickly child and would paint *The Sickly Twin* in his studio in London. He regarded this painting as one of his best and it was found in his Wangi Wangi home after his death.

He made many paintings of the River Thames and its many bridges. These paintings highlight the importance of the River as a major thoroughfare in a great Capital City.

At this time William earned money by doing illustrations for several London magazines and he also designed posters for the P and O Shipping Line.

One morning in 1934 William was boarding in Bayswater and was woken by his landlady who said that her husband had died and would William help to lift his body into his bed. When this was done William

was surprised to see the woman comb her hair in front of a mirror and announce;

***He was a good man so I'm going to give him a ham funeral. No leg of mutton for him.***

Back in his room William sketched the scene and his painting, ***The Dead Landlord*** was born.

William told the story to his friend Patrick White and he wrote ***The Ham Funeral***.

In 1937, William and a group of Australian Artists in London were commissioned to design the ***Australian Wool Pavilion*** at the 1938 British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow. . William was paid £10 a week for six months which gave him a good financial boost.

In 1938 with War looming, William received news that his father was very ill so he decided to return to Australia. He arrived back in Sydney in February 1939 and his father died soon after.

That is part of my story about a great Australian . I will finish it and you will hear about how William Dobell survived the War and became one of our important Painters.

( John Imrie, 16/6/2021)