

WILLIAM DOBELL. Part two.

This is to continue with my story about William Dobell who changed the way that Australians looked at Art.

We last saw him returning to Australia in 1939.

When William left for Britain in 1929 the Australian Art World was very small, isolated and conservative. There were few opportunities to read books, see reproductions of the great painting masters and certainly no chance of seeing works by the Impressionists.

In 1939 there was a changed scene in Australia. The Art Conservatives were still a force to be reckoned with but most of the young Australians who had been living abroad, were now coming back home. There was a new attitude to Art including Modernism and Impressionism.

William took a flat in Kings Cross and found a job teaching at East Sydney Tech. He also began exhibiting with the *Society of Artists*.

William's father had many properties in Newcastle and he left them equally to his children. The family had decided that William should have *Allawah* at Wangi Wangi and that his sister, Alice, should continue to live there.

The house would become William's retreat and many of his friends who were Writers and Artists would become frequent visitors for the rest of his life.

During the War of 1939/45, Kings Cross became a place for Servicemen, particularly Americans, to take their leave. William would spend much time sketching the many characters, who flocked to the area.

In 1941, William joined the War effort as a member of the *Civil Construction Corps* and he and his fellow Artists were set to work painting aeroplane hangers to look like houses and painting dummy cows to make military buildings look like farms. William wrote;

It was all a waste of time. The Japs were not that stupid. I even had to paint a name on the side of a dummy cart and I doubt that a Jap pilot would have flown low enough to read it.

In 1943, William broke his wrist watch and he did not have enough money to buy a new one so he approached a jeweller and offered to give him a painting as payment. The jeweller was not too keen but as he was unable to pay his doctor for a consultation he asked the doctor if he would accept the painting as payment. Dr. Edward McMahon would describe the deal.

A jeweller, who owed me 19 guineas(\$40) telephoned me and said- "there's a bloke who has come in here, says his name is Dobell, wants to exchange a painting for a watch, I don't want the bloody painting but I know that you might". The jeweller said that I might accept the painting in lieu of my fee. I agreed to the three-way deal and the picture was delivered to me. It was a study of a mother and a child.

Many years later, when he was one of Sydney's leading surgeons, Dr. McMahon would regard the acquisition of the painting as the finest fee that he had ever received. In 1958 William Dobell would be very thankful for this deal.

William Dobell would become the Official Artist for the *Allied Works Council* and his War Paintings of men and women engaged in construction work are wonderful examples of people working in the War. He raised these labourers to hero status with his sketches and paintings.

At this time, William met a fellow artist also working on the *Civil Construction Corps* and they became firm friends. Joshua Smith and William shared similar interests in painting and portraiture. William made several sketches of his friend's angular face and they would develop into a painting that was called *Portrait of an Artist*. Joshua would sit for Dobell at his studio and at the same time Joshua was painting a picture of 78 year old Dame Mary Gilmore that he intended to enter into the 1943 Archibald Prize.

Dobell told Joshua that he might enter his portrait as well,

The two artists joked about this and accepted that it was all a bit of friendly rivalry. This would change when it was announced that Dobell's picture of Joshua Smith had won the prize. Joshua was not amused. Dobell wrote;

It was dreadful, Joshua's first reactions, then his mother's and his father's reactions. Joshua's parents visited me very early one morning and they wept all over the place. I had to give them a towel. They begged me not to show the portrait again and they offered to buy it. They offered me £300 (\$600) which was big money but I felt, why should I. It was only because Joshua was annoyed that he had not won the Prize. He had been sure that his portrait would win. He said that he regarded my portrait as a joke. He got a shock when I won.

Dobell had also entered two other paintings in the 1943 Archibald Prize . They were, *Brian Penton*, the Editor of the Daily Telegraph and *Billy Boy* , a worker at Rathmines RAAF Base. James Gleeson, Art Critic, would write;

Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith was a great painting and a great portrait. Of the three portraits entered by Dobell, no comparable

sequence of portraits has ever appeared in Australian Art nor would it be easy to find their like anywhere in the contemporary World.

One of Australia's oldest and best-known Art Prizes is the prestigious **Archibald Prize** for Portraiture, offered by the **Art Gallery of NSW** and was first awarded in 1921. It takes its name from J.F. Archibald, a passionate journalist who, with a friend John Haynes, founded **The Bulletin** magazine in Sydney in 1880. This radical magazine addressed issues of Nationhood, Culture and Identity. Archibald employed the best Artists of the day as illustrators, including Norman Lindsay.

Archibald thought of himself as being very European and he led a very Bohemian lifestyle. He changed his given names from John Feltham to Jules Francois. He left money in his will to build a fountain in Hyde Park to mark the association between France and Australia in WW1. He was also a trustee of the **Art Gallery of NSW** and would leave a legacy that enshrined his name in **Australian Art** forever.

In January 1944 the Trustees of the **Art gallery of NSW** announced that the 1943 **Archibald Prize** was awarded to William Dobell for his portrait of Joshua Smith, entitled **Portrait of an Artist**.

This caused an uproar in the staid Art World of Australia and two Artists, Mary Edwards and Joseph Wolinski, brought an action in the Supreme Court against **The Art Gallery of NSW** and William Dobell. They claimed that the winning painting was a caricature, not a portrait.

The ensuing Court Case was held for five days and was both intense and very tedious. Huge crowds packed the Court in Sydney and the local newspapers had a field day. People who had never had an interest in Art now expressed opinions about the portrait and no matter who won, Australian Art would change forever.

The Daily Telegraph wrote;

ACTION BEGINS TODAY

ON DOBELL ART PRIZE.

This is as important a battle in the World of Art as the Second Front against Germany is to England.

For the next five days the battles of WW2 would be seen on page four. As always our newspapers were only interested in conflict not content.

The Case was heard before Justice Roper in the Equity Division of the Supreme Court.

Edwards and Wolinski engaged Mr. Garfield Barwick K.C. The Gallery Trustees engaged F.W. Kitto K.C. Mr Dobell engaged C. Dwyer K.C.

To a quiet man such as William Dobell, the trial was an ordeal. For Joshua Smith it was a devastating experience as his physical appearance was subject to minute analysis.

ART ON TRIAL.

I have now included some of the questions asked at the trial.

The first witness was J.S. Mac Donald a leading Art Critic.

Barwick. Are you familiar with portraits hung in Galleries?

MacDonald. Yes.

Barwick. Do you find any element of distortion in any of the figures?

MacDonald. No.

Barwick. What is the date of the last good portrait?

MacDonald. It was painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence in 1831.

Dwyer. You have no respect for the evolution of Art that has occurred in the last century?

Barwick. In your opinion is the painting a portrait of Joshua Smith?

Mac Donald. No, it is an elf person . A person sick in body and mind.

Dwyer. Have you seen the painting in the Gallery?

MacDonald. No. I have only seen black and white photographs.

The next witness was Dr. Vivian Benjafield.

Barwick. Have you seen Mr Joshua Smith?

Benjafield. He has been pointed out to me.

Barwick. What state of Mr. Smith's appearance does this represent?

Benjafield. The body of a man who has died and has dried up. The eyes lack expression . It looks like a corpse.

Dwyer asked one question. Do you know anything about Art?

Benjafield. No.

The next edition of The Sun had the following headlines.

***MEDICAL MAN DECLARES DOBELL'S PRIZE
PORTRAIT TO BE A CORPSE.***

Sculptor Lyndon Dadswell said that the portrait was a work of art and the painter must be allowed to express his own point of view.

Finally, William Dobell was in the witness box and he gave details of his training, his teachers, his scholarships, his time in Europe, his exhibitions and his prizes.

Dwyer. Was your entry in the Archibald a serious work?

Dobell. I would not have exhibited it otherwise.

Dwyer. In painting Mr. Smith did you think that you succeeded in your aims?

Dobell. I know Joshua . I know his real character. I respect him.

Dwyer. Did you try to manifest his character as you knew it in his portrait?

Dobell. I think that I succeeded in painting a picture worthy of the name of a work of art. Joshua is a very determined person and I admire him for that. I think I did get a likeness of Joshua.

Dwyer. Do you think of yourself as a Modernist?

Dobell. No. I was not called that until I came back to Australia.

Barwick. The arms are very thin.

Dobell. Yes. Mr. Smith is very thin.

Barwick. The nose?

Dobell. Yes.

Barwick. The neck?

Dobell. Yes. It is difficult to give lessons in two minutes . You are taking the portrait bit by bit. I might as well criticize your case by the angle of your wig.

There was loud applause and much cheering in the Courtroom.

Barwick. Was your painting a jest?

Dobell. I do not paint in jest.

Barwick. As he sat for you, did he appear as he now appears on canvas?

Dobell. You cannot answer a question like that with yes or no. Not on an artistic point of view.

Barwick. Leave the Art out for the moment.

Dobell. You can't leave the Art out.

Barwick continued to analyse the painting, bit by bit, He questioned the red tie, the red cardigan, the red handkerchief. At the end of the third day most of the people believed that Dobell's dignified defence was winning the case and they sensed that a folk hero was in the making.

It would be 12 days before Justice Roper announced his verdict.

The case had aroused popular public interest in Australia and throughout the World. The Australian Press had given it the widest coverage and the War had been off the front page for weeks. Dobell's name was now a household word. Bill Dobell became a Public Figure and he was both berated and cheered. He wrote;

It was terrible. You have no idea what the persecution was like at this time.

There was a cartoon by Dobell's friend Bill Pidgeon(WEP). It captured an untidy courtroom with all the characters . The Sunday Telegraph made copies which they sold for two shillings each and gave the money to the Red Cross.

On the 8 November 1944 Justice Roper delivered his findings .

The picture in question is characterised by some startling exaggerations and distortions clearly intended by the Artist, his technique being too brilliant to admit to any other conclusion. It bears a strong likeness to the subject and is, undoubtedly a pictorial representation of him. I find, as a fact, that it is a portrait within the meaning of the word in this Will and consequently the Trustees did not err in admitting it to the Competition.

Edwards and Wolinski had lost their action and were ordered to pay all costs. William Dobell would win the *Archibald Prize* but it was a victory with no winners . Bill Dobell's friendship with Joshua Smith was lost forever and both men would be emotionally scared for many years.

Joshua Smith would win the *Archibald Prize* in 1944 with his portrait of Dame Mary Gilmore. It was always obvious that Dobell's painting of him was more famous.

The final comment must go to Dobell's Counsel Dwyer K.C.

This childish litigation was conceived in jealousy and born in spite. A disgrace to Australian sportsmanship and a blot, forever, on the records of Australian Art.

William Dobell would win the Archibald Prize in 1948 with a painting of fellow Artist *Margaret Olley* and he also won the 1948 Wynne Prize for Landscape Painting with the beautiful painting *Storm Approaching Wangi..*

In 1958 William was diagnosed with abdominal cancer and he was admitted to St. Vincent's Hospital where he was treated by Dr. Edward MacMahon who had accepted a payment of his bill by receiving a Dobell painting in 1943.

Dr. MacMahon, in his gown, left an indelible image on William's memory and his painting of the good Doctor would win the Archibald Prize once again in 1959.

The two men became firm friends and in 1959 William was awarded an OBE for Art and Dr. MacMahon was given a Knighthood for Medicine.

In June 1966 William accepted the honour of a Knighthood and he would kneel before his old friend Lord Casey and become *Sir William Dobell of Wangi Wangi*.

The party at Wangi Wangi lasted three days and all the residents attended.

On the 14 May 1970 Sir William (Bill) Dobell died at Wangi Wangi and Tributes flowed in from all around the World

Today there are two memorials;

The Sir Bill Dobell house at Wangi Wangi which is a Museum .

The Sir William Dobell Art Foundation which assists Artists. l

(John Imrie, 30/6/2021)