

DAVE O'NEILL

THE BARD'S VISION

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23 January — 23 February, 1992
the Fisher Gallery, Pakaranga

29 February — 26 April, 1992
the Sarjeant Gallery, Waiarua

I first saw a Dave O'Neill painting in a Wanganui Arts Society group exhibition sometime in 1963.

✦ I looked at it for a long time trying to decide if I liked it enough to buy. In the end, I decided to pay the asking price of seventy dollars, but also to visit the man himself and see if there were other examples that would tell me if this fresh little landscape was a typical "O'Neill" (as I hoped) or a quirky accident by an otherwise nondescript painter. ✦ I visited the O'Neills at their home one afternoon and Dave showed me all the paintings he had done, about twenty or so. ✦ There were kingfishers and toia, motorbikes and steam trains, and a couple of incredible paintings of Mount Ruapehu and Ngauruhoe—certainly enough to show me that my new O'Neill was more than just a flake!

✦ Ten years on and Dave's subject matter has become even more diverse, encompassing Celtic Mythology and Irish Folklore, and also incidents from daily life. ✦ The exhibition title comes from a painting of the same name in which a hard experienced a vision of spirits and demons while kneeling before an ancient stone monument.

Quite simply, I see Dave as a bard who conjures visions—sometimes from the long-ago, and sometimes from last week. ✦ I would like to thank the lenders to the exhibition: Iris Wright, James Kirkwood, David Sherman, the Sarjeant Gallery, Mrs. A. Crichton, S. Campbell Smith, Ross Dragovcovich, Jan Part, B. and M. Sherman, A. Greenhough, Craig and Rachel Collier, Neil Anderson, Malcolm Harrison, Greg Barke, the Christopher Moore Gallery, Tim Walker, and Dave O'Neill. ✦ I would also like to thank the staff at the Fisher Gallery, and the Sarjeant Gallery, Brian Boyce for his contribution to the catalogue and graphics, and Dave O'Neill for making this exhibition so enjoyable to put together.

Paul Bayne

✦ Paul Bayne, January 1992

I have been asked what my philosophy as a painter is—a thorny question—which I will answer by stating my motive. ✦ Being retired after a lifetime of mechanical pursuits I sought escapism, firstly in wood cutting, in relief carvings. Satisfactory, but the subsequent mess in cramped space proved too much of a chore. I was forced to teach myself to paint in oils. ✦ I found that I could indulge in nostalgia and imagination and some people enjoyed it, whereas if I tried to write about it most people would find it boring. ✦ Painting gave me the opportunity of describing human achievements, my interpretation of landscapes and seascapes, and the opportunity of indulging in the mythology of my Celtic ancestors and, of course, my somewhat queer sense of humour. ✦ In this materialistic age which I never anticipated, I found myself a social outcast, a third class citizen and, in fact, a bloody nuisance, a charge on the state. Painting gives me access to young people and the opportunity to talk to the young in terms of equality. ✦ Who in the Art world do I admire the most? Speaking as an old nuisance, I admire Picasso who in his old age proved that age has no barrier to stop genius. Neither did it stop Titian with his masterpiece *The Fall of Man* painted in his nineties, nor did it inhibit Goya at 82 from painting *The Milkmaid of Bordeaux*. ✦ Now to the artists who inspire me. Well, I have to resort to literature. I learned that a good book taught the reader something about life. Artists who paint life as they see it have always inspired me. Men like Bosch, Bruegel, Goya, Constable, Turner, and the Impressionists come to mind. Artists who painted common people and their efforts and achievements. ✦ I am not keen on labels and asked what I describe myself in that respect I usually reply that I wish to be known as Dave O'Neill—someone who paints what he wants to paint.

Dave O'Neill

✦ Dave O'Neill, January 1992

Born 8 July, 1911, in the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, Dave O'Neill was born a son of Irish parents. He was one of four children, having a brother and two sisters. His father was a policeman who, with his family, returned to the place of his birth—County Antrim, North Ireland, after completing his service in the Dublin Metropolitan Police. In the period between 1925 and 1933, Dave completed his schooling in County Antrim. Dave's interest in ancient Irish History started around this time, no doubt influenced by a remarkable Stone Age monument called the Hale Stone a half-mile from Dave's school (see catalogue listings 17 and 27). Almost 30 feet high with a circumference of 100 feet, the monument is crowned by a standing stone with a hole bored through it. Across the same valley are the ruins of what is reputedly the largest Stone Age settlement in Britain. Three miles further on is Donagore (where O'Neills have been buried since 1848) and spectacular earthworks: a large constructed mound surrounded by a moat. In 1926, Dave's father bought the village pub. Dave's mother died suddenly in 1933. His father's health deteriorated to such an extent that Dave was forced to leave school at 15 to assume responsibility for family affairs. After a few difficult years at home Dave joined the army in 1938. Having been given a somewhat battered motorbike when aged 12, Dave was a motorbike enthusiast and so became a Despatch Rider in the army (see catalogue listing 29). A Despatch Rider had to memorize information and, after completing his lap of the journey, had to impart the message verbally to the next rider, and so on, until the message went through.

Very soon, Dave enjoyed the rank of Despatch Rider-in-Charge of his troop, the North Irish Horse Regiment. Dave cites a number of prominent 20th century names who were also Despatch Riders: Hitler, Lawrence of Arabia, and Paul Mares, the "lost Impressionist." (Raynard Kipling, another of Dave's heroes, confessed to being a motorcycle enthusiast.) Hospitalised in 1941 from a duodenal ulcer, Dave was suspended from further "D.R." duties. Instead, he was promoted to Technical Storeman—one of the highest paid trade ranks in the army. Discharged from the army in 1942, permanently unfit for any type of military duty, Dave was granted a *Disability Caused Through Military Duty* pension and "a King's Badge to prove it." He rejoined the workforce at Albion Motors (a Scottish heavy vehicle manufacturer) in 1942, as a Factory Representative for Northern Ireland. His father died the same year. In 1946 Dave married Margaret Irwin Currie at Donegal Road Methodist Church, Belfast. He was appointed Factory Representative for all of Ireland in 1949—a position he held until Albion Motors was taken over by Leyland Motors in 1952. He was laid off that year as a result, "with no compensation." Two subsequent positions proved unsatisfactory and Dave became disillusioned. In January, 1954, Dave "applied for sunshine and arrived in New Zealand." He soon found work with the Auckland Transport Board as a Shift Mechanic on the buses and trolley cars. In December he took a job in Okakura which also afforded accommodation. Dave hoped that Margaret (who was still in Ireland) would like New Zealand country living. "Despite her city sophistication," she did and soon they were both pig hunting, fishing, and "enjoying the local parties wild and tame" (see catalogue listing 25).

From 1935 through 1941 Dave was Officer-In-Charge (‘‘actually Mechanic-In-Charge’’) of the Department of Education school bus garage at Ohakune. Margaret and Dave took up market gardening in 1951. She grew strawberries and gladioli, he grew vegetables, mainly brassed sprouts. Margaret was critically ill in 1944 from Peritonitis, but she eventually recovered. When their market gardening business collapsed in 1973, Dave began work as a motor mechanic for the Ministry of Works at Waiouru, where he retired in 1978. They moved to Tei St, Tawhara, Wanganui, in 1979. Dave began painting in 1980. At first, he painted in low relief, carved wooden surfaces. Then he tried painting in impasto on smooth board, and later with thinner paint. His work was included in the Sir Wanganui Painters exhibition in 1984, at the Serjeant Gallery, Wanganui. In 1985 Dave received a Merit at the Montana Art Awards, Gibsons, for *Cross* (see catalogue listing 14). In 1990, Margaret’s health deteriorated and she had to be moved to the Jubilee Hospital, Aramoho. The same year, Dave had a solo exhibition at the Christopher Moore Gallery, Wellington, and a second there in 1991. *Irish Emigrant’s Return* (see catalogue listing 34) was included in the exhibition *The Viscerary Landscape* at the National Gallery, Wellington.

Dave and Margaret O’Neill lived in Ohakune for twenty-five years, and were fascinated with the mood changes of the mountains: ‘‘One thing we were really impressed by was the clear harsh landscape where a line was clear-cut, like a knife-cut in cardboard.’’ The Ngauruhoe eruption of 1984 was one of the greatest events of Dave’s life: ‘‘I’d witnessed the German air raids on Britain, but Ngauruhoe was different, more spectacular with the realisation that what I saw had nothing to do with humans; in fact I thought Mother Nature was reminding me that human beings were living there under sufferance.’’ Of *Kaapohu* (see catalogue listings 22 and 37), whose peaks were estimated by a surveyor to be nine miles from their back door, Dave says it was ‘‘a truly atmospheric phenomenon —sometimes it would seem twenty or thirty miles away, other times overshadowing our shack. Colours ranged from blood red through blues and violets to eye-burting golds and dazzling white.’’

THE BIRD'S VISION

- 1 *Goldfinches*
oil on woodcut 1980
Iris Wright, Wanganui
- 2 *New Zealand Falcon tempting Maggie*
oil on woodcut 1981
Iris Wright, Wanganui
- 3 *W. L. Handley winning on a Rex Aome, Isle of Man, 1920's*
oil on woodcut 1981
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 4 *Douglas & Scott racing in the Isle of Man, post first World War*
oil on woodcut 1982
Private Collection, Wellington
- 5 *Untitled (Going past the grandstand)*
oil on woodcut 1982
James Kirkwood, Auckland
- 6 *Untitled (Over the brow of a hill)*
oil on woodcut 1983
James Kirkwood, Auckland
- 7 *Two feeding on Kouhai*
oil on board circa 1983
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 8 *Pig Root Track, Otape*
oil on board circa 1983
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 9 *Main Trunk & Road, Pohaka*
oil on woodcut circa 1983
David Shennan, Auckland
- 10 *Broad Aarman*
oil on board circa 1983
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 11 *Shepherds in Stourton*
oil on board 1983
Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
- 12 *New Year 1955 (Ohakune Junction a Happy Memory)*
oil on board 1984
Mrs. A. Cribben, Ohakune
- 13 *Ballymore May Fair*
oil on board 1984
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 14 *Cirrus*
oil on board 1985
S. Campbell Smith, Hamilton
- 15 *Nostalgia*
oil on board 1985
Rosa Dragovicich, Wanganui
- 16 *Lakes Scenic, Ohakune*
oil on board 1986
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 17 *The Bird's Vision*
oil on board 1986
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 18 *Conscious as the Horned God of the Animals*
oil on board 1986
Paul Rayner
- 19 *Tongariro National Park Manungutupe Hut & Ngumarohoe*
oil on board 1987
Jan Port, Wanganui
- 20 *Lower Tuma Lake, Tongariro National Park*
oil on board 1987
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 21 *Foot Bridge & Trumper with Raupunga and High Country Landscape*
oil on board 1987
Paul Rayner, Wanganui

- 22 *Kaupapa & National Park High Country*
oil on board 1987
E. and M. Shennan, Auckland
- 23 *Late Snow in North Island High Country*
oil on board 1987
A. Greenough, Nelson
- 24 *Stockman mustering Cattle*
oil on board 1987
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 25 *Moody in the Kitchen*
oil on board 1987
Private Collection, Nelson
- 26 *Irish Traditional Fiddler*
oil on board 1988
Craig and Rachel Collier, Wanganui
- 27 *Northern Lights from a Bolestone to Stone
Age monument?*
oil on board 1989
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 28 *My Day of the Dirigible*
oil on board 1989
Neil Andersen, Wellington
- 29 *Despatch Rider*
oil on board 1989
Malcolm Harrison, Auckland
- 30 *Cuchulainn challenging Queen Maeve at the
Gates of the North (Ulster)*
oil on board 1989
Collection of the artist
- 31 *The Coming of Lugh*
oil on board 1989
Collection of the artist
- 32 *Celtic Dream*
oil on board 1989
Greg Burke, Wellington
- 33 *Blind Harpist breaking the Spirit
of His Ancestors*
oil on board 1990
Christopher Moore Gallery, Wellington
- 34 *Irish Emigrant's Return*
oil on board 1990
Malcolm Harrison, Auckland
- 35 *A Wellington Hill under a Clearing Sky*
oil on board 1990
Paul Rayner, Wanganui
- 36 *Auckland Wellington Limited Express
crossing Napasawehman Viaduct
approaching Ohauara*
oil on board 1990
Collection of the artist
- 37 *Kaupapa from Harapiti*
oil on board 1990
Collection of the artist
- 38 *Captain of Sailing Ship watching Tea
Clippers racing into the English Channel
sixty days out of Canton*
oil on board 1991
Tim Walker, Wellington
- 39 *The Old Passenger Admiring Air
Mandarin (the waiting)*
oil on board 1991
Christopher Moore Gallery, Wellington
- 40 *Museum's Dilemma*
oil on board 1991
Christopher Moore Gallery, Wellington

- 41 *The Vocal Mrs. O'Reilly Best on Slaughter*
oil on board 1991
Christopher Moore Gallery, Wellington
- 42 *King Country War Party*
oil on board 1991
Collection of the artist

C O L O P H O N I

This catalogue has been designed on a Macintosh IIfx using Quark Express. It was designed by Brian Byrne and produced with the help of Paul Rayner. The fonts used are *New Century Schoolbook* and *Palazzo Heavy*, set at ten points with four points leading; the stock is *Conqueror Vallum*. In an edition of fifty copies, signed by the artist and the curator, this is number / 7

