

# | MCATAMNEY GALLERY AND DESIGN STORE

## BOB KERR | THE THREE WISE MEN OF KUROW

An exhibition of paintings by Bob Kerr.

A couple of Kilometers west of Kurow in the Waitaki valley the highway crosses the Awakino Stream. It's an easy place to drive past. There is no sign to tell you that this shady gully with its scrappy broom and choking willow trees influenced how New Zealanders have lived for the last sixty years.

Over 350 unemployed men and their families set up the camp at the Awakino Stream during the worst years of depression of the 1930's. They were hoping to join the 2000 men working on the Waitaki Dam which was being built a couple of kilometers further up the Waitaki River. Many of them walked up the valley from Oamaru, some brought their own shovels. When they found there was no job they waited at what became known as The Willows rather than make the long trudge back down the valley to Oamaru. They lived in tents and shacks made out of willow branches and beaten out fuel cans. There was no Unemployment Benefit, no Domestic Purposes Benefit and if you got sick, no public hospital care. There was charity and rabbit stew if you were lucky. The hills on either side of the stream protected the squatters from the worst of the freezing westerly winds but they also shaded the valley and winter frosts remained on the ground for weeks. Local legend has it that 'whiskey froze in the bottle and nappies hung like boards on the line.'

Girvan McMillan the Kurow doctor, Andrew Davidson the local headmaster and Arnold Nordmeyer the minister of the Kurow Presbyterian church were soon in regular contact with the families at the Willows. It set them thinking. The three wise men, as they were affectionately called, were appalled at the squalid living conditions they saw at the Willows.

Andrew Davidson's school roll suddenly grew from 63 to 339. He was a tireless and innovative educator. He believed in public education and that each child 'possessed a spark of genius somewhere'. It was the teacher's job to find it. Nordmeyer's sermons dealt more with the here and now rather than the hereafter and McMillan was known for his fast and furious driving around his large practice and his expectation that trains in the Kurow shunting yards should make way for him. He was running a medical scheme for the dam workers funded by hospital board and worker contributions. In his book *Waitaki Dammed*, Gil Natusch gave this description of McMillan. 'He regarded himself as on call 24 hours a day, and without a surgery nurse he was willing to tackle anything from delivering babies to treating everybody's ailments, extracting teeth, dealing with sickness and major accidents and emergency amputations. The 'little Doctor' is still remembered with respect and affection by those he served.'

The three men would meet in the doctor's house to discuss what they saw at the Willows. It was at the doctor's kitchen table they formed the idea of a national health scheme based

on the one that Dr. McMillan was running at the dam. It would be free, it would be complete and it would meet the needs of all the people.' They wrote down six clear sentences they believed should form the basis of this national health scheme:

- 1 It must aim at the prevention of disease.
- 2 It must make provision for income loss.
- 3 It must provide all the facilities for the diagnosis and treatment of disease.
- 4 It must be based on the provision of a family doctor for every person.
- 5 The service must be based on the principle of the patient's free choice of doctor.
- 6 It must include the adequate provision for research in all matters relating to health.

McMillan presented these ideas at the Labour party conference in 1934. They were adopted as policy. In 1935 McMillan and Nordmeyer were elected to Parliament, McMillan in the seat of Dunedin West and Nordmeyer in Oamaru. In parliament they expanded their ideas into the Social Security Act of 1938, which combined the introduction of a free health system with comprehensive welfare benefits.

The introduction describes it as: 'An Act to provide for the payment of superannuation benefits and of other benefits designed to safeguard the people of New Zealand from the disabilities arising from age, sickness, widowhood, orphanhood, unemployment, or other exceptional conditions; to provide a system whereby medical and hospital treatment will be made available to persons requiring such treatment; and further, to provide such other benefits as may be necessary to maintain and promote the health and general welfare of the community.'

Bob Kerr's exhibition of paintings at the McAtamney Gallery visualizes how these three remarkable men developed their ideas for a better New Zealand in the stark, beautiful North Otago landscape.

### ***Bob Kerr Biography***

Bob Kerr is a Wellington based painter author and illustrator with an interest in New Zealand's history and landscape.

In this exhibition, *The Three Wise Men of Kurow*, he looks at Girvan McMillan, Andrew Davidson and Arnold Nordmeyer's experience of living in Kurow during the depression of the 1930's and how they changed New Zealand's social and political landscape.

Previous exhibitions have looked at the period of the First World War: *The Rua Expedition* dealt with the police invasion of Rua Kenana's community at Maungapohatu in 1916.

*Number One Field Punishment* examined Archibald Baxter's opposition to military conscription and *Hell Here Now - The Gallipoli Diary of Alfred Cameron* visualized Alfred Cameron's experiences at Gallipoli in 1915.

A recent show and publication looked at the Waihi strike of 1913.

Bob has also done three previous exhibitions that looked at the landscape through the eyes of New Zealand scientists, these were: *Some of The Field Evidence*, which looked at

the life and work of Leslie Adkin. *Charles Fleming Hears The Kokako Sing* which visualized Fleming's campaign to save the native forest of the Mamaku Plateau and *The Man Who Moved New Zealand* which examined the geologist Harold Wellman's work on The Alpine Fault.

Bob has also written and illustrated many award winning children's books. Perhaps his best-known painting is on the cover of Michael King's *Penguin History of New Zealand*.

### *List of exhibitions*

**The River of Salt Water Where we Landed.** Idiom Studio, Wellington, 1999.

**Some of The Field Evidence - Paintings based on the Diaries of Leslie Adkin.** Idiom Studio, Wellington, November 2000. Manawatu Art Gallery, August - September 2001.

**Bob Kerr - New Paintings,** Idiom Studio, Wellington, August 2001.

**Bob Kerr - New Paintings,** Idiom Studio, Wellington, October 2002.

**Boundary lines,** McPherson Gallery, Auckland, 2003.

**The Rua Expedition** Whakatane Museum and Art Gallery, November - December 2003. Rotorua Museum of Art and History, December - February 2004. Idiom Studio, Wellington, February - March 2004. Waikato Museum of Art and History, March - May 2004.

**New Paintings by Bob Kerr,** McPherson Gallery, Auckland, June 2004.

**South Coast,** Idiom Studio, Wellington, November 2004.

**You are Here,** McPherson Gallery, Auckland, June 2005.

**The River,** Idiom Studio, Wellington, November 2005.

**Charles Fleming Hears The Kokako Sing,** McPherson Gallery, Auckland, July 2006. Rotorua Museum of Art and History, May 2007.

**Waiting For The Grader-man,** Milford Galleries, Queenstown, November - December 2006.

**Moving Right Along,** Idiom Studio, Wellington, December, 2006.

**Coming into Land,** McPherson Gallery, Auckland, June - July 2007

**Number One Field Punishment - Archibald Baxter's Opposition to Military Conscription,** Milford Galleries, Dunedin, August - September 2008.

**The Man Who Moved New Zealand - Harold Wellman and The Alpine Fault** Bowen Galleries, Wellington, August - September 2008.

**Hell Here Now - The Gallipoli Diary of Alfred Cameron** The Rotorua Museum of Art and History, April - May 2009. Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, March - May 2010.

**Hell Here Now.** A musical interpretation of Bob Kerr's painting with Slava Fainitski, Violin, Catherine McKay, piano and Brenton Veitch, cello and readings from Alfred Cameron's diary by Robin Kerr. 22nd April - 25th April 2010. Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures.

**Capital Times.** A group show with Geoffrey Notman, Barbara Strathdee, Ans Westra, Neil Pardington, Ann Shelton, Bob Kerr. Suite Gallery, Wellington. 21st May - 26th June 2010.

**Hell Here Now.** Aigantighe Art Gallery, in Timaru. October 2012.

**The Three Wise Men of Kurow.** Enjoy Public Art Gallery, 147 Cuba St. Wellington. 21st and 22nd of March 2011.

**The Rocky Barron Hills.** Suite Gallery, Oriental Parade. 24th November - the 12th of December.

**Hell Here Now - The Gallipoli Diary of Alfred Cameron,** Whitespace Contemporary Art, Auckland, April - May 2012.

**Gold Strike.** Waihi Arts Centre and Museum. November the 11th - 25th of November. The Rotorua Museum from 13 April - 30 June 2013. Whitespace Gallery, 12 Crummer Rd. Ponsonby, Auckland July 2013.

**Number One Field Punishment with a soundscape by Andrew Laking.** Tauranga Art Gallery, April 12, 2014 until June 8, 2014.