

James
Preston



James Preston

A COLONIAL
PRIMITIVE



THE AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
AUGUST - NINETEEN FIFTY-NINE

F O R E W O R D

AMONG THE EARLY New Zealand artists we have exhibited so far, James Preston appears as the only primitive; and because of his naive vision we are given a very real impression of those colonial days, when the European and his habitations had not quite fused with the landscape.

As all the work of Preston is in the Canterbury Museum, we are all the more grateful to the Trustees and Director for placing this material at our disposal.

Mr Hamish Keith of the Gallery staff has selected the exhibition and written the introduction to the catalogue.

P. A. TOMORY



I N T R O D U C T I O N

APART FROM THE FACT that James Preston was born in Westmorland in 1834, the son of the Rev W. S. Preston, and received his education at Edinburgh, little is known of his early life. That he was later ordained would suggest a University education, and it can be supposed that his family were little more than comfortably off.

The New Zealand Church News of November, 1898, contains Preston's obituary, but its information concerning his earlier movements is apparently inaccurate. It mentions that he left England in the early 1850's, and resided in Australia; and that in 1860 he married and came to New Zealand. His sketch books contain no reference to Australia, but they do establish him in New Zealand as early as 1854.

During this year he worked for Charles Reed in the Hurunui district. Reed had applied for a run at Hurunui in November, 1854, and named it Warlise; but it was likely that he was working this area earlier than that date, since Preston mentions living there for almost the whole of 1854. CAMP NEAR THE HURUNUI GORGE (cat. No.1) was painted from a sketch made at this time. Preston's companion Bryant, was J. H. Bryant, Reed's manager. Bryant managed Warlise till about 1856, and quite probably went from there to Temuka.

It is possible that Preston's position with Reed

was that of cadet. This was a system of labour in return for keep and experience. The cadet was supposed to work without pay for the station experience he gained—presumably with a view to taking up a run of his own. According to Samuel Butler this system was seldom satisfactory. In 1855, James Preston spent some time at Rangiora and later in the year made his way to the gold diggings in the Nelson area. CAMP AT COLLINGWOOD (cat. No.2) is a record of this experience, but apparently painted from a pencil sketch at some later date. He was also at the diggings at Doctor's Creek and the Slate River.

His fortune was evidently not to be made at the gold diggings, for in 1856, he returned to Canterbury and either farmed or worked on a farm at Charteris Bay. The paintings of this time are not nearly as lively as the pencil sketches they were made from. No new localities appear in his paintings until his return to the colony in 1860, so it is possible that he remained at Charteris Bay until 1859, when he sailed for England in the ship *Salem*.

While in England he married and, perhaps on his wedding trip, visited the Isle of Man. In 1860, he returned to New Zealand aboard the *Harwood*, this time a seasoned enough traveller to observe and enjoy the discomforts suffered by his fellow passengers at the hands of King Neptune.

On his return to the colony, according to the *Church News*, he took up farming on the Wai-

makariri, but this is possibly inaccurate and may refer to his earlier visit. Whatever his occupation then, his drawings and paintings take on a more leisurely character and it seems likely he visited the North Island.

His movements and activities at this time cannot be determined and the next accurate information we have about him is his ordination, as deacon in 1870, and priest in 1872; in that year James Preston was appointed curate in charge of the parochial district of Geraldine.

The county of Geraldine is extensive, bordered on the north by the Rangitata river (some 70 miles south of Christchurch), and in the south by the Opihi (10 miles north of Timaru). It runs from the sea inland for about 45 miles and up until 1882, included the Mackenzie Country. This was a very large parish for one man and the Rev James Preston covered over a hundred miles a week on horseback. He still, however, found time for picnics, fishing trips, and excursions into the mountains. Preston died at Geraldine on 4 October 1898.

Canterbury, and particularly South Canterbury, seems to have had very little painting activity in its earlier period. Apart from Edmund Norman, who worked at Burkes Pass, and William Packe, who had the Raincliff run, there seem to have been almost no resident painters. A number of noted watercolourists had painted in the district: David Con Hutton, Samuel Cousins, Nicholas Chevalier, William Fox and Julius von Haast

among them, but as a whole the activity appears to have been slight.

Possibly the reason is found in Samuel Butler's comment 'Scenery is not Scenery — it is "Country" — if it is good for sheep, it is beautiful, magnificent and all the rest of it; if not, it is not worth looking at.'

Land was apparently the major preoccupation — not land for homes or small farms as in the other provinces — but land for sheep. Once it was gained, the stocking of it and turning it to financial returns was a most absorbing occupation. The province was notably single minded in this respect and even Butler was not untouched by this desire to make the land yield money.

This was the first ambition to be achieved. Once satisfied, the home could then be built and the life made. Perhaps the absence of the Army and the distance from the seat of government contributed to the lack of some of the refinements of civilization enjoyed by settlements with more varied interests.

Canterbury had the advantage, however, of being involved in a pursuit with a definite span; and at the end of the century, when the rush was over and more cultural pursuits followed, the arrival of Van der Velden helped make it the art centre of New Zealand. It is difficult to include Preston amongst the band of talented amateurs flourishing in colonial New Zealand. The distinctly Primitive nature of his painting sets it apart.



Plate i CAMP NEAR THE HURUNUI GORGE, 1854 (1)

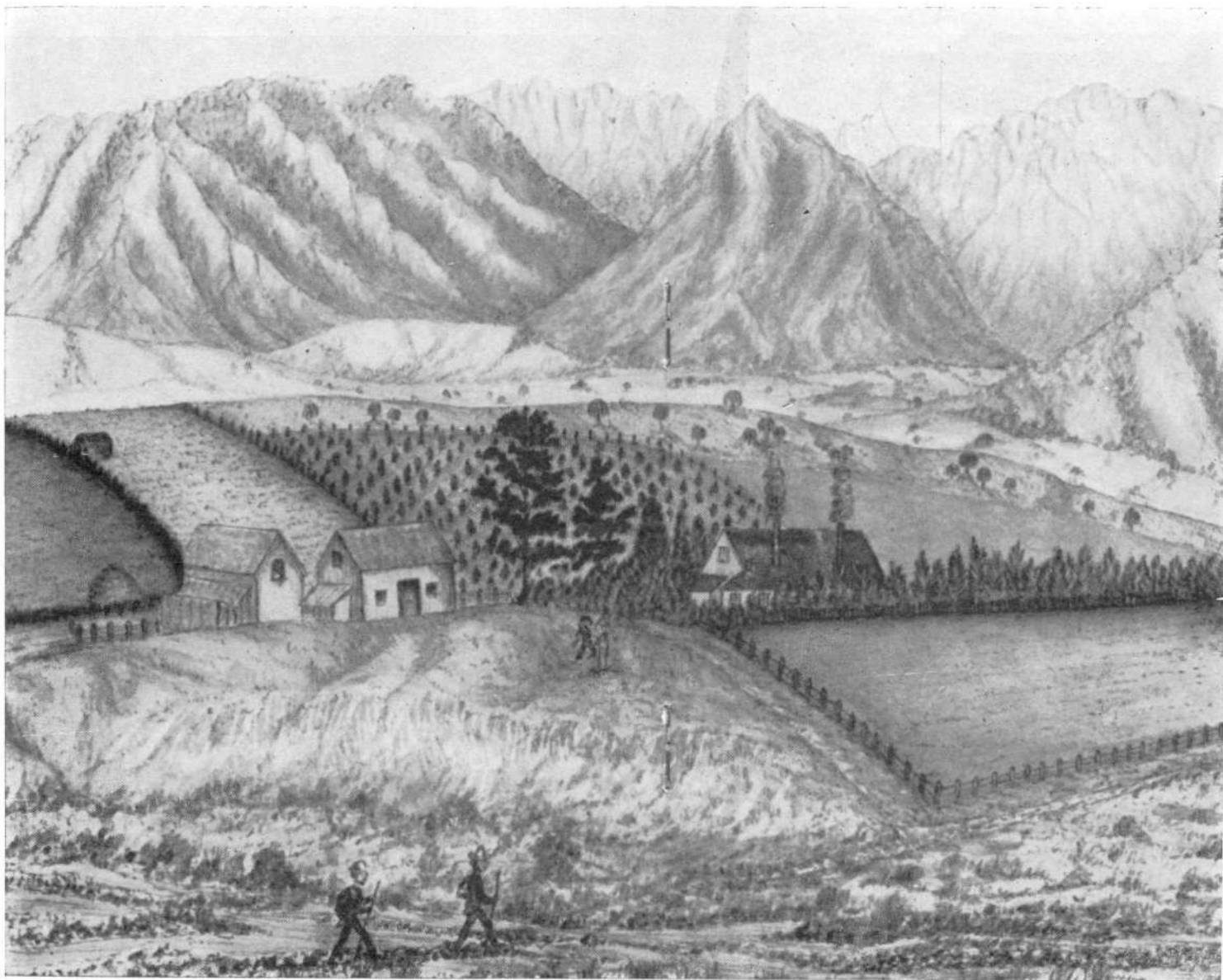


Plate ii OPAWA STATION, ALBURY (26)



Plate iii *CROSSING THE LINE IN THE SHIP HARWOOD, 1860* (10)

The term Primitive does not connote a state of crudity or backwardness, but rather a lack of means. It is not a term that can be applied to any sort of crude, provincial or anonymous painting. It is most clearly marked by its lack of attempt at an illusion of appearance.

The motives of a Primitive are mostly obscure. Some strive consciously for a fidelity to Art, but it is unlikely that Preston shared such a desire. He seems to have wished to recall or record those moments in his life which had pleasure or significance—a fishing trip, a picnic, an unfortunate incident with wild pigs—places he must have seen every day or week. The Primitive's emancipation from illusion would allow him to find wit and beauty in the commonplace. The number of versions of the same subject, some at a considerable distance from the event, would suggest that Preston strove to improve his means; however, there is no great change in style or facility throughout his lifetime.

Primitive painting is almost completely conceptual, drawing on a memory of images and symbols; a memory which makes a selection of those aspects which present objects in their greatest clearness and completeness, it describes rather than depicts. This fidelity to a visual convention becomes, at times, almost a perversion of appearance.

The relationship of the people of Preston's world with their environment varies from complete bewilderment and stupidity to a childlike joy. The

balance, however, is always on the side of Nature, and these doll-like people never dominate, but accept and fit their places in the scale of things as easily as a tree. This relationship of people to their environment is not usually found in colonial painting, where figures are, more often than not, introduced merely as compositional devices.

No particular significance is given to any one part of Preston's pictures — the event, the scene and the participants invariably find themselves in harmony, each receiving as much care and attention as the other.

It seems that only in the artificial environment aboard ship, could Preston look closely at his fellow men and when he did so, it was not without malice or wit. His **CROSSING THE LINE IN THE SHIP HARWOOD** (cat. No.10) has, obviously on a slighter scale, some of the sting and brutality of James Ensor's **CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO BRUSSELS**.

The sources for most of his paintings are pencil sketches, drawn mainly on his trips; the best of these have a fluency and spontaneity quite distinct from his watercolours. One of his many sketchbooks contains a number of copies from Maori rock drawings at Opihi. His additions to these, notably top hats, would perhaps suggest that he identified his own symbols with them.

The sketchbooks also contain the now expected paraphernalia of a Primitive painter, picture postcards and illustrations clipped from magazines and newspapers — an illustration from a tale of adven-

ture — a sweetly drawn head of a young girl — a carefully coloured advertisement for Zelandia boots.

It is pleasant to be drawn into James Preston's world — a world into which his mannikins and their houses do not quite fit, but are not unduly worried by it, content to enjoy the simple pleasures of a picnic or a snow-slide. Preston's paintings and vision, his wit and simplicity are possibly even more charming in their freedom from topographical reference.

H. K.

THE CATALOGUE

Measurements of pictures are given in inches, height before width. They are sight measurements, i.e. the size of a picture as seen within frame or mount. The water-colours and drawings in this exhibition have been drawn from the Canterbury Museum's collection of works by James Preston.

1 CAMP NEAR THE HURUNUI GORGE, 1854

Watercolour 9 x 11¼

Inscribed: Staid in this Bush near the gorge of the Hooroonuey for 3 days by myself cutting posts. Bryant came occasionally with the bullocks for a load. Bryant and myself at dinner 1854.

2 CAMP AT COLLINGWOOD, 1856

Watercolour $6\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{8}$

Inscribed: *Diggers Camping ground Burnt Hill
Collingwood N.Z. 1856.*

3 PLUMBER'S HUT. CHARTERIS BAY, 1856

Watercolour $9\frac{1}{8} \times 11\frac{7}{8}$

4 YARDS AT CHARTERIS BAY

Watercolour $9 \times 11\frac{7}{8}$

5 HOUSE WITH CIRCULAR PATH

Watercolour 7×11

6 RANGITATA HUT

Watercolour $5\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$

7 RANGITATA MOUTH

Watercolour $6\frac{1}{4} \times 11\frac{3}{4}$

8 FISHING RANGITATA

Watercolour $9\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$

**9 ROCKS AT MARTINS GAP, TRINIDAD, SEEN
FROM THE SHIP SALEM, 1859**

Pencil and wash $8\frac{7}{8} \times 7\frac{3}{8}$

**10 CROSSING THE LINE IN THE SHIP
HARWOOD, 1860**

Four watercolour drawings $4\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{3}{8}$

11 LAKE ROTORUA

Watercolour 6 x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$

12 HOUSE WITH ITS BACK TO THE LAKE

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$

**13 THERMAL LANDSCAPE WITH BAND
ROTUNDA**

Watercolour 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$

14 ROTORUA ?

Watercolour 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{7}{8}$

15 COTTAGE, BACK OF ASHWICK STATION

Watercolour 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 11

16 LOOKING DOWN BURKES PASS

Watercolour 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{8}$

17 BURKES PASS

Watercolour 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$

18 ROAD BESIDE RIVER

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

19 THE PIG HUNT

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

20 WATERFALL AND ROCKY GORGE

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

21 FOOT OF THE GLACIER

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

22 THREE FIGURES ON A GLACIER

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

23 RIVER FROM AN ICE-CAVERN

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

24 THE SNOW SLIDE

Watercolour 7 x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$

25 MT. COOK

Watercolour 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 11

26 OPAWA STATION, ALBURY

Watercolour 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{8}$

27 LIMESTONE

Watercolour 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

**28 FARM BUILDINGS AND LOCOMOTIVE NEAR
CRICKLEWOOD**

Watercolour 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$

29 HIGH COUNTRY LANDSCAPE

Watercolour 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

30 SHERWOOD DOWNS

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$

31 SHERWOOD

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

32 CLAYTON STATION

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

33 ROAD THROUGH PEEL FOREST

Pencil 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$

34 GOING TO MT. PEEL

Pencil 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$

35 UNDERWOOD PEEL FOREST

Watercolour 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$

36 UNDERWOOD PEEL FOREST

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

37 DENNISTOUN'S HOUSE PEEL FOREST

Watercolour 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

38 CROSSING THE RIVER BED

Pencil 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

39 A PICNIC

Watercolour 10 x 13 $\frac{1}{4}$

40 A PICNIC

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$

41 CAMP IN THE BUSH AT ORARI GORGE, 1880

Watercolour 9 x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$

42 FISHERMEN RESTING

Watercolour 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10

43 FISHING ORARI GORGE, 1893

Watercolour $7\frac{3}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{8}$

44 ENTRANCE TO ORARI GORGE, 1893

Watercolour $9\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{3}{4}$

**45 MR HUGHES, MYSELF AND ARTHUR,
FISHING IN ORARI GORGE, 1893**

Watercolour $8\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{8}$

46 CAMP AT THE EDGE OF A FOREST

Watercolour $7 \times 9\frac{7}{8}$

47 OLD WALTER'S HUT, 1897

Watercolour $7\frac{3}{4} \times 12$