

Years of Hope

As THE WAR ended Noel and Pat were both leading highly political lives. He was drawing a weekly cartoon for the *Guardian* and contributing occasional articles. Pat was involved with party organisation. As a result of the great increase in membership that had taken place during the last two years of the war the four large districts of the Victorian party were divided into ten smaller ones and Pat was placed in charge of the new Richmond district.

He continued to lead a busy life, painting as best he could in the narrow confines of the living room of their East St Kilda flat, producing his cartoons in the *Guardian* office, and occasional commercial work at the *Herald*. He was an active member of the Arts and Sciences Committee of the party, designing posters and covers for pamphlets, and material for May Day. Sometimes he gave a talk on questions of political or cultural interest. The relationship between Australian painting and Australian literature interested him.

I would like to comment on what has always struck me as an interesting fact about Australia's cultural development—its *uneven* character. As everyone is aware Australian literature has been marked from the beginning by its plebeian and strongly rebellious character—its intimate relationship to the labor movement and its reflection of militant democracy—All our major poets and writers were rebels—but look at Australian painting—what a contrast! Our 'eminent' artists have been servants of the bourgeoisie, tied to the tastes and values of a vulgar philistine bourgeoisie in most cases. In every way one is struck by the lack of rebels in the sense of Lawson, Furphy and Co.

It is only in the last decade or so that the rebels in painting have bobbed up—the modern movement contained its 'aesthetic' rebels, its fathers, like George Bell, Shore, Frater, Lawlor and Co but all these gentry are so firmly tied to the values of the bourgeoisie too—witness their gradual 'respectabilisation'(!) over 12 years—and their terrible fear of 'content'—leading, in their opinion, direct to bolshevism. On the other hand the freedom of expression and knowledge of French painting of the last 100 years introduced to Australia by the Modern

The Cough . . . Stone Dust, linocut, 1947.

Movement aided the development of painters interested in objectivity, social truth.¹

He was doing what he could to promote an objective social truth in Australian art—and from Melbourne. It is of interest to note that all his examples of Australia's 'aesthetic' rebels were Melbourne painters. Because of travel difficulties during the war and the lack of any readily available general account, discussion about Australian art was very much a state affair. There was little direct knowledge of what was happening interstate. There was also an element of rivalry, if not misunderstanding. A similar situation obtained among the left in their attitude to Australian literature. Impressed by the success and wide readership achieved by the first issue of *Australian New Writing* (March 1943) Waten and O'Connor set out to achieve something similar in Victoria. The venture was to be known as Dolphin Books, a name inspired by the success of the Penguin imprint.² Their first publication was to be an anthology of short stories, verse and essays with all the contributors from Melbourne. Brian Fitzpatrick on early Australian socialism; P. M. Stanley, their drinking pal at the Swanston Family, on Lawson and Brady; Judah on social realism in Australian art; short stories from Alan Marshall and Herz Bergner. But as they were interested in a New Zealand readership, Noel was asked to write to his old friend R. A. K. Mason, the New Zealand poet, seeking his support with a contribution, and also something from Frank Sargeson.

A group of us here are about to publish a new book . . . where 'Australian New Writing' is principally devoted to new, amateur writing, we are concerned with a more professional production, but to constitute as formidable a statement as possible of a progressive, 'realist' position in contemporary literature and art. All the work will express more or less a similar point of view.³

The fact was that Counihan, Waten and O'Connor, as a result of their fierce differences with the *Angry Penguins* group, had developed something of a siege mentality. There was an emphasis upon professionalism but also a tendency to denounce in strident terms the work of all but politically committed artists as bourgeois or worse. In Sydney, by contrast, a greater tolerance prevailed; the stress there was on the development of a wider audience for the arts. The Encouragement of Art Movement was typical of Sydney's more populist approach, in sharp contrast to the vanguardist approach adopted in Melbourne by both the *Angry Penguins* group and the Melbourne realists—the one championing an aesthetic vanguard, the other a political vanguard of professional realists.

In Sydney the Studio of Realist Art (SORA) sought to build upon the enthusiasm developed by the Encouragement of Art Movement. It was established in March 1945 as a result of discussions between a small group of artists: James Cant, Roy Dalgarno, Roderick Shaw and Hal Missingham. Its objects were primarily educational. Three months after its establishment SORA was instructing fifty-six students in drawing and painting and had over one hundred members. In reply to a letter from the architect and artist John D. Moore, SORA, through its *Bulletin* (10 May 1945), pointed out that it welcomed new forms of expression:

every student and artist [had] his right to express himself in his own way . . . we admire the findings of the genuine abstract painter, and seek to recognise the strength of his language . . . we don't disagree with the forms of Cézanne, Picasso, Mondrian, Calder, Nicholson and so on. We recognise the value of their work. But that does not mean we see anything vital or important in the work of many of their imitators or followers . . . We realise that shapes and colours have abstract relations creating pleasure or displeasure through the human eye, as sounds have abstract relations through the ear. The investigation of these relations must remain an important part of the science of painting. But we refuse to accept the part for the whole. In the greatest art there is more than the 'bones', that is line, tone, colour; there is also humanity, because art is produced by men. Abstract art, we find, easily degenerates into obscurantism, preciousness and downright falsity. At the present time, artists should seek more consciously a relationship between their work and the society of which they are part.

That was more open-minded than anything proceeding from the Melbourne realists in their conflict with the Reed group. But it was addressed to the prosecution of an art teaching programme. None of the artists of SORA were grappling with the aesthetic problems of painting in a realist manner in the way that Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor were.

In February 1945 Sydney Ure Smith's *Present Day Art in Australia* appeared. It published four of Counihan's most impressive recent works: *At the Start of the March 1932*, *At the Corner of Nightingale Street*, *At the Meeting*, and *In the Waiting Room*. Among formidable company, they were well received. An ABC reviewer, while acknowledging the vitality revealed in the work of Drysdale, Preston and Gleeson (also reproduced), concluded that 'for sheer power Noel Counihan's work is the most impressive in the whole book'.⁴

In the winter of 1945 he began working on a new series of paintings based upon ideas gained from the drawings he had made in the Wonthaggi mines: 'the problems presented by the underground scenes are very tough, and there are no examples or precedents to turn to, the problems must be tackled originally'.

Had modern painters, had any painters, ever sought to paint miners in their dark and dank working conditions? He did not know of any. Was that not at least as original as painting imitations of Dali and Mondrian? They are all memorable paintings and the finest of the series is *Miners Working in Wet Conditions*. Some years later he described the scene depicted:

Two miners in six inches of clay-coloured water . . . a suction pump grunting and gurgling in the slush . . . one fellow on his haunches crank-handling an antiquated drill into the wet stone beneath the coal seam, making holes for explosives. His mate stooped to use his shoulders to shore up an upright timber propped against the dripping roof while water splashes off his naked shoulder.⁵

Though much smaller in size, the painting bears comparison with Tom Roberts's *Shearing the Rams*. The Roberts is an image of rural labour typical of nineteenth-century Australia; the Counihan an image of industrial labour characteristic of early twentieth-century Australia. In both paintings stooped bodies and broad backs have been chosen as significant forms to epitomise the subject. But whereas Roberts's shearers are seen in a cool, roomy shed, open to any breeze that blows, Counihan's miners are depicted in mud, slush and darkness. He was aware of and prepared to point up such contradictions; knew well enough too that in the kind of society in which he lived, progress, like Marx's Indian god, only partook of the nectar through the skulls of the slain.

There is evidence in the painting that he sought to suggest the presence of death in the mines; that he remembered Chris, dying of silicosis, as he painted. At the lower left, beneath the feet of the man shoring up the timber, there is certainly one image, perhaps two, of skulls emerging from the impasted brushstrokes.

In *Miners Preparing a Shot* two miners crouch side by side, symbols of mateship and co-operative labour, drilling holes to lay explosives. Again it is a scene of Rembrandtesque gloom, lit only by the miners' lamps. The strong shoulders of the man on the left are contrasted with the emaciated face and chest of the other. The Wonthaggi mine, he knew, was not a healthy place to work in.

Counihan was working on a theme unprecedented in Australian art. For most of those who collected paintings, mining was an activity beneath the level of constituted 'culture'. He hoped to draw attention to its existence. But in order to produce good paintings he not only needed to look at life, he also needed to look at paintings, many paintings.

While he was painting the mining paintings Daryl Lindsay, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, mounted a show that

included the work of McCubbin, Withers and David Davies. Counihan was deeply impressed.

These pictures are very important in the development of contemporary Australian painting . . . These pictures are serious paintings, solving problems very timely to their time, and without which no national tradition of any consequence could have developed. What a fine show, a really representative display of Fred McCubbin, early Streeton, the best Roberts and Conders, and Withers and Davies would make.⁶

It would not be until forty years later, one year before his own death, that he would be able to see such an exhibition.⁷ In another letter written in September 1944 he told me of his reactions to 'a batch of about seven McCubbins and a solitary but lovely Conder' on view in a show at Sedons:

I personally had no idea that McCubbin had taken impressionism to such astonishing lengths as these delightful little pictures reveal. They are most sensitively handled, very honest in their vision and in fact prove what a fine painter McCubbin really was and how he towers above those who've since reduced Aust. impressionism to such conventional banalities. But the most striking picture in the show, judging the pictures on their individual merit, is the small but powerful Conder. This little picture, so insignificant in size, is nevertheless a Gallery picture by reason of the breadth and 'largeness' of its conception. Just a woman and a wisp of tree in a broad dark landscape with a glimpse of magnificent sky, this fine strong painting, surely, certainly and delicately painted, impressed me very deeply. I have not yet seen anything by Conder which has left me unmoved and McCubbin's impressionism and Australianism in his landscapes and his feeling for simple folk has played a tremendous part in moulding our national painting.⁸

Counihan submitted the two mining paintings, and a third entitled *In the 18 Inch Seam* to the Australia at War exhibition which opened in the National Gallery of Victoria on 21 September 1945. The idea of the show had been developed by party members active in the Artists Advisory Panel back in 1942, and most of the donkey work such as getting it approved by government and the army authorities was done by them. But in order for it to be successful and fully endorsed by the press and public they had to take a back seat. The Australian Council for Education in Music and the Arts (CEMA) cheerfully accepted responsibility for sponsoring the exhibition though it had little to do with its creation. Although the idea was first mooted in Melbourne by the Artists Advisory Panel, as soon as the war ended the left-wing leadership that had given a new thrust and dynamic to many aspects of Australian culture was challenged by sycophants of the privileged. For them art was not a criticism of society but a token of their own

legitimacy. For the moment, however, images of miners contributing to the war effort were acceptable.

The Australia at War exhibition was a great success. It could be said to have been the first of the local post-war blockbusters—if the word is not confined to exhibitions brought to Australia from abroad. It included both professional and amateur work on a national scale (an innovation in itself) and was of the greatest importance for the development of a wider audience for art during the early post-war years. By the end of July over 700 paintings had been received. Eventually 287 works were selected. Industry, the press, and well-known individuals had been canvassed to provide prize-moneys which ranged in value from £100 donated by the Melbourne *Herald* for the best work in the exhibition to a fourth prize of 4 guineas donated by Wiltshire Inks in the amateur section.

Selecting and judging the exhibition was a complicated procedure. Preselection and recommendations for prizes for the New South Wales and Queensland works were undertaken by a committee in Sydney consisting of Margaret Preston, Elaine Haxton, William Dobell, Frank Medworth, James Cook and Sydney Ure Smith. The final selection and the awarding of the prizes was carried out in Melbourne by a committee that consisted of Daryl Lindsay, Arnold Shore, Hal Missingham, James Quinn, Nutter Buzacott, Wallace Thornton and Edith Hughston. The patrons listed in the catalogue included almost everybody who was anybody in the worlds of art, industry and the armed services, from General Sir Thomas Blamey, Sir Keith Murdoch and Frank Packer, the newspaper magnates, to Professor Walter Murdoch, chancellor of the University of Western Australia. The exhibition was divided into sixteen sections, with a first prize and often a second and third prize in each section. There were sections for war: (1) on land, (2) in the air, (3) at sea; for (4) war industry, (5) women's services, (6) medical services, (7) voluntary services, (8) the Civil Construction Corps, (9) women in production, (10) front-line sketching, (11) graphic illustration, (12) the home front, (13) sculpture, (14) an amateur section, (15) a prize for the best work by a serviceman not taking a prize in any other section, and (16) a prize for a front-line sketch which was awarded by the art committee of Melbourne's Savage Club.

Counihan's *Miners Working in Wet Conditions* won both the first prize awarded for the best work in the exhibition and for the best work in the industrial section. His painting *In the 18 Inch Seam* won the third prize in the same section. It was a personal triumph in a field that included some of the best-known and most talented artists in the country. During 1945 and 1946 the exhibition was shown in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. It was by far the largest exhibition of Australian art that

had ever been organised, attracted large crowds, and began the development of a new popular audience for Australian art.

However, it may be noted that no works by Arthur Boyd, John Perceval, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker were entered in the exhibition. One commentator has suggested that they 'boycotted the enterprise' because their war-time work was not 'in the spirit demanded by the organisers'.⁹ But it may be questioned whether any boycott of the exhibition was ever undertaken by the artists in question and in any case it was the selection panels in Sydney and Melbourne, not the 'organisers', who selected the works. The importance of the Australia at War exhibition has been marginalised and diminished by commentary inspired by cold war evaluations.¹⁰

The award of the first prize to *Miners Working in Wet Conditions* was well received. Clive Turnbull, art critic of the Melbourne *Herald*, the paper that had provided the prize, described it as 'a powerful work' and praised its 'extremely skilful handling of a pictorial problem'.¹¹ J. S. MacDonald, now writing as the art critic of the *Age*, criticised the show in that inimitable way of which only he was master:

a glut of would-be psychology, half-baked Marxism, chip-on-the-shoulder class rubbish, all of which, artistically, is indefensible . . . The picture which won the prize for the best work in the exhibition is a bourgeois piece of painting; orthodox student's work. The title is politico-industrial, and at that propaganda; for without it one could not have known that it was not capitalists picking gold out of a privately owned mine, under ideal conditions; or uranium . . .

Any country's art is the aesthetic doctrine of its total spiritual state; that is why Germany's has been so soulless and France's so meretricious. This then, is decidedly not our true art. We are healthy, young; not jaded, jejune, introspective and egocentric.¹²

MacDonald's ideologically charged perception blinded him to the aesthetic quality of work he disliked for political reasons. It was a problem that would plague Counihan all his life. He never at any time denied that he was a member of the CPA; he took pride in it and wanted it known. He also wanted to be known and assessed as a practising, professional artist who was personally often critical of the quality of his own work. Many like MacDonald, and increasingly so as the cold war climate settled in and became endemic, could not make the distinction he sought and expected. Fortunately for Counihan the best Australian art critics of his own generation did make that distinction, directing their attention to the aesthetic qualities of his work, whatever they may have felt about his political views.

When the show opened in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in February 1946, Paul Haefliger, the art critic of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, wrote that *Miners Working in Wet Conditions*, was 'in a class of its own'.

It has undeniable power and conviction and imparts the dirt and sweat, the cramped space, the despairing darkness of appalling working conditions. Slowly a degree of humanity merges with his work, which softens the purely propaganda aim of his earlier paintings.¹³

Heartened by the reception given to his 'miner' paintings, Counihan decided to show *Miners Working in Wet Conditions* at the first exhibition of SORA which was held from 11 to 26 October at the David Jones Gallery, Sydney. It was an impressive beginning for Sydney's post-war realist group. Among others who exhibited were Paul Beadle, Frank Beck, Joseph (Yosl) Bergner, James Cant, Roy Dalgarno, William Dobell, Oscar Edwards, George Finey, Nan Hortin, Jack Koskie, Olive Long, Herbert McClintock, Hal Missingham, V. G. O'Connor, Margaret Preston, Roderick Shaw and Jeffrey Smart. For the show Counihan also exhibited his *Head of a Liberal*, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales lent *At the Start of the March* 1932.

Reviewing the SORA exhibition for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Paul Haeffliger singled out *Miners Working in Wet Conditions* as 'one of the finest paintings to visit Sydney from Melbourne in recent years'.¹⁴ However he felt that the painting, because of its lack of subtle contrast, lacked 'carrying power'. This was the kind of shrewd assessment that the artist valued and sought to act upon.

Although he did send two small paintings, *The Speaker*, 1932 and *Coalminer*, to the 1945 annual exhibition of the CAS, Counihan had become disenchanted with the society. He felt, as did O'Connor and Bergner, that increasingly it was becoming an appendage of the Reed group. Those who did not rank an invitation to the Reed household at Heide Park were of little account, and the Ern Malley affair had seriously damaged the reputation of *Angry Penguins* as a responsible avant-garde journal.¹⁵ They decided not to send any more work to the CAS and instead support the Victorian Artists' Society. For a time they considered setting up something like SORA in Melbourne, just as the success of *Australian New Writing* had prompted the establishment of Dolphin publications, but nothing came of the idea.

Since his relapse in 1943 Noel's health had, with occasional setbacks, gradually improved, but it was not until the end of the war that the TB bureau gave Noel and Pat permission to have children. In any case that had not been a serious option during the war. Art and political activity had entirely engrossed him; Pat's attention had been directed towards his health, her own political activity and their economic support. But with the war over she decided to have a child and in July 1945 became pregnant. Her relationship with her father had improved. He resumed his business trips to Australia, visited them in Melbourne and made his peace

with Noel — the political dissident who had been deported from his country and taken his daughter with him. So much had he distrusted him that he left £100 on deposit in a Melbourne bank for fear Noel would abandon her and she would need ready money. But time had healed the wounds. Now he described him as 'one of nature's gentlemen', much to Noel's embarrassment.

Pat's mother had died during the war in a Lyall Bay nursing home when it was impossible to travel to New Zealand but now, with her first child on the way, it seemed a good time to return to Wellington and see her sisters and Aunt Beeby. With financial help from her father and aunt she made a three-month visit to New Zealand between November 1945 and February 1946, travelling via Sydney on the Sunderland Flying Boat Service. After she left, Noel stayed for some weeks — as they had often done before during the Christmas vacation — at the White Hart at Horsham, where Sol Waten, Judah's father, had been residing for several years. While Noel was there Sol died with Noel by his bedside.

While Pat was in New Zealand Noel began preparing for the joint show with Victor O'Connor and Yosl Bergner that they had been talking about for months. Entitled 'Three Realists', it was held in the Myer Art Gallery, established the previous year in response to the sudden post-war boom in art sales. The boom, it was said, was due in part to the comparative rarity of other consumer durables. It was the first time they had exhibited together. Between them they collected fifty-eight paintings and thirty-eight drawings. Most were for sale but some were borrowed from their owners. Their friend Frank Dalby Davison, the novelist, opened the show. He said that although the work revealed a 'preoccupation with the art of living, which, in the grim realities of today is bound up with suffering and the art of dying', the final critical assessment of such work would be made by men and women yet unborn, but there was evidence that the vision and technical equipment displayed . . . was achieving an aim which very few contemporary artists seemed to be attempting.¹⁶

High praise. Others held different views. Most notably J. S. MacDonald. He conceded that all three painters possessed technical competence but criticised the subject-matter. They were dreary paintings filled with dark allusions about which 'the world' had never shown anything but a 'passing interest'. If these were paintings of reality, 'their ideas of realism are not those of others'.¹⁷ It was a point MacDonald was bound to make for both he and Lionel Lindsay saw themselves as the true guardians of Australian realism then being seriously challenged by modernism. But their realism was one in which politics should not intrude: 'Nothing less realistic than the canvasses of Joseph Bergner and Victor O'Connor can be

imagined, and the proof is that Mr Bergner's pictures of Warsaw can be taken for those of Mr O'Connor; swap these bits of "realism" and no one would be the wiser'.¹⁸

Whereas for Davison, a novelist of sensitivity and compassion, realism centred upon the fundamental human experiences of living, suffering and dying, for MacDonald realism was a kind of descriptive regionalism—a way of distinguishing one neighbourhood, Warsaw or Carlton, from another.

MacDonald conceded that Counihan could paint and draw, but he put 'political hopples' on his endeavours. 'Let him talk his beliefs, or write them; painting is a bad medium for the purpose. Ditgo [*sic*] de Rivera, or any other cartoonist, never did a jot of good to his cause, but did his painting harm.'¹⁹ Most of the successful and market-oriented artists of the affluent West accepted this view as beyond question. The artists of the third world were just as unanimous in rejecting it. For the oppressed and rejected, art was one of the most potent of all the forces of liberation.

Counihan exhibited two memorable paintings in the Three Realists show: *Waiting for the Mine Bus*, and a portrait, *William Dolphin*. In the first he foregrounded three miners against a stark neighbourhood of elementary housing. He does not present them as a doctrinaire socialist realist might—and in Soviet art at that time would have been expected to—as representatives of a working class confident that it will inherit the post-war future. He depicts them withdrawn and distracted, as he saw and experienced them in Wonthaggi, migrant workers making the best of things in an indifferent and often hostile Australian social environment.

Clive Turnbull, art critic of the Melbourne *Herald*, was the only art critic who responded to the pathos of the painting; 'a very moving work', probably more effective as 'social realism' than some of the more deliberately tendentious pictures. 'One has to go back a long way for the sympathetic treatment of the human scene in Australia—to Fred McCubbin, probably; not that he is any way comparable in style with Counihan.'²⁰

Counihan's portrait of William Dolphin is one of his best. Developed from pencil sketches and studies—for he worked, in his paintings, more from memory than observation—he presents his friend as the skilled artisan, viewed in his workshop holding the neck-piece of a violin in one hand and a varnishing brush in the other while listening attentively to a visitor who has dropped in. After the Myer exhibition closed, Counihan shipped the portrait to Sydney for the Archibald Prize of 1945. Hal Missingham, then director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, admired it and hung it beside the portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund Herring by William Dargie. Paul Haeffliger, writing in the *Sydney*

Morning Herald, praised Counihan's work for its 'strength of purpose and . . . unity of composition which allies it, in its own way, to the expressionism of Dobell'.²¹ But the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales could not then, or in the future, bring themselves to award the Archibald Prize to a known communist, whatever the aesthetic merit of his work. The portraits of Dargie, a conservative in art and politics, were more to their taste. They awarded him the prize eight times. On this occasion, Herring's portrait stood for all that the gallery trustees admired. Herring was just the kind of 'distinguished Australian' that J. F. Archibald had in mind when he created the prize. A few years later Herring would be one of the prime movers in the notorious, 'Call to the people of Australia' on Remembrance Day, 11 November 1951, that set itself to warn the nation against alien philosophies 'which sap the will and darken the understanding and breed evil dissensions'.

In 1946 Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor ceased to be members of the CAS. It had lost its former war-time vigour and it stopped activity a year later, not resuming—once again under the presidency of John Reed—until 1953. They joined the Victorian Artists' Society. Though an older body, it seemed more tolerant of a variety of views and one in which they felt they could work creatively.

By the end of 1946 Noel Counihan was one of the best-known artists in the country, his paintings admired by a diversity of informed critical opinion in both Melbourne and Sydney. But his housing conditions remained difficult. In the cramped East St Kilda flat there was one laundry for all fourteen apartments; two stone tubs, a mangle and gas copper on the ground floor; a single clothes hoist for the whole establishment. But he continued to work as best he could. Michael Counihan was born on 6 April 1946 and his arrival accentuated their domestic inadequacies. Noel would now have to find more newspaper work to replace the modest amount that Pat had been earning as a party functionary. From the *Sun News Pictorial* he had earned £118 for the financial year 1945–46. The paper wanted caricatures of sporting heroes: footballers in winter, cricketers in summer.

During the war years, as we have seen, Counihan played a leading role in helping to unite Australian artists in support of the war effort. A local instance of the 'united front against fascism' policy, it had produced in the CPA a measure of tolerance to a wide variety of art styles, though it had also alienated the realists within the party from the avant-garde in the CAS. But with the end of the war a distinct hardening of line in cultural policy emerged. Now for the first time the official cultural line of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSUB), as enunciated in Andrei Zhdanov's doctrine of 'socialist realism', began to prevail. In response to the

growing rivalries between the superpowers the cultural policy of the CPA became less tolerant. The new hard line was first announced by J. B. Miles, the general secretary, to a large meeting of the party's cultural cadres in Sydney shortly after the end of the war. It was also spelt out in a speech by J. D. Blake to the Victorian Arts and Sciences Conference of the party held in June 1946. In the course of his address, which was published in the *Communist Review* of August 1946, Blake adopted as his determining guideline the basic opposition between 'naturalism' and 'realism' which dominated Soviet aesthetics (such as they were) during the Stalinist era.

Naturalism was all that was bad because it could do no more than reflect 'naturalistically' the decline of bourgeois society. It led to the domination of 'pessimism, mysticism, and abstraction and escape from reality'. This was the path taken, according to Blake, by the 'Melbourne contemporaries'. Socialist realism, on the other hand, attached itself to the new class forces building the new socialist society. Blake congratulated Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor on having made a 'clear artistic break' from the dominant corrupt and decaying trend among the contemporaries. In his view they were on the right road. But Blake did not leave it at that. Their work was not yet socialist realist, it was only becoming so. The weight of emphasis in their work remained on the critique of the old, and that could still belong in the category of true bourgeois realism. But for a Marxist, reality was itself dialectical, and the creative imagination of the artist should be able to show the new growing out of the old, in painting, novel, film. Only Marxism allows us to see through all the human misery and suffering, through all the hypocrisy and avarice of the present-day capitalist world—through all this an invincible forward march of human progress.

But should party members who were artists and who clearly saw enough workers who were downcast and dejected, or suffering from terminal illnesses as Counihan had seen them at Wonthaggi, refuse to depict such images because they would be images of bourgeois decay and instead concentrate on happy workers on 'the forward march of human progress'? The fact was that all three, Counihan, Bergner, O'Connor, had represented the pathos of manual labour and of the outcast, the refugee, the victims of society, not heroic representatives of the working classes goose-stepping along history's autobahn to a utopian future.

Nevertheless Counihan was not a fairweather communist, as so many of those who entered the party after Hitler invaded Russia were, and left as the cold war began, in fear and trembling for their

future careers. His commitment was grounded in his bitter experience of the early Depression years. So he took Blake's criticisms seriously. But he knew that neither Blake, nor any other party functionary, had any concrete answers to the problems implicit in relating art to the people. Rhetoric was one thing, the creative solution of pictorial problems another.

Although Blake had some doubts about Counihan's paintings the party certainly enjoyed his cartoons. Between May 1944 and August 1946 he had contributed regular weekly cartoons to the party paper. In appreciation the International Bookshop published *60 Counihan Cartoons from 'The Guardian'*, with a foreword by its editor, Ralph Gibson.

Noel Counihan had seen through to the heart of the great events of the later war years, Gibson said, 'with a strength, simplicity and directness that makes him one of Australia's very finest cartoonists. His cartoons have become a real political force'.²²

However, he had no wish to confine his art to the political cartoon. But the move into painting produced ideological problems. He knew that working-class people could not afford to buy his paintings even at the relatively modest price he had to place on them to cover basic costs and continue to paint. How could he relate his own work in practical terms to the working class? One way was to return to the linocut, the medium with which he had begun his career as an artist. It had long been favoured by artists seeking to make social or political statements in simple, strong, direct terms. Technically it demanded a technique that was the inverse of painting. The power of the statement achieved lay in the ability to reduce the image to its basic intentional thrust. Complexity, ambiguity, reduced its power. Counihan's painting, by contrast, proceeded by a continuous building-up process, the techniques of the old masters, not of the impressionists or most of the modernists: underpainting, overpainting, glazing, more painting and more glazing. To paint effectively in this way one had to attend to complex relationships in pigmental depth and across the surface of the canvas. It was a visual art by means of which complexities of mood, message and intention were best addressed.

Why not then seek to reduce to their basics the complex moods that had been embodied in his Wonthaggi paintings? It would be an essay in the art of visual translation. Counihan returned to his Wonthaggi drawings and paintings and began transforming them into linocut, producing a set of six printed by his friend Jimmy Flett in an edition of fifty, to be sold for 5 guineas a set.

This was work that could be bought more cheaply; memorable images of the stress of life in the mines that could be reproduced in

the radical and trades union press. It was one way of bringing his art to the people. But it still was social realism, not socialist realism of the kind that Blake and other party functionaries talked so much about. The linocuts certainly did not present the working-class as the triumphant catalyst of 'history's progress', of a class aware that its mission was to end class society and achieve a socialist world. Cuts like *In the Shadow of Disaster* and *The Cough . . . Stone Dust* emphasised the risks and dangers of the miners' life; but they could not be classified in the crude terminology of Stalinist aesthetics as a naturalism passively reflecting capitalism in decline, nor did they posit a heroic future for miners or anyone else. They were addressed critically to the nature of labour under capitalism and, by implication, to all forms of industrial society that allowed such things to be.

Drawing and painting at home with young Mick often under Noel's feet was a problem. Silvia Veal, the sister-in-law of Hayward Veal, lived a short distance away in Lansdowne Road, East St Kilda. It was a big house in which the family lived downstairs. She offered him the free use of the top storey, where there had once been three bedrooms, as a studio area. There he was able to paint and hold a regular Sunday-morning class. One of his students was Harry Reade, who later drew for the *Guardian*, lived for a time in Cuba and became better known as a playwright.

Shortly after he joined the Victorian Artists' Society Counihan became involved in a new publishing venture. In 1946 the VAS decided to publish a small house magazine entitled *Genre*, edited by Alan McCulloch and Len Annois. When Alan left for the United States early in 1947, Richard Haughton James became editor.

James joined the VAS after he moved down from Sydney where, during the war, he had conducted the Design Centre at 166 Phillip Street with Geoffrey and Dahl Collings. James, a highly skilled English commercial and industrial designer, had practised in London, Paris and Rotterdam before coming to Australia. Persuasive and urbane, James was exercised by the need to develop a wider and more discriminating audience for the arts in Australia. He succeeded in convincing the council of the VAS that they should change the name of their magazine to *The Australian Artist* and develop it as a national art journal. Since *Art in Australia* had ceased publication in June 1942 there was nothing of the kind available. *Angry Penguins* had always been too avant-garde and controversial, and more concerned with literature than the visual arts to fulfil that role, and had ceased publication the previous year.

Haughton James adopted an open-ended, forward-looking policy

sympathetic to modernism and intellectual debate but avoided the avant-garde, élitist, controversial tone upon which *Angry Penguins* had foundered. James was a persuader not a controversialist. The first issue of *The Australian Artist* appeared early in 1947 and was devoted entirely to drawing. It was about the last thing an issue of *Angry Penguins* would have been devoted to. Seeking to appeal to a potential national audience, James commissioned a diversity of viewpoints on drawing. Joseph Burke, the recently appointed Herald professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne, wrote on line and scholarship in English drawing, McCulloch wrote on meaning in drawing, Lawlor on drawing and the modern sensibility, Ursula Hoff on drawings in the print room of the National Gallery of Victoria, Counihan on the social aspects of Australian drawing. Counihan's article is essential for an understanding of his own preference for a social and critical realism, as distinct from the socialist realism of working-class heroics advocated by Blake.

In Counihan's view art achieves its greatest meaning when it concerns itself with the artist's time. S. T. Gill's powers of observation and sympathy for the life around him made his work authentic. The drawings of Tom Roberts (he had studied the sketchbooks in the possession of R. H. Croll) represented the highest development of the illustrative genre in colonial art. By contrast, the drawings of the 1920s were 'a dull poor lot' reflecting the dreadful gentility, the stagnant drawing-room art of that period; a time characterised by the 'banal eroticism' of Norman Lindsay. Dobell and Drysdale were the most influential contemporary draughtsmen in Australia. He praised both, but with significant reservations. The barrow-pushers Dobell had drawn while serving in the Civil Construction Corps during the war years were 'studies in the flow of line'. The work, what the men were doing, was incidental; Walter Withers could do it better. In his pencil sketch of a ploughman Withers expressed the essence of toil; how he heaves and strains as he works. Drysdale's work was of significance for the way it had brought a renewed growth of national feeling into Australian art, the red emptiness of country streets, the eroded land, the struggling outback families. But Counihan deplored the mannerism and affected sentiment present in the work.

A regional preference is present here. Counihan is expressing reservations about the work of Dobell and Drysdale, both Sydney-based painters (and then the most famous in the country) that was shared by John Reed and the *Angry Penguins* group. What Counihan most preferred was 'socially significant subject-matter expressed in terms intelligible to the general public'; he found it in a wide range of Melbourne and Sydney painters: Len Annois, Ambrose Dyson, Peter Graham, George Luke and Nutter Buzacott

in Melbourne; Douglas Annand, Roy Dalgarno, Frank Broadhurst and James Cook in Sydney.

Counihan reserved his warmest tributes for the work of close friends and associates. Bergner was the most mature. Behind the vividness of his imagery lay centuries of traditional Jewish art. He had chronicled the sufferings of the most persecuted people in Europe. By contrast Victor O'Connor's work was lyrical, atmospheric and highly individual, a person who 'feels rather than sees'. Wigley, as a result of six months with Ronald Berndt, the anthropologist, had brought back hundreds of drawings of Aborigines: 'often bitter in their realism, these works present a unique picture of the tragic aboriginal people, whose culture and very existence we are ruthlessly destroying'.

Throughout his life Counihan was always willing to express his point of view publicly even if it made him enemies and lost him former friends. In concluding his article he criticised the work of George Bell, Francis Lyburner, Eric Thake (an old and friendly associate) and Donald Friend. He did not care for drawing that sacrificed reality for pattern. Friend came in for the severest criticism:

an experienced and fluent draughtsman with a facile command of wash, tone and line, but his drawings appear to provide us with little more than a sophisticated catalogue of fashionable styles and forms. It is equally impossible to miss the note of frivolity and irresponsibility in the art of Donald Friend.²³

It is a revealing comment. Friend's unquestioned skill, his shrewd, light-hearted and highly intelligent wit, and his fluency of line were seen as a significant challenge to Counihan's own more serious and committed humanism. Friend's light banter, its subtle thrusts at the pompous and banal, eluded him. Counihan recognised the significance of satire as a powerful weapon in the hands of the critical realist, but his own satire lacked the subtlety of Friend's. Counihan's satire, as revealed in his *Guardian* cartoons, tended to the heavy hand, the hammer rather than the stiletto. But the relevant point here perhaps is that in his *Guardian* cartoons Counihan was addressing a working-class audience; Friend, for the most part, an audience of well-heeled sophisticates.

Concluding his article, Counihan made an interesting observation. In the past, realism in Australia, such as the realism of the impressionists, had largely been uncritical. The social realism of the present day was a critical realism. It developed a strand of criticism present in Australian literature, the literature of Lawson and Furphy, but not present in former Australian painting.

To the second issue of *The Australian Artist*, devoted to 'personality in art', Adrian Lawlor contributed a challenging and provocative article entitled 'The One and the Many'. It stressed the incapacity of bureaucracy, even in a capitalist democracy like Australia, to make fine, discriminating aesthetic judgements. Artists who co-operated with the state to gain recognition did their best to oust those who refused to accept state approval and blandishment. This situation, though bad enough, was quite different from the forcible silencing and suppression of artists and free spirits in modern Russia. There the influence of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAAP) had become a rigid orthodoxy. As a result men of talent and genius such as Yessenin, Mayakovsky, Zamyatin, Romanov, Babyel, Pilnyak and Polonsky were hounded to silence or death. As for Australia, 'if we are far from being a democracy, we are at least equally far from being a full totalitarianism'. It was Lawlor at his best and he concluded on a radically democratic note: 'it will be a notable day indeed in our cultural history when we can dispense with the noxious distinction that is constantly made (especially by the "cultured") between artist and non-artist—between the one and the many'.²⁴

In the third issue of *The Australian Artist* Counihan published a long letter that sought to rebut Lawlor's criticism of the state of the arts in the Soviet Union but failed to grasp the essence of Lawlor's argument, reducing it to a defence of the artist as an anti-social individual opposed to mankind as the 'vulgar mob'. Although he did make the point that Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a bureaucratic decision that had assisted artists in a creative way he failed to refute Lawlor's criticisms of the suppression of dissent in Russia. There was no attempt to respond in detail to Lawlor's list of suppressed Soviet writers. As to Mayakovsky's suicide, that, he said, was a personal tragedy, the result of an unhappy love affair, and illness and strain arising from continued attacks by Trotskyite critics who were using RAAP for Anti-Soviet sabotage. In consequence RAAP had been disbanded on the initiative of Stalin and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The facts about Mayakovsky, he said, could be confirmed in Herbert Marshall's *Mayakovsky and his Poetry* and the official report of the 'Trials of Trotskyites and Wreckers'. It is clear from this that Counihan in 1947 was still prepared to accept a Stalinist account of the events that resulted in the eradication of dissent in Soviet politics and culture during the 1930s.

In the fourth issue of *The Australian Artist* Lawlor penned a dignified reply. Counihan, he wrote, 'himself a distinguished artist



Furnace Man, lithograph, 1948.

and a man of considerable vigour of mind', had not refuted his case. He had simply said that he was 'grossly misinformed'. Would Counihan agree that Koestler was also grossly misinformed when he cited the names of the prominent communists and intellectuals liquidated by the Nazis:

Mr Counihan may of course argue that Arthur Koestler was grossly misinformed in his facts, slanderous in his inferences and absurd in his conclusions . . . but he must allow me to point out that any discrimination he might interject between the effect of a purge imposed by Nazis and that brought about by a 'semi-asiatic dictatorship' would be prejudicial equally to his own good faith as an artist—a man of 'creative opposition' and his personal standing as a figure of intellectual probity in a community where—if it isn't slanderous to say so—both these marks of distinction are absurdly, if not grossly, unusual . . .

Mr Counihan might, as an idealistic Marxist, and however intransigent his political convictions, have deserved my indifferent respect perhaps. As it is, the only effect the reading of his letter has had upon me is to have set me asking—what is he (an artist) to Stalin, or Stalin (a dictator) to him.²⁵

Thus Adrian Lawlor elegantly located and revealed the basic contradiction between Counihan's political faith and his artistic practice. It was a contradiction that sullied the clarity of his thought even as it energised his pictorial practice. It would be many years before he resolved it.

For the moment, however, a sense of political self-confidence and a comparative lack of local knowledge concerning the true state of art and literature in the Soviet Union made it possible for Counihan to influence a younger generation of artists who had served in the armed forces and were sympathetic to socialist ideals. Several of them were then engaged in art studies at the National Gallery School and elsewhere as part of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (CRTS). Two of his close friends, Yosl Bergner and James Wigley, were students at the Gallery School. Art as a criticism of society became a feature of the early work of a new generation of Victorian artists such as Sam Fullbrook, Peter Miller, Jack Freeman, Ray Jackson, John Brack, Clifton Pugh, and others.

This younger generation of artists was able to establish an ethos in Melbourne during the early post-war years that was sympathetic to the realism that Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor had defended during the war. It persisted, largely because of Counihan's leadership, into the 1950s and 1960s, though with diminishing strength, as a still younger generation of artists, art students, and their teachers and newspaper critics steadily succumbed to the fashionable blandishments of abstract art. In this respect the Melbourne post-war art scene differed radically from that of Sydney.

It was typical of Counihan that he should play a leading role in organising an auction of artists' works at the VAS to raise money for the Eureka Youth League's delegation to the World Youth (Peace) Festival held in Prague in August 1947. The auction took place on 1 May. Artists who freely contributed a drawing or painting included Frank Andrew, Nutter Buzacott, Victor

O'Connor, Douglas Green, Peter Graham, Noel Counihan, Haughton James, William Hunter and Frank Covell. It was probably for this exhibition that Noel borrowed the VAS membership list and wrote a circular letter of invitation to all members seeking their participation. Who, after all, could deny that peace was not a good thing? The letter began, Grahame King, then secretary of the VAS, later recalled, with the salutation, 'Dear Comrade'. That sent shock waves into the committee of the VAS; 'Was the society being taken over by communists?'²⁶

There need be little doubt that it was provocative indiscretions of this kind that eventually sealed the fate of *The Australian Artist*. Despite the fact that Haughton James's hard work had established the financial security of the journal, a conservative council, fearing its authority to be threatened, arbitrarily decided to cease publishing the journal without reference to the general membership. The last issue of *The Australian Artist* appeared in the winter of 1949.

BY THAT TIME Counihan was in London. It had been quite a struggle. In a short contribution to the *Guardian* of 8 August 1947 he noted that many of Melbourne's younger painters were leaving for study abroad. Max Newton had just left; Peter Graham and Grahame King were about to sail. Later that year he raised with Pat the prospect of going abroad for three years. There seemed little possibility of his taking her and young Mick with him, at least not immediately. Financing his own trip would be difficult enough. She agreed that he should go, but it made her feel the need, if he were to be away for three years, for a second child.

London was his first objective. He would have to raise not only his fare but enough to sustain himself until he could secure work, perhaps on Fleet Street. Lithography might be one way to earn the needed cash. He had long admired the work of Kollwitz and Daumier. A friend, Frank Klepner, who had shared a tent with Yosl at Tocumwal during the war, had lent Noel a splendid book of the lithographs by Daumier, published by Nicholson and Watson in 1946. Rem McClintock encouraged his interest, invited him to make use of his lithographic stones at 11 Selbourne Road, Kew, and agreed to give him some instruction. Noel admired, as already noted, the lithographs of S. T. Gill, the first artist to portray the common people of Australia. He had used one of Gill's lithographs in his article in *The Australian Artist* on the social aspects of Australian drawing. It depicted a blind beggar, with his wife and a dog, playing his accordion in the street while people of wealth and fashion ride swiftly by in a phaeton. Gill called it *A Melbourne*

Solicitor. Counihan was keen to continue this popular, colonial tradition in lithography.

He decided to produce a set of six lithographs in a limited edition of one hundred. They were based on drawings he made in Ruwolt's foundries in Richmond, where the influence of the party, as a result of the work of Gordon King and others during the 1930s and war years, was considerable. To these he added *An Important Conversation*, a satirical comment on the new look in women's dress, some studies of Mick, then two years old, and a portrait of his mother. He drew on the stones at McClintock's house, and McClintock printed the lithographs for him. Vance Palmer, the novelist and a good friend of the artist, wrote a foreword for the set, drawing attention to the special character of lithography. A feature article in the *Age* by J. S. MacDonald hailed the portfolio as an instance of the revival of lithography in Australia, and noted that SORA in Sydney had recently purchased a press. MacDonald was keenly interested in lithography and was a competent exponent of the lithographic portrait himself. In this case political differences were submerged by a common interest in a medium that had been neglected in Australia as a fine art—and MacDonald was in favour of realism when it was not associated with politics.²⁷

A distinct change of mood is noticeable in the drawings (and the lithographs derived from them) of metalworkers at Ruwolts. Counihan's earlier work in genre, such as the Depression paintings of 1944 and the Wonthaggi paintings that followed, presented people, however stoical, as victims of capitalist society. The metalworkers of the lithographs are not victims. They are heavily built, well-fed, confident men, tough in body and presumably tough in mind. Here we see Noel's desire to depict typical Australian workers of the early post-war years, the years of hope. These lithographs may be read as the artist's answer to those who had criticised his earlier work for its tendency to present workers as the victims of society rather than reveal their potential strength in political organisation. Katharine Prichard had criticised his paintings as portrayals of 'lumpen proletarians', and J. D. Blake had criticised the Melbourne realists for their tendency to mirror capitalism in its decay. These lithographs were Noel's answer to such criticisms. They are the closest his work would ever come to 'socialist' realism as Blake and other party functionaries chose to define it. In the lithograph *In the Foundry*, for example, a small group of workers are depicted talking to each other while two from management watch them with apprehension.

Counihan developed a painting from the drawings made at Ruwolts, calling it *Moulders*. It is an excellent work. Counihan

often painted at his best on a small scale. Here the change from a social to a socialist realist presentation has resulted in a change not only in mood but also in technique. Whereas the Wonthaggi paintings were executed in a broadly painted, dark-toned 'Rembrandtesque' technique, in *Moulders* his technique has become more complex, with layers of underpainting, glazing and over-painting developing a tactile presence. As a result the picture possesses more carrying power than his earlier work. Perhaps he took note of Haefliger's criticism. Again, the Wonthaggi miners were presented as men enclosed by and victims of their working environment; the *Moulders*, by their physical strength and toughness of mien, are presented as virtual masters of their work and workplace. From a formal point of view they have been realised volumetrically as so many interlocking cylinders, cubes and spheres. If people are indeed formed by the nature of their occupation, as Marx asserted, these workers are remarkably like the objects they produce—men of steel. In a formal sense at least it is more 'modernist' than any of his earlier paintings. As in the lithograph *In the Foundry*, two mates, their heads strongly contrasted against a dark wall, are caught in conversation. They are talking on the job! Their self-confident air expresses that hope for a new and better society based upon the principles of socialism which spread widely through the Australian working class (and was embraced by many writers and intellectuals) during the early postwar years. Was it possible for a new society committed to shared human values and a genuine spirit of equality to emerge from the carnage of war and replace the hyper-individualism, selfishness and greed characteristic of capitalism? This is the intrinsic mood that pervades *Moulders*; and it is an excellent example of socialist realism, a painting that expresses the confidence of the working class in its own future; a confidence that was shattered so far as the CPA was concerned by the failure of the national coal strike of mid-1949.

Despite its inherent quality, paintings like *Moulders* were not likely to gain the affection of Australia's propertied classes and others who could afford to buy paintings. They found it far more difficult to relate to paintings that were socialist in theme than to those that were 'social' in theme. Representations of the socially disadvantaged in various conditions of wretchedness or vulnerability might possibly arouse a sense of sympathy, guilt or shame among the more sensitive and thus win a measure of aesthetic acceptance. But to present the working class as self-assured was anathema to such people, a kind of aesthetic blasphemy. Most Australians 'cultured' enough to buy paintings were convinced that the unions were running and ruining the country.

Nevertheless it should be stressed that *Moulders* is a fine painting,

its steel-blue tones beautifully related to its spatial organisation and spirited expression. It could only have been painted by an artist who had mastered the traditional skills of figure draughtsmanship so essential for painting people realistically. But to paint such pictures a few months after Winston Churchill's Fulton speech, which in effect announced the onset of the cold war, suggested an inversion of social values unacceptable to middle-class Australians. Counihan as socialist realist became even less popular than Counihan the social realist.

In holding to his faith Counihan had to face up to a lot of local punishment. He possessed not only the courage to paint but also to write directly against the mainstream of contemporary art opinion, as was made clear in an article he wrote about this time entitled 'The Decline of Bourgeois Art'. It was published after his departure for London, first in the *Communist Review* (February 1949) and then in the *New Zealand Labour Review* (March 1949).

In the article he drew attention to the gulf that lay between art and the public, to the poverty in which Australian artists were forced to live, and to the trivial content of much of their painting. In England a full-time painter earned £180 in a good year—that, after deducting costs, would be 27 shillings a week in a good year, nothing in a bad year. In Australia things were even worse. The average return to a member of any of Australia's three largest art societies was £2 3s 1d per annum; an average return from a one-man show £4. 'Only a few privileged artists live on the sale of their art. A tiny handful have private means. The rest live by teaching, by commercial art or work entirely outside their profession by day.' Nevertheless, during the war, stimulated by the struggle for democratic survival, painters had succeeded in producing better and more responsible pictures, and the potential creative talent of the common people was expressed in the flood of amateur art from industry and the armed services; the audience for art had also much increased. But since the end of the war the trend towards portraying everyday life had declined, to be replaced by a fashionable cosmopolitanism derived from the School of Paris and contemporary English romanticism. Art critics peddled art-for-art's sake 'at the dictates of Australia's newspaper magnates: Fairfax, Murdoch, Packer'. As a result, 'nonsense, servility, chauvinism and anti-democratic prejudices predominate'. Australian art had developed its independence just as capitalism developed into imperialism, its moribund condition. Despite the achievements of *plein-air* and impressionist painting, they contained the seeds of their own decay because 'man as the proper hero of art' had been passed over for light, which had become the central subject of painting.

The article revealed Counihan's deep respect for the Renaissance

masters. 'Their noble conceptions of man's dignity and earthly insistence on his humanity along with their inspired realism constitutes a great leap forward in man's aesthetic development'. Leonardo's remark that art should mirror nature was revolutionary for its time:

Alongside the epic imagination and intellectual depth of Michelangelo and the abundant many-sided imagery and formal mastery of other 16th century masters like Titian, the puerility of content and poverty of form of 20th century formalist art is self-evident.

It is clear from this that Counihan's aesthetic values remained loyal to the humanist ideal that he had first encountered in Merezhkovski's *The Forerunner*. For Counihan post-Renaissance art, at its best, emerges as social critique. Though Dutch realism was bourgeois realism, its greatest figure, Rembrandt, 'saw so far beyond the horizons of the complacent Dutch burghers that he rapidly fell into bankruptcy and died in neglect'. The artist critics of the bourgeoisie, Goya and Daumier, are dealt with at length. By contrast with their achievement, impressionism failed because it elevated light above man as its preferred subject-matter.

Counihan's argument here closely follows that of Plekhanov's *Art and Society*, which fails as a serious Marxist account of the history of painting when it comes to impressionism. For the scientific analysis of light both in physics and painting was as much a 'human' concern as Leonardo's devotion to proportion and anatomy, and Michelangelo's fascination with biceps. It was the persistent scientific and artistic analysis conducted during the nineteenth century into the nature of light that led to the discovery of photography, cinematography and television, modern modes of representation that far outstripped painting technologically in the all-too-human desire to represent human nature and the human condition.

However, what is significant in tracing the development of Counihan's thought is his rejection of the formalism of modernism. It was an art, he asserted, accepted and subsidised by multi-millionaires, particularly American, who were planning the subjugation of the 'world to an ultimately Fascist United States, even at the cost of destroying millions of innocent people with atomic weapons'. Such patrons had no place for the image of man in art. Unfortunately such art was influential even among Australian painters whose sympathies lay with the people. He reminded his readers that Tom Roberts had advised young painters to turn to themes of national significance. The realistic traditions of Roberts and his comrades must be fought for against the reactionary millionaire vulgarians:

and the George Bells, Lawlors, Haeffligers, Prof. Burkes and the rest of the formalist crew whose preachings degrade art and render it offensive to the people. We possess the knowledge of the alternative path that stems from the classical realism of the Renaissance, Rembrandt, Goya and Daumier and whose modern development has been pioneered and is being mastered by the socialist realism of Soviet art and by the democratic artists from China to Mexico.

So it was that both in his practice and theory Counihan identified himself unequivocally with socialist realism on the eve of his departure for London.

IN OCTOBER 1948, a few months before he left for London, James Quinn awarded Counihan the Albury Art Prize for his painting *Waiting for the Mine Bus*. The prize, worth £75, was established the year before in order to promote an interest in art in the Albury region and build a permanent collection for the city. 'His work,' Quinn said when asked to comment on the award:

will not die or be forgotten in a year or two. The winning painting shows Counihan to have high artistic achievements and an intense interest in humanity. Its execution as a painting is fresh and original in thought. Apart from being well painted the picture has enduring qualities and the figures are not caricatures. It is evident that real miners posed for the artist.²⁸

That was true enough; the centre figure is based on Bill Webb, with whom Counihan stayed while at Wonthaggi, and the figure on the right is based on Wattie Doig, then a well-known miner and union leader at Wonthaggi.

Earlier that month a Noel Counihan Art Fund was launched officially from the office of J. Humphrey Skerry, chartered accountant, Temple Court, 422 Collins Street. The chairman of the fund was Vance Palmer. Judah Waten and Rosa Rothfield acted as joint secretaries, Skerry as treasurer. The Counihan committee included Audrey Blake, Frank Dalby Davison, Brian Fitzpatrick, Dr F. L. Lawson, Alick Mushin, Victor O'Connor, Dr Guy Reynolds, Nat Rothfield, George Seelaf and Don Thomson. In a letter seeking contributions to the fund, Palmer outlined its function and set out Counihan's projected programme abroad:

Entirely self-taught as a painter, Noel Counihan has shown himself to be possessed of brilliant and original gifts. But he has reached a stage in his work where he feels that study in the European galleries and the great masters of all schools is essential to his further development. For ten years illness and war postponed this ripening experience; now these barriers have been removed. But scholarships are for young students; not for practised artists of thirty-four. The Noel Counihan Art Fund Committee is intent on devising means by which this

promising and distinguished artist can be given the kind of opportunity readily available to the young student.

Australian critics have noted the varied nature of Counihan's gifts and the searching quality of his intelligence. As a cartoonist he has the same unerring faculty for piercing to the heart of a situation as Dyson and Low. As a painter, he calls on all the resources of his medium to reveal themes of social and national significance. Like most men of robust mind he believes it is the function of the artist to interpret the life of his times. While abroad, he intends to study trends in contemporary English and European art, particularly mural art, which appeals to him as having the same possibilities of development in Australia as in Mexico. He also intends to examine the various advanced teaching methods in use, having in mind the idea of teaching when he returns.

The Noel Counihan Art Fund Committee believes that two years of European experience will not only greatly benefit Counihan and his art, but will prove a source of enrichment to this country as a whole. By the publication of a limited (100 copies) edition of lithographs, a mass edition of silk-screen prints, by a public exhibition of the artist's work, and by an appeal to all art lovers for donations, it is hoped to raise enough money to achieve its ends.²⁹

It was hoped that it would be possible to raise £1500. The folio of six lithographs was published in a limited edition of 100, guaranteed by the destruction of the original drawings on the stones, and priced at 10 guineas each. Two silk-screen prints were also published in a limited edition, from original drawings made in the Richmond iron foundry, one called *Metal Pourer*, the other *Iron Worker*. They were priced at 5 shillings each.

Sets of the folio, on a sale or return basis, were sent to Sydney: to the Macquarie Galleries; to Morley and Torda; and to the Picture Library of John Sands and Kenneth Dibble. A display of silk-screen prints at 5 shillings each and a few artist's proofs of the lithographs at 7s 6d each were displayed at the 1948 People's Carnival organised by the party. The Jewish Unity Association's January issue of *Unity* published Counihan's plans for working in Europe and its Appeal Fund, and noted that he had designed the cover and drawn the illustrations for the first Yiddish novel (by Pincus Goldhar) published in Australia.

The Counihan Art Fund was advertised in the *Guardian*. No attempt was made to disguise the fact that he was a well-known member of the CPA. J. D. Blake, the state secretary of the party, speaking at the gathering that launched the appeal, claimed that it was not accidental:

that his artistic growth, especially his deep humanism, is due to the close relations he has maintained, and the active part he has played in the workers' movement. The working-class movement needs artists of the calibre of Noel Counihan, just as these artists need the working-class movement. That is why I believe the workers should render every possible assistance to the fund for the further development of one of their most outstanding artists.³⁰

And workers did respond. In sending Skerry a money order for 7 guineas, Agnes Doig, the honorary secretary of the Wonthaggi Miners Women's Auxiliary, informed him that her auxiliary was 'mindful of the kindly and understanding way in which Mr Counihan portrayed the Wonthaggi Miners during his stay', and that 'his kindness won him many friends'.³¹

Counihan's friends among Melbourne's Jewish community also assisted. Shortly before Christmas 1948 an evening to raise funds was held in the Toorak home of Mrs Sonia Grodeck, the sister of David Levine, one of Noel's oldest friends. Herz Bergner and Alan Marshall addressed the gathering and Dave, as Noel said later, 'put the nips in'.

Although the Commonwealth Investigation Services (CIS) were not in a position to purchase a set of the lithographs they too took a keen interest in Counihan's impending departure. They had filed photographs of him in their Criminal Photo Book and their Special Photo Book (at p. 126). On 18 January 1949 the deputy director of CIS, Melbourne, informed his director in Canberra that Counihan had applied for a passport to proceed to England, France, Switzerland and Italy and proposed to travel on 16 February 1949 and expected to be abroad for three years. He also noted that he was a prominent member of the Communist Party and that his wife was also identified with the movement. There would be 'little doubt he will be commissioned to undertake party business whilst abroad'.³²

The director of the CIS in Canberra asked Melbourne to inform him as soon as Counihan had actually embarked and sought information from his Sydney office regarding Counihan's possible activities in New South Wales. His deputy in Sydney informed him that Counihan was an 'exhibitionist [*sic*] of S.O.R.A. in which organisation a great deal of communist influence is executed'. He also proffered the opinion that Vance Palmer, the chairman of the Counihan Art Fund, was a 'suspected member of the Australian Communist party'.³³ Finally, Melbourne was able to inform Canberra that the object of their attention sailed on 16 February on the *Orontes* and that he occupied cabin 254 in the tourist class.³⁴