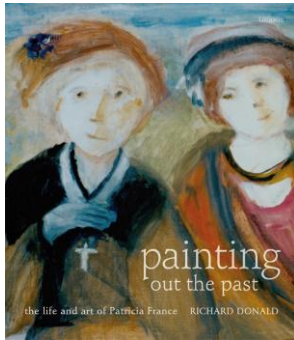


Extract from:



Painting out the Past : the life and art of Patricia France by Richard Donald

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Author's Note

Before my first rendezvous with Patricia I was nervous and uncertain about what to expect. I knew she had been a patient in a psychiatric hospital but did not know why. I opened the gate in the thick holly hedge and walked cautiously down the brick path towards her.

I hardly noticed the imaginative design of her garden, as I was focusing intently on the small figure in a black velvet dress with hands clasped in front – in a deceptively demure pose. I relaxed when I saw the warm, welcoming smile on her deeply lined face, and the knowing glint in those intelligent eyes. In no time at all we were chatting freely – probably too freely in my case – and Patricia had made another conquest.

So this book does not pretend to be an objective, impersonal account of Patricia's life and art. Such a work would only be possible if one had never met Patricia, and would ignore one of the most important qualities of her character and the very basis of her art: emotion. This is a subjective biography, if that is not a contradiction in terms; but, in order to avoid a totally one-sided picture, I have quoted liberally from interviews with Patricia's many friends. The portrait that emerges is of a woman who changed dramatically in the course of her life; who, like Janet Frame, narrowly avoided a frontal leucotomy; and who went on to establish a career as an artist in her late sixties. She was highly regarded by other artists of the period and was at the centre of a Dunedin 'Bloomsbury Group' of painters, poets, sculptors

and dramatists. She was a gifted hostess and a prolific letter writer. Her art collection was impressive and her house had a special magic of its own.

Patricia triumphed over her early upbringing by 'painting out the past', and stoically ignored her later ill health. This is a story of courage and perseverance in a woman with unusual talent and an unforgettable personality.



Chapter 8, Patricia and the 'Dunedin Bloomsburys'

There were other paradoxes in Patricia's life. The previously rather superficial socialite became deeply involved with the interesting group of painters, poets, sculptors, theatre directors and actors who made up the Dunedin equivalent of a Bloomsbury set in the seventies, eighties and nineties. After spending several years in a psychiatric hospital herself, she helped many of her friends and colleagues with their psychological difficulties. At a time when most people have retired from work, she launched her career as a painter, and as an art connoisseur she cheerfully mixed the old with the new. She was usually elegant and charming, but at times could be waspish and terse. She had a sense of fun and frivolity but there were deeper layers of anger and melancholy. Her manners may have been old-fashioned but her thoughts were modern.

[...] Charles Brasch in particular had been very generous and supportive of the arts and had built up a special coterie of artists who had either attended art school together or held Frances Hodgkins Fellowships that he had financed. He was perhaps the father of the 'Dunedin Bloomsburys'. Although Charles Brasch died (in 1973) at about the time that Patricia was entering the Dunedin art world, Patricia was soon part of the artistic circle that he had fostered. Her friends included painters Ralph Hotere, Colin McCahon, Toss Woollaston, Jeffrey Harris, John Z. Robinson and Derek Ball; painter and musician, Alastair Galbraith; and sculptors Marté Szirmay and Peter Pawlowicz. [...]

[Michael Hitchings:] I got into the habit of going to Patricia's on a Friday. She would ring me on Thursday night about shopping and I would do that on Friday morning when I did my own. I would take it to her in the afternoon and have a cup of coffee and a chit-chat.

When she bought the place on Highgate she knew no one. She was priced out of going back to Auckland where she would have liked to have gone and had to settle for Dunedin. At first she went to Danseys Pass Hotel quite frequently and stayed there occasionally. It's a marvellous bit of the country. Later she gave up driving [her little Fiat 850 sports car, in which she felt 'so dashing'] and I would take her for drives. [...]

We didn't talk much about her art... She would ask me what I thought she should do to finish off a painting... I would say, 'You're the artist.' I didn't have to make any concessions at all. I just admired her work... I don't recall her discussing the people in the paintings. But a phrase comes to mind: 'Painting the past and painting out the past'.