

Takaka & Nelson 1912–1930



Arrival at Wharariki, 1984, oil on board, 560 x 860mm, collection of Golden Bay High School, Takaka. Donated to the school whose primary division he had attended more than sixty years earlier, this painting shows Abel Tasman's *Heemskerck* confronting a vast Sphinx-like rock off Wharariki Beach near Farewell Spit and, in Bensemann's ambiguous words, 'bringing enlightenment to a dark, savage land — ha!'.

I Where the Landfall all happened

One of Leo Bensemann's last paintings, *Arrival at Wharariki*, 1984, brings together a number of strands in his life and art. Wharariki, south of Farewell Spit, is a wild, windswept beach of weirdly weathered rocks that Leo often visited. In the painting the white beach is scattered with driftwood and low rocks, while dominating the central space is a huge rock, a ubiquitous element in his paintings of Takaka and Golden Bay, in the sea. Further out, backed by clouds billowing in from the Tasman, is a small sailing ship, bright flags aflutter. While painting it, Bensemann got a request from Golden Bay High School about which he wrote to me:

The ... School wrote to ask me (as an Old Pupil!) if I'd be good enough to sell them one of my Takaka landscapes with which to start a NZ collection. I was quite touched and (as an Old Pupil!) presented them with this painting — a painting,

I may say, that gave me immense pleasure and satisfaction to work on. You will probably know the brooding, sphinx-like rock that squats in the sea at Wharariki — the ghostly ship is of course Tasman's 'Heemskerck' bringing enlightenment to a dark, savage land — ha! Both the painting and the symbolism have been a great success in the school and town. I am also glad to say they are now showing a renewed interest in Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas'.¹

Bensemann's painting evokes the scene just prior to Abel Tasman's first encounter with Maori. After rounding Farewell Spit, the *Heemskerck* sailed into the sheltered waters of Golden Bay, which Maori call Mohau. In a cove called Whariwharangi near Separation Point several Dutch sailors were killed in a bloody skirmish with Ngati Tumatakokiri and Tasman took off north without setting foot on land.² Allen Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas', focusing on this event, was commissioned in 1942 for a book



Near Whariwharangi, 1980, oil on board, 575 x 900mm, private collection. Whariwharangi was the site of Tasman's bloody encounter with Maori in 1642, commemorated three centuries later in Allen Curnow's 1942 poem 'Landfall in Unknown Seas'. Bensemann described Whariwharangi as his 'Mecca'.

published by the government to commemorate the 300-year anniversary of this historic meeting; it also contained an essay by leading historian J. C. Beaglehole and a new translation of Tasman's journal. At the Caxton Press, Bensemann had set up and printed Curnow's *Sailing or Drowning* in 1943, which includes the poem; it also inspired *Landfall in Unknown Seas*, an orchestral suite in three movements (each followed by a reading of a section of the poem) by Douglas Lilburn, the leading composer of his generation.

In a 1978 letter to Lilburn, Bensemann mentioned this radioactive cluster of circumstances: 'I know the Bay backwards but all the same cannot shake off the urge to make a yearly pilgrimage — the Mecca, you might call it, being Whariwharangi. Do you know it? Troubled, powerful, beautiful and haunted not only by Rangi but also by Tasman, Curnow and

yourself because that was where the Landfall all happened.'³ This makes explicit what Golden Bay had come to mean to Bensemann: a site of 'yearly pilgrimage', gateway to his personal 'Mecca'. Painting no. 1 in Bensemann's 1979 Brooke Gifford catalogue is *Near Whariwharangi* — a lonely history-haunted beach with golden sand and lively waves, strewn with rocks and driftwood, and backed by rugged and muscular-looking golden-green hills.

For Bensemann, Golden Bay was, or eventually became, what Maori would call his turangawaewae, a place to stand. First, as the place of his birth, in Takaka, and of his early childhood, it was a storehouse of remembered images. Second, fortuitously, as the site of first European contact with New Zealand, it was a focus of historical recollection and artistic investigation of these events 300 years later by

prominent cultural nationalists — Beaglehole, Curnow and Lilburn among them — a movement in which Bensemann was closely if somewhat ambivalently involved. Third, from 1965 Bensemann decisively reconnected with Golden Bay both as a holiday destination and as the subject matter for more than sixty paintings made in the last twenty years of his career. The Leo Bensemann story begins and ends in Takaka and Golden Bay.

II Germany, Ireland, Takaka

Leo Vernon Bensemann was born in Takaka in 1912, the eldest of the four children of Vernon Victor Bensemann — a blacksmith of German ancestry — and Ruby Arnold of Irish and English descent; both of his parents were New Zealand born. Leo spent his first ten years in Takaka before moving with his family to Nelson in 1922.

Cordt Heinrich Bensemann (1810-83), Leo's great-grandfather on his father's side, was among the first hundred or so German settlers who emigrated to New Zealand in 1843, soon after the foundation of Nelson. The Bensemanns came from the area south of Bremen in North Germany known as Bruchhausen-Vilsen, and in earlier generations the family name had been Rehmstedt. Leo's ancestor was a farmer who had bought a second farm from a family called Bensemann and, as was the custom in that part of Germany, he took on the name of the previous owner. Thus Rehmstedt became Bensemann. Johann Albert (1788-1844), one of four sons of this Rehmstedt/Bensemann, was the father of Cordt.⁴

In 1833, Cordt married Anna Margretha Elisabeth Kotrade (1811-74). They had had four children by the time they emigrated to New Zealand and several more were born in Nelson, including Johann Diedrich, the youngest, who was Leo's grandfather. Before leaving his homeland at the age of thirty-three, Cordt had



Peter Siddell, *Golden Bay*, 2001, oil on canvas, 630 x 884mm, Nicoll family collection, Auckland. Seen from the elevation of Takaka Hill, the Takaka River winds through its valley towards Golden Bay, passing the minuscule township where Bensemann was born. Artists from Charles Heaphy onwards, including Colin McCahon, Doris Lusk, Olivia Spencer Bower, Cedric Savage, Toss Woollaston and Aucklander Peter Siddell found subjects for painting in this rich environment, as did Bensemann.

visited England with the Hanoverian Army to witness Queen Victoria's marriage in 1840 to the German Prince Albert.

German emigration to Nelson was connected to Edward Gibbon Wakefield's colonisation scheme. The *St Pauli*, a ship of 380 tons, took 176 days to journey from Hamburg to Nelson, arriving on 14 June 1843. Cordt and his family at first stayed in Nelson where he worked as a carpenter. They eventually moved to Upper Moutere, or Sarau as it was known to the German settlers, 35 kilometres to the west of Nelson, in 1850. Part of the house Cordt built was incorporated into the Moutere Hotel, of which he became innkeeper in 1857. The hotel is still standing today. Anna contributed to the family income as a spinner and weaver of cloth.

In 1876, Leo's grandfather Johann Diedrich (Dick) Bensemann (1854-1919) married Maria Johanna Eggers (1858-1939), who was born in Mecklenburg, Germany. In about 1901 they



Ruby Arnold and Vernon Bensemenn, Leo's parents, on their wedding day, Takaka, 1910. Photography by Tyree Studio, Nelson. Leo's mother's background was Irish-English, his father's German. Leo was the eldest of their four children.



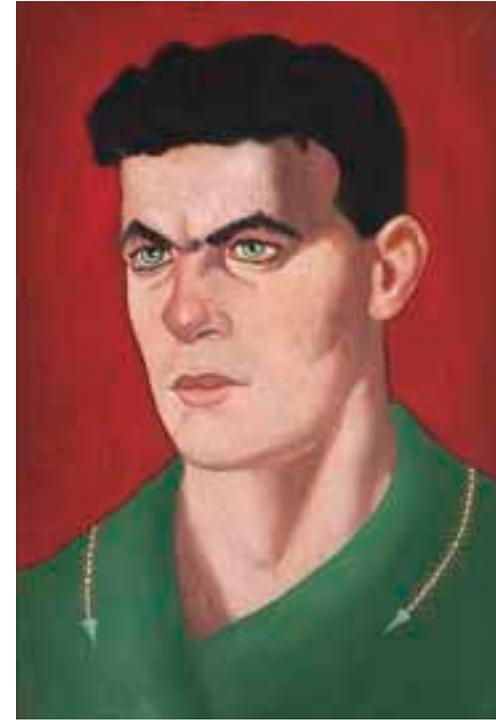
The Bensemenn family forge in Takaka, c. 1915. Photographer unknown. Leo's father, Vernon, is standing next to the horse. The man with the white shirt fifth from left is Johann Diedrich (Dick) Bensemenn, Vernon's father, and the other young man is probably Vernon's brother. The sign reads 'Golden Bay Forge. Bensemenn Bros Wheelwrights and General Blacksmiths'.

acquired a farm of around 100 rugged acres high in the Anatoki Valley on the western side of Takaka Valley. Leo recalled, as a young child, travelling to his grandparents' farm in a horse and buggy, being carried along through the nights 'by the ruts and the stars'.⁵ Later paintings, such as *West Takaka* from 1979 (p. 166) no doubt incorporate long distant memories of such places. It was from his grandmother that Leo learned to speak and read German, a skill he retained and developed throughout his life. Vernon Victor Bensemenn, Leo's father, was born in 1886, the seventh of their twelve children. He married Ruby Arnold in 1910 in Takaka.

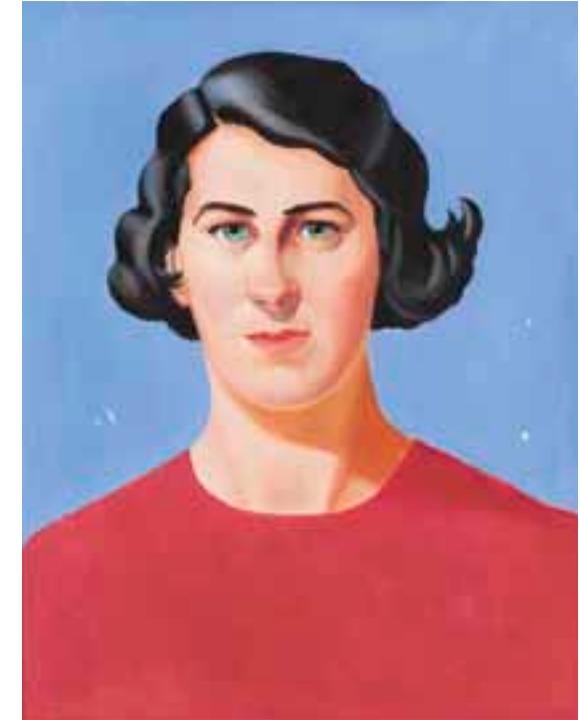
Leo Bensemenn's mother, Ruby (1885-1974), was from Irish and English stock — the daughter of James (Jim) Arnold and Sarah Margaret Fowler. Jim Arnold's father, James (Leo's great-grandfather), emigrated from Middleton, County Cork, Ireland, in 1840. His wife, Hannah Ratt, came from Nottingham in England and they married in Nelson in 1847 and settled in Riwaka.

Leo's maternal grandmother, Sarah Fowler, was born in Spring Grove south of Nelson in 1857, the seventh of twelve children. Her parents, John and Mary Ann Fowler, had arrived from England in 1843, the same year as Cordt and Anna Bensemenn. Like the Arnolds, they settled in Riwaka, and owned a flax mill, later destroyed by fire. Sarah married Jim Arnold in 1878, and they had five children, including Ruby. Jim fought with the colonial troops against Te Whiti at Parihaka in Taranaki, was injured there and died a few years later. Sarah died in Nelson in 1946.

Ruby Arnold, Leo's mother, was born in Spring Grove in 1885 and died in Nelson in 1974. She was one of eight children and grew up in the Riwaka Hotel known as the Travellers' Rest, which was owned and run by her parents, from 1887 to 1905. She married Vernon Victor Bensemenn at the Presbyterian Manse, Takaka, on 7 September 1910 when she was twenty-five. Her Irishness was more emphasised within the family than her Englishness. It is said that Leo's signature heavy



Cyril Bensemenn, undated, c. 1936-37, oil on canvas, 373 x 280mm, private collection, Christchurch, and Peggy Cox (formerly Peggy Bensemenn), undated, c. 1937-38, oil on canvas, 395 x 313mm, private collection, Christchurch.



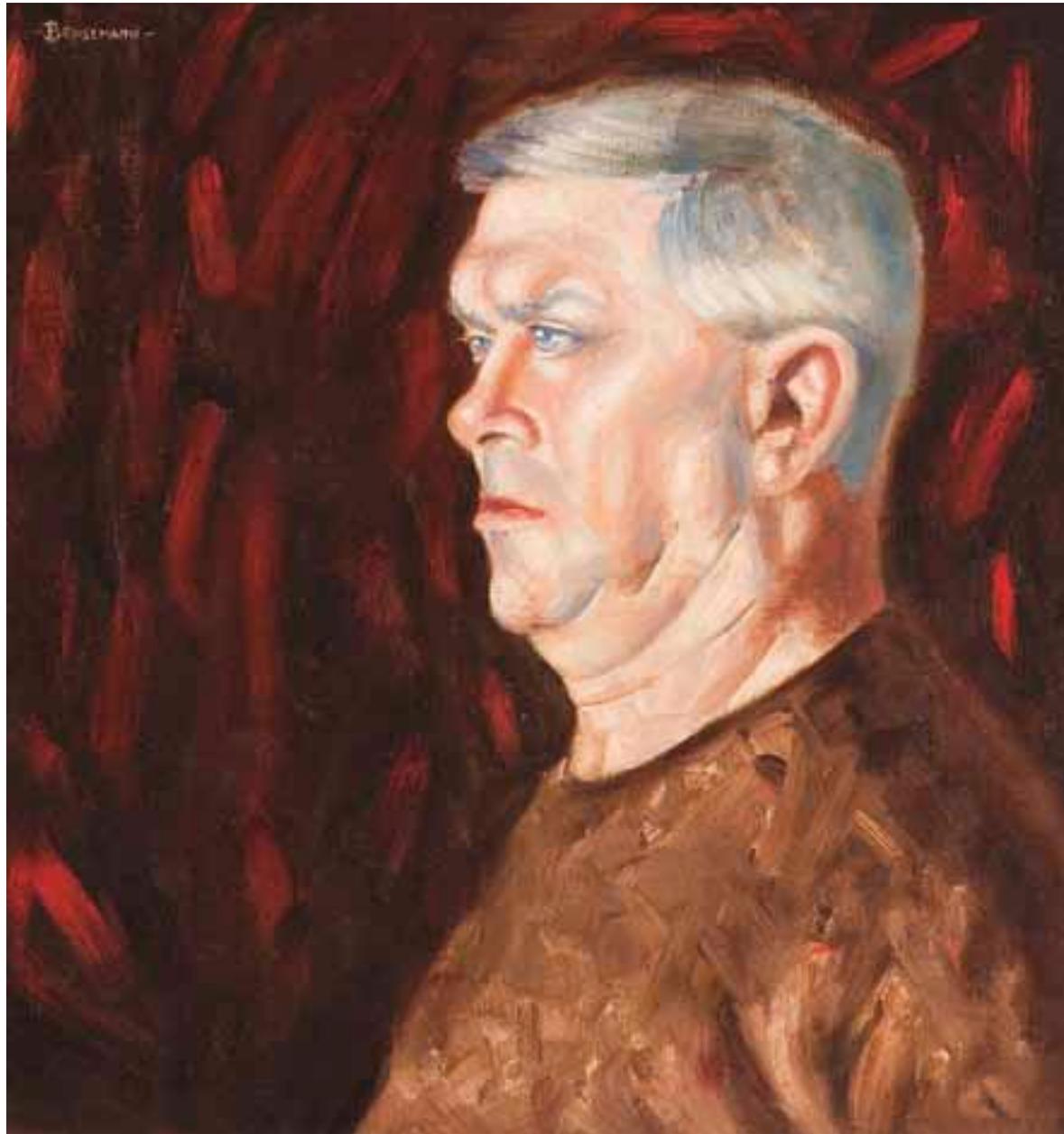
eyebrows were an Arnold/Irish inheritance, as was his humour and dark wit, and his penchant for the outsider position. Lilburn once wrote of the residue of Leo's German-Irish inheritance: 'He was ... nurtured by a strong Germanic tradition ... with a strain of Irish wit'.⁶

Of Vernon and Ruby's four children, Leo was the eldest, born 1 May 1912. His siblings were Cyril, born in 1914, Peggy, born in 1916, and Claire (known in the family as Billy), born in 1924. Cyril became a mechanic in Nelson; Peggy trained as a nurse in Christchurch, and was a frequent visitor at 97 Cambridge Terrace when Leo was living there; and Claire eventually settled in Australia.

Leo's father, Vernon Victor, was a blacksmith and brass-band player. He appears in an undated photograph of a blacksmith's shop in the main

street of Takaka township. A later photograph shows the sign as 'Phoenix Forge. V. Bensemenn Farrier & General Smith'. Vernon appears to have taken over perhaps when his brother went away to fight in World War I. Leo's sister Peggy recalls: 'As children we would watch the work at the forge at times, I can remember the flames, the smell of the hooves and the heat. We could roam about Takaka, there were very few cars and the pace of life was very slow'.⁷

According to Trevor Moffitt, a younger Group artist and critic who became one of Leo's close friends, 'Everything went wrong for the family in Takaka. ... [Leo's] father would work all day repairing waggons and then go on the booze for days'.⁸ Leo's portrait of his formidable-looking father, c. 1937 (p. 6), is one of his first mature paintings. The patches of red in the background



Portrait of My Father (formerly V.V. Bensemann), undated, c. 1937, oil on canvas, 410 x 385mm, private collection, Christchurch. Vernon Bensemann was in his fifties when this portrait was painted.

possibly suggest the flames of the forge or the blacksmith's fiery temper.

A traumatic experience for the Bensemanns was the outbreak of war in 1914 when Leo was two. New Zealanders of German descent were perceived by patriotic citizens, most of British ancestry, as 'Boches' or 'Huns' who were suspected of sympathising with the enemy, though several of Vernon's brothers fought on the British side against their German cousins. Moffitt recounts: '[Leo's] father had been crushed by a horse and was not called upon to fight. His Uncle Albert never recovered from the horror of Germans fighting Germans . . . Leo remembers sitting on a mat in front of the fire as another uncle leaned on the mantelpiece and said goodbye to his mother; the uncle was crying with misery at the whole situation.'⁹ Surely such painful scenes lay behind the determined pacifism which Leo adopted when the next war against Germany loomed.

In Takaka, Leo attended the local primary school, then known as Lower Takaka District High School, a couple of kilometres from his home in Hiawatha Lane. In a 1979 letter he recalled, 'I have never forgotten my first day at school in Takaka. At least I remember trudging down that endless dusty road to the school to enter a total mystery at the end of it.'¹⁰

At some point during the war the Bensemanns shifted temporarily from Takaka to Tarakohe on the coast, about 11 kilometres away, where Vernon was employed at the Golden Bay Cement Works, the largest industrial plant in the region. They lived in a small cottage high enough up the Pohara Valley to avoid the smothering cement dust. No doubt Leo would have enjoyed the spectacular scenery around Tarakohe, especially the limestone bluffs — crimson in summer with flowering rata — and craggy bush-capped islets around the rugged coast, scenes which decades later would inspire paintings such as *Landscape Near Tarakohe, Golden Bay*, 1984 (p. 195).

III Nelson College and the Baigents

In 1922 the Bensemanns moved to Nelson, renting a small house at 36 Grove Street. According to Moffitt: '[Leo] recalls the home as being completely barren of books, paints or even writing material. In fact the whole German community in Moutere was culturally barren. They had brought little with them and being scared after the outbreak of the first world war did not wish to have anything in their homes that could be compromising'.¹¹ Bensemann was later to fill this cultural vacuum with the world's art, literature and music, achieving such a remarkable degree of erudition and culture he must to some extent have been compensating for the paucity of his childhood environment.

From 1922 to 1924, Leo attended Nelson Central School and then went on in 1925 to Nelson College, leaving after six years in 1930 when he was eighteen. At college, Bensemann's career was not academically distinguished; indeed he was a weak student, spending two years in the fourth form and three in the fifth, never progressing to the sixth form. It is hard to credit that someone who later manifested such high intelligence and wide learning performed so poorly at high school. It suggests either that he was completely alienated or that six people crowded into a small house was not conducive to study. However, he did well in sports, being in the first XI for cricket in 1929-30, and was a competent rugby player and swimmer. He was a house prefect in his last year at school, so cannot have been seen as a total loss, and, more to the point, won the drawing prize, jointly with his friend Ray Gilbert, in 1930. He had received some rudimentary art instruction from an Englishman named Hugh Scott, who also ran a studio in the town which Bensemann occasionally visited. According to his sister Peggy: 'No-one else in the family had an artistic bent to paint or draw. An uncle



Leo and friends at Nelson College. From left: Jim Buttress, Cyril Bensemman, Lawrence Baigent (at back) and Leo Bensemman. Buttress, Baigent and Leo were known as 'the three Bs'.

was a wood carver, and some family members were members of the Takaka and Moutere brass bands. Father was a blacksmith with considerable skills in iron work. Access to art materials at home was non-existent, and there were very few books. There was no money for books. It was a working class family, times were hard and father's health was not good. We were all members of the local library which Leo used too, but not so much after he met Lawrence because he could borrow their books.¹²

Bensemman formed lifelong friendships at Nelson College with Jim Buttress, later a surveyor in Taranaki, and Lawrence Baigent — together they were known as 'the three Bs'.

Lawrence Albert Baigent was the same age as Leo; they began college together in 1925 and left in the same year. Lawrence was more academically successful than Leo and was a precocious writer. Issues of the *Nelsonian*, the school magazine,

are stacked with his surprisingly sophisticated efforts. In the two 1930 issues he had eight poems with learned titles such as 'Villanelle — Contemplation', 'Triplet' and 'Sapphic Ode'.

Leo and Lawrence were brought closer together by an extraordinary circumstance. According to family stories, Lawrence was the only pupil at Nelson College injured in the devastating Murchison earthquake of 17 June 1929, which killed seventeen people, though none at the college. The *Nelsonian* reported the event at length:

It was a glorious morning, calm and peaceful. The College clock stopped at 10.20am at which time the city experienced the severest earthquake in its history ...

It was not until the shock was at its height that the tower, unable to resist further the terrific vibrations, broke apart at the top, showering



Mrs Florence Baigent, undated, c. 1936–37, oil on canvas, 453 x 448mm, Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, Nelson. Mrs Baigent befriended Leo as her son Lawrence's closest friend, and invited him to stay with them in a succession of Christchurch flats in the 1930s. She died in 1937.