

The History of Art in Canada

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legislatures, instead of aiding and abetting discrimination as formerly, can be expected to support the side of decency. Hopefully also, human rights commissions and other agencies may give the protection which the courts so lamentably failed to provide in the past.

LOVELL CLARK

The History of Art in Canada*

An historian cannot be entirely comfortable reviewing publications on the history of Canadian art. The authors of such books usually come from backgrounds and concern themselves with questions different — often far different — from those of the historian. Though the disciplines of history and art history sometimes come close to one another, they retain their distinctiveness and both are different from art criticism. Most writers on Canadian art history concern themselves primarily with the analysis of style, technique and influence. The history of subject matter is relatively neglected as is the social infrastructure or cultural context of art. Canada has yet to produce, except in Barry Lord, a writer concerned with the social history of art.¹ And it has yet to produce a writer interested in the broader culture of which art is a part; if art history in Canada is distinct from history, it is even more divorced from literary history. It must be realized, however, that the history of art in Canada is only beginning to come of age. Its genesis might justifiably be dated as recently as the 1960s and its initial focus located in the work of R.H. Hubbard and J. Russell Harper, then both of the National Gallery of Canada.

Until quite recently Canadian universities have given Canadian art almost no standing and even now only a very marginal one in English Canada. The universities have tended to retain their allegiance to the Great Tradition, in which Canada plays almost no part. While it would not be unusual for a university history department to have one-quarter of its staff as specialists in Canadian history, it is doubtful that a single anglophone university's art history division reaches anywhere near that proportion. The contribution of gallery curators, especially of curators of the National Gallery, to Canadian art scholarship deserves, therefore, adequate recognition. When no others, save amateurs, journalists and the curious savant, were in the field, curators did the work and their contributions still surpass others in quantity if not always in quality.

* Because of the limitations of space, I have chosen to deal only with post-Confederation books, a decision which forces the omission of several important works such as J. Russell Harper's *Krieghof*.

¹ Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards A People's Art* (Toronto, NC Press, 1974).

The last few years have seen interesting developments in Canadian publishing by all types of writers. The most obvious development has been the splashy Christmas-market art book. For those with thicker wallets and an eye for investment, the limited edition has appeared. More important has been the astonishing growth of exhibition catalogues of all sizes and of substantially researched monographs. The Goup of Seven and, last year, Emily Carr, have been the focus of most of the publications, but with some significant attention to earlier and later artists. Sculpture counts for little; Canadian art, unfortunately, is almost entirely Canadian painting.

One of the most important studies to appear recently is Dennis Reid's "*Our Own Country Canada*": *Being An Account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto, 1860-1890* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1979), which presents the results of the extensive work done for a major National Gallery exhibition. It is not an exhibition catalogue, but a solid, substantial monograph of over 450 pages. Reid tells us a great deal that was previously unknown or only imperfectly known about the more important landscape artists and groups in Montreal between 1860 and 1890 and in Toronto from 1873 to 1890, and a very great deal about Lucius O'Brien, John A. Fraser and William Notmann. He expands our knowledge of the founding of the Royal Canadian Academy and is particularly effective in dealing with *Picturesque Canada*, with the CPR's relationship to Canadian painting in the 1880s and with the relationship of photography to painting in these years. Reid's is an important book, representing an attempt to deal with a significant period of time and a large number of artists, to present them, their art and their associations coherently, and to integrate a number of important themes such as photography, landscape styles and external and internal influences. In all of these he is successful.

Reid is an assiduous researcher. He has mined the city directories, organizational minute books and newspapers. Unfortunately, he feels compelled to pass all the information on: every son and daughter who lived and died, every exhibited picture and every prize, every business and personal residence, every trip taken, every newspaper comment made. There is little discrimination between the relevant and the trivial. At times, confronted by a string of block quotations, it seems that Reid is just stapling together his xeroxs. Manning Clark, in writing his magisterial history of Australia, insisted upon using not a single quotation; he would not, he said, surrender any of his narrative to another man's style. Such obsession is excessive but salutary. Choppy in its organization, gradgrinding in its use of sources, sometimes verbosely flabby in its descriptions of paintings, Reid's book, while sweeping in scope and important in its breadth, is not a model of artful writing.

The preoccupation with residences, itineraries and progenies, for exhibited pieces and minute books, leaves an intellectual vacuum only partially filled by Reid's attempt to place the artists and their organizations within a context of

“jingoistic [surely the wrong word] nationalism”, “romantic involvement with the land”, and “straining materialism”. That national ambitions were at work among the artists, organizers and patrons is probably undeniable, but they have little to do with the things Reid writes of. Even he seems unsure about what he means by national aspirations. Sometimes he is describing the formation of an organization (the Royal Canadian Academy) with a point of view “beyond the local concerns of any one region” (presumably the “regions” of Toronto and Montreal). Yet the RCA of his period or for years later never had a coast-to-coast viewpoint. It (and the National Gallery) were only slightly more “national” than the CNE. Artists of both Toronto and Montreal tried to appropriate it to their own locality. Indeed, “the imperialism of appropriation”, one of Reid’s better phrases in another connection, more or less describes this kind of “national” aspiration. In the last third of the book, Reid loosens up and introduces some metaphysical and symbolic interpretations of the content of the images. But the book is not strong on ideas; Reid does not write intellectual history. He is thorough on technique and conscious of influences, but he is much weaker in dealing with intention.

Reid closes his account in 1890, at a time when he considers the exuberant pursuit of an ever-expanding landscape was spent. Certainly F.M. Bell-Smith, the subject of an exhibition catalogue by Roger Boulet,² would not have agreed. He, like a number of others slightly younger than the Fraser-O’Brien group, were only beginning their *a mari usque ad mare* artistic explorations. Boulet, with a narrower focus, explores some of the same themes as Reid — the associations and milieu of artistic Toronto, the link between photography and painting, the CPR patronage. He, too, ties the passion for landscape to national aspirations. Although he, too, resorts to chunky, undigested reproduction of research notes, he also makes a contribution to our knowledge of a little researched era.

Exploration of the relationships between painting and photography in the nineteenth century has been a keen interest of British and American scholars for some years. The most comprehensive presentation of the Canadian relationship is by Ann Thomas, first in a thesis for Concordia University and then in *Fact and Fiction: Canadian Painting and Photography, 1860-1900* (Montreal, McCord Museum, 1979). Thomas’ examination is systematic and exemplary.

The reassessment of the Group of Seven, begun in 1970 with the publication of the carefully researched books by Dennis Reid and Peter Mellon,³ has continued. Despite the clearing away of some of the more apocryphal mythology surrounding the Group, their position in the history of Canadian art remains central. They represent both a major shift of taste and a real and symbolic break with older conventions of subject and style. David P. Silcox’s fine essays on Tom

2 *Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith (1846-1923)* (Victoria, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1977).

3 Dennis Reid, *The Group of Seven* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1970); Peter Mellon, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1970).

Thomson's life and art, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and The Storm* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977), continue the reappraisal. The literary sources for Thomson are few and were well researched by Joan Murray in *The Art of Tom Thomson* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971). Silcox reviews that material, but his intention, and that of his collaborator, Harold Town, who writes as an art critic, is to reproduce and examine much of Thomson's art. Scholarly apparatus is discarded; so too, unfortunately, is any attempt at dating. But Silcox's essays are sensible and provocative. He casts aside the heroic myths surrounding Thomson while attempting to explain the legendary standing of the artist. He evaluates the art in both its weakness and its strength. Oddly, Silcox believes that Thomson's painting of the North was possibly the least of his accomplishments and the least of his real concerns; that Thomson is important not for what he painted but for the way he painted. This judgement — that Thomson's significance lays in his technique and not in his subject matter — while arguably true, misses much of the point of Thomson and the Group and of their place in Canadian history. The brash and shocking style of Thomson and his fellows was a decisive event, but so too was the boldness of their choice of subject matter. Thomson and his confrères insisted upon painting a wilderness that was not cononically fit to be painted.

It is difficult not to realize how strong was the convention against Canadian wilderness as a subject matter. Wild nature unassociated with human incident was not accepted as landscape fit for painting. John Ruskin had stressed the inseparability of humanity and landscape and he laid down the dictum that physical phenomena, no matter how splendid, did not necessarily make a landscape. The strength of this aesthetic into the twentieth century is revealed in Rupert Brooke's judgement that Canadian forests were "windswept and empty", her mountains "irrelevant to humanity", and in W.J. Phillips' argument that virgin country or forest primeval did not stimulate the imagination so certainly as the scene in which the hand of man was apparent.⁴ Assessments of Thomson's importance purely in painterly terms leaves out fully half of the revolution in taste in which he and the Group were so central.

Jeremy Adamson's *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978) is plausably the most important book dealing with a member of the Group of Seven yet to appear. Adamson writes firmly from within the stylistic analysis school of art historical scholarship, but he pays some attention to content and to ideas. His discussion of Harris' religious and philosophical ideas, too important to be overlooked in any treatment of Harris, is deftly handled. Like so many art writers, Adamson tends to turn the narrative and analysis over to others in block quotations; yet he does write well and his descriptions are firm and meaningful, unhampered by

4 Brooke, *Letters from America* (London, 1916), pp. 154, 148; Phillips, unpublished typescript in possession of John C. Cralt, Winnipeg.

excessive jargon or meaningless phrases. While keeping a firm grasp on his themes, Adamson gives us a rich and almost whole portrait of Harris' work to his 1930 turning point.

Paul Duval's treatment of J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Tangled Garden: The Art of J.E.H. MacDonald* (Scarborough, Prentice-Hall, 1978), on the other hand, does not do justice to his subject. Duval is uncritical, drowning us from page one with such childish comments as "an authentic hero of Canadian art", "his life was one of immense courage and creative dedication", and "it would be difficult to find a more truly Canadian artist". On that page we are also improbably told that MacDonald's grandfather served in 1850s Halifax as a non-commissioned officer in the Canadian Army. Duval used the MacDonald papers and this saves him from complete disaster, though not from dull mediocrity.

Other recent books have contributed to the literature on the Group of Seven. Marjorie Lismer Bridges, *A Border of Beauty: Arthur Lismer's Pen and Pencil* (Toronto, Red Rock, 1977) combines elements of an unpublished autobiography with personal memoirs of her father. *The Other A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1979) is a memoir of the painter's later years by economist and collector O.J. Firestone. Repetitive, sometimes banal and even pathetic, Firestone's simple and usually unpretentious stories are somehow engaging. Dennis Reid's *Edwin H. Holgate* (Ottawa, National Gallery, 1976), one of the short studies in the National Gallery's "Canadian Artists Series", is usefully informative about this Montreal associate of the Group. Reid's *Bertram Brooker* (2nd ed., Ottawa, 1980), in the same series, is a valuable contribution upon this relatively unknown artist, writer and critic. When the history of modernism in Canada is written, Brooker's significance cannot be overlooked.

LeMoin FitzGerald, the Winnipeg artist who was a very loose associate of the Group, received a portion of the attention he deserves in an exhibition catalogue prepared by Ann Davis and Pat Bovey.⁵ Successive essays deal with FitzGerald's life, his art and with some European influences upon his art. FitzGerald stands somewhat apart from the main lines of Canadian art, but, like David Milne, his accomplishments were incredible. Using the artist's papers, the authors do a creditable exploration of the influences upon and the techniques of this lonely and enigmatic painter. While the emphasis is upon style, both Davis and Bovey grapple with intention. FitzGerald is quoted as telling his students that they should "consider technique as a means by which you say what you have to say and not as an end in itself. What you have to say is of the first importance, how you say it is always secondary". While Davis and Bovey do not keep that order of priority, both try to fathom what FitzGerald had to say and lead us toward a better understanding of it. The same cannot be said about Michael J. Gribbon's exhibition catalogue dealing with another Winnipegger, *W.J. Phillips* (Ottawa,

5 *LeMoin FitzGerald* (Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1978).

National Gallery, 1978). Gribbon is thoroughly of the technique school and intention or ideas in art seem to pass him by. The writing is pedestrian. That objects of remarkable imagination and beauty can be written of in so artless a way would raise questions about the sensibilities of the author were such stylelessness not so common.

While the Group retained its dominance, 1978-79 was Emily Carr's year with the appearance of three books. Edyth Hembroff-Schleicher's *Emily Carr: The Untold Story* (Saanichton, Hancock House, 1978) is a strange and petulant book. Based upon personal memories — some of which contradict her earlier *M.E.: A Portrayal of Emily Carr* (Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1969) — a great deal of research, and a fanatic devotion, Hembroff-Schleicher presents an odd assortment of aggressive essays aimed at other writers on Carr and valuable compilations of lists and chronologies. Intent upon correcting the errors of others, she commits not a few herself. Doris Shadbolt, who has curated numerous exhibitions of Carr's work including the 1971 centenary exhibition, authored *The Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1979), a coffee table book which does honor to that format. Graciously written, informative and judicious in its descriptions and interpretation, it is one of the finest of its type. Maria Tippet's *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1979) received both a Governor General's award and the Canadian Historical Association's John A. Macdonald prize, testimony to the quality of its research and the artistry of its presentation. Tippet deals with the whole person and what made Carr the woman, artist and writer that she became. Technique and intention are equal concerns; what Carr painted is as important to Tippet as the way Carr painted. In Canadian art biography, only François-Marc Gagnon's *Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre* (Montréal, Fides, 1978) contests it as scholarship and none as literature.

Gagnon's monograph on Borduas won a Governor General's award in 1979. The author's emphasis is upon the development of Borduas as an artist. It is not, strictly speaking, a biography for we learn little about Borduas as a person, as a teacher, as a husband and father. The analysis, partly structuralist, has no parallel elsewhere in Canadian art and the general reader will doubtless follow with greater interest the broad lines of Borduas' development, his relationship with other Quebec artists and intellectuals, the ferment which produced *Refus Global* and the reaction to it. Within its intentions, it is a superb book. Gagnon has also written a short study of Borduas for the "Canadian Artists Series" and contributed to the special *artscanada* number on Borduas,⁶ whose importance in Canadian art is now justly recognized.

Excepting Dennis Reid's "*Our Own Country Canada*", few writers have

⁶ *Paul-Émile Borduas* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1976); *artscanada*, nos. 224/225 (December 1978/January 1979).

attempted to depart from the single artist format. Joan Murray, one of Canada's most prolific curatorial authors (and one of the best), wrote *Painters Eleven in Retrospect* (Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1979), a short but well-researched catalogue dealing with that pivotal 1950s group of Toronto abstractionists. Heather Robertson's *A Terrible Beauty: The Art of Canada at War* (Toronto, James Lorimer, 1977) tells us nothing new about the art of 1914-18 or 1939-45. It merely assembles pieces of war literature inside the same covers as reproductions of war art. More important is *Modern Painting in Canada: Major Movements in Twentieth Century Canadian Art* (Edmonton, Hurtig, 1978), a series of stimulating essays by Terry Fenton and Karen Wilkin. As Fenton writes in the introduction, the essays are not intended as a history of Canadian painting in the twentieth century, but as reflections prompted by reading and experience. The book, in fact, is polemic masquerading as art criticism. Fenton and Wilkin are well known for their position on the question of nationalism versus internationalism in Canadian art and these essays, which cover from the Group of Seven into the 1960s, are their considered contribution to that debate. Personal and opinionated and therefore provocative and contestable, Wilkin and Fenton confess their concern with development, with "the major movements and groups of painters which were influential in Canada during this period, particularly the ones which were instrumental, in some way, in establishing modern — or modernist — painting in this country" (preface). The concern is with those who advance certain tendencies and not with those who stand against or outside the onward-and-upward development of modernism. This is Whig history, untroubled by the strictures of Butterfield; such assumptions are prevalent in art history and pervasive in art criticism.

The history of art in Canada is maturing rapidly. Still a neglected child within the anglophone academy, it flourishes in Quebec universities and in major public galleries across the country. Its scholarship is much more serious, substantial and widespread than only a few years ago. Increasingly adept at research, writers on the history of Canadian art too often suffer from at least a tinge of Whiggish assumptions, from a restricted range of concerns and from bad writing. But the momentum of scholarship will, hopefully, soon erode such deficiencies.

DOUGLAS COLE