

Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, 473 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper)

Caterina Pizanias

Volume 15, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073442ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073442ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pizanias, C. (1988). Review of [Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, 473 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 15(1), 79–80. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073442ar>

for Europe in 1952. During the next seven years, Kurelek sought help for his shy, introspective, chronically depressive and sometimes suicidal personality by making extended visits to psychiatric hospitals: London's Maudsley Hospital and Surrey's Netherne Hospital, where he was encouraged "to paint his problems." He found companionship and spiritual guidance in Catholicism, to which he was converted in 1957, and in the Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen. Finally, he broadened his knowledge of art by travelling to the continent to view, among other works, Pieter Brueghel's paintings in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, and to London's Tate Gallery to study the paintings of Stanley Spencer. He also read Nicolaidese's book *The Natural Way to Draw*, attended evening courses at the Hammersmith School of Building Arts and Crafts and painted a *trompe-l'oeil* series that he exhibited at London's Royal Academy of Art.

Kurelek returned to Canada from Britain in June of 1959. In the autumn of that year, private gallery owner Avrom Isaacs, who mainly handled the work of abstract-expressionist artists, encountered his work. His "My God" response to Kurelek's paintings was soon echoed by the prestigious New York critic Alfred Barr and Canada's own Robert Ayre who admired the artist's "seriousness and involvement with the human predicament." Like Ayre, others also found the abstract school of artists as represented by Michael Snow "trivial, even trashy, by comparison." Not surprisingly, Kurelek's first exhibition at Isaacs's gallery in 1960 drew a record crowd.

Spurred on by his success, Kurelek's life now took on a greater sense of purpose: he wanted to become Canada's premier painter of the people and the land. In order to do this he travelled widely: to Stonewall and to Shandro, in order to capture something of his Ukrainian-Canadian boyhood, to the Arctic, French-speaking Canada, and the Maritimes, among other places, recording the country's diverse ethnic groups and landscape. His art also became a vehicle for expressing his strongly held views against abortion, homosexuality, and pre-marital sex. All of these endeavours were assisted by his dealer, Isaacs, his book publisher, Christopher Ondaatje of Pagurian Press, and Mary Ebbitt Cutler of Tundra Books, among others. The reception of Kurelek's paintings, books, and prints was fuelled by the public's aversion to abstract-expressionist painting, by increased wealth, and by the willingness of Canadians to spend their money on art. Also important in accounting for Kurelek's success was the Canadian government's involvement in Expo '67 and its multicultural policies of the early 1970s. Kurelek responded to the enormous demand for his paintings by working up to seventeen hours a day in cramped surroundings (his death from cancer at the early age of fifty might well have been caused by fumes from his oil sprays and lacquers), by making multiple copies of his work and by employing an assistant-apprentice to paint backgrounds of flowers and grass.

All of this makes for a good story. And yet *Kurelek: A Biography* does not knit the various source materials and biographical approaches into an integrated whole. The research that would have allowed Morley to do this is certainly there—if not on the works of art, certainly on his life. But while Morley has gathered much material,

she has not processed it, digested it, and taken the time to reflect upon it. For example, Morley calls Kurelek a genius several times, yet it is not clear to me why she repeatedly makes this claim. What in the end accounted for Kurelek's phenomenal success? Was it the work? Was it simply timing: nationwide interest in the country's diverse ethnic groups? Was it the public's aversion to abstract-expressionist painting? Or was it simply the presence of an infrastructure of private and public art galleries and publishers capable and willing to promote the work?

And what about Kurelek's development as an artist? We simply need more than content-analysis descriptions of the paintings in which Morley assumes that reality can be recorded and that Kurelek somehow did this. A more complete discussion of the paintings would not have been difficult, given the obvious influences of Spencer and Brueghel. These and other lacunae are unfortunate because Morley has done an admirable job of gathering her material and because there are insightful accounts of Kurelek's relationship with Isaacs and with his book publishers. But the biographer must go beyond the mere assembling of data; he or she must tell a story with force, emphasis, and wit.

MARIA TIPPETT
Robarts Professor of Canadian Studies
York University
North York, Ontario M3T 2R7

GAILE MCGREGOR *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, 473 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper).

This is an unusually rich and insightful work and a brief summary or review cannot do it justice. *The Wacousta Syndrome* is a comparative examination of the "frontier" cultures of Canada and the United States (a comparison that will be expanded in a future work to include the cultures of Australia and New Zealand), which the author characterizes as similar in language, derivation, and geohistorical terms. The purpose of the work is to elucidate the *Weltanschauung*, first by isolating and explaining the mechanics of cultural change, second by rationalizing the relation between culture at large and various kinds of cultural expression (novels, paintings, films, etc), and last by devising a portable methodology for "mapping" marked traits.

The organization of the material in this extensive book is highly individual and requires keen attention, but it offers considerable rewards for those who persevere. The stage is set with the comparative examination of two nineteenth-century novels, *Wacousta* by Major John Richardson, a Canadian, and the *Leatherstocking* stories by James Fenimore Cooper, an American. McGregor's comparison of these novels stems from her desire to "define the conceptual underpinnings of the Canadian imagination," and is informed theoretically by notions of socially constructed aspects of wilderness and other components of reality. In this sense, differences in the treatment of nature found in the novels under dis-

discussion are not merely idiosyncratic, but rather outcomes of an essential divergence between the geohistorical conditions in which they were produced. McGregor convincingly argues that the confrontation between civilization and wilderness during the frontier settlement of the two countries has produced two different imaginations. For Canadian artists there is "habitual negativity toward their environment" and "recoiling from it"; in fact, "once recognized, the characteristic Canadian response seems omnipresent in all aspects of Canadian cultural history." The rest of the book is a discussion of these omnipresent elements, primarily in terms of Canadian literary history. This reviewer is not familiar enough with the literature to comment on the sensitivity and nuances of the literary sources to which McGregor refers. However, her research, discussion, and re-evaluation of Canadian painting, especially of the prairies, provides a viable theoretical framework for students of painting interested in speaking of the medium not in formalist terms but in relation to specific social contexts and periods.

Facing the Canadian prairie, with its harsh climate, limitless space, and unending horizon, must have been even more devastating than confronting the "northern frontier." The paintings of the first artists who painted and drew the West (travellers or settlers) were representational, using the imported conventions of the English landscape school of painting. Upon closer scrutiny, their identifying aspects were their short focus and their avoidance of the truly picturesque and sublime tendencies prevalent in the conventional British landscape genre; the painters, like the characters of *Wacousta*, were determined to paint the view from the "fort" only.

The specific aspects of the Canadian paintings of the period, according to McGregor, are the following:

1. There is a preponderance of transportation modes in the subject matter, implying preoccupation with escape.
2. There is a compositional breakdown between the foreground and background, indicating a denial of meaningful relation between man and nature in the broader sense.
3. The background is left relatively indistinct, suggesting an attempt to limit the unmanageable distance visually.
4. The horizon is raised or hidden by compositional preoccupations in the fore- to middle-ground.
5. The sense of depth is delimited, exacerbating the claustrophobic effect of the shortened focus.
6. The general atmosphere is ominous and inimical to the viewer.

McGregor further argues that Canadian artists' response to the landscape has not become more familiar and positive, but rather the contrary. This rather peculiar statement contradicts the author's basic theoretical premise: that our notions of nature are socially constructed. To be socially constructed does not imply being static, and assuming that the sociohistorical context of Canada has changed sufficiently during the last century or so to allow notions of nature to change, then one might expect the imaginative treatment of nature to change as well.

This stimulating and comprehensive book takes up most of the relevant issues that have occupied the discussions of cultural scientists and art historians and cri-

tics for many years, but McGregor's boldness and imagination of treatment make it a must for all those who talk or care about what it is to be Canadian. The book could benefit from an index to aid the novice in grasping its sometimes complex and very comprehensive context; to its credit, the book has full notes and references and an excellent catalogue of primary sources.

CATERINA PIZANIAS
Department of Sociology
University of Alberta
 Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E1

JOHN FITCHEN *Building Construction Before Mechanization*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1986, 326 pp., illus., \$25.00 (cloth).

Years ago, when I was an undergraduate, because I realized I had very little interest in how a building was put together, I decided that it was perhaps wiser for me to take up the serious study of art history than to become an architect. More recently, as an art historian teaching architectural history to fledgling architects, my earlier self-recognized deficiency has been joined by additional feelings of guilt at still being more drawn to matters of style than of structure and construction; this has resulted in the occasional resolution to rectify the situation—to some degree at least. After reading John Fitchen's *Building Construction Before Mechanization*, I find that (a) I know more than I realized and (b) the book has not really informed me about those factors of which I felt I should have some greater grasp in order to reduce my guilt and provide me with a modicum of self-confidence when trying to answer "How did they . . . ?" In fact, I feel not greatly the wiser, although I have acquired several tidbits of a "useful" nature.

The scope of Fitchen's work is world wide, extending from "Architectural Year One" (p. xii) to the advent of mechanization, at some date in the nineteenth or twentieth century. The organization of the material is, contrary to one's expectations, neither chronological nor cultural (historical periods). Neither are the 14 chapters focused on the major building materials—mud-brick/brick, wood, stone—or minor ones, such as wattle and daub or thatch, nor on the major aspects: foundations, floors, walls, roofs, vaults. The material within each chapter is also non-chronological in its structure. As a result, the substance of the book seems to deal solely with building construction, rather than construction methods and procedures.

The work's organization is best described as topical and rather ahistorical. This can be seen by citing some of the chapter headings: "The Role of the Builder"; "The Nature of Building Construction and Sources of Information about Its Former Practices"; "Physical and Cultural Forces Affecting Building Construction"; "Jerry-Building and the Unending Quest for Standards of Safety"; "The Problem of Ventilation." Even within this scheme, I find the logic of the chapters' sequence difficult to understand. Chapters 1-3 clearly form a general introduction; chapter 4, however, seems as if it should be at the end of the study. More problematic is the core of the book, chapters 5 to 11. A sequence that seems to