

Painting in British Columbia: A Review Article

Painting in British Columbia, like all cultural forms in the province's past, remains one of the larger of the many gaps in our historical knowledge. There is much we do not know about even major figures like Emily Carr and F. H. Varley. The rest is episodic, a few names remembered or revived — Paul Kane, W. G. R. Hind, Thomas Fripp, W. P. Weston — until the sudden explosion of the 1950's when Vancouver emerged as a major Canadian art centre. Some information may be taken from the occasional exhibition, such as *Impressions of an Age* at the Centennial Museum in 1969, but W. Wylie Thom's thesis on early Vancouver and the work done for the 1969 Jock Macdonald show are the only pieces of solid historical research. The paucity of knowledge cannot be ascribed to a lack of material — painting in B.C. reaches back almost two hundred years to John Webber's 1778 drawings of Nootka Sound. Perhaps the reason lies in a cultural cringe, in a colonialism which assumes there is nothing worthy of study in this distant province.

Such a feeling once characterized the study of Canadian art, but no longer. William Colgate, Graham McInnis, R. H. Hubbard, J. Russell Harper, Paul Duval, Peter Mellon and Dennis Reid have shrugged away that clinging cringe. It yet remains for British Columbians to view their regional art in similar terms. The province's artistic past is a microcosm of the larger whole, possessing many of the same themes, posing some of the same historical problems, sharing similar responses to new influences, and having a comparable search for identity. Like English-Canadian art, its history is rooted in the English watercolour tradition, receiving from that source a dominating concern with landscape. It too has its "impressionist" period when young artists sought their inspiration from Paris rather than London, and it came of age in the interwar period when artists like C. H. Scott, Paul Rand, and W. P. Weston, as well as Carr, Varley and Macdonald, seized upon European style and Canadian example to paint landscape in a manner as "racy of the soil" as the Group of Seven. Equally clear is the continuity between the interwar artists and those who participated in the creative burst of artistic energy in the 1950's. If painters in Canada "have consistently reflected the moulding sensibility of the age," as Dennis Reid has it, and if "a history

of their activities inevitably describes the essence of our cultural evolution," then the same historical legitimacy attaches to art in British Columbia.

Reid, curator of post-Confederation art at the National Gallery, has codified in his *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*¹ the Canadian school of art history, one which acknowledges the hinterland relationships to Europe and the United States, but assumes the growth of a Canadian experience and tradition based upon its own developing artistic centres. The *Concise History*, partly because of its general excellence and partly because it is the only modern history available at textbook price, is certain to be a standard work. Reid realizes this: with accuracy, if immodesty, he stated that his book and Russell Harper's *Painting in Canada* "are the two firm legs upon which Canadian art history now stands."

The acknowledged shadow of Harper falls heavily over the early portions of the book. Although Harper was concerned with the West *qua* West, the focus here is clearly central Canadian. Missing from Reid's account, as from Harper's, is any mention of Webber. Paul Kane and Hind, to whom Harper has devoted considerable attention, are included. After 1840 Reid relies upon his own research and it is here that the Canadian metropolitan assumption is most obvious. The influences upon Victoria and Vancouver art scenes are viewed as conservative Ontarian until awakened in 1926 by another easterner, F. H. Varley. The Ontarian, Thomas Mower Martin, is seen as the early artistic leader of Vancouver. Coming to the west coast ten times, in search of spectacular subjects and "a less sophisticated market," Mower Martin, Reid tells us, locked the tastes of Vancouver into the nineteenth century and even set the style and subject matter for Emily Carr. The multitude of vagabonding Canadian artists who swarmed over B.C. after the completion of the CPR left their mark, but the conservative taste of early twentieth century British Columbia was set much more by emigrant Britons, by James Blomfield, Thomas Fripp, S. P. Judge, John Kyle, by those Britons who organized the art societies and gave tuition.

For this pre-Carr period, only Sophie Pemberton is singled out for attention. She achieved, writes Reid, "an academic competence that would have been acceptable in Toronto or Montreal ten years earlier." Uneven, awkward she may have been, but one can argue about the academicism of her work and certainly cavil at deference to a turn-of-the-century central Canadian avant garde. In dealing with Emily Carr,

¹ *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, by Dennis Reid. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973. 319 pp., illus., \$8.95. \$6.50 paper.

the firm central Canadian orientation, now focused through National Gallery lenses, is ever more marked. Eric Brown of the Gallery, searching for a west coast "Group," mounted a show with anthropologist Marius Barbeau for Carr in 1927. Reid recognizes that the B.C. artist had been brought to the Director of the National Gallery's attention six years earlier, but does not mention that Brown ignored her work, contemptuously dismissing her pictures as of interest only to anthropologists. Nevertheless, the section on Carr is well done, despite a slightly misleading description of Mark Tobey's style during the time he gave Carr "crits" in 1928. Charles Scott and W. P. Weston receive a casual recognition, mostly in reference to Varley. There are omissions, justified perhaps in a concise history; Tom Fripp is probably a bit old-fashioned to be included, and C. J. Collings and Statira Frame are little appreciated, even regionally.

*Image of Canada*² is the catalogue prepared by the Public Archives of Canada for the exhibition currently on tour and recently seen in Vancouver and Victoria. Although the introduction by Michael Bell is weakly derivative, the textual accompaniment to the pictures, drawn from contemporary literary sources, is an imaginative and commendable feature. Usually remarkably suitable, they give the viewer a sense of time and milieu, for *Image* was much more an historical than artistic exhibition. Paintings dealing with B.C. are few, reflecting accurately the archives' collection. H. J. Warre is well represented — the archives possess a remarkable holding of his drawings and journals — and there are pictures by Webber, Edward Roper, Lady Dufferin, Frederick Whymper, and Edward Panter-Downes. More might be said of *Image* were it readily accessible, but it is virtually unobtainable. The reason perhaps lies in the quite similar book, *Painters in a New Land*,³ published commercially at more than five times the price by Bell, now no longer with the painting and drawing section of the archives. Bell has slightly altered *Image*'s organization, doubled the number of pictures, but retained the textual accompaniment. Both volumes are useful, introducing us to drawings of B.C. never before published. There are errors. Roper did not die in 1891; Panter-Downes' dates are 1834-79; Whymper's 1838-1908. The texts for British Columbia, which rely too heavily on G. M. Grant, could often have been more appropriate.

² *Image of Canada/Visage du Canada*, by the Public Archives of Canada. Introduction by Michael Bell. Ottawa: Information Canada, 1972. No pagination, illus., \$4.00 paper.

³ *Painters in a New Land*, selected and introduced by Michael Bell. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973. 224 pp., illus., \$22.50.

Something might also be said about acknowledgements. Bell's own book gives none, while *Image* carried a preface by the Dominion Archivist which, while giving special thanks to Bell, noted that the archives staff had done considerable work for the show. Reid acknowledges only Harper, though the section on inter-war Vancouver carries the unmistakable imprint of research done by Ann Pollack, then of the National Gallery, and Judi Francis of the Burnaby Art Gallery for the Jock Macdonald exhibition. Anyone who has seen evidence of the work done by such people would appreciate the justice of an acknowledgement by those who use it. A lack of footnotes is no bar to an expression of indebtedness.

Finally, there is *Impressionism in Canada*,⁴ the catalogue accompanying the excellent exhibition of that name which opened its Canadian tour at the Vancouver Art Gallery in January. Its organizer, Joan Murray, has called it a "problem show," concerned with the definition of impressionism and its application in Canada. Although the show is impressive and presents the problem well, Westerners might raise their own enquiries. Inglis Sheldon-Williams, an Englishman who settled in Regina after study in London and Paris, is, with Robert Harris, the only non-central Canadian represented. Sophia Pemberton, who studied at Julian's in Paris, might have been included. So too Emily Carr, a student at the Colorossi, whose French and post-French pictures are vibrant in the colour and technique of late impressionism. One might even have expected a Statira Frame, who, though never abroad, painted well within the impressionist tradition.

Northrop Frye's dictum, that "the centre of reality is wherever one happens to be," is applicable here. "Impressionism in Canada" would be more real to British Columbians if they saw themselves as participants in it, if they saw Pembertons and Carrs and Frames mixed among the Cullins, Morrises, and Suzor-Cotés. Canadian art belongs to British Columbia, and British Columbia art belongs to Canada. The province's art has had its own blend of influences, but it shares in a kindred experience of balance between external example and indigenous qualities. Above all, British Columbia art belongs to British Columbia. More attention needs to be given to its past, not just by Canadian curators, but by its own historians and curators.

Simon Fraser University

DOUGLAS COLE

⁴ *Impressionism in Canada, 1895-1935* by Joan Murray. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1973. 152 pp., illus., \$4.50 paper.