

Dennis Reid, *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/National Museums of Canada, 1979. 454 + xvi pp., 179 illus., \$29.95

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encore, c'est cette appartenance à la « classe bourgeoise » qui aurait influencé l'évolution des œuvres automatistes: « Les peintres du groupe Borduas et Borduas lui-même eurent du mal à se dégager de l'emprise de leur milieu, ce milieu « bourgeois » qu'ils affectaient de mépriser... Il faudra l'exil pour que Borduas se détache et vole en plein ciel » (p. 35). Comme si le caractère « cubiste » que Borduas, à partir de New York, reconnaîtra aux œuvres de l'Automatisme québécois devait quoi que ce soit à cette classe bourgeoise québécoise, qui rejetait certes tout de la révolution de Braque et de Picasso.

Cette confusion entre idéologies de classe et différentes catégories de pouvoir culminera dans l'accusation ultime, à savoir que Borduas aurait utilisé une « morale terroriste », qui serait assimilable à celle du pouvoir politique duplessiste: « À la crainte généralisée qui constituait le centre psychologique de la société canadienne-française de 1948, Borduas oppose une autre terreur, celle des mots qui purifient par le refus qu'ils expriment. Mais pouvait-il espérer que cette terreur porteuse de refus entraînerait les fous à se transformer? » (p. 143-144). Par quelle mauvaise foi s'attache-t-on ici à vouloir confondre la « terreur » toute rhétorique d'un style d'écriture poétique ou plastique à la « terreur » d'une « répression organisée » ?

L'on se souvient d'ailleurs que dans « Borduas et sa société » les conclusions du sociologue Marcel Fournier disaient qu'à partir de sa contestation de l'idéologie religieuse, « Borduas rejoint (et dépasse) la contestation des syndicalistes, journalistes ou intellectuels d'alors » (p. 124). Cette fameuse parenthèse fait grincer bien des dents, aussi bien dans les milieux intellectuels que syndicaux. Cette question de « dépassement » et de présence préoccupe beaucoup J. Éthier-Blais qui voudrait suggérer, quant à lui, qu'autour de Borduas, un grand nombre d'individus de « l'élite » québécoise l'ont déjà précédé dans la même contestation de l'ordre établi. C'est par le ton que *Refus global* aurait surpris le milieu québécois, plus que par « la matière » (p. 117). L'auteur affirme, sans s'appuyer d'aucune démonstration autre que le fait que l'on pouvait trouver des ouvrages de Mabile dans certaines

librairies, que « la classe intellectuelle qui sentait fléchir l'autorité suprême du régime était disponible. Dans ces conditions, la pensée de Borduas n'avait rien de rébarbatif. Les idées qu'il défendait circulaient dans tous les milieux éclairés... » (p. 117). On nous permettra bien des réserves sur la disponibilité des « milieux éclairés » des années 40 à recevoir la pensée automatiste. Et dans la recherche historique sur le climat intellectuel de l'époque qui reste certes à faire, il faut se garder de faire équivaloir des conduites ou intentions se prêtant à mille interprétations à ce type d'action sociale, réalisée par Borduas, qui catalyse dans une prise de conscience ouverte et nette, clairement articulée, des mouvements encore diffus.

Plus important encore, on ne parlera qu'autour et alentour de la présence de Borduas dans le milieu québécois si on n'interroge que ses textes verbaux, au lieu d'analyser la déconstruction idéologique opérée par son moyen privilégié d'expression, *la peinture*. Les effets dynamiques et révolutionnaires de cette œuvre picturale sont peut-être aussi virulents dans les années 80 qu'ils l'étaient dans les années 40.

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DENNIS REID *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/National Museums of Canada, 1979. 454 + xvi pp., 179 illus., \$29.95.

The exhibition *Our Own Country Canada*, circulated by the National Gallery of Canada in 1977-78, allowed gallery-goers, for the first time in over one hundred years, an opportunity to assess the work of the first Canadian artists. 'Canadian' being defined as those who paid attention to the specifics of the Canadian landscape. It was an instructive and useful attempt to bring into focus the nature of Canadian painting during the last half of the nineteenth century. Particularly gratifying was the opportunity to examine work by O'Brien, Fraser, Way, Jacobi and others in depth rather than in isolated examples. A

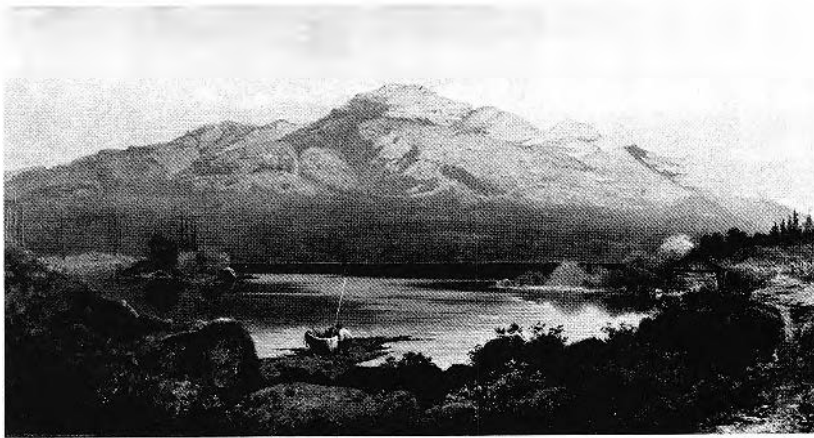
rich and comprehensive view of Canadian, or rather English-Canadian art, it forced many to realize that Canadian art did exist before Tom Thomson.

What the exhibition missed was a catalogue. Fortunately this lack has now been remedied by Dennis Reid's book. While appearing considerably after the exhibition the book was well worth the wait. It is obviously the result of careful, considered research and a deep sympathy for and intimacy with the art. If Reid is perhaps a little impatient with what he calls the 'jingoism' of the era, he recognizes and makes his readers appreciate the importance of the art of our Victorian predecessors.

As Stephen Vickers so aptly suggests in his Foreword, the area which Reid has chosen to explore has been hitherto 'a wilderness.' It is a mark of Reid's considerable achievement that we come through the wilderness not only unscathed but eager to delve further. One hopes that we will soon see closer examinations of the artists who figure so prominently in Reid's story.

The book has a long subtitle, 'Being an Account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto 1860-1890,' which serves well as a statement of its scope and intent. Throughout we are reminded of the need for the Dominion to establish a sense of natural identity. That artists should have turned to the glories of the landscape seems, in retrospect, only natural. What Reid points out however, is that this turn to the landscape is intimately linked with commercial and territorial expansion. As railways fanned out from central Canada so too did the artists and photographers.

Dividing the work into three major sections, Reid deals in turn with Montreal, Toronto and the Dominion. Rather than attempt to follow the whole scene he has concentrated on a number of major artists and their activities (the founding of societies amongst other things). Discussing each in turn, he gives us a brief resumé of their lives and careers to the end of each period, picking up some artists again as the story develops. It is significant that while discussing the work sensitively and clearly, Reid also gives some attention to personality. We are perhaps too ready to



John A. Fraser, *Laurentian Splendour*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 48.9 cm × 95.3 cm. Ottawa, Galerie nationale du Canada.

forget that artists are living, breathing creatures and not machines. O'Brien's personality played an important part in the formation of the RCA and accounts of Charles Horetzky's difficult persona shed considerable light on his photographs.

This should not in any way suggest that Reid places undue emphasis on character traits. The art remains the primary evidence and Reid's analyses are incisive. At the same time, he is not afraid to suggest that an image is beautiful or extraordinary. Indeed it is a mark of the book that we are often aware of Reid's personal affinity for the images.

Extensive use has been made of contemporary documents and newspaper accounts throughout the book. These are particularly useful, revealing much about the mindset of these good Victorians and the sense of optimism and promise which pervaded the period.

Perhaps what is most significant about the book however is the consideration of the landscape photographers – Notman, Baltzly, Horetzky and Henderson. Reid rightly suggests that these men were the equals of the more celebrated painters both in their art and in the minds of their contemporaries. The significance of the Notman firm can hardly be underestimated and photographs by Henderson, in particular, are remarkably powerful works of art. Far from being unthinking, mechanical reproductions, they reveal a highly personal sensibility.

On the whole the book is highly enjoyable but the high quality of the text is not matched by the illustrations. Regrettably the only colour is the dustjacket and the reproductions in the book are often too small and occasionally fuzzy. The second lack is in the bibliography, something more extensive would have been much appreciated. This especially when even browsing through the book, one realizes that it is a synthesis of information from a dizzying variety of sources.

These points aside, the book is highly readable and, to this reader at least, exciting. Dennis Reid's contributions to our knowledge of Canadian art have, in the past, been notable and the present book is no exception. It should become essential reading for all students of Canadian art.

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Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

DAVID ELLIOTT *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*. Toronto, Random House of Canada Limited, 1979. 136 pp., illus., \$20.00.

This book was originally published to coincide with the widely reviewed and consistently praised retrospective exhibition of Rodchenko's work organized by the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1979. It contains an extensive photographic survey of the entire range of his work (including compass and ruler drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, collages, photomontages, photographs, and designs for advertisements, book and magazine

covers and illustrations, posters, logos, furniture, clothing, a teapot and a stage set), as well as critical essays, documentary texts representing Rodchenko's and his colleagues' writing from 1919 to 1941, and the reminiscences of his family and former students. A supplement, listed in the contents to include a catalogue list, chronology and bibliography, was missing from the copy of the book I received to review.

Like other artists of the period, Rodchenko was initially dedicated to a search for the *new*. In 1915 he wrote to his artist wife, Varvara Stepanova, 'Yes, I have found something to paint and think that it will be new and daring. I shall free painting, even Futurist painting from what it has up until now slavishly clung to... I have found an entirely original path' (as quoted in Alexander Lavrentiev's contribution to the book, 'Alexander Rodchenko: An Introduction to His Work,' p. 28). In 1919, in his manifesto for the X State Exhibition Moscow, he wrote, 'The crushing of all 'isms' in paintings was for me the beginning of my resurrection... My work is to create new paintings... I am the inventor of new discoveries in painting' (p. 8).

By 1920 Rodchenko's statements reflect a change in his attitude. No longer was he satisfied simply to investigate new formal possibilities for painting and sculpture: his concern for an art that would serve society and its environment began to develop. His statement for the XIX State Exhibition Moscow read: 'Non-objective painting has left the Museums; non-objective painting is the street itself, the squares, the towns and the whole world. The art of the future will not be the cosy decoration of family homes. It will be just as indispensable as 48-storey skyscrapers, mighty bridges, wireless, aeronautics and submarines which will be transformed into art' (p. 8).

Having explored the formal properties of painting for the preceding six years, in 1921 Rodchenko exhibited three monochromatic canvases in the primary colours, following which he stopped painting for almost two decades. With Stepanova he wrote the Productivist Manifesto that year. It proclaimed the following slogans: '1. Down with art, long live technical