

PAINTING PLACE

The Life and Work of

David B. Milne

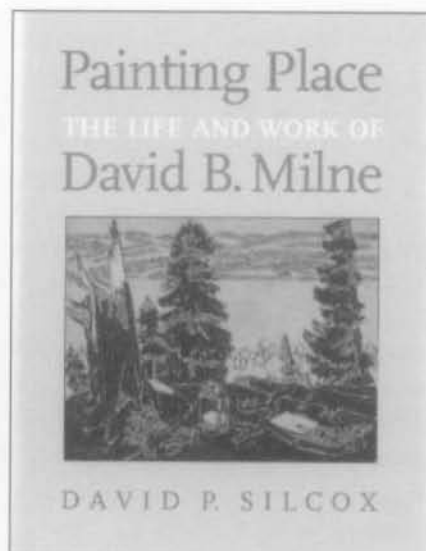
David P. SILCOX

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The son of Scottish immigrants, David Brown Milne (1882-1953) grew up in rural Bruce Peninsula near the shores of Georgian Bay. As a country school teacher, he began taking correspondence courses from a New York art school. In 1903 he decided to attend the school full-time and pursue a career in illustrating. Soon Milne set his sights higher and began a serious effort to launch himself into the tumultuous New York art scene, firmly aligning himself with the Modernists who were inspired by the new French art. The peak of his early career came in 1913 when his work was exhibited at the famed Armory Show, which introduced Modern art to a wide North-American audience. But the wear and tear of this life took its toll and in 1916 Milne retreated to the countryside of Boston Corners, N.Y. This set the pattern for the remainder of his life, in which economic considerations and his preference for subjects in nature kept him away from cities. Except for a stint in the Canadian Army in 1918-19 when he served as a war artist and a brief sojourn in Ottawa, Milne remained in the



United States until 1929. Returning to Canada that year, he lived mostly in the small Ontario villages, with Toronto as the focus of his activities within the Canadian art world. Milne's breakthrough came in 1934 when, desperate for money, he offered his entire artistic output to Vincent Massey. The prestigious Massey support extended to finding Milne a dealer and drew the attention of critics, artists and collectors to a new artist who could rival the Group of Seven. Milne died in 1953, leaving behind a large body of work that included paintings, watercolours and prints of unsurpassed excellence, intelligence and originality. He also wrote numerous letters, published and unpublished essays, and painting diaries that reveal him to have been a most literate writer and an erudite thinker on art and the essence of creativity. Today,

following the attention generated by several important exhibitions and a growing library of thoughtful and scholarly publications produced over the last two decades, Milne is recognised as one of the few real artistic geniuses this country has produced.

David Silcox's *Painting Place: The Life and Work of David B. Milne* evolved from his work with David Milne Jr. cataloguing the artist's paintings and watercolours and compiling all of Milne's known writings. It is meant to be the definitive biographical and critical study of the man and the artist. Without doubt *Painting Place* is physically and visually a weighty tome. Unfortunately, the same adjective cannot be ascribed to its biographical and art-historical ambitions. Sadly it is a failure, freighted with poor writing, sloppy scholarship, misguided judgments, unsupported assertions, and inappropriate comparisons, all packaged within a framework of sophomoric art historical knowledge.

In the second paragraph of the preface Silcox artfully claims to have been "persuaded ...to think that more, not less is better," thereby hoping to absolve himself of any criticism for the book's undisciplined flood of information. He then provides the chronology of his longstanding admiration for Milne, which began in 1957 and picked up speed and intensity in 1969 when he and David Milne Jr. began their worthy enterprise to produce a *catalogue raisonné*

of Milne's paintings and watercolours. His admission that he has been pursuing his study of Milne for so many years suggests an obsession but this is not necessarily a guarantee of erudition. To establish his credentials for taking on the task, Silcox places himself as the direct descendant of none other than Douglas Duncan and Alan Jarvis, Milne's most passionate promoters and critics during the artist's life and the decade after his death. Alarm bells begin to sound when Silcox states "my ambitions to scholarship are modest" and describes how friendly readers convinced him to "discard" a first draft written in 1980. He began writing the draft of the published book in 1982 and one must presume it just grew and grew. This would account for the lack of coherent approach and emphasis, as well as the shifts of pace and textual density from chapter to chapter, which gives the book the feeling of an unedited draft.

The most obvious criticism of this book is that it contains a number of simple, careless factual errors. Some of these should have been caught by the many readers and editors the author cites in his preface. For example on page 113 there is the curious chronology which, following Milne's time spent as a war artist on the Continent, has him travelling to Scotland for holidays in October 1919, returning to London in September and thence in early October embarking for Canada to be "demobbed" in Toronto on 14 October.

But too many of the mistakes can only be attributed to the author. In some instances the errors are as "unimportant" as the captions of photographs and here I cite two of Milne in army uniform. On page 88, the photograph is described as Milne in February or early March 1918 at Boston Corners before he embarked for training camp in Toronto, where he would receive his private's uniform.¹ However, the photograph shows Milne in the uniform of a Canadian officer, a uniform he acquired in England during the Spring of 1919 before he left for France. (The photograph is in fact one of several taken soon after his return to Boston Corners in November 1919, when he was showing off his uniform during a visit of his friend and patron James Clarke.)² The second photograph, on page 115, is, according to Silcox, of Milne on the former battlefields of France during the summer of 1919. But he is wearing the high-collared uniform of a Canadian Army private, a uniform he would have shed by this date. In fact, on the back of the photograph, Milne described it as having been taken at Black Lake, Québec in the summer of 1918.³ While it may be said that errors in identifying photographs are of minor concern, it does alert one to the author's lack of precision. This leads to inaccuracies of much greater significance, such as stating that Douglas Duncan's first visit to see Milne at Six Mile Lake took place in January 1935. This was one of the most

important "events" in the artist's career and the date is well-recorded in first-hand accounts and scholarly publications as September 1935. This can also be confirmed in a letter Milne wrote to Alice Massey on 24 September 1935.⁴ The quantity and frequency of such factual errors is alarming.

Silcox seems to be particularly prone to inaccuracies when recording Milne's exhibition history. Poor organization of research notes may account for assertions that Milne only exhibited two works at the 1930 Ontario Society of Artists exhibition when in fact the catalogue indicates he showed four works - the oil *Painting Place III* and three colour drypoints: *North Elba (Fourth Version)* [Tovell 48], *Lake Placid (Second Version)*, [Tovell 46] and *Painting Place (Large Plate)* [Tovell 52].⁵ There is no explanation for the numerous errors and omissions on page 221, where the *Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art* held in 1932 at the National Gallery of Canada is described simply as "a national touring exhibition." (It did not travel.) In the same paragraph, which is meant to be an account of Milne's exhibition history in the early thirties, Silcox mentions exhibitions in Cleveland and Chicago without including particulars such as title, institution or works shown.⁶ He makes no mention of Milne's participation in the annual exhibitions in 1931 and 1932 of the Art Association of Montreal and the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, the

First Annual Exhibition of Canadian Arts at the Manoir Richelieu in Murray Bay, Québec, held in 1930 and the Fine Art Exhibition at the Canadian National Exhibition in 1930 and 1931.

Throughout the book Silcox's commentary on exhibitions and their contents is inconsistent, confusing and often inaccurate. This is exemplified by his description of Milne's participation in the celebrated 1913 Armory Show. According to Silcox, Milne was not only invited to submit work but was rewarded with the acceptance of an unusually large number of works because of his friendship with Jerome Myers, a member of the organizing committee. In fact, a look through the Walt Kuhn papers and the Armory Show catalogue itself, shows that Milne was one of the many *uninvited* artists who submitted their work only after hearing news of the impending exhibition.⁷ While Milne was represented by six works, this could not be described as "generous" in comparison to the numbers of works other artists enjoyed seeing hung in this exhibition. It is also a bit of a stretch to describe Jerome Myers as a "friend" when the only documented contact is that Myers, in his capacity as the representative of the Philadelphia Water Color Club, visited Milne's studio to select work for the Club's exhibitions. In addition, Myers was a minor player in the Armory Show's organization holding what could be described as an honorary position to represent

Philadelphia's arts community. If Silcox really intended to imply that Milne's selection for the Armory Show was based on favouritism rather than ability, a far more likely influential "friend" would have been Maurice Prendergast, who headed up the jury for uninvited submissions. Prendergast exhibited with Milne at several annual water-colour society exhibitions and was a fellow member of the New York Water Color Club. In addition, Milne's style and subject matter at this stage in his career bore an undeniable similarity to that of Prendergast.

The misreading of Milne and the Armory Show could be ascribed to Silcox and his Canadian research assistants' lack of familiarity in the byways of American art history of this period. However, a similar ignorance of Canadian art history is evident when Silcox researches Canadian events such as Milne's Toronto exhibition and his involvement with J.E.H. MacDonald in 1924. According to Silcox, Milne participated in an exhibition with the Ottawa Group of Artists held at Hart House in January-February 1924. Without elaborating on the circumstances or suggesting any connection, he then writes that MacDonald arranged another exhibition in Toronto which received "considerable interest ...but a great deal of wondering from the critics."⁸ Lacking any proof, Silcox suggests this second show was either at the Arts & Letters Club or the Ontario

College of Art.

By untangling this story, we are offered a far richer view of Milne's efforts to re-establish himself in Canada in 1923-1924. In Ottawa, Milne became friendly with a young Japanese artist Yoshido Sekido who had a studio in the same building. Sekido, a recent graduate of the Ontario School of Art had found a mentor in MacDonald. As a member of the Ottawa Group of Artists, he must have been the contact with MacDonald who arranged for an exhibition of their work at Hart House — a show that was delayed "on account of dramatics & other things."⁹ (There is no need in this review to elaborate on the already well-known connection of MacDonald with Hart House and its theatre.) The Hart House show was reviewed by a newspaper critic who was indeed left "wondering."¹⁰ In July, MacDonald, still in possession of the Milne's six watercolours shown at Hart House, wrote to Milne indicating that he had taken the liberty of reproducing one of the watercolours in that month's issue of *Canadian Forum*, and invited Milne to write an article for the magazine on Big Moose Lake where he was then living. (Neither of these points is mentioned by Silcox.) MacDonald concluded his letter by offering to enter the six watercolours in the Fine Arts Exhibition at the Canadian National Exhibition.¹¹ Silcox's misinterpretation of this sequence of events is not just a matter of poor art historical knowledge.

Most of the information can be gleaned from MacDonald's simply and clearly-written two-page letter. Silcox's misreading of the letter indicates a surprising inability to recognize and interpret his archival sources while the omissions seem to bolster his thesis of Milne as unappreciated genius.

David Milne's relationship with Vincent and Alice Massey and the exhibitions they instigated from 1934 to 1938 at the Mellors Gallery effectively established Milne as one of Canada's pre-eminent artists. The extraordinary Massey purchase of Milne's artistic output from 1929 to 1934 and for a few years thereafter, not only gave Milne the financial security he needed during the Depression, it also gave him the cachet of having the patronage of one of the Canada's most discerning and influential collectors. The exhibitions at the Mellors Gallery brought Milne to the attention of collectors, critics and curators, and positioned him as the successor to Tom Thomson and the recently disbanded Group of Seven.¹² Silcox's long discussion of this passage in Milne's career is remarkable for its omissions. The Massey purchase and the Mellors dealership are treated as a catalogue of business correspondence, contracts, financial transactions, etc., leaving the impression that Milne received no benefits but was rather a victim, bamboozled and conned out of money and paintings. While it is true Milne did not do well financially in the long

run, it was not a matter of deliberate exploitation. It did give Milne a career boost of a sort he had never experienced before and for which he was always grateful. In the dozen pages devoted to these twin tales, Silcox never discusses the "art part" of the transactions. We are not told of the specific works acquired by Massey or exhibited by Mellors. Nor is any ink wasted on describing or analysing Milne's critical reception, the impact or place of his work within the cultural milieu of Toronto and Canada in the thirties which the Massey-Mellors connection brought him. When Silcox does provide art historical contextualisation the result can be incomprehensible. For example, the meaning and relevance of a paragraph on James Wilson Morrice (p.221) remains unclear after several readings.¹³

Silcox's inability to judge the relative importance of issues such as those just described can be found throughout the text. For example, it seems more important to know that in New York, Milne wore wool socks knitted by his mother than the dates of his sketching his trips to Pennsylvania or trips home to Paisley, information which is buried in footnotes. Silcox includes a comprehensive description of the building of the Milnes' house at Big Moose Lake in the twenties, including the installation of thirty-four electrical outlets, but there is no mention of the Milne's response to the Adirondack wilderness, the poetic closeness he felt with its

natural world and the influence it had on his art.

However, the most shocking example of Silcox's inability to establish priorities and recognize the more important topic appears on page 119. Two paragraphs totalling 24 lines describe a painting journal Milne began at Boston Corners in 1919. The description is limited to the ambiance and physical nature of the journal's making - typed in the evening while looking over his painting of the day. Silcox also provides a brief account of the dates the journal was kept. We are not told anything regarding the content of the journal or given any indication that this is something of significance. The journal's appearance is accorded the same importance as the activity described in the paragraph which follows immediately: it is of equal length and devoted to Milne's one summer-long career as an onion farmer. However, the discussion of the onion farming is the more informative of the two. Milne's labours in the fields are treated in loving detail and, for good measure, we are given a report on the onion market at Boston Corners and the nearby villages. Silcox seems to be quite unaware that the journal is a milestone in Milne's artistic life. It is the most tangible evidence we have that Milne was beginning a second, parallel "career" — that of aesthetic theoretician. It is also the moment when Milne began to seriously read art critics as diverse as John Ruskin and Clive Bell

(whose "aesthetic emotion" would become the cornerstone of Milne's own aesthetic apparatus), and nineteenth-century American philosophers like Henry David Thoreau.

As a child of the nineteenth century who matured in the twentieth, Milne brought to his art theories two apparently conflicting philosophies — Naturalism and Modernist aesthetics. After the War, Milne began to read extensively on art and philosophy. During the 1920s, the effect of Milne's reading of Modernist theory can be seen primarily in his unresolved and awkward codification of painting methods in his system of colours and their values. However, it was American Naturalism, in the guise of Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, that dominated the direction of his art during this decade. Silcox reduces the influence of *Walden* and Milne's replication of the Walden experience during a winter on Alander Mountain to little more than an impetus for a life-style change and as a means for living economically. In fact, Thoreau and Alander showed Milne how to achieve greater visual acuity and sensitivity to the natural world and hence find the aesthetic cues which pushed his art into new directions. His correspondence throughout the twenties continues to demonstrate how deeply Milne was in Thoreau's thrall. While living in Palgrave and then Six Mile Lake during the early thirties, he was able to devote himself totally to his painting. The

seeds of Modernism planted in the twenties took root at this time and came into first bloom in a now famous letter to Alice and Vincent Massey written in 1934. However, Milne's devotion to Naturalism was not abandoned. Throughout the remainder of his life, he continued to refine his theories on art. These also evolved in various directions, the most startling of which can be seen in his subject, memory, and fantasy pictures. Milne's theories were as much an explanation of his current work as they were an outline for his future endeavours.

Silcox uses Milne's writings as a way of describing his art of the moment but he does not recognize them as a body of work, separate from but integral to Milne's painting, with its own intricate sources, evolutionary changes and apparant contradictions. By dealing with Milne's writing in such a limited way, Silcox has denied the artist his unique place in Canadian art. Other authors have acknowledged the significance of Milne's writings. John O'Brian has given us a compelling and perceptive essay on Milne's Modernist roots and his interpretation of them.¹⁴ Lora Senechal Carney has written persuasively of the artist's surprisingly long progress towards his fantasy subjects.¹⁵ Christine Boyanoski has provided us with the most cogent explanation of the apparent conflict between Milne's philosophical sources.¹⁶

These are not the only examples

of Silcox's apparent avoidance of the existing Milne literature. During the last two decades there have been a number of important and scholarly publications on Milne by some of Canada's leading art historians, but curiously and inexplicably Silcox has chosen not to build upon them. For example, he writes at length on Milne's activity as a printmaker and yet he does not seem to have opened my critical biography and *catalogue raisonné* of the prints except to insert my catalogue numbers into his text for the colour drypoints made from 1927 onwards. As a result these portions are replete with errors, omissions and unsubstantiated date changes. Valuable new research and clarifications found in my publication as well as those of the other Milne specialists are disregarded and/or contradicted without proof or explanation.¹⁷ It would seem that in order to present himself as the heir of Duncan and Jarvis, Silcox deliberately chose to ignore most of the work by more recent Milne specialists.

On a more positive note, Silcox has peppered his text with a liberal number of colour illustrations, many of them never before published. He has also provided extensive new biographical information but given the evidence of careless writing as well as weak organizing and interpretative skills, one must approach this information with serious reservations. The *catalogue raisonné* Silcox has co-authored with David Milne Jr. has just been published.

At first reading, it appears to be a major achievement and an important contribution to Canadian art history. The thorough research and meticulous organization of this publication only underscores the short-comings of the biography. A companion volume of David Milne's writings, edited by the artist's son, is scheduled to appear in two years. *Painting Place's* association with these two publications will probably prevent it from being relegated to the back of the bookshelf, although it will be of limited usefulness to future generations of art historians.

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National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Notes

1 David B. MILNE, *Autobiography*, typescript, Milne family Papers, 45.

2 Rosemarie L. TOVELL, *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1980), 48. The photographs are in the collection of the National Archives and came from the collection of James Clarke.

3 The photograph and the quote from Milne's caption are published in John O'BRIAN, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1983), opp. title page.

4 The letter is in the Massey Family Papers, National Archives of Canada. Silcox has used other information from this letter (i.e. the visit of the sons of Maulsby Kimball) but has curiously missed the reference to the unexpected Duncan and Jarvis visit.

5 TOVELL, *Reflections in a Quiet Pool*. This exhibition history is noted in this *catalogue raisonné* of Milne's prints. The impressions shown were inscribed "OSA" by Milne.

6 For the record, Milne sent three dry-points *Barns* and *Waterfall* to the *International Competitive Print Exhibition sponsored by the Print Club of Cleveland* in March 1931 but his submissions were rejected. It is possible he sent the print *Barns* to the same Print Club's exhibition in November 1935 but again it was not shown. (Milne to James Clarke, 18 Nov. 1931 and 20 Jan. 1936, Milne Papers, National Archives of Canada). The Chicago exhibitions included the 1931 *Annual Exhibition of Etchings under the Management of the Chicago Society of Etchers* at the Art Institute of Chicago (the drypoint *Blind Road*). At the 1932 *First International Exhibition of Etching and Engraving* organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Society of Etchers Milne exhibited *Barns* and was the only Canadian represented.

Note: As this review was going to press the David Milne Jr. and Silcox *catalogue raisonné* was published. It contains a complete list of the

exhibitions and the works shown. The accuracy and completeness of this list underlines the carelessly recorded information in the biography where, for example, they do not record an exhibition in Cleveland.

7 Milton BROWN, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Joseph Hirschorn Foundation, New York Graphic Society, 1963), 270. See also TOVELL, *Reflections*, 17-18 and 217, n 48.

8 J.E.H. MacDonald to David Milne, 27 July 1924, Milne Papers, National Archives of Canada. (Quoted by Silcox, 165.)

9 *Ibid.*

10 Unidentified news clipping, c.31 Jan. 1924, in the Artists File, Documentary Art Section, National Archives of Canada. This clipping was probably inserted in MacDonald's letter. The article which is undoubtedly a review of the Hart House show, describes Milne's contribution as follows: "David Milne's watercolour drawings are likely to prove a bone of contention. Their extreme carelessness of outline and lack of detail serve only to call attention to the remarkable effects of perspective. In "Dart's Camp" Mr. Milne gives his impression of a clearing in the bush. Stumps and dead trees strewn the ground, while beyond the clearing the evergreens stand thick. All is done with remarkably few brush strokes."

11 MacDonald to Milne, 27 July 1924. Evidently Milne did not reply in time or did not give MacDonald the go-ahead to submit them to the C.N.E. committee.

12 See Christine BOYANOSKI, "Milne and his Contemporaries" in Ian M. THOM, ed., *David Milne* (Vancouver: Douglas & Macintyre, 1991), 26.

13 For further commentary on Silcox's writing style and his inability to discuss Milne, see Garry Michael DAULT's review "Text not up to production in David Milne biography," *The Globe and Mail*, 30 Nov. 1996.

14 O'BRIAN, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting*.

15 Lora Senechal CARNEY, "David Milne: 'Subject Pictures,'" *The Journal of Canadian Art History* X, no.2 (1987):104-19. Carney makes an interesting connection between Milne's juxtaposition of still-life elements as in his canvas *Water Lilies and the Sunday Paper* and his reading of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. Ruskin praised such an enchanting combination of elements as one of the highest acts of the human mind. Compare this to Silcox' bewilderment at Milne's interest in Ruskin on page 124 or his own tortured explanation of the same painting on page 204.

16 BOYANOSKI, "Milne and his Contemporaries," 21-35.

17 In addition to the publications already cited, see also John O'BRIAN, *David Milne, The New York Years 1903-1916* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981).