



Fig. 1. William Brymner, *A Wreath of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 55". Coll. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

SHORT NOTES

WREATH OF FLOWERS*

In 1884 William Brymner would finally terminate his much-interrupted student days in Europe and return to Canada in search of painting subjects and remunerative employment. He wanted, however, to spend the summer of that year somewhere in Europe working at his craft. His companions were to be F. W. Jackson, a north-of-England man¹ and J. K. Lawson, a fellow student from Hamilton, Ontario. The three were interested in "good subjects" and were considering working in either Belgium or England.²

According to Brymner's correspondence with his father, Jackson influenced them to try Yorkshire and the little village of Runswick Bay.³ This was and is a most picturesque fishing settlement perched at such a precarious angle on the side of the ocean that not too long after the turn of the century, a whole section disappeared into the North Sea.

The three men stayed initially at the Sheffield Hotel which still stands, "like a lighthouse above the village in the fields overlooking the German Ocean."⁴ In Brymner's letters he wrote of the proprietors, the local families, the customs of the area and of his "magnum opus" which would become *The Wreath of Flowers*,⁵ a work which Canadian art historians have assumed was painted in France. It was painted in a little orchard on the side of a hill and when Brymner wanted to work there Mr. Hatt the coastguard and owner of the orchard gave him the key.⁶ In his correspondence to his father, Douglas, Brymner referred to the difficulties and experiences he had with the children who posed for him:

The subject is stunning including the landscape . . . the difficulties of painting children the size of mine are awful. Keeping the pose for two minutes and then doing something altogether different for ten nearly drives me wild sometimes.⁷

The youngster I had this morning never kept one part of her body still for one half minute at a time and finally ran away . . . I was putting her in my big picture sitting on the grass knitting a very dirty garter, the day was just right so I

*This historical note is based on correspondence between William Brymner and his father Douglas, written between the fourth of March and the 18th of November in 1884; an article in the *University Magazine*, "Village Life in Three Countries" published in April 1912 and a visit by the author to Runswick Bay in October of 1973.

was very disappointed.⁸

Later he wrote a nostalgic article for the *University Magazine* in which he said:

Here in the warm light of the sun's afternoon glow (as) these children dance and play . . . the background comes up of mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers and still others having done the same things for centuries before these children were born.⁹

While Runswick Bay seems untouched by time, it has in fact become a seaside escape for contemporary urban Yorkshiremen. Still there though, is the little orchard, safely locked behind its gate, where the *Wreath of Flowers*, the "magnum opus", was painted.¹⁰ (Fig. 1)

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Notes:

¹ Brymner wrote to his father from Paris in March of 1884 that Jackson received about £200 a year from a Manchester man "for all he does." The Manchester man was Samuel Barlow. Barlow who owned a bleach and dye works, was an art patron to the Manchester School of landscape painters and one of the earliest buyers of French impressionist paintings. (cf: Cecil Gould, *Burlington Magazine* [January-June, 1966] pp. 141-42.) Barlow later befriended Brymner and opened his collection for him to study.

² William Brymner to Douglas Brymner, various letters (Paris: March 8, 1884), p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* (Yorkshire: May, 8, 1884), p. 3

⁵ *Ibid.* (Yorkshire: May 28, 1884), p. 1. Brymner referred continually to this large picture in his correspondence with his father. On November 14th, he wrote to tell his father that he had decided to send it to Ottawa, would call it *The Wreath of Flowers* and would like to sell it for \$150. The painting was finally hung, one of six Brymnars, in the RCA and OSA 1885 exhibition. It was #103 - \$400. In 1886 it was deposited as his diploma piece for the Royal Canadian Academy.

⁶ *Ibid.*, "Village Life in Three Countries," *University Magazine* (April 12, 1912), p. 323.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *op.cit.* (Yorkshire: June 8, 1884), p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *University Magazine*, p. 324.

¹⁰ The author visited Runswick Bay in October, 1973 and was shown Mr. Hatt's small orchard, now the property of a non-resident Londoner.