

BOOK REVIEWS

LEONARD HUTCHISON, *PEOPLE'S ARTIST: TEN YEARS OF STRUGGLE, 1930 TO 1940*

Lynn Hutchison Brown
NC Press, \$3.95

Leonard Hutchison, People's Artist: Ten Years of Struggle, 1930 to 1940 is the first in a series of monographs entitled *Toward a People's Art* to be published by the NC Press, the publishing arm of the Canadian Liberation Movement. Apparently emerging from Barry Lord's interpretation of Canadian art, *The History of Painting in Canada*, this monograph is to be followed by works on Jan Wyers, Miller Brittain and *The Life of Norman Bethune* in comic book format.

This book contains forty-four full page reproductions of Leonard Hutchison's wood-block prints, including five in sepia and black, as well as an introduction by Barry Lord and a short essay by the artist's daughter Lynn Hutchison Brown. Though occasionally too dark, the NC Press has done a fine job in reproducing the prints. It is especially pleasing to see a monograph dedicated to a Canadian graphic artist as the history of the graphic arts in Canada is too little known.

Of English birth, Leonard Hutchison settled permanently in Canada after the First World War. He painted first in oils and watercolours but soon turned to the graphic arts, believing their wider distribution to be more democratic. As Lynn Hutchison Brown points out his first landscape prints reflect the compositions of the Group of Seven. However, like other young Ontario artists in the thirties, Charles Goldhamer, Tom Wood, Carl Schaefer and Henri Masson, he turned from the empty North to the inhabited landscape: wheat fields lined with stooks, old and abandoned mills and barns and the small fishing ports on Lake Erie. While no people are depicted

in these prints, they remain human landscapes, witnesses to the lives and labours of men and women.

However it is Hutchison's figure work that strikes the most original note in relation to Canadian graphic art of the thirties. In such works as *Blacksmith Shop*, *Builders of Roads* (originally entitled *Steam and Brawn*), *Logging* and *Bright Leaf* he depicts the workers at their jobs in the rural and agricultural industries of southern Ontario. In *Got Anything to Eat?*, *Depression* and *Breadline*, he documents the plight of the victims of the Depression. In other prints, large portrait busts of the workers fill the image frame and are boldly set against the landscape of their livelihood. The strong contrast of uninked areas, solid black and deeply gouged and heavily inked parallel lines, accentuate the character and strength of these faces. Two of the most impressive of these, *Protest* and *Lockout*, typify the labour struggles of the decade.

Lynn Hutchison Brown provides the reader with some basic biographical information though many questions are left unanswered. What role did Hutchison's wife, the artist Grace Fugler, play in his career? How did his graphic art relate to his own photographic work and to the graphic art being produced by other Canadians at that time? To what extent was the Spanish Civil War a catalyzing influence in Leonard Hutchison's political commitment? What was the artist's actual relationship with the unions and did they buy his work? Why did he almost stop producing prints after 1942 when he was able to create works of such strength during the Depression? However, this book is not written for the art historian and to a certain extent these questions are asking a lemon to do an orange's job.

This book has been published to witness the support of an artist in the struggle for social change and the texts

provide us with the necessary approach for the interpretation of a people's artist. Barry Lord informs us that a people's art is "national, upholding the dignity and independence of the nation, and opposing domination from the imperial centre. It is scientific, seeking truth from facts and realistically depicting struggle and change. And it is truly democratic, serving the working people, the vast majority of the population." Lynn Hutchison Brown points out that Leonard Hutchison's style is social realist as it "analyses social conditions, reveals the contradictions within society, and ennobles the working and oppressed peoples."

Does Leonard Hutchison's work fall into these tri-partite formulae? One would be hard put to determine how the Port Dover landscapes depict struggle and change. In fact without being aware of the rest of Hutchison's work, one might almost accuse him of "slumming down city streets, glorifying and rendering 'picturesque' the filth and decay created by the capitalist system," an accusation levelled at Yvonne McKague by a writer in *The Masses*.

Other works, such as *Depression* and *Breadline* contradict Milton Acorn's definition that "a people's art doesn't reflect the plight of the suffering from oppression but arises from and joins in the fight." Certain works do live up to Lord's and Brown's political expectations, among others *Protest* and *Canadian Homes and Gardens*; however I question to what extent they were created in a national (Canadian) spirit in opposition to domination from the imperial centre (the United States), especially in light of the historical development of social realism in Canada.

In the United States during the Depression massive government patronage encouraged and supported social realist art and the political involvement of artists. Canadian artists concerned about

their role in the social and political issues of the day were encouraged by the American example. In 1941 André Biéler organized the Kingston Conference to bring Canadian artists together and debate the social role of the arts. The main speakers at that conference were Americans: Walter Abell, professor at Acadia University, formerly of the Barnes Foundation; Thomas Benton, noted American-scene painter and Edward Rowan, Assistant to the Director of the Fine Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration. Those artists of the late thirties and forties whom Barry Lord praises as "people's artists" were to a large extent influenced and inspired by developments in the United States. Both Miller Brittain and Jack Humphrey had received their formative training in New York. Nathan Petroff went to New York after graduating from Central Technical School in Toronto and much of Fred Taylor's work finds its parallel in American art.

While Leonard Hutchison's prints relate stylistically to the work of certain Canadian artists (Edwin Holgate, André Biéler and W.J. Phillips) it is incorrect to blame U.S. domination of Canadian art for the neglect of Leonard Hutchison's work. It was the New York Public Library that purchased Hutchison's *Earth Can Never Die* from the Canadian Society of Graphic Art exhibition at the New York World's Fair in 1939 before any of the major Canadian public institutions had acquired his work. Americans were interested in social realism at that time, Canadians were not.

I believe one of the great strengths of Leonard Hutchison's graphic art is his deep human commitment to his subjects. Maybe Barry Lord could follow this artist's example to create a dialogue between the writer and the artist rather than oppressively imposing his own ideology on his subjects.

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