



*Painters Eleven: The Wild  
Ones of Canadian Art*

IRIS NOWELL

Vancouver: Douglas and  
McIntyre, 2010  
364 p.

---

*Graham Broad*

---

This is the first book devoted to Painters Eleven, a collective of abstractionists who worked out of Toronto and region from 1954 until the group's dissolution in 1960. Art by members of the group remains a staple of many commercial galleries in central Canada and is often found on display in public buildings in Ontario. At least three members of the group, William Ronald, Harold Town, and Jack Bush earned some measure of international acclaim and Clement Greenberg once described Bush as among the best painters North America produced in the twentieth century. However, published studies of Painters Eleven have been limited to exhibition catalogues, book chapters, and Ronald Belton's *Theatre of the Self*, a short but

good biography of the group's mercurial founder, William Ronald. By itself, then, the fact that this is the first work of its kind makes it a welcome addition to Painters Eleven literature.

Nowell, whose previous books include a biography of Joyce Wieland and a memoir of her long relationship with Harold Town, says in her introduction that she considered this book hers to write. She seems to have put her past association with several members of Painters Eleven (the last surviving, Tom Hodgson, died in 2006) and their families to good use, having received from them various diaries, letters, recollections, and rare photographs. The book consists of individual biographical chapters on each of the group's members, interspersed with short and at times perfunctory chapters on the group's creation, its heyday, and its dissolution.

The biographical chapters are deeply affectionate, even reverential, but are thorough and will serve students and scholars of Canadian art as useful works of reference. Nowell's decision to depart from chronology makes for somewhat erratic and at times repetitious reading, especially where the lives of the artists converge. But in focusing on the members as individuals rather than as a collective, she also reminds readers that Painters Eleven existed only briefly, and numbered eleven for less than three years (Oscar Cahén died in 1956; Ronald resigned in 1957). No photograph of the eleven together exists.

One is reminded, too, of what a diverse group of personalities the eleven were. Though they found common

purpose in their shared commitment to abstraction, Nowell describes many nights of hard drinking in smoke-filled rooms, nights that sometimes culminated in alcohol-fueled rages and even fisticuffs between some of the group's younger members. It is hard to imagine that such evenings held much appeal for the introverted Kazuo Nakamura or the group's most senior members, the underappreciated and deeply spiritual Jock Macdonald, and Hamilton art teacher Hortense Gordon, who was nearly seventy when the group was formed.

These biographies are lively and make for diverting reading, but do they contribute anything new in terms of situating Painters Eleven in the broader historical and cultural circumstances of the era? Nowell's approach is strictly matter-of-fact, narrative, and anecdotal rather than deeply analytical. Perhaps by choice, she renders the cultural contours of 1950s-era Canada in a decidedly two-dimensional fashion. The historical context of the group's establishment in the early 1950s, for instance, is the subject of a chapter of just three pages; the group's dissolution at the turn of the decade, when the whole of Canadian society was on the cusp of a cultural revolution, gets two pages. Although the stated goal of the Massey Commission was to foster uniquely Canadian cultural development in the face of what many perceived to be American cultural imperialism, and some later artists, including London's Greg Curnoe, saw abstract expressionism as precisely that, the commission is the subject of a single paragraph in a chapter devoted

to art dealers who helped advance the group's career. In this respect, then, the book offers less insight than *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* by Denise Leclerc (who, admittedly, contributes a warm foreword to this volume), Roald Nasgaard's *Abstract Painting in Canada*, or even such older mainstays as J. Russell Harper's *Painting in Canada: A History* and Dennis Reid's *Concise History of Canadian Painting*.

Instead, *Painters Eleven: The Wild Ones of Canadian Art* works best as a big, colourful, sumptuously illustrated coffee-table book, featuring nearly three hundred reproductions of the eleven artists' work. Nowell has selected the best gallery works to reproduce but has also tracked down many fine paintings in private collections. Moreover, one should not be churlish about the significance of the technical achievement of photo-reproduction and precise colour correction. The group's work has never been presented so well.

Admirers of abstraction will find many of these works breathtaking. Some members, including Hodgson, a two-time Olympian who liked to produce big, muscular abstract expressionist canvases, and Oscar Cahén, a talented illustrator who Nowell describes as the group's artistic center-of-gravity, seem due for major studies of their own. Walter Yarwood's post-Painters Eleven career as a sculptor finally gets due consideration. Jack Bush's colour-field paintings of the 1960s and early 1970s, which seem to have staked out a mid-point between the serene contemplativeness of Mark Rothko and the often severe work of Barnett

Newman, continue to impress, as do Harold Town's understated monoprints of the 1950s. But it is also hard to escape the conclusion that some members, including Ronald, stopped evolving artistically after the 1950s, and that some of their early abstracts seem blandly decorative or simply slapdash, works by painters groping their way towards understanding a new artistic vocabulary.

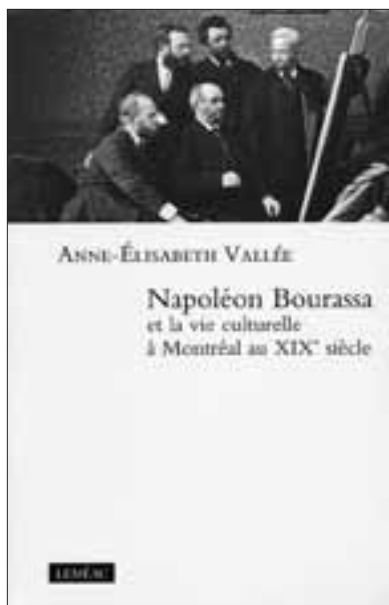
In art history, the modernist perspective sometimes implies that there was something wrong with artists who continued to paint portraits and landscapes while the vanguard was making the bold leap into the nonrepresentational. So it is refreshing to discover, near the end of the book, a photograph of an aging Yarwood painting a small, rather delicate landscape, as if abstraction for him was not so much the end-point in a teleological process as a style that held his interest for a time. This in turn makes one wonder about Nowell's claim that Painters Eleven were "plotting an artistic coup" (297) in the allegedly stolid English Canadian art scene. Inevitably, the history of Painters Eleven begs comparison to the group's slightly earlier counterparts in Quebec, *Les Automatistes*, whose members are inextricably linked to an early shot across the bow in Quebec's Quiet Revolution, Paul-Émile Borduas's incendiary pamphlet *Refus Global*. In the light of that group's genuinely revolutionary manifesto, Painters Eleven's goals appear more straightforwardly commercial. Nowell, however, casts them in the familiar heroic mold, placing the group at

the forefront of a movement that acculturated Canadians to the aesthetic language of abstraction.

Undeniably, Canadians' aesthetic tastes were sometimes reactionary in the early 1950s, and Nowell describes the alienation that the group's members felt in this often-stultifying environment. But there is also good reason for regarding Painters Eleven as *part of* rather than the start of any "coup." Winnipeg's Bertram Brooker had exhibited geometrical abstracts in Toronto as early as the 1920s; some former members of the Group of Seven, most notably Lawren Harris, painted surrealist and abstract works throughout the 1930s and 40s, and of course the *Automatistes* had come and gone before Painters Eleven was even founded. By the early 1950s, Cubist, surrealist, and abstract works were commonplace in juried shows, they were mainstays of the magazine *Canadian Art* and beginning to appear in the collections of major public galleries.

Moreover, the Canadian public did not live in the cultural hinterland often ascribed to them. They vacationed Stateside, watched Hollywood movies, listened to American radio, and increasingly watched American television. Above all, they read American magazines, and presumably the tens of thousands of Canadian subscribers to *LIFE* magazine had seen its feature article on Jackson Pollock in 1949. By the time the Painters Eleven mounted their first show in Toronto in 1954, the days of the paint-splattered bohemians were already coming to an end. The many fans of the group will feel vindicated

by the overdue appearance of a book about them and will admire this work's beautiful reproductions. Some students of Canadian art history, however, might wonder if Nowell's assertion that Painters Eleven were "the wild ones" of Canadian art is better suited to their individual temperaments than to their art.



*Napoléon Bourassa et la vie culturelle à Montréal au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*

ANNE-ÉLISABETH VALLÉE

LEMÉAC, Montréal, 2010  
255 p.

---

Monique Nadeau-Saumier

---

Ce livre est une version remaniée pour publication d'une thèse de doctorat en histoire de l'art, *La contribution artistique, pédagogique et théorique de*

*Napoléon Bourassa à la vie culturelle montréalaise entre 1855 et 1890*. Soutenue à l'UQAM en 2009 par Anne-Élisabeth Vallée, cette thèse a été élaborée sous la direction de Laurier Lacroix<sup>1</sup>.

En publiant ce condensé de sa thèse, l'auteure permet à un plus large public de prendre connaissance d'un aspect jusqu'alors pratiquement ignoré de la vie de Napoléon Bourassa. En effet, si Bourassa a joui d'une certaine notoriété comme peintre et architecte durant la dernière moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, son implication et son rayonnement dans plusieurs domaines de la vie culturelle de Montréal restaient, jusqu'à la publication de ce livre, des dimensions très méconnues de sa longue carrière.

Le texte d'introduction fait part de faits déjà connus et n'innove pas vraiment au plan biographique, son intérêt se situant à un autre niveau. Basé sur une recherche poussée des nombreux écrits publiés et de la correspondance de Napoléon Bourassa, le livre permet au lecteur de mieux saisir l'importance du rôle qu'il joua dans le développement de la vie culturelle montréalaise durant la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Sont aussi mis en lumière certains aspects de sa personnalité qui ont contribué à affirmer la présence significative de Bourassa dans le domaine culturel et artistique de Montréal, en particulier, et du Québec, en général.

Né dans une famille prospère, sur la rive-sud de Montréal, le jeune Napoléon entre adolescent au Collège de Montréal, où s'amorce le début d'une longue et fructueuse relation avec les Sulpiciens.