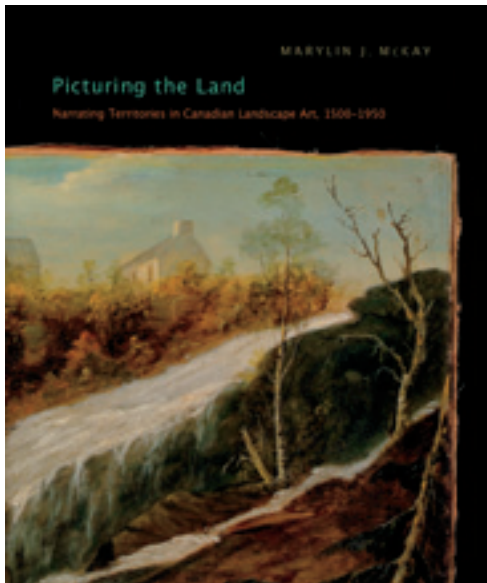




Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950

MARYLIN J. MCKAY

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011
384 p.

Karen Stanworth

In *Picturing the Land*, Marilyn McKay has achieved the ambitious and laudatory goal of re-presenting Canadian landscape art by arguing that it is embedded in Western visual culture yet also specific to the territories and moments depicted. Working from an understanding of representation as a process of mediation, McKay offers alternative ways to comprehend landscape images in relation to

contemporaneous discourses about the land. While she modestly claims that she does not provide a complete account of Canadian landscape, she takes the reader on a remarkable journey from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century “art-maps” of French and English Canada to modernist landscapes of the mid-twentieth century.

McKay ties thematic and chronological chapters together by relating the images to a set of concepts that delineate Western attitudes towards territory. While the categories she proposes are cumbersome at times, her argument not only clearly establishes that landscape needs to be located within Western tradition, but also makes an important contribution to Canadian art historiography. The dominance of the Group of Seven in histories of Canadian art has led to a widespread assumption that Canadian landscape painting inevitably portrays wilderness and an untamed landscape. McKay provides a nuanced discussion of domesticated property, which insists that the representation of land is always meaningful, but not necessarily always about the portrayal of seemingly unpopulated and unknown territories.

In the introduction, McKay describes four concepts of territory that shape her vision of landscape art. She explores the roots of what she calls the nomadic, Arcadian, Edenic, and sedentary notions of territory in historical writings. Citing Homer (ca. 800 BCE), McKay suggests that the nomadic idea of territory is defined in his contrasting of civilized space to the

boundless, often uninhabited, space beyond it. The Arcadian or pastoral concept also emerges from Greek thought, but represents a temporary retreat from the civilized world. The Edenic is distinguished from the Arcadian in that Eden represents the garden of Judeo-Christian thought, a site to which one longs to return. The origins of the sedentary concept are located in Herodotus (500 BCE), whose writings link the desire to occupy land and the ways in which that settlement contributes to land-based identity formation. This collective identity depends on the belief that the land “was always agricultural and never wilderness” (7). Teasing these concepts apart in subsequent chapters, McKay provides a way to think about the depiction of settled land with nuance and specificity. McKay offers a fifth concept that is located solely in the twentieth-century vision of territory as ‘universal’. This category is proposed as a way to understand the shift from the depiction of specific locations to modernist and abstracted images of the land. McKay draws parallels between these conceptualizations of the land and the thematic boundaries of each chapter.

Exploring the iconography of art maps, McKay points to the relatively evident relationship between maps featuring vignettes of conquering nations and the nomadic. The maps are well illustrated in colour and provide a glimpse into their substantial contribution to the visualization of the strange and ‘savage’. The drawings and watercolours in the chapter on “Place

and Displacement, 1600–1830” are also situated within the aesthetic and philosophic tradition of the nomadic. McKay argues that, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century versions of the nomadic, territories are subject to ownership and the resulting landscape images served to support and encourage “exploration and occupation” (45).

McKay frequently refers to contemporaneous literature, such as the writing of nineteenth-century, English tourist E.A. Talbot who comments that the features of the “Lake of the Thousand Islands” displays all the features of “the placid, the picturesque, and the sublime” (61). Yet Talbot’s view of the picturesque is constantly challenged by the contradictions that arise “with a striking intermixture of the savage and the uncouth” (61). This would have been a good moment for McKay to explain how the conceptual category of the ‘nomadic’ allows for the contradiction between the tamed and the untamed, and how ownership relates to a rhetoric of colonization. Talbot’s comments on the “savage and the uncouth” beg to be unpacked, particularly in relation to the practices of “exploration and occupation” that McKay earlier identifies as part of the ‘nomadic’ concept. While Talbot’s observation was directed at the contrasting elements of the picturesque Canadian landscape, his choice of words speaks to the ways in which colonization required the subjection of the land and its occupants. Given that one of the largest islands, Wolfe Island, for example, had been conquered by

the French, then the English, and was occupied largely by wealthy American summer tourists by the 1870s, there is a wealth of detail about the “savage and uncouth” that could have been mined here.

On occasion, the attempt to draw the distinctions between concepts leads to unwieldy discussions of particular images. In the 1830 to 1850s, for example, English artists often used conventions of the picturesque to depict settled territory. Robert Whale’s (1805–1887) *General View of Hamilton* (1853) loosely references John Constable’s *Dedham Vale* (1828). However, Constable’s Romanticism establishes a relationship between the viewer and the scene, whereas the strong contrast between the distant view of civilization and the wilderness of the foreground in Whale’s landscape serves to situate the viewer as a passive observer. As such, McKay argues, Whale remains within the nomadic concept of territory. Still, one could argue that contemporaneous writing, which often describes an Edenic experience, reinforces a Romantic relation to the land. The strength of McKay’s argument may well lie in the conversations that she provokes about these relations as opposed to an absolute categorization.

McKay engages with earlier studies of landscape in Canada with no holds barred. For example, she suggests that the tendency to interpret Quebec landscape as about “homeland” results in a homogenizing of the differences that underpin representations across time. McKay also critiques the

limitations of art histories that focus solely on male artists. In response, she includes numerous landscapes by women (Elizabeth Simcoe [1762–1850], Elizabeth Hale [1774–1826], Anna Jameson [1794–1860]) yet acknowledges that these women did not have access to the same skill development as male artists of the period. However, the women did participate in the same nineteenth-century ideologies of empire and represented what they saw through the same aesthetic categories (beautiful, picturesque, and sublime).

Perhaps it is inevitable in a book with such a wide scope that small errors creep into the otherwise excellent coverage of the art historical literature achieved by McKay. While somewhat critical of John Porter’s interpretation of Joseph Légaré’s (1795–1855) landscapes as “innovative,” McKay nevertheless relies on Porter’s documentation of Légaré’s aesthetic environment (chapter 4). The repetition of Porter’s observation that the English dominated the Society for the Encouragement of Art and Science, established in Quebec City in 1827, is not actually correct. Indeed, the membership of the learned society was predominantly French until its 1829 union with the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec.

In the chapter on farmland images of the 1870s to 1915, McKay suggests that the depictions “are based on the Arcadian or the Edenic, or a mixture of the two concepts” depending on the location of the farm depicted (104). She argues that the “Canadian experience of Arcadia . . . was not just a place of

idyllic repose” but “also a locus of material progress achieved through hard labour” (110). The farms of this Arcadia were largely situated in eastern Canada, and farming scenes depicted by artists such as Homer Watson (1855–1936) and William Hind (1833–1889) portrayed domestic animals contentedly grazing or distanced views of rural families in harmony with the land. Attempts to describe the West as an “earthly paradise” were readily refuted by the barren tree-less quality of the land, the impoverished state of many immigrants, and the “sorry state of Native people” (119). While the illustration of posters promoting immigration juxtaposed against photographs of poor settlements is welcome to promote understanding of how landscape art participates in a visual discourse of nationalism, McKay’s narrative stance can result in generalizations or omissions. For example, Watson, a central figure in the development of a distinctive approach to landscape in Ontario, receives short shrift with only one paragraph of discussion.

In yet another well-researched chapter – on wilderness landscapes that pre-date the Group of Seven – McKay argues that images demonstrating “dominion over wilderness territory” depict the use of natural resources for profit and recreation (154). She draws on numerous contemporaneous authors to illustrate how territory was explicitly linked with national progress. The use of different stylistic approaches – aestheticism, art nouveau,

expressionism – in the depiction of wilderness images reflected a desire to appeal to the senses “and offers an intense anti-modern experience” (164).

McKay astutely divides her examination of the Group of Seven into two chapters. Chapter 8 focuses on the writing and work of the group of artists; chapter 9 on the cult that developed around their work. Curiously, she does not call upon the landscape concepts that frame earlier chapters, although by this point in the book, she may well anticipate that the reader would see aspects of the Arcadian and the nomadic in the depictions of wilderness. But there seems to be a reluctance to place this work into the same conceptual categories as earlier narratives of territory. Modernism and the depiction of wilderness do not fit the nomadic vision, yet many of the terms recall the ideas of the savage, rugged, and untamed.

McKay incorporates the conclusions of a significant number of Canadian art historians throughout the book, sometimes with less than complimentary commentary. While she agrees with Canadian art historians (citing J. Russell Harper, Dennis Reid, Christine Boyanoski, and Charles Hill), that mid-twentieth century representational art may appear moribund, she points out that, by moving beyond visual appeal to consider why the work might appear “lethargic,” a critical history of the period can emerge (241). Landscapes by artists such as Jean Paul Lemieux (1904–1990),

Goodridge Roberts (1904–1974) and David Milne (1882–1953) are discussed as “fantasy landscapes” and McKay suggests that this concept provides a way to think about the abstracted canvases of the 1930s to 1950s. The term is not imposed but draws attention to the invented character of images that remain landscapes, yet withdraw from national or regional specificities.

In a recent review, *Picturing the Land* was described as a social history (*Atlantic Books Today*, May 2011). I would argue that this characterization inadvertently diminishes the significance of McKay’s extensive examination of a broad range of contemporaneous beliefs and practices that inform how the land was understood, and the limits of possibility within which the land could be depicted. The scope of the book is remarkable, even more so in that McKay manages to tell the story of an extraordinary range of visual objects produced over a 400-year period. Over 150 excellent reproductions bring the diversity of landscape images into conversation with each other. The writing is engaging and provocative. McKay has produced a major study that promises to stimulate further research and conversation about how visual culture narrates stories of the land.