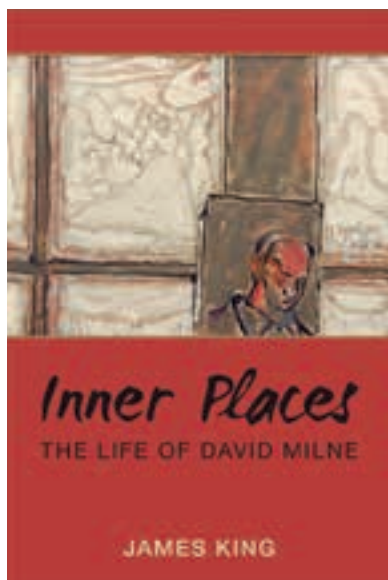




*Inner Places: The Life of
David Milne*

JAMES KING

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015
388 p.

Liz Wylie

To write a straightforward, traditional biography of Canadian artist David Milne (1881–1953) seems an odd task to undertake, as there are already several excellent publications in print on this painter and his work. This was my first thought on reading about this new book, but then, I surmised, perhaps a small, portable book on Milne, one written for the every-person, might be a really good idea. However, a basic challenge for a would-be Milne biographer is that David Milne did not really have much of a “life,” but devoted himself completely to his art. So unless one were able to write well about his work, there would

be little point to a biography. As King points out in his preface, David Milne is an excellent example of an artist’s artist. I would add that Milne’s work is demanding and difficult, and one begins to appreciate it only after some hefty doses of study – both of writings on art and paintings. It is not generally work that has mass appeal. If this makes Milne sound like an elitist artist whose work is accessible only to art experts, well . . . there may be no way around that estimation. King does not state what his goal was in writing this book, nor whom he hoped his audience for it would be. He does not inform the reader whether he unearthed any new information about the artist, nor whether any points he makes are new thoughts of his own. He only rarely refers to previous texts on the artist in his own writing, although in his acknowledgments he credits several previous writers on Milne as having been important to him in his research.

David Milne had a hard life: he was lonely and poor for the majority of his years, and received some recognition for his work only during his last several years. With the exception of his stint as a soldier and war artist in England and France during the First World War, he really had very little life to chronicle, only a sad and often penniless wandering, and a repeated building of tiny cabins in the woods, as he tried to find a way (in the Zen Buddhist sense) for doing his art while staying alive and having a roof over his head. King ends his biography with Milne’s death, not tracking (as the David Silcox biography does [University of Toronto Press, 1996])

the rise of the artist's reputation and high esteem for his work that began posthumously and continues to grow.

Without being an art expert himself (although King has written other biographies of artists), King is at a clear disadvantage in taking on a biography of David Milne. Milne was a sophisticated thinker, both as an artist and in terms of sheer intelligence. His writings explain the goals he was striving toward in his work, many of which are technical and seem removed from the emotional expressiveness we often associate with painting. King has not grasped the aesthetic musings and struggles that form the basis of the trajectories of Milne's art. The author seems intent on portraying the artist as a good fellow who had a hard row to hoe, and as someone who loved nature. The most glaring incidence of this is King's misunderstanding of Milne's use of what he termed "kick" in his work. It came from his reading of Bloomsbury art critic Clive Bell's notion of aesthetic emotion: an emotion (and it is real) that comes from art, and not from what we might call real life (although looking at art is part of real life). It lies at the base of all the artist's colour theories and compositional devices – everything he invented and deployed. It does not relate to his real life nor to his enjoyment of the natural world. King misinterprets this as Milne feeling a kick when he transformed the "careful observation of nature into art" (256).

Somewhat related, and another important aspect to Milne's work that King discounts, is the role and question

of subject, or what Milne called "motive" in his painting. As has been established by previous authors on Milne, and referred to by King, Milne was not interested in subject, that is, the objects portrayed in his paintings. He was preoccupied with formal concerns, and not intent on any expressive content about his subjects. King quotes Milne as saying this, but seems unable to accept it, and notes that Milne "denigrated subject" (164), as though it were some inexplicable quirk of his.

This aspect of King's treatment called to mind an experience I had once when viewing Ian Thom's 1991 Vancouver Art Gallery survey show of Milne's work when it was at the McMichael Gallery. As I visited the exhibition, two women were making their way around the gallery, reading the labels of the works out loud. They came to Milne's masterful and serene 1923 dry-brush painting *Lanterns and Snowshoes*, painted in the tea house at Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks (a business that his first wife Patsy was running, while Milne worked as a handy man at the resort). "Oh, there are the lanterns," one woman said to the other, pointing to the work, "and there are the snowshoes." Satisfied, they moved on. It is this misguided inventory method of looking that one must leave behind in order to penetrate the meaning of Milne's work. Writing of this same painting, King mistakenly comments that Milne's goal in the painting was to show viewers "this is how . . . a genuine artist lives" (199), but says nothing about his open/shut shapes, dazzle spot, and visual

rhythm, to mention only a few aspects that give the work its aesthetic power.

King is an enthusiastic, earnest, and well-meaning biographer, and his interest in Milne the person seems strong and sincere. His writing is clear and easy to read, and the book is logically organized, in individual, chronologically arranged chapters. The work is not a half-hearted attempt, and King has been thorough in his treatment of the various phases of Milne's art, and living places. However, his lack of knowledge and understanding of Milne's art takes its toll as one reads through the book. King seems to have been unable to sift through material about art and artists to give a sense of what is important and what/who is not. For instance, he democratically lists a handful of unknown painters – who, along with Milne, once depicted Bish Bash Falls near Boston Corners, NY – in the same manner as he addresses artists such as Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne. This even-handed treatment would make it hard for a lay reader to discern who were the major players and who the extras on the stage of the development of modern art. We know that Milne, on the other hand, was an art expert keenly aware of movements in art and knowledgeable about important contributions of artists, both before him and contemporary with him. He lived in the countryside for most of his life mainly because cities were expensive, but he made sure to keep up to date with artists' work and developments in art. This aspect of Milne's life is not emphasized by King, and there is no

indication by him that he finds any of Milne's paintings good or noteworthy, just that Milne doggedly produced them. King also uses some terms loosely, "modernism" for instance, so that we do not have a clear sense of what King means by them. For example, he writes of "the artist's use of spiky modernist forms in the rendition of trees" (121). King calls etching a "form" (80) and a "format" (81) rather than a medium, and terms oil a "form" also (219). King's account of Milne's inclusion in the hugely momentous so-called Armory Show in the USA in 1913 is described, but not ascribed with any importance (100–101).

Especially when writing on Milne's early years in New York, King seems determined to see the artist as an ambitious careerist, stating that in his early New York years Milne "wanted . . . to make his mark, and he was determined to do everything in his power to ensure his success" (89), when in fact Milne was just eking out a subsistence living by doing commercial art (show cards), and trying to get paintings exhibited. When Milne came to Ottawa in 1923 to explore the viability of returning to Canada to live and work, King mentions that he was not able to "penetrate the marketplace in any significant way" (214), seeming not to realize that there was no "marketplace" for contemporary art in Ottawa at that time.

There is one section of the book in which King differs widely in his interpretation of events from David Silcox's 1996 biography of Milne,

although King neither states this, nor mentions that the opinions given are his own. In his account of the 1934–37 fiasco of David Milne’s patronage by Alice and Vincent Massey, and the financial shenanigans of the art dealers they approached to sell his paintings, King seems to want to see Milne as a calm and fair-dealing sort. He comes down hard on the dealers, while leaving the Masseys in the clear. One quick read of Silcox’s detailed account of this abusive and hair-raising episode in Milne’s life will set a reader to rights as to this complex situation, but King does not state that he is departing from previous scholarship on this area. Overall, King seems to have wanted to be fair and even-handed. In his treatment of Patsy, for example, and the unraveling of her relationship with Milne, we sense King straining to see both sides of the situation.

An assortment of little textual errors plagues the work, the kind of things that give writers nightmares, as we all depend on copy editors to catch these. King’s copy editor was asleep at the switch. There is an unfortunate skipping of a “not” in quoting Thoreau, so that the American writer’s statement reads as its own opposite (170). Vincent van Gogh is spelled wrongly as Van Gogh all the way through the book, except in one instance. King refers to the New York Water Club (missing the word Color), and notes that in one Milne painting “the colours . . . are complimented by a sky” (258). He describes Milne’s trees in one work as having a luxuriant fulsomeness (261), a word in dispute, but

not one to use with confidence in this context. Instead of using the adjective Sisyphean, King writes that Milne’s life “became a Sisyphus-like endurance” (214). The overall tone of King’s book is lowered by these little problems.

Coming to consider the book itself physically, it is unfortunately poorly designed and suffers from very low production values. The opening pages of each chapter feature three typefaces: a sans serif for the number of the chapter; a script font for the chapter title; then a serif font for the body text. The running header of the chapter title is set in all capitals on the facing page and on all subsequent pages. This mix makes for a jarring read. The photographs of Milne and historical places, as well as the reproductions of the paintings are murky and dark to an extreme degree. This sad visual state means the book is a failure if it were trying to be a portable, small-format every-person’s Milne volume. One must go to other publications to see good reproductions of the artist’s work.

In conclusion, the aims behind this book are not stated and do not become clear upon reading. The title of the book, *Inner Places*, does not map onto Milne the artist or Milne the person. King explains his choice in his preface, stating that it was apt “because Milne’s inner world is depicted in his paintings” (27). It most certainly is not. Milne’s art has not been well served by the writer. Milne’s life is described in accurate detail, but he did not lead a life that was particularly worth chronicling apart from his art, which meant everything to him. One

might just as well scour Milne's diaries and letters for details on how he built his various cabins in the woods, and then write and publish a cabin-building manual based on his techniques – it would be equally beside the point. Thankfully, we do have several extant books on Milne available to readers who want to see faithful reproductions of his paintings, and read in depth about his ideas on art. This book does not take a place among those efforts.



The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968–1978

GARRY NEILL KENNEDY

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012
480 p.

Robin Simpson

The institutional affiliations surrounding Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s share a history fraught with contradictions. Located at the terminal point of the post–Second World War economic boom, the apex of Conceptual art is situated in a period of cultural upheaval and hard-fought struggles against the dominant culture. Questions of autonomy and authorship, alignments with Continental philosophy and critical theory, and an acute awareness of the influence of social and political systems on art production all primed the entry of Conceptual art into the arena of higher-level art education. Key among these instances was the