

*DANIEL FOWLER OF AMHERST
ISLAND 1810-1894*

Frances K. Smith

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's
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During recent years, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston has sponsored a series of one-man exhibitions of deceased Canadian artists. This ambitious programme has embraced such men as J. Harlow White, J.P. Cockburn, George Heriot and William Brymner; more are proposed for the future. Recently Daniel Fowler's name was added to the ever-growing list. This latest exhibition, organized by Frances K. Smith of the gallery staff, is a more mature version of a Fowler show held some years ago. Her re-examination is accompanied by a most ambitious and commendable catalogue which incorporates significant research material unearthed as a background to the presentation. Similar publications have accompanied all of the exhibitions and cumulatively provide a sizeable and important body of Canadian art literature. The Agnes Etherington's record of achievement in historical Canadian exhibitions and catalogues must surpass that of any other comparable gallery during a similar period, and indeed be the envy of the nation's largest institutions.

Two aspects of the catalogue provoke comment. One portion of the publication deals with the actual Fowler exhibition; but it also includes the artist's autobiography written on Amherst Island near Kingston during his later years; it has been transcribed from a manuscript in the possession of descendants, of which only two chapters previously were available to art historians. It is a remarkable one-hundred page narrative wherein Fowler shrewdly examines his own artistic roots and attitudes to art. He outlines his English training and its shortcomings, castigating with blunt honesty the fallacy of substituting sheer technique for an examination of nature as a

basis for art. It continues with a setting down of what must be the only real first-hand account by an artist from Canada of his reaction to the Pre-Raphaelite movement of the 1850's. With rare insight, he describes the shock of realizing the group's achievement, particularly their discovery of truth in simplicity and nature as contrasted to the artificiality which had crept into English painting of the mid-century.

The autobiography continues by dealing with many incidents in the artist's own life, in the Canadian art world, a discussion of exhibitions, art criticism and contacts with patrons and fellow artists. The whole is couched in a highly readable style that happily blends informative detail, philosophical insight, and anecdote. It is not surprising to find that Fowler, in his own lifetime, had literary efforts accepted for publication. Surely this is one of the most lucid revelations of a painter's life written by a creative artist in the Canadian scene during the nineteenth century. The editor has added numerous annotations. One wonders how this manuscript has remained so long unpublished in its entirety, and whether other similar documents remain to be discovered!

The exhibition and autobiography are complementary. The whole speaks eloquently of the new men and new forces burgeoning in Canadian painting during the Victorian years. Particularly strong at the time were new British influences and their adaptation to the local scene. Earlier portions of the autobiography look back at Fowler's youthful English career. Then he turns to his life and work as it developed in the Canadian context. This "Janus" aspect is reflected in the exhibition selection where the organizer, in mirror-like proximity, has placed various English period paintings beside later Canadian interpretations of the same subject. Many thousands of newcomers were arriving at eastcoast ports on the immigrant ships to seek a fresh life, new opportunities and a liberalism denied them in Europe. Artists were

among them: *The Last of England* painted by the Pre-Raphaelite, Ford Madox Brown, pictures himself sailing away to Australia; it is not mere rhetoric. Many artists came to Canada, C.J. Way, John Fraser, Otto Jacobi, F.M. Bell-Smith and Wm. G.R. Hind. Like Fowler who emigrated for health reasons, all brought with them tradition, technique and a certain sophistication and outlook rooted in the old world. Fowler's watercolour studies of flowers and game are executed by an expert technician in standards demanded and excelled in by Britishers. Yet on arrival in Canada, all artists had to undergo certain major re-adjustments. Fowler comments in particular on the qualities of the clear Canadian atmosphere; it gave him a new appreciation of colour in both landscape and still-life painting.

Without consciously setting out to do so, Fowler discloses much about Canada's artistic life and art organizations as he and the other newcomers gradually fitted into their niches beside their artistic confrères. He and the immigrant artists constituted a lively sector of the evolving art establishment. Active among them were such native-born painters as Lucius O'Brien, Homer Watson and Henry Sandham. Fowler's paintings appeared in exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal, Ontario Society of Artists and the Royal Canadian Academy. Indeed he was so highly respected that his name was suggested for the presidency of the Academy. The list of titles of his paintings and details of sale reflect how artists in these corporate art establishments relied on ever-increasing patronage for their income from enthusiasts who purchased the secular "subject" painting in either watercolour or oil.

Other features in the catalogue demand comment, not because they are innovations but more particularly because they are part of a new high standard now prevalent in art publications, contrasted with those of a quarter of a century ago. An essay summarizes the conclusions

from the probing into Fowler's output. All the paintings in the exhibition are reproduced in black and white, accompanied by appropriate documentation. There is a chronology of the artist, an extensive bibliography, and an exhaustive listing of all Fowler's exhibited paintings. The whole must serve as an invaluable aid to a further understanding of his art and an admirable reference book for all wishing to further investigate this man, a most respected painter in Victorian Canada.

The mention of two minor points may seem like a sour afterthought. Meaningful innovations must always be welcome. Yet a lay-out which deviates from the norm, such as relegating captions to the bottom of the page, seems only to confuse and adds no aesthetic improvement. Selection of the cover colour-plate must have been a frustrating experience. Certainly the one chosen is a key work in Fowler's output, one which he regarded himself in the highest terms. Yet, as Frances Smith points out, it is faded and robbed of that "rich and brilliant . . . colouring" singled out as significant by contemporaries and still admired in many paintings. Perhaps some fresher example might have done more justice to Fowler's abilities in this respect and been more meaningful to those unfamiliar with his paintings other than the *Hollyhocks*.

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