

PUBLICATION NOTICES / NOTES DE LECTURE

Edmund Morris: Frontier Artist

Jean S. McGILL

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When Edmund Morris was growing up the Indian was a mythic hero to every Canadian boy. The subject was of special interest for Morris because he was the son of Alexander Morris, Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories from 1872 to 1877, who was personally responsible for a treaty which provided the basis for the settlement of 55,000 crucial square miles of the Canadian West. To be the son of the great treaty-maker was an inspiration to Morris.

The book on Edmund Morris by Jean S. McGill, following a catalogue and exhibition of Morris' Indian portraits by Michael Parke-Taylor and Geoffrey Simmins for the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, has recalled the days when that mythic role of the Indian took hold on Canada. Morris in his own way was sorting through this myth.

In 1889, after a short stint in architecture, Morris entered the Toronto studio of William Cruikshank and studied at the Art Students League in Toronto. With Cruikshank he acquired a strong taste for Canadian nationalism. Further training in New York at its Art Students League and in Paris at the Académie Julian with J.-P. Laurens and Benjamin Constant and at the École des Beaux-Arts under Jean-Léon Gérôme extended his ability to draw the figure. By 1896, he was back in Canada painting at Sainte-Anne de Beaupré with such recent Paris graduates as Maurice Cullen.

Morris' interest in Indian portraits began before his return to Canada; one such work is dated 1894. Such a subject would have been well received abroad. Back home he was more inclined to show off his Paris training as in his impressionist *Girls in a Poppy Field*, 1895 (Art Gallery of Ontario), which he worked up from sketches he had made in Holland. The turning point in his career came in 1906 when he was commissioned by the Ontario government to paint the Ojibway in northern Ontario. He accompanied poet Duncan Campbell Scott (an Indian Affairs Commissioner) on Treaty Expedition Nine. The sensitive Indian portraits in pastel which he drew on this trip launched his career and are today in the Royal Ontario Museum collection in Toronto.

Morris' commission of 1906 led to other commissions of a similar nature, one from the Ontario government in 1907 to paint Plains Indians for the Parliament Buildings in Toronto. From 1907 to 1910, there were similar commissions from Saskatchewan and Alberta. In 1913, while sketching from a railway bridge beside the lower St. Lawrence, he fell and drowned. His career had lasted only seven years.

Such Indian portraits as he produced are the key to works by later artists such as Nicholas de Grandmaison. Morris always dealt with the Indian as an idealized and perfect human being, wise, noble and brave. His image of the Indian was a complete change from that of F. A. Verner, who painted Indians in a group as a sort of Holy Family On an idyllic, lazy picnic among the tepees. Morris provided portraits with a moral glint in his eye. He had been commissioned to paint the Indian because Indians would soon be gone. The audience was to

get the point that a living heritage of accumulated wisdom was being torn from their midst. To some extent, this was the way Morris' work was received. James Mavor, a University of Toronto economics professor and one of the important critical voices of the day, saw his portraits as "vigorous and faithful renderings of remarkable types of which it is very advisable to preserve authentic records."¹ Sir Edmund Walker, art collector, banker, and first chairman of the board of the then Art Museum of Toronto, saw them as "searching in analysis of Indian character."²

But were they? Morris tried hard to give his Indians heroic scale in the way he had learned in Paris, where three-dimensional qualities were emphasized in assignments. (Jean-Paul Laurens, who taught at the Académie Julian said, in the presence of A. Y. Jackson, that "the painting was like a glove with the hand withdrawn."³). Morris combined this kind of work with the impressionism he had also learned in Paris. The result was that his portraits were partly realistic, partly imaginative works of art. Critics of the period complained of his adventurous technique, "spirited but sketchy." The implication was that they were not notably coherent. His work would have changed if he had lived. As it was, he founded the Canadian Art Club in 1907, the pioneering group in Canadian art prior to the Group of Seven.

Jean McGill's book rounds out our picture of Morris. She examines his life through his diaries, and her writing style is unpretentious. Michael Parke-Taylor and Geoffrey Simmins in the catalogue of the Norman Mackenzie Gallery show write choppily, but place the paintings in relation to the period. McGill's book also presents Morris' landscapes, which were better executed than his Indian portraits. It is hard not to see him as a precursor of Tom Thom-

son when both were Cruikshank's students (Thomson in 1906), and the composition of some of Thomson's early canvases recalls Morris' *Cap Tourment*, c. 1903 (National Gallery of Canada).

The catalogue of the Norman Mackenzie Gallery show is most helpful when it brings out Morris' problematic quality by comparing his portraits with his photographs of the same subjects. Clearly, Morris' depiction of Indians was of a special nature. Art had worked its miracle again, transforming as it went. Edmund Morris, as he wished to, got the best "types," as he called them, before (as he said) they "shuffled off to the happy hunting grounds."

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Notes

¹ J. MAVOR, "The Canadian Art Club," n.d., reprinted in *The Canadian Art Club, 1907-1911* (Toronto: 1911), p. 21.

² Sir. E. WALKER, *The News*, March 30, 1909.

³ A. Y. JACKSON, *A Painter's Country* (Toronto, Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 8.