

In 1973 Peter Robertson of the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada put together, under the title *Relentless Verity* (University of Toronto Press), a history of Canadian military photography from 1885 to 1970. In contrast to *A Terrible Beauty*, it passes scholarly muster. Not only does *Relentless Verity* contain adequate notes, an extensive bibliography, and short biographies of the military photographers represented, but also every one of the 158 full-page photographs appears with a detailed and accurate caption. Furthermore, Peter Robertson's introduction gives a well-researched history of the use of photography to record military events and the experience of war. *Relentless Verity* has one other virtue which *A Terrible Beauty* lacks: it is bilingual, French and English, throughout. In *A Terrible Beauty*, even the selections from French-Canadian writers have been translated into English. The choice of English alone is strange for a book whose purpose is to reclaim an important part of the past of all Canadians and which quotes historian Desmond Morton's observation on the conscription crisis of 1917: "If war is one of those shared experiences which transform a people into a nation, Canada indeed became a country of two nations." (p. 11) Was the use only of English, like the weak scholarship, part of the price which had to be paid when the makers of *A Terrible Beauty* decided to present not only an anthology of Canadian war writings but also reproductions of Canadian war art as well?

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From Desolation to Splendour: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape. MARIA TIPPETT and DOUGLAS COLE. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., c1977. 159 p. ill. ISBN 0 7720 1048 X \$19.95.

Perhaps taking their inspiration from such recent exhibitions as "The European Vision of America," Hugh Honour's splendid bicentennial look at the New World through Old World eyes, two young Canadian cultural historians, Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole, have adopted a similar approach to the landscape painting of their native province of British Columbia. The result is not only a very interesting survey of the many painters who for more than two centuries have grappled with western forests and mountains, but also an effective summary of the dominant European aesthetic doctrines which inspired and supported much of British Columbia landscape art right into the twentieth century.

The tradition began with the eighteenth-century explorers and their sailor-artists, who were the first to paint the Pacific coastline. Accustomed to the artfully refined landscapes of Claude and Gaspard Poussin and to the seemingly natural vistas of parkland artificially created by Humphry Repton and Capability Brown in imitation of these Old Masters, Captain George Vancouver found the BC landscape almost totally desolate, a point of view reflected by the topographical artists, who concentrated their attention on the natives and their dwellings. The Europeans could only approach this forbidding terrain through the doctrine of the Sublime, which permitted an awesome admiration or a melancholy contemplation of the overwhelming forces of Nature for the sake of spiritual uplift. The Eden-like site of Victoria, on the other hand, could be universally and enthusiastically admired because of its resemblance to a tamed English landscape garden.

Throughout the nineteenth century, visiting artists from Henry James Warre, a British army officer, to Lucius O'Brien, the first president of the Royal Canadian Academy, focussed on the Rocky Mountains in romantic, picture-postcard views which catered to the Victorian mania for the Picturesque, a sentimental mode of seeing which still holds sway in a much debased form in popular shopping-centre art. Not

only were many European artists unskilled in drawing conifers convincingly, but prevailing aesthetic theory vetoed these trees of "dark murky hue" as dreary and mournful subjects, thus damning thousands of miles of BC forest to artistic oblivion.

The Picturesque mountain vista survived well into the twentieth century in the works of Thomas Fripp and other academic painters. It was against such sterile and hackneyed formula-art that Emily Carr and her contemporaries revolted, producing deeply felt paintings of forests and coastline that built on Post-Impressionist techniques to create the first identifiably "Canadian" landscapes in our history. As the European vision gave way to a Canadian one, the interpretation of the landscape changed dramatically: instead of unrelieved desolation, the land was now filled with splendour, a salvation to an increasingly urbanized population. But the authors are quick to point out that behind the new landscape impulse of the Group of Seven lay another set of international philosophical premises, such as theosophy and the writings of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, which replaced the time-worn tenets of the Sublime and the Picturesque.

After reaching a glorious climax with Carr and Varley, one is distressed to plunge into the abyss of mediocrity so suddenly after the Second World War. The spirit that had produced the golden age of BC landscape art was spent and continuity of inspiration shattered. In terms of creativity, we have moved from splendour to desolation. Although the authors make a brave stab at rehabilitating the reputation of W.P. Weston, his grotesquely writhing trees, knotted with Angst and battered with Weltschmerz, seem hilarious caricatures of earnest Group of Seven motifs. Weston leads us down from the mountain into the depths of contemporary art: Iain Baxter's Pop landscapes in plastic relief and his "ecological projects" or earthworks, one of which was "to black out, using a plastic tarp, one acre of forest until all vegetation wilted or died." Could one find a better example of the death of landscape art than this? Fortunately Tippet and Cole see some glimmerings of a landscape renaissance in Toni Onley and Gordon Smith, but the rampant emotionalism of a Carr or a Varley has been defused by the overruling concerns of modern formalism. A vibrant regional school of painting has become blandly international, losing much of its excitement along the way.

One of the real pleasures of the book is its seventy-four plates, of which nearly half are in colour, carefully selected and integrated into each chapter. For the connoisseur of *petits maîtres*, there are some outstanding discoveries: the almost Chinese primitivism of E.M. Richardson's "Inner Harbour, Victoria," the delicate Japanese-inspired woodcuts of Walter J. Phillips, and the evocative watercolours of Charles John Collings, who made the improbable combination of Turner and Hiroshige a winning one. Indeed, the influence of the Orient on the BC landscape tradition is perhaps one of the areas which the authors have overlooked. If one is grateful for the introduction to Richardson, Phillips and Collings, none of whom are exactly household words in Canadian art history, one wishes that other painters had been left to moulder in the front parlours of Victoria. Maude Lettice, Statira Frame and Margaret Wake are not minor characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but genteel daubers of such appalling banality that an Easterner is forced to relegate them to the only-a-British-Columbian-could-love category.

From Desolation to Splendour reads and looks like the introduction to an exhibition catalogue. One can only hope that a major Canadian institution will commission Tippet and Cole to continue their research toward a definitive exhibition devoted to their fascinating theme.

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