

# *The Artist as Historical Commentator: Thomas Burrowes and the Rideau Canal*

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Reporting recently on the exhibition, "People and Places: Early Canadian Painting," John Bentley Mays commented:

Despite shifts in social ideology, patronage and the creative weather, a large number of Canada's most original artists from Champlain's time to the present have done their best work as documentators of the land and its people, and interpreters of the facts of living here.<sup>1</sup>

May's comment underscores the main theme of this paper: that art should be regarded as a documentation and an interpretation of the society of which it is a part and upon which it provides commentary.

With their acute powers of observation, sensitive imaginations, and well-honed skills in communicating through words or images, artists are especially equipped to serve as participant observers of the past, and have produced valuable documents for the historical researcher. Lewis Coser, long an advocate of the utility of the humanistic source, argues the case succinctly:

Nothing Human ought to be alien to the social scientist; if a novel, a play or a poem is a personal and direct impression of social life, the sociologist should respond to [it] with the same openness and willingness to learn that he displays when he interviews a respondent, observes a community or classifies and analyzes survey data.<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, art is data as well as evidence, and as such it is often well informed, accurately reported, and insightful. This is not a philistine denial of the primary artistic purpose of the work, but rather an advocacy of an appropriate use of the artists' powers of observation, insight, and communication.

The purpose of the first part of this paper is to explore the various ways in which Canadian art may contribute to the illustration of facts, interpretation of facts, and,

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1 John Bentley Mays, "Art Doubles as a Lesson in History," *The Globe and Mail*, 13 August 1983.

2 Lewis A. Coser, *Sociology Through Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), p. xvi; for a fuller discussion of the utility of art as a source for "humanistic" studies, see R. Rees, "Landscape in Art," in K. Butzer, ed., *Dimensions of Human Geography* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 48-68; and R. Rees, "Images of the Prairie: Landscape Painting and Perception in the Western Interior of Canada," *Canadian Geographer* 20, no. 3 (1976), pp. 259-78.

a category neglected by Mays, the creation of facts in Canadian history. In the second part, an attempt will be made to demonstrate the strengths and deficiencies as an historical source of the work of one artist-cum-draughtsman, Thomas Burrowes.<sup>3</sup>

## ART AS EVIDENCE

In using artistic sources, the historian should subject the material to the same historical method as other historical documentation. For Elton, "the historical method is no more than a recognized and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of the past, and so far as possible their true meaning and interrelation."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to argue that historical "facts" are only "knowable" by the evidence they leave behind, evidence which is often enigmatic. It is only after rigorous scrutiny and testing, therefore, that the artistic evidence may be used with confidence as a reliable source of historical fact.

As with all documents, attention must be paid to such criteria as the authenticity of the document, the reliability of the evidence, the purpose and intent of the communication, the expertise of the commentator, and the general cultural context and milieu of which the communication was a part.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in considering the reliability of the art form for historical research, attention must also be paid to such criteria as artistic style and convention, medium, and public preferences. With these qualifications in mind, it becomes clear, therefore, that artists may function in several capacities and that several categories of artistic documentation may be recognized.

### *The artist as reporter*

The true measure of an artist's work may not be the accuracy of the rendering of reality, but rather the imaginative and sensitive perception of this reality. But for the student attempting to reconstruct the material world of the past — the very fabric of the society under investigation — realism is preferred to impressionism. Indeed, prosaic draughtmanship and amateurish daubings are preferable, if they are also accurate renditions of the world being portrayed.

The watercolours produced by the nineteenth-century traveller, or the bored wife of the colonial administrator *en route* to a new posting preserve for posterity an image of the country and communities through which they passed. Apart from such genteel hobby artists, pictorial records were also produced for more pragmatic purposes by surveyors, engineers, and military personnel. Precise renderings of topography, buildings, and machinery were essential to their professions, and instruction in draughting, field sketching, and painting was an integral part of their training. In particular, officers trained at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and similar military establishments were instructed to a certain level of proficiency as topographical draughtsmen, if not artists. The military required their engineers to be able to illustrate their reports with maps, drawings, and plans while the artillery and infantry officers had to be able to turn out drawings of landscape features, defences, and enemy dispositions. Canada was provided with a continual stream of these

3 For more information on Thomas Burrowes, see Brian S. Osborne, "Thomas Burrowes and the Rideau Corridor," in Parks Canada Report Series No. 34, *Rideau Canal Reports* (Cornwall, 1983).

4 G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1970), p. 86.

5 See Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York, 1966).

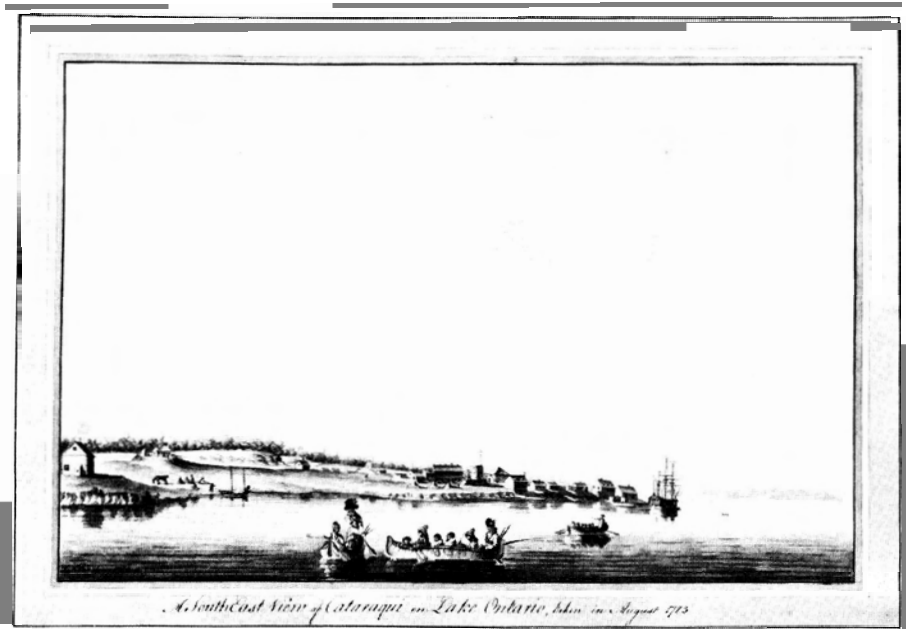


Figure 1: James Peachey (act. 1773-97), "A South East View of Cataraqui on Lake Ontario taken in August 1783," watercolour. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-1511.

military illustrators and recorders of the regions through which they travelled and in which they worked and functioned.<sup>6</sup> With an emphasis upon topography and remarkable sights, their work is often deficient in human content or social comment and there are few figures in their landscapes. But there are some exceptions; Lieutenant Peachey's sketches of the early Loyalist settlements at Cataraqui (Figure 1) serve not only to record the relics of the former French fort, Fort Frontenac, but on close scrutiny, also to detail the camps and fishing style of the otherwise anonymous local natives, the Mississauga, or are they the transplanted Mohawks? James Pattison Cockburn of the Royal Artillery consistently includes human subjects and domestic scenes in his sketches and watercolours. As a final example, Captain Henry Byam Martin, Royal Navy, is noted for his profuse illustration of Indian guides, St. Lawrence River pilots, slave auctions, and southern worthies.<sup>7</sup>

But not only the military were concerned with authenticity and detail in their work. C.W. Jefferys' instructions to his students clearly demonstrate one landscape

6 See Michael Bell, *Painters in a New Land* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 9-13; J. Russell Harper, *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (Toronto, 1970); Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto, 1973); and Arnold Wilson, *A Dictionary of British Military Painters* (Leigh-on-Sea, England, 1972).

7 For a fuller discussion of the work of Martin, see Jim Burant, *Friendly Spies on the Northern Tour, 1815-1837* (Ottawa, 1981).

artist's concept of the proper preparation for the presentation of artistic statements of "reality":

I have always recommended to my students to carry a sketch notebook and to acquire the habit of putting down rapidly details of the life about them, always and everywhere; notes of the way people act, move, and their gestures, their characters, the set of their clothes, all the things that make them individual human persons. And also their surroundings — the house, city and country, trees and shrubs and flowers, riverbanks, roadsides. In addition to this visible record, unconsciously the memory becomes stored with a fund of knowledge upon which it can draw, in every sense of the word.<sup>8</sup>

It is this concern for detail that allows us to turn with confidence to Jefferys for his representation of the landscape of rural Ontario at the turn of the century, to Frances Anne Hopkins for a record of nineteenth-century canoe travel, to William Armstrong for a pictorial record of native life, places, and a variety of economic activity ranging from commercial fishing to work in a steel mill. The intrinsic artistry of their work was not diminished by this emphasis upon verisimilitude, a quality much appreciated by scholars who turn to them for renditions of the past.

Sensitive artistry also communicates accurately some less tangible dimensions of reality that are also of importance in historical work. For Northrop Frye, "Painters and writers are not acts of God: they come out of specific communities, and are the individual points where those communities have become articulate."<sup>9</sup> The artist, therefore, not only records such "facts" as setting, scene, characterisation, and events, but also expresses such "values" as ambience, attitudes, emotions, and values. It is these subjective dimensions which are, so often, unapproachable realities for the historical researcher.

### *The artist as interpreter*

While artistic sensitivity and interpretation are important qualities, artistic creativity may interfere with the accurate recording of the "real," the "objective," the "actual" world. Alice Munro comments on this, underscoring the need for caution in the too literal reliance on the artist's work:

There is a sort of treachery to innocent objects — to houses, chairs, dresses, dishes, and to roads, fields, landscapes — which a writer removes from their natural, dignified obscurity and sets down in print. There they live, exposed, often shabbily treated, inadequately, badly, clumsily transformed.... And even as I most feverishly practise it, I am afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking), an unavoidable lie.<sup>10</sup>

This is particularly the case with the application of art to an important component of historical research, past landscapes. Yi-Fu Tuan quotes T.S. Eliot's warning that

8 Robert Stacey, *Charles William Jefferys, 1869-1951* (Kingston, 1976), p. 20.

9 Quoted in the *Globe and Mail*, 18 October 1977.

10 Alice Munro, in J. Metcalfe, ed., *The Narrative Voice* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 181-82.

“landscape is a passive creature which lends itself to an author’s [artist’s] mood” and goes on to associate “landscape with a tendency toward moody subjectivism among educated Europeans.”<sup>11</sup> Moodiness, perhaps, but subjectivism, definitely yes. William Gilpin instructed the English to seek out landscapes that “would look good in a picture” (the “picturesque”), and in rendering the picturesque, artists had “learned instinctively to adjust the composition of any painterly landscape according to the precepts of the picturesque.”<sup>12</sup> The untidiness and rawness of frontier settlements could be domesticated into the picturesque mode by the artist’s brush and imagination much quicker than it could by the pioneer settler. A Bartlett could elevate the modest Fort Henry heights into a Gibraltar-like eminence and transmute Kingston into a Mediterranean fishing village lying below. As a symbolic statement of the importance of the military presence, this might have been appropriate, but as a representation of the physical fabric it leaves much to be desired. With their preoccupation with the “sublime” and “picturesque,” such artists as Lucius O’Brien, John Fraser, and Robert Whale rendered their views of a land which was being “systematically fictionalized” by the artists’ imitation of European artistic conventions and the public’s aping of European artistic preferences.<sup>13</sup>

Not until the late nineteenth century would Maurice Cullen, Daniel Fowler and C.W. Jefferys contribute their domestic landscapes of an essentially Canadian scene. While Kriehoff had romanticized the Canadian winter, Cullen broke the artistic taboo on the more prosaic rendering of snow and ice and his “Logging in Winter” is a quintessential statement of a Canadian winter landscape. Jefferys also preferred the vernacular elements of the rural landscapes of “Old Ontario” such as cleared fields, rail fences, wood lots, cemeteries, and country roads. Jefferys turned to these scenes, thought by contemporaries to be “inartistic and unpaintable,” in his search for the “significant and typical” in the Canadian landscape.<sup>14</sup> Once the dominance of the European conventions was broken, landscapes such as those produced by Fowler, Cullen and Jefferys can be taken as realistic statements of their “lived-in world,” particular attention being directed to detail, authenticity, and the “typical” in their landscapes. These pioneers did much to emancipate Canadian landscape art from its earlier imitative and “fictionalized” forms, a task which was to be completed a generation later by the more acclaimed “Group of Seven.”

### *The artist as artisan*

Not all art is for art’s sake. In some cases, not only did the piper play the tune paid for, but took instructions as to style also. Artists have long been renowned for “gilding the lily” and “making mutton appear as lamb.” Some of the artistic renderings available to us must be used with caution, being more statements of what the patron, sponsor, or client wanted to be rather than what was there, or even what the artist interpreted to be there. The insight provided, therefore, is into the purpose and motivation rather than into the subject being rendered artistically.

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11 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self* (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 174.

12 Christopher Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 253.

13 For a detailed study of these artists, see Dennis Reid, *Our Own Country Canada: Being an Account of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto, 1860-1890* (Ottawa, 1975).

14 Stacey, *Jefferys*, p. 16.

Thus, one frontier developer and speculator, concerned that his promising community of Elora be represented favourably, gave very explicit instructions to ensure that both the actual and anticipated symbols of progress be recorded:

An artist may come to take a sketch of the Falls of Elora, & the village; and if he does go up, be sure to point out the most interesting spot, or spots, where he can see them to advantage: let him insert half a dozen houses in the village with some other principal matters. Let him not forget the church in the background through the trees.... Take care they do not, by any means, destroy the effect of the little island; it is a great beauty in my eyes. Tell the artist to hoist a British flag on it; & let them give us the mill and shantys which may be erected or to be erected.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, such specific suggestions were intended to direct and channel the artist's skills beyond imagination into the realm of propaganda and even fantasy.

Again, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, native, immigrant, and American artists earned a livelihood as itinerant artists serving a *clientele of frontier communities and households*. They travelled the countryside peddling their artistic talents and optimistic views of homes, livestock, landscapes, and people. More important for their insights into the social and historical context than their artistic merit, they reflect the hopes, aspirations, and preferences of their clientele:

Too many white lies are told in the livestock paintings and too many landscapes are distorted to fit the pastoral styles of Europe.... They record — sometimes against the intentions of the artists — not the art achievements of the rural society, but the values of its hard work and simple pleasures.<sup>16</sup>

Purdie comments insightfully on the symbolism of the work of such livestock artists as Joseph Swift and J.J. Kenyon and the often undistinguished itinerant landscapist:

The two areas of distortion that appear in many of the paintings — overemphasis by the primitives on the straight backs and geometric perfections of livestock and the stylistic imitations of European values by the more sophisticated landscape painters — appear in retrospect to be as natural as the architectural and social systems, also derived from elsewhere, that had yet to be absorbed and modified by the land itself.

The same could be said of the illustrations provided for the genre of County Atlases which rendered its subscribers' farms as models of the nineteenth-century view of agricultural progress and attainment, if being less complimentary to their human occupants.<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing that artistic forms produced images in peoples' minds which would affect their perceptions and decisions caused some to attempt to censor, or at least direct, artistic creativity. The reaction to Cullen's innovative renderings of Canadian scenes is a good case in point, but was not an isolated occurrence. At the more popular level, concern was expressed that Canadian was being represented by artists

15 *Gilkison Collection (in possession of Charles Corke, Guelph)*, William Gilkison to Simon Fraser, 28 March 1832. I am grateful to Gilbert Stelter for providing this reference.

16 Review of exhibition in McDonald Gallery, Toronto, by J. Purdie, *Globe and Mail*, 17 July 1976.

17 Betty May and Frank McGuire, *County Atlases of Canada: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Ottawa, 1970).

“as a land of snow and ice, of Indians and half breeds, and of bears and fur overcoats,” which prompted an editorial in the Kingston *British Whig* in 1881 entitled “Libels on our Land.” The offending items were scenes in the Christmas edition of the London *Graphic* and the “Christmas cards being sent forth this season from Canada in thousands to contribute their quota to our country’s ill favoured reputation.” The *Graphic*’s artistic slanders were itemized for the *Whig*’s readers:

Two men are represented as hoisting a Christmas flag in a snowy waste, with furs up to their very eyes; a second subject is a Canadian skating pond with the usual liberal supply of skaters in furs; while the remaining attentions of the lofty minded artist are bestowed upon an Indian trading shop and a Half-Breed and Indian jig-dance in British Columbia. One might almost doubt whether English artists ever get a glimpse of Canadian homes and public and private festivities, so prone are they to select scenes as foreign to the experience of the bulk of the people of the Dominion as they are curious in European eyes. A Christmas market in Kingston, for instance, would be a far worthier view than the ‘Graphic’ has yet produced in Canada’s name.<sup>18</sup>

In a parallel situation of “directed” art, artists also participated in the commodification of the Canadian Rockies by the Canadian Pacific Railway. As explained by Dennis Reid, “landscape had indeed become one of the principal products the CPR intended to sell. And what more effective way of advertizing than the presentation of actual images of the product.”<sup>19</sup> While not actually commissioned for this task, such artists as John Fraser and Lucius O’Brien were issued free CPR passes to travel throughout the West. For the historical researcher, their artistic works cannot be separated from the entrepreneurial imagination that produced them and the growing national chauvinism which they helped engender.

### *The artist as conceptualizer*

Apart from the accurate recording and interpreting of existing realities, artists have also taken the lead as creators of images and attitudes, as disseminators of new realities. Some artists made a contribution to the national identity merely by recording the world around them; others had a more focused objective. Thus, whereas Cullen, Fowler, and Jefferys were among the first to be concerned with an indigenous art, an art concerned with the representation of the Canadian life-world, others took this further and pursued it as a mission of both artistic and national integrity. In this way, their art and the eventual popularization of it served to create an image, a mental “inscape” of the world they saw and they wished others to see.

Undoubtedly, the most effective and, therefore, best known demonstration of this is the well-documented contribution of the Group of Seven. The question of whether they were stimulated by Dutch, French, Scandinavian, or American predecessors can continue to be debated, but their purpose was clear: their work was to contribute to the creation of a new national self-image. This was enunciated unambiguously in the catalogue to their Toronto exhibition in 1920: “Art must grow and flower in the

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18 *British Whig*, Kingston, 6 December 1881.

19 Reid, *Our Own Country Canada*, p. 389. See also E.J. Hart, *The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism* (Banff, 1983).

land before the country will be a real home for its people."<sup>20</sup> They further state: "Recognizing that Art is an essential quality in human existence they will welcome and support any form of Art expression that sincerely interprets the spirit of a nation's growth."<sup>21</sup> This was the essential nationalistic purpose of the "group of seven artists" who offered a different view of the Canadian landscape as part of an attempt at providing a fresher view of "the spirit of a nation's growth." As stated by Berger, they became "the leading edge of a nationalistic Canadian expression because they had (or so it was thought) successfully broken with the dead hand of tradition, discarded Old World techniques, experienced the north country directly, and boldly conveyed its shapes and colours."<sup>22</sup>

Concerned with countering the provincialism of both Canadian art and Canadian society, the Group's focus on the North and the Canadian Shield produced an unquestionably unique symbolic statement of national identity. But there are other Canadas, and some of these were demonstrated in the exhibition "Coasts, the Sea and Canadian Art." One critic commented:

In arguing for a more realistic approach to Canadian art history, the exhibition asks for conclusions based on actual experience instead of idealist aspirations like "the Canadian experience." Regionalism may not appeal to linear thinkers, but it remains a fact of life.<sup>23</sup>

The Group's renderings of "the apotheosis of the Canadian experience" are challenged by "Canadian experiences" other than that of the geology of northern Ontario which may be better thought of as one of several regional statements. The Maritimes of a Colville or Pratt, Jackson and Bieler's Laurentians, the Prairies of Jefferys and Kurelek, the forests, seas and indigenous cultures of Carr's West Coast, and the metropolitan scenes of a Kathleen Morris, all serve to demonstrate other Canadian "inscapes" rendered by their own artists.

The utility of such artistic renderings for historical research is in no way diminished by the recognition of this diversity of artistic focus. The student of the development of the Canadian "national consciousness" can only benefit from an appreciation of the Group of Seven's contribution to the contemporary search for Canadian identity. Nor can the student of the present realities ignore the artistic expression of the continued existence of discrete regional landscapes and powerful regional sentiments. Again, this has been forcefully expressed by Northrop Frye:

There is something vegetable about a culture: it needs roots and a limited environment.... Everywhere I look in Canada, I get an impression of immense energies trying to find their proper regional outlets, continually blocked by unreal obstructions.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever other sources are used in exploring such themes, the researcher would, therefore, be well advised to also consider these imaginative statements of real forces.

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20 "Group of Seven," Catalogue of Exhibition of Paintings, 7-27 May 1920, Art Museum of Toronto.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1976), p. 55.

23 P. White, reviewing the exhibition at The Gallery, Stratford, "Coasts, the Sea and Canadian Art," *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1978.

24 Northrop Frye, *Globe and Mail*, 18 October 1977.



*Art as History*

Art as objective fact, art as a manipulated half-truth, art as imagined reality, art as a catalyst for developing consciousness, all of these have had a part to play in Canada's art history. And as such, the art exists for the historian to examine and attain a better understanding of various dimensions of past realities.

In an attempt at demonstrating some of the themes which have been discussed here, I now move on to a treatment of one artist, Thomas Burrowes, whose extensive art coverage of a section of eastern Ontario constitutes a valuable source for the historian of that area. Burrowes' work has not gone unrecognized or unused. Indeed, as early as 1927, A.H.D. Ross, Burrowes' grandson, first advertized the existence of the paintings and used the then recently recovered collection to illustrate his book, *Ottawa: Past and Present*.<sup>25</sup> Since then, items have been culled out of the collection to illustrate general texts or to serve as evidence or description in virtually every one of Parks Canada's numerous monographs or site-studies of locations along the Rideau Canal. Fittingly, therefore, Robert Passfield has provided the most comprehensive treatment of Burrowes' work in his study which served as Parks Canada's contribution to the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Rideau Canal.<sup>26</sup>

There are two objectives here. First, given the thrust of the argument presented above, there will be an attempt at demonstrating the strengths and deficiencies of the genre of prosaic illustrations produced by military and other surveyors and administrators of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Secondly, given the increased use of Thomas Burrowes' work, this section will provide a fuller picture of the man and his images.

**THOMAS BURROWES: THE ARTIST OF THE RIDEAU CANAL**

Who was Thomas Burrowes? Born in 1796 in Worcester, Worcestershire, England, he served as a Corporal in the Royal Sappers and Miners from 1813 until 1824, the last nine years of his enlistment being in Canada. Following a short stay in England, Burrowes returned to Canada with his family in 1826, and secured a position as Overseer of Works on the Rideau Canal construction project. Here he came under the wing of John Burrows, a fellow Overseer of Works, who claimed that he trained Thomas Burrowes in the skills of surveying, and prepared him for his registration as a Provincial Surveyor.<sup>27</sup> Later promoted to Clerk of Works of the southern section of the Rideau Canal, Burrowes continued in this service until 1846. Based at Kingston Mills during these years, he chose to retire there at the end of his service, taking up the roles of farmer and postmaster of the local community. During these years, Burrowes lived in his cottage "Maplehurst" overlooking the Rideau waterway and Kingston, and on his death in 1866 was buried in the Catarauqui cemetery. A soldier, surveyor, farmer, and government official, Thomas Burrowes fulfilled many

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25 A.H.D. Ross, *Ottawa: Past and Present* (Toronto, 1927).

26 See R.C. Harris and J. Warkentin, *Canada Before Confederation* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 126, 143; Robert W. Passfield, *Building the Rideau Canal: A Pictorial History* (Don Mills, Ontario, 1982).

27 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), M.G. 13, W.O. 44, vol. 23, John Burrows' Memorial, 30 January, 1835.

roles, but it is as an illustrator of his working and domestic environment for forty years that he made the major impact.<sup>28</sup>

But Burrowes was not alone in this role. Because of the novelty of the Rideau Canal as the world's first system of steam navigation, because of the prodigious feats of engineering ingenuity at such sites as the stairway of locks at Bytown, the stone arch dam at Jones Falls, and the Chaudiere Bridge, and because it served as a major artery of movement for immigrants and travellers between the Canadas, the Rideau corridor received the attention of many writers and artists. The great masses of immigrants passing through the region left but little record of their impressions, but the numerous ladies and gentlemen on "The Grand Tour," a class of people who had been trained in the skills of painting in watercolours, were more productive. More importantly, the association of the military with the survey and eventual construction of the Rideau Canal and the passage through it of many officers *en route* to duty elsewhere in the colonies ensured the production of numerous sketches and paintings, albeit of varying quality, of the sights along the waterway. Henry Francis Ainslie (83rd Regiment of Foot), Phillip Bainbrigge (Royal Engineers), George Seton (93rd Regiment of Foot), and E.C. Frome (Royal Engineers), as well as John Burrowes, all served in Canada, travelled the Rideau route, and left us their impressions of the newly constructed system.<sup>29</sup>

But none of these recorded the landscapes and society of the past as copiously or assiduously as did Thomas Burrowes. With his 115 known watercolours and a dozen or so pencil sketches, he has provided a considerable body of visual records of the land, people and society of his day, enabling us to better approach, if not completely answer, a whole suite of questions about the past. What did the region look like prior to the arrival of the surveyors and workmen? In many sections there had been two generations of settlement and development whose achievements were to be modified, if not eliminated, by the "improvements" wrought by the engineers and "navigators." How did the work progress? Little is known of the construction technology, the organization of labour, the mundane details of the construction process. What did the system look like at the time of its completion? The manicured grounds and buildings of the present lock sites, however attractive they might appear today, are a far cry from the working sites of the heyday of the operation of the system, let alone the first years following construction. What was the original mode of operation? Designed as a system of steam haulage, the early years required improvisation and innovation in both vessels and cargo containers. It is questions such as these which may be approached via Burrowes' artistic work.

### *The Coverage*

Thomas Burrowes merits the accolade of "artist of the Rideau" by reason of his 115 watercolours and other sketches. Figure 2 demonstrates the region of Burrowes' artistic activity, depicting the locations of his paintings, sketches, ground plans, and

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28 The Thomas Burrowes Collection of Watercolours are held at the Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), although a set of copies are held by the PAC's Picture Division; they are accompanied by notes and commentary provided by A.H.D. Ross, Burrowes' grandson.

29 See Bell, *Painters in a New Land*; a good sample of their work is used by Mary E. Peck, *From War to Winterlude: 150 Years on the Rideau Canal* (Ottawa, 1982).

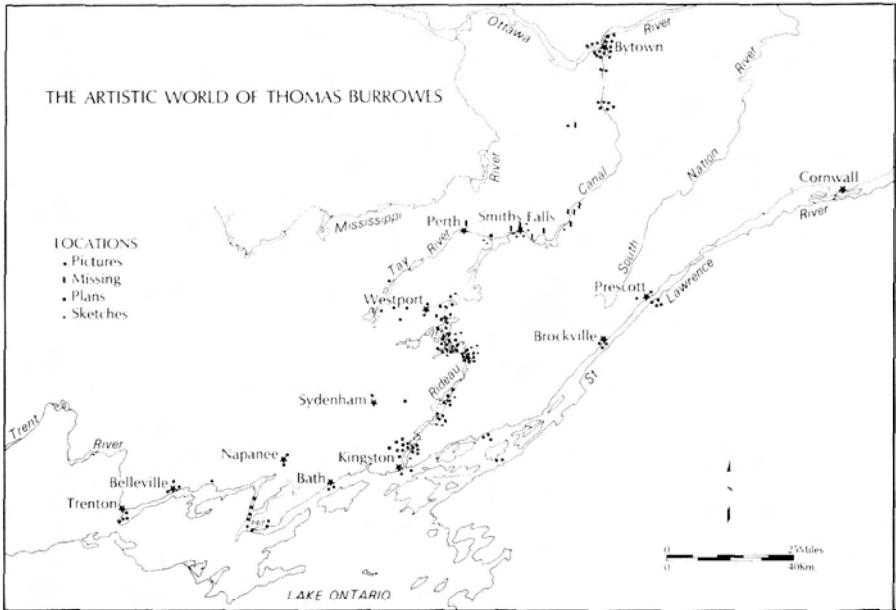


Figure 2: *The Artistic World of Thomas Burrowes*, prepared by the author.

engineering drawings.<sup>30</sup> These works cover the period from 1826 to 1861 and may be grouped chronologically into several periods of activity, each with its own regional coverage.

For the first four seasons following his appointment to By's staff in 1826, Burrowes travelled extensively throughout eastern Ontario while engaged in the exploration and survey of possible water routes. His earliest work, dated September 1826, is of the "Twin Falls of the Rideau" and subsequent renderings demonstrate that he also visited and recorded locations throughout the whole of the Rideau corridor. Apart from recording the circumstances of potential lock sites such as Long Island, Brewers Mills, and Kingston Mills, Burrowes also visited the emerging frontier communities of Perth, Westport, and Richmond and recorded their townscapes as they appeared at that time. One sequence of views suggests that Burrowes might have participated in an exploration of a possible water route via the river Tay, Bobs Lake, Wolfe Lake, and Westport. Another thirty-six views in the collection are of scenes from the St. Lawrence in the east to the mouth of the Trent River in the west. Prescott, Brockville, Bath, Napanee, and Belleville are all represented, although Kingston is conspicuous by its absence. While some may have been rendered later, seven of these works are dated 1830, and Ross claims that Burrowes was sent on a reconnaissance survey to the mouth of the Trent River in that year.

30 This map represents the watercolours referred to above; the maps, plans, and drawings are found in the PAC's National Map Collection, copies of which were used at the Cornwall and Smiths Falls offices of Parks Canada; sketches and drawings which are to be found in the Baird Papers AO, and which are attributed here to Thomas Burrowes.

From 1831 to 1832, Burrowes was active in construction activities, being particularly concerned with the lock sites at Upper and Lower Brewers. He also recorded the construction activities at Kingston Mills.

With the completion of the project in 1832, Burrowes undertook new duties as Overseer of Works, and later Clerk of Works, for the Kingston-Narrows district. From 1832 to 1845, Burrowes travelled the whole extent of the Rideau system and recorded all the lock sites from the Isthmus to Kingston, with Jones Falls and Kingston Mills being particularly well represented, and a few scenes recording his occasional visits to Bytown. Several waterscapes of the Rideau Lakes region were produced at this time and constitute Burrowes' only attempts at more impressionistic pieces. Of some significance is the absence of material for the section running from the Isthmus to Long Island. Ross argues that there were paintings of the locks at Smiths Falls, Emonds, Kilmarnock, Merrickville, and Burritts Rapids, but that these have since been lost.<sup>31</sup> The only other explanation is that the work which has survived reflects the region with which Burrowes interacted most during the travels associated with this duties.

From his retirement in 1846 to his death in 1861, Burrowes lived on his farm "Maplehurst" in the community of Kingston Mills. As a farmer, postmaster, and embittered litigant, Burrowes' artistic productivity apparently diminished, but he did produce four paintings. Three of them are of the Kingston Mills community and record the changing form of settlement and the construction of the Grand Trunk trestle bridge there in the 1850s. Another item, the only personal piece in the collection, is a family scene at Sydenham, north of Kingston, produced *shortly* before his death.

### *The Content*

The major contribution of Burrowes' work is in presenting a record of the appearance of the region prior to the construction of the canal, the actual processes involved in the construction itself, and representations of the various vessels which used the waterway. Ross quotes Wilfred Campbell's comments on the personnel involved in the construction of the Rideau Canal:

They were a generation of plodding, staid, careful and contented, exact and honest artisans and toilers from the old land, of the slower but more solid methods, and controlled by a class of military officers who were for the most part skilled engineers and artists who could draw a map or plan or sketch a picture with equal exactness and idealism....<sup>32</sup>

Burrowes' exactness is more prominent than his idealism. He, together with John Burrows, Philip Bainbrigg and a number of other artists, painted the staircase of the first eight locks at the junction of the Rideau and the Ottawa River, soon after the completion of the system.<sup>33</sup> All the elements of the contemporary landscape and

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31 A.H.D. Ross' notes accompanying the Thomas Burrowes Collection in the Archives of Ontario state that some appear to be missing, and refers specifically to one known to be held by someone in the Ottawa area.

32 Quoted in AO, Burrowes Collection, A.H.D. Ross' notes.

33 AO, Burrowes' Collection, No. 13, "First Eight Locks of the Rideau Canal, the North Entrance from the Ottawa river."

socio-economic fabric are represented (see Figure 3). Colonel By's house is located on the hill to the left; Sterling's Brewery and the steamboat wharf are at the water's edge; the eight locks and the Sappers Bridge crossing them at the top are clearly identifiable; the Royal Engineers' Office and the Commissariat Store are recorded facing each other across the locks; even the several buildings of the Barracks Hill, together with a company of Royal Sappers on parade, are all recorded for posterity. It is primitive, if exact, landscapes such as these which Burrowes produced all along the route of the new waterway.

Another location which attracted the attention of several of the itinerant military and civilian artists was Jones Falls (Figure 4). Indeed, while several of John Burrows and Thomas Burrowes' paintings are of the same subject-sites, at Jones Falls they appear to have stood at the same spot when they painted their scenes.<sup>34</sup> Both recorded the upper locks, the basin, the staircase of lower locks, the famous stone arch dam, the various buildings at the site, and vessels passing through the system. But how were these landscapes produced? How did the artists obtain the vistas and perspectives they represented? Even allowing for a severe clearing of all the lock sites to facilitate construction and an ensuing regeneration of the forest over the last century, it is not possible to locate a vantage point where the complete system at Jones Falls is discernible in one panorama. The topography there simply does not allow it. While military topographic artists are credited with an eye for detail and a penchant for verisimilitude, they do appear to have been gifted with the powers of levitation, or else they exercised considerable imagination. A detailed examination of the paintings suggests that most of John Burrows and many of Thomas Burrowes' subjects are oblique views from vantage points elevated above the available topography. In this way, they were able to transcend the limitations of site and render a view of the subject which was faithful to detail but artificial, if effective, in its perspective.

At several sites, Burrowes has provided a sequence of sketches and paintings over the construction period and first years of operation. Perhaps the single most detailed rendition of the construction activity is that of Kingston Mills (Figure 5); the site is stripped of trees, construction is proceeding apace at the locks, with the steamer *Pumper* moored at the foot of the works as a work vessel.<sup>35</sup> The rigours of repair work and maintenance are represented in the views of Davis and Long Point Locks. But the best construction sequence is provided for the works at Lower Brewers Locks. The 1827 sketches record some of the buildings, but it is the view painted in 1829 (Figure 6) which represents the scene as it appeared soon after Burrowes' arrival to work under Lieutenant Briscoe. He is looking to the southwest at the land which has been cleared along the banks of the Cataraqui Creek and over the extent of the eventual lock site there; the original buildings are represented, together with others constructed to accommodate the workers; construction has commenced and several workers are employed in excavating the site for the locks. The next view is dated 1831-32 (Figure 7); Burrowes has moved his vantage point to look to the west over the construction proceeding at the locks; the masonry work is in progress and tripods have been erected for raising and lowering the materials; several work gangs are recorded performing their unidentifiable tasks at various locations on the site. A

34 *Ibid.*, No. 57, "Locks etc. at Jones' Falls, from the Rocky Hills southwest of them."

35 *Ibid.*, No. 72, no title, but of Kingston Mills Locks under construction.



Figure 3: Thomas Burrowes, "First Eight Locks of the Rideau Canal, the North entrance from the Ottawa River," 1834. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-12449.



Figure 4: Thomas Burrowes, "Locks, &c. at Jones' Falls, from the Rocky Hills south-west of them," n.d. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-12464.



Figure 5: Thomas Burrowes, [Masonry of three lower locks at Kingston Mills completed. Steamer Pumper at entrance of the lower lock], c. 1830. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-11175.

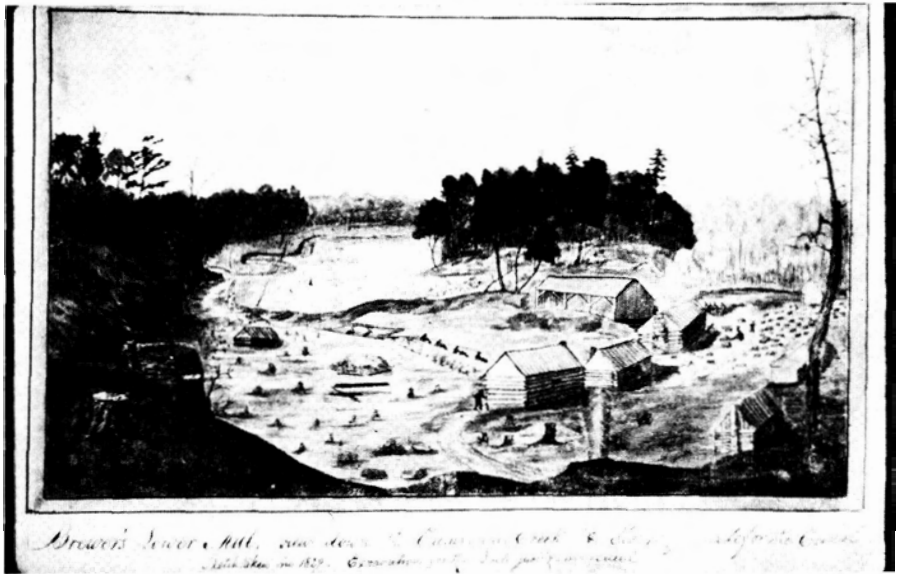


Figure 6: Thomas Burrowes, "Brewer's Lower Mill, View down the Catarauqui Creek & Clearing made for the Canal. Sketch taken in 1829. Excavation for the Lock just commenced." Courtesy: Archives of Ontario.



Figure 7: Thomas Burrowes, "Brewer's Lower Mill. Masonry of the Lock nearly complete. Excavation for Canal in progress 1831-2." Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-11173.





Figure 8: Thomas Burrowes, "Work completed at Brewer's Lower Mill," 1832. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-11174.

view painted in 1832 (Figure 8) shows the completed locks and is devoid of any evidence of construction or workers. The set is completed by John Burrowes' softer rendering of the same location in 1835. Perhaps this sequence is the best set of representations of the development of any lock site of the system over such a short period of time.<sup>36</sup>

Burrowes' sketches are replete with representations of the contemporary traffic along the system. The earliest pictures include a whole range of small boats, including the large eight-man transport canoes carrying their three gentlemen passengers, smaller skiffs, row boats, and rafts of logs.<sup>37</sup> The renditions of the canal in its early years of operation record faithfully the steamboats with their tall smokestacks travelling through the islands of the Upper Lakes, entering the locks at

36 This sequence consists of AO, Baird Papers, A-2-c(i), box 2, env. 1, "Brewers Lower Mill;" AO, Burrowes collection, No. 67, "Brewer's Lower Mill, view down the Cataragui Creek & Clearings made for the Canal. Sketch taken in 1829. Excavation for the Locks just commenced;" No. 68, "Brewer's Lower Mill: Masonry of the Locks nearly completed, Excavation for Canal in progress, 1831-32;" No. 69, "Work completed at Brewer's Lower Mill;" PAC, Picture Division, John Burrowes, C-9296.

37 Several of the Burrowes' views include a variety of forms of water transport: AO, Burrowes Collection, No. 14, "North Entrance of the Rideau Canal from the Ottawa River; taken from the Royal Engr. Office Bytown" has canoes, rafts, and steamboats; see also No. 21, "Beckett's Landing & Ferry, Long Island Reach or still water looking towards Long Island, Bytown etc. Perhaps the best rendering of the mode of travel used by the engineers and surveyors prior to the opening of the canal is to be found in No. 33, "Upper Rideau Lake; Canoe en route to Bytown; Westport in the distance;" and No. 34, "Upper Rideau Lake; from the north side of the Isthmus."

Jones Falls, or unloading at the wharf at the northern entrance to the system.<sup>38</sup> But these were only the power units; the bulk carriers were the barges they hauled. The view of Davis Locks shows five of these, apparently loaded with a cargo of grain, and carrying deck passengers, poling their way from the locks to the steamer *Bytown* waiting for them out of view.<sup>39</sup> Despite John Burrows' preference for his sloop, the Rideau was very much a steam system and Thomas Burrowes' representation of the steamer *Hunter* proceeding "down" to Bytown gives an impression of how the first steamer *Pumper*, renamed *Rideau* for the occasion, must have appeared to the sparse population along the route.<sup>40</sup> One of the passengers on the maiden voyage commented on the local reaction and recalled

the astonishment of the surrounding neighbours, who flocked to the shore as she passed through these heretofore unnavigable waters. The reiterated shouts of the thunderstruck inhabitants rent the air, and the kindly feeling displayed by the Indians can hardly be described.... These natives of the forests were living on the banks of Indian Lake, forty miles in the interior, and on the boat entering that lake, they formed themselves in front of their camp — number about forty or fifty men, women and children, with two Union Jacks floating in the air, shaded with the dark green foliage of the darkening pines; they gave three cheers and fired a foie de joie that would not discredit a regularly organized corps.<sup>41</sup>

Such an evocative description as this underscores what Burrowes did not record. There is little social content in his views. Bytown, Richmond, Perth, Kingston Mills, Prescott, Bath, Napanee, and Belleville are recorded as assemblages of buildings, and historians can turn to these views for details of the physical fabric of these communities. The rural landscape of snake fences, clearings, and log cabins is also included as foreground or background to other subjects, but the people are missing. As a surveyor-cum-engineer, Burrowes' concerns were quite prosaic and his illustrations were working documents; consequently, most of his paintings are "landscapes without figures." The exception is the picnic scene at Sloat's Lake,<sup>42</sup> and one wonders whether the artist painting the Sappers Bridge, one of the gentlemen in the canoe crossing Rideau Lake, and the solitary figure waiting for the ferry at the river Trent may be whimsical self-portraits.<sup>43</sup>

But not all of Burrowes' paintings are prosaic, lacking in sensitivity. His representation of the islands of Mud Lake (Newboro Lake) invokes the image of Casson's "White Pine," even if Burrowes' rocks and trees lack the texture and vitality

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38 See *Ibid.*, No. 57, "Locks etc. at Jones' Falls;" and No. 100, "Bay of Quinte; Stone Mills. (Lake of the Mountain) to the left, Hallowell Bay in the Distance."

39 *Ibid.*, No. 49, untitled view of Davis Mill Lock; No. 50, "Lock, Dam etc. at Davis' Mill; Barges passing from Lock to the Steamboat Bytown."

40 *Ibid.*, No. 47, "Opinicon Lake, looking to N.W."

41 *Gazette*, Montreal, 27 June 1833.

42 AO, Burrowes Collection, NO. 94, "A Pic-nic at Sloat's Lake; near Sydenham, Township of Loughborough."

43 *Ibid.*, No. 11, "Lower Bytown from the Barrack Hill, near the head of the Eighth Lock and the "Sappers' Bridge, 1845;" No. 33, "Upper Rideau Lake ... en route to Bytown;" No. 34, "Upper Rideau Lake; from the north side;" No. 114, "Ferry at the Mouth of the River Trent."

of the more acclaimed work.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, several of the waterscapes of the Rideau Lakes capture the lighting and reflections typical of the scenery there, and were perhaps more interpretive pieces where Burrowes allowed himself a reflective interpretation of the beautiful world in which he worked, through which he travelled so often, and with which he had become so familiar.

## CONCLUSION

The case has been put, therefore, that artists have served the historian by producing records of the past landscapes and peoples, represented how some perceived that world, and, in some cases, have themselves been active agents in developing past consciousnesses. Several scholars have recognized this and have turned to the unique source of pictorial record for more than illustration alone. Thus, Francis Klingender's pioneer investigation of the humanistic renderings of the technology, society, and landscapes of the Industrial Revolution relied heavily upon pictorial representations.<sup>45</sup> More recently, an excellent exhibition turned its attention to the way in which the visual images of European artists reflect both what they saw and how they felt about things "American."<sup>46</sup> Or again, C.E.S. Franks' fine book on canoeing relies extensively upon artistic sources to develop his statement of the evolution of canoes and canoeing and their importance to the economic and social history of Canada.<sup>47</sup>

No doubt there are other examples and, certainly, there are plenty of questions still to be explored. With such an emphasis placed upon the environment in the interpretation of both Canada's art and history, less attention has been paid to the role of the shanty, the mine, and the factory. The artistic interpretation of the urban townscape and urban society is an equally important theme. But since industrialism and urbanism emerge at the same time as the refinement of professional photography and the advent of "public" photography, perhaps these problems are best approached via the new medium. But I am sure the questions will be the same.

It is certain, too, that the importance of documentary art to the historical researcher cannot be overemphasized. Such records, despite their sometimes strong aesthetic appeal, are not, however, the exclusive purview of galleries and the art curator. The documentary content of such works as those of Thomas Burrowes, the necessary appreciation of their historical context, the critical understanding of their inherent biases, and the need to preserve them as interrelated collections rather than isolated items — all this speaks directly to the archivist trained to analyze carefully the creation, evolution, and nature of all the records assigned to his or her care. The active collection of documentary art should be seen, therefore, as an essential part of any archives' mandate and a vital ingredient of the nation's recorded heritage. Certainly such an approach will enrich our understanding of the past.

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44 *Ibid.*, No. 40, "Mud Lake; looking to the East."

45 Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (St. Albans, 1975, first edition, 1947); see also Julie Wosk, "Artists on Technology," *Technology Review*, (December-January 1980), pp. 66-74.

46 Hugh Honour, *The European Vision of America*, The Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, Ohio, 1975).

47 C.E.S. Franks, *The Canoe and White Water* (Toronto, 1977).