

Letters to the Editor

Review of *Kurelek. A Biography*: The Author Comments

In a review of *Kurelek. A Biography* (*Archivaria* 25), Nancy McMahon made errors of fact as well as interpretations which seem to me naive. I would like to correct the former and offer another view of the latter.

McMahon begins by claiming, "Morley appears to have embarked on the project primarily because of the enormous number of documents available." If she had read my preface more carefully, she would have seen (second paragraph) that I give two primary reasons for taking on this labour of love, namely an admiration for Kurelek's paintings, and a strong interest in his unusual life and personality. Anyone who would devote seven years of his/her life to a task "primarily" because of an abundance of documentation would seem to me to be an odd individual. There is no shortage of documentation, as archivists well know.

McMahon charges me with failing to make clear that Kurelek remained "a deeply troubled and often difficult individual." While it is not for me to say whether or not I have succeeded in this task, I do point to the internal contradiction in the review on this point, since the reviewer begins by saying that the paradox of cheerful paintings and a troubled life provide "the centrepiece" of my biography.

The acknowledgement of Mrs. Jean Kurelek's help is made in my preface rather than the acknowledgements, thus setting it in a category by itself. Mrs. Kurelek naturally found a full biography (as distinct from a eulogy or a hagiography) to be stressful, and neither she nor her children discussed the artist with me. I respected their privacy wherever that restraint did not involve distortions or silences that would have falsified the portrait.

This brings me to McMahon's central point, that I would have been better advised to wait until the majority of the documents are in public hands. This ill-advised notion, if followed, might entail a delay of a quarter-century or more and, with that delay, the loss of much of the evidence on which my biography is based. *I did have* the vast majority of the primary papers available to me and, more importantly, I had complete freedom to use them as I saw fit. My contract with the Kurelek Estate gave me that freedom, as I note in my preface. By waiting twenty-five years

I would have gained little, while the loss would have been enormous. I would have lost the opportunity to talk with hundreds of Kurelek's contemporaries, relatives, and friends whose memories of the man were still fresh and vivid. Had I begun even five years later, I would not have been able to talk with his father, with several British physicians, and with other central players in the life drama.

McMahon claims that I have failed to write the "definitive" work. There is, in the opinion of this working biographer, no such thing, although the cliché is beloved by reviewers. Each biography is *one individual's view* of another individual life. This is true no matter how much documentation is available or how many years are devoted to studying it. I have provided not *the* view but *a* view of Kurelek's life, one supported by a wealth of contemporary evidence which attempts to make sense of the conflicts and paradoxes within that evidence. All future biographers will be heavily indebted to my book and to my research papers. Only a strong personal interest in the subject could have sustained me through the arduous labour involved. I have tried to convey some of that passionate concern to my readers.

Patricia Morley
Manotick, Ontario

The Reviewer Responds

Patricia Morley does not address the key points I raised in my review of *Kurelek*. I suggested that Morley's discussion of William Kurelek's conversion to Roman Catholicism is too accepting of the artist's belief that religion provided a cure for his psychological problems. I pointed out that Morley fails to discriminate among important causal factors in the artist's development in the first half of his life. I also argued that because the author does not analyze the importance of the artist's relationship with his wife, to whom Morley is indebted for the use of manuscript sources, her treatment of the second half of his life lacks balance and critical acumen.

Morley distorts my review and, upon reflection, I concede neither errors of fact nor interpretation nor personal naiveté. I will address her points briefly in turn:

1. I did not deny that passion and commitment to her subject served Patricia Morley as motivating factors in writing this book. What I contended was that the opportunity and timing of the biography rested on a previously unknown cache of documents. Morley's words in her own preface support my original assertions rather than her attempted rebuttal. Therein she clearly states that her discovery of Kurelek papers was the pivotal event which led her to write a biography. She describes attending a Kurelek exhibition at The Isaacs Gallery where she heard an individual say that Avrom Isaacs possessed bags of William Kurelek's writings. Patricia Morley writes,

Bags of his writings [original italics]. It was a curious, not to say an extraordinary phrase. The effect on me was startling. My interest in Kurelek, which had been growing quietly for nearly two decades, suddenly