

No Man's Land. The Battlefield Paintings of Mary Riter Hamilton, 1919-1922. UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG IN COOPERATION WITH THE WAR AMPUTATIONS OF CANADA AND THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA. Mounted at the National Archives of Canada. 25 March - 25 April 1993. 40 p. catalogue.

"No Man's Land"—forty paintings in assorted mediums—is a record of one woman's odyssey through the battlefields of Europe immediately following World War I. They are supplemented with five reproductions of wartime posters; the images and titles, such as *Heros to the Front - Go!* contrast ironically with the images of blasted landscapes and ruined cities that are just beginning to heal as nature and ordinary civilians trickle back to put down new roots.

Mary Riter Hamilton's paintings, as this exhibition demonstrates, represented the final winding down of World War I. When executed, they were the work of a talented, sensitive artist sponsored by the War Amputations Club of British Columbia. The 1993 show at the National Archives of Canada was a rewarding project involving the War Amputations of Canada, which not only helped finance the show and catalogue, but also joined in the production of a videotape that was part of the exhibition.

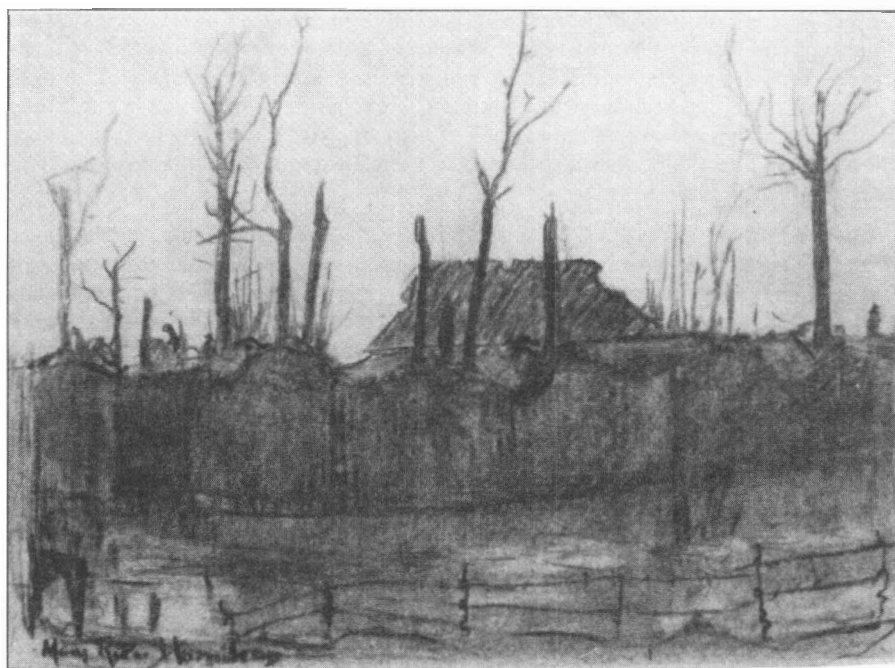
The video itself, featuring Cliff Chadderton of the War Amps and Angela Davis, who organized the show with Sarah McKinnon, was a welcome component; it helped focus the paintings in a visitor's mind, providing both historic and human context. A casual viewer might have walked through "No Man's Land" in ten minutes; the overview provided by the video, however, encouraged more thoughtful study and comparison. It also probably moved people to pick up and read the catalogue. Nevertheless, the video contained a few erroneous statements. Lawren Harris, for example, was *not* a World War I official war artist (although his son held such an appointment in World War II).

The most striking error is found both in the video and the catalogue—the statement that *Tragedy of War in Dear Old Battered France* depicts "the remains of a human body suspended from what appears to be a cross." Whatever the symbolic intent of the painting, it is clearly not the remains of a body; any such remains would have been removed by the time Miss Hamilton visited the battlefields; even if such remains had been missed, they would have been reduced to skeletal fragments. In fact, what the painting depicts is a calvary—a common roadside shrine—battered by shellfire.

Such details aside, "No Man's Land" remains a fascinating exhibition supported by a fine catalogue. The forty works are but a fraction of the 227 paintings eventually donated to the National Archives of Canada by Mary Riter Hamilton. Her intent was to record the battlefields before they had been softened, even obliterated, by time and reconstruction. In doing so, she encountered many discomforts and even dangers, such as human scavengers living in the abandoned bunkers and tunnels. The presence of many unexploded mines and shells may not have been apparent to her.

Each viewer will have his or her favourites. In this writer's opinion, *Memorial for Second Canadian Division in a Mine Crater* and *Cemetery of the 7th Battalion*,

British Columbia, Canada, 1919 are contrived and constitute the weakest works. On the other hand, *Dead End, Flanders, 1920* (showing abandoned wire in a crumbling trench) is a powerful work; the place continues to shock and terrify even when the armies have departed. *The New Home, 1920*, showing a civilian family making a fresh start in a discarded Nissen Hut, speaks of hope eternally renewed. *Market Among the Ruins of Ypres, 1920* is similarly optimistic and speaks of indomitable human spirit; anyone who has seen photographs of Ypres taken in 1917-18 knows how thoroughly the whole city had been devastated; Ypres had been much more than its famous Cloth Hall, which figured so much in wartime paintings and photographs.



Ravages of War, n.d. Charcoal. National Archives of Canada.

For someone familiar with the Canadian War Memorials Collection of paintings (formerly held by the National Gallery of Canada, now that of the Canadian War Museum), a few paintings invite comparison between Miss Hamilton and other artists. *The Sadness of the Somme* evokes images of a misty road and artist Gyrrh Russell; *Filling the Shell Holes in No Man's Land, 1920* reminds one of Frederick Varley's *For What?* Similarities are inevitable, given the times and the subject matter. In fact, simply by arriving in France several months after the Armistice, Mary Riter Hamilton staked out her own unique field.

It is a cliché among journalists to lament how this or that writer, artist, hero, or heroine has been "forgotten" by the public, only to be rediscovered by the reporter

now using the phrase. In fact, journalists themselves frequently re-write old stories about familiar subjects, only occasionally seeking out new material. Museums and archives exist in part so that the works of these less famous people may be preserved until the press and public are ready for fresh insights. These works may be "out of sight" while preserved in storage, but they are never completely "out of mind"; those responsible for archival collections remember until, like "No Man's Land" for Mary Riter Hamilton, an exhibition calls attention to the subjects. When the show ends and the works return to storage, the catalogue remains as a record of what had been presented and what might be retrieved again, together with the knowledge consolidated on paper by those who compiled the document. Exhibitions and catalogues, such as have been arranged in this instance, are crucial to one another in preserving the national memory.

Hugh A. Halliday
Canadian War Museum

Her Stories: Lives of Women in the Detroit River Region. FRANÇOIS BABY HOUSE: WINDSOR'S COMMUNITY MUSEUM. Mounted at the François Baby House, Windsor. 21 February 1993 - Summer 1994.

This exhibition, the first of its kind for Windsor, looks at aspects of our social history which have been, if not forgotten, certainly ignored. The tendency in local history has been to look at transportation links with the United States, automotive history, and our amalgamated towns (Walkerville and its famous Canadian Club Whiskey). But women's history? Along the Detroit River region? One walk through will ensure the most sceptical person that this was a subject very worthy of examination. "Her Stories" (a nice little twist on HIStory) brings to light fascinating tales of eleven women "who lived or travelled through the Detroit River region in the 18th and 19th centuries." In addition to presenting the traditional way of life for pioneer women, "Her Stories" demonstrates that there were a number of women who chose to lead very different lifestyles for their time.

The information for the exhibit was extensively researched; it becomes apparent that very little documentation is available locally on the topic of early women's history. One original document can be found in the display—part of a poem by Byron which, it is presumed, one of the Reynolds' sisters had copied. I say presumed because there is no caption for it. All other documents are photocopies or typewritten excerpts. Thus, there is a photocopy of Suzanne Baby's 1800 partition document dividing her estate among her surviving eleven children (she had twenty-two in all) from the Archives nationales du Québec, and printed passages from Ann Powell's diaries contained in the Powell-Jarvis Papers from the Archives of Ontario. Three original pieces of art (ink and watercolour), attributed to Catherine Reynolds, are from the museum's collection and serve to show how talented this woman was. The caption explains that she chose to remain single even though she was one of few women in the military town of Amherstburg. "In the early 19th century, increasing numbers of well-to-do women chose to lead what was known as a life of 'single blessedness' in order to develop their own special talents and abilities." Fortunately, there are a number of photographs (none of them originals) which serve to further illustrate the lives of these women. Notable is the