

After some 465 pages of documents, we are presented with a bibliography of sorts entitled “Copyright Acknowledgments.” For any publication, a bibliography is an integral part that gives credibility and authority to what is written. A good bibliography is well organized and allows the sources to be easily identified with valid citations. Unfortunately this is not the case for *First Drafts*; the “copyright acknowledgments” is a single continuous paragraph covering twelve pages, separating the source of each individual document from the next citation only with a semi-colon. It is not divided into sections (thereby reflecting the general structure of the book) and no page numbers are given that would indicate where the documents are located in the book. Using the bibliography is an exasperating exercise that is compounded by the realization that the actual citations are often incomplete. Well known among archivists is the singular frustration of attempting to locate a document without benefit of collection title, series, or file references. This will be the experience of many researchers and archivists when it comes time to look at some of these *First Drafts* documents again. For example, for archival material there is no record group (RG) or manuscript group (MG) number, only the title of the collection. No series, file numbers, or volume references are provided. For those documents that were located through a Web site, the address is provided only in some cases, otherwise leaving the reader to find this information on their own.

So what is the purpose of this book? Given the scope it covers (hundreds of years of history) and the number of documents it contains, it obviously is not trying to present a comprehensive view of Canadian history, nor can it be considered a serious research tool because of its structure and the flawed nature of its citations. It does, however, present archival sources in an appealing way to a population that most likely perceives of archives as dusty and dark and practically useless. As more archives focus much of their efforts on accessibility, books such as *First Drafts* can showcase our documentary treasures while at the same time making history more interesting to those other than archivists and academics, without sacrificing the needs of any audience.

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The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas Art Architecture. DOUGLAS ORD. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003. 464 p. ISBN 0-77352-509-2.

I do not quite know what to say about this publication. Initially, when asked to review it, I suggested that others with a background in architecture or museum studies could do it more justice. After I did agree, I struggled to make it

through the book, because I found the prose style virtually unreadable, the overall thesis problematic, and some of the photographic interpretations ludicrous. I then spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the book and hoping that I would begin to like it better in retrospect. I didn't. I am torn between admiration for the effort and disbelief at the quality of the finished product, and I can only conclude that it is a heavily-researched but deeply flawed product. It shouldn't have been so.

Although the book is relatively well-organized and follows a roughly chronological pattern, Ord has a tendency to jump from idea to idea, making philosophical and intellectual segues which are impossible to follow. These are not helped by the quality of the writing, which is abysmal. I found myself continually having to read and re-read entire paragraphs, pages, and chapters in an effort to figure out what Ord was actually trying to get at, because I kept losing the thread of his arguments. Where were the McGill-Queen's editors when they were needed? I often had to force myself to go back to the same paragraphs again and again, after I had initially given up trying to make my way beyond a particularly obtuse passage. I decided to illustrate this by picking out, entirely by chance, one example, a randomly-selected paragraph (p. 84), in which Ord tries to reveal more about the links between National Gallery director Eric Brown, Christian Science, and Tom Thomson. For the purpose of clarity, I omit the endnote numbers after each quotation:

The terms of involvement in a material world whose very existence was denied by Christian Science were again for Brown – as for Mrs. Eddy – thereby smoothed over. Conflating “nature’s marvellous design” with God’s “creation,” he could declare that he had recognized this “revelation of nature’s wonderland of beauty” in the “younger generation’s” “temperate and rational advance along the lines of more brilliant colour and stronger design which is influencing the whole of contemporary painting today.” For it was they, Brown insisted, who revealed “the wonders of creation and the marvellous possibilities of colour, form and design to interpret them.” And yet Tom Thomson, who, according to Brown, had “gone further along the road than anyone else,” had also died mysteriously amid this very “wonderland,” whose “marvellous design” he was allegedly discerning. Did this indeed make him like “all prophets” who had “gone before him,” including even the “infallible” Mrs. Eddy, who lived to be almost ninety? And how could a “nature” that “does not *choose* her prophets idly” and “never let him go” be identifiable only with a “wonderland of beauty”?

I could have picked out a hundred such paragraphs, since they are on virtually every page. Citations run into each other like commuters on the Toronto subway at rush hour, dashes are liberally sprinkled throughout the text, and repetitiveness abounds. Ord continuously uses verbs such as “alleged” and “seemed” to drive his arguments home, and emphatic adjectives like “very” and “deeply,” which provoked my suspicion once I had seen them for the one-

hundredth time. Ord may have something useful to say, but he never allows his thoughts to flow steadily. Instead, his stream of consciousness seeps into multiple channels, dries up in side streams, flows strongly down others, or is drained into a morass of obscurantism, never quite reaching its destination. To read him is so frustrating, it is almost painful.

That is not to say that I didn't appreciate the effort. Ord obviously is a bright man, and I admired the extent of the research into the Gallery's archives that is demonstrated by the many archival records which he consulted. He demonstrates an extensive knowledge of European and Asian philosophies, has done a great deal of analysis of art and architectural histories, and was intrigued by the threads that he was attempting to weave among all of this material. His purpose, in essence, was to write a history of the National Gallery, and to ground that history in deeper intellectual, spiritual and architectural philosophies. He admits (p. viii) that his history is only a "version," and that it can be contested. And from my viewpoint the version he comes up with is most certainly contestable. Having grown up, in a matter of sorts, with the National Gallery – I was born and raised in Ottawa, and remember visiting the old Lorne building as a teenager just becoming interested in art, doing research there while a university student, and since the 1970s having been involved with its staff and collections on a professional level – I also have my own "history" of the Gallery. Perhaps my view on Ord's thesis then is a slanted one. What I found most difficult to appreciate about the book was the constant criticism of the Gallery and its staff (people don't have the right backgrounds, they make the wrong choices, they have the wrong friends), the search for failure (acquisitions not made, forgeries condoned, reactions to modernism), the emphasis on errors in judgment (dealing with donors, with governments, with other public servants), and the exploration of quirks of personality or physical features (Boggs's and Jarvis's good looks), which permeate the entire effort. As someone who knows how bureaucracy and the political and economic system works within a museum world, this constant search for flaws in the Gallery's development is grating. Sometimes one has to understand that matters are beyond the hands of Gallery directors and their staff.

Ord's study deals primarily with four directors – Eric Brown, Alan Jarvis, Charles Comfort, and Jean Sutherland Boggs – and he doesn't seem to like any of them. Brown, director from 1910 to 1939, is dismissed both because of his "uninspiring beginnings" (p. 56) and because of his commitment to Christian Science, which, Ord implies again and again, deeply affected the choices that Brown made throughout his career. Charles Comfort, on the other hand, director of the Gallery from 1960 to 1965, fails because he lacked Brown's "metaphysical framework" (p. 118). Alan Jarvis, director from 1955 until his dismissal in September 1959, fails because in spite of his charisma, intelligence, and internationalism, he was condescending and contemptuous

towards “amateurs” and the concepts of art and its role within a democratic nation-state (pp. 154–55). Finally Jean Boggs, director from 1966 to 1976, fails because she could not achieve her vision of the Gallery as a “hallowed atmosphere” with a “museum aura” (p. 207) in an era of technocratic bureaucracy. Other directors are given much shorter shrift – Harry McCurry, director of the gallery from 1939 until 1955, gets a few short pages in which his successes are grudgingly admired (pp. 129–131) but he is castigated for memorializing Brown’s promotion of the Group of Seven. At least Ord admits that “McCurry had not only exploited wartime dislocation to add to the Gallery’s collection of modern European painting.... he had also achieved.... what Brown had failed to do... the National Gallery *was* going to get a new building....” (p. 130). Both Hsio-Yen Shih, director from 1976 to 1980, and Shirley Thomson, director from 1987 to 1998, are described as coming from obscure backgrounds, and as having an advantage because they brought no art historical debts to the job (Shih, p. 262; Thomson, p. 357). Ord prefers controversy, and the colourless if successful McCurry, and the diplomatic and political Thomson, both deserve far more study and admiration than Ord is prepared to give them. What is more galling is the fact that Ord also spends little time in acknowledging the expertise and dedication of a highly professional staff, whose efforts to build a substantial and meaningful collection in the face of public indifference, insufficient funding, and sub-par accommodation, deserves a great deal of admiration. Individuals like John Watts, Kathleen Fenwick, Robert Hubbard, Donald Buchanan, and James Borcomann, to name only a few of many such curators, deserve more gratitude from Canadians than they get in this study, which is a pity. In my view, Ord fails to put the situation of the National Gallery into its context, both in Canadian social and political life – a country where appreciation of art was, for a very long time, at the bottom of political and social agendas.

Of course much of the book is devoted to the relationship between architecture, particularly the architecture of the current National Gallery, and the sources for Moshe Safdie’s design, ranging from the Temple of Hatshepsut in Upper Egypt, the Gothic cathedral in Amiens, France, the Corridoio Bernini in the Vatican Palace, to Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem. Ord works hard to try and determine the origins of Safdie’s thinking and struggles to find links which, to say the least, require a leap of the imagination: he links the angle of the ramp leading to the Great Hall of the National Gallery with that of the ramp leading to the mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir-El-Bahari near Thebes, and then makes the statement: “The resonance here is too enticing to ignore. For was there also a hint, in the ramp’s design, of a memorialization – more or less unconscious – of the National Gallery’s own ‘first great queen’, the indomitable Jean Boggs herself?” (p. 327). I thought the architectural comparisons, the search for links, the desire to psychoanalyze the origins of the Gallery’s designs one of the most unsatisfying parts of the book. The

search for a site, especially, gets shorter shrift than it deserves. Anyone familiar with the history of the national capital region will realize how difficult, Byzantine, and inexplicable the federal planning process is – and how easily plans change or alter, depending on politicians' moods, developers' financial contributions, shifting priorities, and mind-numbing bureaucratic planning committees. As it is, the National Gallery, with its echoes of Egyptian temple architecture, seemed to end up in exactly the right place – a site which English visitor William Kingston had predicted (after a visit in 1853) was perfect for such architecture: "I could not help coming to the conclusion that the situation was worthy of one of the proudest cities of ancient Egypt or Assyria, and I half expected to see those massive rocks crowned with the equally massive temples and palaces of the Pharaohs ..."¹ If a visitor to Ottawa in 1853 could see this, Safdie's eventual design, reflecting both Egyptian and Assyrian architecture, and, it might be added, Islamic, Gothic, and Mesoamerican architecture, strikes one not as anomalous, but as appropriate. What Ord tends to ignore is the worthiness of the building itself in housing the collection, and its relationship to that collection. Had Ord not devoted so much time and effort into seeking out religious, iconographic, emotional, authoritarian, political and intellectual connections, and then repeating the same arguments throughout the book, he might have succeeded in providing a better picture of the meaning of a National Gallery.

I must finally come to terms with Ord's imaginative interpretations of visual documentation, which inevitably led me to question the quality of his research and scholarship. I'll start with the Karsh photo of Alan Jarvis, which provides Ord with an opportunity for another of his psychological flights of fancy. He notes that "... the Gallery's only copy of a portrait of Jarvis by Karsh was discovered by accident, misfiled in the Gallery's archives, and there is no record of it in Karsh's own files, as handled by his New York agent" (p. 182). He seems to have been unaware that the Yousuf Karsh archives were actually down the street at the (then) National Archives of Canada, where both the original negatives and proof photographs of Alan Jarvis do indeed reside – a fact well-known since the National Gallery of Canada had featured Karsh's portrait photography in a 1989 exhibition and catalogue. But perhaps the existence of such photographs would have prevented Ord from embarking on an attempt to besmirch Jarvis's reputation: "Some idea of the intense feelings Jarvis generated, however, is conveyed by the fact that, as mounted on heavy cardboard, this print showed fracture lines both vertically and horizontally, suggesting that someone had deliberately smashed it on the edge of a desk" (p. 183). How Ord could have come to this conclusion, I am not sure. I was also repelled by Ord's interpretation of a short sequence from a television broadcast, in which he interprets

¹ W.H.G. Kingston, *Western Wanderings; or, A Pleasure Tour in the Canadas*, Vol. II (London, 1856), p. 77.

Jarvis's facial expression as he pronounced the word "amateur" as a perfect demonstration of his contempt for ordinary Canadians (p. 155). But there are other examples where a photo is wielded as evidence of Ord's interpretation of misdoings in the Gallery's history: the Eric Brown tea party in 1936 (p. 394), where the presence of Duncan Campbell Scott demonstrates in visual terms the exclusion of aboriginal art and artists from the Gallery until well into the 1990s; Jacqueline Kennedy's visit to the Gallery in May 1961 (p. 175), which is seen as symbolizing the backwardness of Gallery collecting policy in relation to contemporary American art; the Rosenquist opening of January 1968 (p. 200), in which the Gallery's previous neglect of American art is portrayed as ending through a handshake ceremony between an American artist, a New York dealer, and Gallery curator Brydon Smith; a November 1968 Gallery opening showing Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Canada's Prime Minister, leaning over to speak to Jean Boggs, which to Ord "suggests that theirs was already a complex and nuanced relationship" (p. 207); a Dan Flavin light installation in September 1969 (p. 213), in which Jean Boggs's expression is interpreted as impatience with contemporary art issues; or finally, a photograph of Jean Boggs with a wheelchair-bound Alan Jarvis in front of Simone Martini's painting of *St. Catherine* (p. 328), in which both she and Jarvis are seen as "martyrs" and "tied to the wheel" – Ord goes further and states that "The photograph is richly iconic, and as much Egyptian as Christian, recalling the inclusion in pharaonic sculpture or official and personal symbols" (p. 329). Ord sprinkles much of the last two chapters of the book with such visual interpretation, both selecting photographs, and reading their content only to suit his own theories about why the Gallery evolved, and how, and also about the individuals themselves, and their physical, intellectual, and psychological relationships.

A brief note about archival sources: Ord was given unprecedented and apparently limitless access to National Gallery of Canada Archives and curatorial files during a research fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada, and seems to have used them extensively. He does not seem to have visited the National Archives of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada) where the additional papers of Eric and Maud Brown are kept, along with the papers of gallery directors Harry O. McCurry and Charles Comfort, and other individuals and organizations associated with many of the events discussed in the book, including Hamilton Southam, Robert Hubbard, J. Russell Harper, the Royal Canadian Academy, and the Canadian Conference for the Arts, among others. Moreover the official records of government, including those of the Department of the Secretary of State, the National Museums of Canada, the Canada Museums Construction Corporation, and the Department of Communications, would have yielded further material of interest. Finally the still and moving image records of the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation could have been utilized to enhance and perhaps engage the story more in a visual sense.

In the end, I came away from this book with a huge sense of frustration and with more than a little sadness. Had he so chosen, Ord could have written a really good book. I was not looking for a hagiography of the Gallery – Canada’s cultural history is littered with similar stories of bureaucratic and political indifference, poor choices, racist and exclusionary policies, and decisions made based on personal rather than intellectual reasons – but I expected something which lacked the cant, the supposition, the repetition, and the scandal-mongering tone of this publication. One hopes that this effort will not discourage others from tackling the important and vital issue of the place of the National Gallery in our cultural, social, and historical understanding of who we are as a people.

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