

Book Reviews

***Ted Harrison: Painting Paradise.* By Katherine Gibson. Victoria, BC: Crown Publications, The Queen's Printer, 2009. 260 pages. 78 images.**

In *Ted Harrison: Painting Paradise* Katherine Gibson¹ tells the story of Ted Harrison's life and artistic development. She leads us to her first meeting with the man, walking us through his garden in Victoria to his studio. She continues to tell Harrison's life story from childhood to the present. Harrison's fans will be delighted with glimpses into his childhood diary and treasure map, his sketchbooks, and family photos.

We accompany Harrison through his childhood, schooling, and subsequent military service in India and Africa. Gibson points out influences to be found in Harrison's later work and character as she tells his stories. Returning briefly to England to become a teacher, Harrison sets out again for Malaya (now Malaysia), where he found his wife, as well, Gibson tells us, as the tropical colour he brings to his Yukon paintings. From there he went to New Zealand, where Gibson traces influences from the Maori absorbed into his paintings. After a short time back in England, he and his wife travelled to northern Alberta to teach. We learn about the family's acclimatization to northern Canada, and the primers he wrote and illustrated so as to teach Dene children to read when he found that Dick and Jane's stories failed to reach his students. Finally, we hear how he came to the Yukon; taught, painted, and found fame; and then moved to Victoria and later cared for his wife in her declining years.

Harrison's quoted aim with the book seems to be autobiographical: "I want to tell my story, to let others know how a miner's son from County Durham came to Canada and got on in life." Gibson wanted to depict "the man behind the cheerful pictures. What, or who, inspired those vibrant colours and the playful, optimistic style? What determined Harrison's carefree, poetic prose? What were the influences, experiences and people that shaped him?" (5).

But there are other intents at work as well. The book sets itself against "the prevailing notion that Ted Harrison's style has changed little over his career" (12). It tracks the changes in Harrison's style and the influences his work was shaped by to give the reader a deeper understanding of his cheery, candy-coloured paintings. And we do see a considerable range. We see his

childhood drawings, paintings of the people and landscape of Wingate (the English mining village where he grew up), paintings showing his absorption of influences in Africa and the Malaysian peninsula, one of his first tries at Yukon plein air landscape painting, and then the development and evolution of his signature style.

Just as it's important to have someone else introduce a performer, it's important to have someone other than Harrison tell his story. It imparts the sense that the story has a wider importance. Harrison's autobiographical publication came out over thirty years ago. *The Last Horizon* tells the artist's story in his own lyrical, effusive words.² It also includes some of Harrison's own poetry, whose rhymes continue in much the same vein. It's listed as coming from Merritt Publishing, which currently advertises itself as a "full service print and broadcast advertising agency."³

By contrast, the *Painting Paradise* media website stresses that "although Ted Harrison cooperated fully with this project, it was not a commission."⁴

There are many things to enjoy about this book. It begins with six pages covered simply with an image of paint surface in Harrison's characteristic colours: lavender, pink, pale blue, and two yellows. Having seen his work mostly in reproductions, I rarely had a sense that they were made of paint. His flat areas of colour translated merely into flat areas of ink, and I wondered why he bothered using oil paint to create his images. This answered that question, and gives the reader his brushstrokes to add to our sense of the works reproduced in the book.

On the other hand, as I was reading the book, I was often frustrated with being unable to find the image being discussed. It's often not on the same page as text referring to it. Sometimes the painting isn't reproduced in the book at all, or the image is on another page. No page number is included in the text to facilitate finding the image, and it's not always listed in the index. The book also includes a mislabelled drawing—on page 178, drawings that are clearly sketches for *The Shooting Of Dan McGrew* are called "*Sketches 1 and 2 of the Sam McGee Series.*" These kinds of details are important, and missing them undercuts the book as any kind of rigorous discussion of Harrison's work.

This frustration made me wonder whether six were too many pages to devote to displaying a sense of Harrison's paint textures, if there could have been more images better correlated to the text. Also, there are pages filled with black and white images repeating paintings shown in colour in other places. This adds a pretty design element, but no content.

Painting Paradise makes the case that Harrison's work is painted in a carefully chosen "primitive" style. Gibson delineates Harrison's work from

folk art in that he “knew the rules and he was trained by leaders in the field. Certainly, his breakout period reflects elements of primitive and naive art, *but he executed these with intent*” (italics Gibson’s, 192).

Placing Ted Harrison’s work remains difficult, and Gibson fails to truly grapple with these issues. Contemporary artists often use primitive or folk approaches to painting. For example, Marcel Dzama’s root beer drawings and Shary Boyle’s mock kitsch ceramics fuse a primitive approach with something original and unsettling, resulting in a personal, sometimes irrational or surreal, response to contemporary social and political issues. Harrison’s work does not do this.

Instead, he refers to his art as belonging to “the School of Cheery!”

“The world has enough pain without putting it on our walls,” he explained, his voice darkening. “I lived for many years in the worst possible conditions. I grew up in the Depression. I know the world of poverty. I’ve seen people reduced to living like animals. Not only in England, but also in Asia and Africa. I’ve experienced destruction and riots. I don’t want that part of life now and so I paint only happy subjects. I paint *my* imaginary world because it’s the only perfect world I have.” (7)

Painting Paradise tells a story of a woman in the midst of a difficult labour finding hope and encouragement in seeing a Ted Harrison print, and what better use of art could there be? If Harrison’s work succeeds on a popular rather than an academic level, he’s in good company with the likes of writers Robert Service and Jack London, and painter Norman Rockwell.

And yet Harrison himself defined his work against a tradition he saw as leaving important things out. He critiques the Group of Seven in his 1988 interview with the *Northern Review*, saying “they had captured the North ... but in almost every case, they had missed out on humanity ... I felt that the North was just as much people and animals as it is the lakes and mountains ... so I endeavoured to put the people in relationship to their environment.”⁵

But all paintings leave something out. There is truly a great deal of the North without any people in it. And there is truly a North of gambolling dogs, ravens, and happily playing children. I recently walked through Old Crow and was reminded of this. Harrison’s paintings also leave things out, and perhaps some important things.

Harrison reduces most of his figures to simple happy areas of colour, with reddish or paler faces, lacking eyes or other features. Even a rare close up painting on page 116, which shows a First Nations child with an

interestingly enigmatic expression on his face, is entitled *Child of the Midnight Sun*, instead of being given a name for himself. I remain uncomfortable with decorative images of First Nations children that give them neither names nor faces. Are these things fair to leave out? Many problematic social issues cannot be addressed in the "School of Cheery."

Nevertheless I would say that Ted Harrison's influence and significance is in fact greater than depicted in *Painting Paradise*, with its focus strictly on his own life. To see this we would look to the artists' work who bear his influence. Just as Caravaggio's fame is increased by the Caravaggisti, Harrison's influence on northern art is great. To take just a few examples, we can look at Lynn Blaikie's fanciful, batiked faceless figures and ravens, and her branching out into storybooks;⁶ Jim Logan's paintings (but note from the first page on his website that his people have faces and inhabit worlds that include a wider range of moods than cheery);⁷ and Emma Barr's crayon-coloured mountains.⁸ Harrison's influence lives on.

A large and devoted audience, national and international, continues to collect Harrison's work. This large, brightly coloured book will be enjoyed on coffee tables in the many houses whose treasures include one of Ted Harrison's paintings or prints.

Notes

1. See "Meet Katherine Gibson" on "Katherine Gibson: Pause, Putting the Brakes on a Runaway Life," 25 September 2011, <http://www.katherinegibson.com> for more background on the author.
2. Ted Harrison. Introduction by Pierre Berton, *The Last Horizon: Paintings & Stories of an Artist's Life in the Yukon* (New York, NY: Merritt Publishing, 1980).
3. "Merritt House Publishing Inc. Releases LifeTrends Fall Edition Magazine," 25 September 2011 <http://www.prlog.org/10951019-merritt-house-publishing-inc-releases-lifetrends-fall-edition-magazine.html>
4. "Ted Harrison Painting Paradise Media Kit, Book Details," September 25, 2011 <http://www.tedharrisonbiography.com/Media-Kit.html>
5. Nicholas Tuele, "Studied Naivete: The Art of Ted Harrison." *The Northern Review*, Summer 1988, Number 1.
6. "Lynn Blaikie Originals," September 25, 2011, <http://www.lynnblaikie.com/originalbatiks.html>
7. "Jim Logan," September 25, 2011, <http://www.jimlogan.net/>
8. "Landscape Paintings," September 25, 2011, http://www.emmabarrfineart.com/Emma/Landscape_Paintings.html

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