

FREDERICK SIMPSON COBURN: THE HUMAN HISTORY OF A LANDSCAPE

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Editor's Note: On the same occasion as Ms. Nadeau-Saumier's delivery of this lecture, Ms. Evelyn Coburn donated Frederick Simpson Coburn's papers to Bishop's University to be housed in the Eastern Townships Research Centre Archives. Ms. Coburn had just completed her biography of the artist, who was her uncle by marriage, and prelaunched the book (Evelyn Lloyd Coburn, F.S. Coburn: Beyond the Landscape, Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1996) on the same occasion.

(Part of this text was published in The Frederick Simpson Coburn Collection, catalogue of the Coburn exhibition, held at the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, in 1996.)

A few years ago, a call made to the Principal's office was forwarded to me at the Eastern Townships Research Centre. Mrs. Evelyn Coburn was making enquiries about the precise date when the artist Frederic Simpson Coburn, her uncle by marriage, had been given an honorary degree by Bishop's University. As a Canadian art historian, I had researched several works in Bishop's Art Collection, particularly those linked with the Townships, the most important of which was a winter landscape offered to Bishop's by the artist in 1942. I was delighted to hear that Mrs. Coburn was working on a biography of this prominent regional artist. This initial contact with Evelyn Coburn was followed by visits to the painter's studio, in Upper Melbourne, where she and her husband, Newlands, spent a few weeks each summer enjoying the beautiful countryside and at the same time researching and looking after their uncle's artistic legacy, as they had done since the artist's death some thirty years before.

With hindsight, I can see today how fortunate was this first encounter with the Coburns, and we are witnessing today the culmination of a fruitful collaboration which led to a major retrospective on the artist at the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, following the acquisition by the Museum of an important part of Coburn's artistic legacy; to the generous bequest of the artist's papers to the Eastern Townships Research Centre; and, more importantly,

to the prelaunching today of the long-overdue biography of one of our most talented native sons. I am both honoured and touched to have been asked to play an active part in this celebration of Frederic Simpson Coburn by presenting the ETRC's annual lecture on a subject that is dear to Townshippers of both cultures.

Frederic Simpson Coburn (1871–1960) was born in Upper Melbourne, Quebec, and received his early schooling at the St. Francis Academy. Family history tells us that, as a lad, he showed talent for drawing and would do small sketches of people in church and was especially interested in drawing pictures of horses. It was precisely one such picture that led to his career in art.

But, as we are today privileged to have at hand Mrs. Evelyn Coburn's excellent biography of the artist, my lecture will focus on Coburn's important and long career and tell how the familiar surroundings of his early youth were to remain his inspiration and his favourite subject matter, resulting in paintings that made him the quintessential Townships artist.

After his studies in New York, at the Carl Hecker School, and then in Berlin, Munich, France and England, Coburn finally settled in Antwerp where he lived for a number of years. He nevertheless returned each year to spend a few months with his family in Upper Melbourne. There, he frequently toured the surrounding countryside to sketch and paint the landscape of the St. Francis Valley. Coburn's artistic production thus alternated between Europe and the Eastern Townships until 1914, at the onset of World War I, when he decided to stay permanently in Quebec. This attraction for the country of his birth did not prevent Coburn, at least at the outset of his career, from interesting himself in other parts of rural Quebec. From 1896 to 1898, Coburn spent a few summers on the Beaupré coast with painters Maurice Cullen (1866–1934) and a few other artist friends. He discovered there a typical French-Canadian region, quite different from Richmond County, which was colonized initially mainly by English settlers. His familiarity with the heart of French-speaking Quebec served Coburn well when he received commissions to illustrate books by two champions of rural Quebec, the poet Dr. William Henry Drummond (1854–1907) and the writer Louis-Honoré Fréchette (1839–1908).

Dr. Drummond's *The Habitant and other French Canadian Poems*, featuring superb illustrations by Coburn, was first published in 1897 and went through 41 editions. For Louis-Honoré Fréchette, Coburn illustrated *Christmas in French-Canada* in 1899. In a letter addressed to Fréchette, Coburn wrote:

I know every house from Ste Anne de Beaupré to Ste [sic] Joachim. The tired horses, already plowing through the drifting snow, Old Jean Baptiste Paré's house on the right set in the bank of that high ridge of hills which skirts your left hand side all the way going to Cape Tourment [sic].

In 1914, when the war in Europe prevented his return to Antwerp, Coburn chose what would become the leitmotif of his artistic production. Going back to the scenes that were so successful for the illustrations of Drummond's and Fréchette's books, he reworked them in the context of the immediate environment of Melbourne, concentrating on the winter woodcutting and logging activities. That same year he wrote to Mrs. Drummond, the widow of the doctor/poet:

I broke the sabbath yesterday by going out to the woods & painted *two* snow effects (the first time in my life I have *painted* on a Sunday) The day was so beautiful & the snow effects so unusual that I know it was a question of getting a "document" then or perhaps never.

The following year, in another letter to Mrs. Drummond, Coburn writes:

I am busy now on half a day on winter things, all essentially Canadian & dealing with logging & life in the woods.

Such subject matter was to launch Coburn's career as a painter after his successful association with the Putman firm as illustrator. In 1922, he presented a painting of logging and life in the woods under the title of *Winter Morning at Melbourne* at the forty-fourth annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. S. Morgan-Powell, art critic at the *Montreal Daily Star*, described this painting in the following flattering terms:

It is a particular pleasure to pay a tribute to the notable work done by Mr. F.S. Coburn, A.R.C.A.. "Winter Morning at Melbourne" is surely this artist's masterpiece. I have seen no canvas that will compare with it from his brush. Open landscape, snowcovered, with the sunlight irradiating part, and part still left in shadow; in the centre a logging team; over the whole the elusive atmosphere of a bright, snappy, invigorating winter morning; admirable in composition, in colouring, and in treatment of winter sky. Two other logging scenes also merit praise, but the first-named is the best of all, and certainly one of the most notable landscapes in the exhibition.

The public recently had the opportunity to see this painting, which is part of the exhibition *The Group of Seven, Art for a Nation*, produced by the National Gallery of Canada and subsequently presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Charles C. Hill, curator of the exhibition, calls attention to a number of contemporary painters, one of which is F.S. Coburn, in order to better position the art production of the Group of Seven in the broader context of Canadian painting in the 1920s. After stating in the introduction that “the nation’s human history was not seen by the Group as being a field for the development of a Canadian art,” Charles Hill later comments in these terms on the painting *Winter Morning at Melbourne*:

F.S. Coburn would achieve both fame and commercial success for his paintings of horse-drawn sleighs loaded with logs in a winter landscape.

Clearly, Hill’s statement about the Group of Seven does not apply to the works of F.S. Coburn for it is precisely “the human history of the nation” that provided a fertile ground for the development of Coburn’s art, specifically in the activities of the woodsmen and farmers of the St. Francis River Valley.

The numerous oil, pencil and pastel sketches of the landscape around the St. Francis River Valley produced by Coburn, show us that, despite his travels in Europe where he received his formal art training, the human history of the Eastern Townships was to remain his most important source of inspiration.

Certainly, other painters before him had been inspired by the Eastern Townships landscape. Among them and of great importance were Allan Aaron Edson (1846–1888) and John Arthur Fraser (1838–1898), who were attracted by the mountains and lakes of the Orford region. Following in the steps of visiting artists such as William Bartlett (1809–1854) and Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–1872), they painted the romantic image of a territory where the recent settling of the first pioneers had not yet left many traces.

A Townships native by birth, Allan Edson was born to American parents in the Stanbridge area, a land occupied by the first Loyalists to come from the United States by way of Lake Champlain. A major part of the work of this noted landscape artist represents the Lake Memphremagog region around Orford and Owl’s Head mountains. Edson favoured atmospheric effects: play of shadow and light, morning mists, coming storms, etc., which he portrayed with great virtuosity. Although some of his works refer to the inhabited landscape



*Frederick Simpson Coburn, On the Logging Road, Eastern Townships,
Oil on canvas, 69.0 x 100.0 cm, Bishop's University Art Collection*

(lonely fishermen, empty boats or farm animals grazing in the fields), Edson's emphasis was on the primitive aspect of a wilderness barely touched by human presence. Referring to a particular painting, *Mount Orford, Morning*, an art critic for the Montreal newspaper the *Gazette*, wrote on March 6, 1871:

Besides his extraordinary sylvan scenes, he [Edson] exhibits a "View of Mount Orford" with the lake stretching out at the base. The mists of morning give the scene a dreariness and shiveriness which is not pleasant, though quite in keeping with the subject. Just so may the old mountain have looked ages before the foot of man had disturbed the silence of the "forest primeval," in the dim dawn when ancient night and chaos lay adying.

Allan Edson produced a large number of oil and watercolour paintings during his short career, including other scenes than those of his place of birth. Yet the Eastern Townships remained a favourite subject to which he returned after each trip abroad where he pursued his art training. Edson died at age 42 as a result of pneumonia contracted during one of his outings to sketch in the area of Glen Sutton, at the heart of his beloved Townships mountains.

John Arthur Fraser, a contemporary of Edson, arrived from England in 1858 and settled at first with his family in Stanstead County. It is probable that the young artist met the Montreal photogra-

pher William Notman when the latter visited the Orford region to photograph the scenery. Impressed by Fraser's talent and aware that his formal art training at the South Kensington School of London would be a positive asset for his budding enterprise, Notman hired him as Art Director of his Montreal studio. Even after settling in Montreal, Fraser continued to paint in the Townships, encouraged by his employer Notman, with whom he travelled when the latter returned to take photographs in the region. As early as 1868 and at Notman's instigation, Fraser presented seven watercolour sketches done around Lake Memphremagog at an exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal [today the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts].

It is believed that Fraser left Quebec in 1868 to open a Notman Studio in Toronto. It is unlikely that he ever returned to the Townships, yet the Orford region was to remain a source of inspiration for his paintings. As Vice President of the Ontario Society of Artists, Fraser presented at that society's first exhibition five oils which appear to have been worked up from the sketches he had done in the Eastern Townships several years before. Among those, the superb painting, *September Afternoon, Eastern Townships*, offers a clarity in the sharpness of outlines which owes a lot to photography, no doubt reflecting Fraser's daily work in that medium. However, the rich colouring, the sense of space and the particular light situate this painting among the artist's masterpieces.

You will probably be surprised to learn that this painting of Fraser was seen and appreciated by the Sherbrooke public in the 19th century when it was displayed as part of the permanent collection of the Sherbrooke Library and Art Association, the Townships' first art museum, founded in 1886.

It was not such landscapes that would provide the inspiration for the paintings of Frederick Simpson Coburn. Along with Allan Edson and John Fraser, Coburn is considered today one of the most significant artists of the Eastern Townships. Yet, unlike his predecessors, he was not interested in the untouched aspects of nature. Quite the contrary, he strove to record scenery that is inviting, a landscape transformed, shaped and, so to speak, brought down to human scale: rolling hills, wooded lots and a river meandering across the valley. Situated on the other side of Orford, which can be seen in the distance from the ridges, the St. Francis River Valley has little in common with the sublime panoramas painted by other artists in the 19th century. Nevertheless Coburn's native countryside was a source of inspiration from his early youth through his long life.

Coburn had acquired the major part of his formal art training in

Northern Europe, more particularly in Belgium and Holland. He was certainly familiar with the landscape tradition of the Dutch Hague School, which owed a great deal to the French Barbizon School. However, for the luminous quality specific to Quebec winters which he captured with such great virtuosity, Coburn was indebted to his friend Maurice Cullen. As stated earlier, Coburn had spent a few summers in the Beaupré region painting with Cullen, one of the first Canadian artists to adopt the Impressionist style. A case in point, *Logging in Winter Beaupré*, painted by Cullen in 1895, is one of the first Canadian works that can be linked to the French Impressionist movement. Actually, it was Cullen who encouraged F.S. Coburn to give up commercial art and concentrate on his painting.

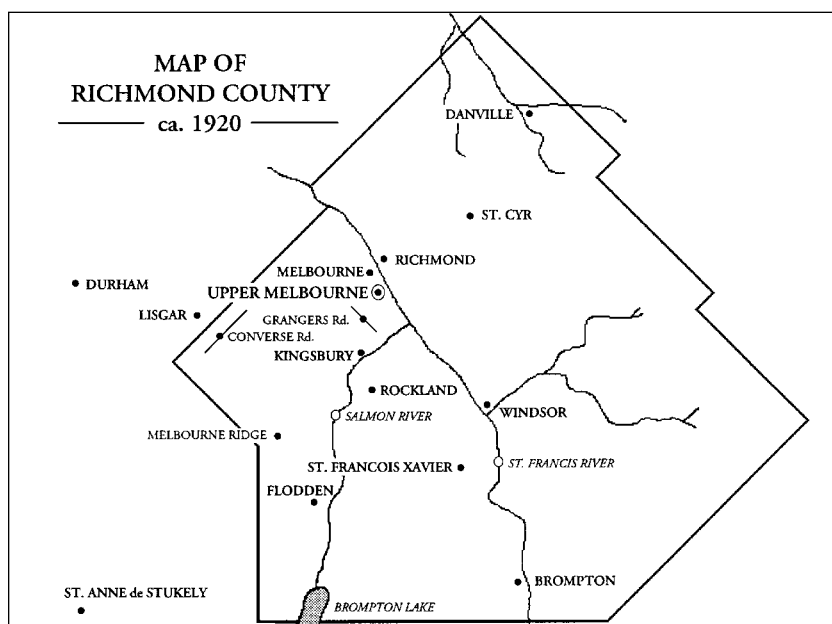
The collection of Coburn's paintings and drawings in the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke features several winter landscapes which show a team of horses or oxen pulling a sleigh loaded with logs. This winter activity represented an important source of income for the farmers of the region, specially since there were numerous sawmills in operation in Richmond County at the time. Coburn himself told Gerald Stevens, who produced a first monograph on the artist in the late 50s, that from his studio window in Upper Melbourne he could see sleighs loaded with logs travelling to the local sawmills. Thus Coburn explains how he found the subject matter that would remain at the core of his work for the rest of his life.

Other winter scenes feature a white horse briskly pulling a red cariole across a sunny backdrop of hills bathed in the special luminosity of a beautiful winter day. As in most of Coburn's canvases, the whiteness of the snow is nicely contrasted to the sky of cerulean blue, a colour dear to the artist.

Save for the works described above and a few other paintings, the Eastern Townships scenery found in the Coburn Collection consists mainly of sketches in oil and pencil. Even given the important body of works that the artist produced on the subject, he was able to keep few paintings of the winter scenes because according to the art dealer Watson, "Displayed in our window, they would invariably sell on the same day."

Coburn has often been blamed for overexploiting the theme of horses pulling a cariole or sleigh on snowy roads, usually under an azure blue sky with puffy little white clouds. This criticism is not unfounded. Coburn's love of the subject and also the need to meet the demands of art collectors perhaps explain why he produced a long series of paintings that, too often indeed, offer little variety in subject and treatment.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the hundreds of sketches done by Coburn over a period of fifty years, from 1892 to shortly before his death, testify to ongoing research on, as well as an attraction to and almost an infatuation with, the landscape of his native region. For their formal qualities, as well as for what they reveal about the evolution of Coburn's artistic production, these sketches constitute an important corpus in the collection that the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke is in the process of acquiring. Moreover, the great number and diversity of these sketches further serve to invalidate the argument that Coburn was lackadaisical in his approach to this subject matter. In most of the sketchbooks, scenes of the Townships are interspersed with other drawings of different locales, for the most part realized during Coburn's stays abroad. The studies of European landscapes, buildings or interiors reveal a special attention to minute detail, whether a plant, a rock or a figure. On the other hand, his sketches of the countryside around Richmond are immediate and of a more spontaneous nature. The line flows on the page, tracing the curve of a road, the dark mass of a fir tree or the distant silhouette of the mountains with an apparent effortlessness that owes much to the artist's affinity for subjects familiar to him since his early youth.



In order to produce this body of sketches that became the alphabet of his formal vocabulary, Coburn tirelessly roamed the region surrounding his studio in Upper Melbourne. For the most part, these sketches are neither signed nor dated; in some instances, however, he has indicated the place, the month and the date of their creation. These indications enable us to follow his itinerary and to realize that, while he visited most of Richmond County, he usually found subject matter within a few kilometres of Upper Melbourne. As a matter of fact, most of Coburn's landscapes represent a terrain that he was very familiar with. We can trace his journeys through the numerous sketches that bear the names of places such as "Brompton Lake, 1892," "South Durham Road, Sept. 23, 35," "Hills at Richmond, Nov. 5, 1937," "Danville Road, Sept. 20, 1940," "Melbourne Ridge" and "Between Windsor Mills & Brompton." However, he sometimes wandered further from Upper Melbourne to sketch "St. François Xavier," "Above St. Cyr" or "Past Lisgar," even going as far as "Ste-Anne de Stukeley." The small groves, the clearings and the cultivated hills that fill his sketchbooks are occasionally inscribed with names of friends and acquaintances. Walking across farmlands and logging roads, Coburn noted: "Near Fraser's Pond," "Back of Grangers," "Billy Converse Hill," "Near Miles Lynch," or again "Lalonde's Barn," "Frédette's" and "Frasers Converse."

The artist's attachment to the village of his birth was manifest in his choice of "The Melbourne Notch" as the diploma work he submitted to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts for his admission in 1929. It is a painting which encompasses all the elements that were already characteristic of his Canadian landscapes: farmers conducting a team of horses pulling logs under a sunny winter sky, the familiar rolling hills of the St. Francis Valley in the background. Coburn remained true to the locale of his youth, which provided the fertile ground for the flowering of his talent.

It is said that the unfinished painting on the easel in his studio at his death represented two horses pulling a sleigh loaded with logs in a grove of fir trees.

This last work, like the others that were featured in the exhibition, is part of the Coburn Collection, the most recent and prestigious acquisition of the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke. The Museum, founded in the early 1980s, was located at the outset in very modest quarters. It has progressed steadily, thanks to the involvement of a dynamic team of volunteers and professionals, and now occupies a handsome heritage building, the former Head Office of the Eastern Townships Bank, built in 1877 after the plans of the architect James Nelson.

In the late nineteenth century, this building was rivalled by another fine building by the same architect that was erected on the other side of the river. The "Arts Building," completed in 1887, was home to the "Sherbrooke Library and Art Association," an institution dedicated to the knowledge and accessibility of culture and art. The art collection of the Association featured many works by important artists, such as the painting by Fraser mentioned earlier. In 1907, the Association's collection was increased with the gift of a work by another Townshipper, the young artist Frederick Simpson Coburn who was to become one of its better-known painters. This acquisition was noted in the Minutes of November 1907:

That the hearty and sincere thanks of the Trustees and Members of the "Library & Art Union" are due and are hereby tendered to Mess. H. Morgan & Co. for their generous gift to it of the interesting and valuable painting by Mr. Coburn which is greatly appreciated by visitors to the Art Gallery.

Unfortunately, it has so far been impossible to trace this work. However, indications found in the SLAA archives seem to indicate that it was a Flemish or Dutch interior scene, similar to many of Coburn's other early works.

Coburn had studied in Belgium and his first paintings were representations of scenes drawn from everyday life in the style of genre paintings much sought after by Canadian collectors. One may assume that his acquaintance with the "Dutch School" helped to establish Coburn's reputation in the early part of the 20th century, when he was one of the rare Canadian artists to enjoy the patronage of Montreal art collectors. In his book *Retrospective: Recollections of a Montreal Art Dealer*, the gallery owner William R. Watson recalled that the first painting by a Canadian artist that he sold in 1906, shortly after his arrival in Montreal, was a still life, *Roses in a Bowl*, by Coburn.

One of the first collectors of Coburn's works was Harry A. Norton, a rich patron from Coaticook who acquired several paintings by the artist. Except for a still life and a Dutch landscape, the works by Coburn in the Norton Collection were typical scenes of the St. Francis Valley, which confirm the interest of collectors for this aspect of Coburn's painting. The Norton collection was unfortunately dispersed, as were those of numerous other art collectors from the Eastern Townships which have thus left the region because of the lack of institutions able to receive and safeguard them adequately.

In presenting part of the recently acquired Coburn collection as

its opening exhibition, the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke situated itself in the tradition of the Sherbrooke Library and Art Association.

Through the planned travelling exhibition and its catalogue; through the generous bequest of Coburn's papers to the Eastern Townships Research Centre which will be made available to researchers, as are the Coburn works in the museum's collection; and especially through the publication of this beautifully illustrated and sensitive biography, the art lovers of the Townships and of the country at large will rediscover Frederick Simpson Coburn, an artist who was inspired by the "human history" of a landscape which is also ours.

