

Past Perfect, Present Imperfect, Future Indicative

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Books

Jacques Poitras, *Beaverbrook: A Shattered Legacy*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2007, 317 pages

Tom Smart, *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2007, 180 pages

JACQUES POITRAS'S *Beaverbrook: A Shattered Legacy* and Tom Smart's *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears*, at first glance seem to share very little in common. In fact, one man, Lord Beaverbrook, links them. Poitras's book is an account of the ongoing expensive dispute between the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton and Beaverbrook's descendents over the status of the gallery's ownership of a number of works of art originally acquired by Beaverbrook and either donated or lent to it. Smart's volume is the catalogue for the Beaverbrook-founded Beaverbrook Art Gallery travelling exhibition about the twentieth-century New Brunswick artist Miller Brittain. Fredericton's Goose Lane Editions published both books in 2007 and they share the same editor in Laurel Boone. New Brunswick also connects their authors. Poitras is a local working journalist and Smart is a former curator at the gallery. Together, both books have much to say about Lord Beaverbrook and his lasting involvement in Canadian art.

Tom Smart is now the director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, another gallery familiar with founders' controversy. His earlier position in Fredericton introduced him to Atlantic art and artists and he has previously written about Mary Pratt and Alex Colville. *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears* accompanies a two-year national tour of Brittain's art, now underway and ending in 2009. It takes in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador; the New Brunswick Museum, Saint John; Confederation Centre of the Arts, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; and the National Gallery of Canada. Smart's accompanying catalogue describes the life and career of the promising Saint John-born artist who was ultimately devastated physically and mentally by the twin tragedies of war and alcoholism. The publication includes an essay by St. Thomas University English professor Allen Bentley, which discusses the visual

and intellectual links between William Blake and Brittain. Indeed, Smart takes the catalogue's title from a line in Blake's 1794 poem, "The Tyger." A substantial and elegant publication, it is illustrated by a number of Brittain's wartime artworks housed in the Beaverbrook Collection of War Art at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. Official First and Second World War Canadian art largely makes up this collection.

Recognized early on by his peers as one of New Brunswick's finest painters and draughtsmen, Brittain trained in New York at the Art Students' League in the early years of the Depression beginning in 1930. It was here, and in Depression-affected Saint John to which he returned in 1932, where he honed an approach to art that focussed on local human experience. Brittain carried this focus into the Second World War as an official war artist, composing extraordinary drawings of flight crew life that, as a former bomb aimer, he based on his own experiences of the war. *G. George Didn't Come Back*, for example, shows an airman reacting to the news that an aircraft, whose crew he must have known, has not returned safely. It is therefore curious that Smart concludes that a major artwork is *Night Target Germany*, which is devoid of human form. In this painting, Brittain reduces the aircraft, bombs, and the shattered city below that are his subject matter to an aesthetically pleasing pattern of bright diagonal lines, stars, and smoke. Smart argues that the painting is important because the artist reused these forms in the compositions that followed, but one can also conclude from the later works that the human elements of Brittain's war work and earlier remained more central to the artist's subject matter. Brittain himself seems to have been ambivalent about this painting. In a 1946 letter to his parents that Smart does not cite, he writes, "My target picture looks like the real thing they say, but I don't like it yet as a picture. In fact at the moment, I feel like putting my foot through it."

In *Beaverbrook: A Shattered Legacy*, Jacques Poitras introduces the extraordinary Lord Beaverbrook. A self-made man, Beaverbrook was born in Newcastle, New Brunswick, in 1879. At a young age, he became a millionaire-businessman, press baron, and, once he had left Canada, a notable British politician. During the First World War, he was the main instigator behind the Canadian War Records, which ran the Canadian War Memorials Fund, which in turn commissioned official art from some of Canada's most famous artists including members of

the Group of Seven. (Later, this scheme inspired the Second World War art program that hired Miller Brittain as a war artist.) Beaverbrook gave money to New Brunswick, particularly its university, and set up the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton in 1959. Before his death in 1964, he had established Beaverbrook Foundations in Canada and in the United Kingdom to hand out grants to arts, letters, and other worthy causes.

In his book, Poitras exposes some of the sometimes difficult and surprising undersides to Beaverbrook's generosity. It is a tale of misunderstanding, misinformation, and, ultimately, power. In no way is his account dry reading. A compelling cast of characters, including local New Brunswickers and offshore British aristocrats, take part in a drama that is tragic as often as it is comic. Strange goings-on with locked filing cabinets are reminiscent of Conrad Black's recent encounters with cardboard boxes, and cataloguing information issues are reminiscent of Florida's troubles with hanging chads in the presidential election of 2000. They bring the story of the ownership of the gallery's art at times close to farce. This level of detail, however, would not have been possible in the book without the support of the English Beaverbrook Foundation, which allowed Poitras unfettered access to its case material.

Poitras's book is a tale of influence and control and it highlights some of the forces that come into play when a major stakeholder in a cultural enterprise changes tack. Canadian art is a fragile edifice built upon the shifting sands of public good will and various kinds of government and private support. It needs all three of these elements in balance to function successfully. The art and arts communities understand this and it explains the outcry that greeted recent announcements that the Canadian government had cancelled various arts promotion budgets. For many groups, it only served to confirm, as did the failure to proceed with a Portrait Gallery in the capital, that art in Canadian museums and galleries is as much about bringing what they offer in line with larger government agendas, as it is about the creative process. Successive governments constantly reframe the meaning of culture in ways that require agility on the part of the institutions that depend on them for funding.

Seen in this light, we can consider Tom Smart's book on Miller Brittain as being about more than Miller Brittain's art. Perhaps it is about positioning the Beaverbrook Art Gallery as a significant national institution that can apply successfully for more grants, persuade donors to contribute more funds, and attract more gifts of significant works? Perhaps, as the gallery showed with the one million dollars the

province of New Brunswick initially loaned it to fight its legal case, it is about the ability of an organization to summon support. When the going got tough, as it undoubtedly did when the British and Canadian Beaverbrook Foundations made a request to sell some paintings that they believed were theirs and the gallery believed were not, provincial government support was critical. Poitras's book provides further support for this conclusion. Like the British Beaverbrook Foundation, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery made all its legal case material available to the author. Whether there is a documented link or not, the gallery must have known this book had the potential to help move its curatorial presence from the often-flooded banks of the Saint John River to the high rocky banks of the Ottawa River. And it has. The Miller Brittain show is going to the National Gallery of Canada in 2009, a first for this artist.

Consider another of the gallery's successful efforts at public relations. Its 2005-6 exhibition, *Art in Dispute: The Beaverbrook Art Gallery*, displayed the artworks at risk. There was no intellectual thesis to this display. All the gallery did was hang the disputed works on its walls. Attendance increased by 20 per cent. Furthermore, the gallery was able to ask for an additional admission charge in addition to the usual gallery fee. It even got a national sponsor in the form of RBC Financial. If you go to the gallery's website and read the page on this show, there is not a mention of a single work of art or a single artist. Here, the art has been used as a political prop in a high-stakes game.

The catalogue co-publishing venture that is *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears* is also about maximizing leverage. On its own, the gallery could not easily have afforded to publish such an impressive volume. It needed help. In the front matter, it acknowledges the support it received from the Museums Assistance Program at the Department of Canadian Heritage. Goose Lane Editions, however, has access to funds that are less easily available to the gallery. For the publisher, co-publishing, in turn, also allows it to publish more and produce a longer list when it goes after funding on its own. Visit the Canada Council's web site, which Goose Lane acknowledges as a supporter of the Miller Brittain book, and you can find out how highly the council regards this Fredericton enterprise. "From its original incarnation as Fiddlehead Poetry Books 50 years ago, Goose Lane Editions has evolved to become one of Canada's most exciting showcases of home-grown literary talent. With a mandate to combine 'a regional heart with a national profile,' the Fredericton-based publisher crosses all literary genres in bringing readers exceptionally-crafted poetry, stimulating fiction, and provocative and

informative non-fiction from Canadian writers.” It is not surprising then, that the council also supported Poitras’s book.

The point here is not that we view this funding complexity negatively but that we acknowledge that producing a cultural record of any kind is virtually impossible without government and private support. Since the government shows no hesitation in commenting on what is acceptable culture, especially for export, all government-funded arts vehicles need to position themselves for maximum private benefit as well. Private contributions can help establish art galleries as worthy of public support. It bears repeating that the origins of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery and the Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, which the state now substantially supports, lie in private funding on the part of a single individual, Lord Beaverbrook. Moreover, that individual’s legacy provided ongoing support for the former for many decades and does so for the latter today.

In discussing the funding of these publications simply on the basis of what I can read in them for myself, I have barely scratched the surface of the complex mechanisms that produce and have produced national and, indeed, regional culture in Canada, whether art or any other form of creative pursuit. In 2006, I published a book about the history of the Canadian war art collections in which Lord Beaverbrook was intimately involved during the First World War. In *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art*’s conclusion, I address the degree to which culture is a product of the state in the context of war art when I note, “Canada’s official war art has always been a government collection. Its curators and artists have always been employees of the state. Through its agencies, policies, programming, and institutions, the government of Canada remains the most influential and powerful facilitator in the future of the collections.”

Contradictions abound. What some might view as a negative development or event can result in a shift later on that is richly rewarding on many levels. Lord Beaverbrook was disappointed that the government did not undertake to build the war memorial art gallery he had had designed after the First World War and that his gift of the war art collection was not properly displayed. Yet despite its public invisibility, the war art influenced a generation of artists and bureaucrats who went on to found the Second World War scheme that in turn inspired artists such as Miller Brittain. Working with artists, Lord Beaverbrook developed an interest in art and artists that contributed to his founding of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Furthermore, the apparent neglect of the war art collections for many decades provided as an important impetus for the construction of a new

Canadian War Museum in 2005 and was used to this end.

Generally, one assumes there will be winners and losers in a legal dispute like that which the Beaverbrook Art Gallery entered into with the British and Canadian Beaverbrook Foundations. Certainly, the gallery has benefitted from widespread public sympathy, Judge Peter Cory’s award to it of 85 of the 133 disputed pieces, and the possibility of a \$4.8-million reimbursement of legal costs (now under appeal). Fredericton is now on the artistic map of Canada with its revitalized gallery and a successful touring show about Miller Brittain. What has the Beaverbrook family, the apparent loser in the case, been doing since in Canada? One would have imagined, nursing its wounds. Nevertheless, there is a happy ending there, too, just as there was in the aftermath of Lord Beaverbrook’s indifferently received 1921 gift of war art to Canada. Even before the court case, the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation had begun to explore new ways in which it could support Canadian art and media studies in ways that had some link to Lord Beaverbrook. Their million-dollar donation to the Canadian War Museum resulted in the popular war art collection bearing the name of Beaverbrook and partially funded the opening exhibition at the new Canadian War Museum, *Art and War*. This donation has also in part funded an upcoming exhibition about post-war military art, *A Brush with War: Military Art from Korea to Afghanistan*, which will tour to eight locations in Canada between 2009 and 2011. Furthermore, a recent gift of \$600,000 to the Canadian War Museum has made possible the acquisition of more war art. Finally, in May 2008, the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation, which perhaps comes out worst in the Poitras book, in association with McGill-Queen’s University Press, announced “its support for a new series devoted to the study of Canadian art and Canada’s visual and material culture.”

Beaverbrook: A Shattered Legacy tells a tale of individual ambition, provincial pride, power, and control. *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears* reflects on an artist for whom the opportunity to be a war artist, a legacy of Lord Beaverbrook’s first World War art program, set his direction. Both books show evidence of Beaverbrook’s lasting impact on the Canadian art world. Nevertheless, Poitras’s book concludes that the Beaverbrook legacy is now shattered. On the evidence of recent Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation initiatives, including the recent establishment of the Beaverbrook Fund for Media@McGill and the Beaverbrook Chair in Ethics, Media and Communications at the same university, I suspect that this will not be the final judgement. Government and

institutional involvement apart, like Miller Brittain's upcoming exhibition in Ottawa, the Beaverbrook reputation – good and bad – has moved from the regional stage to the national. The next chapter in the story may well add another and probably surprising chapter to the history of art and culture in Canada.

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