ART AND OCCUPATION

Maxwell Bates
Workmen (lunch hour) c. 1957

In the cheerless yard of a dreary Calgary warehouse three workmen are having their lunch. They convene on empty apple crates, facing each other around a semi-circle. On the left a cowboy in a crumpled hat and frilly blue shirt, holds a sandwich and sits by some planks, a hammer at his side. The worker in the green hat, arm resting on a blue lunchbox taps ash off his cigarette. His mate in the blue hat and dungarees, lunchbox, worksheet and discarded cigarette at his feet, clutches a bottle of milk to his chest. Their care-worn ‘Beckettian’ faces and gnarled hands speak of a lifetime of manual labour. Behind them a young man in a blue bobble hat, a number 17 sports vest and three-quarter length trousers is leaving through an open doorway. Their surprisingly colourful work clothes contrast strongly with the muted browns and greys of the factory, giving life and soul to an otherwise drab industrial scene. Outside a chimney stack emits a dark plume of smoke into a windswept threatening sky. A small male figure stands in front of a red factory wall looking at a large poster—public

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announcement, factory closure? The cowboy (spirit of the prairie community) and his two lunchmates (the older unskilled population) ‘manipulated by forces over which they have no control’ [1] seem wearily resigned to their fate. The sporty juvenile (the next generation) relishing the new prospects turns his back on the past. During the 1950s Calgary underwent a massive re-development following the discovery of oil. In 10 years the population doubled to 250,000 as the city became the Canadian headquarters for an international industry and its workforce grew increasingly white-collarized and affluent.

Maxwell Bennett Bates ‘Canada’s premier Expressionist artist of the mid-20th century’ [2] was born in Calgary on 14 December 1906, son of architect William Stanley Bates. He started painting at an early age but initially worked in his father’s firm studying art in evening classes at Calgary’s Provincial Institute of Technology and Art. In 1931 he moved to England where he joined and exhibited with a group of young artists (Twenties), which included Barbara Hepworth. At the outbreak of WWII he joined up and went to France with the British Expeditionary Force. He was captured and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Thuringia (Germany), where, as part of the ‘Transport Gang’, he undertook forced manual labour every day at the local salt mine [3]. He later wrote about his experiences, which were to have a considerable impact on his art [4]. Returning to Calgary in 1946, he joined the Alberta Society of Artists and went back to the Provincial Institute as an evening class art teacher but managed to find enough time to study under Max Beckmann at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York exploring expressionist artists such as Paul Klee [5]. He also continued to work as an architect and painted Workmen (part of his Prairie People series) [3] whilst designing Calgary’s modern Norman-Gothic RC Cathedral [6].

Bates suffered a stroke in 1961, retired from architectural practice and moved to Victoria BC, where despite some residual paralysis he continued to paint and write, producing some of his best work. His last known painting is dated 1978 the year he published A Wilderness of Days [4]. He suffered a second stroke in 1980 and died 14 September in Victoria [6]. An earlier poem Life Work [7] captures his philosophical approach:

I am an artist, who, for forty years,
Has stood at the lake edge,
Throwing stones in the lake
Sometimes, very faintly,
I hear a splash.

Although 75% of Canadians work in the service sector the oil industry is an important source of employment with Alberta producing more than 2 million barrels per day [8]. Studies indicate that the industry’s adverse occupational health effects have been limited [9], but its environmental impacts remain uncertain [10]. Despite elevation of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and toxic metals in local rivers [11] there is still ‘no credible evidence’ to show downstream contamination at levels expected to cause either an increase in human cancer cases or a threat to the viability of local aquatic ecosystems [12]. Nevertheless, total greenhouse gas emissions regularly exceed 100 megatonnes (carbon dioxide equivalents) per year [13], and pollution remains a major challenge for the Alberta and Canada Governments whose legislative programmes ‘do not appear to have kept pace’ [12]. Time someone threw some more stones in the lake?

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References