Kathryn A. Young and Sarah M. McKinnon. *No Man's Land: The Life and Art of Mary Riter Hamilton*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Pp. 272.

Readers aiming to increase their knowledge of Canadians in the Great War won't find much to satisfy in *No Man's Land: The Life and Art of Mary Riter Hamilton* by Kathryn A. Young and Sarah M. McKinnon. This biography of the under-recognized Canadian artist is much more informative on women, mental illness, and perseverance in the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of female friendships to widowed women's economic survival, and women artists as they struggled to be included in the nascent Canadian art scene.

Mary Riter Hamilton (1868-1954) was born in Ontario, but the Riter family moved to Manitoba to homestead in the Clearwater district when Mary was still quite young. She relocated to Port Arthur, Ontario in either 1887 or 1888, married Charles W. Hamilton in 1889, had a stillborn son, and was widowed in 1893. Having been trained as a milliner and always interested in artistic pursuits, Hamilton migrated to Winnipeg to pursue china painting, the most feminine of the easily commercialized art forms at that time. The settling of her late husband's estate meant she had enough money to be comfortable for some years, but Hamilton never stopped hustling: she taught classes, set up artists' organisations, established exhibitions, sold as much work as possible, and generally treated her artistic ability as a commodity, not just to make ends meet but to gain an identity and reputation as a professional artist. Switching to watercolours and then moving beyond them, she studied art in both Berlin and Paris, and enjoyed some important successes and recognition in the latter city. Hamilton returned to Canada three years before the beginning of the Great War, living in Manitoba, then British Columbia. While in Western Canada, she continued to hold exhibits and sold her "gentle landscapes, interiors, and portraits" to highly ranked members of society (p. 83). During the early years of the war, Hamilton involved herself in charity work and fundraising for the war effort, and in early 1917, perhaps moved like so many by the tragedy of the Battle of the Somme, Hamilton approached the Canadian War Memorial Fund to express her interest in becoming a frontline artist. This request was of course a hopeless one, as the small number of women taken on as artists with the CWMF were limited to scenes "painting the female

contribution to the war," which almost exclusively took place well behind the lines and often on the homefront (p. 83). While the book seeks "to understand Hamilton and her passion for art" and "what drove her forward," why this woman, at fifty years of age, went to the still-dangerous Great War battlefields four months after the armistice is not entirely clear (pp. 145, 83).

Although we are told that Hamilton felt the loss "of those who fought and died" deeply, the book does not ultimately explain why Hamilton took such an interest in capturing the battlefields on canvas; such subject matter wasn't in her artistic wheelhouse and marked a clear departure from her output to that point (p. 82). Why she was rejected from participating in the CWMF (beyond the obvious gendered reason) is more directly discussed by Young and McKinnon: she wasn't part of the central Canadian art scene and therefore not part of the artistic pool that the Fund drew from. Her female friendships and the patronage of those friends' husbands finally led to an opportunity for Hamilton to paint the battlefields in the spring of 1919, when the Amputation Club of British Columbia offered its financial support. With the club's help, she vowed to "create a visual record of the ravaged countryside before rebuilding could diminish the horror" (p. 82).

The scenes that Hamilton captured over six years in France and Belgium focused both on specific sites where Canadians fought and the general scarring of the landscape at places like Ypres. Hamilton also captured the stillness of graveyards and the work being done to reclaim land and shelter in the return to peacetime. The Impressionistic and post-Impressionistic paintings contain stark contrasts such as broken trees and blooming flowers, shattered churches and solid white grave crosses, and working men and cemeteries. It is truly astonishing, that she was so determined and prolific while she lived alone in harsh conditions with virtually no money at her disposal (beyond what her friends back in Canada were able to forward in response to Hamilton's pleading letters).

No Man's Land's discussions of Hamilton's finances while overseas gives us a clear view of how essential her networks of women friends and women's organizations in Canada were to both her career and financial survival. Without the aid of those women in publicizing, selling, transporting, storing and showing her work, it seems likely the painter would have been unable to continue. While she often expressed her gratitude for help received from friends back home,

Hamilton was not a silent martyr to her craft while in Europe; she grumbled constantly in letters about the rough living conditions, and the prices and lack of supplies in France and Belgium. These circumstances were ones the locals had been dealing with for years, nothing compared to the privations experienced by enlisted men in the area earlier, and should have been anticipated by Hamilton. Periodic stays in European hospitals for seemingly malnutrition-related, but vague psychological and bodily ailments, allowed her to write more letters to her friends back home. Hamilton was very clear that beyond those works that had to be sold to provide her sustenance, the paintings should be donated to a national repository as a record of the places impacted by the Great War. Returning to Canada in the 1920s, broken in health and virtually destitute, the artist donated over 200 paintings to the Public Archives (now Library and Archives Canada). She expressed great relief that "the work done amid the inexpressible desolation of No Man's Land has been considered worthy of a place among the Memorials of our Canadian men, the survivors and the fallen" (p. 124). Three decades of struggles with mental illness, which had plagued her intermittently since at least the turn of the century, followed. Hamilton died in a British Columbia mental hospital in 1954.

This study of Hamilton relies on a great breadth of sources, most effectively her letters and references in newspapers published during her lifetime, as well as initial explorations done by the late Angela Davis. The book opens with a prologue that's useful while the epilogue, on the other hand, reads like a modified book proposal. The narrative of the book in the main body of text is generally chronological but occasionally goes back and forth in time and airs key points before logic would say is appropriate, making the general timeline of Hamilton's life difficult to parse in places. Many of the endnotes are discursive, with interesting asides that ideally could have been situated in the actual text. An appendix of short biographies of Hamilton's contemporaries is welcome, as are the colour reproductions of some of her work, photographs, and a few maps in this volume.

Perhaps the primary missed opportunity in the book is the lack of appropriate context regarding its major themes (one exception is the French art scene during Hamilton's training and battlefield periods, which the authors thoroughly discuss). There is no detailed information here about Canadians in the Great War, life in Winnipeg and on the west coast at the time, women in old age, artists and

poverty and post-war life in Canada. There is very little about official attempts by the Canadian government to capture the war and its aftermath by artists. This is surprising, because Hamilton was shut out of this "official" group of war artists and did the work anyway on the promise of others' generosity, including the BC Amputation Club, whose motivation and terms of support remain opaque. Lastly, there is no discussion about the reception of Hamilton's work from the latter 1900s to the present day. Hamilton's paintings were often difficult to sell while she was alive, but where does the art world place her now? Are Canadians only recently coming to understand her importance as an artist and her contribution to the commemoration of the Great War? Certainly this book goes a long way toward increasing the general public's knowledge of this interesting character and will hopefully generate a renewed interest in her work.

As a widow, Hamilton struggled financially for much of her adult life, but the lack of a husband and children was what ultimately allowed her to pursue professional painting and in trying circumstances—she was an example of a woman who was allowed to transgress her "proper place" only through great personal sacrifice. It is easy to see in *No Man's Land* the creative connections between grief and artistic expression. Hamilton's depictions of the post-war battlefields in France and Flanders between 1919 and 1925 essentially shows how time did or did not impact the epicenter of that grief; the frontlines where so many met their deaths. The book leads the reader to a contemplation of how grief impacts artistic output, and how the creator's emotional climate influences the viewer's impression of that art.

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