A War Artist’s Legacy: Patrick G. Cowley-Brown (1918–2007)

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Examine the nearly 200 sketches and paintings by official Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) war artist Patrick Cowley-Brown in the Canadian War Museum and you can easily imagine a long-ago era. Paintings such as *The Steel Matt*, which depicts a temporary Second World War air strip in the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the British Columbia coast brings to mind the period when RCAF aircraft patrolled Canada's western shores. Small installations such as this have long since vanished. Look at his drawings and finished works on paper of Rockliffe air base in the early 1940s, *Catalina in the River*, for example, and understand a very different Ottawa, when air force activity was a significant contributor to the capital's lively wartime urban fabric. Few remnants of the base are still there today.

Patrick Cowley-Brown, the artist who ensured the depiction of this part of Canadian history, died on 30 August 2007. He was born in Singapore in 1918 and moved to Canada when he was 8 years old. After an uneventful youth marred only by the premature death of his beloved father, he attended art school in Vancouver where he counted the future war artist Paul Goranson as a friend and influence. Indeed, at one point he shared a studio with Goranson. He was teaching when the Second World War began. In 1941, he enlisted in the RCAF and trained as a wireless air gunner. Posted to England in 1942, he became ill and returned to Canada. From 1942 to 1944, he worked at Rockcliffe air base where he painted and drew. During this period, he met war artists Edwin Holgate and Charles Goldhamer, whom he found supportive and inspirational. In April 1944, Cowley-Brown won first prize in the 1944 RCAF art competition.

That same month, his artistic abilities brought him to the attention of Group Captain Kenneth Conn, the head of the air force’s Historical Section in Ottawa, who arranged his formal appointment to the section. He became an official war artist in May 1944.

Western and Northwest Air Command was his subject and he painted many locations associated with coastal air installations and stations and the Alaska Highway including Alliford Bay, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Fort Nelson, Massett, Patricia Bay, Seal Cove, Smith River, Watson Lake, Teslin, Tofino, Ucluelet, and Whitehorse. After completing the painting of his allotted subjects, the artist left the RCAF in December 1946. A year before he did, fellow air force war artist Moe Reinblatt painted his portrait. Cowley-Brown eventually returned to Ottawa where he worked as a designer.

He worked in two distinct styles during the war. The carefully rendered and observed illustrations of daily life at Rockcliffe air base are all works on paper. The western paintings – mostly oils on canvas or board – consist of many preliminary freely painted and quickly noted sketches and a significant number of more finished studio works based on these sketches. Where the field sketches are concerned, in most instances, the artist noted the details of the scene on the back. He based the canvases he completed in Ottawa on these field sketches. Summarizing his contribution as a war artist in 1995, he wrote that his "duties were to provide in visual terms an authoritative and accurate historical record of the operations, installations and activities of the stations and detachments in which many Canadians served."
These accurate words suggest competence and thoroughness and convey a certain detachment on the part of the artist. Indeed, Cowley-Brown himself was characteristically modest about the worth of his war art. “I do not feel that it created any new dimensions for me as an artist,” he wrote in 1995. He was undoubtedly unfair in his assessment. In the northern and western paintings in particular, his fascination with his subject matter shines out in the scenes he chose to depict. In his paintings, we can see what VE Day was like in Fort St. John and what a northern Victory garden encompassed at the RCAF base at Teslin in the Yukon. Compositions such as these tell us something about Canada in a time of total war. Without them, it is harder to visualize the country’s domestic commitment at its outer limits. It is a worthy legacy.

Notes

1. The Steel Matt, 1945. oil on canvas, 61 x 76.5 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-1999
2. Catalina in the River, 1943. watercolour on paper, 37.8 x 53 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-1889
3. The Canadian War Museum has two undated sketchbooks that document Cowley-Brown’s sketching habits from this time (19950057-001, 2.) A third undated sketchbook contains material associated with his western Canadian work.
4. Moe Reinblatt, Pat Cowley-Brown, 1945. oil on canvas, 49.3 x 39 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-4938
5. Patrick Cowley-Brown brought a written account of his war artist service to his interview with the author on 18 March 1995, which is in the Canadian War Museum’s artist file for this artist.
6. Ibid.
7. ‘VE-Day’, Fort St. John, undated, 81.3 x 91.6 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-2012; Victory Garden, 1945, oil on canvas, 29 x 34.5 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-2014.


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