

HUMANSCAPES

by Bill Stapleton

2005

Over the years we have heard these stories that describe our father's life beyond the context in which we were central actors. Children cannot help but see their parents' histories and reminiscences in the Kodak hues of romantic fairy tales, no less for those descriptions of tragedy than for those of wonder. We sailed down the Avon River on that raft, gasped for oxygen in the tail of his Lancaster, trembled pie-eyed at the threat of Dutch Schultz living just down the hall, and choked at the horror of Batman Joe's decapitation by the blade of a propeller.

Write these stories down for the grandchildren, we said. And he did. Over three decades we converted his difficult handwriting on our typewriters, lost some of them, and re-wrote them onto our hard-drives. Some of these anecdotes have sketches that belonged to them. Others were pure recollections. Incomplete as they may be, here they are collected into a kind of scrapbook, not only for the enjoyment of his five grandchildren: Emma, Evan, Joshua, Ariel, and Alexander, but also for friends and family, and all those people who have collected his work.

It has been a daughters' project moved by love and respect for a father who is truly the creative product of his convictions.

Lynn, Judy, Sharon

2005



FOREWORD

Bill Stapleton: An Art with a Human Face

Art can indeed have a public message. Bill Stapleton has, over the years, dedicated his art to the communal, social side of life. His portraits are penetrating, provocative at times. They reveal insights into the human condition, but do not treat social portraiture as an exclusive regime as so many of his compatriots have over the years. They are intimate expressions of kinship in context, and so a better name for them is “humanscapes.”

While the Group of Seven dominated the Canadian art scene, to the exclusion of many talented artists who treated issues and themes of contemporary life — hardship, poverty, disenfranchisement and inequality - landscape painting became the backdrop of social identity in Canadian art. These landscapes depicted places where nothing offensive could happen, where no social or political drama could take place, where only the sad shadows of Romanticism could cast their lengthy tint, this time in an Impressionistic decorative revival style. Conflicts of larger proportions were largely excluded from Canadian art history, from galleries and museum collections. If they were

eventually brought into collections they were often relegated to storage shelves or drawers. One can think of Paul Rand, Paraskeva Clark, Louis Muhlstock, Alan Caswell Collier, Leonard Hutchinson, or even Tom McLean, to name but a few.

The urban social, political and economic dramas that were being played out in Canadian society in the early and mid-twentieth century - before during and after the wars - were simply not reflected in the official Canadian arts scene. Public art galleries and private patrons excluded so many talented artists through negligence and a lack of developed taste. It was as if the social matrix would be threatened by these marginalized artists’ treatment of fundamental, vital social themes. The ‘social’ in art can bring a greater depth of understanding between peoples within a society and break down barriers that many do not want to recognize actually exist.

Bill Stapleton comments: “I still get passionate about causes, about inequity and inequality, about what’s wrong with our society, with the environment and with the economic system... Look, you have to

have anger, passion, indignation, love, tenderness - the whole gamut of human emotion - if you're to be a real artist. Injustice is always with us, and one of the jobs of responsible artists is to respond to it. Art becomes an essential voice in all the chaos of our times, a tool for bearing witness, and a weapon for effecting change."

The Stratford-born Stapleton found his metier at eighteen, while working in close quarters with a broad spectrum of men on a Works Project in the Northern Ontario landscape. And since then he has unceasingly been committed to the notion that artists can and should play a role in guiding society towards recognizing its own goals, aspirations and, indeed, the identity that is always there but seldom spoken of. Stapleton's own background and training was not provincial by any means. He studied at the National Academy of Design and the Works Progress Administration school in New York, at the Slade School of Art in London, England and Toronto's somewhat puritanical Ontario College of Art.

Working in a variety of media from pastel to conte to watercolour to oils and acrylics, the independently minded Stapleton has mastered the human subject in a way that renders it universal — a human face captured in pen and ink, or pastels, becomes a symbol of survival in the face of repression. Bill Stapleton's "humanscapes" reveal a solidarity with the common people, who are often victims of unseen political, social and economic forces. The causes are more far reaching than we might think.

Serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War in Europe furthered Bill Stapleton's commitment to finding peaceful solutions to international conflicts. He has since participated in Veterans Against Nuclear Arms, Artnica (Artists for Nicaragua) and Arts for Peace, which he co-founded in 1982. First Nations peoples, new Canadian minority groups, womens' rights and workers' collectives, as well as the plight of the inner-city homeless are all concerns Bill Stapleton identifies with in his art. His supports of the plight of the downtrodden comes through direct action. Portraying the world we live in enables Stapleton to express the human condition with many human faces.

Humanism is something we can build into the social matrix through direct action. Each effort we make to improve the apparently mundane status quo is a victory that fosters cultural growth and diversity. A social art can help build truly open and democratic values among people. One need look no further than the Mexican mural movement which spread beyond that country's borders and continues to influence our vision of a future art.

There is no questioning the fact that Bill Stapleton's art draws its energy from life as it is lived in many places. His art is a sincere embodiment of this drive to improve and secure basic rights for individuals and collectives. Stapleton's solid vision of an equitable life is manifested in his art. It is an art that recognizes the solidarity within that builds bridges between peoples of all races, ages, religions and classes.

- John K. Grande