

ERNEST LAWSON AND THE GRANT FAMILY.
By MARGARET GRANT ANDREW.

~~MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTION~~

READING ROOM

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by

Margaret Grant Andrew

In 1887, the future American artist Ernest Lawson, then a young boy of 14, came to Kingston to stay with his Aunt Jessie, his father's sister and the wife of Principal George Munro Grant of Queen's, my grandfather.

Ernest was neither an orphan nor a poor relation. Indeed his paternal grandfather, William Lawson, had been one of the wealthiest merchant-traders of Halifax, a founder and director of the Bank of Nova Scotia. Ernest's father, Archibald Lawson, was a graduate of Dalhousie Medical Faculty, a man of restless energy constantly on the move partly in search of a suitable climate for his ailing wife. From Halifax he went to California, from California to Kansas, and thence to Mexico. But he and his wife wanted their young son to have a Canadian upbringing and education, so they sent him along to the Grants in Kingston.

Mrs. Grant, my grandmother, a gentle soul with outgoing sympathies was herself a semi-invalid. But she soon developed a great fondness for Ernie whom she welcomed as a playmate for her Willie, a precocious lad the same age as his new-found cousin. The boys quickly became fast friends.

Principal Grant was not as pleased with the newcomer as his wife for he failed to see why his sister-in-law should bask in Mexican sunshine relieved of the cares of a growing boy, while his own wife, whose health was equally frail, was saddled with a nephew in addition to her own family.

Moreover, 1887 was a critical year at Queen's, the University had once again turned down a proposal to become a federated college in the University of Toronto, and by 'going it alone' was obliged to embark on a strenuous endowment campaign. Much of the time the Principal had to be away from home, canvassing and, as in his determination to raise the endowment he overtaxed his strength. By March 1888 he was able to report that the objective of a quarter of a million dollars had been reached but he was broken in health. The Trustees voted him \$2,000 and sent him on a world tour without his family to recuperate.

It may have been for this reason that Mrs. Grant's mother, now a widow, came to live in Kingston and lend a hand with the grandchildren. A remarkable woman she was in many ways. Born Mary Jane Katzman, she grew up in a well-to-do Jewish family and early developed literary and artistic interests. Two of her books were published post-humously, a collection of verse entitled Frankincense and Myrrh and a History of the Townships of Dartmouth, Preston and Lawrencetown, Halifax County, Nova Scotia.

I know little about her romance with my great-grandfather but I imagine her in her widowhood as one of those strong, opinionated Jewish women whose veneer of Halifax Presbyterian respectability she was glad to shed as age strengthened her independence and her personality. I gather that my grandfather found this new Kingston invasion of his in-laws an additional trial.

During summer holidays, Ernie seems to have joined his own family in Mexico, returning each fall to go to school in Kingston. From his grandmother he may have inherited his artistic bent. At any rate, she encouraged his talent for drawing and saw that he was given lessons.

Dr. Grant disapproved of this concentration on drawing, not that

he was against art or narrow-minded on the subject. But like a majority of Canadians at the time, he had little direct knowledge of art or artists. He was willing to support the plastic arts so long as they were useful. As a practical man of affairs, however, he knew that it was not possible for anyone to make a respectable living in Canada by art alone. But however well-intentioned, his views and his advice went unheeded by young Ernest.

There was a union crisis in 1891, Willie Grant, my father, was about to enter his freshman year at Queen's and hoped he could persuade Ernie to join him, or to go to R.M.C. But Ernie had got a job in Mexico as a draughtsman and wanted only to make enough money to go to Art school in New York.

"I have been here in Mexico six months" he wrote, but it is more like a year. The days drag slowly on, very slowly...By September I will have enough to support me for a year or so."

Grandmother Lawson applauded this resolution and although no longer wealthy, afforded financial help. By September Ernest was enrolled in the Art Student League in New York and loving it. As his letters to his Kingston cousin show, Willie was asked to explain to old Mrs. Lawson that New York was full of expenses even though her dutiful grandson had managed to resist all (or most) of the tempting delights of the great city.

Ernie worked hard, gained confidence, made friends. He and his roommate Morrison went off to Paris and spent the summer at Martigues on the Mediterranean near Marseilles.

Money was still a problem and Ernie now turned to his Uncle Charlie an officer in the British Army in command at Aldershot. To an

impecunious art student he seemed very well off but Uncle Charlie in his own eyes had to struggle to keep face with the English gentlemen around him. He was more than willing to supply his nephew with a good dinner but didn't feel obligated to go any further. Ernest was always a good story teller and the literature abounds in good stories of his encounters with 'rich Uncle Charlie', most of them contradictory.

But if debts piled up, Ernie never doubted that he had taken the right course. Two of his pictures were exhibited in the Paris 'Salon'. To Willie Grant in Kingston he wrote, May 1894:

I have been in Paris for five weeks now--an enforced stay on account of money. There has been some trouble in drawing money and I owe bills galore but in a few days my fingers will feel the long forgotten touch of gold. Alas! only for a few days, for it melts like the snow of Spring.

Do you know that after long thought I have decided to 'Spring' myself on the long suffering American public in a month and a half? My stay over here has been very beneficial as far as it has gone. But as far as influence goes we can get too much and to know when we have had enough seems to me one of the big questions of life. I want to keep my individuality and at the same time get as much of the best of French influence as will be consistent with it. I think now I have had enough for the first dose. As with medicine French influence kills if taken in too large a dose, witness most of our best artists...

I came into Paris from the country from a wealthy American to copy pictures for him in Paris. Again on the coast of a wave he now cast distraction to the wind and is a

to see the 'Salon' into which exhibition as you may have heard I got two pictures. I did not expect to have two accepted by the jury as I had absolutely no influence among them and it is through that medium that most of the pictures are accepted. I was greatly surprised also on Varnishing Day to see one of my pictures hung in one of the best places in the Salon. Although small it can be noticed by everybody. The 'Varnishing Day' is a great show for the celebrities are there and you can see more of them together than at any other gathering. Of all the celebrities of the world Sarah Bernhardt attracts most attention and she is followed around by one and all. Although there were 20,000 people there it was empty were Sarah was not... I had a couple of notices in the paper. The one I send you although small I like better than the others as the critic is a good one and does not echo the same old cry (Gaston Lesaulx in Journal des Artistes.)... I had an introduction to Whistler who invited me to his Studio.

This was the high point for a long time. Ernest came back to America. He painted and he taught painting and barely made a living. Today a young Canadian or American painter who had had as much success in Paris as Ernest Lawson would have little difficulty with Commissions or Canada Council grants. But then it was different; it took courage to fight for survival as an artist.

After about a year Ernie sold a painting and got a commission from a wealthy American to copy pictures for him in Paris. Again on the crest of a wave he now cast discretion to the wind and in a

moment of misguided chivalry married his former art teacher, Ella Holman, several years his senior in order to rescue her from the inartistic plight of having to work in a Philadelphia business office! A rather fey and delicate woman, however, she shared little of his ebullient love of life, and adventure.

Without writing a word to his family about this new adventure, Ernest took his bride to Paris and began frantically copying master works for his patron. For a while all went well. Then, suddenly, the American died and his heirs refused to acknowledge any obligation to Lawson. Ernest caught typhus; then his wife and infant child came down with it.

The first word the family had of the marriage was a bill from a Paris hospital for Mrs. Lawson and baby. Ernest had left some paintings and then disappeared with his family but ^{the hospital found that} the paintings wouldn't cover the costs.

Meanwhile William Lawson in Halifax, Ernest's uncle, then head of the family business went bankrupt and would offer no help. Old Mrs. Lawson in Kingston had enough to live on but no more. She was outraged by Ernie's clandestine and unprovident marriage as were all the family. My grandmother Grant, however, took pity on the plight of the wife and baby and went to plead with her aged mother to send them something. But the eccentric old lady was not to be moved. "Mrs. Grant" she announced in melodramatic tones "You are too fond of blackguards," and ordered her out of the house.

What could be done? If her mother wouldn't help, she must turn to her husband, for the Principal, no matter how strongly he disapproved of Ernie's wilful determination to be an artist, was a

compassionate man--and he loved his wife. Of course, from his standpoint it wasn't only that the young man had persisted in a course of action against which Dr. Grant had warned him. That was bad enough. But to marry before he was yet established made his course of action immoral as well as unwise. The family decided that Ella must be a hussie; and what would the good Kingstonians think when they found this strange ménage living as guests in the Principal's residence?

If this thought occurred to Dr. Grant it probably made him the more determined to help. He was used to brickbats for obeying his conscience. For offering protection as unlikely to promote sobriety he was soon to be villified by fanatics within and without the church. And the fact that the proprietors of an enterprising Kingston cigar factory called one of their popular brands "Grant Cigars" complete with a colored photograph of the Principal on each box must have set more pious tongues wagging. The Principal remained unperturbed.

One look at Ella convinced my grandparents that she was no hussie. Ernest had brought along some of his paintings and Dr. Grant summoned the young librarian, Lois Saunders, arbiter of all things artistic, to pronounce on their merit. She proclaimed the work good, though the colours, she said, (which appear to us so glowingly gentle) would seem garish to Canadian viewers! But it was enough to satisfy the Principal that Ernie had some talent after all. He was promptly given a job painting two retired professors. Queen's still has the portraits.

When this work was finished Ernest wanted to set himself up in Toronto. Dr. Grant gave him letters of introduction but the venture

was not a success.

I think it rather sweet that when Ernest told my grandmother his paintings shocked Toronto, she timidly asked him if they were very nude. At this ~~she~~ he ~~hoot~~ed with laughter for the pictures in question were all landscapes and it was the manner, not the matter, that shocked Toronto!

To ease the financial strain Ella now returned with the baby to her own impoverished home in Philadelphia and many times must have wondered whether it was worth being rescued from office work at such a price.

Ernest also went to the States and put in some hard, really hard years. Begging letters continued to arrive and some meagre help was afforded. For years Ernest felt bitter about his Canadian relatives. But my grandfather despite his position at Queen's had genuinely to stretch his own finances to put my father (a Queen's gold medalist) through Oxford. For a time there was a breach between my father and his artist cousin. The bitterness Ernest felt was not so much because money was not forthcoming as it was because of the advice of her relatives to give up art and go into some more remunerative line of work. This the gentle, convivial man refused to do. All he ever wanted to do was paint and paint in his own way. The public would eventually accept his work; meanwhile he had to scrape along. In New York he made an impression on some kindred artists. Together they formed "The Group of Eight" and held a show in 1908. Five years later the famous Armory show revolutionized American ideas on painting.

Ernest Lawson was never an aggressive member of the Eight. It never occurred to him to be other than a painter or to paint otherwise

than he did, whatever the fashion of the day. For this he will always have a place in the history of American Art, and because of work in Halifax and his work in Kingston Canadians will claim him as one of their own. And indeed he was much encouraged in his career by the discrimination and the patronage of Eric Brown when he was Director of the National Gallery of Canada.

To close on a happy personal footnote. The breach between my father and Ernest Lawson was healed in time for me to remember him as a very genial, very sophisticated, and I thought very rich American 'uncle' with a strange, fey wife. His photographs and self portrait make him look rather sad; his biographies reveal that he was always poor, and speak of him as "innocent and simple". But as a young girl on a visit to Paris in 1930 I took a very different view of these things and the cakes he fed me in the Café de la Madeleine were rich enough to make the occasion for me a glamorous and unforgettable one.

Colgate, William. Canadian
Art; its origin and development.
Ryerson Press. p. 168

"Ernest Lawson, N.A., a landscape
painter of much reputation who was
born in 1873 in Halifax, the son of
Dr. Archibald Lawson. studied first
in Kansas City and in Mexico City,
where his father was in practice, then
in Art Students League in New York and in Paris."

Natl Gallery. The development of Can. Art. (3)
p. 87 Lawson (1873-1939)
at time Canada still held little place
for the really independent artist.
Like Morris 1864-1929 born in Montreal
studied in Paris
David Milne like Ernest Lawson

unusually high order, being notable (5)
for its exquisite colour values, its tone
and vibrating quality. By metropolitan
critics he is accounted one of the
greatest of living American painters.

Ernest Lawson

Won medals and honours.
Silver Medal at Louisiana Purchase Exhibit 1904
Herman "An Landscape Univ. of Penn.
Hallgarten Prize at Natl Acad. of Design N.Y.
Gold medal at Panama Pacif. Exhibit San Fran 1915
→ in Natl Gallery at Wash.
Metro. Mus. in N.Y.
Natl Gallery Ottawa
— member of Canadian Art Club.

Exquisite
colour values
tone
vibrating quality

MacTavish, Newton. The fine arts in (4)
Canada.
1905 Macmillan.

One of the most renowned of the expatriated
Canadian is Ernest Lawson, N.A. of New York.
Lawson became a member of the
Canadian Art Club shortly after its
inception and during the lifetime of that
Club was one of the constant and most
prominent exhibitors. His work is of an

"Varnishing day."

Vernissage Reception which
precedes the opening of an exhibition
of works of art + during which,
before the artists were engaged
in varnishing their pictures before
exposing them.

Actually three portraits.

Kenneth Fenwick
Faculty of Medicine

H. J. Saunders
Faculty of Medicine

Hon Wm. Morris
one of first Bd. of Trustees
Died in 1858
Portrait done in 1896
from a photograph