

## **Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith**

*Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith*. An exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and held September 1977; circulated to Calgary, Oshawa, Stratford, Kingston, London, and Windsor, November 1977 — July 1978

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Catalogue: Roger Boulet, *Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith (1846-1923)*, Victoria, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1977. 156 pp., 181 illus., \$7.95.

The paintings of F.M. Bell-Smith from 1867 to 1921, shown in the exhibition, together with Roger Boulet's catalogue, reveal the life and times of a successful journeyman painter who achieved the recognition due a master – the result, it seems, and as Dennis Reid suggests in his foreword, of doing the right thing in the right place at the right time. Despite the suggestion, quoted from the *Guelph Weekly Mercury and Advertiser* and from a letter of the artist's, that his return to Europe planned for 1889 was prompted by European enthusiasm for his work in contrast to Canadian indifference, he did not leave until 1891, and then remained for only one year. On the contrary, his success seems to have been wholly Canadian. Among the principal exhibitions listed by Boulet are only two outside Canada: international exhibitions at Chicago in 1893 and Buffalo in 1902, and these represented Canadian rather than foreign tastes and standards.

That success was considerable. From his first employment as a twenty-year-old assistant to a Montreal photographer, he went on to become an established artist, a member of the Royal Canadian Academy, and president of the Ontario Society of Artists (1904). In connection with the death of Prime Minister Sir John Thompson at Windsor (1894), he painted Queen Victoria in 1895. (The artist's account of this notable honour is reprinted in the catalogue.) His paintings of the Rocky Mountains and of London and Paris street scenes sold well and his prosperity continued until his death in 1923.

Bell-Smith was born and trained in London, England, the son of a respected miniaturist. He came to Canada in 1867, following his father by one year. He

worked first as a photographer's assistant in Montreal and then in Hamilton, and there he established his own studio. He became an accomplished and successful illustrator for *The Canadian Illustrated News* and other periodicals in the 'seventies. He had continued to exhibit paintings through this period, and in 1881 moved to London, Ontario, to work as a teacher of art in the public schools and at Alma College in St. Thomas. From the 1880s on, his career as a painter continued to develop, and with his move to Toronto in 1880 it became his principal concern.

In both watercolours and oils, Bell-Smith could give competent, if rarely moving, accounts of his subjects. These included scenes of London and Paris, based on visits there from 1891 on, some documentary painting, and, perhaps best known, the Rocky Mountains. He first saw the Rockies in 1881 when he took advantage of Sir William Van Horne's offer of free transportation to artists, whose paintings would help to promote tourism along the CPR route.

These subjects might suggest considerable range; the mountains particularly could well have inspired some



FIGURE 1. Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith, *Mists and Glaciers in the Selkirks*, 1911. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Cat. no. 96.





FIGURE 2. Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith, *St. Clement Danes*, 1899. Private collection. Cat. no. 58.

new departures in vision and technique from the competent routine of Bell-Smith's urban subjects. Instead, we find the same soft edges and colours seen in misty London streetscapes transferred to the mountain views. The air of romantic mystery must have pleased his audience but it falsified the subject – a failure of seeing as much as one of technique. A later oil, *Mists and Glaciers in the Selkirks* (1911, cat. no. 96, Fig. 1), shows both how successful and how inadequate this approach would be. His failure to respond to the mountain scenery is a measure of his limitations, especially his dogged application of the same approach to all subjects to produce the occasional striking effect, but no illumination.

The exhibition gives a generous display of Bell-Smith's career, beginning with a watercolour illustration *Parade of the York Volunteer Regiment* (1867, cat. no. 1); some watercolours from the 'seventies, a small, free, and expert *Skating on Burlington Bank* (1872, cat. no. 2), and the larger, more formal, and wooden *Lacrosse Game* (1872, cat. no. 3). The problem of giving life to the formal studio painting was one that Bell-Smith never solved, but it was by such major productions that he established his success. *Daughters of Canada* (1884, cat. no. 16) is a well-known, large (92.4 × 152.7 cm) canvas from his London, Ontario, years. The fence-top bisects the painting horizontally, the figures seem stiff, unrelated to the building behind – presumably the school which they have left – and there is a deadening similarity to all the faces. *The Heart of the Empire* (1909, cat. no. 95), a watercolour London scene, shows similar defects but less obtrusively. His skill in rendering individual figures and objects has increased in twenty-five years; nothing else has changed.

It is a measure of his talents and his defects that the most consistently convincing parts of his work are the architectural settings for his London and Paris streetscapes. If he had given the same attention to Toronto and Hamilton as he did to Paris and London in *Fog – Paris* (watercolour, 1896, cat. no. 53); *St. Clement Danes* (oil, 1899, cat. no. 58, Fig. 2), and *The Strand Near Somerset House* (watercolour, ca. 1900-10, cat. no. 59), he would have created a priceless record, and perhaps have grown more as an artist. Unfortunately, he never responded fully to the challenge of a different (and less exotic) urban character and climate.

Despite Bell-Smith's limited artistic success, the exhibition is a welcome and worthwhile display. Successes and failures both give insight into taste and technique in the half-century following Confederation. Bell-Smith's energy (perhaps three thousand pictures during his lifetime) was impressive; his interests and his skills show the problems of adapting well-worn English techniques and ways of seeing to the Canadian environment.

Roger Boulet's catalogue is a substantial and useful volume with an account and chronology of the artist's life and lists of his principal exhibitions and of the works displayed. It includes as appendices material by and about Bell-Smith, including a *Maclean's* article of 1912. In addition to photographs and paintings illustrating the biographical section, the catalogue proper reproduces all 105 paintings in the exhibition (five in colour), as well as some related sketches and photographs.

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