

Woldemar Neufeld's Canada: A Mennonite Artist in the Canadian Landscape, 1925-1995 By Laurence Neufeld and Monika McKillen, eds., Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen

Tom Smart

Volume 102, Number 2, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065590ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065590ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smart, T. (2010). Review of [*Woldemar Neufeld's Canada: A Mennonite Artist in the Canadian Landscape, 1925-1995* By Laurence Neufeld and Monika McKillen, eds., Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen]. *Ontario History*, 102(2), 248–249. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065590ar>

campus, in Scarborough. In both cases Forestry could have been a big fish in newer, smaller ponds (and ponds surrounded by actual forests!). Kuhlberg believes that the failed Scarborough move may have set in motion the termination of Toronto's undergraduate forestry program, concluded in 1993. Yet *One Hundred Rings and Counting* ends on an optimistic note. In 2007, the centennial year, Kuhlberg had found Forestry—now a faculty for graduate study only—to have become a research powerhouse with a strong conservation ethic and a firm national and international reputation.

In contemporary times, however, I note (as does Kuhlberg) a relapse into old denials, particularly the belief that Canadian forests were inexhaustible. In comparison with most developed countries, can we honestly label ourselves today as exemplary environmental stewards? As of early 2010, Forestry at the University of Toronto also sits on another precipice

of major restructuring. Can one imagine the outcome, had Queen's or Guelph been home to forestry? Is Lakehead University poised to be home for the leading (or only) forestry faculty in Ontario in the present century? The title of the concluding chapter—"all that is old is new again"—rings on even beyond the end of *One Hundred Rings and Counting*.

I greatly enjoyed *One Hundred Rings and Counting*, both as an exciting and easy read and as an important historical summary of a yet broadly undocumented and important piece of Ontario's forestry legacy. It should appeal to anyone with a concern for resource management and will have a particular pull for those with an interest in forestry or the inner workings of Canadian universities. I hope that this book also finds a place in the courses of Canada's (remaining) forestry programs.

Nathan Basiliko
University of Toronto Mississauga

Woldemar Neufeld's Canada: A Mennonite Artist in the Canadian Landscape, 1925-1995

By Laurence Neufeld and Monika McKillen, eds., Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen.

Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010. vi + 146 pages. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55458-190-0 (www.wlupress.wlu.ca)

One of the gratifying events in the life of a curator or art historian is discovering a new voice. Rarely does an artist appear fully formed with a body of work that is unique, deeply felt and resonant. All the more is the pleasure when the artist's life and work are digested between the covers of a book that explores the art fully, in depth and with an intelligence that accords the artist a proper place

in the landscape of Canadian art. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen have done such a service in their sensitive and nuanced analysis of the art of Woldemar Neufeld, a Mennonite artist whose work is deceptively simple, yet speaks to the great feelings of loss and longing clothed in the garments of what the artist saw in front of his eyes and in the back of his mind.

Neufeld the person was formed out of the traumatic convulsions of the Russian Revolution. His father was executed by the Revolutionaries and, with his mother and stepfather, young Woldemar fled to Canada. There he grew up in the company of a large step-family and in the bosom of the Mennonite community in central Ontario. Neufeld the artist channelled the contemporary Canadian landscape idioms, spawned by the Group of Seven and their acolytes, and displayed an acute visual memory, absorbing the crafts of commercial art, graphic illustration and woodblock printing. An art education in Cleveland gave this precocious young man an avenue to break out of what must have been claustrophobic worlds: Canadian art at mid-century, and the mores and conventions of his community.

Neufeld travelled across the country painting, and it would seem that he was in many ways self-taught. To be sure, he was well trained, yet his personal style and idiosyncratic voice prevented him from merely aping modes, movements and contemporary trends. As the Tiessens so ably convey, Neufeld answered to his own muse, displaying a confidence to remain aloof from fashion; he never fully embraced one way of painting or image-making that could rightly be claimed as his alone.

Neufeld's work betrays a deeply elegaic sense, though. The over-riding theme is diaspora—a theme that the Tiessens

highlight but hesitate to explore in all its dimensions. There is a sense of anxious movement in Neufeld's images, a kind of furtiveness that persists in his images of alleys and backyards, farm fields or broken limbs. Neufeld the artist appears to look with fondness at the idyllic civic parks, but there are surreal elements in each image that take them beyond the saccharine to a place that is neither real nor completely imagined. This is the tension in the art that the authors suggest. Neufeld's journey as an artist mirrors a kind of existential wandering that took hold in North America as

the Europe of his youth collapsed. Its exiles, particularly young artists like Neufeld, had to subsume loss and find new metaphors of home in a distant and strange land. His was the plight of the alien, and his art traces his search for the home he lost.

Woldemar Neufeld can rightly be placed in the company of such fellow Canadian artists as William Kurelek, Ernest Lindner and others—artists whose unique voices rendered them regionalists, or curiosities whose work would never comfortably fit in the canon or the rubrics of modernism. The Tiessens have done a great service by introducing us to this gifted, idiosyncratic and generous man whose relentless search for home still resonates.

Tom Smart
McMichael Canadian Collection

