

Susan Butlin. *The Practice of Her Profession: Florence Carlyle, Canadian Painter in the Age of Impressionism*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. pp. 309.

At first glance, Florence Carlyle's paintings—like *Golden Rod* (1901) and *Mother and Child* (1910)—convey the familiar, comforting qualities of late Impressionist art that are guaranteed to appeal to many of us: soft, pastel shadings; calm interiors; pretty, feminine subjects. But for Susan Butlin, the gentleness of these images belies the stamina and agility that Carlyle (1864-1923) had to possess to guarantee professional success. This particular biography began as Butlin's MA thesis; her PhD expanded to include more than fifty women artists active in pre-war Canada. Why the return specifically to Carlyle, then? Well, because she was representative—as a woman and an artist—but also because she “went one step further” in her “independent and active organization and promotion of her own career.”(221-2) If Carlyle was bound by the conventions of art and womanhood in late-nineteenth-century Canada, she nonetheless, Butlin insists, was possessed of enough ambition and business acumen “to negotiate firmly and lead a self-directed professional life.”(141)

In many ways, Carlyle exemplifies the “New Woman” who appeared in the latter part of the nineteenth century. She was born into a respectable, educated, Anglo-Saxon family (her great-uncle was Thomas Carlyle) settled in a prosperous town in south-western Ontario. Although an organized art community was very much in its infancy in Canada—1870s Toronto was disparaged as “an artistic sloth”(26)—the artist came of age during a fascinating period in Canadian history which saw a rapid growth of arts institutions as well as a new engagement by women in societal causes and mutual organizations. Thus the “New Ideal of Womanhood” expressed by Agnes Machar in 1879 (20) was the Princess Louise, patroness of the new

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Royal Canadian Academy (RCA), to whom Carlyle sold one of her first paintings.

Butlin beautifully situates Carlyle in the artistic landscape of the day, particularly in terms of the “asymmetrical” (74) institutional classifications that both nurtured and contained women artists. This asymmetry profoundly shaped Carlyle’s career: from the “Ladies Department” at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, where a teenage Carlyle first showed her work to Princess Louise, to Charlotte Schreiber’s auxiliary designation as (only) an associate of the RCA; from the invigorating climate of *salons* and art schools abroad, to the familial obligations and financial restraints which brought her home to the relative isolation of Woodstock. Indeed, one of Butlin’s strengths is her recognition of the role of practical as well as ideological constraints. Like many of her fellow Canadian artists, Carlyle spent years in Paris and then in London, paying homage to the European artistic canon, enjoying a qualified degree of liberty, and earning the necessary credentials for an *entrée* into exhibitions at home. Her lifestyle, though, appears to have been anything but “bohemian”; the only “thrill” she reports was found in the studio.⁽⁵¹⁾ Carlyle herself seems to have left few sources, which forced Butlin to draw creatively on period accounts like newspaper reports, and to extrapolate from the experiences of artist contemporaries.

By her early twenties, Carlyle was devoted to painting what would become her signature subject: women in domestic spaces. But she herself was not content to remain at home in Woodstock in such a setting, amid “the solitude of a prosperous, agricultural, art-forsaken corner of Canada,” as Homer Watson said of nearby Doon, Ontario.⁽⁹⁰⁾ So, after a few years, she followed the other metropolitan pull on the nascent Canadian art world, and lived for two different periods in New York. To some extent, the gamble paid off. She displayed and sold her work more consistently; work as a commercial illustrator brought not only steadier income but the chance to depict women in a modern, urban environment. She also achieved the peak of her acclaim, exhibiting at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901,

winning a silver medal at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, and selling major works to the Ontario government and the National Gallery of Canada. When the portrait of a lovers' quarrel, *The Tiff* (1902), sold for "the enormous sum" of \$1,000, it elevated Carlyle "to a new level in the Canadian art world." (118) But in a lapse of her usual savvy—what Butlin calls an "uncharacteristic lack of foresight" (138)—by focusing primarily on the American market, Carlyle neglected her relationships with Canadian contacts like the RCA. It was unfortunate timing, because in the two decades before 1914 the Canadian art world really came into its own, with numerous new societies, publications, and exhibition venues. Equally important, women professionals—artists, but also the journalists who profiled them—became more prominent, their networks more established, and their work more than simply ladylike accomplishment.

Such energetic growth is remarkable, and Butlin truly shines in weaving Carlyle in and out of the narratives of Canadian art history and the politics (or business) of art in the early twentieth century. She references other artists, events, and organizations with a degree of detail that brings the period to life without being overwhelming. But if Carlyle's training was European and her subjects domestic, her relationship with an emerging, self-declared "Canadian" art seems ambivalent at best. It is unclear, for example, why British reviewers considered *The Joy of Living* (1910), a portrait of a jovial washerwoman, "essentially Canadian." (160) With a new emphasis on landscape art as *the* subject matter of nationalist choice (a strongly gendered shift, too, as seen in the future Group of Seven), together with the disconcerting style of Post-Impressionism, it was Carlyle's relatively conservative style that preserved her place in the Canadian art world. She moved to England in 1913, and while she contributed a major portrait to the 1918 Canadian Patriotic Fund Exhibition, she lived out her last decade active in war work but artistically "out of the mainstream." (195)

In 1912, Florence Deacon wrote a profile of Carlyle for the Toronto *Globe* in which she said of the artist that "her ambition is all for art itself." (178) Butlin argues that, like many of her peers, Carlyle

“believed she must choose between marriage and career as an artist.”(22) Although there did not seem to be any point at which Carlyle consciously foreswore romance, Butlin suggests that at this time in history such a choice, and Carlyle’s commitment to her profession, were proof of “a life apart from convention.”(101) Somewhat ironically, much of this book echoes rather conventional messages of a generation of feminist history: a critique of an older history which privileged men (whether by the deliberate omission of female artists, or by the characterization of the female artist as amateur *vis à vis* the male professional); the value of female support networks; and the astute agency wielded by Carlyle in shaping a “strategically organized, self-defined career.”(xv) Like many biographers, Butlin is very much an admirer of her subject, but the writing is appealing: evocative, well-paced, and engaging. As part of a welcome new series dedicated to Canadian art history from McGill-Queen’s University Press and the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation, *The Practice of Her Profession* does a fine job of returning Florence Carlyle to the public eye.

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