

Mack Laing Lives on in Brian Scott Paintings

Hamilton Mack Laing (1883-1982) indeed continues to haunt the Canadian imagination, as does the memory of his eastern contemporary, Tom Thompson (1887-1917), if only in the memory of contemporary artists. Pictures of these two eminent Canadian painter/naturalists even sometimes bear a semblance (See attached pictures.)

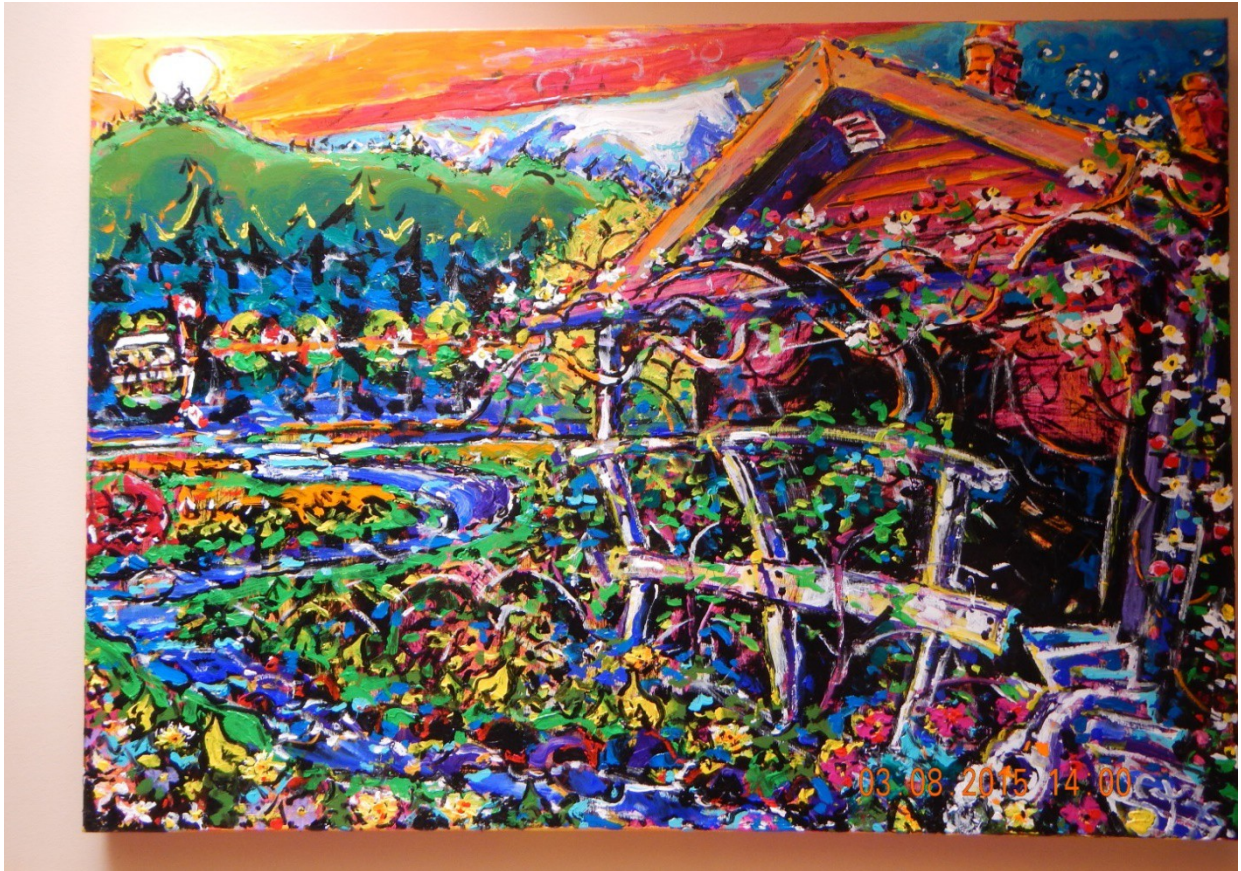


Figure 1. 2 Canadian naturalist/painters Tom Thompson (Photo by Franklin Carmichael) and Hamilton Mack Laing

Unbeknown to many – even to some of his friends, BC artist Brian Scott, who has been a generous benefactor and strong supporter of the Mack Laing Heritage Society, and many other successful environmental societies in the Comox Valley, such as the Cumberland Community Forest Society, occasionally paints evocative paintings of Baybrook and Shakesides. They are becoming a new occasional

theme in his already vast repertoire. Usually turning to a powerful expressionist idiom, Brian Scott paintings are visual narratives celebrating the Comox Valley's history and landscapes. They are a celebration of BC's cultural past, a kind of reminder of a Marcel Proust "time withheld."

For BC Day I happened to be in the Brian Scott Gallery, in Black Creek – a destination not to missed by Vancouver Island or Comox Valley residents – talking to Brian and looking at a collection of his recent paintings, when I spotted a new painting of Baybrook unknown to me. To date I knew that Brian had produced four paintings in the "Baybrook and Shakesides" series, so I was taken aback by this one, and I asked him if there were others: "Oh yes a lady came in and immediately fell in love with one. Yes, Baybrook is such a beautiful place, replete with history, sometimes I get up at night and paint it. It is so tragic that the Town of Comox just doesn't seem to care for its history and is bent on erasing the memory of one of Canada's premiere conservationists from the 1920's, and even the memory of Alice Munro. I just don't get it. And I keep telling visitors, Alice Munro stood on that deck, spent time in this house. Place is memory."



True. Culture is memory. There is no place without memory, and a place without memory – as even old theologians knew is “un lugar sin limites” – “a place without limits”, which was the definition of “Hell.” And that is quite true – the old Soviet Union spent a lot of effort erasing memory, so that the hell that was the communist system could tell its own truth. And, as history tells it, that turned out to be a kind of Hell. Any place without heritage, and only manufactured history is about as interesting as Wall Mart. It becomes a kind of Hell.

It is hard to describe, but though the use of prime colours in Brian Scott’s paintings give them a fauvist solidity, the lilt of his perspectives light up a warm fire and glow that sets into motion a continuous narrative that invites the viewer into the tale of the local history that his paintings tell. The paintings are not just about the houses, boats or places they depict. They are about inviting viewers into the spirit of place. The boat series are literally reflections on an age of abundant fishery and a stillness of boats now at harbour. In the Shakeside and Baybrook series, it is as though he picked up a thread from the memory of Tom Thompson

and his generation, and called the viewer back to contemplate the distance travelled in our cultural history. It is a kind of magical conjuring of a time withheld that shines over us and informs our national identity. It is more than just the capturing of an era, it is an evening song of memory in which sunsets infuse many of his paintings.

In this painting nature takes over, revels and celebrates in the memory of one of Canada's most esteemed naturalists and the world of a young post- WWI Canada. The growth around the porch is "limitrophic". It is a boundary, it creates a curtain on a threshold to Mack Laing's inner world. Under the spectre of a receding Comox Glacier there is a movement through time in this new painting basking in a sunset that sweeps out into a Van Gogh-like starry night sky. If you catch that, there is a typical humorous Brian Scott tongue-in-cheek reference to VanGogh.

Although it is perhaps an unintentional reference, it bears pointing out, to those of us who may not have had a good art education. As critics have often pointed out, in Van Gogh's "Starry Sky" painting the sky deliberately points to the smallness to the "small town." And behind Baybrook's skyline lies the Town of Comox.

It is indeed a small town that would go out of its way to demolish what is now a now recognized national heritage site, as Heritage BC pointed out to Mayor Ives and Council in June 2015, and which The National Trust of Canada has now pointed out again. A small town that would sanction the demolition of national heritage, would make cultural vandalism seem a respectable civic occupation.

The small-minded town in this painting is a dark place behind the generous and giving nature that flows out the front door of Mack Laing's Baybrook. This generosity and openness characterizes the rest of the valley and the life-giving bounties of the estuary. Fortunately, this is a painting. In life as in this painting, the small town needs not remain small-minded, there is redemption. Through Baybrook, the small town is connected outwards by the outflow of Brooklyn creek to two small Canadian flags that re-assert what Laing would time and again call, "the real thing": real Canadian values that celebrate our Canadian identity and the pioneers of Laing's generation who deserve to be remembered and celebrated on this BC Day 2015.

This paintings, and others, are for sale at the Brian Scott Gallery in Black Creek or by contacting Brian at: <http://www.brianscottfineart.com/>

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