

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By J. K. NESBITT

The Lost Pictures of Early Victoria

IF YOU SHOULD come across a painting of British Columbia scenery, signed G. T. Brown, 1883, buy it. It's valuable.

In this age of British Columbia—perhaps it's only a craze—the paintings of long ago have become the rage, and some high prices are being paid for them, prices far higher than the artist ever received.

Lieutenant-Governor Frank Mackenzie Ross has done a fine job for British Columbia by purchasing—and otherwise obtaining—many fine paintings of our scenery for the new Government House. It was he who largely set the current fashion, which has auctioneers delighted.

G. T. Brown is not as well known, even in Victoria, as other artists of long ago, such as Emily Carr (far ahead of all in price and fame), Paul Kane, Bell Smith, Rose Bullen, Frederick Whymer, Henry James Warre, Thomas Frupp, Thomas Bamford, Thomas Mower Martin, James Blomfield, L'Aubiniere, Samuel Maclure, Emily Woods, Susan, Josephine and Barbara Crease.

There are several Brown paintings in the Provincial Archives, thanks to the diligence of Provincial Archivist-Librarian Willard E. Ireland, who haunts old places looking for just such treasures, so that they may be preserved for the public.

G. T. Brown caused some stir in Victoria in 1882-83. Little is known of him today, except that he came from California. His photograph shows him a tall, slender man, with black beard and long black hair, handsome, somewhat conceited one might say, an elegant dresser.

HOTEL STUDIO

He traveled extensively through the interior of the province, and set up a studio in the Occidental Hotel, at the corner of Wharf and Johnson. It would be interesting, and valuable, if today we knew more of his life.

Victorians first learned of G. T. Brown in The Colonist in late November of 1882:

"The Great Interior on Canvas—About three months ago Mr. G. T. Brown, an artist of more than local celebrity in California and elsewhere passed through Victoria and joined Mr. A. Bowman's geological survey party east of the Cascade Mountains.

"At Kamloops Mr. Brown commenced taking sketches and secured one of a beautiful piece of landscape of the South Thompson looking up the river from Peterson's Hotel. The next is a very pretty picture of the same charming river 18 miles higher up, taking in a portion of Duck and Pringle's ranch and the scenery adjacent.

"Shuswap Lake is illustrated by four very fine views and Spillamacheen by two, one of the river and the other with Mr. Fortune's farm premises in the foreground, equally choice. Long Lake, a beautiful sheet of water running parallel with Lake Okanagan has two sketches, one looking up from a very peculiar low-lying island at high water called the Railroad, which at low water divides the lake in two, and the other from the same point of view looking both ways. A nice bit of scenery taken from Eli Lequine's residence, Okanagan Mission, comes next in order, from which point the artist proceeded to Keremev, where he took a charming sketch of the mountain a few miles from Mr. Fric's residence.

"Going up the Similkameen, a lively picture is made with a nice flat in the foreground and the majestic Similkameen Mountains, in which vast deposits of silver are said to exist, stretching away south of the 49th parallel. The Forks of this river, just above Allison's Ranch, showing the distant Cascades, make an excellent picture, as does also the Giant's Castle Mountain. Two or three magnificent bits of scenery in the vicinity of Hope are transferred to canvas; together with several equally choice views on the Fraser, between Hope and New Westminster. Those pictures were all taken with the exquisite tints of autumn on the foliage; which give the landscapes a rich, warm coloring that must be seen to be appreciated.



G. T. BROWN . . . somewhere his paintings must still exist and may be very valuable.

"Mr. Brown has a fine view of Mount Baker, taken from opposite Trial Island, and a number of other B.C. sketches that are well worth a visit to his studio at the Occidental Hotel, Wharf Street. He is purposing to do those pictures in water colors and will furnish any of them to order that visitors may take a fancy to, as he will stay in this city during the winter and take another tour into the interior next summer.

"His opinion is that this province may challenge the world for magnificent and picturesque scenery."

BROWN SEEMS to have worked hard all that winter in his studio, for he turned out a great deal of work, and in June of 1883 he was ready for his first exhibition.

The Colonist offered him space, and gave him fine publicity: "Exhibition in oils of British Columbia scenery—Yesterday was the opening day of the exhibition at The Colonist's new building of oil paintings from the brush of our local artist, Mr. G. T. Brown. Viewed in the light of artistic productions, they are excellent, but when inspected by those with whom the scenes represented were familiar, their fidelity elicited an extra meed of praise, proving that the artist has taken great pains to make them correct portraits, as well as good paintings.

"They are executed from sketches made on the spot by Mr. Brown. The gem of the collection is undoubtedly that entitled 'Sunset on Shuswap Lake,' which is simply perfection from an artistic point of view alone, independently of its resemblance to the original. The effects of distance have been carefully preserved, while the heavy clouds hanging overhead, whose lights and shadows have been successfully delineated, aid the calm, clear water to reflect in gold and crimson the declining rays of the setting sun; and the foliage of the trees, which thickly fringe the shores, borrowing its brilliant shades from the same source, lends an additional beauty to this lovely scene.

"Notable among the others also were 'Race Rocks and Royal Roads', 'The Gorge', from the west bank and 'Nature's Vase and Bouquet', the latter representing a mass of granite that ages ago had fallen from the mountain above, but on whose surface sufficient soil has formed to rear large trees of several kinds. The locality of this scene is on the banks of the Okanagan Lake. Several of the paintings have already been sold, and considering the general excellence of the display, the fact is not surprising. All who can spare time should pay a visit of inspection, which is free to all."

The Lieutenant-Governor of the day, Hon. Clement Francis Cornwall, was as interested in B.C. painting as is the Lieutenant-Governor of today, and he went to see the exhibition, and gave encouragement to the artist:

"The attendance of visitors to Mr. G. T. Brown's picture gallery on Government Street was considerably greater than that of the day previous. During the afternoon His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor was present and purchased a painting entitled 'Twilight on the South Thompson' (a very pretty scene) and expressed himself greatly pleased with the collection. Those who are in the habit of boating on the Arm will at once recognize the truthful likeness in the view called 'Above the Gorge.' 'Long Lake, B.C.' and 'Clover Point, Victoria,' are also worthy of notice. Mr. Brown is already selecting fresh subjects for new pictures."

HIGH PRAISE

During the exhibition, Brown found time to get out into the woods for more work: "A Beautiful Painting—G. T. Brown has just completed a sketch of Goldstream Falls, which will be placed on exhibition today with the present collection. It is a picture well worth seeing, as it represents one of Victoria's choicest spots in nature. The sketch was taken in the afternoon, when the cool, refreshing pool below the falls is in shadow; above the falls, the sun lights up the foliage in rich, warm tints, giving the entire picture a clever picturesqueness."

A reviewer signing himself "Max" wrote in The Colonist: "To the gentleman who represented in his landscape paintings some of the most charming scenes of our beautiful province there is more than praise due. The hand of the artist is noticeable in all his paintings exhibited in The Colonist's new building.

"Taking into account that he is the pioneer—the originator of this intellectual and refined art—that he is the first to supply the young people of this city with the grand idea of the 'noble art'—he should be more than patronized. Not one of his paintings should be left unsold. Any one of them is not without merit.

"In the 'Goldstream Falls' painting the glorious tints of summer foliage under a bright blue sky are delicately handled—the waterfall itself looking at natural as it looks to the eye of those who saw it falling in the midst of the cedar and pine of the forest."

"The early morning at Vermillion Forks' . . . in this picture the grandeur of mountain scenery is portrayed with wonderful taste, the Cascade range unfolding the majesty of mountain scenery.

"The thunder storm on Shuswap Lake' . . . the grand gloom, with the sunlight breaking through, is like hope coming in the darkness of despair. This painting is natural and fine.

"The Gorge, Portage Inlet, Victoria' . . . this painting is so natural that a dreamer might suppose he was looking at nature itself. The foliage of the different trees in nature's variegated colors is exquisitely put before the observer; the rocks and dells are nature's.

"If I were in the habit, or rather, if I had the ability of describing landscape painting, any one of these pictures would not be without a purchaser. Many of them are sold. They are works of art, exhibited by the pioneer artist of the province. They should all be purchased of him, if it were only to encourage those (and they are few) who have a natural taste for the refined art of landscape painting."

And that, as far as we can learn today, was the end of G. T. Brown in Victoria. Not another mention of him can be found in The Colonist.

Did he return to California? And wouldn't it be fine to know who bought his paintings, and for how much, and where they are all now?