

Kilpin and the Arts Milieu of Montreal (1906-1919)

By Barbara Winters

Lekh Kilpin was one of many English artists who came to Canada around the turn of the 19th century in search of new opportunities. Available evidence indicates that he may have been struggling to make a living in England. After 22 years, he had left his Enfield Grammar School position in 1902. Furthermore, his appointment as an examiner for the annual South Kensington examinations was on a year-to-year basis and provided only short-term employment. As an art teacher with basic industrial arts training, Kilpin likely found it difficult to gain recognition within the hierarchical and crowded British 'fine arts' world. His well connected brother George, who was Vice-President and General Manager of Imperial Oil in Montreal, encouraged him to move and offered help to get him established. Kilpin was 52 when he arrived in Montreal in 1906 with his wife Blanche and their three children, Noel, Marie and Eric.

Kilpin's English background would carry substantial cachet in the Anglophile Canada of this period, where the main arts organizations and educational programs were based on British models. He was soon teaching at the Montreal Technical Institute and then in public schools in the Westmount School District. In 1907, he became a member of the Art Association of Montreal (AAM), the country's largest, most distinguished private arts organization and the domain of prominent Anglophone art collectors and patrons. For artists, AAM membership had obvious benefits, not least of which was contact with affluent collectors. The AAM spring exhibition was an important showcase for Canadian art, and Kilpin submitted works annually. He astutely entered several portraits in his first AAM shows, no doubt to display his prowess in this genre. While collectors bought few works by Canadian artists, preferring the prestige and investment value of European art, they did commission portraits. Kilpin achieved considerable success in portraiture, as evidenced by the successive list of works in AAM exhibitions and by known commissions such as portraits of Bishop Oxenden and Chancellor Bethune for the Anglican Diocese of Montreal. Among the most prominent of his sitters were Lady Van Horne, John Ogilvy, an art dealer, and John Bowles Learmont, a pillar of the AAM.

In 1912, Kilpin was nominated for membership in the newly founded Montreal Arts Club by Maurice Cullen, a key figure in the Montreal arts milieu. At this time, Kilpin had a studio near Cullen's on Beaver Hall Hill and may have come to know him and the other founding members of the Arts Club who worked together in Cullen's studio on Saturday afternoons. Much smaller and more intimate than the AAM, the Arts Club was an invitation-only men's enclave of prominent Francophone and Anglophone artists, architects, writers and art lovers who were interested in promoting Canadian culture. A well-appointed clubhouse on Victoria Street offered a social environment where topical issues like nationalism and modernism could be debated with peers. Among the broad spectrum of members were the most radical artists in Montreal. A.Y. Jackson, John Lyman and Randolph Hewton, whose Post-Impressionist inspired paintings received now-legendary condemnation from critics when shown at the AAM in 1913, were actively recruited for membership. Exhibitions were mounted several times a year to feature members' work as well as that of leading contemporary Canadian artists. Kilpin took an active part in club events, showing his work in the exhibitions and serving on the House Committee. Noel Kilpin later recalled that club members such as Cullen, Herbert

Raine and Wilfred Barnes were frequent visitors to the Kilpin home on Sherbrooke Street.

It was during his Arts Club years that discernible changes appear in Kilpin's art, particularly in paintings and prints of the Canadian landscape, that archetypal Canadian subject important to the nationalists of the day. Many of his late works show that Kilpin was responding to the more expressive, impressionist approach of highly regarded associates such as Cullen and Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté. Those influences are most evident in Langley collection paintings such as *The Harbour* and *Clark's Creek*. Like these and other Quebec artists, Kilpin made frequent sketching trips to favourite sites in the Laurentians, especially around Shawbridge where the family had a cottage, and along the north shore of the St. Lawrence in the Charlevoix region. His children recalled him working outdoors in the snow, his hands in gloves with trimmed off fingers, trying to capture the essence of the winter landscape. Even though Kilpin never abandoned his well-honed use of English landscape conventions, his naturalistic style and sober palette, the landscapes of the last decade of his life, when he was fully immersed in the art scene in Montreal and inspired by the Quebec countryside, are the most evocative and personal of his career.

The Valley of the Derwent at Haddon, 1905, watercolour, 28.9 X 46.4, Langley Centennial Museum, 8125



This detailed, typical English watercolour landscape derives from the topographical tradition of the 18th century. In this case it is a house ‘portrait’ reminiscent of the famous scenes of Windsor Castle by Paul Sandby (1830-1809). This watercolour depicts Haddon Hall, which was one of the estates of the Duke of Rutland, Marquess of Granby. Blanche Kilpin corresponded with Violet Granby, herself an artist, who admired Kilpin’s paintings and was trying to help find patrons and dealers for him. In 1906 Granby wrote in a letter to Blanche : “I thought the paintings I saw last autumn (when you were at Haddon) by your husband, so excellent, so poetical –that I should like to help you and him—to get work to do. I consider his ‘drawing’ so good in his paintings—that he is the very man to paint pictures or subject sketches of peoples [sic] houses—or bits of their properties.” *The Valley of the Derwent at Haddon* is one of several scenes Kilpin painted in this area of Derbyshire, some now in the Langley Museum collection. Violet Granby bought a painting by Kilpin of Bakewell footbridge, a medieval bridge over the River Wye at the entrance to Bakewell, a town near Haddon Hall.

The Harbour, n.d., oil on board, 27 X 43, Langley Centennial Museum collection, 8102



The Harbour, broadly painted with an icy palette, captures the essence of a frosty scene in a busy port on the St. Lawrence, probably Montreal. This painting exemplifies the transition in Kilpin’s work from the meticulously detailed landscapes of his English period to his more boldly expressive work of the 1910s. It is similar in style and atmosphere to works such as *Montreal Harbour* (1915) by Maurice Cullen and *Fumées du port de Montréal* (1914) by Suzor-Coté. Seascapes had a long tradition in European painting and were particularly popular in the late 19th with Impressionists who were interested in the transient play of light and colour on water and mist. Certainly in

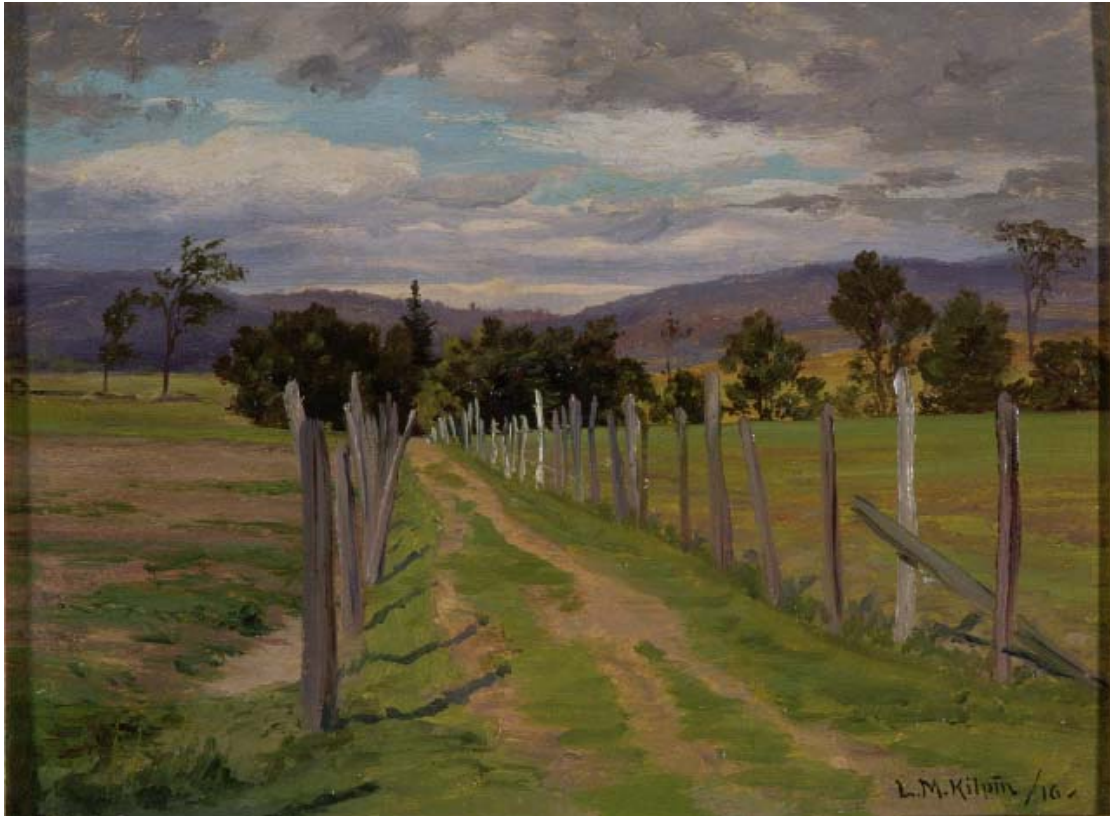
Canada, for the earliest English painters to numerous artists of Kilpin's period, the activity on the St. Lawrence and in its major harbours was a subject of continuous interest.

Clark's Creek, n.d., oil on board, Langley Centennial Museum collection, 5924



In 1912, when Kilpin was developing a friendship with Maurice Cullen, the April edition of *The Canadian Magazine* published “Maurice Cullen: a Painter of the Snow” by the critic Newton MacTavish. In this article, illustrated with several paintings of streams winding through a snowy landscape, MacTavish praised Cullen as the interpreter *par excellence* of the Canadian winter. Although in works such as *Clark's Creek*, Kilpin was clearly influenced by numerous similar compositions by Cullen and Suzor-Coté, his work retains a greater sense of solid form. Kilpin never fully adopted the broken brushstrokes, brighter palette and impasto technique of these Canadian colleagues. As a result, *Clark's Creek* lacks the vibrancy and brilliance of their winter landscapes.

Back Road to Shawbridge Station, c. 1916, oil on board, 23 X 30.5, Langley Centennial Museum collection, 5917



This may be a work that Kilpin did on site while sketching in the region of the family cottage at Shawbridge. It is an unimposing scene, chosen for what it offered in design possibilities. The central dirt track lined by rustic fence posts allows the artist to explore the elements of deep perspective and geometric patterning set up by the view directly down the road. The horizon divides the scene in half, with fence, road and fields forming three triangles that contrast in bold shape and colour with the soft curving forms of hills and clouds. While Kilpin doesn't dramatically flatten perspective like more modernist contemporaries, he does, nevertheless, make the viewer aware of the substance of painting by the formal structure and the use of gestural, textured brushstrokes. This is a successful, vigorous sketch that demonstrates the artist's sheer joy in painting, while maintaining, always, a conscious sense of composition.