

## “Missionary for Culture”: Walter Abell, Maritime Art and Cultural Democracy, 1928-1944

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Résumé de l'article

Pendant son séjour en Nouvelle-Écosse, Walter Abell acquit une influence à titre de critique, d'universitaire et d'activiste artistique. Bien que les efforts d'Abell pour nationaliser les institutions et les initiatives artistiques des Maritimes puissent sembler avoir contribué à la domination du centre du Canada sur les institutions culturelles, il faut reconnaître qu'Abell voyait ses actions d'une tout autre façon et qu'il croyait que ses expériences réalisées aux Maritimes concernant ce qu'il appelait la “démocratie culturelle” pouvaient s'étendre à tout le pays. Toutefois, la plus grande erreur de jugement d'Abell fut peut-être d'avoir cru que son objectif d'une culture fondée sur la participation et la collaboration de la communauté était le but commun visé par les élites et les institutions canadiennes.

# “Missionary for Culture”: Walter Abell, *Maritime Art* and Cultural Democracy, 1928-1944

KIRK NIERGARTH

*Pendant son séjour en Nouvelle-Écosse, Walter Abell acquit une influence à titre de critique, d'universitaire et d'activiste artistique. Bien que les efforts d'Abell pour nationaliser les institutions et les initiatives artistiques des Maritimes puissent sembler avoir contribué à la domination du centre du Canada sur les institutions culturelles, il faut reconnaître qu'Abell voyait ses actions d'une tout autre façon et qu'il croyait que ses expériences réalisées aux Maritimes concernant ce qu'il appelait la « démocratie culturelle » pouvaient s'étendre à tout le pays. Toutefois, la plus grande erreur de jugement d'Abell fut peut-être d'avoir cru que son objectif d'une culture fondée sur la participation et la collaboration de la communauté était le but commun visé par les élites et les institutions canadiennes.*

*During his years in Nova Scotia, Walter Abell became an influential critic, scholar and arts activist. Even though Abell's efforts to nationalize Maritime art institutions and initiatives can be seen to have contributed to central-Canadian domination of cultural institutions, it should be recognized that Abell understood his actions very differently and that he thought his Maritime-based experiments in what he called “cultural democracy” could be expanded across the country. Abell's perception, however, that his goal of a participatory, cooperative, community-based culture was the common aim of Canada's elites and institutions was perhaps his greatest misjudgment.*

DURING HIS 16 YEARS IN CANADA (1928-1944), all but the last of which was spent in Nova Scotia, Walter Abell created an impressive résumé. One of the first professors of fine art in a Canadian university, Abell was instrumental in the creation of the Maritime Art Association (MAA) and became the founding editor of Canada's first fine-art magazine – *Maritime Art*. He was an organizer and keynote speaker at the first national assembly of Canadian artists in 1941 and was a founding executive member of the organization that arose from this conference, the Federation of Canadian Artists (FCA). Abell was also an influential critic and aesthetic theorist who promoted both modern and socially relevant art. Historians have documented these accomplishments and have analyzed how they, for good and ill, helped shape the development of Maritime and Canadian culture.<sup>1</sup> What tends to be understated in

1 On Abell's role in founding the Maritime Art Association see Amanda Forbes, “The Maritime Art Association”, Honours thesis, Acadia University, 1990 and Karen Herring, “Creating a Centre/Recreating the Margin: Ted Campbell and his Studio, Saint John, New Brunswick, in the

these accounts, however, is that Maritime and Canadian culture did not develop as Abell had envisioned. The culture of a nation, Abell once said, was “like a stellar system with infinitely complex interweaving movements; with vast incalculable forces at work. We cannot chart [its] exact goals, but we can see . . . a common drift”.<sup>2</sup> The “common drift” Abell thought he was seeing in Maritime and Canadian culture during the Second World War changed course in the post-war years. A fuller understanding of Abell’s Canadian career must reckon with the variance between our recorded past and his imagined future.

The disjuncture between what Abell achieved and what he hoped to achieve is in part explained by an apparent contradiction: Abell was simultaneously a cultural radical and a member of the cultural elite.<sup>3</sup> This duality is perhaps nowhere better

1930s and 40s”, MA thesis, Carleton University, 1993, pp. 30-43. On his editorship of *Maritime Art/Canadian Art* see Julia Scalzo “Walter Abell: From *Maritime Art* to *Canadian Art*”, *Vanguard* (February/March 1987), pp. 20-3 and Robert Graham, “Understanding artscanada: History, Practice and Idea”, MA thesis, McGill, 1988. On Abell’s part in the Kingston Conference see Michael Bell, “The Welfare of Art in Canada”, Introduction to *The Kingston Conference Proceedings: A Reprint of the Proceedings of the 1941 Kingston Artists’ Conference* (Kingston, 1983) and Jeffrey D. Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada: American Philanthropy and the Arts and Letters in Canada* (Montreal, 2005), pp. 138-47. The latter book is a revised version of Brison’s “Cultural Interventions: American Corporate Philanthropy and the Construction of the Arts and Letters in Canada, 1900-1957”, PhD diss., Queen’s University, 1998. Previous studies of Abell’s socially conscious criticism include the following: Hélène Sicotte, “Walter Abell, Robert Ayre, Graham McInnes: aperçu de la perspective sociale dans la critique d’art canadienne entre 1935 and 1945”, MA thesis, Université de Québec à Montréal, 1989; “Walter Abell Au Canada, 1928-1944: contribution d’un critique d’art américain au discours canadien en faveur de l’intégration sociale de l’art”, *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, 11, 1&2 (1988), pp. 88-107; Esther Trépanier, “Modernité et conscience sociale: la critique d’art progressiste des années trente”, *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 8, 1 (1984), pp. 80-108; Nancy Cynthia Clark, “Understandings and Misunderstandings of Modern Art in Canada: Aspects of Canadian Art Criticism and Theory, c.1910-1940”, MA thesis, Carleton, 1987, pp. 148-54; and Anna Victoria Hudson, “Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950”, PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1997, pp. 80-3. Andrew Nurse analyses Abell as a cultural anti-modernist in “A Confusion of Values: Artists and Artistic Ideologies in Modern Canada, 1927-1952”, MA thesis, Queen’s University, 1991, pp. 92-3.

- 2 Walter Abell, “Art and Democracy”, in André Biéler and Elizabeth Harrison, eds., *Conference of Canadian Artists, held at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ont., June 26th, 27th, 28th, 1941, National Gallery, Ottawa, June 29th 1941, under the joint auspices of the Carnegie Corporation, the National Gallery, and Queen’s University* (Kingston, 1941), p. 32.

- 3 Both Abell’s status amongst the cultural elite and his radical ideals can be traced to his early life in the United States. Born in Philadelphia in 1897, Abell was a conscientious objector during the First World War – a stance that either underlay or was motivated by his involvement with the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers). After graduating from Quaker-founded Swarthmore College in 1920 with a degree in English literature, he was for two years editor of the *Friends Intelligencer*, the monthly publication of the liberal wing of American Quakers, and then spent a year as Publicity Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, an international aid organization. He then returned to Swarthmore to pursue a master’s degree in art criticism, which resulted in a thesis entitled “Fine Art as an Element in Liberal Education” (1924). Abell’s thesis shows that he had ambitious ideas about what art education could achieve in society. Following American philosopher John Dewey, Abell suggested that the importance of the arts was their relationship to “aesthetic experience” and the social benefits these kinds of experiences would produce. Aesthetic creations, in Abell’s view, “socialize” the aesthetic experience of their creators and thus prompt aesthetic experience in their observers. The dissemination and democratization of aesthetic experience had the potential to replace the “acquisitive” ideal of modern society with a “creative” ideal that alone could

illustrated than in his opening speech, “Art and Democracy”, delivered to the assembled delegates in Kingston at the Conference of Canadian Artists on 27 June 1941.<sup>4</sup> Abell knew his audience was dominated by fine artists, especially painters, but he urged them to conceive of art in an inclusive sense. “In order to discuss art and democracy”, Abell suggested, one need consider “not only painting but sculpture, architecture, town planning, the decorative arts like textiles and pottery, the industrial arts including everything from vanity cases to motor cars, and public utilities such as highways, dams, and bridges”. And the “democratic usage of art”, he continued, “would serve the life of the people as a whole; no particular class, no particular individual, but the whole of society served in the fullest, richest possible way, in order to bring about the greatest enjoyment of life and the greatest dignity of living through the services of the artist to the community”. Artists in Canada, Abell feared, were not serving their communities. Rather they served the economic elite. Canada was not a cultural democracy, but a “cultural plutocracy” which was “determined by a small group possessing great wealth”. Canadian slums, Abell said, were both “an affront to democracy and to art” and that in Canada it was time for artists to play a role in the renaissance of democracy: “Every one of our artists could improve the life of the people by at least one forward step, and many could make great advances”. Standing in the way of these advances was an “industrial and economic organization” involving “two basic factors of the social history of recent times: the shock to cultural traditions

achieve “the union of all in a common effort to satisfy needs which are felt by each, as contrasted with the effort of each to personally control limited commodities which are sought by all” (pp. 54, 70). It was while working on his master’s thesis that Abell first came into close contact with the Barnes Foundation, an organization which seems to have shared, if not inspired, Abell’s educational ideals. In collaboration with Dewey, Dr. Alfred C. Barnes established his foundation in 1922 to provide “non-discriminatory access to art and education”. Dewey was named its first director of education in 1923. It was likely Barnes or Dewey who put Abell in touch with George Santayana, with whom he seems to have spent some time studying in Paris. The intellectual influence of these contacts was long lasting. In the acknowledgements of Abell’s first book, he credits Barnes and Santayana with providing him with the “foundations of critical thinking”. Practically, these contacts with American intellectual luminaries may have also been influential in helping him obtain his first teaching position as an associate professor at Antioch College, a small, liberal arts college in Ohio, and in obtaining grants from the Carnegie Corporation for summer studies at the Art Institute of Chicago and at Harvard University. These career details are gleaned from Abell’s résumé in his personnel file in Departments: Education, Walter Abell, 1937-1938, Records of the Office of the Director (P.N. Youtz, 1933-1938), Brooklyn Museum Archives as well as Hélène Sicotte, “Walter Abell Au Canada, 1928-1944”.

- 4 On the organization, proceedings and significance of this conference, referred to generally in the historiography and hereafter in this article as the Kingston Conference, see Hélène Sicotte, “À Kingston, il y a 50 ans, la conférence des artistes canadiens : débat sur la place de l’artiste dans la société”, *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, 14, 2 (1992), pp. 28-47. My reading of “Art and Democracy” diverges from Andrew Nurse’s, which treats Abell’s speech as an example of “anti-modernism”. Abell refers, Nurse argues, to an “idyllic, almost utopian folk culture”. Nurse’s analysis is convincing, but it does little to differentiate between conservative antimodernists such as Marius Barbeau and Helen Creighton, who sought to preserve an “authentic” folk culture that had no natural place in modern society, and an antimodernist like Abell who sought to use elements of the (idealized) past to reform the present. What social critique does not turn upon an idealized other place or time – for contemporaries of Abell it was the Soviet Union – to argue that the here and now is not immutable and unchangeable? See Andrew Nurse, “A Confusion of Values”, pp. 92-3.

caused by the industrial revolution, on the one hand, and the great concentration of wealth in our social system on the other hand”.<sup>5</sup>

“Art and Democracy” expresses, from a cultural perspective, ideas typical of the leading left-wing political formation of the late-1930s and early-1940s, a formation Ian McKay has called “radical planners and state builders”.<sup>6</sup> Yet Abell’s selection as the opening speaker of the Kingston conference also supports Jeffrey Brison’s categorization of him as a member of an “international art elite” – financially dependent upon and sympathetic to the aims of American philanthropic foundations. Brison argues that, in spite of Abell’s professed support of cultural democracy, “in reality” the Kingston Conference “reflected the desires of a small group of artists, art bureaucrats, and their backers at the Carnegie Corporation to organize and lead a Canadian artistic constituency”. The success of the conference allowed this small group, of which Abell was a prominent member, to place “the Canadian art scene on the path to centralization and bureaucratization on a scale that exceeded the wildest fantasies of American New Dealers”. The conference, in Brison’s reading, was an exercise in “elite consolidation” and the “self-appointed” leaders of the conference would be “invited into the state as the state’s sphere of influence increased” in post-war Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Brison is right to raise concerns about control of the means of mental production and he, following Mary Vipond, is convincing in his conclusion that a “boy’s club” of educated elites, of which Walter Abell was a member, had privileged access to these means in Canada.<sup>8</sup> Less convincing is Brison’s claim that “what stands out” in his research “is the cultural elite’s ability to ‘conspire’ – to ‘speak together’ in order to defend and even impose certain values [that] either directly reinforced or indirectly drew attention away from the inequities of a liberal capitalist order”.<sup>9</sup> For this to be true, Abell’s speech at the Kingston Conference that, contradictorily, drew attention specifically towards these inequities, needs to be silenced or ignored. Abell’s speech and his other contributions to Canadian cultural discourse reveal ideological fissures

5 Abell, “Art and Democracy”, pp. 23, 25, 27.

6 Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History* (Toronto, 2005) pp. 169-83. This formation envisioned a planned economy controlled by bureaucrats and technocrats applying the research of scientists and social scientists to solve social problems. The largest political organization mobilized by this formation, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), has attracted a great deal of attention from historians, with Walter Young’s *The Anatomy of a Party* (Toronto, 1969) remaining the classic monograph study. A significant intellectual organization, the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR), is studied in Michiel Horn, *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada, 1930-1942* (Toronto, 1980). Insights into the intellectual life of this formation are also to be found in Marlene Shore, *The Science of Social Redemption: McGill, the Chicago School, and the Origins of Social Research in Canada* (Toronto, 1987) and in L.B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967* (Montreal, 2003), pp. 29-103, although this latter work considers “cultural critics” across the ideological spectrum. The diverse cultural manifestations of this formation have begun to attract scholarly attention. Notably, in the visual arts, Anna Hudson’s path-breaking dissertation, “Art and Social Progress”, explores the connection between social democratic politics and visual language of Toronto painters in this period.

7 Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada*, pp. 138, 69, 141 and Brison, “The Kingston Conference, the Carnegie Corporation and a New Deal for the Arts in Canada”, *American Review of Canadian Studies* (Winter 1993), p. 519.

8 Mary Vipond, “The Nationalist Network: English Canada’s Intellectuals and Artists in the 1920s”, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 7, 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 32-52.

9 Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada*, p. 10.

beneath the surface of apparent elite unity. If Abell's efforts to nationalize Maritime art institutions and initiatives – for example, transforming *Maritime Art* into *Canadian Art* – can be seen to have contributed to the bureaucratization and centralization of culture in Canada, Abell understood his actions quite differently. Abell envisioned the experiments in cultural democracy he was enthusiastic about in the Maritimes being expanded across the country. Rather than bureaucratic and centralized, Abell envisioned coordinated, cooperative, community-based culture. Abell's perception that this goal was the common aim of Canada's elites and national cultural institutions was, perhaps, his greatest misjudgment.

"There was no uncertainty about the significance of the [Kingston] Conference once it got under way", Abell wrote in *Maritime Art*. "Something in the atmosphere of the group seemed to lift it above sectionalism and divisionism, binding the members together in the experience of a large and liberating unity".<sup>10</sup> If the ideas expressed in "Art and Democracy" would have been radical a decade earlier and seem radical again today, at the 1941 Kingston Conference they were much closer to "common sense" – close enough, at least, to leave Abell feeling that his speech was a part of a "large and liberating unity". Abell's belief in this unity persisted beyond the intense days of the conference. More than two years later, in August 1943, Abell wrote to his friend, Montreal artist Frederick Taylor, who was, at that moment, both vice-president of the FCA and a member of the Communist-organized Labour Progressive Party: "It is heartening to find an increasing number of people who seem to see eye to eye on the essentials of cultural progress. I think that we may find things sweeping before us faster than we thought possible a few years ago".<sup>11</sup>

When Abell writes about "things sweeping before us" it is clear his intentions were not merely to organize Canadian culture, but to change it. "I remember a phrase of William Lloyd Garrison to the effect that if he ever got a chance to strike a blow against slavery, he'd strike hard", Abell wrote to Taylor. "I have felt for many years that if I ever got a chance to strike a blow for the kind of culture that a democracy ought to have, I'd strike hard. I feel now that I have a chance and I'm going to strike with all my might – not with mere reckless brute force, of course, but with all the real power, intelligence, and integrity which I can command".<sup>12</sup> If Abell wished to "strike a blow" for democratic culture in Canada, however, this desire was tempered by his financial reliance on the patronage of the Carnegie Corporation.

Abell's Canadian career was initiated by a letter sent to him in 1927 by Frederick P. Keppel, the Carnegie Corporation's president. "I have just had a chance to recommend you for a position as professor of fine arts at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia", Keppel wrote. "If the matter is one that will interest you at all, let me know and I will press it forward vigorously".<sup>13</sup> Acadia was among four

10 "Editorial", *Maritime Art*, 2, 1 (October-November 1941), p. 2.

11 Abell to Taylor, 13 August 1943, Fred Taylor Papers, reel H2992, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Taylor's involvement in the Communist Party of Canada is featured in Merily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Toronto, 1983) and his involvement in the FCA is discussed in both Michael Bell, "The Welfare of Art in Canada" and Andrew Nurse, "A Confusion of Values", pp. 126-50.

12 Abell to Taylor, 13 August 1943, Fred Taylor Papers, reel H2992, LAC.

13 Frederick P. Keppel to Professor Walter H. Abell, 17 March 1927, Carnegie Corporation New York fonds, series III A, box 1, folder 6, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library



Canadian universities endowed with a fine arts department by the Carnegie Corporation in the late 1920s.<sup>14</sup> Keppel's recommendation was heeded and Abell began teaching at Acadia in 1928. Carnegie also funded Abell's preliminary efforts to organize the MAA and this financial support grew substantially after the organization was launched in the spring of 1935. Carnegie also subsidized the publication costs of Abell's first monograph, *Representation and Form* (1936), underwrote the magazine *Maritime Art* beginning in 1940 and, when Acadia decided it could no longer afford a fine arts department in 1943, provided a salary for Abell at his new position as director of education at the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>15</sup>

With so many of Abell's contributions to Maritime and Canadian culture materially dependent upon the Carnegie Corporation, it is no wonder Brison, in his critical account of the corporation's cultural activities, has characterized him as a "long-time Carnegie ally". Brison's analysis suggests that not only did the Carnegie Corporation seek to preserve and disseminate traditional elite culture, it also vested contemporary elites with control of the bureaucratic mechanisms that would facilitate this dissemination.<sup>16</sup> There is little room, however, in Brison's analysis for subversives who thought Carnegie's means could lead to very different ends or for those who may have been naïve about Carnegie munificence. On occasion, Abell seems to have been remarkably innocent. After Carnegie had subsidized Abell's first book, Abell requested \$150 to defray research costs for a proposed second one in 1938 entitled "Culture in Democracy". The outline of this book included the section heading "How did our culture sickness come about?" with the following subheadings:

Concentration of wealth and leisure in the hands of industrial leaders.

Destruction of environment for industrial exploitation.

Creation of a proletariat lacking means or leisure for the refinements of life, and mechanized by routine working conditions. [With] the resulting cultural institutions:

The private collection of rare and costly objects by the wealthy industrialist.

The formation of museums in terms of such collections.

The art market and the inflation of the price of art.

The centralization of culture in capitals possessing large museums.

(CURBML). Keppel, the son of a New York art dealer, was appointed president of the Carnegie Corporation in the fall of 1923. He would continue to direct the corporation's philanthropy towards support of the fine arts, in both Canada and the United States, until his retirement in 1941 (see Graham, "Understanding artscanada", p. 17).

14 The others were the University of Alberta, McMaster University and the University of Toronto. See Brison, "Cultural Interventions", p. 216.

15 At the National Gallery Abell was funded out of the remaining \$24,000 of the \$30,000 Carnegie grant to the National Gallery for the extension of educational activities. The grant had been made in the late 1930s to finance Arthur Lismer's proposed "National Art Centre" through the National Gallery. See Walter Jessup to H.O. McCurry, 10 March 1943, Abell files, National Gallery of Canada (NGC).

16 Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada*, p. 69.

The Carnegie Corporation refused this request, citing budget restrictions.<sup>17</sup> Implicitly, however, Abell may have understood from this refusal the limit of radical expression that could reasonably expect to receive funding. Abell's success in obtaining Carnegie largesse to finance his Maritime activities suggests that the corporation did not associate these activities with the ideals of "Culture in Democracy".

As John Reid has pointed out, during this period American philanthropic foundations regarded Atlantic Canada as an economic and cultural backwater – an underdeveloped region that needed assistance to comprehend and reap the benefits of modernization.<sup>18</sup> Abell arrived in Wolfville a self-proclaimed "missionary for culture" – a choice of words that implies he was setting out to convert cultural heathens.<sup>19</sup> Abell's career at Acadia got off to a good start. His assistant, Helen Beals, recalled that Abell was such an entertaining and popular lecturer that his class on art history soon required a larger theatre than it had originally been assigned. By 1934, the Wolfville Art Club that Abell founded had 70 members, the majority of whom were Abell's students at Acadia.<sup>20</sup> In the early years of the Depression the Wolfville Art Club and Acadia University's art department established a partnership with Mount Allison University to bring a number of traveling American exhibitions to the Maritime Provinces. In 1933-34, however, money was so scarce that even these combined resources proved inadequate to continue the exhibition program. Abell sought more widespread cooperation, and this served as the practical inspiration for his campaign to form the Maritime Art Association.<sup>21</sup>

Brison's research makes the Carnegie Corporation's support of Abell's efforts to establish the MAA unsurprising. The corporation, Brison writes, sought to "organize the power of a national cultural elite in a series of bureaucratically-structured committees, institutions, and associations . . . solidifying the infrastructural base of a national culture in central Canada while, at the same time, developing what was seen by all parties involved in decision-making as a complementary (but subordinate) regional infrastructure".<sup>22</sup> The MAA was a perfect fit for such a strategy and it is obvious that, as far as the National Gallery was concerned, the cultural current flowed in one direction only. Not once between the formation of the MAA and the end of the Second World War did a show of Maritime art grace its walls in Ottawa, nor did the National Gallery purchase works by Maritime artists in the 1930s in any significant fashion.<sup>23</sup> Abell also had to defend the National Gallery against Maritime critics during his efforts to organize

17 Walter Abell to Dr. F.P. Keppel, 4 June 1938 and Keppel to Abell, 13 June 1938, Carnegie Corporation New York fonds, series III A, box 1, folder 6, CURBML.

18 John G. Reid, "Health, Education, Economy: Philanthropic Foundations in the Atlantic Region in the 1920s and 1930s", *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 64-83.

19 This is claimed by Helen Beals, who was Abell's assistant in the department, in an interview with Pat Townsend and Fran Kruschen on 30 October 1981. See Helen Beals Fonds, 1991.005, Acadia University Archives (AUA).

20 Walter Abell to Frederick P. Keppel, 10 November 1934, Maritime Art Association Papers, "Correspondence 1934-1936", AUA. Abell estimates that two-thirds of the 70 members were his students.

21 Walter Abell, "Cooperative Art in the Maritimes", *Saturday Night*, 12 June 1937, p. 7.

22 Brison, "Cultural Interventions", pp. 211, 222.

23 Saint John painter Jack Humphrey did sell two small watercolour paintings to the National Gallery in 1938. See Patricia Maureen Feheley, "Douglas Duncan and the Picture Loan Society, 1936-1950," MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1979, p. 57.



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the MAA. He explained to the gallery's Assistant Director H.O. McCurry that he often was met "with a certain degree of hesitancy in connection with the idea of National Gallery exhibitions" because in the past they had been expensive and difficult to obtain in a timely fashion.<sup>24</sup> This changed rapidly after the formation of the MAA. In the first two years of the MAA's existence, ten exhibitions from the National Gallery toured the Maritime Provinces and visiting lecturers were sent east by the gallery to speak at MAA events.<sup>25</sup> The National Gallery paid for Abell to lecture at every MAA locale in 1936 and McCurry, who was also an instrumental member of the Carnegie Corporation's Canadian committee, supported Abell's efforts in adult education.<sup>26</sup>

Lectures sponsored by the National Gallery reinforced the notion that authority over cultural matters rested with elite, educated, cultural professionals such as Abell. As Abell wrote in *Saturday Night*, it was necessary to provide a "commentary" written by a "competent authority" for each MAA exhibition because "fine pictures often fail of their purpose because they are not appreciated by the people who see them".<sup>27</sup> In fact, all of the MAA's activities in its early years – from developing a lending library of art books to issuing resolutions calling for increased art education and the placement of artworks in schools – can be viewed through Brison's paradigm of mass dissemination of elite culture in order to preserve and sanctify the cultural elite. What must be recognized, however, is that this was not the function Abell envisioned for the MAA. Abell believed that amongst the causes of "cultural sickness" were the "increasing control [of culture] by scholar and theorist" and the "centralization of culture in capitals possessing large museums". These themes appear to have been central to a lecture he offered member groups of the MAA entitled "The Cultural Problems of Democracy", which explained why "modern culture is in an unhealthy state".<sup>28</sup> It then described some "experiments" that promised new cultural health for democracy, including child art, folk art, amateur creative workshops, murals and other popular art forms. These were, as Abell put it in the already mentioned outline of "Culture in Democracy", the "movements of modern art that have broken old forms and prepared the way for new ones, with increasing emphasis upon the creative possibilities in the common man". These movements influenced the programme of the

24 McCurry, who would replace Eric Brown as director of the National Gallery in 1939, was also an influential member of the Carnegie Corporation's Canadian Advisory Committee. The quotation is from Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 27 November 1934, Maritime Art Association Papers, "Correspondence 1934-1936", AUA.

25 The exhibitions "ranged from modern color prints and British travel posters to Canadian paintings from the Gallery's permanent collection". The lecturers included Eric Newton, Julius Held, Arthur Lismer and Andre Biéler. See Abell, "Cooperative Art in the Maritimes", p. 7.

26 One of these was a forerunner of the "Farm Forum" and "Citizen's Forum" offered over CBC Radio by the Canadian Association for Adult Education in the late 1930s and early 1940s. McCurry describes the idea in a letter to the operator of CKIC (Wolfville) requesting that Abell be granted evening broadcast time: "The suggestion is that small reproductions of works in the NG be distributed to teacher groups throughout the province and that Professor Abell base his lectures on these". See H.O. McCurry to Dr. Rev F. W. Patterson, Maritime Art Association Papers, "Correspondence 1934-1936", AUA. The "Farm Forum" and the "Citizens Forum" are analyzed in Kuffert, *A Great Duty*, pp. 85-103.

27 Abell, "Cooperative Art in the Maritimes", p. 7.

28 "Abell, Walter", Lectures by Walter Abell, 1938-1939, Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4 A, file 1, NGC.

MAA. In its first years, member organizations were offered lectures or classes on marionette making, mural painting and the importance of child art.<sup>29</sup>

Abell's lecture also promised to explain the "kind of cultural institutions which must be encouraged if modern democracies are to receive genuine cultural expression".<sup>30</sup> A later document, a 1943 report Abell prepared for the Wartime Information Board, calls for the formation of "Local Art Service Councils". Equipped with workshops for the teaching, production and reproduction of art, a committee of local artists and representatives of "key social organizations" would organize and facilitate community art activities.<sup>31</sup> These local councils were to be coordinated on a regional basis and the regions coordinated nationally. This same vision seemed to animate Abell's hopes for the evolution of the MAA. From its earliest days Abell suggested that it expand to link "interested groups from coast to coast".<sup>32</sup> When, in 1941, the Carnegie Corporation asked for Abell's opinion of André Bieler's idea to host a conference of Canadian artists to discuss artistic technique at Kingston, Abell saw an opportunity to bring his national vision for the MAA into realization. He suggested that the focus of the conference be the relationship between the artist and society, and it was his hope that a national arts organization would result.<sup>33</sup> Far from the "subordinate regional infrastructure" Brison describes, Abell envisioned a national "interchange" which would counter the "isolation of the Maritimes" and help the "natural talent" of the region gain broader exposure. "Not only will the rest of Canada gain the best that the Maritimes has to contribute", Abell promised, but such an interchange "would also bring to the Maritimes what others have to give us".<sup>34</sup>

Initially, Saint John's most well-known professional artist, Jack Humphrey, who attended the MAA's inaugural meeting, expressed concern that Abell would allow the organization to become controlled by conservative forces like those who then held sway in the Saint John Art Club.<sup>35</sup> Abell wrote to reassure him: "I wish the Maritime Art Association could bring in a millennium. Of course it can't. But I believe it will be a constructive force working in the right direction by promoting increased interest in art and by educating public opinion to an understanding of the aims of the modern artist. . . . Were it to become conservative, I should have little further use for it". Abell's next letter to Humphrey suggests that the two men shared a common political outlook: "I share quite fully the views on social conditions expressed in your letter. . . . A new world order is

29 Forbes, "The Maritime Art Association", p. 43.

30 "Abell, Walter", Lectures by Walter Abell, 1988-1939, Outside Activities/Organization, 7.4 A, file 1, NGC.

31 Walter Abell, "Art in Relation to War Effort, 6 March 1943, p. 1, Wartime Information Board records, vol. 15, file 8-26, LAC. The "key social organizations" Abell had in mind undoubtedly included the progressive unions he wrote about in his 1944 article "Art and the Industrial Worker", *The Gazette* (Gloucester), 11 September 1944, p. 12.

32 Abell "Cooperative Art in the Maritimes", p. 7.

33 Brison, "Cultural Interventions", p. 254.

34 Walter Abell, "A Statement Concerning The Maritime Art Association", 7 January 1943, Maritime Art Association Papers, AUA.

35 Humphrey's attendance at the first MAA meeting is confirmed in the *Evening Times Globe* (Saint John), 30 March 1935. Among others who attended the MAA's first meeting were Ted Campbell, Julia Crawford, Violet Gillett, Jack Bishop, Ruth Starr, Marjorie McIntyre and Lillian Clarke. A notable absence from this list is Miller Brittain, but the report may not have been exhaustive.

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essential to the making of another step toward a rational and humane society”.<sup>36</sup> Humphrey must have been convinced of the MAA’s progressive nature since he and other Saint John artists were very active in the organization and in the production of *Maritime Art*. The reasons for the cooperation between Abell and Saint John artists are multiple and interrelated. For one, artists in Saint John during the 1930s, namely Julia Crawford, Jack Humphrey, Ted Campbell and Miller Brittain, received their training in the United States where they were exposed to many of the same currents of thought that influenced Abell. Moreover, these Saint John artists were actively engaged in the activities Abell identified as hopeful for cultural democracy. These included their educational efforts, which extended to both children and adults, and their own artistic production that made use of populist forms: performances, murals, lithographs, woodcuts, crafts, folk art and watercolours. Nowhere was this engagement better exemplified than in the “Art in Action” performance which coincided with the 1942 annual MAA convention held in Fredericton. Staged under the direction of Ted Campbell, the event drew crowds into the gymnasium of the Provincial Normal School to see a free public demonstration of artistic techniques. In one corner, Jack Humphrey, surrounded by his works depicting the people and houses of Saint John, gave a demonstration of portrait painting. Elevated on scaffolding, Miller Brittain worked on the cartoons of a mural commissioned for the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital. Well-known New Brunswick potters, Kjeld and Erica Deichmann, turned and modeled clay while Campbell showed visiting children how to make their own marionettes. People, according to a young artist in attendance, “came in droves” (see figures 1 and 2).<sup>37</sup>

Abell supported the work of Humphrey, Brittain and the Deichmanns publicly in his lectures and articles, personally through his contacts in Canada and the United States and financially by collecting their work. The sympathies of sensibility, which these purchases suggest, were an important factor in the mutual assistance between Saint John artists and Abell. The works of these artists were more consistent with Abell’s conception of modernist aesthetics than those of many other Maritime artists. Abell explained in the foreword of the MAA’s first exhibition of Maritime painting that “traditional and experimental points of view are both represented. . . . Roughly speaking . . . we may discover in the exhibition three general types of art, corresponding to three successive generations”. Abell, like his allies in Saint John, identified with the third of these generations, which he called “the modernistic”.<sup>38</sup> The aesthetic ideals of the modern generation could not be isolated from their political ideals as Abell explained to a Saint John audience in 1942. In his lecture, Julia Crawford reported, Abell developed “the idea that great art combined great form with the expression of great faith. He looked to the faith of the people in democracy for the spiritual stimulus to a great modern art”.<sup>39</sup>

36 Walter Abell to Jack Humphrey, 24 May 1935 and 19 June 1935, Jack Humphrey Papers, NGC.

37 Sara Johnson, “The Artists of Saint John”, unpublished memoir, New Brunswick Museum (NBM).

38 “Foreword” to the MAA exhibit catalogue 1935-1936, *Paintings by the Artists of the Maritime Provinces*, Walter Abell Fonds, 1900.028, file: Ephemera. The three generations seemed to correspond chronologically with, in a Canadian context, the Royal Academy, the Group of Seven and the artists Abell includes in his article “Some Canadian Moderns”, *Magazine of Art*, 30, 7 (July 1937), pp. 422-7.

39 Julia Crawford, “Saint John”, *Maritime Art*, 2, 5 (June/July 1942), p. 162.



Figure 1 – Miller Brittain at “Art in Action”, 25 May 1942. Illustration accompanying Kathleen Shackleton, “Art in Action”, *Maritime Art*, 2, 5 (June-July 1942), p. 159.





Figure 2 – Jack Humphrey at “Art in Action”, 25 May 1942. Illustration accompanying Kathleen Shackleton, “Art in Action”, *Maritime Art*, 2, 5 (June-July 1942), p. 158.

Abell saw potential for Maritime artists to contribute to a great Canadian modern art movement. Abell did much to promote the work of the “modernistic generation” of Maritime artists in Central Canada. Ontario-based critic Graham McInnes recalled in 1948 that it had been Abell who had drawn McInnes’s and other central Canadian critics’ attention to New Brunswick artists Jack Humphrey, Miller Brittain and Julia Crawford in the mid-1930s. During his visits to Montreal and Toronto in these years, Abell also became enthusiastic about the work of young central-Canadian artists.<sup>40</sup> After one such trip to Toronto in 1936, Abell wrote to Jack Humphrey about his conviction that there had emerged a “very important group of young Canadian painters”. “On the whole”, Abell wrote, “they seem to me more important than the Group of Seven”.<sup>41</sup> Abell’s influence was behind the selection of two of these young painters, Charles Comfort and Pegi Nicol MacLeod, as judges of the 1936 MAA exhibition of Maritime art and, in the pages of *Maritime Art*, Abell published reproductions of works by Nicol MacLeod, Fritz Brandtner and Paraskeva Clark.

These and other young Canadian painters were the subject of Abell’s first published article on Canadian art, “Some Canadian Moderns”, which appeared in the

40 Graham McInnes, “Painter of Saint John”, *Canadian Art*, 5, 4 (Spring 1948), p. 170.

41 Walter Abell to Jack Humphrey, 15 July 1936, Jack Humphrey Collection, box 1, file 2, NGC.

*Magazine of Art* in 1937. In it, Abell presented a “new generation” of Canadian painters to an American audience who, he assumed, associated Canadian art with the wilderness landscapes of the Group of Seven. While the Group of Seven had performed a service in awakening Canadian national sentiments, Abell explained, their era of influence was passing. Creative leadership was passing to a new generation of artists who were “rendering a vital service to Canadian art . . . by broadening its range of subject matter, enlarging the role of creative personalities, and above all by deepening its sense of the subtler and more complex realms of aesthetic experience”. In this context, Abell mentioned fifteen artists of the “new generation”. Just one of these, Jack Humphrey, was an artist of the Maritime Provinces but, of the rest, only Emily Carr was known for wilderness landscapes and at least eight were involved in left-wing organizations. Abell knew of the politics of many of the artists he discusses in “Some Canadian Moderns”, but nowhere in the article were they discussed in political terms. Abell’s first book, *Representation and Form*, stressed the ability of art to convey meaning yet, in this article, Abell was uniformly vague about the meanings of the works he describes. Pegi Nicol MacLeod’s work, Abell wrote, expresses “human vicissitude” and “the enigma of life” while in Lillian Frieman’s paintings Abell saw the “lights and shadows of life” in figures that have the “at-homeness-in-the-world of peasants”. Abell offered no explanation, however, of either life’s lights or shadows or the significance of being at home in the world.<sup>42</sup>

“Some Canadian Moderns”, however, was still too radical for some Canadian cultural figures. Edward Buckman, an Ontario-based critic, responded with a strident defense of the unassailable “Canadianness” of the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson in the pages of the *Magazine of Art*.<sup>43</sup> Another critic, H.O. McCurry, exerted his influence on “Some Canadian Moderns” before it was published. Abell was indebted to McCurry because the research trip to Toronto that resulted in “Some Canadian Moderns” had been subsidized by the National Gallery.<sup>44</sup> As a courtesy, and in hopes of obtaining reproductions for illustration, Abell sent a draft of “Some Canadian Moderns”, under the title “New Directions in Canadian Art”, to McCurry for his consideration. McCurry was not impressed. He suggested that Abell might be pushing Canadian art in the wrong direction: “I am inclined to question whether the need is for

42 Abell, “Some Canadian Moderns”, pp. 422, 426, 427. In terms of the fifteen artists see Charles Hill, *Canadian Printing in the Thirties* (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 12, 130 and Margaret Gray, Margaret Rand, Lois Steen and Carl Schaefer (Toronto, 1977), p. 15. The artists Abell mentions are Jack Humphrey (Saint John), Lillian Frieman (Paris), Pegi Nicol (Toronto), David Milne (Toronto), Bertram Brooker (Toronto), Kathleen Munn (Toronto), Carl Schaefer (Toronto), Gordon Webber (Montreal/Toronto), Paraskeva Clark (Toronto), Marina Goodier (Toronto), Louis Muhlstock (Montreal), Aleksandre Bercovitch (Montreal), Fritz Brandtner (Montreal), Andre Bieler (Kingston) and Emily Carr (British Columbia). A person’s politics is not merely to be judged by affiliation, but those artists who were involved in political organizations include Clark (Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy or CASD and likely also the Communist Party of Canada), Nicol (CCF and LSR), Brandtner (CASD), Bieler (LSR), Webber (LSR), Muhlstock (CASD), Bercovitch (LSR) and Brooker (LSR). Carl Schaefer, speaking of himself and Charles Comfort, explains “we were all Left in those days, all radical” (p. 15).

43 Graham McInnes summarizes both Abell’s article and Buckman’s response in “World of Art”, *Saturday Night*, 6 November 1937, pp. 27, 30.

44 The research trip was intended to provide Abell with sufficient expertise about Canadian art to provide lectures on the subject to MAA groups. See Water Abell to H.O. McCurry, 25 February 1937, Abell files, NGC.



international traditions rather than closer contact and understanding of the national scene and life". Abell, initially, attempted to convince McCurry that "if it is easy to ape foreign models and lack native vitality, it is also easy to make a fetish of nationalism". Surely, Abell suggested, McCurry would agree that some of the Group of Seven veered at times "toward an overemphatic and self-conscious nationalism". McCurry, though, did not agree, and Abell's next letter to him suggests a retreat: "I am inclined to think that your feeling about the desirability of cultivating national qualities is a sound one", Abell wrote, "and have omitted my previous statement concerning the need for international influences".<sup>45</sup>

The correspondence between Abell and McCurry regarding "Some Canadian Moderns" illustrates the deep attachment of McCurry and, through him, the National Gallery to the Group of Seven style. It shows, additionally, the deference of Abell to the authority of the National Gallery and Canadian representatives of the Carnegie Corporation. Abell's deference was rewarded. In February 1943, when Acadia decided to close its art department, McCurry offered Abell a position at the National Gallery. Abell would become education director and the magazine *Maritime Art* would move with its editor and become *Canadian Art*. The only problem, Abell explained to McCurry, was "dealing with the Maritime Art Association, which nominally controls the publication at present".<sup>46</sup>

While the MAA did nominally control *Maritime Art*, Abell controlled it in all other respects. Originally, the publication was to have been a monthly bulletin of association news. The first issue, however, with its articles, reproductions and linocut print, makes it difficult to believe Abell ever aimed at anything less than developing an art magazine. His first editorial suggested that he already anticipated growth beyond the geographic scope of the MAA. "Our first issue is only a beginning", he wrote. "With the cooperation of the creative forces of the Maritimes, and the assistance of those who are working for similar ends in other centers, we hope to grow both in range and in vitality".<sup>47</sup> In a later editorial, explaining that the magazine was devoted to the "*co-operative* ideal in Canadian culture", Abell noted that "from the radical to the most conservative . . . there is no one point of view which we have not, on various occasions, invited to contribute material to our pages". His hope, he wrote, was that this open forum would lead to "increasing co-operation, pooled resources, and collective power".<sup>48</sup>

45 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 25 February 1937, McCurry to Abell, 3 March 1937, and Abell to McCurry, 8 March 1937, Abell files, NGC.

46 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry 13 February 1943, Abell files, NGC.

47 Walter Abell, "To be Creative", *Maritime Art*, 1, 1 (October 1940), p. 3. The first issue of *Maritime Art* can be read as an effort by Abell to appease conservative factions within the MAA. The first artist featured in an article was Mabel Killam Day, a Nova Scotian artist whose reproduced works – *The White Village* (Bear River NS), *Nova Scotian Landscape* and *Frozen River*, Fredericton – combine Group of Seven subject matter with Academic style; they were, in other words, conservative editorial choices for the author of "Some Canadian Moderns". See Anonymous, "Mabel Killam Day", *Maritime Art*, 1, 1 (October 1940) pp. 4-11. Likewise, the first issue's "original print supplement", *Reflections* by Annie Louise Ricker, was a typical scene of a tree beside a lake (n. p.).

48 Walter Abell, "Cooperation or Conflict", *Maritime Art*, 3, 2 (December 1942), p. 36. The italics on "co-operative" are in the original and undoubtedly were quite intentional. Abell was very enthusiastic about the cooperative movement amongst Nova Scotia fishermen, with whom he had spent the summer of 1940. "[There was] plenty of opportunity to see the cooperative movement at work", he

There should have been no doubt, however, among MAA members about where Abell placed himself in this spectrum of opinion. In the last issue of *Maritime Art*'s first year, Abell's editorial explained the difference between 19th- and 20th-century attitudes towards art. Twentieth-century society was beginning to recognize art as any product of human skill and apply artistic values to "cars, houses, gardens" as well as painting and sculpture. In schools, "under the impulse of the progressive education movement", children would "express their own ideas in their work" and gain "creativity and vitality". Museums understood that they needed to perform a "more democratic and social function through educational programs, creative workshop activities, etcetera". Through "contemporary Mexican and American influences" there was a revival of art in public places, bringing art "into closer and more normal relation with public life". Slums would be eliminated in the 20th century and handicrafts would supplement and inspire industrial production in which "the machine is thought of as a potential tool in the hands of the artist". According to Abell, 19th-century society provided a negative contrast for each of these progressive developments of 20th-century society, a historical narrative that underlined Abell's own social and aesthetic ideals as progressive and forward looking.<sup>49</sup>

Not all members of the MAA shared Abell's cultural enthusiasms nor did they all support his plans for *Maritime Art*. At the business meetings of the 1942 MAA annual convention, Abell reported that the principal problem facing the magazine was "finding the right relationship between regional demands on the magazine and the editor's effort to develop it on a national basis". After a lengthy discussion, Abell admitted that the "general opinion of the meeting seemed to favor returning to the original regional type of magazine, keeping the control of it within the Maritimes".<sup>50</sup> By the time Abell received his job offer at the National Gallery, however, he had already made considerable strides in ensuring that the MAA would co-operate with his plans for nationalizing the magazine.

Since resigning from the presidency of the MAA in 1938, Abell had been discontented with the association's progress. Other than the production of *Maritime Art*, for which Abell was largely responsible, the MAA had launched few initiatives under Halifax-based president John Meagher.<sup>51</sup> When war broke out in 1939,

explained in a letter to Jack Humphrey. "It is a grand movement. It has only made a fair start, and cannot be said to have radically changed the economic status of the people. But it has given them a new hold on their economic destinies, and in time if pursued far enough, and if not crushed by resistance from groups in power, could transform the economic order. It is the only thing I know about which seems to have some real hope of economic democracy in it, for by a perfectly orderly process it is capable of placing economic power in the hands of those who should hold it – namely those who produce it in one way or another by their labor". See Walter Abell to Jack Humphrey, 8 September 1940, Jack Humphrey Papers, NGC. The latter part of this quotation suggests that Abell's use of the word "co-operative" may have also alluded to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.

49 Walter Abell, "Changing Attitudes Towards Art", *Maritime Art*, 1, 5 (June 1941), pp. 3-7. More conservative approaches to art and aesthetics occasionally appeared in the letters-to-the-editor section of *Maritime Art*. In the February-March 1943 issue, for example, two letters criticizing "modern art" were published, one from R. L. Chadwick and the other from Allan P. Allsebrook. See *Maritime Art*, 3, 3 (February-March 1943), p. 132.

50 *Maritime Art*, 2, 5 (June-July 1942), p.173.

51 Meagher, who had studied at the Victoria School of Art in Nova Scotia, was a former president of the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Art. See *Maritime Art*, 1, 1 (October 1940), p. 2.

Meagher curtailed MAA activity almost entirely.<sup>52</sup> By December 1941, as Abell explained to Saint John artist Julia Crawford, he had tired of prodding Meagher: “I believe we would do well to find a new president next year if we can find anyone who will combine Mr. Meagher’s dependability with some initiative and efficiency”.<sup>53</sup> After Abell met with Carnegie officials, who were concerned that the MAA was insufficiently active to justify its yearly grant, Abell wrote to Meagher in the fall of 1942 urging him to plan a more dynamic program.<sup>54</sup> Meagher found this letter and the perceived snub rendered him by the unnamed Carnegie officials sufficient impetus to resign his position. The MAA presidency fell to the vice-president, Abell, who claimed to be unable to devote as much time to the association as he had in the mid-1930s. In a letter to McCurry, he complained that “Meagher had lots of time but no ideas; I have plenty of ideas but no time!”<sup>55</sup> For this reason, Abell appointed two Saint John cultural workers to new MAA positions: Violet Gillett, art instructor at the Saint John Vocational School, was named “Exhibitions Coordinator” and Edith Hudson, education director of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, became “Program and Study Adviser”. It is clear from the first issue in the fall of 1943 of the *Maritime Arts Bulletin* – the association newsletter that replaced *Maritime Art* – that Gillett supported Abell’s desire to transform *Maritime Art* into a national magazine and that Hudson shared his social ideals. In the editorial, Gillett wrote: “That we have been the means by which Canada has acquired a National Art Magazine – that long desired and most necessary adjunct to a fully developed consciousness of Canadian talent – is a matter upon which we can look with considerable pride”. Hudson’s column, “Programme Suggestions”, began with the very Abellian thesis that “the fundamental prerequisite of a good society is a body of good citizens, and good citizens can only be created by providing all of them with decent living quarters and liberal educational facilities”; she then proceeded to recommend several articles by Abell to assist MAA study groups.<sup>56</sup> Having regained the presidency of the association and placed two allies in executive positions, Abell was able to proceed with his plan to transform *Maritime Art* into *Canadian Art* prior to the 1943 general meeting of MAA members. When Abell presented his president’s report to this meeting, entitled “Changing Tides in Association History”, the decision to nationalize the magazine was already made.<sup>57</sup>

52 In a letter distributed to all MAA members upon Meagher’s resignation, Abell claimed that for several years he had felt that “the general program of the Association has been gradually sinking into decline . . . merely repeating on a diminishing scale those projects which were put in operation at the time of its origin”. In 1943, when Meagher resigned, there were only two exhibitions and “no other activities or projects were definitely under way”. See Walter Abell, “A Statement Concerning the Maritime Art Association”, p. 2.

53 Water Abell to Julia Crawford, 13 December 1941, Julia Crawford Papers, NBM.

54 Walter Abell to John Meagher, 17 November 1943, Madge Smith Papers, MC 168 MS 3/46, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB).

55 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 28 November 1942, Abell File, NGC.

56 *Maritime Art Association Bulletin*, 1, 1 (October 1943). The support of Saint John artists for Abell’s plans for *Maritime Art* was not merely *a posteriori*. For example, on 12 June 1942, Julia Crawford wrote, on behalf of the Saint John Art Club to the MAA, “We recommend that the “Maritime Art” magazine become a national magazine, as an expansion of the present publication. We feel that the Maritime Art Association should get solidly behind the national magazine”. See Julia Crawford Papers, NBM.

57 Walter Abell, “Changing Tides in Association History”, Julia Crawford Papers, NBM.

The magazine moved to Ottawa with Abell as editor and Gillett was elected MAA president to succeed him.

Abell's role in elbowing Meagher out of the MAA presidency can be fairly regarded as a self-serving power play that facilitated Abell's career and editorial ambitions. Yet his disdain for Meagher's contention that cultural activity needed to be curtailed in wartime was sincere.<sup>58</sup> In the years after the Kingston Conference, Abell's articles, lectures and radio broadcasts stressed the importance of seizing a historic opportunity for art and society. His optimism about the new world that would emerge from Allied victory is revealed in his 1942 article "Canadian Aspirations in Painting". "The release of energy consequent upon democratic victory", he suggested, "would bring a transforming flood of new force to the democratic impulse of the world . . . a new conception of democracy in which economic and cultural privileges would be considered as much a part of the 'inalienable rights of man' as political suffrage is today".<sup>59</sup> Political suffrage, however, would be essential to achieving victory on what Abell called the "cultural front": "Military victory . . . in itself it can make no direct contribution to democratic cultural progress. It will not clear away slums, plan cities, build art centers, or render any of the other creative services of which humanity stands in need. . . . The democratic progress of the people must be assured through political victories".<sup>60</sup> These victories, Abell hoped, would bring "economic and cultural" equality to millions of underprivileged people and foster a "new faith in the destiny of mankind". This faith would spur one of the great "collective expressions in art which great faiths have always inspired".<sup>61</sup>

The 1942 "Canadian Aspirations" article also reveals that Abell's aesthetic judgments were virtually unchanged in the five years after the publication of "Some Canadian Moderns". Abell still believed that the new generation of Canadian artists was "more dynamic" and "more actively in touch with contemporary world trends" than preceding ones. Abell could not conceal his boredom with the debate between the "national" and the "international" in Canadian art. For Abell, the division was between genuine and derivative artists, but such questions were moot so long as "every active Canadian artist has in his studio hundreds of pictures for which he can find no use" while Canadian homes and community buildings "stand forlornly bare of the vivifying significance that art could give them". In these circumstances the question of "national" art was an "evasion of the essentials". The essentials could only be overcome through "social changes" that would be consistent with the "ideals of true democracy" for which "Canada and her allies are now fighting". And what would these social changes mean for the future of art in Canada? Some of the possibilities of "community culture in the modern world", Abell explained, had been revealed "by Mexico, by Russia, and by the federal art activities in the United States". He expected similar developments would follow in Canada: "Landscape, figure, and still life painting – all subjects aloof from social concerns – will probably be supplemented and

58 In his "Statement Concerning the Maritime Art Association," Abell makes reference to Meagher's use of the war as an excuse for inaction and dismisses it: "The fact remains that in many places the war has stimulated new and unprecedented artistic developments" (p. 1).

59 Abell, "Canadian Aspirations in Painting", *Culture*, 3, 2 (1942), p. 182.

60 Abell, "The Cultural Front", *Maritime Art*, 3, 5 (July-August 1943).

61 Abell, "Canadian Aspirations in Painting", p. 182.

in part replaced by themes of larger social significance. . . . The conception of a work of art as an object for ‘collecting’ or ‘exhibiting’ will no doubt give way increasingly to a recognition that art is to be used and enjoyed as a normal part of daily life, much as we use and enjoy our cars and radios”.<sup>62</sup>

The war alone is not sufficient explanation for the explicit politics of “Canadian Aspirations” when compared to “Some Canadian Moderns”. The overwhelmingly positive response Abell received at the Kingston Conference must have given him confidence that his ideas were commonly held in the Canadian artistic community. Abell was certainly aware, however, that some influential figures were less enthusiastic about cultural change than others. When McCurry confirmed that Carnegie would finance Abell’s new position at the National Gallery in March 1943, Abell realized he was in a compromising position. He was just about to publish Lawren Harris’s “The Federation [FCA], The National Gallery, and a New Society” in *Maritime Art* and recognized that this article would likely irritate McCurry, his soon-to-be boss. Abell used his editorial discretion to stay in McCurry’s favour. The same month his National Gallery job was confirmed, he wrote to McCurry about Harris’s article:

In this article Harris outlines the ideas concerning further decentralization of National Gallery activities. His general proposals, I take it, are quite in accord with your own ideals for the Gallery and incidentally in keeping with much that we are proposing of the new educational efforts. . . . There was, however, a negative side opposing any effort to secure a new National Gallery building. . . . I had some doubts about the advisability of publishing a statement against possible future building projects, especially without knowing what your reaction would be in the matter. As the article had to go to press at once, what I decided to do was to delete the negative portion, which I herewith enclose.<sup>63</sup>

Abell overestimated the extent to which Harris’s general proposals were in accord with McCurry’s ideals. Harris proposed a “people’s National Gallery” that would essentially become a distribution centre, circulating art between the 75 community centres that the FCA proposed be built across Canada after the war. National institutions like the National Gallery, the National Film Board and the CBC would all make use of the centres, but the centres would primarily “serve the cultural life of the community” providing services to “factories, clubs, schools, and to the rural communities”.<sup>64</sup> As historian Michael Bell observes, Harris’s “gallery extension” proposal “set the FCA on a collision course with McCurry”.<sup>65</sup> In a letter to the FCA secretary, H.G. Kettle, vice-president Fred Taylor described his confrontation with McCurry over the latter’s objections to the community-centre plan: “I faced him with

62 Abell, “Canadian Aspirations in Painting”, pp. 180, 181.

63 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 24 March 1943, Abell files, NGC.

64 Lawren Harris, “The Federation, The National Gallery, and a New Society”, *Maritime Art*, 3, 4 (April-May 1943), p. 126.

65 Bell, “The Welfare of Art in Canada”, p. xiv.

his personal consideration, the collapse of the dream of the great new N.G. 'palais des beaux arts' in which he would be enthroned, and the loss of prestige, in his present narrow personal outlook through decentralization. He candidly admitted that these considerations weighed heavily with him".<sup>66</sup>

McCurry's position won him no friends in the FCA. Taylor wrote to Kettle that "McCurry is McCurry, civil servant and small man in a position to effectively push his own interests"; Harris subsequently wrote to Taylor "if there should be a change of Govt. then let the CCF who know their way around culturally appoint a new director of the Nat. Gallery and give Harry McC[urry] a job suited to his capacity".<sup>67</sup> Abell could have come to a similar conclusion when McCurry rejected his first proposal as National Gallery education supervisor. Abell had proposed the purchase of 30 to 40 pieces of Deichmann pottery to assemble a model "fireside exhibit". These exhibits, Abell speculated, could be packed into a single suitcase and distributed for people to "use intimately in their clubs or their own homes". Not only would this programme allow exhibits to reach remote locations, Abell also saw it as "a means of progress in the direction of connecting art with ordinary life situations – which seems to be one of the key problems of the present time".<sup>68</sup> McCurry cited insurance and logistical concerns in his rejection of Abell's proposed "fireside exhibition" programme.

In spite of this rejection, Abell was optimistic about his prospects for significant accomplishment in his first months at the National Gallery. He wrote to Taylor in August 1943: "I feared that some of my ideas might be a little advanced for the National Gallery, and am delighted to find myself increasingly convinced that they will prove acceptable and that the way is open, or can be opened, for genuine advances. . . . I think you feel exactly the same way about your work, Fred. So we're on the road shoulder to shoulder. The Group of Two. Starting for the Group of Eleven Million". The Group of Two came together because of Abell's admiration for Taylor's efforts to "coordinate art and labor"; these were, Abell told him, "two worlds which have been severed by circumstance and which need each other".<sup>69</sup>

Abell published his own major statement on the subject, "Art and the Industrial Worker", in *The Gazette* of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, in 1944. Abell considered this publication one of his major triumphs as education supervisor at the National Gallery because *The Gazette* was "the only daily newspaper in Canada owned by labor" and his access to its pages was an "indication of the trend of the times toward a wider diffusion of cultural advantages".<sup>70</sup> In this article, Abell was less circumspect than in any of his other writings. Throughout history, he wrote, art had been the most impressive method of the powerful to present their "ideas and ideals" to the world. Since "the masses of people by their productive labor hold the final source of economic power", labour could similarly use art to present its "social aims and

66 Fred Taylor to H.G. Kettle, 9 December 1943, Federation of Canadian Artists Papers, MG 28 I 499 M-9251, LAC; also cited in Bell, "The Welfare of Art in Canada", p. xv.

67 Fred Taylor to H.G. Kettle, 23 May 1944 and Lawren Harris to Taylor, 18 June 1944, Federation of Canadian Artists Papers, LAC.

68 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 7 June 1943, Abell file, NGC.

69 Walter Abell to Fred Taylor, 13 August 1943, Fred Taylor Papers, reel H2292, "Walter Abell", LAC.

70 "NGC Report of the Educational Supervisor for the Year 1943-1944", Abell file, NGC.



democratic ideals". There was a pressing need to combat the "powerful forces" that were at work "attempting to distort the image of labor in the eyes of the world". Abell provided his usual examples of international inspiration – Mexico, Russia and the American New Deal – with special emphasis on art projects produced by labour groups themselves. The industrial worker and the artist were natural partners in the struggle to create "the kind of world which human beings can live in happily", Abell wrote, but cooperation between them was still in its infancy. For it to reach maturity, unions needed to study and experiment with the use of art in their work while artists needed to identify with "those deeper human aims and democratic social ideals which underlie the labor movement". Abell could imagine nothing that could contribute more to "a human progress than art and labor working hand in hand".<sup>71</sup>

There were promising signs that art and labour were drawing closer together in Canada, as evidenced in work Abell reproduced with "Art and the Industrial Worker". While paintings by Taylor and Leonard Brooks were depictions of observed industrial workplaces, Fredericton art student J. Gregory Todd's *Trapped Laborers* was an imagined scene that showed "the tragic results brought on laborers by the corruption of those in charge, who use graft and cheap materials in order that they may gain". Such a picture, Abell wrote, "is a challenge to all who see it to help correct the evils which cause such useless suffering and loss".<sup>72</sup> Todd was not alone amongst Maritime artists interested in depicting industrial workers. Miller Brittain began depicting Saint John workers, particularly longshoremen, in the late 1930s. During the war, while Brittain was in the air force, both Jack Humphrey and Julia Crawford entered industrial workplaces and depicted the production of, respectively, ships and veneer.

In January 1944, a few months after Abell began publicizing depictions of war industries in *Canadian Art*, Humphrey wrote to McCurry hopeful that the National Gallery would purchase some of his images of shipbuilding and commission more. A little more than a year later, Humphrey had clearly given up his hopes of receiving National Gallery support. "I suppose you are about swamped with the war-records works of the artists who had important work to do", he wrote to McCurry with bitter sarcasm. "No doubt the commissioning of my friend Miller Brittain as a war artist has made anything I may have or may do of little or no importance. Thus the Maritime quota is attended to by him, is it not?"<sup>73</sup> Humphrey may have been mistaken about McCurry's regional bias: in spite of numerous appeals, Fred Taylor, too, had no success in attracting support from the National Gallery for his effort to depict the Canadian war industry.<sup>74</sup> These frustrations suggest that although Abell considered the publication of "Art and the Industrial Worker" a triumph of his career at the National Gallery, its message had little influence on the gallery's purchasing priorities.

In "Art and the Industrial Worker", Abell predicted that "there will come a time . . . when labor and art will be united in fully organized agencies for the promotion of

71 Walter Abell, "Art and the Industrial Worker", *The Gazette* (Gloucester Bay), 11 September 1944, p. 12.

72 Abell, "Art and the Industrial Worker". Todd was the subject of one of a series of articles Abell published in *Canadian Art* on promising young Canadian artists. See Abell, "Young Canada – J. Gregory Todd", *Canadian Art*, 1, 4 (April-May 1944), pp. 152-4.

73 Jack Humphrey to H.O. McCurry, 29 February 1945, as quoted in Karen Herring, "Creating a Culture", p. 91.

74 Andrew Nurse, "A Confusion of Values", p. 149.

their joint aims". That time had not yet arrived in 1946. Abell observed that industry, not labour, was emerging as the great patron of the arts in the post-war world. In an extended piece in the *Magazine of Art*, "Industry and Painting", Abell weighed the pros and cons of this development. Industry, Abell admitted, had gone a long way to relieving the financial hardships faced by many artists, but had artists "left the ivory tower only to goose-step into a golden prison?" For Abell, "the potential dangers of an industry-controlled, rather than a community-controlled culture are obvious". The old plutocratic culture, controlled by "a handful of millionaires", had been replaced by a new one controlled by "a handful of corporation executives". This could not be a "democratic culture in any real sense of the term".<sup>75</sup> Art historian Erika Doss favourably cites Abell's "Art and Industry" as one of the few published articles to voice concern about American business's status as "culture broker" in the post-war world.<sup>76</sup> Read in comparison with "Art and the Industrial Worker", however, it is obvious that, on the cultural front, Abell had moved from a vanguard to a rearguard position in a mere two years. No longer was Abell championing trends that portended cultural democracy; he was, now, protesting trends that threatened it.

In the interim, Abell's hopes of contributing to Canadian cultural democracy through the National Gallery of Canada fizzled. On the surface, it seems that Abell's year at the National Gallery was reasonably successful. According to Abell's final report, circulation of Canadian art had doubled over the course of 1943-44. At the new Carleton College, Abell designed and taught Ottawa's first university art course. One hundred fifty children were registered in both the Friday and Saturday art classes held at the National Gallery, and another fifty were on a waiting list. Abell also pointed to his publications and his numerous lectures and radio broadcasts as evidence of a productive year.<sup>77</sup> While Abell's departure from the National Gallery was ostensibly precipitated by the offer of a return to academic life at Michigan State College, correspondence between Abell's friends describe personal conflict between Abell and McCurry. Kettle wrote to Taylor about Abell's plans to leave: "As you know he has been feeling very uneasy for some time at the NG and rather depressed. Not seeing that there were any real possibilities ahead, and not feeling either that he had McC[urry's] confidence or would be likely to be given any opportunity of going ahead".<sup>78</sup>

In the National Gallery's files, there is no evidence of overt hostility between Abell and McCurry before his departure, but subsequent correspondence sheds light on their differences. While beginning his career in Michigan, Abell finished one of the tasks he had brought with him from Ottawa – rewriting the National Gallery's circulating

75 Walter Abell, "Industry and Painting", *Magazine of Art*, 39, 3 (March 1946), pp. 83-93, 114-18. The illustrations chosen for this article suggest that Abell was quite aware of the irony that could emerge through industrial patronage of the arts. On the first page of "Art and Industry" appears Communist painter Stuart Davis's *Terminal* with the caption "A prize winner in the Pepsi-Cola 'Portrait of America' exhibition, 1944, it was reproduced in color on 600,000 calendars". Though he makes no mention of their politics, Abell also reproduced works by other left-wing artists who benefited from the patronage of industry including Rockwell Kent and Henry Moore.

76 Erika Doss, "Catering to Consumerism: Associated American Artists and the Marketing of Modern Art, 1934-1958", *Winterthur, Portfolio* 26, 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1991), pp. 143-67.

77 "NGC Report of the Educational Supervisor for the Year 1943-1944", Abell file, NGC.

78 H.G. Kettle to Fred Taylor, 17 April 1944, Federation of Canadian Artists Papers, LAC. The incomplete sentence at the end of the quote is in the original document.

lecture "Introduction to Canadian Art". Abell's draft of this lecture is, not surprisingly, consistent with "Canadian Aspirations". He has special praise for a mural executed by Jack Shadbolt in the United Services centre in Vancouver. The artist's choice of medium, Abell wrote, revealed the growing "impulse toward large scale forms of community art expression" while its subject matter "completes the swing" in Canadian painting away from wilderness landscape toward "maximum human significance in art . . . focus[ing] the searchlight of artistic scrutiny upon the actual life of the nation". Humphrey's depictions of Saint John, too, are highly praised, and are discussed as a necessary step in an aesthetic transition: "The artist and his audience are no longer contemplating the solitudes of the wilderness. They have turned to the buildings, the streets, the waterfront, of a city built by man. Sooner or later they are likely to look into the meaning as well as into the appearance of these forms, and then human considerations will be intensified".<sup>79</sup> The letter Abell sent to McCurry accompanying this draft makes clear his desire to remain involved in Canadian cultural life. The CBC was interested in more broadcasts from him and Abell suggested he fulfill this request in combination with a National Gallery-sponsored lecture tour in the spring of 1945.<sup>80</sup> "What I feel would really make a good job", he suggested, "would be to get into your national art center campaign. . . . The whole art center question interests me deeply because it seems to me one of the important trends of cultural democracy".<sup>81</sup> When McCurry replied to Abell two months later, there was no mention of Abell's suggested lecture tour. There were, however, numerous complaints about the "Introduction to Canadian Art" draft.<sup>82</sup> Abell, in McCurry's view, had paid far too much attention to Shadbolt and not nearly enough to A.Y. Jackson, J.W.G. Macdonald, Prudence Heward, Edwin Holgate and Goodridge Roberts. Clearly, McCurry was looking for a lecture with more focus on artists featured in the National Gallery's on-going silk-screen reproduction programme, a programme dominated by landscape painting. In her detailed study of this programme, Joyce Zemans suggests that "it established the Group of Seven and landscape painting as the *sine qua non* of Canadian art, creating the lens or aesthetic filter through which Canadian identity would be defined".<sup>83</sup> Ironically, given Abell's

79 "Introduction to Canadian Art", enclosed with Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 18 December 1944, Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4 A, file 3, NGC.

80 Abell's series of CBC radio broadcasts on "Art and Democracy" were aired in May of 1944. Two days after the 21 May broadcast on "Art Centres", J.D. Pringle of the CBC wrote to McCurry to let him know that "we have already received some very favourable reaction on Mr. Abell's series". Pringle began forwarding letters from enthusiastic listeners: F.J. Connor, for example, was very excited about the prospect of art centres: "Can you provide me with any literature regarding this or where and when they will be established?" See J.D. Pringle to H.O. McCurry, 23 May 1944 and F.J. Connor to CBC, 4 June 1944, Outside Activities/Organizations 7.4 A, file 3, NGC.

81 Walter Abell to H.O. McCurry, 18 December 1944, Outside Activities/Organizations 7.4 A, file 3, NGC.

82 H.O. McCurry to Walter Abell, 12 February 1945, Outside Activities/Organizations 7.4 A, file 3, NGC.

83 Joyce Zemans, "Nationhood, Identity and the Sampson-Mathews Silkscreen Project: The Wartime Prints", *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 19, 1 (1998), p. 7. See also Zemans, "Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery's First Reproduction Program of Canadian Art", *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 16, 2 (1995), pp. 6-27 and Zemans, "Sampson-Mathews and the NGC – The Post-War Years", *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 21, 1/2 (2000), pp. 97-136.

often expressed enthusiasm for prints as a means to democratize art, the medium was used by the National Gallery to reify what was, for Abell, regressive, nationalistic painting.

Abell's departure allowed McCurry to put pressure on the FCA by threatening to cease the publication of *Canadian Art*, the federation's main vehicle of publicity. Lawren Harris wrote to Taylor: "The fact that Harry Mc[urry] said that he would suspend publication shows a complete lack of responsibility, vision or understanding of the country's need".<sup>84</sup> It may be only coincidental that the "Plan for the Extension of the National Gallery of Canada", which the federation ultimately proposed for presentation to the House of Commons Special Committee on Reconstruction and Re-establishment in June of 1944, contained a greatly softened attitude toward the construction of a new National Gallery building in Ottawa.<sup>85</sup> Even the softened plan, however, was not presented to the committee. Shortly before the FCA was scheduled to present their brief, they were contacted by the Royal Canadian Academy and invited to a meeting that would coordinate the presentations of arts organizations to the committee. At this meeting, representatives of 14 arts groups agreed to jointly present the FCA's Community Centre Plan to the committee, but not the extension of the National Gallery to service the community centers.<sup>86</sup> From this meeting, emerged the Canadian Arts Council [CAC]. As a lobbying organization, the FCA was soon subsumed by this larger organization, whose executive was elected by representatives of member groups.

The CAC's first president, Herman Voaden, was closely associated with the Group of Seven. "A member of the [Toronto] Arts and Letters Club and a playwright", the February 1946 bulletin of the FCA explained, "[Voaden's] *Six Canadian Plays* is an attempt to direct the ideas and inspiration of the Group of Seven Painters into the Canadian theatre". The same bulletin contained news of the FCA's own silk-screen project, which was also directed by the ideas and inspiration of Group of Seven painters. Lawren Harris, encouraged by McCurry and A.Y. Jackson, spearheaded and financed this project in the name of the FCA over Taylor's strenuous objections.<sup>87</sup> Submissions

84 Lawren Harris to Fred Taylor, 18 June 1944, Federation of Canadian Artists Papers, LAC.

85 Though the report still called for initial construction to be largely limited to a "central assembling and distributing plant to serve the provincial and regional branch galleries across Canada", this was described as only the first part of the construction of an eventually fully functioning National Gallery with exhibition rooms, a library and administrative offices: "We expect this building to be not only functional, but a fine example of Canadian architecture". See "A Plan for the Extension of the National Gallery of Canada", Jack Humphrey Papers, "Federation of Canadian Artists" file, NGC, p. 2.

86 Those societies represented were the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour, the Society of Canadian Painter-Etchers and Engravers, the Canadian Group of Painters, the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, the Federation of Canadian Artists, the Canadian Authors' Association, the Music Committee, the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and Town Planners, the Dominion Drama Festival, the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, the Canadian Guild of Potters, and the Arts and Letters Club [Toronto]. See Elizabeth Wynn Wood, "Art Goes to Parliament", *Canadian Art*, 2, 1 (October-November 1944), p. 3. An account of the formation of the CAC and its lobbying efforts is available in Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 168-76.

87 In "A Confusion of Values" (p. 150), Andrew Nurse very neatly summarizes the philosophic differences between Harris and Taylor: "For Taylor, art had to change. It had to become active and

were judged by Jackson, A.J. Casson and Yvonne McKague and, as the bulletin explains, “three designs were selected for immediate publication. . . . The first is by Dr. Jackson from a painting by Tom Thomson. . . . The other two designs are by Naomi Jackson [A.Y. Jackson’s niece], and Thoreau Macdonald [J.E.H. Macdonald’s son]”.<sup>88</sup> Eventually, six more submissions were selected for reproduction: three of these were by Harris himself, one was by Jackson, one by Bertram Brooker and one by Dorothy M. Williams. The distinguishing feature of the works, Zemans writes, was their “decorative, Christmas-card prettiness”.<sup>89</sup> Also notable is the lack of representation of painters Abell considered leaders of the “new generation” of Canadian art. Taylor, appalled with the development of the FCA, resigned from the organization in 1946.

Three years later, Taylor decided to attend the open sessions of the FCA’s first national conference since 1942. He described his experience in a letter to Abell:

It was a really ghastly experience and to me, very sad. . . . It impressed me in the same way as being at the deathbed of an intimate friend whom I’d loved deeply, worked hard with and for and whose enormous potential was being deliberately snuffed out by a planted cancer. . . . For a split second I thought of screaming something, anything, to have the thing out in the open – but by that time or rather, at that moment, I was too sore and hurt to do any good – I’d only have done harm.<sup>90</sup>

Abell replied with commiseration: “I feel as sad as you do about the Federation. . . . It has followed exactly, on a national scale, the pattern which the Maritime Art Assn. did on a regional scale. The larger number of people anywhere, it would seem, are petty people, and the organizations of which they become members are, sooner or later, weighed down to petty levels.”<sup>91</sup> By the time Abell left Canada, it was clear that the MAA no longer shared his vision for national integration. Though MAA President Violet Gillett pushed for affiliation with the Federation of Canadian Artists in her annual reports, this was resisted by the majority of the membership. The MAA also declined to support the FCA’s brief to the House of Commons Special Committee on Reconstruction and Re-establishment.<sup>92</sup> Isolationism also extended into art criticism. In 1944’s “Room for Improvement”, Saint John-based artist and curator Avery Shaw writes: “It is not so much lack of talent as lack of proper training that makes the painters of Canada so backward and so incompetent. . . . In the Maritimes we are fortunate to have talent schooled not in Ontario, but in the States; this is one reason

meaningful in the lives of working people. And, through this process, it could in turn support, and help to change, society. For Harris, the process was almost reversed. He did not feel that art had to change. What was necessary, Harris argued, was that society find a means to expand the audience for art as it existed”.

88 Federation of Canadian Artists, *FCA Bulletin*, February 1946, Wartime Information Board records, vol. 15, file 8-23, LAC. The familial ties to the Group of Seven, indicated in the square brackets, are my insertions and do not appear in the original source.

89 Zemans, “Sampson-Mathews and the NGC – The Post-War Years”, p. 106.

90 Fred Taylor to Walter Abell, 24 April 1949, Fred Taylor Papers, reel H2992, LAC.

91 Walter Abell to Fred Taylor, 27 April 1949, Fred Taylor Papers, reel H2992, LAC.

92 MAA president’s reports – 1943/44 (Gillett) and 1945/46 (Gillett) – in MAA reports, Minutes, 1944, Walter Abell Fonds, 1900.028, AUA.

why Saint John ranks as Canada's richest city in painters talent. The local painters are outside of and above the Upper Canadian trend."<sup>93</sup> Abell would likely have agreed with Shaw's positive assessment of Saint John artists and with much of his critique of Canadian landscape painting. Shaw's placement of Maritime painting "outside of and above" Canadian painting, however, is indicative of the failure of the national interchange Abell hoped would be achieved through the Maritime Art Association.

By the end of his life, Abell was no longer attributing the lack of development of a modern democratic culture in Canada to personal pettiness. His posthumously published work, *The Collective Dream in Art*, suggests that all art reflects the collective subconscious "tensions" of the society in which it is created. Negative tensions had dominated western civilization since the social dislocation of the Industrial Revolution and the failure of the majority to embrace modern art was the result of a popular false consciousness: "Unwilling to face this cultural recession, unable to rise with the creative artist to the plane and the pain of negative self-realization, society justified itself by an indirect defense reaction. It rejected its creative artists, offering esthetic distaste as an excuse for its rejection". If collective social tensions became positive, Abell anticipated that this rejection would end. A new modern art would emerge in the form of a "new realism". For Abell, realism did not mean an accurate transcription of the visual world, but rather an "expression of shared social faith":

If and when the hundreds of millions of men living in industrial societies begin to sense a relief from conflicts like those between capital and labor and between capitalistic and communistic states . . . we may expect the emergence of a new realism as the most vital artistic manifestation of its period. . . . If cultural integration is not achieved by the industrial world, then the destructive waste and fury of its conflicts will gradually sap its vital energies . . . [then] we can predict a gradual petrification of art as the reflection of a petrifying society.

"If we were to reduce our concept to a single sentence", Abell continues, "the cultural image becomes for us a symbolic expression of collective tensions generated by the objective realities of history".<sup>94</sup>

What, Abell asks, had broken down to cause the negative social tensions motivating modern art?

In the broadest and simplest terms, can we not say that it is a system of cultural relationships? Technological relationships between certain human needs, certain natural resources, and certain methods of exploiting those resources; social relationships between competing groups, classes, or societies; mental relationships between habitual ways of thought and results once attained but no longer attainable by those ways of thought.

93 Avery Shaw, "Room for Improvement", *Maritime Art Association Bulletin*, 1, 3 (February 1944), pp. 3-4.

94 Walter Abell, *The Collective Dream in Art: A Psycho-Historical Theory of Culture Based on Relations between the Arts, Psychology, and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 351, 245, 74.



What was required, therefore, to create a “more fulfilling order” was for society to “cease its habitual repetition of inherited culture patterns” and to “evolve new culture patterns”.<sup>95</sup> What was required, in other words, was a whole new way of life. In *The Collective Dream* Abell was calling for what Ian McKay suggests is the basis of every socialist formation – an experiment in living otherwise.<sup>96</sup>

When Abell addressed the Kingston Conference in 1941, he spoke of hopeful “new culture patterns”, referring to the intensified interest and promotion of folk arts and crafts, child-art initiatives, murals, and community centres for art education, production and performance. Each of these developments Abell personally witnessed through his activities in the Maritime Art Association, particularly through his connection to the artists of Saint John. These were the patterns Abell hoped to disseminate through national organization and they were precisely the patterns that central, national organizations were ill-designed or ill-disposed to propagate. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine Abell a radical hero undone by conservative villains like Mc Curry. Rather, Abell’s career neatly illustrates the accommodations a radical must make to attain cultural power and the capacity of cultural and political power structures to accommodate cultural radicals.

All Canadian socialisms have failed, Ian McKay observes, to “transcend the liberal order”. Every Canadian socialist, therefore, has “necessarily made compromises with hegemonic liberalism”. Yet Canadian socialists have succeeded in “creating spaces of resistance” from which “projections of an alternative humanity have attained reality-status”.<sup>97</sup> Because of Abell’s status within the cultural elite – with easy access to highly placed figures within the Carnegie Corporation and the National Gallery – his compromises with “hegemonic liberalism” are obvious – so obvious that some choose not to call them compromises at all. Yet his writings and speeches do project an alternative humanity and, during the Second World War, an intense optimism that this alternative humanity was imminent. So quickly did this optimism dissipate that by 1947 Fredericton artist Lucy Jarvis already predicted its disappearance from our cultural memory. Writing in the magazine once called *Maritime Art* under the title “Notes from a Benighted Maritimer”, Jarvis anticipated a future when no one remembered the Maritime cultural activities that so excited Abell: “Unless, of course, we heard of a similar adventure being well publicized in some other part of Canada, to which we would say in our contrary way, ‘It happened here long ago’, and nobody would believe us”.<sup>98</sup>

95 Abell, *The Collective Dream*, p. 242.

96 McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, p. 7.

97 Ian McKay, “For a New Kind of History: A Reconnaissance of 100 Years of Canadian Socialism”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000), p. 74.

98 Lucy Jarvis, “Notes from a Benighted Maritimer”, *Canadian Art*, 4, 4 (Summer 1947), p. 164.