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**Review of Edmund Morris: Frontier Artist By Jean S. McGill and  
Land of Earth and Sky: Landscape Painting of Western Canada By  
Ronald Rees**

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*Edmund Morris: Frontier Artist.* By Jean S. McGill. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984. Photographs, chronology, index, bibliography, notes. 208 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

*Land of Earth and Sky: Landscape Painting of Western Canada.* By Ronald Rees. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984. Illustrations, bibliography, index. x + 148 pp. \$24.95.

In a brief, narrative biography of Edmund Morris, a Canadian artist of landscapes and Indians, Jean McGill describes the major events of his life and career. She is particularly factual in treating his educational experiences, his family and friends, and his varied, numerous paintings. Sometimes, however, these sections are little more than listings. Indeed, the unanalytical quality of this book is its major limitation. Often quoting the opinions of others, the author seems hesitant—almost unable—to put forth her critical reactions to Morris's life and works. Instead of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the paintings noted, she includes extensive commentaries from newspaper and other art critics.

If McGill is nonevaluative in dealing with Morris's art work, she also has produced an external biography with few comments on her subject's feelings and thoughts. The reader looks in vain for the author's tentative speculations or educated guesses about the makeup of Morris. Too often lists of facts cry out for some sort of order or interpretation. McGill would also have strengthened her book if she had put the life and work of Morris in context. Did he reflect cultural-intellectual currents of his time, for example? Were his views and treatments of western Indians typical of his era? In addition, how do his paintings compare with those of George Catlin and Paul Kane, who are mentioned here on several occasions but who are not revealingly compared with Morris? Generally, then, this volume betrays something of an amateurish quality in its contents and makeup. Along with the weaknesses mentioned above, the black-and-white

reproductions of Morris's paintings are not well done, often so dark as to shadow rather than project or clarify Morris's talents. And a more demanding copyeditor would have caught grammatical and structural errors. A pertinent map or two would also have augmented the value of the volume.

Edmund Morris deserves a comprehensive, analytical biography, but this volume is not that needed study. In short, although the author's prose is clear and straightforward, although she seems to have uncovered numerous manuscript materials concerning her subject, her writing, her approach to her topic, and her conclusions are too descriptive and nonconceptual and thus reveal too little about Morris the man and artist.

Ronald Rees's study of western Canadian landscape painting is more successful. American scholars unacquainted with art treating the Canadian West will be surprised with the parallels between art depicting the two Wests. If George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Albert Bierstadt, for example, betrayed their European training or their predispositions formed by eastern or academic backgrounds in painting the American West, similar preconceptions and experiences shaped what nonwesterners limned in depicting the Canadian West.

Because Rees is particularly interested in demonstrating the importance of painters' previous experiences and their attempts to deal with new and unfamiliar landscape and history, his brief but useful book is not so much "an essay in art history," as a discussion of drawings and paintings "as documents that elucidate the relationship of people to a land, [and] not as objects for aesthetic appreciation" (p. 2). As a cultural geographer, the author comprehends that cultural artifacts—be they literature, historiography, architecture, or art—are as much products of artists' cultural conditioning as they are descriptions of actual scenery and inhabitants. The painters treated here reveal as much about themselves as about the physical settings they are treating.

In his abbreviated but illuminating text of

scarcely fifty oversized pages, Rees discusses more than one hundred years of artistic works dealing with the Canadian prairies from the Rockies eastward to the Canadian Shield. Noting the first negative reactions to the flat, forbidding, and isolated land, the author also reveals how the gradual acceptance of this terrain paralleled the need to settle it, thereby demonstrating the power practical, governmental affairs had on artists' renditions of the prairie West. Subsequent chapters deal with the impact of regionalism, modernism, and folk art on landscape treatments of western Canada. More than eighty pages of attractive full color and black and white paintings amply represent the artists discussed. Particularly noteworthy are the sections devoted to the life and works of Peter Rindisbacher, Paul Kane, C. W. Jeffreys, L. L. FitzGerald, Illingworth Kerr, Robert Hurley, and William Kurelek. The layout, organization, brief bibliography, and quality of paper are also appealing.

While skip-and-run readers and coffee table addicts may be drawn most to the superior physical and pictorial features of Rees's book, no one should overlook the probing and useful qualities of the author's analyses. While he is not able to do more than mention most artists, his compressed vignettes are helpful since they are more interpretive than descriptive, especially those appearing in the first sections of the volume. For those interested in a brief, analytical introduction to western Canadian landscape painting, this will be a very handy, attractive volume.

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