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Banting — The Artist

IN 1931, at the height of his fame, one of the discoverers of insulin was shyly pleased when some of his Quebec snowscenes were accepted for use as Christmas cards.

In fact Sir Frederick Banting dreamed of retiring from medical research to live in the country and paint.

Ten years later, on a blustery February day in 1941, the famous scientist lay dying in a snowy setting that might have been lifted from one of those cards. The big Hudson aircraft that was flying him to England for secret war work in Aviation Medicine Research, lay wrecked in five feet of snow, 12 miles from Gander Bay, Newfoundland.

In his almost 50 years of life, Banting achieved what few men ever have. Although his name is indelibly associated with insulin and later work in cancer research, silicosis, aviation medicine and myocardial failure, only a small coterie of art-lovers remember this great Canadian researcher as an artist of promising talent.

"Fred Banting had a tendency to downgrade his art," says his friend and art colleague—C. A. G. Matthews of Sampson-Matthews art studio, Toronto.

"At the time I knew him in the 1930's, he was a shy, retiring man with people he didn't know, but full of warmth and humor with people he knew and liked. He always thought of himself as a novice in art, without formal training. But I thought he showed tremendous ability."

Matthews remembers vividly the time in 1931 when William Coutts suggested doing a series of greeting cards designed by Canadian artists. It was the year the Coutts Company did a hands-across-the-border tie up with Hallmark Cards in the U.S.A. And it was a year of struggle for the emerging Group of Seven artists in Canada.

"Bill Coutts—a fine man with a fine idea—asked me if I could get Fred Banting, A. Y. Jackson and some of the others to do some designs. At that time, we were doing Coutts' engravings and Bill wanted us to try some silk screen work. I had several of the Banting originals in my possession, including his St. Irene painting which we thought would be a good subject for silk screen. Banting's good friend Jackson helped him to do the 'translation' to exact card size—flattening it out to take the vivid blocks of color. Later, three other paintings were adapted for Coutts Hallmark Christmas cards. I think Banting was quite flattered that we wanted them."

How did a great medical researcher become interested in painting? Probably because he cared—about Canada, about people, about the land. He was first and foremost a humanitarian—deeply involved with life and all its facets.

Born of pioneer stock on a hill-top farm near Alliston, Ont., in 1891, Banting attended the town's public school. He was not a brilliant student but a conscientious one. Perhaps even more

than his studies, he enjoyed sketching—trees, houses, farm animals, pen and ink cartoons—for his interest in art showed up early. He even tried his hand at oils while still in public school.

But other impressions were crowding in. One day young Fred Banting saw a serious accident. Two men, while shingling a roof, fell to the ground and were badly injured. He ran for a doctor and stayed to watch him at work. Said Banting later: "In those tense minutes, I thought that the greatest service in life is that of the medical profession. From that day, it was my greatest ambition to become a doctor."

Banting eventually graduated in 1916, and enlisted in the Canadian Army Medical Corps in December. In 1917 he went to France with the 13th Field Ambulance — winning the Military Cross "for fortitude and hard work in spite of wounds" helping the casualties during stiff action near Cambrai.

After the war, following internship at Toronto Sick Children's Hospital, Dr. Fred Banting set up in practice in London, Ont., augmenting his income by demonstrating at Western University medical school. In the long hours waiting for patients who didn't come, he once again took up painting and assiduously read medical literature.

Even after the fame and honor which culminated in a knighthood in 1934, he never lost his simplicity, modesty—and love of painting.

In one of his numerous diary notes while out sketching, Banting wrote: "Work is the only thing in life that brings happiness." And he followed it to the letter. He brought the inquiring mind and unrelenting persistence of the researcher to the world of art. He was

no dilettante, no Sunday painter. He believed in working at art—even outside on a winter's day at 10 below zero! Whenever he could escape from his busy round, he painted.

All diabetics know the late Dr. Banting as a physician who conceived experiments resulting in the discovery of Insulin. But how many members know Banting, the Artist.

We are pleased to reproduce on the front cover and in this article two paintings by Dr. Banting. This has been made possible through The Medical Post, in which issue for December 20, 1966 the article appeared under the by-line of Margaret Burrows, and by William E. Coutts Company Limited (Hallmark Cards). We appreciate the willing co-operation extended to us in arranging for the reprinting of the article.

The sleighing scene with the single house is entitled "Homeward Bound" and was used as a Christmas Card in 1931. The scene with several houses is entitled "Quebec Village" and was also used on Christmas Cards.

Much against his will he was lionized at home and abroad, but never felt quite at ease in high society. Always it was a relief to escape from the drawing room to the real "drawing room" of the countryside where he could set up his easel and paint. "I always did hate to be at a certain place at a certain time," he wrote wistfully.

In the late 1920's, his long friendship had begun with A. Y. Jackson, dean of Canadian landscape painters and leading light of the Group of Seven artists. Banting simply knocked at Jackson's

door one night to ask his advice and help in his painting. Jackson became not only his friend but instructor. He took Banting on many sketching trips—to little French villages in southern Quebec, to the French River and Georgian Bay in Northern Ontario, to Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, and even on a memorable trip to the Arctic on the Government boat, the "Beolithic".

A. Y. Jackson, in his moving little book, "Banting as an Artist", says that Banting started by dabbing too often at his canvas but quickly learned, "like a surgeon, with swift sure strokes", to achieve simple designs, mass, and adequate use of clear, unmixed color.

Banting realized, writes Jackson, that "success in art mostly went to painters who were akin to the fashionable practitioners in medicine rather than to



Banting's diaries from these trips are as rich with his love of the land as are his vivid paintings. "It is a great country," he wrote. "The more I think of the city the more I want to live in the country, and the more I think of being a Professor of Research, the more I want to be an artist, or something else with more work and less responsibility."

the research workers." Banting was a non-conformist. He gloried in the work of the Group of Seven who were rebelling against the Constable and Gainsborough style of making Canada look like an English meadow. Like Jackson, Lismer, Thompson, Harris and the rest, he looked for the bold sweep of the rocks and pines, the glitter of the snowfields and waterways of

the true Canada. Yet, never quite sure of his own talent, he would show A. Y. Jackson a sketch and say: "Now, what's wrong with it?"

Banting took with him on his sketching trips not only his own realistic eye for nature's color and drama, but his human awareness of life around him. At St. Irene, St. Fidele, and St. Tite des Caps, along the south shore of the St. Lawrence, Jackson remembers, "He always had a crowd of kids about him. He liked them."

On one of the trips, although trying to be incognito, he treated a French woman's sick baby. On his Arctic trip the problem of the Eskimos distressed him and led to important reports on their diet and health. And on the northwest trip he was deeply conscious of the plight of the Indians. He hoped one day to write a book on these unfortunates.

Except for marine studies in Gloucester, Mass., a few paintings in Spain and Norway, pen and ink studies in Russia and several other European countries, the great majority of Banting's work is Canadian in subject and spirit. "See Canada first" was his credo. "He had a sublime faith in Canada's destiny," wrote Jackson, "and saw the need of education, research and culture if we were ever to be a nation."

"No country can afford to neglect its creative minds," wrote Banting in his diary.

In February 1943, two years after Banting's death, in the snow he loved so much to paint, 200 of his sketches and paintings were put on exhibit at the Hart House Art Gallery in Toronto. It was a memorial tribute sparked by Professor Barker Fairley and organized with the help of Lady Banting, Surgeon-Commander Charles

H. Best, Dr. F. Hipwell, A. Y. Jackson and Professor Hardolph Wasteneys, in co-operation with the art committee of Hart House. "It was like the story of his life in pictures," commented A. Y. Jackson.

Dr. Lloyd Stevenson sums up his work thus: "The best of the paintings are boldly and cleverly composed, never blurred, misty or wantily tinted. All is well defined and glowingly colored. Swinging white clouds against ardent blue sky. Flaming trees. Thick yellow sunshine. Dazzling snow."

Said C. A. G. Matthews recently as he nostalgically fingered the Coutts Hallmark Christmas landscapes: "The sad thing is that Fred wanted to retire at 50, live in the country and just paint. He missed it by a matter of months."

NATIONAL FUND APPEAL FOR \$150,000 STARTS MARCH 15TH

Everything is in readiness to launch our National Fund Appeal on March 15th, 1967.

We are looking to the Branches to participate more fully in the 1967 campaign.

Special Letter Writer Kits have been mailed to all Branch Presidents and Branch Appeal Chairmen.

If you would like to be a special letter-writer, contact the President or National Branch Appeal Chairman of your nearest Branch right away.

Publication Deadline

First Quarter — December 15

Second Quarter — February 1

Third Quarter — September 1

Fourth Quarter — October 25