

The History of Medicine Museum

Hours: Monday to Friday
9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Viewings by appointment:
telephone Mr. J. Senior, Curator, 922-1134, Ext. 27

BANTING AS ARTIST

The month of February recalls a sad anniversary, that of the death of Sir Frederic Banting. While flying to England on a medical mission during the war, he was fatally injured in an airplane crash and died in Newfoundland, February 21, 1941. Banting is, of course, best known for that significant contribution to the treatment of diabetes, the isolation of insulin for which, along with his department chairman, J. J. R. MacLeod, he received in 1923 the Nobel prize for medicine. Members of the research team included J. B. Collip and prominently, Charles Best.

Less commonly known, however, is Banting's considerable artistic talent and his working relationship with a respected member of the Group of Seven, A. Y. Jackson. Jackson describes their first meeting: "He knocked at my studio door. He told me who he was; he had heard I had some war sketches and would like to see them. He was nervous. He looked over the sketches, picked one out, pulled out the money and went away with the sketch."¹ Jackson found him "very shy and very modest" but despite this innate reticence, a friendship developed and they spent much time together on painting expeditions to Quebec, the Arctic, Algoma and Georgian Bay.

The Academy possesses some of the fruits of Banting's labour: two small oil sketches and a larger, more formal oil canvas. There is also a pencil sketch of Charles Comfort, an artist who later executed the Academy's Centennial project *Medicinae Canadensis Tabula*.

Jackson had exerted a powerful influence over the artistic style of Banting and as a result at least one critic who had an enviable knowledge of Canadian art identified one of Banting's sketches as an A. Y. Jackson. At this, Banting laughed "just wait until I tell 'A.Y.' that

one."² Banting's generally modest and good-humoured approach to his work was demonstrated on yet another occasion. A collection of his sketches was to illustrate an article on the North. Jackson was impressed with this quality and with one in particular so much so that he put his own name on the back as a way of claiming 'first refusal', a precautionary measure because of Banting's habit of giving away his work. When the publication appeared, the article gave Jackson credit for the sketch. Banting's response was to remark to Jackson, "I wouldn't have cared a scrap but they stuck your name on the only decent sketch in the lot."³

On another occasion, it was the absolute clarity of his authorship which amused Banting. D. I. McLeod took a number of Banting's sketches to an outspoken picture-framer in order to determine whether they were indeed worth framing. This was the artisan's evaluation: "You have no reason to be discouraged; when Doctor Banting first took up sketching, he came to me with some sketches to be framed, and some of them were even worse than these!"⁴

Banting and Jackson's friendship was long and close; Jackson commented: "He was a good companion, ready to go anywhere, patient, persistent, and energetic."⁵ From a painting expedition to Quebec in 1927, Jackson recalled an incident. "It was March, but there was no sign of spring, and we were working in very exposed country. The winds swept in from the Gulf and there was no shelter from them. Banting persisted, though it was an ordeal for him. I found him one day crouched behind a rail fence, the snow drifting into his sketch box and his hands so cold he could hardly work. He turned to me and said, 'And I thought this was a sissy game'.⁶ It was clear that Banting used his excursions with Jackson to escape the pressures of his daily routine and at times

resorted to the use of an assumed name. "He did not want to be known as a doctor in places where there was almost no medical service."⁷ Inevitably, Banting relented and saw those needing attention, in one instance a woman who had delivered a baby, in another a boatman with diabetes. In the case of the Arctic expedition aboard the "Beothic", his participation was justified by his agreeing to supply information to the Department of the Interior on the welfare of the natives, many of whom had become dependent on the Hudson's Bay Company for support. And, in fact, this study was instrumental in beginning reform of the traders and of government relations with the natives.⁸ On this trip, Jackson remarked on Banting's improvement and thought that he showed a lot of promise. "I would josh him about dropping science and turning to art. 'When I am fifty, that's what I intend to do,' he would say."⁹

Of Banting's paintings at the Academy, two are oils done near the French River on Georgian Bay about 1930. One was given by Banting to Dr. George Young at Christmas 1930, the other found its way to the Academy sometime in 1934. The larger and more formal canvas entitled "Cobalt" came from the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. These paintings as well as the pencil sketch of Charles Comfort were exhibited at a retrospective showing of Banting's works at Hart House, University of Toronto in 1943. At that time, the catalogue *Banting as an Artist* was prepared by A. Y. Jackson. This publication listed the dates and locales of the paintings but indicated that they were untitled. Eventually the locations pencilled in on their undersides were adopted as titles. Banting displayed no strong attachment to individual works. "[The] sketches are scattered far and wide. He took a sincere pleasure in showing them to his friends and if he thought they liked them he would give them away."¹⁰

One of Jackson's more poignant reminiscences illustrates the real joy that was

Banting's as an artist. "One of the last things he said to me was, 'Won't it be great when the war is over to get back to the country and paint again!'"¹¹

Since the Group of Seven have of late attained respectability in the art world and are perceived as a distinctively Canadian version of Impressionism, it will be interesting to await a serious aesthetic appraisal of Banting's work. It is clear that his intimate working relationship with Jackson and his characteristic comportment to the Canadian landscape place him firmly within their camp. If not strictly a member of what is a well-defined school but as their successor, he proceeded to interpret the Canadian landscape in a uniquely Canadian fashion. Sir Frederic Banting in both vocation and avocation did nothing if not contribute to the quality of life.

1. Alexander Young Jackson, *Banting as an Artist* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1943), p. 11.
2. Lloyd Stevenson, *Sir Frederic Banting* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1946), p. 234.
3. *Loc. cit.*
4. William Colgate, *Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1943), p. 252.
5. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
8. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 239 ff.
9. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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Corrigendum to: "Notes on the History of Scarification" in the Bulletin of the Academy of Medicine, LI, 4 (Jan. '78). Footnote 11 should read *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*.

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