

The Arts:

Images that will not fade away

By Jenny Pearson

Cornelius Krieghoff, a painter of the Flemish school who settled in Canada in the early part of the nineteenth century, holds a unique place in the history of the country. He was an old master in a new scene, an original who imported the techniques of the old world and brought them to bear on the people and scenery of the new.

If he had remained in Europe he would probably not have made too much impact, being just another excellent painter in the style of Breughel the elder, Jan Steen and Terriers, whom he admired and imitated. But in Canada, using and adapting his considerable talents to record a life-style and a scenery that no one else was painting (excepting perhaps Paul Kane), his work has a special place in the history of art as well as in the social history of the country of his adoption.

The current exhibition of his work at Canada House, in Trafalgar Square, recognizes this dual interest: relics of his time, including clothing and hunting instruments and the familiar "raquettes" on which the artist shows Indian hunters and travellers crossing the snow, have been brought over from Canada so that visitors to the exhibition can experience a part of the world he painted. At the same time Books Canada, a few paces up Cockspur Street from Canada House, has a small accompanying exhibition which includes Hughes de Jovancourt's definitive and lavishly illustrated book, *Cornelius Krieghoff*.^{*} The exhibitions close on April 30.

The appearance of Krieghoff in London at this moment is particularly interesting because it polarizes many of the diverging attitudes of the British as well as of Canadians at home and abroad. For he was a romantic who had the good fortune to live in Canada's romantic age, setting down on canvas the very images that many Britons still prefer to believe in – unaware that the life he portrayed has largely disappeared under the impact of urbanization and mechanization.

Krieghoff painted sleighs riding over wide open spaces, Indians hunting in the forest and portaging canoes besides wild mountain streams, endless beautiful snow scenes with just a few figures in the landscape and farms and log cabins and country inns – representing an escapist world in terms of the lives most Canadians now live. It is one to which many British nevertheless cling in imagination, either

^{*}Published by Musson Book Company, Toronto, 1971.



ignorant or simply preferring not to absorb the facts of Canadian life today. Even homesick Canadians, according to the poet Earle Birney, tend to dwell on such images when they travel abroad and so help to perpetuate the myth.

But if Krieghoff encourages our escapist tendencies, he also dwells on an aspect of Canadian life that some would rather forget – the traditional life of the French Canadian *Habitants*. It was a world he knew well, having married the daughter of a French Canadian farmer, Emilie Caiuthier and spent the early years of their marriage living among the *Habitants* in the village of Longueuil, across the St. Lawrence river from Montreal.

The traditional image of the *habitant* has something in common with the popular English characterization of the Irishman: he is pictured as rather simple, jovial fellow, a hard-working, ruddy-faced peasant who labours on his own small farm and whose life-style is dictated by a paternalistic Roman Catholic Church. Traditionally he has numerous children, living in an extended family unit where everyone is expected to lend a hand with the day's work. Krieghoff painted them thus: his pictures show

Habitants at work making sugar, cutting ice, in their farmyards, piling on to their sleighs, drinking and playing cards in their houses and berrated by the priest for breaking Lent (something which happened to Krieghoff himself, though a Protestant). Even his pictures of the English upper classes in their elegant sleighs and fashionable clothes contain figures recognizable as *Habitants* – literally the hewers of wood and carriers of water to that society.

While some French Canadians may look upon Krieghoff's work with dismay, for the Indians of Canada it abounds in nostalgia. Krieghoff himself was a romantic figure, an incurable wanderer who loved the open air and the forest. The Indians of his day were still a free people who lived partly by trading with the white man, whose interest was in furs, and partly by hunting for the food they ate. Krieghoff admired them, made friends with them, and spent a lot of time hunting and painting among them.

He in turn became skilled in hunting and forest life and it is told how they enjoyed his company on hunting expeditions. After he moved from Longueuil to Quebec City, he made friends with a Huron Indian named Teriolen who lived nearby and who