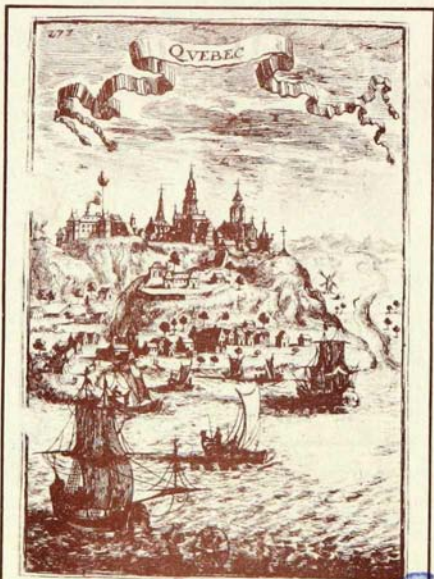


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CLARENCE A.
GAGNON



CANADIAN ARTISTS SERIES

CLARENCE A. GAGNON

R. C. A., LL. D.



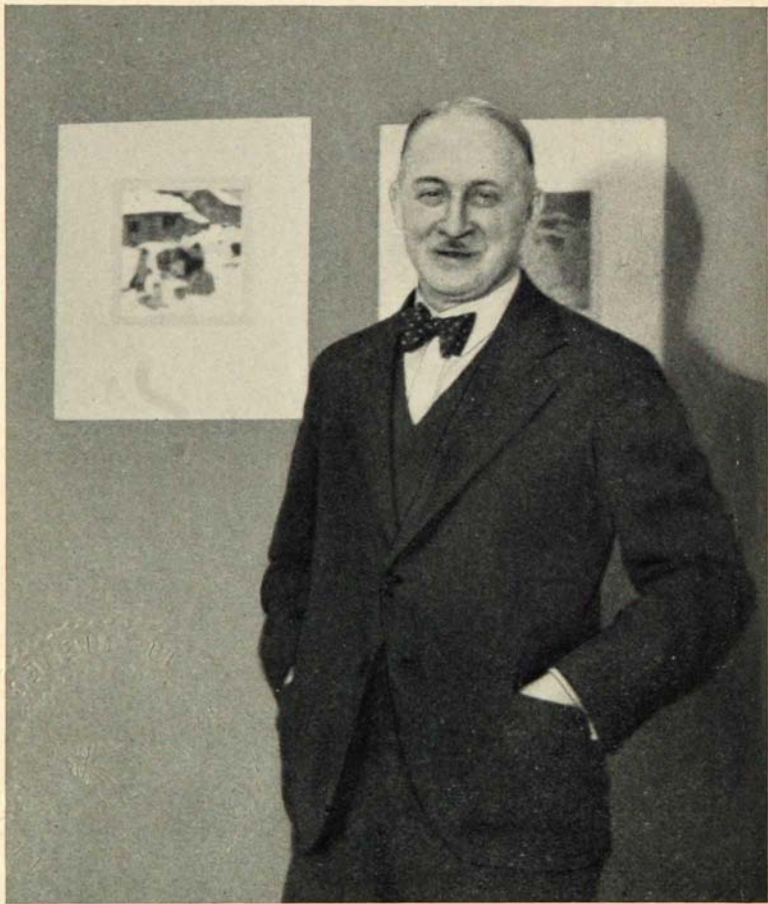
By ALBERT H. ROBSON

Author of

CANADIAN LANDSCAPE PAINTERS



THE RYERSON PRESS — TORONTO



CLARENCE A. GAGNON

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CLARENCE A. GAGNON

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IT is not easy to write a short appreciation of the work of Clarence A. Gagnon. His mediums have been so varied, and his accomplishments in several fields of art expression so distinguished, that one must subdivide his activities in order to appraise them properly. As an etcher, painter, and illustrator, he held an enviable international reputation. His work in any one of these mediums has been of sufficient importance to deserve special and extended comment.

Back in 1643 three Gagnon brothers left Normandy to seek their fortunes in the New World; one settled on the Isle of Orleans and the other two nearby on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. To-day their descendants are a numerous and important family scattered throughout the Province of Quebec. Clarence A. Gagnon was born in Montreal on November 8, 1881. Soon after his birth the family moved to Sainte Rose, a small village north of Montreal. Here he attended school until the age of ten when they moved into Montreal again. His father, Alphonse E. Gagnon, was the manager of a milling company in Montreal and his mother a cultured English woman with literary ability. While Clarence A. Gagnon is rightly considered a French-Canadian, he formed a happy link between the English- and French-speaking artists of Canada. His

eminence as an artist demanded the respect of both groups, while his broad sympathies and clear logical thinking made him an asset to the art politics of the Dominion. At first appearance he looked more like a successful business man than a foot-free artist. He was athletic, clean-cut and well-groomed, with a magnetic personality and a merry, roguish twinkle in his eyes. An ardent angler, he was always willing to change from the serious discussion of art to the raconteur, telling fascinating fish stories drawn from a wide and varied experience in many parts of the world. His father hoped he would go into business, but even as a mere child in Sainte Rose Clarence's greatest interest was in the illustrated book his mother read to him in the evening, and he spent his spare time laboriously copying the illustrations of Gustave Doré.

In Montreal he studied under William Brymner at the Art Association, spending his holidays sketching in rural Quebec. His work attracted the attention of James Morgan, of Montreal, who sent him to Paris in 1904, where he studied under Jean-Paul Laurens at the Académie Julian. Later he made many trips abroad and visited every country in Europe except Russia, but he always remained a Canadian both in his work and outlook. Since 1909 the Baie St. Paul district had been his favourite sketching ground where he was a familiar figure among the habitants and the trappers, with his sketching materials in a rucksack on his back, and a fishing rod or gun in his hand.

Gagnon has, of course, sketched in many parts of the Province and always took the keenest interest in the native French-

Canadian crafts. He loved old things and old customs, partly for the intrinsic honesty of the old hand-made objects and partly for the local colour which they radiate. He was an untiring worker in the interest of the handicrafts of Quebec, believing that the preservation and encouragement of these fine old native industries would add both profit and pleasure to the life of the rural inhabitants. Sitting round with the habitants in the evenings, he worked out colour schemes for their homespun carpets or made beautiful colour designs for their hooked rugs. He taught them how to obtain more attractive colours in dyeing their yarns, how to make better-wearing rugs by the inclusion of some of the long tough hair of the native cattle. These were jocularly nicknamed "bull wool rugs" by his friends. Carrying through with the usual Gagnon thoroughness, he helped them find better markets for their work. He knew, too, some of the more northern outposts of civilization in Quebec and with his old friend, Judge Simard, the magistrate of the district of Ungava, he explored the villages and settlements along the north shore of the St. Lawrence to the Labrador coast.

Gagnon did not do anything by halves. He had an insatiable desire to get down to fundamentals and build soundly and well. In his etchings there is apparent a perfect mastery of this difficult medium, with sure and sensitive draughtsmanship, fine composition and infinite artistry. In his exquisitely beautiful illustrations there is the same astonishing thoroughness and understanding of the intricacies of the mediums of reproduction. In his painting he delved deeply into such technical and scientific matters as

pigmentation and, since 1915, he ground his own colours to attain greater purity and permanency. It was just what one would expect from Gagnon; a competent and thorough understanding of all the problems involved and a thorough mastery before proceeding. This statement does not imply any lack of artistic feeling, for Gagnon was first and last a sensitive artist. He had, however, little sympathy with sentimental inefficiency, and believed that art is not exempt from the laws which regulate other forms of human activity, and that it requires for its successful pursuit application, intelligence, initiative and knowledge.

Clarence A. Gagnon first attained wide international acclaim for his etchings, and in this medium he is represented in many of the important public collections of Europe. Having mastered the intricacies of this difficult medium, in which he reached the pinnacle of achievement and renown, Gagnon decided to discontinue etching. His French-Canadian love of colours did not find sufficient scope in etching and he returned with greater enthusiasm to painting.

As a Canadian painter Gagnon held an important position. He was one of that small group of Montreal painters who introduced impressionism into Canada in the early years of the century. Along with Maurice Cullen and Suzor-Côté he did much to open the eyes of Canadians to the beauty and brilliancy of colour and light in the Canadian scene. On returning from his earlier trips abroad, Gagnon painted subtle and beautiful pictures of rural Quebec radiant with light and atmosphere. He applied the new theories of *plein air* painting to the scenes he knew and loved, and in so doing

enriched the art of Canada. In his later paintings he moved towards greater brilliancy of colour, simpler design and decorative pattern. There is more definite personality in his later work, and something more nearly related to the spirit and tradition of our French Province. In most of his paintings he introduced life and action, for to Gagnon the people, churches, houses, horses and sleighs are all part of a living whole. His intense love for his native Province, his close contacts with the simple rural life of the countryside, place him as a supreme interpreter of Quebec. And why not?—for Gagnon belongs to the soil of Quebec. Stretching back for three hundred years to the early days of pioneer settlement his family have been part and parcel of the Province. He knows both the external facts and the innermost thoughts and aspirations of the people. There are deeper things in his painting than mere rural topography; there is insight, sympathy and understanding in every stroke of the brush. Despite his frequent and sometimes lengthy sojourns abroad, he remained at heart and in his work solely French-Canadian.

During his last few years, Clarence A. Gagnon turned his attention to book illustration, and his achievements have set spectacular new standards of artistic achievement in this field of art expression. In 1929, Mornay, of Paris, published *Le Grand Silence Blanc* illustrated in colour by Gagnon. A limited edition de luxe was priced at 1600 francs and the regular edition at 400 francs. Both editions were quickly sold out and were soon quoted at a premium. The purchasers were buying the Gagnon illustrations. This success was followed, in 1933, by a beautiful edition of Louis

Hémon's classic of French-Canadian frontier life *Marie Chapdelaine*. Gagnon worked five years on this book and produced fifty-four illustrations of exquisite beauty which were reproduced by colour photogravure. In this series of pictures, for pictures they are, Gagnon found ample scope to express his intimate and sympathetic knowledge of peasant life and the Quebec countryside. All who have seen these illustrations will concur with Colonel Wilfred Bovey who said:

"The spirit of the land guided the artist's brush. The wonderful Canadian spring that Rudyard Kipling loved, summer on the rivers and in the hills, autumn and winter, the lumberjack in the woods, the good wife at her loom, the little church on a Sunday morning, all these and many others make up a single whole. This set of pictures is a document of Canadian life, charming to the lover of colour and design, valuable to the student of our country and people, beyond price to him who knows Quebec."

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Born in Montreal, November 8	1881
Lived in the village of Sainte Rose until	1891
Studied at the Art Association of Montreal under William Brymner	1897-1900
Awarded Scholarship	1899
Went to Paris, France	1904
Studied under Jean-Paul Laurens and at the Académie Julian	1904-1905
Won Bronze Medal at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition at St. Louis	1904
Awarded Honourable Mention in Paris Salon for his etchings	1906
Returned to Canada and sketched round Baie St. Paul which has been his favourite sketching ground ever since	1909
Elected an Associate Royal Academician	1910
Married Lucile Rodier of Montreal who also was a pupil of William Brymner	1919
Elected Academician	1921
Won the Trevor prize at the Salmagundi Club, New York	1921
Illustrated <i>Le Grand Silence Blanc</i>	1926
Illustrated <i>Maria Chapdelaine</i>	1933
Received the degree of LL.D. (<i>honoris causa</i>) from the University of Montreal, May 27	1938
Died in Montreal	1942

PARTIAL LIST OF PAINTINGS

BY CLARENCE A. GAGNON IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

THE NATIONAL GALLERY, OTTAWA - *Rue du Canal, Moret-Sur-Loing*
In the Laurentians, Winter
The Wayside Cross, Autumn
Street Scene, Quebec, at Night
Evening on the North Shore
The Pond, in October
Moonlight, Quebec, Winter
Village in the Laurentian
Mountains

MONTREAL ART ASSOCIATION GALLERY - *Autumn, Pont de L'Arche*

THE ART GALLERY OF TORONTO - - *March in the Birch Woods*
A Laurentian Homestead
Horse-Racing in Winter, Quebec
The Farm on the Hill
Lonely Village on the
St. Lawrence

QUEBEC - - - - - *Ice Bridge, Quebec*
Village Street, St. Urbain
Laurentian Homesteads, Winter
Indian Summer, Baie St. Paul
Killing the Pig, Winter Scene
The Beach at Paranie, Brittany
Village Street, Winter Morning,
Baie St. Paul

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY - - - - *Spring Thaw*

ST. JOHN, N.B. - - - - - *La Selle sur Seine*
HALIFAX, N.S. - - - - - *Autumn, Moret-Sur-Loing*
MANCHESTER ART GALLERY, ENG. - - *The Bend of the River,*
Winter, Laurentians



MR. GAGNON IS REPRESENTED BY ETCHINGS IN THE
FOLLOWING PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- PARIS (PETIT PALAIS).
- LONDON (VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM).
- DRESDEN.
- FLORENCE.
- VENICE.
- MULHAUSEN.
- THE HAGUE.
- LIVERPOOL (WALKER GALLERY).
- OTTAWA (THE NATIONAL GALLERY).
- MONTREAL (MONTREAL ART ASSOCIATION GALLERY).
- TORONTO (THE ART GALLERY OF TORONTO).
- SAINT JOHN, N.B.
- HALIFAX.
- QUEBEC (MUSEUM).

Plate I. THE CLEARING. Canvas 21 x 29

Courtesy of W. C. Laidlaw

GAGNON changed his manner of painting since this comparatively early picture was produced; nevertheless it has a quiet and restrained beauty of its own. It shows something of the infinite knowledge and sound draughtsmanship on which he has built. There is subtlety of values, deft drawing and beauty of design in the picture. The late afternoon sun casts a warm glow over a bit of the valley and the distant hills, adding delicate pearly tints to the floating clouds. The dark silhouette of the wooded ridge lends a decorative note of contrast and a sense of sombre grandeur to the scene. The graceful screen of saplings, and the little figures and barn in the middle distance, complete a very convincing picture of winter in the hills.

Any sincere artist must necessarily serve as a mirror to his time and environment, and Gagnon knew and felt all the moods and character of the Quebec Laurentian hills.

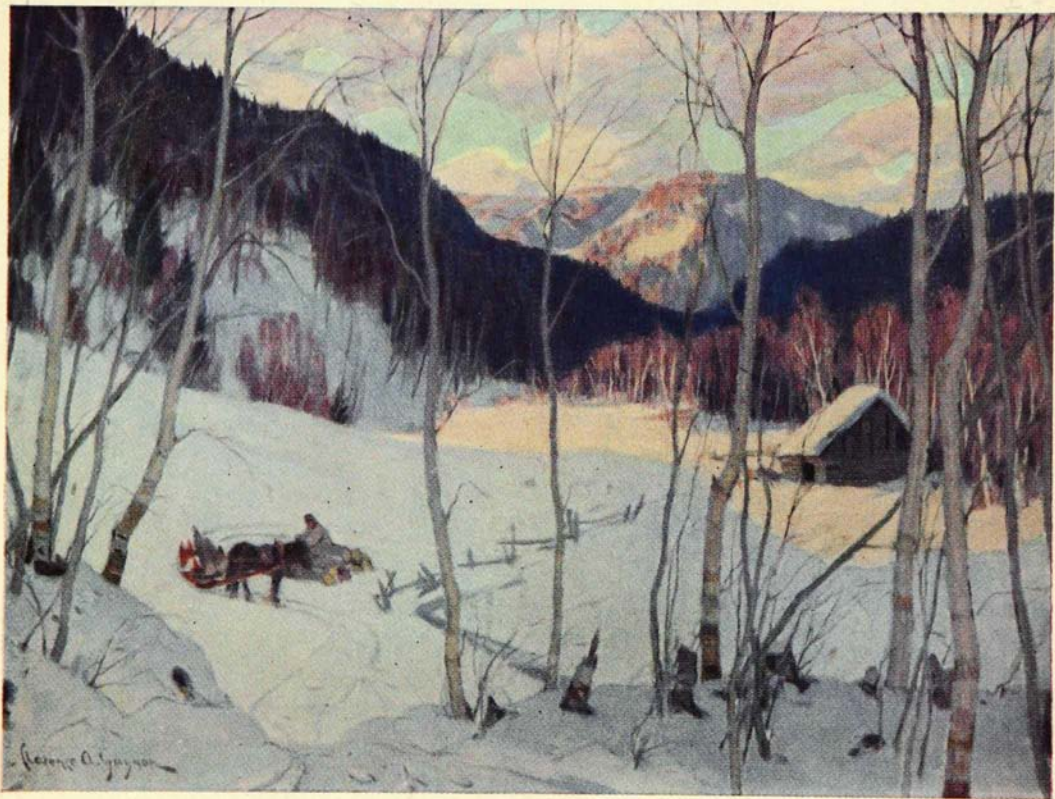


Plate II. QUEBEC HOUSE IN WINTER

Sketch $6\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$ ||

Courtesy of Clarence A. Gagnon

EVEN in this small out-door sketch by Gagnon there is a suggestion of finish and completeness. It is really a picture in miniature and shows no signs of vague impressions or lack of careful and planned consideration. While small in area it is broadly painted, masterly in drawing, and beautiful in colour. The warm glow of sunlight on the snow, and the deftly suggested tracery of branches of the fruit trees by the old stone house are delightfully painted. The blues and greens of the hills and river in the distance make a magnificent contrast to the warm colours in the foreground as well as adding a sweep of country and a sense of bigness.

Gagnon had an ingenious and effective way of signing his sketches which should make duplicating or faking of his work impossible. On the back of all his sketches he placed a plainly marked fingerprint in ink as a positive means of identification.



Plate III. MARCH IN THE BIRCH WOODS

Canvas 29 x 36

Courtesy of The Art Gallery of Toronto

THIS canvas was produced at an intermediate period of Gagnon's development as a painter. He had lost some of his early enthusiasm for subtle values and atmospheric envelopment and was moving towards bolder design and greater brilliancy of colour. The red-blanketed horse and blue-smocked habitant are painted in with force and brilliancy, and the flicker of sunlight in the birch wood is handled with simplicity and restraint. The early spring hauling of firewood is one of the stern necessities of rural life, while the winter snow still makes possible the hauling of heavy loads through the bush.



Plate IV. SPRING THAW. Canvas 24 x 32

Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery

THE lyrical, jewel-like quality of Gagnon's later paintings is well illustrated in this charming picture of a small Quebec village set in the Laurentian hills. The gaily-coloured houses sparkle against the winter snow. The grey sky and distant blue hills add the required note of contrast and supply a satisfying background to the scattered little settlement. The decorative pattern of the broken and soggy ice on the river in the foreground is repeated in the pattern of roads, fences and village, adding a quality of unity to the picture. The simplicity and directness of this canvas is one of its chief claims to true beauty.



Plate V. HORSE-RACING ON THE ICE

Canvas 40½ x 51

Courtesy of The Art Gallery of Toronto

HERE we see Gagnon's more recent tendencies toward simpler design, brighter colour and decorative pattern. It is realism distilled to essentials and expressed to give a vivid, vibrant impression of the facts recorded. Horse-racing on the ice is a popular sport in Quebec, and Gagnon shows all the vital facts with clarity and force. The typical Quebec architecture, the quaint, brightly-coloured sleighs, the blanketed ponies, the habitant costume, and straggling village on the distant hill are depicted with something of the same charm as a gaily-coloured habitant quilt. He has used his intelligence and sympathetic understanding as well as his eyes in painting this decorative picture which sparkles with colour and animation.



Plate VI. VILLAGE IN THE LAURENTIAN
MOUNTAINS. Canvas 34½ x 51

Courtesy of The National Gallery, Ottawa

THERE is movement and pattern in the design of this canvas. The rickety board sidewalk and the snow-laden street wind their way among the quaint village houses, the road finally disappearing over the distant hills. The ox with its heavy load of logs, plods its way into the foreground and adds a note of primitive rural simplicity which sets a keynote for the picture. One instinctively feels this is the back country, a village on the outskirts among the hills. The gracefully spired church, dominating the little hamlet is typical of Quebec. All the architectural facts of French-Canadian village homes are set forth with simplicity and the utmost economy of means, but the main charm rests in the moving pattern of gay colour woven into this picture.



Plate VII. VILLAGE STREET. // Canvas 22½ x 29¼

Courtesy of R. S. McLaughlin

A TYPICAL village street in Baie St. Paul, Quebec, with the brilliant light of a warm March afternoon sun lighting up the characteristic habitant cottages and casting blue shadows over the last of the winter snows. Gagnon's intimate knowledge of the Quebec houses is apparent in this canvas, and he has presented all the interesting facts with a fine breadth and simplicity of handling. It is only in rural Quebec that one sees the unusual children's sleigh in the foreground of the picture, while the primitive habitant low-built work sleigh is an ingenious and useful conveyance, which has so far proven to be the only practical winter vehicle for the Laurentian mountain district.

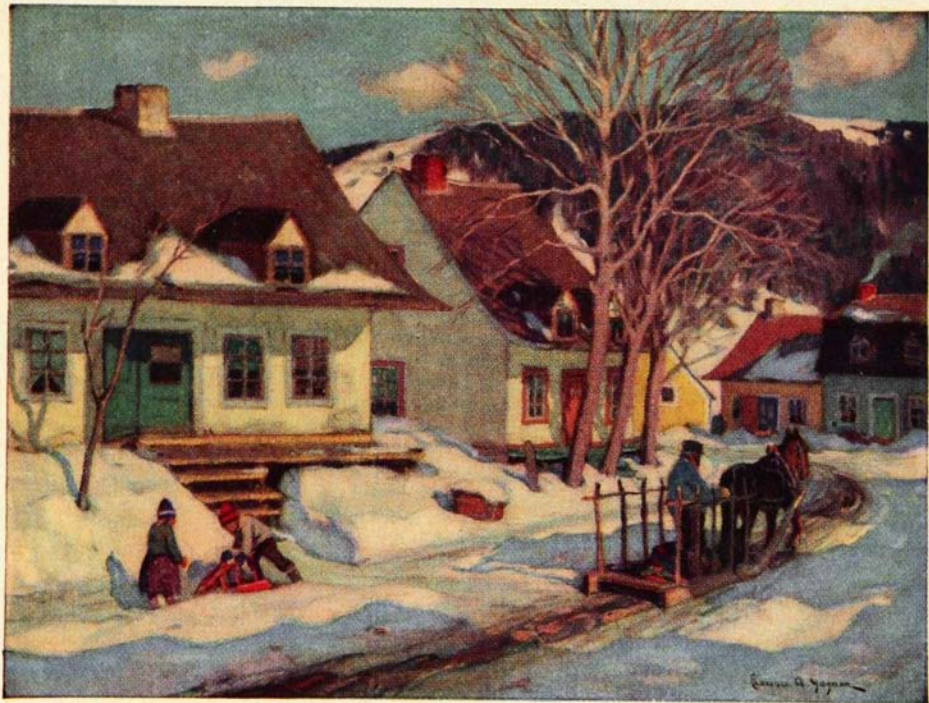


Plate VIII. ILLUSTRATION FROM *MARIA
CHAPDELAINÉ*. Monotype $7\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{7}{8}$
Courtesy of Editions Mornay, Paris, France

Of the birches, aspens, alders and wild cherries scattered upon the slopes October made splashes of many-tinted red and gold.—*Louis Hémon*

THIS is one of the remarkable series of fifty-four illustrations which convey a vivid and faithful impression of the life of the pioneer settler in Quebec. Gagnon knew his country, and his intimate understanding of the work and joys of the people are poured forth in this complete pictorial record. The delightful feature of these illustrations is that the fidelity to facts and accuracy of details has not stifled the verve, originality, and artistic beauty of execution. This is a picture of autumn ploughing with the haze of Indian Summer hanging over the countryside. The toil of breaking land and the hard struggle against primæval wilderness is beautifully expressed. The edge of the virgin land not yet cleared for cultivation is a telling note in the foreground. The hard labour of stumping and removing the rocks is still necessary to expand the meagre fields. The pull and movement of the ox as contrasted with the horse could not be painted by anyone who had not closely studied both these animals in action. Intimate knowledge of facts is written all over the painting, from the quaint old-time wheeled plough to the details of harness and ox-yoke.

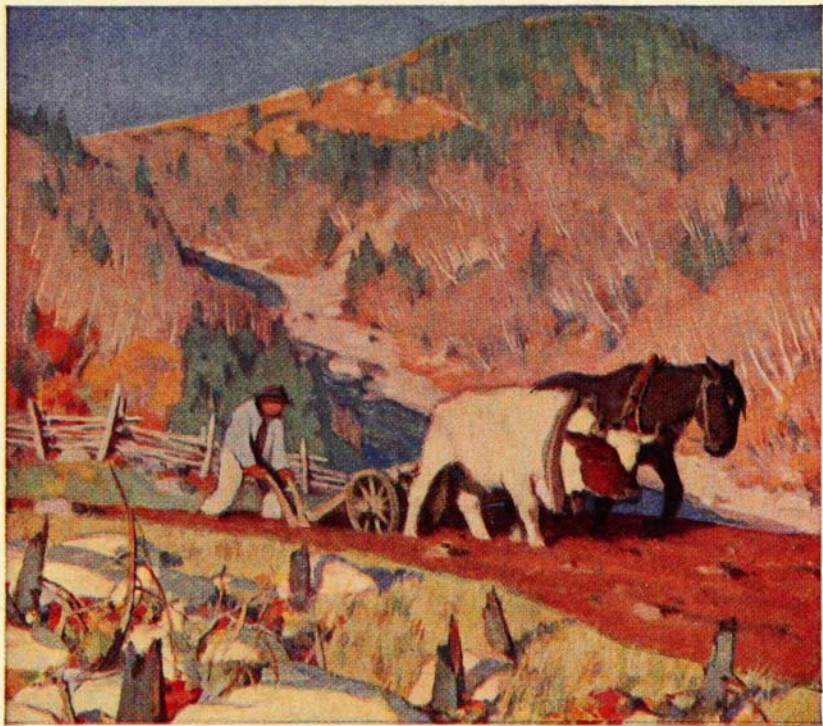


Plate IX. ILLUSTRATION FROM *MARIA
CHAPDELAINÉ*. Monotype $8\frac{3}{4}$ x $8\frac{3}{4}$
Courtesy of Editions Mornay, Paris, France

To strive from dawn until nightfall, spending
all strength in heavy tasks. —*Louis Hémon*

MUCH of maple sugar making to-day is a highly specialized and mechanized business, and here Gagnon shows us the good old-fashioned pioneer method. It was hard work and required long hours, everyone in the family taking part, but a breath of spring in the air added joy to the occasion. The complete story of "boiling down the sap in the old iron kettle" is told in every detail in this illustration. It is a vivid and faithful impression of the scene painted with restraint and decorative beauty. The crisp, pure colour introduced so deftly in a harmony of grey-greens sparkles with a jewel-like quality and completes a very charming colour arrangement.

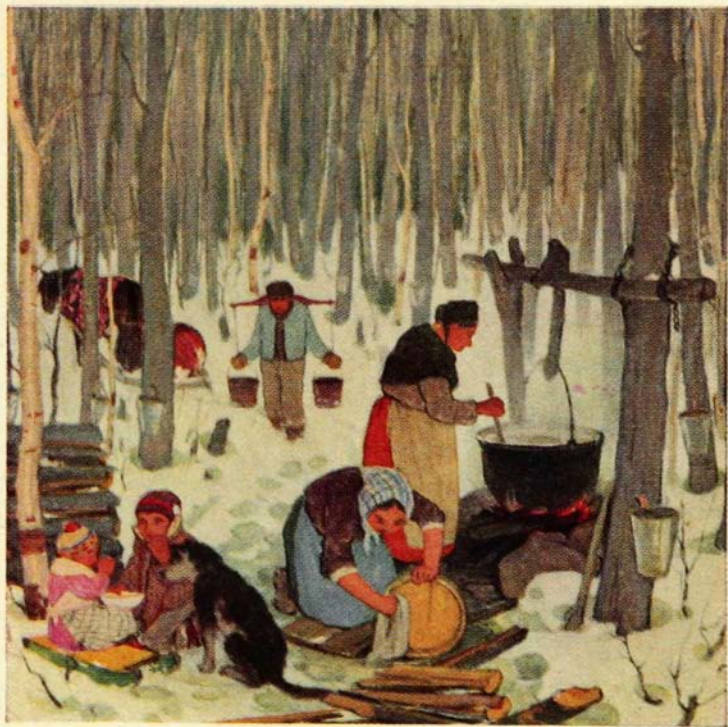
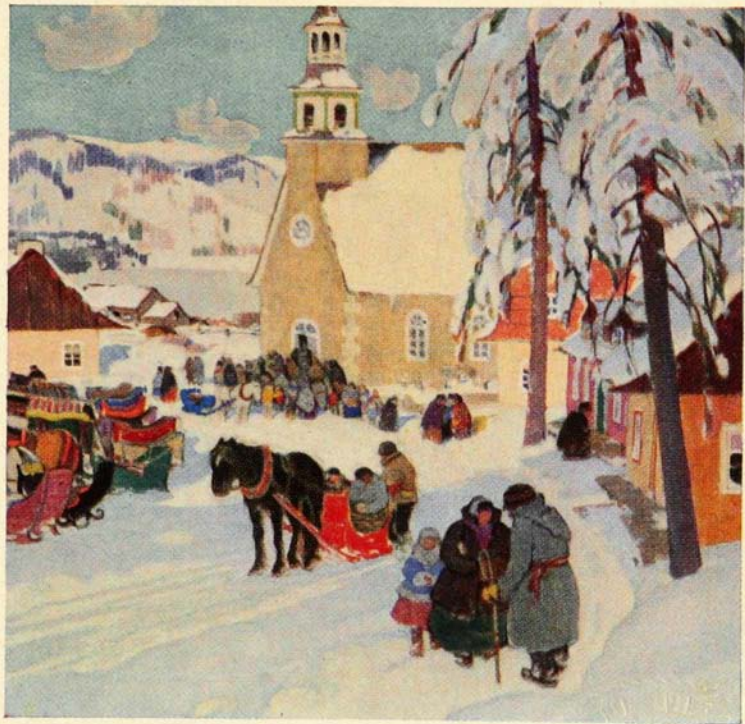


Plate X. ILLUSTRATION FROM *MARIA
CHAPDELAINÉ*. Monotype 8¼ x 8¾
Courtesy of Editions Mornay, Paris, France

The door opened and the men of the congregation
began to come out of the Church of Peribonka.

—*Louis Hémon*


HERE the artist has painted one of those bright winter days when the newly fallen snow clings to the trees and transforms the landscape into a scintillating fairyland. It is a vivid and beautiful illustration, true in every detail, reflecting Gagnon's intimate knowledge of the life and country. The deftly painted and well-placed groups of figures and the gay-coloured sleighs and horses with their blankets are so arranged as to lead the eye to the entrance of the typical Quebec rural church, which is the centre of interest. The illustration is decorative and sparkles with colour, but above all it is a lyrical song of a glorious Canadian winter Sunday in Quebec.



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