

# IV

1945 - 1946  
Exercise Muskox

In 1945 Wilson's Embarrassment; Reflections and Head Table were accepted for the OSA exhibition at the AGT and Head Table (a satire on head tables) won the J.W.L. Forster Award for the best subject painting. The humour of the head table had long attracted York, many not listening to the speaker, asleep or fiddling with something. A selection from the exhibition went to Quebec City where they had a bilingual catalogue, then later to Cornell University in New York State.

Head Table was shown again along with The March Past with the RCA at the Montreal Art Association. Among the comments New World Illustrated reproduced Welfare Worker and Head Table:

Artist ably captures boredom of older men at business dinner - Most acute satirical comment in the show is made by York Wilson... This is Mr. Wilson at his best...; York Wilson is responsible for this devastatingly clever satire...

The March Past, 1945 with the crowd discussing their bets was shown with the RCA and OSA, 1948. This painting was a favourite of the art critic, Paul Duval and hung in his studio since.

Wilson was elected an Associate of the RCA in 1945. The aging President was Ernest Fosbery of the RCA with the elderly E. Dyonnet as secretary. M. Dyonnet brought a large trunk filled with RCA business to meetings he would fish through his pile of papers looking for the required item, then the lid would bang down. Apparently the two dear "elderlies" plodding through RCA business made a most amusing playlet which tickled York who felt so privileged just being there. He couldn't resist doing a few quick sketches at meetings. However M. Dyonnet was not slow in getting out the letter to inform York that he had been accepted as an Associate and could now put ARCA after his signature. A.J. Casson was vice-president at the time and Wilson was soon on the executive. It wasn't long before the Academy came alive with the new blood, just as the

OSA had been doing.

An art group in Brantford, Ontario calling themselves So-Ed often invited York to speak, demonstrate and judge their work. In 1945 his demonstration was to paint a portrait, selecting someone from the audience. A Press report says:

Mr. Wilson invited lovely Francis Anita Kaminski, So-Ed'er, to sit for him. Then while he sketched her portrait, working with oils, he explained the different processes, stopping from time to time to answer questions. Finished, he presented his model with the portrait.

Four artists were invited to show at the Eaton Galleries, John Alfsen, Hedley Rainnie, York Wilson and Wm. Winter. The Telegram mentions his clever landscapes:

...but Mr. Wilson's ballet scenes are his top-ranking canvases, these not altogether beyond the experimental stage, but sometimes brilliant in the solutions at which the artist has arrived...

York's approach to ballet was entirely his own, taking front seats always at a Ballet performance, making sketches, and hiring his own models. He had a great love and real feeling for the ballet, giving us some colourful and unique work, the Degas of his time, but no connection. However within two or three years he was defeated because they became too popular and some so-called art critics misunderstanding the solo effort taunted with words like saleable and sweet. When people started to say "I will buy the next one you paint," York decided he had painted his last ballet and meant it. He felt with this growing demand that he would never be allowed to paint anything else. Some threatened they would never buy anything else and proved it for a while. His popularity in the Press and frequent sales began to cause jealousies.

The OSA caused a stir with their special section which they called "POSTDIMENSIONS," instigated by York as vice-president. On being queried about it during the showing in London, Ontario, York declared that no one should consider he had given a painting a fair chance to explain the artist's meaning until he had studied it for at least 15 minutes. A London paper commented on Wilson's own work:

“Picture of Thumbs” One delightfully simple piece of this modern work was exhibited by York Wilson, OSA, also of Toronto, who accompanied Mr. Casson. It proved one of the few modern pieces that the average individual could understand. Titled Embarrassment. Its glowing red blush of colour blended into a cluster of large thumbs, those things into which fingers are wont to transform themselves when a steady hand is wanted. An unhappy creature on one side brought to the onlooker’s mind all the times he had tripped over the rug, knocked over his water glass, or suffered any of many such social misfortunes. His feet and hands appear grotesquely large and completely out of proportion with the rest of him.

York was invited by the University of Toronto in March to do a demonstration of palette-knife technique. H did a portrait of his friend Stanley S. Cooper and sent it to the CSPWC exhibition which toured to the Willistead (now Windsor) Art Gallery.

The Windsor Daily Star: “Good Portrait” York Wilson makes exceptional use of the resources of water-colour in a portrait of Stanley S. Cooper, one of the best things in the show. It is not only a technical achievement, but an excellent portrait, with rich colours, good skin tone, and discerning characterization.

Later York gave this portrait to Stan Cooper; Stan didn’t like it, which is not uncommon with one’s own portrait may have even destroyed it. I tried to reach Stan’s daughter after his death, but did not know her married name.

Wilson again taught at the Doon summer school of Fine Art. He was attracted by the progress of his students as well as interesting evenings with the other instructors. He managed to paint in his spare time; returning to Toronto to concentrated sessions on weekends. Ross and Bess Hamilton, were fine people, very supportive of the arts and Bess was an excellent cook.

The CGP again invited York to exhibit with their Group at the AGT, Saturday Night Hop and Bus Stop were accepted. The first a lively dance group, the latter a line-up at a bus stop, as usual interesting characters. In March the AGT ran a Quiz Program with a Panel of Experts, Florence Wyle on sculpture, Boris Hambourg on music and York Wilson on painting. It was a lively evening with

good questions. Later York did an excellent india ink drawing of Boris Hambourg.

Things were moving fast for York Wilson, elected to the OSA in 1942, vice-president in 1945 and president in 1946, an associate of the RCA in 1945 and an academician in 1948. It was obvious he had a lot to offer, a natural born leader. However he stopped there, convinced that he should just paint. His leadership remained, but in "art."

The University of Toronto invited a one-man exhibition at Victoria College in 1945. The London Art Gallery displayed 18 of his paintings following the OSA exhibition in the Spring. In the Fall he was invited to take part in an exhibition at the Women's Art Association and he sent seven paintings.

In 1945 Exercise Muskox took place to test clothing and materials in the Canadian Arctic for the U.S.A. and Canada with headquarters in Churchill, Manitoba, J. Tuzo Wilson, the well-known geophysicist, was appointed captain, York Wilson official artist and Gilbert (Gib) Milne photographer. Gib and York arranged a few commissions to augment their time on the Exercise. One of Milne's clients was Exide Batteries, who gave him a giant-size thermometer, thinking to get publicity. York arranged with Provincial Paper to stop off at a lumber camp to do some portraits. Both tested their materials in a large, walk-in Toronto refrigerator. Milne found the oil in his cameras had to be changed, it congealed and slowed the shutter. Wilson found his oils solidified and decided to sketch in pencil, followed by water colours once inside.

York let it be known he was anxious to go on this Exercise. His friends at Liberty Magazine said, "That's easy, you can go as our Press representative." They contacted the government and it was made official, so all expenses were paid. York took the train to Gimli, Manitoba, then boarded a Hercules work plane for Churchill. The plane had metal seats, no heat and he learned he was regarded as excess baggage, space being at a premium for necessary materials. He was squeezed between loose oil barrels which slid around and pressed on him at times, depending on the angle of the plane. In trying to land they circled and circled as there was a raging blizzard and vision was almost nil. An experienced worker said quietly, "I will be glad to land," the other said, "I will be glad 'if' we land," great comfort for a novice like York. He was warned when they landed he must not lose sight of the person ahead or he would be found frozen stiff. When they finally landed, they ran for the hangar

and York found it almost impossible to keep a head and shoulders ahead in his sight. He was assigned to the officers' mess and promptly informed as to the rules of the arctic. One must never go out alone, always watching the face of a companion for frostbite. If it appears, you must not rub it, only apply snow and get inside as fast as possible. It is necessary to be sure you can see the route to the next building: if temporarily lost you can numb and freeze within minutes at fifty degrees below zero. Many things were learned about materials. They must wear sun glasses because the glare of the snow and the rays of the sun were dangerous for the eyes. In clothing they found an open woven cotton was best next to the skin, as any dampness would freeze rapidly. They wore loose, no arch, leather fur-lined mukluks on their feet and parkas with the fur turned inside. Wolverine fur was best because it didn't ice up from the breath.

The buildings were wood whereas igloos are made with blocks of snow fitted together. An oil lamp is kept burning in an igloo to hold the temperature above freezing. Without that small source of heat it would be dangerous.

The first morning Gib Milne hurried outside to place his giant size thermometer for Exide Batteries and photographed it. When he checked later the mercury had shot right out the top. York was out first thing that morning and found he had to hold his pencil in his big insider fur mitts, difficult for fast notes; then hurry inside to make more accurate notes.

A game the officers played in the evening was to stand on the Bar with a full glass in hand, do a somersault to the floor, without spilling a drop. It was probably inspired by the rum rations of 150 proof Lemon Hart rum. There was a theatre showing films, no seats so the men stood around a great mound of ice in the middle, from a drip which never melted.

York wanted to get to Eskimo Point, a few miles north, but materials had priority. One day they said he could go and he piled into the plane, in his bulky parka. When they got there the blizzard was too ferocious to land and they parachuted the oil drums down. A disappointed York didn't have another opportunity.

A Bar/Eats place called "Mammas" was the only one and Mamma made all decisions where you could sit, even separating friends. If you protested, she would say, "If you don't like it, get out." One evening York was sitting next to a "Breed," (a mixture of Indian and Eskimo or one or the other with a Scotchman). The Breed, Artie Oman lived down the road about a mile. He invited York to

visit him (after York suggested it). He said his home was the last one on the right and to be careful of mounds in the snow as they could be fierce sled dogs, huskies. York set off that evening in a dim light, and on arrival there was Artie waving madly. It was a small wooden shack, one big room lined with paper to keep out the wind. There was one big bed, a table and little else. He met Artie's wife, three children and his wife's parents, all living in this small space. One side was open and Wilson asked "why?" He was told, "Oh, that faces south." They were beyond the tree line and further south is called the banana belt. They sat and talked on the edge of the bed while York did a few sketches.

During York's absence, I heard over the news that there had been a fire and one of the barracks was burnt to the ground with two or three deaths. I had a few bad hours wondering who the unfortunates were when York phoned. It appears the wooden barracks burnt so rapidly nothing could be saved and smoke had overcome the victims trying to find the door. The space left only sheer walls of snow.

Always looking for new experiences, York persuaded Gib Milne to spend the night in an igloo. They were given instructions to keep an oil lamp (a wick in a dish of oil) burning for warmth as the Eskimos did. Apparently one of them knocked it over during the night and they were forced to return to the barracks. Another time listening to stories about having a sauna, when they were so hot they could hardly breathe, the wonderful feeling dashing out in the nude and diving into the snow. Of course they had to do this but made the mistake of not testing the snow beforehand. All went well until they dived, not only did the snow have a hard crust but there was an old door with hinges hidden under the snow and they limped inside grazed and bloodied.

Gib Milne took many photos for official records of the terrain, people in their strange looking parkas and the snowmobiles. York filled a couple of sketch books and did many small watercolours. He wanted to bring something home. He enquired about Polar Bear skins but decided they might smell if not properly cured, so he settled for a few walrus teeth and tusks. He was made a member of the "Short Snorter Club," his membership badge a signed shinplaster, the requirements, "having been in the arctic." I never heard what the initiation entailed, I shudder to think! On York's return he was invited to tell his experiences on the CBC program "Cavalcade" and in the Press. He painted many larger oils and of course one went to

Jim Harris of Liberty Magazine.

On the way back York took the train as directed by the Provincial Paper Company to a certain station and was met there in the middle of the night. They drove for some time finally arriving at the lumber camp deep in the bush. All was silent and dark, everyone had gone to bed. He was taken to a sleeping cabin, his guide, indicating silence, pointed to an empty bunk and shut the door. There were two sleeping men in the other two bunks. Early in the morning he found his companions were two German prisoners of war and he followed them to the dining room for breakfast. No one had mentioned that it was a German prison camp with the prisoners employed cutting and preparing trees. Its whereabouts was top secret.

In the dining room he found a very long table with men on both sides but strangely no one spoke. They just ate, passing their fork and pointing if they wished something. If anyone made a sound they were rapped harshly on the knuckles by the cook. York learned that this is a rule at lumber camps because the cook's time is valuable. The workers are to eat and get out.

The management soon put York in touch with his prospective subjects, three bosses in charge of the camp. He settled down immediately doing the portraits and was off again in a couple of days. The portraits appeared later in Provincial's monthly publication.

In the summer of 1945, we went on a sketching trip to the east coast of Canada, including Virginia and her dog Suzi Q. We started out in our old second hand jalopy with its questionable wartime tires.

All were excited when we crossed into Quebec; the shapes and colours of the barns, horse-drawn carriages, haystacks, coping with the language with our school French, was intoxicating. When York would see something he wanted to sketch, we would stop. I remember many sketches such as On the Road To Ste. Cecile de Masham, a horse-drawn carriage in the rain; the Laurentians, Cap Chat and the rock at Percé. Often it was difficult to find a restaurant, sometimes a small house. One such luncheon we asked for the washroom and the owner beckoned us to follow him to the basement where he indicated the coal bin. Next we crossed into New Brunswick and were astounded to find so many unpainted wooden houses. It was explained that the wood lasted longer without paint in the salty air from the sea. I remember the illusion of the 'magnetic

hill'; we put the car in neutral and it seemed to back up a hill.

Along the coast of Nova Scotia, York made many sketches, Peggy's Cove, Indian Harbour, Lunenburg and St. Margaret's Bay. At Digby when the tide went out, there was a great roar, called the "Boar," as the basin emptied. Virginia's dog, Suzi, in her excitement fell into the deep basin, fortunately the tide was in, but we panicked. We needn't have as Suzi swam nicely to shore. On the way back we crossed briefly into Maine then on to Montreal.

We had been visiting all possible art galleries and while in the Dominion Gallery in Montreal, the proprietor, Mrs. Millman asked to see the sketches and bought one entitled Carlton Place. This was a tremendous help as our money was depleted from buying old used tires every few miles, all that was available during the war and they didn't last long.

York was elected president of the OSA in 1946. The 74th exhibition opened at the AGT and York sent one of his Arctic paintings Forty-Six Below and a portrait of Jack Kent Cooke, now the owner of the profitable radio station CKEY. York painted Jack sitting at the piano with his music spread around him on the floor.

G&M: A particularly clever portrait not in the formal manner...

World Views: York Wilson captured the mood and character of the sitter in a way that formal portraits could never do... reproduction.

OSA on the Air: Live from the AGT - York Wilson, the emcee interviewing artists and VIP's, over radio station CKEY.

G&M: Artists forgather... The Gallery Council gave them a Buffet... Congratulations were in order for the new OSA President...

Jack Cooke assisted the OSA because of our long friendship. We were both from the Beaches area of Toronto and now both lived in Armour Heights, just beyond the city limits. In the fields north of us near the Cricket Club were two lonely houses and the Cookes owned one. Jack had sold his partnership interests with Roy Thomson in order to buy radio station CKEY from the Gooderhams. He had mortgaged and borrowed heavily in order to complete the

deal. A certain night about 2 p.m. it came on the Air under Jack's ownership. We four sat in his garden waiting and celebrating the big event.

No money to furnish the offices, ingenious Jack went to the Robert Simpson Company persuading them to furnish his offices and give him their account. He invented the singing commercial, which took hold, and he patented the idea and franchised it to other stations. He never looked back.

Now he was in his sumptuous Bayview Avenue home. His wife Jean had misgivings about Jack's ambition; she didn't want him to become wealthy, she was happy as they were, but nothing would hold Jack back. When they moved into the Bayview Avenue house, she admitted she was reading books on how to handle help which she discussed with me.

Liberty Magazine by Larry Gough: Profile:

York Wilson's never-ending versatility... fellow artists have given him their unqualified stamp of approval...  
Reproduced Forty-Six Below and a photo.

The CGP opened at the Montreal Art Association and later at the AGT. Saturday Night Hop and Bus Stop were invited.

The RCA at the AGT showed, Young Dancer and Indian Harbour. Viscount Alexander and Lady Alexander came to open the exhibition. The RCA committee planned a dinner at the Arts and Letters Club, Toronto, before the opening. It was learned that the Viscount enjoyed Irish whisky, a bottle was found and taken to the Club. A fine dinner was prepared and I had been elected to make strawberry-filled meringues. I tested various recipes and found one with a touch of vinegar which seemed to tenderize the meringue for easier cutting. Taking dozens to the Club they were filled with strawberries.

Conversation flowed easily as the Viscount was an artist too. He was pleased to be in our Arts and Letters Club and with his favourite tipple. On hearing that I was studying Spanish, Lady Alexander said she was too but admitted feeling stupid in trying to converse. After dinner she complimented me on the meringues. Came the moment to leave for the Gallery and I was elected to carry the bottle under my cape. After an interesting opening speech the Viscount mingled with the artists discussing their paintings. The art critic of the G&M said: "Alexander Turns Critic at Academy."