

**Almost Outnumbered:
The role of Alberta in the life and work of Marion Nicoll**

Natasha Pashak

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Canada

Abstract

Almost Outnumbered: The Role of Alberta in the Work and Life of Marion Nicoll

Natasha Pashak

This thesis examines Marion Nicoll's contribution to the cultural life of Calgary and Alberta and, in turn Canada, while situating Nicoll's painting practice within the broader context of North America in the 1950s and 1960s. It expands upon previous scholarship by including Marion Nicoll's role as teacher and community activist in addition to considering her craftworks, prints and paintings and by examining her many influences with particular attention paid to the role of place. This thesis proposes that an understanding of Alberta is integral to an understanding of Marion Nicoll's work.

The text is structured in 4 parts. The introduction provides the theoretical framework for the thesis through a discussion of regionalism and modernism in North America. Chapter 1 provides a biographical overview of Marion Nicoll's life and includes pertinent information about her grandparents and parents as well as significant events in Alberta history in order to provide context to the artist's life and achievements. Chapter 2 examines Nicoll's influences, with particular attention paid to the Arts & Crafts Movement and the Indian Space Painters. The third chapter includes an examination of 3 winter-themed works to indicate how an understanding of Alberta is integral to an understanding of Marion Nicoll's work.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of those early Alberta artists whose creativity, talent, tenacity, bravery, self-reliance, and civic-mindedness has not been forgotten.

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Introduction

Marion Nicoll (1909–1985) is considered the first Alberta artist to pursue Abstract painting (Ainslie & Laviolette, 2007). She defined her work as “classical abstraction,” by which she meant her work was derived from a specific source rather than a non-objective one (Tousley, 1986; Jackson, 1986a). In 1977, Nicoll was the first woman from Alberta to be elected to the Royal Canadian Academy. Her work is held in many private and public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada. She received two Canada Council grants in the 1950s and 1960s. Nicoll chose to pursue her career in the place of her birth, Calgary. She began teaching at the Provincial Institute of Technology & Art (PITA, then SAIT, now ACAD) in the 1930s as a student teacher and she continued to teach there, with the exception of various leaves of absence, until her retirement in the 1960s. She developed the craft curriculum and helped establish the ceramics program. Marion Nicoll is fondly remembered as a teacher and mentor. For many years, she was the only woman on faculty. When asked how she felt about this, Nicoll replied, “Almost outnumbered” (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.15). This statement implies a wilful determination to transcend systemic barriers, an attitude Nicoll appears to have imparted this quality to her students. She also taught art at the Baker Memorial Sanatorium, where she encountered Bill Panko, later described by J. Russell Harper (1988) as creator of the “most native and purest western Canadian art of his twentieth-century generation” (p.320). Marion Nicoll was one of the first students at what eventually evolved into the Banff Centre for the Arts, where she later returned as faculty to teach summer sessions alongside A.C. Leighton, J.E.H. MacDonald, André Biéler, and others. Former student Stan Perrott described her as “the rock upon which everybody stood when they were starting out to make art. She has been the spearhead of whatever is good in Alberta” (quoted in Tousley, 1985). She and her husband, Jim Nicoll, worked in

the community at large, lobbying to establish both a library and a community centre in their neighbourhood. They were among the first to donate a large body of artworks to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection, and they made a sizable bequest to the City of Calgary to ensure an art legacy for its citizens.

This thesis will examine Marion Nicoll's contribution to the cultural life of Calgary and Alberta while situating Nicoll's painting practice within the broader context of North America in the 1950s and 1960s. It will expand upon previous scholarship by including Marion Nicoll's role as teacher and community activist in addition to considering her craftworks, prints and paintings and by examining her many influences with particular attention paid to the role of place. This thesis proposes that an understanding of Alberta is integral to an understanding of Marion Nicoll's work.

Given her accomplishments, it is surprising how little has been published about the work and life of Marion Nicoll. Although most survey texts about Canadian art mention her (Harper, 1988; Reid, 1988; Murray, 1999; Newlands, 2000; Nasgaard, 2007; Prakash, 2008), few discuss the breadth and depth of her involvement in the arts, or acknowledge the recognition she received as an artist. Though it is known she is an important figure, Marion Nicoll's contribution to Canadian art history has not been adequately accounted.

In publications concerned with the history of art in Alberta, Marion Nicoll is always mentioned, but often in a cursory way. The earlier texts such as *Painting in Alberta: An Historical Survey* (Wilkin, 1980), *Artists of Alberta* (Baker, 1980), and *Spaces and Places: An Introduction to the Formative Years of Painting in Alberta* (Ironside, 1986) and, more recently, *The Painted Valley: Artists along Alberta's Bow River, 1845–2000* (Armstrong & Nelles, 2007) do not provide rigorous analysis of any artist's work, but they do list the important figures and events in Alberta's art history, including some of Nicoll's contribution. In other recently published texts, notably *A History of Art in*

Alberta: 1905–1970 (Townshend, 2005), *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art* (Lavolette, 2005), and *Alberta Art and Artists: An overview* (Ainslie & Lavolette, 2007), Nicoll's legacy and work are more thoroughly investigated. Townshend (2005) devotes an entire chapter to Nicoll, "Marion Nicoll: Art of Metaphor." Despite these more recent efforts, many aspects of Nicoll's work, career, and life remain unexplored.

There are three exhibition catalogues devoted solely to Marion Nicoll. The first, *Marion Nicoll: A Retrospective, 1959–1971* (Edmonton Art Gallery, 1975), contains black and white reproductions of some of the paintings included in the exhibition and an interview conducted by curators (and former students of Nicoll) Ron Moppet and John Hall, together known as Duck Ventures. The second, *Marion Nicoll, RCA* (Joyner, 1979), was published by Master's Gallery of Calgary in a very limited edition and includes an introduction by Janet Mitchell, a brief biography, and limited analysis of some works, with descriptions of Nicoll's major influences. The third catalogue, *Marion Nicoll: Art and Influences* (Jackson, 1986), is the most comprehensive and the most important. Published by the Glenbow Museum to complement a touring retrospective exhibition, it includes both colour and black and white reproductions of paintings in the exhibition, a biography, a discussion of Nicoll's major influences, some mention of her role as a teacher, and descriptive analyses of selected paintings representing different phases of her painting practice. It does not, however, include any substantive information about her craft-works, curriculum, or the full range of influences that Nicoll herself cited.

In these texts there is general consensus that Nicoll's mature work is the synthesis of three important influences: A.C. Leighton, the British-born artist and highly influential head of the Provincial Institute of Technology & Art (PITA); Jock MacDonald, a well-respected artist and educator; and Will Barnet, a renowned New York-based artist. All three texts report that Nicoll credited Leighton for having imbued her with a strong

sense of colour and providing a role model for her in teaching; that MacDonald encouraged Nicoll to explore automatic drawing in 1946; and that her encounter with Barnett at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan, in 1957 spurred Nicoll's most prolific painting period.

In more general Canadian art history texts, Jock MacDonald is cited as the major influence on Nicoll, though Newlands credits Will Barnett with sparking Nicoll's "more structured, simplified approach to abstraction" (2000, p.233). Harper describes Nicoll as an important influence on Bill Panko, which indicates some awareness of her role as mentor and educator. None of these texts include analysis of Nicoll's works in any detail; Murray states that Nicoll made "particularly good paintings" (1999, p.107), and Newlands describes the work, rather dismissively, as "colourful fantasy images" (2000, p.233). Prakash only briefly mentions Nicoll and only as a subordinate clause in a sentence about Alexandra Luke and the growth of the abstract tradition in Canada.¹ Not one of these texts mentions Nicoll's involvement with craft, leaving the impression that she was an abstract painter only.

The literature, broadly speaking, neglects many significant aspects of Marion Nicoll's life and work, namely to do with her crafts practices, her pedagogy, and the breadth of her influences, and presents conflicting information regarding the extent of her artistic practice, the impact of automatic drawing on her work, the significance of her work, and her relationship to Alberta. The latter is particularly important to the extent that her family background and life in Alberta shaped her artistic practice, her community activism, and her pedagogical convictions.

With regard to the breadth of her artistic practice, although Nicoll taught craft and design for 30 years, no critical assessment of her textile, leather, jewellery, or print works

¹ The complete sentence is, "Luke's work, using glowing colour and gestural effects, animated by suggestions of both the natural and the spiritual, was important to the growth of the abstract tradition, as was the work of Marion Nicoll in Calgary, who in 1947 had begun to make automatic drawings and, later, paintings with hieroglyphic-like forms and strong silhouettes." (Prakash, 2008, p.31)

has ever been published. If mentioned at all, Nicoll's prints are described as an extension of her painting practice (Leclerc, 1993); she reported to have based many of her prints on earlier paintings after chronic arthritis purportedly had made painting too painful an activity.

In an interview with Duck Ventures, Nicoll said, "The crafts were the way I made my living" (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures interview transcript, p.4), referring to 30 years of teaching batik, jewellery, ceramics, and leatherworking, among other craft practices. Jackson asserted that Nicoll "had to" study crafts in order to be able to teach them (1986, p.36). These quotes suggest that Nicoll's only interest in the crafts was financial. However, Illingworth Kerr, a former head of the PITA and someone with whom Nicoll was known to clash, wrote, "Marion Nicoll, who in due course became noted for her splendid abstract paintings, taught Design and Crafts. She always battled to have the crafts recognized as equal to any other form of expression" (1987, pp.108–9).

Though her craft works have never been analyzed, her role in the Alberta craft scene is discussed in recently published histories of Alberta art. Ainslie and Laviolette describe Nicoll as one of the province's "most influential artists and teachers" (2007, p.51). They suggest that Nicoll virtually originated the ceramics program at the PITA by lobbying for equipment and hiring faculty. Townshend (2005) suggests that Nicoll's perspective on the importance of craft served as the basis for the Alberta government's initiatives to develop craft industries. Townshend is the only author to mention Nicoll's roles as adjudicator for the Alberta Visual Arts Board scholarship awards, as organizer and chair of Albertacraft, and as advisor to the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (2005, p.232). Townshend is also the only the author to make mention of Nicoll's craft mentors, Bernard Adeney, Sidney Cockerell, Dora Billington, and J. Christjansen (2005, p.210).²

² Townshend writes Pillington [sic].

There are differing accounts with respect to the significance of the automatic process to Nicoll. Automatic drawing is a technique developed by the Surrealists that requires the artist to place pen or pencil to paper and allow the hand to draw of its own volition, without consciously controlling the result. The intention of the process is to facilitate accessing the unconscious mind of the artist. Not merely a creative exercise, automatic drawing is related, like automatic writing, to the revolutionary anarchistic aspirations associated with the Surrealist Movement. The Duck Ventures interview merely mentions it as an aid to Nicoll's creative process (Edmonton Art Gallery, 1975); Joyner (1979) refers to her automatics as from the "dreambook"; and Jackson (1986a) details how Nicoll devoted 10 years of her career to the process and suggests how the resulting drawings reveal something about Nicoll's state of mind during that period. About one automatic, Jackson writes, "There is clearly something unsettling, subconscious and irrational about the image. Its reference is not to perceptual reality but to a murky dream world and the symbolism of the surreal" (1986a, p.39).

There is a wide range of perspectives about the significance of Marion Nicoll's painting, much of which is related to the extent to which she engaged in abstraction. Some scholars assert that from the late 1950s Nicoll pursued the international style of the day, forsaking local inspiration; others, more compellingly, insist that her work remained rooted to place. Ainslie and Laviolette are the only authors to state that Nicoll evolved into a "pure" abstractionist (2007, p.52). "Nicoll's work became increasingly simplified and abstract . . . Initially she abstracted from life, seeking the essence of form, but increasingly objects became just the starting point from which to develop compositions" (Ainslie & Laviolette, 2007, p.55). They describe *Spring* (oil on canvas, 1959) as "a transitional work between her objective and non-objective painting" (2007, p.55).

Furthering this view, Dan Ring (1993) describes Nicoll's *The City (Sunday)* (oil on canvas, 1960) as a painting that "affirms a new subjectivity; the topography of the city is only alluded to in the rectangular form of the composition and the title" (p.102). Ring states that the post-war economic boom in North America and the pervasive force of American culture imposed a homogeneity in the arts where regional, cultural, and geographic differences were not celebrated but instead were relegated to "kitsch" (1993, p.101). Ring suggests that the significance of Marion Nicoll's work is in how it represents a prairie artist's desire to "establish a link with international movements" by "replac[ing] subject matter with abstracted form or gesture" (1993, p.102) and choosing international trends over local subject matter as inspiration.

If Ring finds the desire to forgo the local in exchange for the international a positive aspect of Marion Nicoll's work, Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles do not. In *The Painted Valley: Artists Along Alberta's Bow River 1845-2000*, Armstrong and Nelles state that Nicoll had a "complete conversion to non-representational art" (2007, p.95) and that from 1957 to the end of her career she "remained firmly committed to the gospel of abstraction" (2007, p.96),³ which is at best misleading and at worst prejudicial. The commentary of Ainslie and Laviolette, of Ring, and of Armstrong and Nelles imply that Marion Nicoll's painting practice is best defined as non-objective, non-referential.⁴

Roald Nasgaard interprets Marion Nicoll's work differently and more accurately. In *Abstract Painting in Canada* (2007) he writes, "Nicoll's imagery can never be called purely abstract, because it is always based on the observable world and on natural forms." Similarly, Jackson explains that Nicoll always "claimed a link between [her] work

³ Armstrong and Nelles appear to disparage those that pursued abstractionism: "Not until after the Second World War did some devotees of abstractionism begin to appear on the local art scene [in southern Alberta], and over the next quarter-century a few hardy souls became and remained loyal to the gospel as preached from New York" (Armstrong & Nelles 2007, p.29).

⁴ For an interesting discussion on the language of abstraction, see Nasgaard's Introduction to his *Abstract Painting in Canada*.

and the natural world” (Jackson, 1986, p.18).⁵ But Jackson also identifies the qualities of Nicoll’s art that locate it in the 1960s: “Marion Nicoll’s work demonstrates very clearly the modernist notion of a painting as a distinct object which exists in its own right and conforms to the necessities of painting rather than the strictures of perceptual realities” (1986, p.44). Nancy Townshend (2005) likewise agrees that Nicoll’s work conveys its inspiration of the observable world. She perhaps overstates the matter by writing, “Using a paring down process, [Nicoll] intensely abstracted the essence of the intangibles of Alberta’s nature, transforming it into her new artistic vocabulary . . . Nicoll’s art is her universalized metaphor about her beloved Alberta” (Townshend, 2005, p.141).

Nicoll defined her painting as “classical abstraction,” by which she meant her work was derived from a specific source rather than a non-objective one (Tousley, 1986; Jackson, 1986). In a 1973 interview, Nicoll asserted that this specific source was the landscape of Alberta: “I became a landscape and weather painter with some social comment. But I was involved in trying to put down what there is here, this particular feeling of space, and again this feeling of scale is the most important part of it.” (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.3). Nicoll similarly commented to Joan Murray that she did not think of her interest in landscape as a Canadian thing, but rather just of “this environment” (southern Alberta), and affirmed that she was “trying to do [her] best” to “express this region” (Nicoll, 1986, J. Murray interview transcript, p.12).

There is conflicting information regarding Nicoll’s feelings toward Alberta. In 1959, Nicoll wrote to her friend Jean Johnson, “If I had to return to Calgary straight from here . . . I would slit my throat and bleed messily from here to Times Square” (Tousley, 1986; Jackson, 1985, p.22). This statement is frequently quoted, but often without the preceding sentences, which provide context for such a statement. These are:

⁵ Joyner (1979) also maintains that Nicoll’s work is “always based on the observable world and natural forms” (p.111).

In Calgary I'm considered a craftsman and a woman and after a while you lose that strong belief in yourself. You must have it to be a real painter. Of course Buck [Kerr] would have me right back to what he considers normal and fitting to my lowly position in ten minutes. That's one reason I don't want to go back⁶ (Nicoll, 1959 [personal correspondence with Jean Johnson]).

In 1966 she said, "New York is a friendlier place than Calgary... To me it is the most beautiful city in the world." (cited in Mortin, 1966). Said Nicoll in interview with Duck Ventures: "Had I been single, I might have stayed in New York" (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures, interview transcript, p.10). However, in her 1972 artist form for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts she wrote, "If I have any sense, I'll stay here [in Alberta]" (Nicoll, 1972, p.7). A 1978 newspaper article reported, "Many of Marion's paintings from the New York period depict the hostility of her surroundings – people enclosed in concrete – but never her own hostilities. 'An artist has no right to show his own wounds,' she said" (Cohen, 1978).

In a 1978 newspaper interview Nicoll was quoted as saying, "New York is a city of conjury. I felt confined. Everything was engineered up and down. There was very little sky exposure. I wanted to go back to the foothills" (Nicoll, 1978, cited in "Marion Nicoll: Painter" in *Contemporary Canadian Artists*, 1997).⁷ Nicoll maintained that to be an artist in Alberta has its advantages, "You don't get pushed out of shape here," she reported in interview, but in other places, "You lose touch with what is your fundamental interest" (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.9). Furthermore, in Alberta, "You have the feeling of time to do what you want to do" (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.9).

⁶ Nicoll was on a leave of absence from PITA, an institution which at the time was headed by Illingworth "Buck" Kerr.

⁷ This quote appears to be taken from a 1978 newspaper article. It is unclear whether the quote is best attributed to Jim Nicoll. (Melnik, 1978).

The only authors who speculate on the significance of Nicoll's decision to choose Alberta over New York are Townshend (2005) and Ainslie and Laviolette (2007). Townshend concludes that Nicoll's relationship to Alberta is evident in her art. She speculates that Nicoll "transformed her ineffable love of certain qualities about Alberta – its weather, months, seasons, all utterly of prairie Canada – into her metaphor link, the relationship between her art and life in Alberta," thereby implying that the natural phenomena of Alberta, uniquely, provided Nicoll with creative stimulus (Townshend, 2005, p.141). Ainslie and Laviolette (2007), on the other hand, do not associate Nicoll's work with anything somehow intrinsically Albertan. Rather, they suggest that Nicoll's sole reason for choosing Alberta was to appease her husband, who missed Alberta and found New York intolerable. Further, they state that being based in Alberta served to limit Nicoll's career, and likewise many other Alberta artists, for no good reason but the politics of regionalism. Joyner (1979) makes an alternative suggestion: blaming the methods of art history and Nicoll's own disinterest in "the waxing lyricism of the mythologizers of contemporary trends," he states that "because she was not identified with some narrow artistic category, she has been frequently overlooked" (p.26).

There are many aspects of Marion Nicoll's life and work that have never been thoroughly investigated, including the influence her time in London may have had. Nicoll cited two major influences from her year of studies in England: Duncan Grant, best known for his association with the Bloomsbury Group and who instructed Nicoll in drawing; and Bernard Adeney, who taught at the London County Council's Central School of Arts & Crafts (1972, AFA artist's file, p.6).

The Central School was founded in 1896 with a curriculum that emphasized practical craftsmanship under the influence of "Arts and Crafts lobbyists" (Livingstone, 2005, p.58). Primarily urban, the Arts & Crafts Movement was nonetheless rooted in the belief of the close relationship between people and nature, evidenced by the use of local natural

materials as a source of inspiration. A vision of British country life was central to British society and therefore to the Arts & Crafts Movement (Greenstead, 2005, p.92).

Likewise, there has been little investigation in the literature into the exact nature of Will Barnet's influence on Marion Nicoll's painting. Recent scholarship into the work of Barnet indicates that during the 1940s and '50s, Barnet was involved with a group of artists known as the Indian Space Painters.

The Indian Space Painters sought to find a North American precedent for avant-garde painting by replicating the stylistic techniques of First Nations artists. The Arts & Crafts Movement and Indian Space share a similar concept. Integral to both is a sense of place. For the Indian Space Painters a sense of place served as a conceptual point of departure; To the Arts & Crafts Movement a sense of place served as a literal point of reference. Because place is the continuous thread that runs through the explored and the unexplored aspects of Marion Nicoll's influences, it serves as the dominant point of reference in this thesis.

Any examination of the importance of place as a determining factor in the development of an artist or artistic movement is necessarily controversial. On the one hand, innovative developments in art and design history can be linked to specific places in specific times, but on the other hand, defining the work of an individual artist according to such contextual factors can constrain the understanding of its full significance. Though writing about architectural regionalism, Vincent Canizaro, editor of *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition* (2007), presents a range of ideas that are useful to a discussion that aims to define the relationship between artist and place. He writes, "regionalist practice strives to establish the connectedness between people and place" (p.25). Canizaro challenges the view of those who consider "the local [as] a place of lesser achievement and the source of backwardness, provincialism and chauvinism" by explaining that "[r]egionalism has the

potential, through thoughtful reference, to situate us in the continuity of our shared human history” (p.12).

In art history, Regionalism arose as a movement in the United States from 1920 to 1945. It:

sought the cultural reconstruction of American life through the revitalization of indigenous and regional history, culture, art and land; it was a progressive and pluralistic movement based on learning enough about a place and its past to provide lessons for the future. On the whole, it did not seek a return to a mythical regional past, nor did it have provincial or chauvinistic intentions. Rather, the veneration of the local served as a resource of creativity and uniqueness – a celebration of the potential for a rich and rewarding life here” (Canizaro, 2007, p.30).

The Regionalist movement aimed to resist and reject the internationalist aspirations of Modernism by celebrating the local. In Canadian art history, writes Virginia Nixon (1987), the term regionalism lacks a stable meaning, serving instead as “a multi-purpose descriptive adjective” that is “used in the battle between figurative and non-figurative art” and “usually a code word for inferior” (1987, p.31). According to Wylie (1998), in Canada, “regionalism has largely been defined in relation to nationalism, sometimes as a centrifugal, even corrosive force undermining the cohesion of the nation-state with its arbitrary borders” (Wylie, Riegel, Overbye & Perkins, 1998, p.x).⁸ Consequently, ‘regional’ is often considered a pejorative term. As stated by Mary Beth Laviolette (2005), “in the Canadian art world . . . there is a glass ceiling facing any practice designated regional. Even when such art is acknowledged as very good, a regional tag implies that ‘very good’ is as far as it’s going to go” (Laviolette, 2005, p.23). Regionalism

⁸ This is contrary to the intentions of federalism, which are to support a system of strong regions with distinct identities for the sake of a stronger whole.

brings “into view tensions between the center and the periphery, the rural and the urban, the local and the cosmopolitan, the regional and the national” (Wylie et al., 1998, p.xi).

Regional differences in Canada certainly exist, however. Roald Nasgaard (2007) suggests that even the use of abstraction in Canada may be regionally categorized. In the introduction to his *Abstract Painting in Canada*, he explains: “Uses of the terminology around abstraction have had to be elastic, incorporating the landscape in Vancouver, and the figurative in Toronto, following more formally the development on the prairies, encompassing the interest in retinal phenomena in Montreal and conceptual procedures in Halifax” (p.15). Nasgaard suggests that there is a measurable criterion of difference, based on geographic location, for the assessment of Canadian abstract artworks.

Likewise, discourse about Canadian landscape art provides an example of tension between critics who discuss the genre from a national perspective versus a regional one. Scott Watson (1991) suggests that Canadian landscape art, as exemplified by the Group of Seven, contributes to the “mythos of Western societies” by depicting a “pre-economic, unnamed, unmapped and largely uninhabited” place in which the ‘authentically’ Canadian artist must renounce the “polysexual European dandy” to realize an idealized type of manliness through contact with “virgin” nature (Watson, 1991, p.107). Watson continues, “nature is clearly female and the exploration of her is accordingly patriarchal” (Watson, 1991, 103). Watson investigates the subtext of Canadian landscape art as contributing to a myth of Canada that is inherently patriarchal and homophobic, and that actively denies the injustices perpetrated on the First Nations. Jeffrey Spalding (1997) is likewise troubled by the Group of Seven’s designation as ‘national art,’ but he does not blame the genre. He states: “To this day, it irks enthusiasts of western Canadian historical art that the vision of the west as presented by [Walter] Phillips, [A.C.] Leighton, [H.G.] Glyde is excluded from standard Canadian art histories” while

depictions of western Canada by “Ontario’s Group of Seven are celebrated as Canada’s national landscape school” (p.46).

For Spalding, the problem posed by the genre of landscape has more to do with a hierarchy within the art world than “centre/region” politics (p.43). He suggests that the Canadian art elite denies recognition to landscape works (which are to be found in abundance in ‘amateur’ galleries) because the “art world has been preoccupied by deconstructive, combative and contrary artworks, examining human and social folly” (p.46). He writes: “It is as if the curatorial community cannot even fathom what to do with a work which expresses joy or acknowledges surrender to the primacy of spirit over intellect and discourse” (p.46). But in Alberta, Spalding asserts:

The prairies and mountains are simply overwhelming, their effect upon the human spirit unparalleled. It takes a very special person indeed to remain jaded, cynical, unmoved in the presence of such authentic experience. (p.46).

Karen Wilkin (1980) similarly acknowledges that landscape – both prairie and mountain – has served Alberta artists as “both a stimulus and point of departure, to make a great variety of images” with a “degree of stylization and freedom” (1980, p.11). She observes identifiable characteristics of Alberta artworks, regardless of genre, and reluctantly proposes that the landscape of Alberta is the origin of the distinction:

Generalizations about the powerful influence of the horizon and the big sky are probably meaningless, yet many Alberta paintings seem more open, less packed with incident than their eastern counterparts. It is equally suspect to talk about the long winter and the omnipresence of snow for half the year, but Alberta color tends often to be more subdued and tonal than that of other parts of Canada. (p.13).

Beyond the formal observations about colour and composition, as presented by Wilkin, and beyond the desire to express one’s connection to the land, as presented by

Spalding, a local perspective on the genre of landscape has political consequences. Unlike the implicit sexism, racism, and homophobia observed by Watson (1991), local critics explain that the genre of landscape may be used to empower an expression of difference. Calgary-based critic Nancy Tousley once said, “Regionalism in art is not, and has never been, so simple as paintings of lonesome pines, grain elevators or prairie roads. Within such images lies a political stance opposing the marginalization of the region and the dominance of established centres, whether they be Paris, New York or Toronto” (cited in Laviolette, 2005, pp.22–23). Frances Kaye’s *Hiding the Audience* (2003) concludes by asserting that regional culture and “hinterland” status is in fact an asset because of the presumption of difference, or otherness, such a label implies. Kaye writes that that which is internationalized or universalized “becomes virtually useless as a repository of difference” (p.259). She writes, “Regional prairie culture has developed a distinct self that can – that must – play a role in maintaining the cultural seedbank of arts and ideas for all of humankind and perhaps the four-leggeds and wings of the air as well” (p.260). The book’s cover features a painting by Marion Nicoll.

These statements from Alberta critics highlight the difference between scholars who examine the meaning of the genre of landscape from a national perspective and those who examine it from a local one. They also indicate that regionalist discourse is most effectively used to frame a discussion of political power relations rather than to function as an interpretive tool to understand the significance of place.

Political historians assert that it is not the landscape itself that defines regional character. In his introduction to *Toward Defining the Prairies* (2001), Robert Wardhaugh writes that even though geography – both in terms of landscape and its related economies – is a major determinant of how “place” is defined, “regions are much more the creation of human thought and behaviour than they are the products of nature”

(Patricia Limerick cited in Wardhaugh, 2001, p.3). Regional identity is determined not only by external forces, but by internal ones as well.

Whether used as a general concept or as a guiding principle to define a specific place, regionalist discourse provides an appropriate perspective upon which to base an investigation into the work of Marion Nicoll. Given the perspective of regionalism and the views of Watson, Spalding, and Wilkin, Marion Nicoll's life and work can best be understood in terms of her relationship to Alberta.

Chapter 1 expands previous scholarship regarding Marion Nicoll's biography by including information about both her maternal and paternal grandparents in addition to significant events in the history of Alberta. It will convey the significance of Alberta's influence upon Marion Nicoll's development as well as the significance of her achievements. Chapter 2 is based on the form that Marion Nicoll completed for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts in 1972, about the time she became debilitated by arthritis. Nicoll listed eight influences upon her development as an artist. She placed "one's life and environment" at the top of her list. Significant moments in Alberta history may also have influenced the development of Marion Nicoll's artistic practice, her activism in the community, and her pedagogical convictions. Other influences will be treated minimally, with the exception of Will Barnet, given recent scholarship concerning Barnet's involvement with the Indian Space Painters. Chapter 3 explores the significance of place in the work of Marion Nicoll. Assessing the complete scope of Marion Nicoll's work is difficult because the works themselves are difficult to access. While some of her paintings, prints, and batiks are held in public collections they are rarely on display and the majority of her works are held in private collections. Though Nicoll kept an art record book that lists her paintings and prints completed after 1958, she did not keep a record of her batik, jewellery, or ceramic works, except for the items of jewellery that were displayed at *Alberta Craft* in 1962 (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds,

Glenbow Museum, 6642, File 115). Because access to the works themselves is limited, this examination begins with an observation based on the titles of Nicoll's works. Though Nicoll made paintings in Europe, New York, and Alberta, closest attention will be paid to her Alberta-based works and more specifically to the role of winter. Of the 129 paintings listed in her art record book, approximately 60 relate to Alberta, as indicated by their titles. Of those 60, approximately 20 relate to winter. Winter on the Canadian prairie, and southern Alberta in particular, is defined by unique natural phenomena that Nicoll represented in her work. The intention of this chapter is to situate Nicoll's painting practice within the broader frame of what was happening in North America in the late 1950s and '60s, Nicoll's most prolific period, to indicate how an understanding of Alberta is integral to the interpretation of her work. The concluding chapter lists potential subjects for further investigation into Marion Nicoll's legacy.

Chapter 1: A Biography

When Marion Nicoll's paternal grandparents arrived in Fort Calgary in the late 1880s, the place was little more than a tent city. A.R.W. and Marion Mackay emigrated from Thurso, Scotland, with their many children. Nicoll's father, Robert Mackay, was the youngest of those children at the time, born in Dunblane, Scotland, on January 2, 1879. He, along with his parents and siblings, arrived at the recently opened (1883) Canadian Pacific Railway station.

The family established a quarry to meet the growing demand for sandstone buildings. Prior to the Mackay family arrival, a major fire had broken out destroying 16 buildings and threatening the viability of the entire settlement. Consequently, an ordinance was passed stipulating that all buildings in the centre of town were to be constructed of sandstone (McGuiness, 1975, p.12). Many of these buildings, which include schools, churches, and banks, are still standing today and are considered important historic resources.

Among the earliest immigrants, the Mackays appear to have settled successfully in their new homeland. Historian Norma Milton (1985) describes the relatively smooth transition to western Canada experienced by many Scots: "Scots were assumed to be British; therefore, they were not subjected to the assimilative pressures experienced by other immigrant groups" (p.122). Milton notes that Scottish immigrants contributed far more to society beyond merely fitting in. In fact, the Scots wielded considerable influence over the establishment of social institutions: "The majority of Scottish-Albertans arrived before World War II and were engaged in establishing basic patterns of social, economic and political activity in the province" (1985, p.122) and this engagement in society was "an expression of their interest in developing a successful life for themselves as well as for their community" (1985, p.115).

In 1886, the population of Fort Calgary was 2000.⁹ In 1894, Calgary became the first place in Alberta to be incorporated as a city (Stenson, 1994, p.21). By 1903, Calgary's population had increased to 8000 and by 1914 it was over 40 000 (McGuinness, 1975, p.12). This dramatic growth meant rapidly expanding opportunities for settlers, though the development of infrastructure was slow to keep pace. Robert Mackay, Nicoll's father, while having little formal education, nevertheless found work as a meter reader, office clerk, and, in his teens, as a leather craftsman for Riley & McCormick. Ultimately, Robert Mackay worked his way up from lineman to become Superintendent of the Electric Light Department with the City of Calgary. The City Commissioner at the time of Mackay's retirement, V.A. Newhall, said, "I know of no finer administrator in the West" (cited in Hawkins, 1987, p.229). Long-time lineman Charles Dyson wrote in his memoirs, "Bob MacKay worked from meter reader to Superintendent of Electric Light and was a very smart and capable man who said what he meant and meant what he said" (cited in Hawkins, 1987, p.220). During Mackay's tenure, Calgary became the third city in Canada to have a secondary network service, in 1937, after Toronto and Hamilton. Secondary networks are now standard in cities the world over, as they allow for more reliable and comprehensive electricity service. W.E. Hawkins described Robert MacKay as a "dedicated but rather dour Scotsman with an insatiable capacity for work" (1987, p.191). Hawkins states that it was the early policies set by Robert Mackay and others that ensured the continuing success of the municipally owned utility.

Robert Mackay was involved in numerous community activities. He served as a volunteer fireman, ran in the *Herald* Road Race, provided electrical services for the Calgary Stampede, and, according to Hawkins, was responsible for the introduction of

⁹ In 1875, the NWMP established Fort Calgary as a southern trading post. A few years later, in the late 1870s, the government began leasing land in southern Alberta for one penny per acre per year to facilitate the ranching industry, and the population began to grow dramatically as secondary industries were required. For more information see Evans (2004) and Rasporich & Klassen (1975).

women's curling clubs to Calgary. Mackay was also responsible for selecting the site of Calgary's airport (E. Reid, 1970).

Marion Nicoll's maternal grandparents, Charles and Margaret Gingras, homesteaded close to Evarts, District of Alberta, North-West Territory, with their two children, Florence and Anna. Shortly after their arrival, in 1904, Margaret gave birth to a son, Charles Roy. Census records indicate that the family had moved numerous times before making their permanent home in Alberta. Charles Gingras was born in "East Canada" (Quebec) to "Canadian" parents, and his wife Margaret was born in Canada to an Irish mother and Scottish father.¹⁰ Nicoll's mother, Florence, was born in Cameron County, Pennsylvania, in 1886. Nicoll's aunt Anne was born in Canada in 1887. Before settling in the North-West Territory, the Gingras family lived in Garfield Township, Michigan, where they owned a farm. Margaret Gingras reported in the 12th Census of the United States that she had given birth eight times and had three children living. Nicoll recalled in an interview, "My grandparents had a farm in Evarts – I can still see the snake fences. We would go by horse and buggy . . . My grandmother made her own cheese [and] churned her own butter" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). When the family arrived in Alberta, Florence was 18 years old. She became a schoolteacher and later moved to Calgary.

As a young teacher from a francophone family, it seems certain that Florence Gingras would have had an opinion about the curriculum she was required to teach as it related to language, religion and British colonial values. Between 1885 and 1892, a public school system was established in Calgary. Prior to that, schools were private and voluntary, the first having been opened in 1884. As the territories inched closer to attaining provincial status, both the jurisdiction and mandate of the school system were significant issues.

¹⁰ According to the 12th Census of the United States (1900). There is no record of the older sibling, nor of Margaret's maiden name (Lines 46–49 of 1900 census).

Territorial politicians wanted complete control over the school system, including language of instruction and religion, though some advocated for outright secular, English-language schools to unify a polyglot citizenry. Federal politicians, facing significant pressure from the French Catholic clergy – both from the Territories and from Quebec, needed to assert authority over public education or face losing a significant body of political support. Ultimately, the decision was made for the new provinces to provide public funding for a separate school system – one common, provincially mandated curriculum with an option for religious instruction. French could be the language of instruction in French-speaking communities (van Herk, 2001, p.215).

Regardless of her perspective on curricula, Florence Gingras did not remain a schoolteacher for long. She met Robert Mackay in Calgary. The couple married on the 6th of May 1906, and Florence took the role of wife and mother. Marion Florence Mackay, named after her paternal grandmother and her mother, was born in Calgary on April 11, 1909. Of the four children born to the Mackay family, Marion was the first to survive infancy and the only child to survive to adulthood. An older sister died in infancy before Marion's birth. Her younger brother died at the age of 15 months, in 1915. Her younger sister Isobel died of pneumonia at the age of 17 in 1929.

Marion's childhood was somewhat typical of the West. In an interview with Laurel Chrumka for the Alberta Oral History Project (1982), Marion described fishing in the river, playing a variety of sports, including hockey, going to school and attending the Calgary Stampede and the Stampede Parade. "We'd go to the City Hall and sit on one of the balconies there and watch the Stampede Parade, which at that time wasn't nearly as elaborate . . . it smelt more of cattle and cowboys and horses" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

When asked to describe her community, Marion recalled:

The community was mixed, as I've never seen any other part of Calgary since and I don't know if there were other parts at that time, but it was every conceivable nationality: Scottish, Jewish, French, Dutch, German, Chinese, everything, Russian, Negro. And my mother never once said you can't have so and so to your birthday party. I grew up accepting everybody as my equal. There was no feeling that this was different, that this was something you didn't accept. It was wonderful and the school was the same, public school . . . it was every possible nationality. (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

A less typical part of Marion's childhood was her interest in art. Though there was little scope for art in the public education curriculum, there was enough to spark Marion's interest. "Grade 6, 7, 8 we had art in school but there was no formal training. The teacher would put a vase with a flower in it on a desk and we would have to draw it." Not comfortable singing, Marion "was allowed to go into the corner and draw while everyone else sang" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). Marion recalled:

Give me paper and pencil or crayon and you could leave me for hours. I'd be no bother to anybody . . . I think [my family] accepted it without any problem because I was always supplied with paper and crayons . . . Yes, [there was] encouragement. My father, I think, could have been a painter, but I don't think that men in Canada at that time ever did that sort of thing, not in western Canada (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

In high school there was greater room for art in the curriculum. R.L. Harvey, the travelling art curriculum director for the Calgary Board of Education, showed Marion some early encouragement:

We had a teacher who travelled around from one school to the other to teach art. He liked what I was doing. He asked if I would help with his normal students . . . [those taking the teaching course up at the university]. I did

drawings for them. I think that now it would be illegal, but I was very flattered to be asked to make drawings for them because they used them in their portfolios . . . I was thirteen (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

Whatever ever else this reveals, it more pertinently indicates Marion exhibited artistic ability. As further evidence of the support her family showed towards her interest in art, Marion reported: “my father fixed up a studio for me in the basement, really fixed it up, like a room the full width of the house, with a fireplace and I’ve forgotten how many electric plug-ins. He had lights for every one of them.” (Nicoll, 1972, “Conversation with” transcript, p.13)

Marion chose to attend St Joseph’s Convent School in Red Deer for Grade 11. Administered by the Daughters of Wisdom, a French-based order of nuns, the school’s curriculum emphasized the arts. There is little record of Marion’s specific memories of the school, though she recalled “there were more Protestants than Catholics. There were a lot of people who sent their daughters up there. And you were really protected and directed and kept very, very busy” (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

Years later, the school was attended by famed Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal, who holds mixed memories of his time there. “The convent school was a very rough experience,” Cardinal has said, but it was also the place where he became exposed to the history of art, architecture and music (cited in “Remarkable Teacher,” 2004). One teacher in particular made a difference, Cardinal recalled:

Back then the church was very strong and dictatorial. But Mrs. Salter was not like that. She always tried to make our lives better . . . I was interested in history, the Renaissance and the Greeks. She would make sure I had books about architecture and art. She got me interested in music and encouraged me to draw (cited in “Remarkable Teacher,” 2004).

While they ultimately did not have a shared experience at the school, both Cardinal and Nicoll emerged from St Joseph's Convent School committed to the arts.

Marion was meant to finish her high school education at Central High School in Calgary, but she "didn't want to" after returning from St Joseph's. Marion recalled, "I told my father that I wanted to go to art school . . . so my father said, 'Well, no point in wasting any more time,' so I went off to the Ontario College [of Art]" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). Perhaps it was his own limited access to education, or the fact that he had no sons to favour, but Robert Mackay supported both his daughters' desires for education. Had her life not been cut short by a fatal bout of pneumonia, Marion's younger sister Isabel intended to study architecture. Mackay's involvement in the community seems to indicate support for women to have the same opportunities as men, as evidenced by his role in the introduction of women's curling clubs to Calgary.

While Mackay appears to have been advancing opportunities for women locally, a much more significant women's movement was taking root in the new province of Alberta. Calgary became the base for five Alberta women known as the Famous Five, who would effect historic change throughout the British Empire.

Emily Murphy, from Edmonton, was appointed the first female magistrate in the British Empire, in 1916. In 1917, Louise McKinney ran successfully as an independent candidate for a seat in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, in the first election that was open to Canadian women. Of the two women elected that year, McKinney was sworn in first and thus became the first woman to sit as an elected official in the whole of the British Empire. Nellie McClung, the youngest of the Famous Five, had written and starred in a mock Parliament in 1914 which asked the question "Why should men have the vote?" McClung too was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, in 1921, and later represented Canada at the League of Nations in 1938. The eldest of the five, Henrietta Muir Edwards, successfully lobbied for the first Dower Act, which ensured the

rights of married women in Alberta. She also published handbooks about the legal status of women in Alberta and in Canada. Finally, Irene Parlby became the first female cabinet minister in Alberta, in 1921. She too represented Canada at the League of Nations, in 1930, and in 1935 she became the first female recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Alberta.

In addition to their accomplishments as individuals, however, the Famous Five as a group were so called because they made history in 1929 when they succeeded in putting before the Privy Council in England the question “Does the word ‘persons’ in Section 24 of the British North America Act, 1867, include female persons?” The answer was Yes and it ensured that women could hold any political office in Canada. The Alberta courts had already established the principle, in 1917, that women and men are both persons and thus equal under the law, a right which Louise McKinney lost no time in exercising in her successful run for MLA that same year.

The efforts and successes of the Famous Five suggest that the social climate in Alberta was receptive to the educational pursuits of women. It was in this cultural milieu that Marion Mackay began studying at the Ontario College of Art (OCA)¹¹ in 1926 under Franz Johnson. Marion recalled to Laurel Chrumka that she didn’t feel particularly challenged by her courses, but that her social encounters made a far greater impression on her. Marion reported in interview that she nevertheless did well in school (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

While Marion was home for a visit in 1928, her mother insisted she not return to OCA, on the grounds that Marion appeared anemic after two years in Ontario. Marion transferred to the Provincial Institute of Technology & Art (PITA), affectionately referred to as “the Tech.” The newly initiated art program was headed by A.C. Leighton, who,

¹¹ The Provincial Institute of Technology and Art did not begin offering art classes, beyond mechanical drawing and draftsmanship, until 1926. There was no opportunity for post-secondary art education in southern Alberta prior to this.

after reviewing Marion's portfolio, placed Marion back into first year because she "hadn't learned anything" in Ontario and "didn't know how to draw" (Nicoll, 1982, Chromka interview, audio file). Marion was undaunted by Leighton's criticism and began her studies at the PITA anew. Within three months she advanced to resume her third year studies, with confirmed respect for Leighton's teaching abilities.

In 1931, Leighton appointed Marion a student teacher at the PITA. Outside of the PITA, Marion took summer classes conducted by Leighton in Seebe, Alberta, east of Banff. These classes were the origin of what would eventually become the fine art department at the Banff School for the Arts, now called The Banff Centre. About this time, Marion met Jim Nicoll, some 17 years her senior, at the Calgary Sketch Club. Nicoll had served in the First World War, notably at Passchendaele and Vimy, and was a civil engineer.¹² It was the beginning of a long and strong relationship.

In 1933, Marion graduated from the PITA and earned a number of Royal Academy Certificates. She was 24 years old. She started teaching, as regular faculty, in the craft department that same year, which would indicate her colleagues' confidence in her character and respect for her skills. Her involvement with the arts in Calgary outside of the PITA increased when she became a member of both the Women Artists of Alberta, formed in 1933, and the Alberta Society of Artists in 1936.

The Alberta Society of Artists (ASA) had been incorporated in 1931, formed from older art associations. As its president, A.C. Leighton promoted the same British techniques upon which he based his teaching at the PITA, to the detriment of artists interested in exploring more avant-garde techniques. Historian Nancy Townshend (2005) comments on Leighton's role in the Calgary art community:

¹² Jim Nicoll received a Military Medal for "conspicuous bravery and resourcefulness and also for expeditious work." The Award certificate details that Nicoll served at Ypres in 1916 and that he spent three months on the Somme and three months at the Vimy front burying cable (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM 6642, File 33).

Leighton autocratically implemented a weeding out of any other kind of art than objective responses to landscape and life in the British watercolour tradition and tonalism. This occurred through the classical education he gave his students at the Tech and summer schools, but most significantly through his selections for membership in a purportedly provincial society of artists, the Alberta Society of Artists, and for its exhibitions (p.12).

As an example of the rigid anti-avant-garde attitude of the art elite in Calgary, two artists, Maxwell Bates and William Leroy Stevenson, were refused membership in the ASA on the basis of their exploration of Expressionism (Morris, 2004, p.133). Marion, however, was not interested in experimenting or pushing boundaries at this point in her career. She spent her time sketching, painting for exhibition, and teaching crafts.

In 1937, to improve her craft skills, Marion travelled to England to study at the London County Council's School of Arts & Crafts. As an indication of her adventurous and independent spirit, Marion journeyed by boat, leaving from Vancouver and travelling down the Pacific Coast through the Panama Canal, sketching throughout the trip. The voyage took six weeks. In London, Marion studied techniques in architectural decoration using mosaic and coloured concrete, bookbinding, weaving, and ceramics. Shortly before Christmas in 1937, Marion received word that her mother had died. In her letters to Jim Nicoll from this period, Marion expresses a strong desire to abandon her studies to return home (1937, personal correspondence with Jim Nicoll, Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, Glenbow Museum [GM] 6642, File 25). Ultimately, her father insisted that she stay on in England and she followed the spring semester with a trip through Norway, Sweden, and Denmark before returning to Calgary in 1938. That fall she resumed teaching at the PITA.

In 1940, Jim and Marion married. At the time, Jim was working for the Royal Canadian Air Force and his job involved supervising the construction of army bases.

Because this required frequent travel, Marion left her job at the PITA. Between 1940 and 1942, Marion and Jim moved approximately 16 times, eventually settling in the town of Bowness, west of Calgary. Marion later remarked, "I was lucky in marrying Jim, I don't think anybody else could have put up with me" (Nicoll, M, 1973, Wright interview with MN, transcript, p.14).

In 1943 Marion began teaching art as an occupational therapist at the Central Alberta Sanatorium (later named the Baker Memorial Sanatorium). While at the sanatorium, Marion met Bill Panko, who was suffering from tuberculosis of the hip and who expressed an interest in learning watercolour. Nicoll recalled that Panko was

an ex-miner from the Drumheller area, who'd come right out to this country and gone right into the mines, developed TB of the bone, not educated, rather a sullen-looking man... His roommate was a captain Bab who wanted to illustrate his letters home and I was helping him... One day [Bab] said, 'Mrs Nicoll? Bill would like to try some painting'... I said, well I'll bring you up some paints and some papers and I'll tell you what you use and how... just technical [instruction] was all I was giving him... I said 'You go ahead and do anything that you like.' He couldn't understand why he couldn't paint like Norman Rockwell... He'd never handled a paintbrush before. (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

When the matron of the sanatorium attempted to instruct Panko in perspective drawing, Nicoll reported storming into her office to say, "You stick to the health of the patients and you leave the art teaching to me" (Nicoll, 1972, interview with Jim and Marion Nicoll, AFA, transcript, p.14). Nicoll nurtured Panko's creative development, protecting him from any influence or directive pedagogy she felt might destroy his

“natural ability” and acted as his art dealer.¹³ Nicoll introduced Panko’s work to J. Russell Harper, who considered Panko the creator of the “most native and purest western Canadian art of his twentieth-century generation” (Harper, 1966, p.320).

In 1945 Marion and Jim moved to their permanent home in Bowness, a working-class village that was eventually annexed by the City of Calgary. A fellow artist and friend to the Nicolls, Janet Mitchell, described the Nicoll home as “a one-roomed house with a lean-to kitchen and an outside toilet. In the lean-to was a well from which their water supply was obtained by lowering a bucket on a rope” (Mitchell, 1979, p.7), and also as “a visual, intriguing place. The interior always seems rather dim, except in the winter afternoon when the low sun nuzzles through the diamond-paned windows to the south. The room with its large fireplace overflows with books, magazines, and papers” (Mitchell, 1979, p.9).

Janet Mitchell¹⁴ is another example of someone Marion mentored outside of the art college and in whom Marion observed a “natural ability.” Marion asserted that Janet Mitchell didn’t need an art education:

We kept telling her that. Jim and I both said, ‘Look, you don’t need to go to art school. You just paint what you feel.’ She was just a natural. I think with early encouragement she’d have been one of the blazing lights, really a blazing light for all over the world, but she had to work for her living . . . she had to earn a living” (Nicoll, 198, Chrumka interview, audio file).

During the 1940s, Marion also worked as a travelling instructor, teaching extension classes for the University of Alberta in Medicine Hat and Black Diamond. In the summer of 1946, she taught landscape-art watercolour classes at the Banff Summer School with

¹³ Nicoll reported to Laurel Chrumka that she would buy a work of Panko’s for \$5 and then sell it for \$5. In 2007, one of Panko’s watercolour and gouache drawings sold for \$3000. http://www.heffel.com/Links/archives/2007_Sept_AOL_Lots_133-138.pdf

¹⁴ In addition to their friendship and collegial relationship, Mitchell was the Nicolls’ accountant and eventually the executrix of their estate.

André Biéler, H.G. Glyde , A.Y. Jackson, George Pepper, Walter J. Phillips, Jock MacDonald, and Murray MacDonald. In addition to being the only woman, she was the youngest member of the staff.

In 1946 Marion resumed teaching at the PITA at the insistence of newly appointed head Jock MacDonald. “The first thing [Jock] did was to call me in to ask if I’d come back to the school and take over the ceramics and some of the crafts and design” (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). In order to establish the ceramics program at the PITA, she secured funding to purchase equipment and to hire faculty, notably Luke Lindoe.¹⁵ Today, Lindoe is considered the most significant ceramist from the prairies. Lindoe recalled the circumstances under which he began teaching:

Marion Nicoll initiated the ceramics program. The classes hadn’t started. There was something that she had taken in her studies in England and was something that she knew was going to come: was something that the school should have. As soon as I showed up on the scene, she said, ‘YOU can have the ceramics department.’ You know Marion. She wanted it there and she really hadn’t wanted to run it. And I did. There was a lot of curiosity about ceramics that I wanted to get worked out. So I did. (Lindoe cited in Alberta Art Foundation, 1981, p.28).

Throughout the 1950s, Marion was very active in crafts. In addition to her teaching and administrative responsibilities at the PITA, Nicoll was active in the community at large. In 1957, she was asked to organize a craft show representing the southern half of the province for the opening of Calgary’s Jubilee Auditorium.¹⁶ In 1958, Marion helped

¹⁵ In addition to teaching, Lindoe founded Plainsman Clay, which mined and sold the unique red clay from Redcliff, Alberta, widely used by ceramists.

¹⁶ In 1955, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the province of Alberta, Premier E.C. Manning announced the construction of two identical auditoria, in Edmonton and Calgary, to serve as centres for cultural advancement and community engagement. “Dedication Week ceremonies held in April 1957 included performances by the symphony, the opera and many other civic groups displaying a genuine celebration of the arts in Alberta” (“Auditoria History,” 2009).

to found a craft co-operative called “The Old Cabin Crafts” which was one of the first outlets for local crafts. Marion described it as “formed on a co-operative basis, run by craftsmen, with a standards committee to insure [sic] quality crafts” (Nicoll, 1965, p.14). Nicoll also later served as a judge for the Alberta Visual Arts Board’s scholarship awards, advised the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, and helped to provide credibility for *Alberta Craft* – an annual exhibition showcasing Alberta’s arts and crafts – by developing an adjudication process (Townshend, 2005, p. p.232).

Ever eager to develop her skills, Nicoll travelled to Vancouver in 1956 to study jewellery-making. One of her jewellery pieces was exhibited in the Canadian Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958 (Townshend, 2005, p.206). She continued to produce jewellery through the 1950s and ’60s, many pieces of which were sold at Canada’s Four Corners handicraft store in Ottawa.

Another example of her commitment to developing skills in a range of media, Marion and Jim signed up for what was meant to be a printmaking workshop at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan, conducted by Will Barnet. When the appropriate supplies failed to arrive, Barnet staged a life-drawing class. Marion described the experience to Helen Wright:

I went up to study with [Barnet] – print-making and the print-making stuff hadn’t arrived so we were drawing from a little Indian model. I was working with water color and he said – “you’re not going to do graphics; you are going to paint.” I took off like a sky-rocket just whoom! (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN, transcript, p.4)

The experience had such impact that Marion took a leave of absence from teaching to enrol in Barnet’s class at the Art Students League in New York for the 1958/59 school year. To fund this year of study, Marion and Jim held an art sale in the yard of their home. Many watercolours were sold for \$5, but the Nicolls made sufficient funds (Jackson, 1986, p.18).

While in New York, Marion was awarded a Category 6 Canada Council Fellowship (Scholarships for Art Teachers and Professional Staff Members of Art Galleries and Museums). The award of \$2,750 eased the financial strain of living in New York and allowed for a few months travel in Europe before the Nicolls returned home.

When Marion and Jim returned to Calgary they became increasingly involved in the community. In 1960, Marion was appointed to the first Bowness Recreation Board. The mandate of the board included providing equipment and activities to facilitate recreational activities for the citizens of Bowness. "The Board had the power to conduct any form of recreation or cultural activity that would utilize the leisure time of the people in a constructive manor [sic]" (Laing, 2005, p.162). Nicoll worked with the building committee on the construction of the Recreation Centre by selecting colours for the centre (Laing, 2005, p.163). The official opening took place on October 1, 1960, and was attended by the Nicolls. At the time, Jim was chairman of the Bowness Library, which was relocated to the Recreation Centre once it opened. (Laing, 2005, p.163). The Rec Centre, as it became known, facilitated a number of art-related activities by hosting travelling art exhibitions, exhibiting local artists, and putting on plays. Marion painted sets for various theatrical productions (Laing, 2005).

In the 1960s Nicoll's career entered a new phase. She was extremely productive in both her painting and craft practice and in the community, while continuing to teach at the PITA, which officially became the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in 1960. Many of Nicoll's students from the 1960s went on to very successful careers as artist and educators. They include Stan Perrott, who later became head of the art department at SAIT, Luke Lindoe, John Hall, Margaret Shelton, Robert Guest, Fred Owen, Vera Garley, Katie Ohe, Jean Mihalcheon, and Alex Janvier. Katie Ohe summarized Nicoll's influence as a teacher: "She was able to make students feel

responsible to themselves, to their talent, to their art, to recognizing their own needs” (Ohe, 2005, personal interview). After Nicoll’s death, Perrott told a reporter:

She knew a great deal about technique, but it was her subjective example and her interest in people that made the difference . . . She started me out when I was floundering and put the joy of art into my head and into my heart. In the world of art, which can be so mechanical and material, her values were aristocratic and civilized; that’s all there is to it (cited in Tousley, 1985, n.p.).

In his biography of Perrott, Max Foran (2001) concluded:

Ultimately, the most important influence in Stan Perrot’s artistic training came from the statuesque and formidable Marion MacKay [sic]. MacKay was always to remain his teacher and in that sense occupied that most exalted of positions understood only by those who themselves have been exposed to an exceptional teacher (Foran, 2001, p.16).

Nicoll was an advocate for her students, none, perhaps, more significantly than Alex Janvier:

I went to battle with the Indian Affairs Branch, who insisted that he take commercial art because it was more sensible. Most Indians – and I think they are lucky in this – have no sense of time, and commercial art is deadline, deadline, deadline.... finally they let him switch to a fine arts course I didn’t teach him, all I did was tell him what he had. Because he had all the instincts of a natural designer, as Indians have if it’s allowed to develop (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file).

Alex Janvier once said about his own work, “I feel very true to my work; it is really my ‘thing’ and not carrying off a traditional Caucasian version of Indian perception” (*Treaty By Numbers*, n.p.). Janvier described Nicoll as:

fighting for her status as a woman and she was getting a lot of static at the time; she was a tough Scot woman. She had to be like that. I think there was some issues that she felt. She was like a mother hen to me in a way because I didn't have much family life so she took me under her wing" (Janvier, 2007, personal interview).

Janvier suggests that Nicoll's support arose from the shared experience of facing racist and sexist systemic barriers. Janvier described how he ended up studying at SAIT despite wanting to attend the Ontario College of Art. "I had to get a written permit to leave the reserve. When I got to the office of the Indian agent in St. Paul . . . when I got there, I discovered he had a different plan, a better plan. It was called SAIT then. I had no idea what that meant." Janvier summarized his regard for Nicoll: "She was very important. She encouraged me to speak more" (Janvier, 2007, personal interview).

Nicoll believed that "inadequately trained instructors do more harm than good" and that a good instructor "is responsible for releasing and developing the innate design sense of each student and leading the way into the adventure of new ideas, resulting in deep personal development" (Nicoll, 1960, "Crafts in the Community," pp.17-18). Her role as mentor to Panko suggests that Nicoll believed technical instruction should be the singular focus of art education to protect that which she felt is intrinsically unique to an individual. It also suggests that Nicoll believed that anything beyond technical instruction has the potential to corrupt individual expression.¹⁷

Nicoll acknowledged the enormous influence teachers have over artists' development. She believed in encouraging individuality rather than promoting any particular artistic

¹⁷ Nicoll felt that technique was the cornerstone of teaching, but not of her own creative practice. ". . . a technique is a 'result,' not a start. You want to say something pretty badly; you have certain skills at your command. Those two things, your desire to say something and your skills will create a technique to say what you want to say. But you don't start with technique" (Nicoll, 1972, Arts & Crafts Division interview transcript, p.6).

mode, but asserted that students need encouragement. This sentiment is evident in her mentoring of others as well.

You can teach people by words to handle different things . . . this is the history of art and colour and the whole rest of it . . . your pencils and papers and canvases and everything . . . You can teach people technically but you can't teach them anything in their mind . . . Which is why I think the art school should be a technical school. This business of the philosophy of art and expressing your dear little souls is an absolute waste of time. Which is why I would go back to apprenticing people to practising artists. Universities turn out artists, so called, with degrees, who are fine when it comes to criticism, to writing articles about art, to running galleries, but not the actual being, the actual doing, the actual being of a top painter . . . If I were running an art school there wouldn't be one person with a degree. Not one (Nicoll, 1972, interview transcript, pp.16–17).

Nicoll fostered culture and community outside of the Institute. The Nicolls' home in Bowness was for many years the hub of the Calgary art scene. The Nicolls welcomed friends "from every kind of condition and position," including artists, students, and community acquaintances (Mitchell, 1979, p.11). As one frequent guest to the Nicoll house, Roy Kiyooka, once said, "Though Marion and Jim Nicoll were not among my actual teachers, I owe them almost all of the literacy I had" (cited in Nasgaard, 2007, p.160).

By the mid-1960s, Marion was experiencing such severe pain from arthritis, a condition that had begun bothering her a decade earlier, that she decided to retire from teaching in 1966. She was 57. Then-principal Fred Jorgenson wrote to thank her for her service to students and staff. "I have appreciated having you as the only full-time lady instructor on campus" (Jorgenson, 1966, personal correspondence with Marion Nicoll).

Stan Perrott recalled that at meetings, the staff was addressed as “gentlemen and Mrs. Nicoll” (cited in Tousley, 1985).

Shortly after her retirement in 1966, Marion received a Senior Arts Fellowship from the Canada Council. Marion used the money to tour galleries in eastern Canada. The trip through eastern Canada was very productive and Marion established connections with many galleries. As a result, several galleries began carrying her work, including Bertha Schaefer (New York), Vincent Price Gallery (Chicago), Gallery 1640 (Montreal), Artlenders (Westmount, Montreal), Bonli (Toronto) (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM 6642, File 117).

Despite this promising turn of events, and some initial sales of prints, batiks and the occasional painting, interest in Marion’s work declined. By the early ’70s, Marion had virtually stopped painting because of her arthritis and apparently stopped promoting her work. In 1975 her former students Ron Moppett and John Hall mounted a retrospective exhibition of her painting at the Edmonton Art Gallery and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. A short time later, Peter Ohler, of the Master’s Gallery in Calgary, became interested in Marion’s work. The gallery hosted a sale of her paintings in 1977 and published a catalogue written by staff member J. Brooks Joyner. Peter Ohler wrote to Marion about his first encounter with her work:

The first time I met you and Jim was indeed an auspicious occurrence [sic]. I remember climbing daintily up Jim’s special ladder into his crow’s nest. There, hot and dust covered, I saw for the first time paintings that were to mean a great deal to me. I remember dear Janet [Mitchell] helping me carry the works down the ladder and lining the walls of your studio with them. I couldn’t believe what was there and why no one had ‘discovered’ the two of you. Every time I remember that first meeting I feel both delight and melancholy. Melancholy for the fact that you had to wait for so long for recognition. In

retrospect I wish I could have afforded to keep a significant number of works, but none of us had any idea that they would sell as quickly as they did. Do you remember that first exhibition? Many other dealers told me I was ‘nuts’ and ‘those things won’t sell’. Well they were wrong. Boy were they wrong (Ohler, 1982).¹⁸

Recognition for the importance of Marion’s work continued to grow and in 1977 she became the first woman from Alberta to be elected to the Royal Canadian Academy. In 1980, on the occasion of Alberta’s 75th anniversary as a province, Premier Peter Lougheed honoured Nicoll “in recognition of [her] contribution to Alberta’s heritage of pride” (certificate, 1980, Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM 6642, File 33).

By 1981 Marion could no longer care for herself. She moved to the Bethany Care Center. A few months later, when it became clear she would never be able to return to their Bowness home, Jim also moved to the Bethany. Under proper care, Marion and Jim returned to their old selves. With the aid of special equipment that gave her improved mobility, Marion began drawing for the first time in years. Additionally, she was introduced to the Apple computer and began to experiment with computer-based art-making techniques (“Past Members – Marion Nicoll”, n.d.).

While in the Bethany, Marion and Jim helped to organize an art committee for the purpose of exhibiting both student and professional work and to brighten up the walls of the facility. They also donated a marble sculpture (Tivy, May 10, 1982). Marion and Jim were also among the first to donate a large body of artworks to The Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) collection after its establishment in 1973. Jim and Marion Nicoll and Janet Mitchell donated some 200 works to support the government’s initiative. The Nicolls supplemented their donation in 1981 with an additional 421 works, by both

¹⁸ The 1978 exhibition at Masters Gallery resulted in the sale of all available paintings by Marion Nicoll (Cohen, 1978).

themselves and others (Lavolette, 2001, p.19). They bequeathed the rest of their personal art collection – made up of their own paintings, prints, and batiks, and of works by their acquaintances, colleagues, and students – to the City of Calgary.

In 1982, the Muttart Art Gallery in Calgary hosted a retrospective exhibition of both Marion and Jim Nicoll's works. Titled "Tribute," the exhibition celebrated "the inspiration the couple have been to a generation of younger Alberta artists" (Tivy, January 21, 1982). By including the works of Jim and Marion together, the exhibition served to commemorate the couple's contribution to Calgary's artistic community through their personal relationships more than through their artworks. Two exhibition reviews explained:

Leading members of the city's art community for more than 50 years, the husband and wife team, both retired now, were polar opposites in style. One of Canada's best abstract painters, Mrs. Nicoll is known for her bold, simple shapes. Mr. Nicoll's works are detailed and realistic. Over the years their warmth and openness as well as their sometimes fiery arguments over art attracted dozens of young artists to their doorstep (Weatherby & McKinley, February 8, 1982, p.44).

Given their differences, it would be difficult to judge which of the Nicolls is the most successful artist. Marion Nicoll has received the lion's share of outside attention because of her abstract paintings... In [pioneering their own forms of modernist art] they were not alone, but the support they received from their own generation of colleagues has been transmitted through their example and their own generous support of younger artists in the community" (Tousley, 1982, "Tribute to the Nicolls").

On March 6, 1985, Marion suffered a fatal heart attack. She was 75 years old. Jim died less than a year later on January 2, 1986. He was 93 years old. They are buried in Calgary's Burnsland Cemetery. Their graves are unmarked.¹⁹

The life of Marion Nicoll stands as an example of both the ordinary and the extraordinary. Ordinary in the sense that her upbringing was typical of southern Alberta. Marion Nicoll's grandparents and parents were representative of Alberta's earliest immigrants. They established a settler society by literally and figuratively building community infrastructure and by responding to ever changing forces around them, all the while pursuing their individual goals. The actions and achievements of her parents reflected the aspirations of new immigrants. Marion, in turn, embodied their spirit. She took advantage of every available opportunity and pursued her goals with tenacity, bravery and determination. Her own actions as a teacher and in the community indicate that she wanted to foster a society in which every individual could pursue his or her goals. Extraordinary in the sense that it wouldn't have seemed so ordinary anywhere else.

¹⁹ The Nicolls donated their entire estate to public art institutions, presumably leaving nothing left for gravestones.

Chapter 2: Influences on the Development of the Artist

In September 1972, the Alberta Culture visual arts department asked Marion Nicoll to complete a questionnaire for her artist's file at the Alberta Art Foundation. The questionnaire asks artists to list "Influences upon the development of the artist." The Alberta Art Foundation was founded in 1972 by the newly elected Peter Lougheed Conservative government with a mandate to collect and promote the work of Alberta artists. At the time, Nicoll had virtually stopped working because of crippling arthritis and would therefore have had an opportunity to reflect on her career and influences. She likely would have considered her answers carefully, earnestly, and with an eye to posterity. Nicoll responded:

One's life and environment, Education, Friends, Enemies, Artist Instructors:
J.E.H. MacDonald - OCA, A.C. Leighton – Best Teacher, Duncan Grant –
Drawing, Bernard Adeney – Design, J.W.G. MacDonald – Automatic Drawing,
Will Barnet – Painting, Associates in the Painting Field, my own dour,
sometimes naïve, reactions, my father who had a queer pride in my deviation
from the normal, but never expected any worthwhile results from my efforts
(Nicoll, 1972, Artists Survey, p.6).

A careful examination of Nicoll's response permits not only the opportunity to gain insight into her sense of awareness about her own artistic practice, but also to place her practice within the broader context of 20th-century North American art history. Marion Nicoll's stated influences are broad enough in scope that they connect to a number of movements and art practices of the 20th century and leave open the potential for scholarly elaboration.

It is worth noting that Nicoll would have treated the Alberta Culture visual arts questionnaire with seriousness, given the excitement felt by those in the arts community

of Alberta over the efforts of the Lougheed government to support Alberta culture in all its forms. During its mandate, Lougheed's government provided "the highest per capita expenditure on culture in Canada" (Rosemary McCracken cited in Fraser, 2003, p.15), creating granting programs and arm's-length institutions that collected the work of Alberta artists and displayed them in government buildings both within the province and in London, England, New York and Tokyo. The Nicolls were such enthusiastic supporters that they inquired about bequeathing their entire estate to the Foundation (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, Glenbow Museum 6642, file 125).

1. "Life and environment"

Of particular interest is Nicoll's decision to associate "life" and "environment" together and to place them first on her list. "Life" may refer to biographical information or the sum of an individual's experience. It also evokes the qualities that animate or vivify existence. Further, it suggests the innate qualities that determine the unique character of an individual. "Environment" may be used literally or figuratively. It may refer to the geographical features of a specific locale. It may suggest the political, emotional, or social landscape of a particular place. By combining life and environment into one influence, Nicoll suggests that one's life, while marked by individual experience, cannot be isolated from the general contextual forces that define the place in which that individual lives.

2. "Education"

This second item on Nicoll's list was detailed in chapter 1, but is summarized as follows. The grade school education Nicoll received in Alberta – both at the Normal School through the encouragement of R.L. Harvey and at St. Mary's Convent School in Red Deer because of its curricular emphasis on the arts – appears to have influenced Nicoll's decision to pursue artistic training. If she didn't receive suitable training, by A.C. Leighton's standards, at the Ontario College of Art, she nonetheless gained an increased

sense of confidence as an artist from her proximity to famous members of the Group of Seven. Through her experiences at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art, Nicoll received rigorous academic training in art, insight into effective pedagogy, and support for her role as an educator. During her time in England while studying at the London County Council's Central School of Arts & Crafts and the Royal Art College, Nicoll deepened her knowledge of Arts & Crafts ideology and techniques. Arguably, the biggest influence in Nicoll's career was her encounter with Will Barnet at an Emma Lake Workshop in 1957. The experience prompted her to enrol at the Art Students League in New York City so she could continue her studies with Barnet.

3. "Friends"

The third item on Nicoll's list is "friends." Throughout her life Nicoll developed strong relationships. As a young student at the OCA, Nicoll befriended Gwen Hutton, the daughter of Leo Hutton, who was the Railway representative in Calgary. The two young artists spent subsequent summers on sketch trips. Other young women artists in Nicoll's circle of friends included Barbara Leighton, the wife of A.C. Leighton, with whom Nicoll was a student at the PITA; Gwen Lamont; artist Margaret Shelton; and opera singer Trudy Carlyle among others.

For years, Jim and Marion's home in Bowness was the site of many gatherings for Calgary artists. In the 1940s, groups would meet at the Nicolls' place after a lecture or event at the Coste House and discuss art and literature "until the small hours in the morning" (Snow, 1995, p.56), notably Max Bates and other members of the Calgary Group. In later years, colleagues, students from the PITA (later SAIT), and artists in the community at large such as Janet Mitchell were among frequent guests. Mitchell described the Nicolls' friendships and the festivities centred in their home as follows:

Their friends were, and still are, from every kind of condition and position. If one had a guest from out of town, one invariably took them to the Nicolls; and it generally was a visit long remembered . . . In the summer there were many happy times – picnic tables laden with hot-weather food, like cucumber sandwiches and watermelon. Around the garden chairs would run the dogs chasing cats, and visiting children chasing the dogs. The light summer conversation was intermittently broken by the noise of the kids and dogs and passing trains. The winter parties were different, people coming in by the lean-to kitchen and depositing their wraps and boots on the bench by the south window. The food was usually different from what some of us were accustomed to – Marion having acquired the European imaginative style of cooking from her stay abroad. No one seemed to mind too much that a cat had been on the table to sniff over the food. In winter, befitting the season, the conversation was deep, sometimes dark and sometimes mysterious, but interlaced with spontaneous laughter as well (Mitchell, 1979, pp.11–12).

4. *“Enemies”*

The inclusion of “enemies” on her list suggests that Nicoll often felt in an oppositional role. While it would not be fair to characterize Illingworth “Buck” Kerr as an enemy, he was described by colleagues as an “autocrat” during his tenure as head of the art department at the PITA from 1947 to 1967. Kerr reportedly butted heads with many colleagues on a number of issues and particularly with Nicoll on matters related to the crafts. In his memoirs Kerr wrote that Nicoll “always battled to have the crafts recognized as equal to any other form of expression” (Kerr, 1987, pp.108–9).

Nicoll once said of Kerr, “At the art school when Kerr was there I felt he didn’t approve too much of women in positions of any responsibility . . . [He wasn’t a patriarch]

He was uncertain of himself. It didn't worry me, just leave me alone and I'll do my work" (Nicoll, 1979, Murray interview transcript, p.6).

Despite the tension between them, Kerr and Nicoll joined forces to battle Indian Affairs on behalf of Alex Janvier. Indian Affairs believed that enrolment in the advertising art program would provide Janvier with a more lucrative career than would a fine arts program. Nicoll and Kerr disagreed, believing instead that emphasis on deadlines would disrupt Janvier's creative development (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). Ultimately, Kerr and Nicoll were successful and Janvier graduated with a fine arts diploma. He was the first "Treaty Indian" in Canada to do so.

If Marion had any real enemies they were the bureaucrats she fought in advocating for the things in which she believed. The Nicoll Fonds at the Glenbow Museum contains copies of letters sent to various public officials and in some cases their responses.

5. "Artist instructors"

Marion included "artist instructors" fifth on her list of influences. She specified six people. Because the existing literature closely examines many of these, they will be treated minimally here.

Marion listed the instructors in chronological order, beginning with J.E.H. MacDonald. As previously noted, Marion attended the Ontario College of Art from 1926 to 1928. In interview with Helen Wright, Nicoll said, "I went to the Ontario College of Art at the time when J.E.H. MacDonald was there – you know, head of the Group of Seven . . . But I don't think this affected me except that I was flattered and excited to be where these people were" (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.1). If studying with the Group of Seven, or at least in proximity to them didn't influence Nicoll's artistic practice, it may have helped to boost her confidence or her sense of what was possible as an artist.

Marion regarded A.C. Leighton as the “best teacher” she had encountered (Nicoll, 1972, AFA, p.6). Leighton was one of many English-born and -trained watercolourists who travelled through, and settled in, western Canada in the first half of the 20th century. When the first head of the art department at the PITA died suddenly, A.C. Leighton was asked to step in. There are two stories about Leighton that Nicoll frequently repeated in interviews. The first is that when Leighton placed Marion in first year even though she had two years of training at the OCA, she was not dissuaded, but determined to improve. She was promoted to third-year studies after only three months and was appointed a student teacher the following year. The second story suggests that Leighton instilled in Nicoll a sense of duty with regards to practising art in Alberta. Nicoll often repeated that Leighton told her that one day Alberta would be painted by people who were from Alberta, people with the capacity to see the province through native eyes. Nicoll recalled to Helen Wright: “He said, ‘This country won’t be painted by me.’ He said, ‘I’ll paint it as an Englishman would do it, trained as an Englishman, but it’s going to be painted by someone who is born here’” (1973).

As a teacher, Nicoll recalled that Leighton never had a discipline problem, because he would simply ignore students who didn’t work, which encouraged students to seek his approval. Nicoll reported in interview:

He wouldn’t accept anything except a little bit better than you could do. You know that feeling of all of a sudden your ears straining? That’s what he gave to you all the time . . . He could teach. He really could. He taught me watercolour and for one whole winter the class was working with two colours: burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. With those two we had to get every degree of light and dark and warm and cool. Not matching colour, but matching light-dark, warm-cool . . . And when you added a couple of colours to that you felt as though you had a full palette . . . And then he put up a white group – white cloth, pieces of

newspaper, metal knife, perhaps a loaf of bread with brown crust, and eggs in a white bowl. You had to do that without mixing more than two watercolours together, and make it look white. Can you see what you'd learn doing a thing like that? You gain a little self-respect when you learn to handle these things properly. It isn't a matter of expressing yourself. It's just learning to handle your tools (Marion Nicoll, 1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, pp.10–11).

Nicoll felt that Leighton's influence was also evident in her work. "He influenced me in tone. One thing I know is tone. Without thinking about it, I know the tone of every colour I look at. What it is in relation to the next colour as far as light and dark is concerned. This may sound trivial, but I use it today in Abstract painting" (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.2).

From her year of studies in London, Nicoll included two instructors: Duncan Grant for drawing and Bernard Adeney for design. More famous for his affiliation with the Bloomsbury Group, Duncan Grant is not remembered as a teacher. That said, during the year that Nicoll lived in London, Grant was associated with and teaching at the Euston Road School. Although Nicoll did not study at the Euston Road School,²⁰ she stated in interview that she had taken a drawing course with Duncan Grant in 1937/38 at the Royal Art College (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). There is little record to corroborate this. However, a brief description of the Euston Road School sheds insight into Duncan Grant's interests at the time Nicoll met him.

"Euston Road" refers both to a group of British painters and to those who were affiliated with the "School of Drawing and Painting" that existed in London from October 1937 to the summer of 1939 (Laughton, 1986, p.3). Initiated in Camden Town in 1937,

²⁰ Bruce Laughton confirmed through personal correspondence that Marion Mackay's name does not appear in the Euston Road School Attendance Book (2008).

the school moved to Euston Road in 1938. Though it was short-lived, ending at the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the school boasted an impressive list of associates. Its chief instructors were Claude Rogers, Victor Passmore and William Coldstream, though Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell were associates as well. The primary motive of the school was to re-establish the virtues of objective painting and to develop methods and techniques (Laughton, 1986). They eschewed the avant-garde preoccupations of the day, surrealism and abstraction, in favour of a return to classical values in painting and drawing.

In her letters home to Jim, Nicoll only refers to Duncan Grant twice. First, from a letter dated April 12, 1938, where she describes packing her belongings from the school. She writes, "My teachers are being very flattering – even the hard headed Cockerel (of the Golden Cockerel Press) says he might make something of me if I stayed on. Duncan Grant is a teacher at the school – life – but is not a good teacher + rather dyspeptic" (Marion Nicoll, GM 6642, file 27). The second reference to Grant is in a letter dated June 8, 1938. Marion writes, "Don't get the Royal Academy Illustrated. I've got it. How's the B in B Club? I hope Duncan Grant's stuff upset them. Just wait until I get home" (Marion Nicoll, GM 6642, file 27).

These references corroborate that Nicoll did indeed encounter Grant while in London and that his work stimulated her. Her studies with Bernard Adeney are easier to substantiate. Bernard Adeney was head of the textile department of the London County Council's Central School of Arts & Crafts from 1930 to 1947. He was also a founding member of the London Group and of the London Artists' Association. As an associate member of the Bloomsbury Group, Adeney would have been familiar with Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry.

The “Bloomsbury Group”²¹ refers to the artist and writer friends and acquaintances of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell who gathered regularly in England in the first half of the twentieth century. Best known for their “unconventional lifestyles and eccentric behavior” the Group “successfully cultivated a deep resentment for the academic and sterile styles associated with Victorian England” (McGuire, 2003, p.223). Other notable associates include E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey.

There is little scholarship detailing the essence of Adeney’s teaching. However, the London County Council’s Central School of Arts & Crafts, founded in 1896, was “considered the most progressive in Europe” and its curriculum served as a model for the teaching of crafts “well into the 20th century” (Livingstone, 2005, p.58). According to Elizabeth Cumming, the Arts & Crafts Movement sought to instill “design unity, joy in labour, individualism and regionalism” in workers (Cumming, 1991, p.7). British arts and crafts schools were particularly important at creating the “regional character of the crafts” (Cumming, 1991, p.84), which was manifest in the use of local materials and techniques in addition to using the local natural environment as a source of inspiration. Some designers based their work on “specific landscapes, plants and flowers,” for instance (Greenstead, 2005, pp.97–8).

The Arts & Crafts Movement involved several idealistic principles, including “the revival of traditional handicrafts, a return to a simpler way of life, and improvement in daily existence through design, manufacture and use of domestic items,” in short the

21 The phrase ‘Bloomsbury Group’ is fraught with controversy. See Richard Shone (1999), who explains, “Bloomsbury is an elusive term, difficult to define, complex in character, burdened with decades of misinterpretation. It is discussed at the highest academic levels and used as an emotive catch-phrase in the most superficial journalism. The history of its critical fortunes moves through distrust and suspicion, to adulation and hatred. But the term is nearly always used inaccurately or with a looseness that denies it any effective meaning” (p.4).

availability of “beautiful things for the homes of simple and gentle folk”²² (Livingstone, 2005, p.7). Leading figures in the movement espoused the restorative power of craftsmanship and the individual mark of the craftsman to counteract the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution and to initiate social reform. Arts & Crafts practitioners viewed all creative acts in equal measure and imagined a society in which people of all social class backgrounds could live in beauty and harmony, though in reality only the wealthy few could truly invest in expensive, labour-intensive products. “The moral aesthetics of American reformers” writes Wendy Kaplan (1987), “developed from British precedent” (p.143).

In September of 1960, Nicoll published an article titled “Crafts in the Community: An Outline of What Can Be Achieved in Crafts with Good Design Instruction” which confirms Nicoll’s understanding of and support for Arts & Crafts values. Nicoll wrote:

Purposes of Community Crafts include: positive use of leisure time; nurture and direction of the universal, innate creative impulses; and the continuity of tradition... [the craft program results in] a) Healthy rivalry and community spirit, b) Sociability, c) Curiosity about crafts all over the world, thus enlarging the horizon of the community, d) The development of the individual, which is so necessary in the mass-producing, mass-educated, levelling-down, mechanized age (p.15).

While Nicoll’s studies in England were brief, it seems she adopted the core values of the Arts & Crafts in her teaching. Former student (and later head of the PITA) Stan Perrott reported to the *Calgary Herald*, “She used local floral motifs, local ideas, local bugs and everything like that. Marion taught us to make all of our patterns and to stylize local things like begonias into border designs . . . I think it was the strength of Marion

²² This quote is attributed to A.H. Mackmurdo as quoted in Linda Parry (1988), *Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, p.15.

Nicoll that made me see through this British influence. She was so together. She was direct and could see practicality in a way that the Englishman couldn't" (cited in Tousley, 1986). Of particular interest is Perrott's emphasis on the importance of seeing through external influence to develop an individual style. Nicoll also believed that craftsmanship is integral to all successful works: "Of course if you're a painter and you're a good painter you're a craftsman as well" (1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, p.6).

Nicoll's 1965 report on the crafts in Alberta indicates her aspirations for local craftsmen: "It is now said that Alberta ceramics are recognizable on sight, having their own unmistakable quality. This is a giant stride ahead and the goal all crafts must attain if they are to gain lasting recognition" (Nicoll, 1965, p.7). She expressed her perspective on the value of crafts when she explained the reason for *Alberta Craft's* success: "Part of its excellence is due to the imaginative and contemporary way of exhibiting the work. There is none of the look of the local bazaar about it. It is like walking into a first rate expensive store, spacious, airy, and never overcrowded with items. More people should see it. All of Canada should be proud" (Nicoll, 1960, p.10).

The next influence Nicoll cited on her list is J.W.G "Jock" MacDonald for instructing her on the process of automatic drawing. Already familiar with work of Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes, Nicoll asked MacDonald about the process when he arrived in Calgary to take over as head of the art department at PITA in 1947. Nicoll recalled, "I asked about the things [MacDonald] was doing, how he reached these strange and different images . . . He said, 'you take a pencil, you are in a quiet place, you put the pencil on the paper and you sit there and wait until your hand moves of its own accord. You do it every day, you date it, even put down the time of day, and you do it steadily, don't miss a day – you keep on doing it. It will happen without any effort on your part'" (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures interview transcript, p.4).

Automatic drawing is best understood by explaining the Jungian belief that all experience is retained, whether it is accessible to the conscious mind or not. Nicoll explained the origin of the process to Laurel Chrumka:

Jung says you forget absolutely nothing. Not even the most trivial experience, touch, sight, sound. It's all stored in your subconscious and what's more it's stored there in its true form, not coloured by your own personal bias . . . After [practising the process for] a while your hand becomes quite fluent and ignores what your conscious mind sees. What's happening is that you are beating a path between your conscious mind and subconscious. You are making available all of the experiences you've ever had and that includes your art training (1982).

For non-artists the exercise would be useful psychologically, but for Marion it was useful artistically. "I don't think I would have become an abstract painter without it. I came to a place where I wasn't satisfied with my work and I didn't know what to do . . . I grabbed on to the automatics as a lifeline because I didn't know where I was going to go and I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview). Nicoll reported that the automatic drawing process "gave me assurance. I'm absolutely sure now that I have a place on which I stand, from which I can paint; that's what the automatic drawing did. It beat a path in and I know that I'm not going to dry up" (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures interview transcript, p.8).

The intention of the automatic drawing process was never merely to function as creative tool. It was rather part of a system of thought that sought the liberation of both the individual and society. Borduas and the Automatistes were less concerned with the meaning of their creations, for example, than the system of thought that "promised release into unfettered freedom" (Naasgard, 2007, p.64), all the more meaningful in the context of Duplessis's Quebec. Others influenced by Surrealist techniques might, on the

other hand, find material evidence in automatic art works, to be deciphered, of the inner truth of the artist and possibly even the universe itself.

Jackson summarizes the advantages Nicoll gained from the automatic process:

“Firstly, she was freed of convention and correctness. Secondly, it allowed her to separate the conceptual from the perceptual, and thirdly, the automatics familiarized her with the accidental relationships of line and form” (p.16). Jackson concludes, “The concepts of essential form, the primordial and the archetypal became extremely important to Marion later in the 1960s” which suggests that the automatic process served Nicoll far more profoundly than keeping her from ‘drying up’; it “beat a path in” to an internal world and altered her means of communicating that world.

Though he remained in Calgary for only a year, MacDonald effected considerable influence. He helped to reinvigorate artist groups and societies, particularly the Calgary Group and the activities of the Coste House (temporary location of PITA’s art classes during the Second World War) by supporting a wider variety of art practices and painting styles. His “Message from the Head of the Art Department,” published in the PITA curriculum calendar, indicates his values:

Material richness is only one aspect of the quality of a country. The cultural expressions are of equal importance, and more so, as they record the character and quality of the people in representing the sincere and imaginative individuals to their environment and traditions. The Art Department of the Provincial Institute of Technology & Art exists for the purpose of promoting and developing the cultural desires of the people of the Province of Alberta and provides a centre of guidance and instructors for such a field of endeavour . . .

While the basic laws of aesthetic sensibility remain constant in our education of young students, we hold as our special qualification of instruction complete

freedom for the students' personal expression in the new consciousness of today (J.W.G. MacDonald, 1946, p.5).

Lastly, Nicoll included Will Barnet as an influential artist instructor. Nicoll and her husband met Barnet in 1957 at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan. Founded in 1955, the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops were initiated by Kenneth Lochhead and funded by the Saskatchewan Arts Board. The purpose of the annual two-week course was to introduce local professional artists to a prominent artist from outside Saskatchewan. Barnet was the second to lead a workshop after Jack Shadbolt from Vancouver, and was the first New York artist or critic to accept the invitation. In *The Flat Side of the Landscape: The Emma Lake Artists' Workshops* (1989), Matthew Teitelbaum describes the workshops as providing "both literal and figurative escape" where participants could connect with the "idealist and internationalist claims of the grandest practitioners of American art" (p.52). The desire to establish a link between local prairie artists and American art centres was based on the Modernist belief in the common language of art that allowed for the boundaries of place to be transcended (Teitelbaum, 1989).

Prior to attending Emma Lake, Marion Nicoll had not painted for over a decade. She had continued the daily practice of automatic drawing, sometimes with watercolour, sometimes with pen and ink, and she had kept up her personal practice of jewellery and batik while teaching craft and design. The Emma Lake sessions that year were originally intended to be a printmaking workshop, and Nicoll enrolled to expand her techniques. When the necessary supplies failed to arrive, Barnet asked the participants to sketch a model instead. Nicoll recalled to Duck Ventures:

Barnet had us drawing and we had two or three Indians who were posing. I worked in watercolour and my hand shook. I just sat there and shook with what was happening. Nothing had been said about how to approach the problem, only that we were to try and get the essence of the figure. [Barnet] had his own

special way of setting up a pose, putting the figure in a certain position and then extending it with color pieces, a tilted mirror, a chair, a stack of books, something, so that your eyes expanded away from the figure. Well this became a totem, an up-and-down thing, with the figure built around that, and I did about a dozen, trying to get exactly what I wanted and each one became more and more abstract. And that's the way it happened. And [Barnet] came along and said, 'You're not going to print, you're going to paint.' And that was it (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures interview transcript, p.5).

Nicoll summarized the moment to Helen Wright: "It was Barnet of course who influenced me, but I don't think it was so [much that he influenced me] as that I was ready for it . . . Because I mean I admire a lot of people. I admire their work but it doesn't influence me, but there was something just at that right moment that caught fire" (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.5).

Recent scholarship into the work of Will Barnet illuminates the nuances of his influence on Nicoll. From the late 1940s to mid-1960s, Barnet was involved with a group of artists who referred to their work as Indian Space Painting (Johnson, 2000).²³ The name was chosen to reflect a style of painting that was inspired by the formal/compositional techniques employed in Native American art. In the exhibition catalogue, *Will Barnet: A Timeless World*, Twig Johnson (2000) describes Indian Space Painting as characterized by "flat, all-over, non-illusionistic designs that balance organic and geometric forms" (p.62). Barnet first recognized this "space" in the ceramic art from Four Mile Run (Hopi territory in northeastern Arizona). Barnet's study of art history, particularly of the compositional structures and strategies of old masters, enabled him to

²³ Very little has been published about Indian Space Painting. In 1991, Sandra Kraskin and Barbara Hollister curated an exhibition at Baruch College Gallery in New York, *The Indian Space Painters: Native American Sources for American Abstract Art*, in which they attribute the source of the group's inspiration to the "Northwest Coast Indians." Will Barnet disputes this, favouring Johnson's (2000) assessment (2006, personal interview).

recognize the complexity of Hopi imagery. For him, Hopi works were exciting because they showed him a way of moving beyond Picasso's cubism without reverting to realism or an illusionistic technique, and more importantly while remaining rooted in North America. Johnson (2000) summarizes, "By eliminating line, and emphasizing the integration of form and ground, [Barnet] was able to synthesize classical values, aboriginal concepts, and personal experience" (p.61). As Barnet explained in interview, "The idea was not to do images that looked like Indian objects or Indian decoration but to find your own object, your own ideas, and use that space as a visual language" (Barnet, 2006, personal interview).

Most importantly, Barnet asserted the desire to find a North American precedent for avant-garde art: "What we wanted to do, which was a philosophical thing between myself and my various colleagues, is that we were trying to go past Picasso. And make it more American. That would be ideology. It was political" (Barnet, 2006, personal interview).

Any discussion of Nicoll's response to Indian Space Painting can only be speculative. However, due to the highly visible material culture of the First Nations in Calgary and Alberta, particularly during the Calgary Stampede, it is possible that Nicoll connected the ideas of Indian Space Painting to Siksika, Piikani, Kainai, Nakoda and T'suu Tina material culture. The extent to which Barnet and Nicoll discussed Indian Space Painting as a genre is not clear, nor is the extent to which they discussed the formal characteristics or design principles in the work of First Peoples.

Nicoll's 1965 report *Crafts in Alberta* indicates she was familiar with the work of First Nations and strongly opinionated about its artistic value. She wrote:

Early crafts in Alberta were based on two main types, the Crees and the Blackfoot . . . Both were migratory peoples and so were limited in the scope of their work. Most of it, except for minor religious items, was applied to objects of everyday use – tepees, clothing, weapons, travois. Some primitive drawing

has been found on rocks and in caves, but it is not of high artistic worth. Animal skins, with or without fur and crudely tanned, were decorated with earth colours, burnt designs and fine porcupine quill work. Beads, introduced by early fur traders and explorers, took the place of quills.

Of the two main types of design – floral and abstract or pictographic – the latter is preferable from a standpoint of design, having a recognizable Indian quality and a highly aesthetic sense of space use²⁴ (Nicoll, 1965, p.1).

Nicoll's assessment appears to be coloured by her belief in an innate identity, with floral designs being less true to her understanding of aboriginal identity.

If Nicoll lacked an open mind about the work of First Nations artists, she did confirm a certain comprehension of the Indian Space Painting technique. She reported that Barnett had instructed, "You always draw on both sides of the line." Further explaining, she said, "What you are doing, when you draw a line, you are creating two areas or two forces – not one or not just a line. You are creating this and you are creating that and those two shapes, whatever they are, have to work just as the line works" (Nicoll, 1982, Chrumka interview, audio file). The statement indicates that Nicoll adopted the Indian Space technique of considering the entire surface of the picture plane as "positive space."

As Joyner put it, "The vocabulary of her canvases included the emblematic and ever-present sphere, the leitmotif of both the solar and lunar celestial bodies" and that Nicoll's interest in "the relationship between the land and sky, the dramatic juxtaposition of the verticals and horizontals of the natural and man-made landscape" conveys her interest in "universal symbolism" (Joyner, 1979, p.107).

Ultimately, the influence of Will Barnett has to do with a sense of looking and communicating that which has its origins in North America – in the local. Not so much

²⁴ Of interest here is Nicoll's description "space use," which suggests the influence of Will Barnett. For further discussion of Nicoll's essentialist beliefs, see Chapter 3.

the Abstract Expressionist style, as preached from New York, nor the restoration of faith through the appropriation of 'primitive' art and techniques in the postwar period, but by asserting that she was interested in depicting the landscape and weather of Alberta with some social commentary, Nicoll indicated that the concept of the local was a primary concern in her work.

6. "Associates in the painting field"

In sixth place on her list of influences, Nicoll wrote "My own associates in the painting field." As already mentioned, the Nicoll home became a hub of activity for the artistic community in Calgary, understandably influencing Nicoll's development as an artist. The Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds at the Glenbow Museum indicates that Nicoll maintained friendships and followed the careers of many colleagues from her years teaching, including Ken Sturdy, Stan Perrott, Illingworth Kerr, Luke Lindoe and his wife Vivian, Jock and Barbara MacDonald, and former students such as Alex Janvier, Jean and George Mihalcheon, Les Graf, Katie Ohe and Harry Kiyooka, Roy Kiyooka, and ManWoman (Pat Kemball).

7. "My own dour, sometimes naïve, reactions"

Of interest here is Nicoll's assertion that her individual characteristics and quirks influenced her work. By including her "life and environment," Nicoll indicated that contextual, external, forces served as an influence but also that internal forces influenced her as well. In a 1972 interview, Nicoll described some of the challenges and freedoms of choosing art as a career:

Talent isn't enough . . . You've got to have guts, to stand it. It's not easy being an artist. A little easier today than when I was young. But not that much. And people always look at you with suspicion. If you're an artist, there's something

wrong with you. You're not quite normal; but you learn that when they look at you like this, they expect you to be peculiar, that this is an advantage. You want to dress the way you want to dress, okay; he's an artist. So they expect you to dress the way you want to dress. This is good . . . You're let free of all the things that a woman for instance is supposed to like and do. They don't really condemn you, because you can't help it, you're an artist . . . There are advantages to being a painter (Nicoll, 1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, p.11).

Nicoll also described some of the challenges of being a woman, and in her case the only woman, on staff at an educational institution. "Don't let them kid you that women are equal when it comes to jobs. You have to work half as hard again as a man . . . When I left there [SAIT], it took the time of a man and a half to do what I was doing" (1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, pp.7-8).

8. "My father"

Finally, as the eighth item on her list of influences, Nicoll wrote "My father, who had a queer pride in my deviation from the normal, but never expected any worthwhile results from my efforts." As described earlier, Robert Mackay expressed continual support for his daughter's aspirations by encouraging her to pursue artistic training, by providing financial support when it was needed, and by building her a studio in the basement of the family home when she was a teenager. Mackay so esteemed the education of his daughter that he even insisted that Marion finish her studies in England rather than return home to attend her mother's funeral. Nicoll often mentioned how her father never expected her to earn a living: "My father let me go to art school; he never expected me to make a living at art in any form. [But] I made my living by teaching art, and by painting; finally all by painting" (1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, pp.8-9).

From her stated list, it would appear that Nicoll was influenced by a wide variety of divergent people, ideas, and events. However, there is a constant thread that runs through her list: place. From the emphasis on regionalism and the veneration of the local that was key to the British Arts & Crafts Movement that Nicoll encountered in London, to the celebration of Canadian identity in painting that was a popular topic of discussion at OCA, to Will Barnet's exploration of North American First Nations design principles, through to her community of colleagues, friends, and students, place, both conceptually and literally, served as the key influence in her life and work. This idea is developed in Chapter 3.

Marion Nicoll's self-defined influences are broad enough in scope that they allow for considerable scholarly elaboration without contradicting her own assessment, but with one possible exception – her husband. While Jim Nicoll may fit under that category of “associates in the painting field,” “life and environment,” “friends,” or possibly even “enemies,” it remains curious that Nicoll did not specify him as an influence. Marion explained to a reporter: “Two painters living together is hell – pure hell... our styles are different, there was never any competition” (Nicoll, M., cited in Melnyk, 1978). Jim added, “We wouldn't ever discuss [our work]. She painted her way and I painted mine” (Nicoll, J., cited in Melnyk, 1978). “Jim stayed with realistic art – mostly landscapes – because he finds modern art ‘dehumanizing’” (Nicoll, M., cited in Melnyk, 1978). Perhaps it is best to conclude that Jim Nicoll²⁵ was not an influence on the development of the artist Marion Nicoll, no matter his influence on her life. “It is reassuring to see a husband and wife team who can and do work with equal conviction in their own fields.

²⁵ Jim Nicoll's artist biography is summarized: “Self-taught artist. He was born at Fort Macleod and graduated from the University of Alberta as a civil engineer. Keenly interested in art and all its forms, in music and in poetry, he first started painting in 1935. He is past president of the Alberta Society of Artists, former chairman of the Visual Arts Committee at the Allied Arts Centre, and a member of the art committee, Calgary exhibition” (Wood, 1958).

While they undoubtedly have had an effect on each other's work, this influence has not been allowed to interfere with individual expression" (Whyte 1971).

I became a landscape and weather painter with some social comment.

— Marion Nicoll, 1973

*West is a winter place.
The palimpsest of prairie*

*under the quick erasure
of snow, invites a flight.*

— Robert Kroetsch in “Seed Catalogue”

Chapter 3: The Significance of Place in the Interpretation of Marion Nicoll’s Work

Marion Nicoll identified much of her work by place. For example, her New York paintings include *Night Walkers on 57th Street* (oil on canvas, c.1959), *Sunlight on the City* (oil on canvas, c.1959), *East River* (oil on canvas, 1958), and *Woman in the Park at Night* (oil on canvas, 1959). Her European paintings include *Sicily II: Ulysses’ Beach* (oil on canvas, c.1960), *Sicily V: Padrone’s House* (oil on canvas, c.1960), *Madrid II: Day and Night* (oil on canvas, 1967), *Roman II: Night* (oil on canvas, c.1960). The majority of Nicoll’s works, however, are set in Alberta, and of those, a substantial portion relate to the theme of winter. An examination of three winter-themed works, *February*, *January*, and *Snow Fence*, provides an opportunity to discuss how Nicoll’s influences are manifest in her work and, ultimately, to speculate on the significance of Nicoll’s engagement with the particularities of place, namely Alberta.

Of the 129 paintings listed in Nicoll’s art record book, approximately 60 relate to Alberta, as indicated by their titles. Of the 60, approximately 20 relate to winter: *Alberta IV: Winter Morning* (oil on canvas, 1961), *Alberta VII: Winter Sunrise* (oil on canvas, 1960), *Alberta XII: First Snow* (oil on canvas, 1962), *Chinook* (tempera on board, 1945), *Chinook II* (oil on canvas, 1960), *Chinook III* (oil on canvas, 1963), *Expanding White* (clay print, 1961), *Prairie Winter II*, *Moon in the Morning* (oil on canvas, 1961), *November Sun* (crayon and pencil on paper, n.d.), *Winter Impending* (clay print, 1962), *Winter Sun* (oil on canvas, 1963), *Long Prairie Winter* (mud print, 1965), *January* (oil

on board, 1968; woodcut, 1969), *February* (painting, 1968; clay print, 1970), *March* (batik, 1968 (there is no record of a June, July, or August)), *Long Cold Winter* (painting, 1972; cardboard print, 1965), *North Wind* (clay print, 1965), and *Sun Dogs* (oil on canvas, 1967; clay print, c.1967).

The motif of winter is similarly evident in her craftworks. Of the 12 jewellery pieces or sets exhibited at *Alberta Craft 1962*, three relate to winter: a pin and earring set of gold and silver with moonstone and opal titled *Winter Sun*, a pin-pendant of gold and silver with aquamarines titled *Winter Seed*, and a pin-pendant and earring set of silver and bronze with pink tourmaline titled *Snow Fence*.

A brief discussion of a seminal Alberta poem sheds insight into the significance of winter on the Canadian prairie, to ground an investigation into select works by Marion Nicoll.

*West is a winter place.
The palimpsest of prairie
under the quick erasure
of snow, invites a flight.*

— Robert Kroetsch in “Seed Catalogue”

In his long-form poem “Seed Catalogue,” Robert Kroetsch poses the question “how do you grow a poet” in the absence that is the prairie. Kroetsch uses the metaphor of winter, describing the prairie as “a winter place.” Winter suggests “absence, death and the empty page,” writes Wanda Campbell, borrowing from the text, in her analysis of the poem. And yet, “under the snow, a seed is burrowing. Into the January darkness, the seed catalogue blooms.” Campbell concludes, “The harshness of winter may invite flight, an escape and evasion, but the model of the garden offers a place to be rooted, and a place to grow.” (Campbell, 1996, p.34)

“The palimpsest of prairie” refers to the way that winter imperfectly erases the traces of times gone by and that the momentary erasure of history invites flight. The word flight

evokes a double meaning. It suggests the need to flee while also evoking the capacity to soar, to spread one's wings. It implies the uneasy freedom to escape and the joyful freedom to triumph.

February (clay print on paper, 1970)

The image is about 35 cm tall by 40 cm wide on white paper (see figure 1). Two lines, one of dark pink atop one of light blue, create a horizon line between halfway and two-thirds of the way up the picture plane. The upper third contains an irregularly shaped rectangle of medium-toned blue placed lengthwise. The lower two-thirds contains a wider, irregularly shaped rectangle of purple, also placed lengthwise. Both rectangles have rounded corners. The lines and rectangles of colour are bordered by the white absence of pigment, but the border is not of a consistent width. It is wider on the right and left edges and thin in the middle and on the top and bottom of the image. The entire image is outlined by a sharp-cornered square of creamy beige that draws in atop the horizon lines of pink and blue.

One might look at this print, or the painting it is based on (figure 2), and assume that its inspiration is sourced from the same well that inspired the abstractionists of the New York School. It bears a certain similarity to a Mark Rothko painting, composed as it is of bands of colour in differing proportions. And like a Rothko, the bands of colour are contained, though Nicoll chooses a sharp line, unlike Rothko's smudged edges. In line with the thinking of the New York School, it would be easy to interpret *February* as an expression of essentially formal design elements, such as the golden mean, insofar as each band of colour rests in careful proportion to the others to create a balanced composition.²⁶

²⁶ Nicoll elaborated a rather standard definition of the elements of design in her PITA curriculum, listing: "1. Line, 2. Form, 3. Tone, 4. Colour, 5. Texture" (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM, 6642, File 59). Nicoll also described the "Principles of Design," which include "1. Space relationship or proportion.

February appears to epitomize Clement Greenberg's definition of modern painting.²⁷ According to Karen Wilkin (2000), Greenberg defined modern painting as that which jettisoned anything not intrinsic to the medium, such as "overt narrative and the illusion of enterable spaces and three-dimensional forms" (p.20). "According to this model, the ultimate Modernist painting would be an uninflected monochrome expanse absolutely congruent with the surface of the canvas" (Wilkin, 2000, p.20). *February* would appear the ideal example of a modern work with its simplified composition and apparent lack of representational subject matter. It is easy to understand why critics suggest that Nicoll "replaced subject matter with abstracted form or gesture" in order to "establish a link with international movements" (Ring, 1993, p.102). When stating Nicoll became "firmly committed to the gospel of abstraction" (Armstrong & Nelles, 2007, p.96) "as preached from New York" (Armstrong & Nelles, 2007, p.23), critics imply that Nicoll's work is merely derivative of modernism and moreover derivative of her mentor Will Barnet. However, the gospel as preached from New York carried heavy political weight far beyond the stylistic innovation of the formal properties of abstract painting as described by Greenberg.

Mark Rothko, for example, deeply influenced by 'primitive art', is described by Michael Leja as one who "envisioned primitive art as messages in a spiritual discourse between natural man and his personifications of cosmic power; Rothko felt it expressed in a universal language essential truths about the human experience" (Leja 69). As abstract expressionism satisfied the North American avant-garde's need to sustain political conviction in the post-WWII era, so too did primitivism satisfy the abstract expressionist's need to engage with uncorrupted human truth.

2. Emphasis to obtain centre of interest. 3. Movement or Rhythm. 4. Balance. 5. Opposition. 6. Transition. 7. Harmony" (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM, 6642, File 59).

²⁷ Whether or not Greenberg would have found *February* to be a good work of art is another matter.

Much has been written about the relationship of so-called primitive art and the rise of abstract expressionism. Leja points out that the concept of the primitive validated western, “modern man’s” need for proof of the timeless truth of human experience, “rife with vestiges of primitive barbarism,” to absolve “from responsibility and guilty conscious human agency and the political order” (p.67). He asserts that the notion of “primitive society” is a construct of western society, “a fundamental illusion, a pseudoscientific myth of origins” (p.53). Abstract expressionists, he writes, “believed in the unproblematic intelligibility of primitive art across culture and history” (Leja 68).

Rothko, however, would not likely have agreed with Leja’s interpretation. Rothko was not interested in replicating primitive art, but in primeval myth as a creative guide to represent a deeper reality than is made possible through representational art:

Our presentations of these myths, however, must be on our own terms, which are at once more primitive and more modern than the myths themselves – more primitive because we seek the primeval and atavistic roots of the ideas rather than their graceful classical versions; more modern than the myths themselves because we must redescribe their implications through our own experience. Those who think that the world of today is more gentle and graceful than the primeval and predatory passions from which these myths spring, are either not aware of reality or do not wish to see it in art. The myth holds us, therefore, not thru its romantic flavor, not thru the remembrance of the beauty of some bygone age, not thru the possibilities of fantasy, but because it expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves, as it was to those who first stumbled upon symbols to give them life (Rothko, 1943, cited in Tuchman 1965 p.139).

Nicoll's interest in automatic drawing and universal symbols suggests that Rothko's idea of the primeval would have resonated with her.²⁸ Though never thoroughly investigated in the literature, two things would corroborate the perspective that Nicoll made a complete conversion to non-representational art, replacing subject matter with form, though the analysis is wrong. First, the modern style of Nicoll's paintings superficially evokes the New York School as exemplified by Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Hans Hofmann, and Jackson Pollock.²⁹ Second, Nicoll's declaration that, for a while, she made, "Indian-looking things, sort of totem-fetish-runic things" (Nicoll, 1975, Duck Ventures interview transcript, p.12). However, Nicoll always declared she was a classical abstractionist, her work always derived from observation of the natural environment.

As the title *February* suggests, there is something other than the formal elements of design that Nicoll calls to the viewer's attention. The containment of vivid colour by the creamy-beige border is a framing device that presents an event – in this case, the strange phenomenon of a pre-spring chinook at dusk or dawn, with a line of pink clouds contrasting the blue sky above the darkened ground. A quick glance at a photograph of a chinook for comparison makes the similarities abundantly clear (see figure 3).

A chinook is a weather phenomenon unique in Canada to southern Alberta.³⁰ During a winter chinook, warm Pacific winds lose moisture as they rise up over the mountains and then rapidly descend on the lee side. This action often results in a formation of clouds in a perfectly straight line across the horizon. The warm dry air dramatically raises the temperature in a short period of time. Consequently, winter is intermittent throughout southern Alberta. The aesthetic intrigue of a chinook is relatively easy to understand, but its cultural significance requires considerable elucidation.

²⁸ Nicoll also believed that "An artist has no right to show his own wounds" (cited in Cohen, 1978).

²⁹ See Tuchman (1965) for more information about artists associated with the New York School.

³⁰ Though rare, chinooks have been recorded as far north as Grande Prairie.

The phenomenon of the chinook has complex significance to people in southern Alberta. Chinooks facilitated the beginnings of the ranching industry³¹ because the warm winds melt the snow so cattle can graze in winter months. But in addition to providing welcome relief from the cold of winter, chinooks also cause problems. Catherine Phillip (1975) describes how they affected early settlers:

The chinook, the gentle wind of winter, is mentioned in almost every diary of that time [late 1800s]. During a chinook, a woman could hang her clothes on the line and perhaps they would dry there. She could walk around Calgary in comfort or walk into the fields around the ranch house, and watch the cattle sunning themselves. The wind was a mixed blessing. Moccasins and woollen socks that kept feet warm in below zero temperatures, when soaked with water, became sodden and cold. Sleighs that glided over snow were stopped by patches of bare prairie” (Phillip, 1975, pp.120–21).

Chinooks also cause problems for farmers. “The extreme temperature fluctuations associated with chinooks during Calgary winters wreak havoc in the garden . . . The flower buds of flowering shrubs and trees can be damaged when the temperatures plunge after a thaw cycle. They may drop before blooming or bloom but not set fruit” (Leatherbarrow & Reynolds, 1998, p.174). Other disastrous consequences include sunscald, which is the result of the freeze/thaw cycles and sunny but below-freezing temperatures; and winterburn, which is the result of high wind and low temperatures and most common in the chinook belt. Both sunscald and winterburn can destroy plants, shrubs, and trees. For those who depend on crops for their livelihood, chinooks can be devastating. More than merely an inconvenience, there is cruelty in the brief respite from the cold that a chinook brings. Chinooks are fleeting and carry a reminder of the brevity of all things. Chinooks enabled the ranching industry, but their unreliability also

³¹ For the history of ranching in Alberta and the importance of the chinook, see Evans, 2004.

devastated herds of cattle and bankrupted many a stockman. In the spring of 1907, after a particularly long and harsh winter, tens of thousands of cattle and horses starved or froze to death when a chinook failed to arrive. The Bar-U ranch alone lost 12 000 head.

With proper identification of its subject matter, *February* provides the opportunity to clarify how the influences of the Arts & Crafts Movement, Automatic Drawing, A.C. Leighton, and her “life and environment” are manifest in Marion Nicoll’s work.

The Arts & Crafts Movement, as both technical and conceptual influence if not a stylistic one, is evident in *February*. It is an example of a printmaking technique that Nicoll increasingly relied on in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the physical demands of painting became prohibitive (Joyner 1979). In his book *Marion Nicoll, RCA*, Joyner described the process:

It is a relatively simple technique that might be compared to the carving process in woodblock or linocut, only in this case the surface is soft clay. Simple as the process is, the complications of Marion’s health over the past six years have made even this printing process laborious and demanding. Nevertheless, she has realized outstanding results in recent years with designs that are compatible with the late paintings (1979, p.121).

Nicoll’s PITA curriculum outlines the requirements for the process: plasticine, paper, oil-based inks, turpentine, and tissue. The plasticine is rolled to a consistent thickness, similar to dough in baking, and placed in a frame to secure it. Marks are made in the soft plasticine with any kind of tool, such as an eating utensil. The surface is inked and then printed. Nicoll recorded that this procedure could yield 15 to 20 prints (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM 6642, File 59). In addition to providing Nicoll with a means of artmaking despite the limitations imposed by her arthritis, the clay-print process is very economical, requiring no expensive printing equipment. In the mid- to late 1970s, the

clay print became Nicoll's exclusive means of visual expression (Joyner, 1979). This craft-based technique allowed Nicoll to maintain a fine art practice.

Nicoll's teaching records provide insight into her creative process as well as her technical practice. In her curriculum for art instructors, she wrote:

In the beginning with children or students it is very important to convince them that they are designing – not duplicating. 'To wear a real bird would be barbarous, to imitate a rea[l] bird would be idle, but all that is beautiful in a bird, such as color, form, poise and movement can be suggested' . . . Remind them that no matter how fantastically or colorfully they design an object the one in nature would outdo it (Jim and Marion Nicoll Fonds, GM 6642, File 59).

This statement suggests that Nicoll privileged the formal elements of design while maintaining a reverence for nature. This speaks to the philosophical ideals of the Arts & Crafts Movement insofar as Nicoll used the natural environment as subject matter and believed that design is integral to a successful work. The Arts & Crafts Movement served Nicoll as both technical and ideological influence.

The influence of the automatic drawing process is equally evident in Nicoll's description of her creative process. In her 1975 interview with Duck Ventures, she related a moment of inspiration:

One day I had a class and I was driving to work up the hill, it was winter and the sun was just beginning to come up and over on this side down the hill, a lot of little houses with smoke, you know, the steam . . . and there was a green moon sitting there and long streaks of yellow moving across the landscape. I had to stop because I had almost gone off the side of the road (interview transcript, pp.7–8).

Nicoll explained to Joan Murray that such a moment might be stored in her memory until the right opportunity to express it:

All the impressions that you have of things, through your eyes, through your senses all gather [in your subconscious mind]... You look at a tree or you look at a flower. A hundred people could look at it and they'd see it in a different way, but nothing that you learn, nothing that you've seen or touched or smelt is lost. It's all [stored] in the subconscious mind and the important whatever, the best work comes from the subconscious mind (Nicoll, 1979, J. Murray interview transcript, p.4).

Automatic drawing provided Marion Nicoll the confidence to trust her own creative instinct and process:

You might draw for a year. It might appear in your sketchbook for a whole year before you actually paint it. It might just come full blow[n] and you paint it in one day. You learn to wait for it. You know when it's right, when it comes out (Nicoll, 1972, Arts & Crafts Division interview transcript, p.7).

If the automatic drawing process strengthened Nicoll's artistic confidence, A.C. Leighton's training in colour theory provided her with the skills to execute her creative vision. Nicoll often explained that Leighton had influenced her use of tone and repeated that it didn't matter what colour one used as long as the tone was right. She remembered one of Leighton's classes:

For the whole winter, we used two colours; [Leighton had] set up a still-life group, burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. We had to get every degree of light/dark, warm/cold that was there, not matching colour but matching warmth or coldness and the light or the dark, and we did this for one whole year. And you'd be amazed at the variation you can get with just those two colours (Nicoll, 1973, Wright interview with MN transcript, p.2).

Nicoll's description of her creative process indicates how the technique of automatic drawing influenced her work. The influence of the Arts & Crafts Movement is evident,

not only in the printmaking process Nicoll employed, but in her use of the local natural environment as subject matter. Nicoll captures the stark and stunning beauty of a pre-spring chinook in *February*. *February* is interesting because it embodies formalist aspirations while having real-world subject matter. This dualism is echoed in the mixed-blessing significance of a chinook and further echoed in the process employed to create *February*, a process that signified both the physical limits and possibilities of Nicoll's creative practice in the later part of her career. Alberta is an influence because of the subject matter: for someone familiar with life in southern Alberta, the chinook is easily recognizable, but the feeling of the chinook is recognizable, too – those pinks and blues only happen in the early spring, long before the last snow or frost. It will still be months before green shoots appear.

January (oil on board, 1968)

If *February* represents a phenomenon unique to Alberta, *January* (figure 4) speaks to a more general experience of winter. Physically, the painting is 137.2 cm tall x 114.3 cm wide (54 x 45 inches). There are five distinct areas of sharply delineated colour: black, white, and three shades of blue. The black forms a circle that rests in the upper third of the picture plane, slightly off centre. The white area forms a T shape with a wide middle section originating at the base of the image and two thin arms that extend to the edge of both sides of the picture plane. These arms create a horizon line. Surrounding the black circle is a field of brilliant blue. The lower right quadrant of the picture plane contains an imperfect rectangle of lighter blue and the lower left quadrant contains a slightly larger imperfect rectangle of darker blue. All three shades of blue are equally saturated in colour, but differ in tone.

The image can be read three ways. The white T may be interpreted as the torso of a simply rendered human figure, with the black circle as the head. Alternatively, the image

may be read as a landscape, with the circle functioning as a sun or moon that casts a white shadow on the ground. Lastly, the image may be viewed as simple shapes on a picture plane. Regardless, the painting provides an optical effect. By relaxing the eye, the rectangles in each lower quadrant of the image alternate between appearing as figure, then ground, or, expressed in different terms, as positive, then negative, space.

January provides an example of Nicoll's use of symbols. As Joyner put it, "The vocabulary of her canvases included the emblematic and ever-present sphere, the leitmotif of both the solar and lunar celestial bodies" and that Nicoll's interest in "the relationship between the land and sky, the dramatic juxtaposition of the verticals and horizontals of the natural and man-made landscape" conveys her interest in "universal symbolism" (Joyner, 1979, p.107).

One of Nicoll's late paintings, *January* provides another example of how the local, conceptually speaking, figures in her work. Nicoll wrote:

This painting attempts to portray the feeling of January – any January – in this country. It is the spirit of cold, an enemy of life and warmth. Even the sun, bright and distant, gives light but no warmth. This is why the sun is painted shiny black – reflecting light only. Spring is so far away. The only reality is cold. It is the "dead of winter" and man spends a good part of his energy in just keeping warm and alive – battling the hostile cold. The style of the painting is *classical abstraction* – abstract in the dictionary meaning of the word, "to take from," in this case the subject – the essence of the subject. This is "hard edge" painting (Nicoll, 1970, cited in Blakeman, p.6).

The range of interpretations suggested by each possible reading of *January* provides an opportunity to further explore Nicoll's influences and also to speculate on the sensibility of the Prairie artist. Indeed, *January's* capacity to be visually read in multiple ways is representative of Will Barnet's Indian Space Painting. To read the painting as a

landscape, the blue rectangles appear on the same visual plane as the white area of the painting. The black circle reads as a sun or moon, a positive figure to the brilliant blue ground. To read the painting as a figure, the black circle also appears as a positive shape, but in this reading the white area of colour shifts to the foreground of perception and functions as positive space, while all three areas of blue retreat to function as negative space. To read the image as simple shapes, the white area appears *behind* the blue sections, which appear to rest on top. The black circle, because it has the darkest pigmentation, attracts the eye, and oscillates between receding and advancing in relation to the blue that surrounds it. Each section of colour may be read as positive space.

Formally speaking, *January* serves as an excellent example of the Indian Space technique by “eliminating line, and emphasizing the integration of form and ground . . . to synthesize classical values, aboriginal concepts, and personal experience” (Johnson, 2000, p.6). The personal experience, in *January’s* case, has to do with winter on the prairie. However, the other potential reading of the image – of a human figure – corresponds to the creative sensibility of prairie artists.

Man’s vertical relationship to the horizontal prairie is the subject of much literary analysis of prairie writing. In *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction*, Lawrence Ricou writes, “The landscape, and man’s relation to it, is the concrete situation with which the prairie artist initiates his re-creation of the human experience” (p.xi). He states that the dominant theme in Canadian prairie literature is the image of “man’s dramatic vertical presence in an entirely horizontal world” (p.ix). In prairie fiction, Ricou asserts that prairie man

may feel insignificant or immensely self-confident; he may feel free or inescapably trapped; he may be deeply religious or a rebel against all authority; his imagination may be stifled or stimulated. In each case, however, his nature

or outlook will be linked to his curiously abrupt position in a vast and uninterrupted landscape” (1973, p.137).

To extrapolate from Roald Nasgaard’s (2007) suggestion that the use of abstraction in Alberta developed in a formalist tradition (p.15), and given the formal intrigue of the Alberta landscape, *January* stands as an example of prairie modernist formalism.³² This is supported by the critical reception of the work. Wrote Evelyn Blakeman:

In its severity of line and angularity of shapes, its economy of detail and its cold colors, the painting bespeaks the harshness of prairie winter that we recognize only too well. There is a quality of reality here that contrasts sharply with the oft-depicted snow scene of sentimental memory. Yet there is beauty in the proportions of the composition – beauty, simplicity, and a certain stillness. Marion Nicoll, the artist, is a very outgoing person, forthright and firm in her convictions, and dedicated to a life of expression, although it has sometimes been less than easy (1970, p.6).

Whether or not Nicoll intended a regional associative meaning in *January*, it is there nonetheless. However, unlike in the case of *February*, no nuanced knowledge of Alberta is necessary for the interpretation of its meaning. Only a general concept of the local is required. As Vincent Canizaro (2007) put it, “Regionalism has the potential, through thoughtful reference, to situate us in the continuity of our shared human history” (p.12). All people know their local landscape. All people know the sun and the moon. It is in this way that *January* speaks to the universal through its origin in the local. Nicoll asserted, “I’m an abstract painter, at the moment. I start with subject matter. I start with a

³² To further complicate the situation, Nicoll distinguished between Alberta and Saskatchewan in terms of their potential for creative stimulus: “The change in earth pattern is interesting. Alberta an[d] Manitoba have similar cultivation patterns, but the earth colours are very different. Alberta is fresh-coloured – lots of contrast; orange brown, yellow and black, with brush patches and areas of what looks like etching with orange on rust or wither on black, and lots of water. Saskatchewan is duller, grayer, with areas of wasteland that look like scabs. (Must remember for painting)” (M6642 – File 94, p.2).

landscape or I start with a cold winter's day or I start with a feeling" (1972, Arts and Crafts Division interview transcript, p.7).

Snow Fence (silver on bronze pin-pendant with pink tourmaline, 1962)

Snow Fence (figure 5) is a 6 cm tall by 10 cm wide (2.5 x 4 inches) pin-pendant of etched bronze with silver applied in a decorative pattern and a pink tourmaline cabochon. The titular 'snow fence', roughly applied to the small, rectangular surface, contrasts the polished but uncut pink tourmaline (cabochon). Able to be worn either as a pendant or as a brooch, this modest work affords an opportunity to examine how Nicoll conveyed the influence of the Arts & Crafts Movement, her interest in universal signs and symbols, and the cultural significance of winter in Alberta.

Cabochon brooches became popular in the early part of the last century and "today, any Arts & Crafts era pins or brooches, mounted with ceramic, glass, or even natural stone cabochons, are often referred to by the generic (and lower case) term 'ruskins'" (Sindelar, 2001), named after Ruskin Potteries and its namesake, John Ruskin. Often employing repoussé, filigree, and or appliqué techniques, these brooches were composed of modest materials, like silver, that highlighted both the hand of the maker and the natural character of the materials. Cabochon stones were preferred to faceted ones for the same reason.

Tourmalines have a variety of symbolic meanings and are found, in North America, in Maine and California. A century ago, North America was the largest producer of tourmaline. Tourmalines come in a wide range of colour and some are even dichromatic – meaning that they change colour in changing light. Each stone is unique. Some First Nations communities traditionally use green and pink tourmaline as funeral gifts.

Snow fences are flexible, temporary constructions that serve a useful purpose in winter climates. They provide a means of directing snowdrifts to either keep snow in or away from a specific spot. Used in many nordic climates, the snow fence has a special importance in the arid climate of Alberta for directing moisture. They are a man-made vertical presence in a horizontal landscape/world, again referencing Prairie artistic traditions, but they may be impacted by the snow – hence the pliable method of their construction. All things related to winter serve as a metaphor for death, yet the snow fence stands out through its association to exert control over the actions of winter. The fence, then, can be seen as both an example of Nicoll drawing from her local experience of living in Alberta (and in particular, of living in Alberta during winter), and as a manifestation of the unique experience of verticality in a horizontal landscape.

February, January, and Snow Fence represent the most common subject matter in Marion Nicoll's oeuvre - winter. They have been examined in relation to Nicoll's influences and in light of the significance of winter in southern Alberta. The purpose of this examination is to suggest that while it is not immediately apparent, the Arts & Crafts Movement serves as a dominant influence to her pedagogy and creative method. Nicoll's work conveys an emphasis on design, a strong individual style, and her personal response to the regional environment in which she worked, as per the principals of the Arts & Crafts Movement (Cumming, 1991, p.7). If the Arts & Crafts Movement influenced Nicoll's values and philosophy, automatic drawing served as a creative resource and Indian Space Painting provided the technical direction to execute her vision.

By examining Nicoll's work through an understanding of Alberta in conjunction with her influences, this thesis refutes the criticism that Nicoll imitated the art trends of her day, but affirms that Nicoll actively responded to them while unapologetically inserting her herself and her experience into her work.

*She was the rock upon which everybody stood
when they were starting out to make art.
She has been the spearhead of
whatever is good in Alberta.*

— Stan Perrott

Conclusion: The Legacy of Marion Nicoll

This thesis has examined the life and select works of Marion Nicoll by first situating her family and upbringing within the broader context of Alberta's formation, then in relation to a number of significant moments in Canadian art history, then by considering her work in relation to major 20th-century movements in art. This examination has permitted the opportunity to reflect not only on significant moments in art history of the 20th century, but on the critical analysis of these moments, while advocating for the important contribution of Marion Nicoll to the cultural life of Calgary and Alberta and therefore Canada. To paraphrase the words of Vincent Canizaro, it is through the thoughtful understanding of our own local environment that we become connected to the greater whole of humanity. The greatest strength of Canada is in its many differences of culture, of language, of geography and landscape; Canada's only future is in its respectful appreciation and consideration of these differences.

This thesis was inspired by both the desire to reconcile Marion Nicoll's determined personality and strength of character with the perception that she remained in Alberta only to appease her husband and the desire to link her actions as an artist, educator, and mentor with what was happening locally and internationally in the middle part of the last century. The structure of this thesis was determined by the necessity to compensate for gaps in the pre-existing literature. Chapter 1 examined Nicoll's family background in relation to the formation of Alberta to convey something of an explanation for Nicoll's remarkable acts of citizenship, her resolute sense of her own place in the world, and possible reasons why Alberta may have held meaning for her. Chapter 2 rounded out

previous scholarship concerning Marion Nicoll's influences to situate her practice in the broader context of art in the 20th century from an international, North American, Canadian, prairie, and Alberta perspective. Chapter 3 examined three works: *February*, to explain how knowledge of Alberta and its unique phenomena is integral to the interpretation of Nicoll's work; *January*, to suggest how her work embodies a prairie sensibility; and *Snow Fence*, to indicate how Nicoll consolidated and applied her influences into her signature style.

This thesis has argued that Nicoll's relationship to the place in which she was raised and the experiences she was afforded throughout her lifetime provide the necessary framework through which to understand her work. It emphasized that the Arts & Crafts Movement served as an integral influence to Nicoll's creative process, both technically and conceptually, and also as the philosophical underpinning of her pedagogy, to refute the perception that her work was merely inspired by the popular abstract style of her day.

It is my sincere hope that this thesis contributes to a renewed interest in Marion Nicoll's work. There are many aspects of her life and work in need of further study, particularly with regard to her craft works, her pedagogy, and a more detailed analysis of her art works, particularly her use of symbolism. Nicoll's automatic drawings present an obvious opportunity to investigate the creative processes of the mind. Her use of a broad range of media presents an opportunity to investigate the relationship of craft and art. This thesis presents the foundation for deeper inquiry into the life and work of Marion Nicoll by correcting the misperceptions about her work. Marion Nicoll's profound contribution continues to endure.



Figure 1. Marion Nicoll, *February* (clay print, 1970), private collection, photo by the author

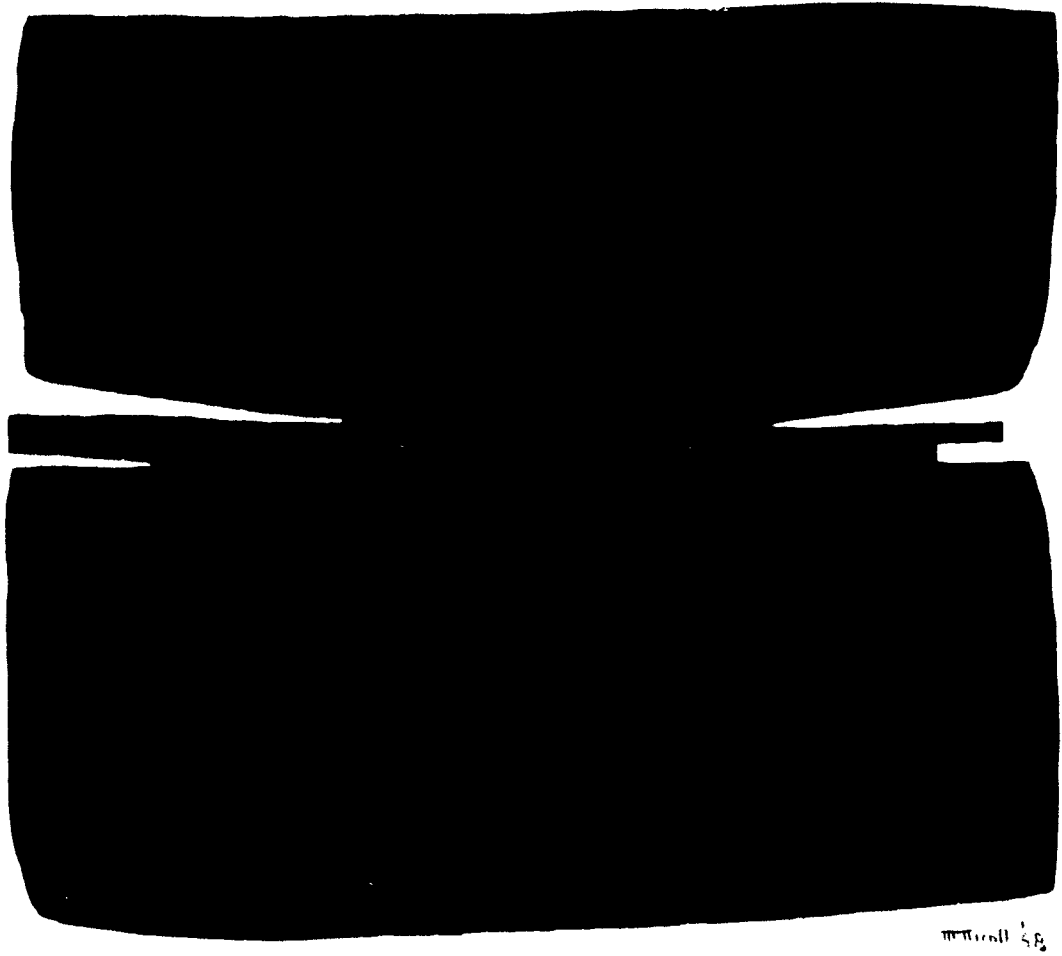


Figure 2. Marion Nicoll, *February* (oil on canvas, 1968), collection unknown, courtesy of Glenbow Archives, PA-2435-17

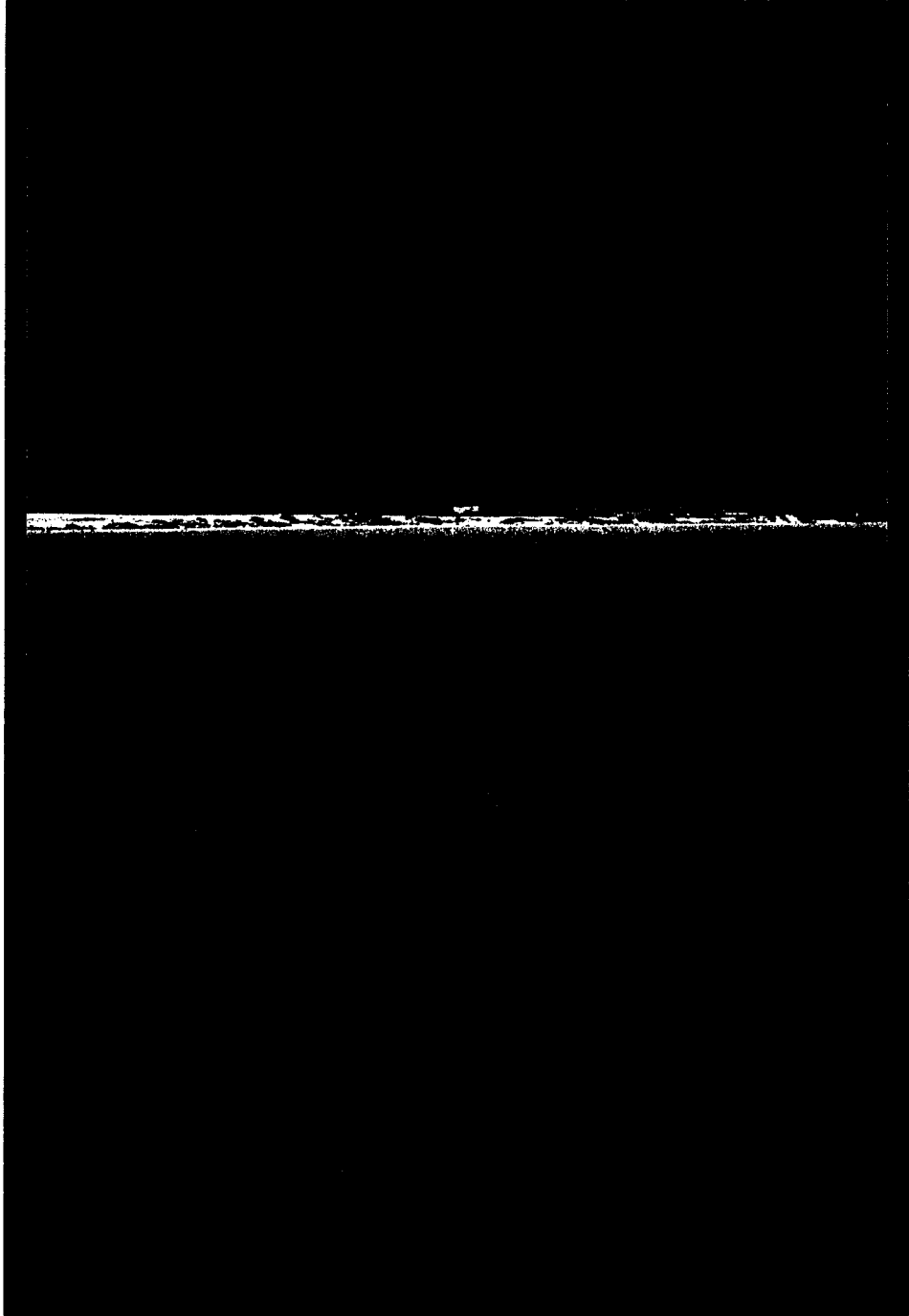


Figure 3. Steven Bulman, *There is a Saying* (photograph, 2008) © Steven Bulman, 2008

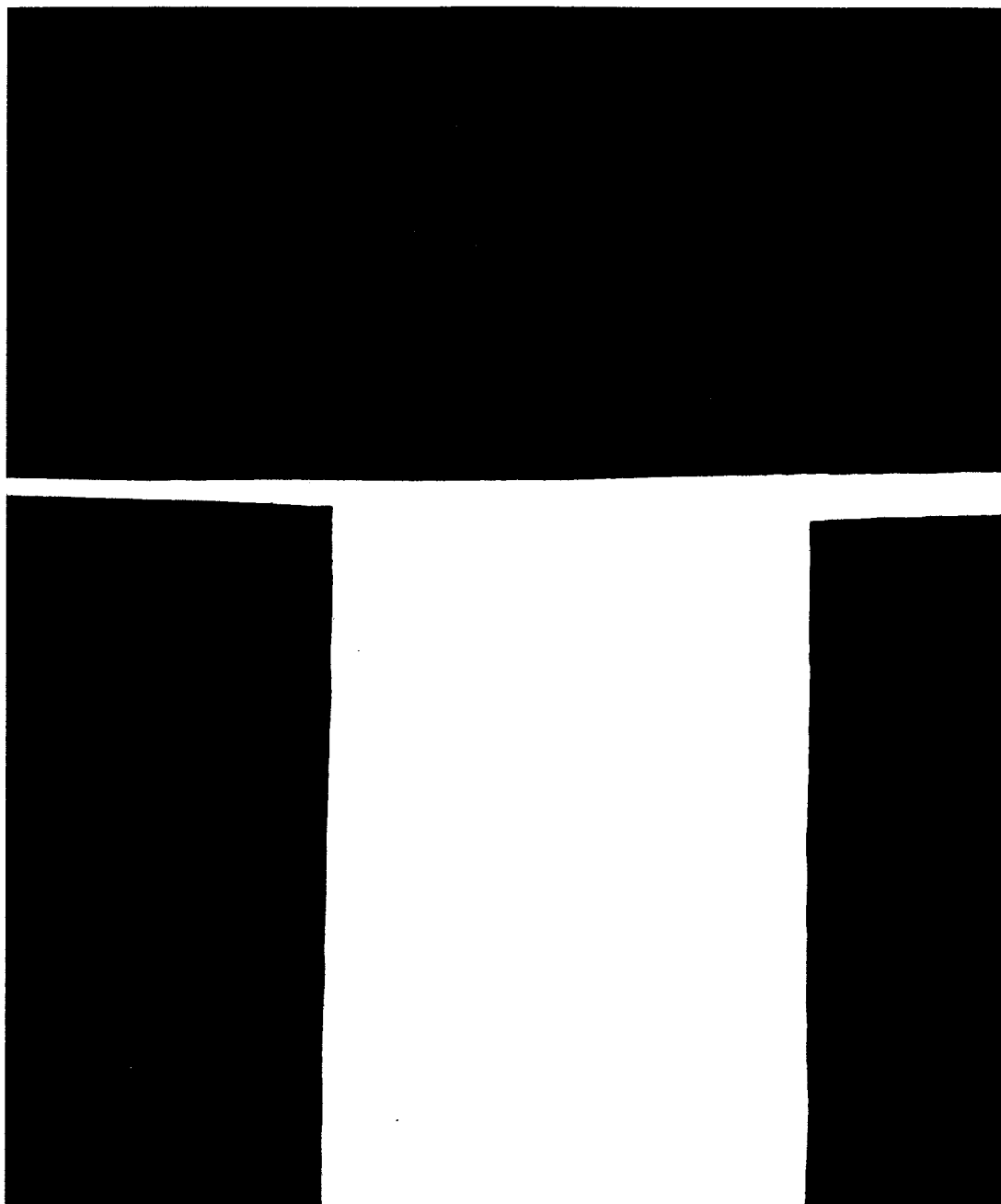


Figure 4. Marion Nicoll, *January* (oil on canvas, 1968), collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, photograph courtesy of the AFA



Figure 5. Marion Nicoll, *Snow Fence* (pin-pendant of etched bronze with silver appliqué and pink tourmaline cabochon, 1963), private collection, photograph courtesy of Master's Gallery © John Dean 2010

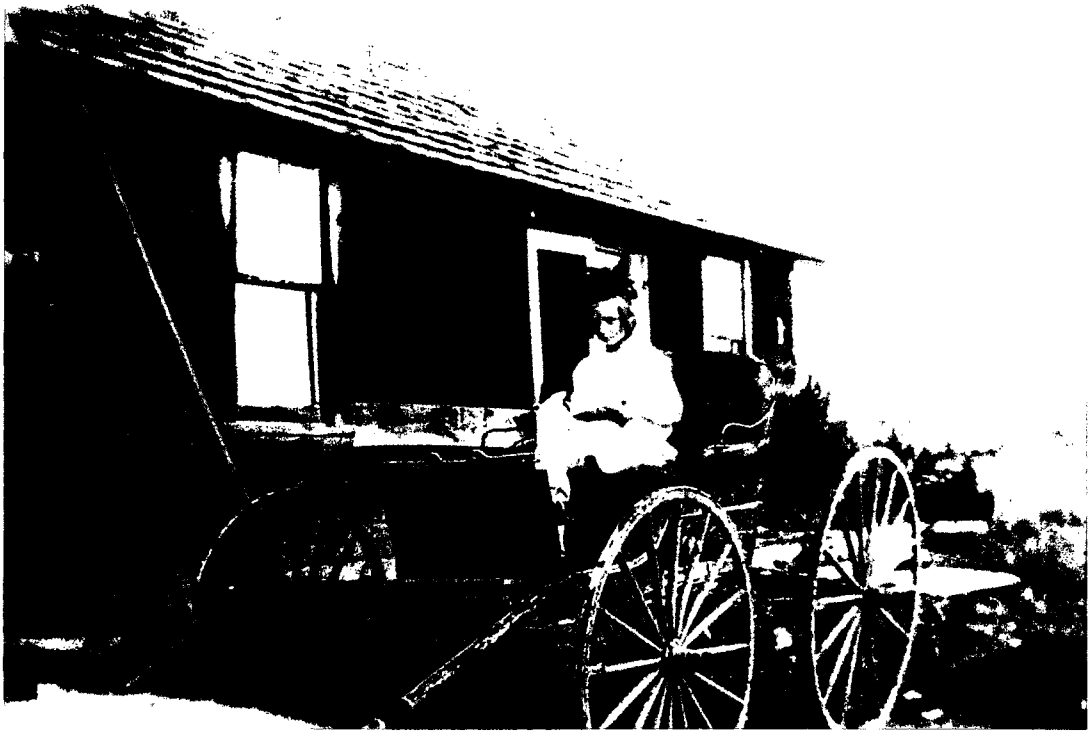


Figure 6. Marion Mackay, age 7, Glenbow Archives, PA-2435



Figure 7. Florence Mackay (née Gingras), Glenbow Archives, PA-2435



Figure 8. Robert Mackay, Glenbow Archives, PA-2435



Figure 9. Harry Palmer, Marion and Jim Nicoll (photograph, 1983) courtesy of Harry Palmer

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