



Mortgaging Canada: George Reid's *Mortgaging the Homestead* and the 1891 Federal Election

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In the late 1880s and early 1890s the Toronto artist George Reid (1860–1947) painted a number of canvases inspired by memories of his childhood. Born in 1860 in Wingham, Ontario near Goderich on Lake Huron, Reid had worked on the newly cleared farms of his father Adam Reid and maternal uncle James Agnew, familiarizing himself with all aspects of rural life. Suspicious of his son's interest in art, Adam Reid tried to direct him towards a career in architecture but in 1879, George began his studies with Charlotte Schreiber (1834–1922) and Robert Harris (1849–1919) at the Ontario School of Art in Toronto. Three years later he moved on to study with Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia where he met his future wife, a fellow art student Mary Hiester (1854–1921) of Reading, Pennsylvania. Married in May 1885, that summer the couple travelled through France, Spain, and Italy, settling in Toronto on their return. It was in the summer of 1886, on a visit to the family homestead at Wingham that Reid began his first farm painting, *Call to Dinner* (McMaster University Art Gallery), a large canvas of his sister Susan against a landscape bathed in bright sunlight that recalls Winslow Homer's well-known painting *The Dinner Horn* of 1870 (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

In May 1888 the Reids held an exhibition and auction of their paintings to enable them to return to Paris to further their studies. Back in Toronto the following autumn, they rented two rooms on Yonge Street in the tower of the Arcade Building where they built living quarters and a studio. That winter George Reid painted four large canvases interpreting memories of his early childhood. *Forbidden Fruit*, dated 1889 (Art Gallery of Hamilton), depicts a young boy in a hayloft reading the forbidden *Arabian Nights* and in *The Story*, 1890 (Winnipeg Art Gallery), young adolescents in a similar setting listen to a boy narrate a tale. *The Other Side of the Question*, 1890 (Art Gallery of Ontario) and *Mortgaging the Homestead*, 1890 (National Gallery of Canada)

Detail, George A. Reid, *Mortgaging the Homestead* (see Fig. 1)



1 | George A. Reid, *Mortgaging the Homestead*, 1890, oil on canvas, 130.1 × 213.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada (86) Royal Canadian Academy of Arts diploma work, deposited by the artist, Toronto, 1890. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

(Fig. 1), are interior scenes, the former depicting town fathers debating civic issues around a library table, the latter dramatizing the crucial moment when a farmer is forced to sign a mortgage to save his farm.

Reid's biographer Muriel Miller Miner has described the detailed sets Reid constructed in the studio to stage the narratives and to carefully recreate the settings in which he posed the models.¹ The figures in *Mortgaging the Homestead* represent three generations. In a plain interior, the farmer, standing in the centre and silhouetted against a light wall, signs the document prepared by the lawyer while his brother seated at the left, his face in shadow, broods. The farmer's wife, holding a young baby, is seated in the foreground and addresses the viewer with a worried gaze. A young girl sits on the floor looking questioningly at her father while his parents, withdrawn into themselves and disconsolate as they see their hoped-for security in old age disappear, are seated by the wall on which hangs a framed epigram, *Heaven is our Home*. The signing of the mortgage lays bare the imminent possibility of foreclosure and eviction.

Forbidden Fruit was sent to Philadelphia to be exhibited in the Pennsylvania Academy's annual exhibition in January 1890 and *The Story*

was purchased in March by the Toronto businessman and banker Edmund Boyd Osler for \$1000² before being sent to Paris for the *Salon* of the Société des Artistes Français. *Mortgaging the Homestead* and *The Other Side of the Question* were first presented to a Toronto audience in a private view in the artist's studio³ then sent to the annual *Spring Exhibition* of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in Montreal. There Reid was elected a full member of the Academy on 26 April and, as required, he submitted a painting as his diploma picture to eventually be deposited in the National Gallery of Canada. *Mortgaging the Homestead* was shown as his Academy diploma picture in the *Ontario Society of Artists Exhibition* in May and at the *Toronto Industrial Exhibition* in late summer before being delivered to Ottawa.

Mortgaging the Homestead was widely admired when shown in Montreal and Toronto, not least for its large scale and prominent display at the entrance to the exhibition rooms.⁴ One Toronto writer praised Reid's judicious choice of characters, effective grouping, and faithful delineation, and hoped this "sermon on canvas" would be a tool to inculcate thrift and industry.⁵ The Montreal *Herald* more sympathetically found "the whole scene . . . so truthfully depicted that one almost feels himself a participant in the cruel deed which robs the inmates of their birthright."⁶ Carl Fuller in the Montreal *Gazette* praised Reid's "bold and broad . . . treatment" and drawing of the figures, and stressed "the decidedly Canadian aspect" of the scene,⁷ a quality equally admired by the writer in *Saturday Night*. "I am pleased to say that Mr. Reid has not been carried away by French enthusiasm and does not run to wooden-shod peasants, etc. The types he has given us in this picture and also in *The Other Side of the Question* . . . are well known to all Canadians."⁸ The painting was also reproduced on the front page of Toronto's *Saturday Globe*, whose writer praised his "daring . . . use of color . . . The employment of deep purple and violet tones adds greatly to the solemnity of the incident which is depicted with dramatic power . . . Mr. Reid shows no tenderness or sickly sentimentality in his work – it is strong, masculine, vigorous."⁹

The critics' emphasis on the particularly Canadian character of the scenes is interesting in light of their very European derivation. *The Other Side of the Question*, a reprise of the 1886 canvas *A Meeting of the School Trustees* (National Gallery of Canada) by Reid's former teacher Robert Harris, was equally indebted to Dutch seventeenth-century group portraits. Reid also later confirmed that the inspiration for *Mortgaging the Homestead* was not a Canadian event but "the heartrending stories of the Dakota farmers" who in 1890 saw land prices collapse in the face of widespread drought and low prices for their products that resulted in massive foreclosures. But the Dakota tragedies affected Reid for very personal reasons: in 1873 the mortgage on his father's farm had been threatened with foreclosure and Adam Reid had

explored the possibility of moving his family from Wingham to Bruce Mines on Lake Huron. The abandonment of the homestead was only avoided when George's brother John went to work for a neighbour to pay off the debt. For the young George "some cherished hopes seemed to have gone forever, and the homestead changed its character. At that time, in my mind, shame as well as misfortune was connected with mortgages, but when I became better acquainted with conditions, I saw that the worthy as well as the profligate were being swept into the vortex of debt . . . Then it was that I became interested in the various movements intended to relieve the inequalities which our civilization is slow to throw off."¹⁰ Details about Reid's interest "in the various movements intended to relieve the inequalities" remain unclear but his painting *Mortgaging the Homestead* would soon figure in the struggle between Liberals and Conservatives over these issues in the 1891 federal election.

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald had come to power in 1878 having campaigned on his protectionist National Policy. The international economic depression that struck Canada from 1873 to 1878 and which may have been a factor in Adam Reid's threatened foreclosure in 1873 was exacerbated by American dumping of cheap goods in Canada. Protectionism championed Canadian manufacturers. But in 1890 Republican Congressman William McKinley instigated the passage of a new tariff that raised duties on agricultural goods entering the United States to the highest levels in the country's history. Canadian farmers were being locked out of the American market and Macdonald accused the Americans of trying to starve Canada into annexation. However, behind the scenes he entered into informal negotiations on reciprocal tariffs after Newfoundland negotiated its own treaty with James Blaine, the American secretary of state and senator from Maine, for the free entry of its sea products. Canada blocked ratification of the Newfoundland treaty to further its own fishing interests but Blaine publicly denied that there were any talks on reciprocity with Canada.¹¹ Macdonald's Conservatives now accused the Liberals, whose financial critic Sir Richard Cartwright was the leading spokesman for unrestricted reciprocity, of aiding and abetting annexation with the United States and waved the flag of loyalty to a British Canada (thus Macdonald's campaign slogan "a British subject I was born, and a British subject I will die"), the old National Policy, and the Conservative Party.¹²

J.W. Bengough's (1851–1923) caricature after Frederic Remington's (1861–1909) "The Last Stand" published in *Grip* on 24 January 1891 shows Macdonald and members of his cabinet holding the fort against reciprocity (Fig. 2). Bengough wrote: "The High Tariffites are now making their last stand against the forces of intelligence and liberty, but the struggle is as hopeless as that which Remington has depicted." He continued:

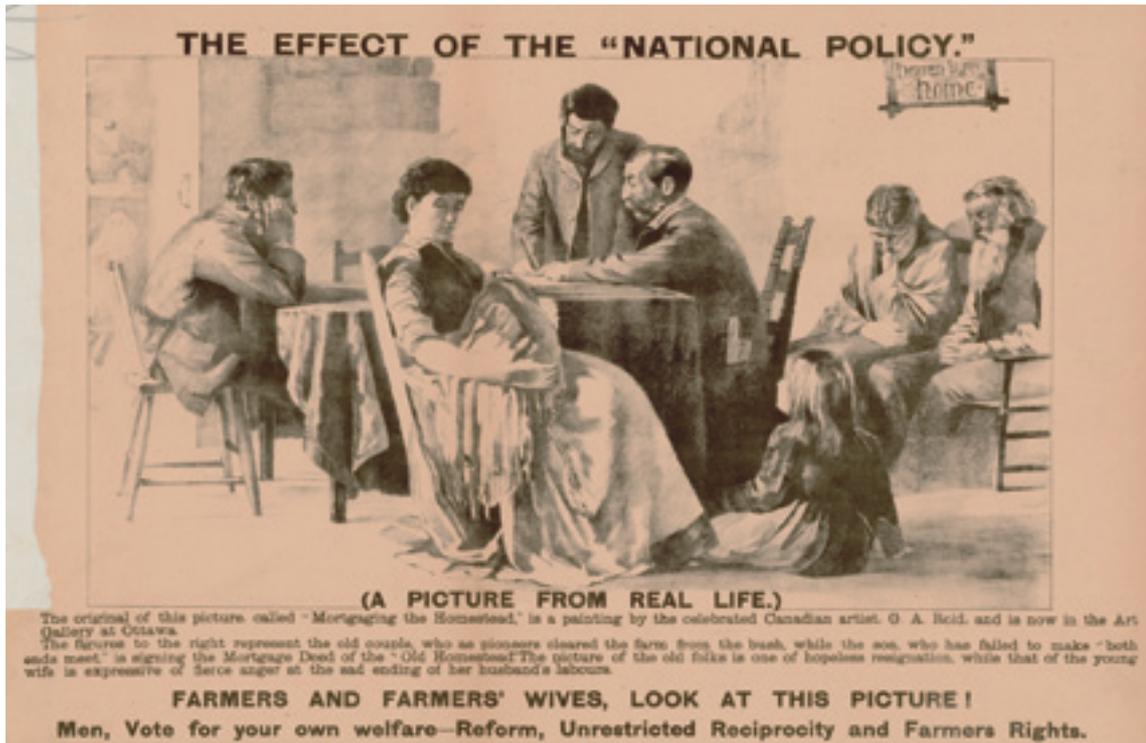


2 | J.W. Bengough after Frederic Remington, *The Last Stand (of the High Tariff Forces)* 1891, published in *Grip*, 24 January 1891, Library and Archives of the National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

In the United States McKinleyism has aroused a universal revolt, just because it has carried the principles of Protection a little nearer to their logical conclusion. People have all at once apprehended that the philosophy which seeks to produce general prosperity by increasing the burdens of the poorer classes is unsound. In Canada the same discovery has been made more gradually by the melting away of the beautiful pictures of tall chimneys and home markets like a series of dissolving views. The eyes of the people are now pretty generally open, and Protection, under whatever euphonious name presented, is regarded as a fraud. Probably nobody in the country is more thoroughly aware of this than the members of the Dominion Government, and yet they are bound to fight for it till the last cartridge is gone. Because they think it is better politics to put their faith in the Red Parlor, than in the cause of the people.¹³

The “Red Parlor” was the room at Toronto’s Queen’s Hotel where Macdonald dispensed patronage.¹⁴

Trade, tariffs and patriotism were the principal issues that dominated the federal election that Macdonald called the first week of February 1891 to be held 5 March. Innumerable posters were printed for the campaigns of the two



3 | Artist Unknown, after G.A. Reid, *The Effect of the "National Policy"* 1891, black and white lithograph on paper, 38 × 53.8 cm, Library and Archives Canada (C-095467). (Photo: Library and Archives Canada)

parties but, in a rare instance, a contemporary Canadian painting was also used to articulate the opposing positions. In mid-February two Conservative papers, the Saint John *Progress* and the Montreal *Gazette*, announced the publication by the Liberals of a reproduction of Reid's *Mortgaging the Homestead*¹⁵ (Fig. 3). The caption read "The Effect of the National Policy (A Picture from Real Life)" and underlined the wife's "fierce anger at the sad ending of her husband's labours. Farmers and Farmers' Wives, Look at this Picture! Men, Vote for your own welfare – Reform, Unrestricted Reciprocity and Farmers Rights."

The poster gave Reid full credit for his painting, "now in the Art Gallery at Ottawa," and it is most likely Reid had given permission for the painting to be used in support of the Liberal campaign. The exhibition of his summer's work held at Matthews Brothers Gallery in Toronto from 29 November to 12 December 1890 had included portraits of the Honourable Edward Blake (current whereabouts of this portrait unknown), leader of the federal Liberal party from 1880 to 1887, and of Mrs. Oliver Mowat (Agnes Etherington Art



4 | Samuel Hunter and The Abiston Lith. & Pub. Co., Montreal, after G.A. Reid, *The Conservative Version Mortgaging the (Canada) Homestead* 1891, colour lithograph, 58.3 × 85.9 cm, Library and Archives Canada (C-095459). (Photo: Library and Archives Canada)

Centre), wife of the Liberal premier of Ontario. That year Reid also painted a portrait of the Mowats' grand-daughter Jean Biggar (National Gallery of Canada).¹⁶ While it was only in 1896 that he avowed his interest “in the various movements intended to relieve the inequalities which our civilization is slow to throw off,” his political engagement was evidently contemporary with the painting of *Mortgaging the Homestead*.

The Liberal poster, published as a lithograph in black ink and measuring 38 × 53.8 cm (approximately 15 × 21 inches), soon instigated a response from the Conservatives in the form of a chromo-lithograph measuring 58.3 × 85.9 cm (approximately 23 × 34 inches), designed by the caricaturist Samuel Hunter (1858–1939) and printed by Abiston Lithograph and Publishing Company of Montreal (Fig. 4). Possibly taking Bengough’s caricature after Remington as a model, Reid’s *Mortgaging the Homestead* was now captioned, “The Conservative Version. Mortgaging the (Canada) Homestead With Apologies to Mr. G.A. Reid.” In this caricature Sir Richard Cartwright, the leading Liberal spokesperson for unrestricted reciprocity, and not Wilfrid Laurier, the head

of the Liberal party, mortgages Canada to Senator Blaine of Maine who had denied the Conservatives any tariff concessions for Canada.¹⁷ Oliver Mowat, as the daughter “Miss Mowat,” and Honoré Mercier, the Liberal premier of Quebec as the brooding brother, have no active role in the drama but are included due to their opposition to Macdonald and their status as strong fighters for provincial rights – additional Liberal threats to Canada. Edward Blake impersonates the farmer’s wife; on whose dress is inscribed “E. Blake His Resignation,” referring to his retirement from Canadian politics, his refusal to stand for election in 1891 and rumoured opposition to Cartwright’s unrestricted reciprocity,¹⁸ an opposition he would confirm the day following the election.¹⁹ The grandparents are the “Old Liberal Party” and “The Old Leader,” Alexander Mackenzie, Liberal Prime Minister from 1873 to 1878. All are presented as being complicit in selling out to the American annexationists.

The Conservatives won the 1891 federal election but Sir John suffered a stroke on 12 May and died on 6 June 1891. Over the next six months both the Conservatives and Liberals became mired in financial scandals and in December Oliver Mowat rejected reciprocity with the United States.²⁰ While not dead, the issue would be temporarily subsumed by the Manitoba school question as four Conservative Prime Ministers succeeded each other over the next five years.

Reid returned to the theme of farm mortgages in *The Foreclosure of the Mortgage* painted in 1892, at a time when he was abandoning his farm subjects for landscapes and more intimate works inspired by his first summer at the artist colony at Onteora, New York. One wonders if his return to the subject was prompted by the fact that the public attention engendered by the first painting had dwindled due to its relative invisibility in Ottawa. The second painting reunites the enlarged family around the bed of the tragically ill father. The bailiff occupies the centre of the composition and is framed by the grandmother and the farmer’s wife, both with bowed heads, while three children and a baby in a cradle in the foreground form a silent audience.

The Foreclosure of the Mortgage was widely exhibited in Ottawa and Toronto and twice in Montreal in 1892 and 1893²¹ and, like *Mortgaging the Homestead*, attracted attention due to its scale and prominent placement (Fig. 5). While the painting would go on to win medals at *Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition* in 1893 and at the *Mid-Winter Exhibition*, San Francisco in 1894,²² when first shown in Canada, it was not as well received as the earlier work. Possibly the paintings of similar social tragedies in the same exhibitions, including Robert Harris’s drunken *Going Wrong*, Edmond Dyonnet’s *The Last Crust*, Franklin Brownell’s *The Step Child* and D.P. Macmillan’s *Dawn*, a mother’s discovery of her dead daughter, diminished the impact of Reid’s tragic story.²³ In their column for *The Globe*, “At the Mermaid Inn,” Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott found



5 | W.J. Topley (1845–1930), Royal Canadian Academy of Arts exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa April 1892, Library and Archives Canada (PA-136768), George Reid’s *Foreclosure of the Mortgage* dominates the exhibition space. This canvas was destroyed by fire in 1918. In 1935 Reid painted a replica that is now in the Government of Ontario Art Collection. (Photo: Library and Archives Canada)

the coincidence of ill health and foreclosure “pathetic,” rather than “tragic and imposing,”²⁴ and the *Ottawa Daily Free Press* critic wondered whether it wasn’t “melodramatic.”²⁵ Some questioned the necessity of depicting the tragic side of life²⁶ while others criticized the painting’s apparent lack of unity of effect.²⁷

Reid denied there was any direct narrative relationship between *Mortgaging* and *Foreclosure*, merely claiming that one idea led to another.²⁸ However, most critics clearly remembered the canvas of 1890 and saw the 1892 painting to be its logical sequel.²⁹ A writer in the *Montreal Witness*, recalling the election of 1891, even wondered whether the *Foreclosure* was or

was not another “sermon on the National Policy.”³⁰ Finally, the *Toronto Globe* wrote, “Foreclosure of the Mortgage,’ let us hope, is the finale of that story. Mr. Reid has brought this typical Canadian family through many trials, but we trust that his next effort will not show them on their way ‘over the hills to the poorhouse.’”³¹

Following the 1891 election, George Reid would not abandon his desire “to relieve the inequalities which our civilization is slow to throw off,” but inspired by the ideas of the British social reformer William Morris (1834–1896), his engagement would move in other directions. Through the Society of Mural Decorators, the Toronto Guild of Civic Art, and the Arts and Crafts Society of Canada, all of which he played a key role in establishing, Reid worked to bring art into daily life, inculcate civic ideals, create a respect for artisan-workers, and ameliorate the inequalities of our civilization.

NOTES

My thanks to Steven McNeil, Curator, Crown Collection, Official Residences, National Capital Commission, for his assistance in locating the two election posters at Library and Archives Canada.

- 1 Muriel Miller MINER, *G.A. Reid: Canadian Artist* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1946), 55. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information is taken from Miner.
- 2 *Grip* 34:9 (1 Mar. 1890): 135.
- 3 Invitation to Private View of G.A. Reid, *Mortgaging the Homestead* and *The Other Side of the Question*, 12 Apr. 1890, Scrapbook I, 143, in G.A. Reid fonds (CA 0TAG SC 010), Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; “Canadian Art,” *The Mail*, 15 Apr. 1890.
- 4 “Canadian Art,” *Herald* (Montreal), 25 Apr. 1890; Carl FULLER, “Royal Canadian Academy,” *Gazette* (Montreal), 25 Apr. 1890; TEMPLAR, “Art Notes,” *The Week* VII:22 (2 May 1890): 349; TEMPLAR, “Art Notes,” *The Week* VII:26 (30 May 1890): 412; VAN, “Among the pictures,” *Saturday Night* III:27 (31 May 1890): 7; “Ontario Artists,” *Saturday Globe*, 7 June 1890.
- 5 “Royal Canadian Academy,” unidentified Toronto paper, ca. 1 May 1890, in scrapbook in Marmaduke Matthews papers (710-003), Trent University Archives, Peterborough.
- 6 “Canadian Art,” *Herald*, 25 Apr. 1890.
- 7 FULLER, “Royal Canadian Academy.”
- 8 VAN, “Among the pictures,” 7. Foreclosures were a subject of considerable debate in Canada at the time. See Loren LERNER, ed., “George Reid’s Paintings as Narratives of a Child Nation,” in *Depicting Canada’s Children* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2009), 335.
- 9 “Ontario Artists,” *Saturday Globe*, 7 June 1890.
- 10 G.A. REID, “The Evolution of Two of My Pictures,” *Massey’s Magazine* I:1 (January 1896): 14.

- 11 P.B. WAITE, *Canada 1874–1896 Arduous Destiny* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), 223, 241–43.
- 12 Ian Albert HODSON, *Commercial Union, Unrestricted Reciprocity and the Background to the Election of 1891* (M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1952); K.A. MACKIRDY, “The Loyalty Issue in the 1891 Federal Election Campaign and an Ironic Footnote,” *Ontario History* LV:3 (1963): 143–54; R.C. BROWN, *Canada’s National Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1964), 192–205.
- 13 J.W. BENGOUGH, after Remington, “The Last Stand,” *Grip* 36:4 (24 Jan. 1891): 57; “Comments on the Cartoons,” 50.
- 14 Carman CUMMING, *Sketches from a Young Country: The Images of Grip Magazine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 114.
- 15 “Some Campaign Literature,” *Progress* (Saint John, N.B.), III:146 (14 Feb. 1891): 1; *Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1891; “Art & Artists,” *Saturday Night* (21 Feb. 1891): 7.
- 16 *Work Executed During the Summer of 1890 by G.A. Reid*, RCA, on exhibition at Matthews Bros. Company’s New Gallery, 95 Yonge Street. Catalogue in scrapbook I, 155, G.A. Reid fonds (CA OTAG SC 010), Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.
- 17 WAITE, *Canada 1874–1896*, 223.
- 18 “Can’t Stand the Pace,” *Grip* 36:8 (21 Feb. 1891): 114, 121.
- 19 WAITE, *Canada 1874–1896*, 226. Joseph SCHULL, *Edward Blake Leader and Exile 1881–1912* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), 141–56.
- 20 Joseph SCHULL, *Laurier: The First Canadian* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1965), 256–58.
- 21 It was exhibited in the *Royal Canadian Academy of Arts Exhibition* in Ottawa, March 1892 and in Montreal, March 1893, in the *Spring Exhibition* in Montreal, April 1892 and in Toronto with the *Ontario Society of Artists Exhibition*, May 1892, at the *Toronto Industrial Exhibition* late summer 1892, and in the *OSA Winter Exhibition*, December 1892.
- 22 MINER, *G.A. Reid*, 66.
- 23 L. and S. [Archibald LAMPMAN & Duncan CAMPBELL SCOTT], “At the Mermaid Inn,” *The Globe* (Toronto), 16 Apr. 1892; “Spring Exhibition,” *Star* (Montreal), 21 Apr. 1892.
- 24 L. and S., “At the Mermaid Inn.”
- 25 “Artists and their Work,” *Ottawa Daily Free Press*, 4 Apr. 1892.
- 26 “Art Notes,” *The Week* IX:27 (3 June 1892): 427; “At the Art Gallery,” *Star*, 2 Mar. 1893.
- 27 L. and S., “At the Mermaid Inn,” John POPHAM, “The R.C.A. Exhibition,” *Gazette*, 11 Mar. 1893.
- 28 “The Study and Work of Mr. G.A. Reid,” *Lake Magazine* 1:7 (February 1893): 427; G.A. REID, “The Evolution of Two of My Pictures,” *Massey’s Magazine* 1:1 (January 1896): 14.
- 29 “Art Notes,” *The Week* IX:19 (8 Apr. 1892): 298; “Ontario Society of Artists,” *The Globe*, 30 May 1892; J.E. POLLOCK, “Canadian Artists,” *The Globe*, 4 Oct. 1892; “The Study and Work of Mr. G.A. Reid,” *Lake Magazine* 1:7 (February 1893): 427; “At the Art Gallery,” *Star*, 2 Mar. 1893.
- 30 “*The Art Exhibition*,” *Witness* (Montreal), 1 Mar. 1893.
- 31 “Ontario Society of Artists,” *The Globe*, 30 May 1892.

Hypothéquer le Canada: le tableau *Mortgaging the Homestead* de George Reid et l'élection fédérale de 1891

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À la fin des années 1880 et au début des années 1890, l'artiste torontois George Reid (1860–1947) a peint un certain nombre de toiles inspirées de souvenirs d'enfance. Né en 1860 à Wingham, Ontario, il a travaillé sur les fermes récemment défrichées par son père, Adam Reid, et son oncle maternel, James Agnew. À l'été 1886, au cours d'une visite à la ferme familiale, Reid peint sa première toile d'inspiration rurale, *Call to Dinner*. Se rappelant des lectures d'enfance dans un fenil, il peint *Forbidden Fruit* (1889) et *The Story* l'année suivante. *The Other Side of the Question* et *Mortgaging the Homestead* (toutes les deux en 1890) sont des scènes d'intérieur moins innocentes ; la première décrit des notables de la ville discutant de questions politiques autour d'une table de la bibliothèque, et la seconde représente le moment dramatique où un fermier est obligé de signer une hypothèque pour sauver sa ferme.

Mortgaging the Homestead, qui était le tableau que Reid avait peint pour son diplôme de l'Académie royale des arts du Canada, a été hautement admiré lorsqu'il fut exposé à Montréal et à Toronto, son format imposant et sa place préminente dans les salles d'exposition y étant pour quelque chose. Un auteur torontois a loué le choix judicieux des personnages, l'efficacité des groupements et la fidélité du tracé, espérant que ce « sermon sur toile » soit un outil efficace pour inculquer le sens de l'épargne et du travail. Malgré l'accent mis par les critiques sur le caractère particulièrement canadien de la scène, Reid a déclaré plus tard que l'inspiration pour *Mortgaging the Homestead* n'était pas un événement canadien, mais les « histoires déchirantes de fermiers du Dakota » qui, en 1890, avaient vu la valeur des terres s'effondrer à cause de la sécheresse et des bas prix obtenus pour leurs produits, ce qui avait entraîné des saisies hypothécaires massives. Il avait dix-sept ans quand la propre ferme de son père avait été menacée de saisie hypothécaire. Les détails concernant l'intérêt de Reid pour « les divers mouvements destinés à abolir les inégalités » ne sont pas clairs, mais son tableau, *Mortgaging the Homestead*, allait bientôt figurer dans la lutte entre libéraux et conservateurs sur ces questions lors de l'élection fédérale de 1891. Le premier ministre conservateur, John A. Macdonald, était arrivé au pouvoir en 1878 en s'appuyant sur une « Politique nationale » protectionniste, après la dépression économique exacerbée par

le dumping de marchandises bon marché au Canada par les Américains. En 1890, de nouveaux tarifs douaniers avaient fermé le marché américain au Canada. En coulisse, Macdonald négociait avec les Américains en même temps qu'il accusait les libéraux d'encourager l'annexion du Canada aux États-Unis en appuyant une réciprocité sans restriction. Quelques semaines avant l'élection de 1891, le tableau de Reid, *Homestead*, était utilisé, avec son accord, comme base d'une populaire caricature politique libérale. La légende se lisait « L'effet de la Politique Nationale (image tirée de la vie réelle) » et soulignait la « la vive colère de la femme devant la triste fin du labeur de son mari . . . ». En réponse, les conservateurs produisirent leur propre affiche fondée sur le tableau, « Avec nos excuses à M. G.A. Reid », sur laquelle les dirigeants libéraux étaient représentés comme vendus aux annexionnistes américains.

Reprenant ce thème en 1892, *The Foreclosure of the Mortgage* a été largement exposé à Ottawa et à Toronto et deux fois à Montréal. Tout comme *Mortgaging the Homestead*, il a attiré beaucoup d'attention, mais moins de critiques favorables. Reid a nié tout rapport narratif direct entre les deux tableaux, se bornant à dire qu'une idée en amène une autre. Cependant, la plupart des critiques y ont vu une suite logique, mais en espérant que ce ne soit pas un autre « sermon sur la Politique nationale ». Après l'élection de 1891, George Reid n'allait pas abandonner son désir « d'abolir les inégalités » et s'inspirait des idées du réformateur social britannique William Morris (1834–1896). À travers la Society of Mural Decorators, la Toronto Guild of Civic Art et la Arts and Crafts Society of Canada, institutions, dans la création desquelles il a joué un rôle clé, Reid a travaillé à faire entrer l'art dans la vie quotidienne, à inculquer des idéaux civiques, à promouvoir le respect des artisans et à améliorer les inégalités de notre civilisation.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette