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## A Canadian Artist in King Arthur's Court: Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes and the Colonial Invention of British Tradition

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After several years of intense work, Canadian painter and etcher Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes (1859–1912) released her elaborately illustrated children's book *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* just in time for the 1904 Christmas season in London, England. A reinterpretation of Sir Thomas Malory's "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney," Forbes's foray into the world of Arthurian legend consisted of an original story, fourteen large watercolour illustrations, and numerous charcoal drawings. Intended as a luxury object and released in a limited print run of 350 copies, the book was a critical success: as early as 1899, the artist was elected an Associate of the Royal Watercolour Society on the strength of a portfolio of watercolours intended for the book; once released, a reviewer for the *Studio* glowingly described each "exquisite" image as "a poem in itself."<sup>1</sup> The book has recently been digitized, its story and illustrations made widely available for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its creator's colonial origins, *King Arthur's Wood* engages with historical and artistic traditions that are recognizably British. Indeed, the book is perhaps the most sustained engagement by a Canadian woman artist with *fin-de-siècle* debates surrounding race, culture, and empire in Britain: a clear participant in the contemporary discourse about what "Britishness" had been, what it was, and what it should be. It equally serves as a powerful, if perhaps unintentional, statement on its Canadian-born author's place in this discourse and in the British art world. This overtly British focus is especially remarkable given that Forbes spent much of her early career working in the company of aggressively *anti*-British artists such as J.A.M. Whistler and Walter Sickert. An examination of Forbes's medievalist text and illustrations in light of these shifting allegiances not only gives attention to a little-studied portion of the artist's oeuvre, but also provides the opportunity to extend the disciplinary boundaries of Canadian women's art history of the pre-First World War period by situating the field within the framework of a wider "British World."

Detail, Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *La Demoiselle Sauvage*: "You are an uncourteous knight," said she, Plate XII in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

## Canadian Women's Art History and the British World

Born in Ontario in 1859, Elizabeth Armstrong left Canada fourteen years later to pursue an art education in London; she attended the South Kensington Schools before returning to the land of her birth in 1877. In the following year she began a three-year period of study with William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York City, then proceeded to Munich, a city she ultimately dismissed as “not at all a place in which women stood any chance of developing their artistic powers.”<sup>3</sup> Making London again her home base, she toured the rural artist colonies of Europe in the early 1880s. When she married fellow artist Stanhope Forbes in 1889, the couple settled permanently in the Cornish colony of Newlyn and became the core of a group popularly known as the “Newlyn School.” After her marriage and the subsequent birth of her only child in 1893, Forbes continued to paint and exhibit widely until her death in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

Forbes enjoyed a prominent reputation during her lifetime. Her prolific career was tracked on both sides of the Atlantic, with articles devoted to the artist appearing in the *Studio*, the *Art Journal*, and *Saturday Night*, and positive mentions of her work in the exhibition reviews of – to name only a few – the *Times*, the *Illustrated London News*, and the *Canadian Magazine*. Notably, critics frequently saw fit to comment on Forbes's national identity – or, more accurately, her lack thereof. Thus, even as the author of an 1891 article in *Lady's Pictorial* saw fit to call her “A Canadian by birth . . . English by adoption,”<sup>5</sup> the *New York Evening Post* could state of her participation in the 1892 Royal Academy exhibition that “decidedly the best showing by Americans is made by Mrs. Stanhope Forbes – a Canadian.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Forbes later recalled that her colleagues in New York insisted on labelling her “the English girl.”<sup>7</sup> These assessments suggest the difficulties her contemporaries faced in their attempts to classify this very mobile artist.

To be sure, Forbes seems to have thought of herself as something of a drifter: she records in her autobiography that her family “lived in . . . trunks” while in Canada, and takes the time to thank her “devoted mother, who had sacrificed much to accompany me on my wanderings.”<sup>8</sup> Forbes continued to experience a certain restlessness even after marriage and motherhood provided a stability not previously known. The artist voiced this professionally, in two travel articles she published in the *Studio*,<sup>9</sup> and in more personal venues, writing in one letter to a friend:

I am interested in your account of the little place in Normandy, for I am trying to hear of a good place to migrate to next summer. I intend to pluck my poor unwilling husband from his beloved Newlyn and

let the house if possible for a few months. He cannot bear the idea of being away long . . . but I have been struck for an entire change of air and scene and I have only been waiting for Baby to be old enough to take about and now that he is beginning to talk I have a deep laid plot to take him to France so that French shall be his first language.<sup>10</sup>

This inclination to nomadism was also noted by critic Marion Dixon, who observed in an article about the artist that “Mr. Stanhope Forbes is less a wanderer at heart than is his Canadian wife.”<sup>11</sup>

Forbes’s transnational career presents continued difficulties for the twenty-first-century art historian. Namely, her life and work highlight the fundamental insufficiencies of the nationalist underpinnings of the modern art history narrative in Canada. In the decades prior to the First World War, the art worlds of North America and Europe were tightly linked, brought together by a booming economy and evolving art market, an explosion in art journalism, and innovations in communications and travel. The attendant disintegration of national schools on both sides of the Atlantic and the emergence of movements that extended across the Western world are phenomena that do not fit smoothly into the traditional geographic parameters of a discipline like Canadian art history. While today Forbes might truthfully be called a Canadian *artist* given the place of her birth, whether an object like *King Arthur’s Wood* – which was, after all, made in Britain, for a primarily British audience – can accurately be called Canadian *art* is a much more complicated question.

Still more complex is the question of whether such categories are appropriate or useful in the study of any artist working in the necessarily transnational context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperialism. Art historians Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz have argued of an earlier period that “to historicize British or French art in the reductive geographical terms of the British Isles or continental France is . . . profoundly to misunderstand the eighteenth-century concepts of Englishness, Britishness, or Frenchness that applied (albeit differently nuanced) to the wider Atlantic world as much as to the metropolis.”<sup>12</sup> Following this line of thought, attempts to label an artist like Forbes as either Canadian *or* British neglect the possibility that she, like many Canadians of the pre-First World War period, did not identify exclusively as one or the other, but alternated between the two depending on the context, and potentially did so strategically depending on what was convenient or beneficial personally and professionally. She may just as easily have identified as both. It is thus necessary to adopt a methodological framework that takes into account these slippery boundaries and acknowledges that artists like Forbes were not confined by national

borders, but rather operated within networks that stretched across the Atlantic and throughout what has come to be called the “British World.”

The theoretical model of a British World presupposes an understanding of sites as unfixed nodes in an extended network of (often unequal) political, economic, and cultural connections.<sup>13</sup> By these standards, the British World signifies a different entity than the British Empire. It might include, for example, the United States, which in the later nineteenth century was attempting to reclaim its British heritage in response to an influx of non-British immigration. Conversely, it might exclude a group technically under colonial control of the British, but which was not recognized as culturally British. A flexible and dynamic set of social, cultural, economic, linguistic, class, racial, and other identifications strengthened often-fragile political ties and acted to bind people of distant and diverse locations (and to exclude others). Given its precarious status between Confederation and the First World War – a new nation that was itself pursuing colonizing activities within its borders, but one that remained tightly linked to its own colonial parent – Canada provides an especially exciting opportunity to untangle the strings that knit together the British World.

Locating the history of Canadian art in the wider context of the British World also opens up new approaches to the study of Canadian women artists of the pre-First World War period. While this model of study presents an important challenge to traditional nationalist narratives, it also extends the work of feminist art history by demanding concerted attention to questions of race and empire, and a more in-depth examination of the role that women like Forbes played in the maintenance of imperial power. Significantly, it was possible for Forbes to identify as both Canadian and British only because she was white. Whiteness, which in the nineteenth century was frequently conflated with Britishness, was an important rallying point for the otherwise heterogeneous, geographically distant population of the British World, functioning simultaneously to unite a group based on a specific racial and cultural identity, and to distinguish and elevate it above competing groups.<sup>14</sup> In Canada, the latter included not only First Nations, black, and Asian populations, but French Canadians and other European immigrants as well. The option to call oneself a member of the British World, and to freely traverse its physical and rhetorical borders, was a privilege not available to all.

### **“A parcel of foreigners”: Elizabeth Armstrong and the Whistler Circle**

As suggested by reviewers’ confusion as to her nationality, Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes did not always find her nomad status unproblematic. Critical reaction in the early years of her career was perhaps unsurprising

given the company she kept. Throughout the 1880s, Armstrong (not yet Forbes) was one of a number of young artists who formed a circle around the man she describes (but does not name) in her autobiography as “that brilliant exponent of ‘symphonies in white’ and ‘nocturnes in blue and silver.’”<sup>15</sup> The artist who evidently needed no introduction was J.A.M. Whistler, around whom artists such as Mortimer Menpes, Theodore Roussel, Sidney Starr, Harper Pennington, and Walter Sickert gathered. Brought together by support of their leader’s Aesthetic outlook and a shared interest in French Impressionism, this informal group crystallized through their involvement first in the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA), of which Whistler was elected President in 1886, and, after his resignation two years later, in the New English Art Club (NEAC). Art historian Anne Koval has observed that in the mid-1880s this group of “Whistler followers” quite self-consciously regarded themselves as “the emerging avant-garde” in Britain.<sup>16</sup> And like any avant-garde, they engendered considerable resistance: notably from competing artists like Armstrong’s then-fiancé Stanhope Forbes, who, together with his own set of followers from Newlyn, argued for a more conservative “square-brush” naturalism to take its place as the national school.<sup>17</sup> Armstrong’s personal and professional links to both the Whistler group and the Forbes faction situate the artist squarely within contemporary debates about artistic style and national identity in Britain.

In her study of the Whistler circle, art historian Anna Greutzner Robins traces the close relationships of these artists both inside and outside gallery walls.<sup>18</sup> As Robins points out, contemporaneous critics commented on the stylistic links between Armstrong’s early work and that of her colleagues. In the 1885 winter exhibition season, Armstrong was cited alongside Sickert, Menpes, and Pennington in the *Illustrated London News* as producing works that showed “evidence of Whistler’s teaching.”<sup>19</sup> While the decorative female figure of a painting like *Young Woman in White* (undated, location unknown) is immediately recognizable as showing Whistlerian influence, Robins argues that Armstrong’s rural genre subjects – her primary focus throughout the period – demonstrate her sympathies with the circle’s interests just as strongly. In *The Critics* (Fig. 1), begun in 1885 and exhibited at the fall 1886 Royal British Academy show, Armstrong’s Impressionist-inspired emphasis on bright light, loosely applied paint, and shallow composition reveal an allegiance to the artistic experiments in colour, composition, and surface finish being conducted by Whistler’s followers (even if their own urban subjects were generally off-limits to her as a woman). Armstrong’s affiliation with the Whistler group is especially clear when juxtaposed with the more traditional approach used by her fiancé in his own work: compare *The Critics*, for example, with the latter’s own well-known 1885 project *A Fish Sale on a*



1 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *The Critics*, 1885–86, oil on panel, 22.9 × 14 cm, Private collection. (Photo: Courtesy of the Richard Green Gallery, London)



2 | Stanhope Forbes, *A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach*, 1885, oil on canvas, 118.5 × 154 cm. From the collections of Plymouth City Council (Arts and Heritage)/Bridgeman Art Library. (Photo: Plymouth City Council (Arts and Heritage)/© Bridgeman Art Library)

*Cornish Beach* (Fig. 2), which made the artist's name when exhibited at the Royal Academy spring exhibition in that year.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the theme of the small painting – art creation itself – must have also appealed to a group dedicated to exploring new directions in art-making. Forbes himself noted the visible similarities between the work of his future wife and her mentor, as well as their affinity in attitudes towards art; he further drew a distinction between their views and his own by dismissively concluding his reaction to one exhibition with “About that little Whistler – honestly it is a pretty little bit of colour and *voilà tout* – You will of course laugh and say that is everything.”<sup>21</sup>

Forbes strongly disapproved of his intended's friends and colleagues, writing melodramatically to her on one occasion “I really can hardly bear to think that very likely you are going to meet him [Whistler] tomorrow,” and further despairing at her involvement with the “clique” of the “Whistler gang.”<sup>22</sup> His protestations against Armstrong's participation in this circle were numerous and vehement. First among them was the perception that the exhibitions organized by the RBA and NEAC were deliberately, even

aggressively, avant-garde and elitist. Armstrong was one of the few women to exhibit with the latter in that institution's early years, and the only one to be elected a member at its founding. Forbes was also a member, and his letters reveal that they supported opposing factions within the Club, with Forbes leading the Newlyn School side and Armstrong continuing to support the Whistler-influenced Impressionist group, now led by Sickert. Forbes's assessment of the 1888 NEAC exhibition is characteristic: despite his future wife's good placement in the show – her paintings had been placed in the "A" class, unlike those of several of the couple's Newlyn friends – he writes, "I was astonished to find the impressionists in great force in consequence of which the public will be considerably astonished . . . some production of Mssrs Starr, Roussel, Sickert, every one of which if I had my way would be sat upon." He concludes pessimistically: "unless the Whistler influence is stamped out the Club will soon go to the bad."<sup>23</sup> In a subsequent letter, he rather petulantly threatens to resign his membership if the "Whistler element" remained prevalent.<sup>24</sup>

Forbes also combined these aesthetic concerns with moral ones. He describes Sickert's work at the NEAC, for instance, as "perfectly astonishing and I only hope it is not in any way a true reflection of the painter's mind. Tawdry, vulgarity and the sentiment of the lowest music hall."<sup>25</sup> In another letter, he complains about the placement of Armstrong's work at the RBA's 1886 fall show. Forbes was horrified to find his fiancée's canvas hung between a painting by Lady Colin Campbell (who was undergoing a scandalous and well-publicized divorce) and a portrait by "a lady you have heard of – I daresay you guess who it is."<sup>26</sup> Forbes clearly believed these notorious women – Whistler's mistress Maud Franklin was the unnamed, but apparently infamous artist – to be unsuitable wall company for his future wife.

Finally, that Forbes specifically identifies these artists as Impressionists hints at a further objection he may have had to Whistler and his circle, namely, hostility to a style that was coded as foreign. In the mid-1880s, Impressionism had yet to make inroads into the London art world. Popularly and critically dismissed, the style was accused of being not only too modern, but explicitly too French, with all of the connotations of immorality and degeneracy that implied to a British audience. While both members of the Forbes couple have since been counted among practitioners of a vaguely defined "British Impressionism" alongside the other members of the Newlyn School, in the 1880s, the *plein air* naturalism practiced in Newlyn was understood to be a distinct style; although often learned in Brittany (as was the case with Forbes), it was generally acknowledged as the international standard of the rural art colony circuit and not necessarily associated with the specific "Frenchness" of the Parisian Impressionists being aped by artists

like Sickert (and Armstrong herself).<sup>27</sup> Forbes's potential xenophobia comes into focus when viewed in relation to the popular debates around Whistler's time at the RBA. Anne Koval has found that the press persistently defined the artist's supporters and detractors in nationalist terms: Whistler was "the most un-English of painters" and his followers were "outsiders"; his opponents (like Forbes) were the true "British artists."<sup>28</sup> Whistler himself described the opposing groups in these terms upon his resignation, writing in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "They could not remain together, and so you see the 'Artists' have come out and the 'British' remain – and peace and sweet obscurity are restored to Suffolk Street."<sup>29</sup>

As an American, Whistler was open to this criticism. Many of his followers were also foreigners: Harper Pennington was also American, while Mortimer Menpes was born in Australia, Sickert in Germany, and Roussel in France.<sup>30</sup> Armstrong, as a Canadian, fit in seamlessly with this mixed set. Like her colleagues, Armstrong experienced critical distaste directed towards the perceived foreignness of her work. This became explicit in 1889, when her submissions to the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers were rejected; Sir Seymour Haden, that society's president and one of Whistler's many enemies (and also his brother-in-law), wrote Armstrong what Forbes called a "horrid letter" to berate her for working with an unnamed French printer. According to Forbes's report to his mother, Haden "says nothing about the etching but is furious that she employed a Frenchman to print it as he is patriotic enough to say that no French man knows how to print a dry point."<sup>31</sup> Although her fiancé defended her on this occasion, he fell decidedly on the side of what the *Glasgow Herald* called the "loyal Britishers"<sup>32</sup> and pressed continually for Armstrong to sever her ties with the other camp. This attitude extended to criticizing the latter's choice of residence; of her pre-marriage decision to live in St. Ives (a colony known to be international in nature) rather than Newlyn (which was primarily home to English artists), he archly informed her that "in my opinion it is more conducive to work to be living amongst a pleasant set of men than with a parcel of foreigners with whom I have no sympathy."<sup>33</sup> Armstrong, who had by this time lived for significant periods of time in Canada, England, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and France, evidently did feel sympathy with this cosmopolitan community of fellow "outsiders."

### **The Invention of British Tradition**

Ultimately, however, Forbes's dislike of the Whistler circle must have played some part in his wife's decision to distance herself from that group: after the couple married in 1889, Forbes made good on his frequent threats to leave the NEAC, and Armstrong followed. In the following decades,



3 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *Will O' the Wisp*, 1900, oil on canvas, sealed to panel, triptych, 68.6 × 111.8 cm, Courtesy of the National Gallery of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay. (Photo: National Gallery of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC)

Elizabeth Forbes (now Armstrong no longer) effectively resolved any critical apprehension about her place in the British art world by turning away from the self-conscious modernity of her Impressionist colleagues and looking instead to the past. Beginning in the mid-1890s, this shift took the form of an engagement with the narrative subjects of *fin-de-siècle* Pre-Raphaelitism. *King Arthur's Wood* is just one iteration of this interest, finding its place among a large oeuvre of fairy-tale subjects, medievalist figure and costume studies, and scenes from British literature, such as *Will O' the Wisp* (Fig. 3). Although these images are clearly different in subject and style than her previous efforts, concurrent shifts in the art world ensured that the Canadian-born Forbes and her work remained at the centre of debates about the Britishness of British art.

Forbes was far from the only artist looking to history for inspiration in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, the

tendency pervaded the Academy and the avant-garde in equal measure. Furthermore, the popularity of historical – especially medieval – subjects in art was paralleled by trends in literature, theatre, and architecture, as well as regional movements to revive Celtic and other ancient native cultures in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and, Cornwall.<sup>34</sup> In a reactionary response to the alarming social confusion of the nineteenth-century present, the medieval and early modern past was celebrated as a time when class lines were firm and understood by all, when gender roles were secure and men and women content to play their parts, and when the “British World” meant simply the British Isles and their white residents. The construction of a collective memory of this history therefore functioned as a very powerful means of uniting the public under a shared cultural heritage. This narrative of a glorious British past was, then, also a narrative about the Britain of the present and the future. That this past was a myth was irrelevant.

Forbes was not the only colonial expatriate to use history to shore up hereditary *bona fides* and negotiate an unstable position within the heart of the empire. According to historian Cecilia Morgan, Canadian travellers frequently went to Britain “in the expectation that there they would find the basis for their own histories, their own meanings of ‘Canada,’ and their own membership in the British Empire.”<sup>35</sup> This colonial longing for the past was more complex than a simple interest in history; it was a longing for a shared cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial heritage, and an assertion of one’s rightful place within that celebrated lineage. This becomes apparent in the breathless references to historical and literary places, figures, and events that seem to flood Canadian writing from abroad. The industrial sights of Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham are consistently ignored in favour of the romantic history evoked by places like Tintern Abbey, the Lake District, and Stratford-upon-Avon, while the streets and squares of London are not filled by modern city dwellers, but haunted by the ghosts of Pepys, Milton, and Shakespeare. Indeed, a vocabulary of haunting, enchantment, magic spells, and ghostly voices permeates tourist accounts. Real history merges seamlessly with fiction, as historical figures like Mary, Queen of Scots, and William Wallace share the landscape with fairies, pixies, and ghostly knights and ladies. Forbes draws on this trope in her own article “An April Holiday,” writing evocatively of the “shivers” she feels upon her encounter with the spirits of the English Civil War at an Anglo-Saxon ruin:

Who knows? – other and more ungentle ghosts may howl along the valley on nights of storm; the clang of steel may echo faintly from hill above – that “Field of Blood” where Athelstan bore down on the last of the Britons; the chant of the Druid and the war-cry of the Celt may

still linger round the Fugoe Hole, mocking the latter day ghosts of Charles's time.<sup>36</sup>

Combining disparate times and peoples, Forbes creates a narrative that runs continuously from the ancient past to the modern present, into which colonial expatriates like herself might smoothly slip.

Canadian journalist, feminist, and tourist Emily Murphy describes her experience at the Tower of London in a characteristic example of this kind of language. Still haunting the castle, she mourns, were the boy-princes imprisoned by Richard III: "to this day, the Anglo-Saxon heart aches for the murdered boys."<sup>37</sup> With these words, Murphy clarifies that the colonial desire for history was a specifically racial desire. Forbes's and Murphy's tourist accounts must be seen as contributing to the popular nineteenth-century discourse of medieval Anglo-Saxonism, which held that all white, English-speaking peoples were descended from an idealized pre-feudal Anglo-Saxon race in which all men were equal and united as a group. As such, historian Alex Zwerdling has argued that Anglo-Saxonism provided a powerful mythology that functioned to link the white members of the British World through a racial and familial metaphor that superseded contemporaneous political and social divisions within the greater group; moreover, this genealogy provided a long lineage, and therefore legitimacy, for that group.<sup>38</sup>

The racial myth of a united, white, Anglo-Saxon race with a long and glorious heritage was a particularly strong rallying point for those of British descent in North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century, given that waves of immigration from locations such as Italy, Eastern Europe, and China were beginning to hit the shores of that continent and inspiring new fears about the racial make up and cultural character of Canada and the United States.<sup>39</sup> Further concerns stemmed from the abolition of slavery and shifting settler relationships with Aboriginal populations. These anxieties were met on an official level by new legislation that attempted to define, limit, and control social integration in order to maintain the white, Anglo-Saxon character of these nations; in Canada, these efforts included laws such as the head tax on Chinese immigrants (1885), the Indian Act (1876), and a variety of policies aimed at restricting immigration from "undesirable" places enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unofficial responses to this perceived threat to racial and national identity included the increased interest in cultural heritage and the study of genealogy evidenced by the organization of groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (founded in 1890) and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (founded in 1900).<sup>40</sup> The search for history by Canadian travellers like Forbes and Murphy was another powerful expression of the white colonial claim to British cultural heritage.

Finally, it was the self-conscious possession of a definable culture with a lengthy history that reassured members of the extended British World that they were valuable parts of a greater whole. Historian Catherine Hall has shown that history writing played a vital role in the construction of an ideal of white Britishness in the nineteenth century, arguing that “Britons’ special status in the world was articulated in part through possession of their history, a narrative that took them from the barbarism of their ancestors to the civilization of the present.”<sup>41</sup> This connection between history, modernity, and civilization both distinguished the modern British from the still-“uncivilized” areas of the world and provided a justification for their colonization. Once comfortably under control, British history could be beneficently bestowed upon new populations, at once uniting them with the greater Anglo-Saxon family of the British World and erasing competing local histories.

First, however, this history had to be created – a project that can be understood as one manifestation of the phenomenon that historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have memorably called the “invention of tradition.”<sup>42</sup> Victorian cultural producers played a major role in this process of myth-making by working concertedly not only to revive, but to reinvent the medievalist past “in their own image”<sup>43</sup> to suit the need for a community united through a common white British heritage, if not by a stable order of gender, class, and racial relations. Significantly, the invention of British history was paralleled by the invention of British *art* history, a narrative to which Forbes and *King Arthur’s Wood* also contributes through its participation in a movement that was coded by contemporaries as uniquely British: *fin-de-siècle* Pre-Raphaelitism.

My use of the term “Pre-Raphaelitism” here deserves further comment, for by the end of the century the work of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) no longer stood alone, as it once had, but had become part of a “diffuse and elusive phenomenon” that then dominated the British art world.<sup>44</sup> By the mid-1890s, the struggle between the Whistler circle and the Newlyn School had all but concluded with neither party emerging as the victor. Both were bested by a movement that can only be loosely defined: indeed, its primary characteristic might be a sheer lack of definition. Though very different in founding principles and visual appearance, earlier British trends as diverse as Romanticism, Neo-Classicism, and Aestheticism had, by the turn of the century, grown together into an eclectic medley that was distinct from, but in many ways a logical successor to the mid-century PRB. With a uniting interest in narrative subjects, especially historical and literary themes, the phenomenon was an important driver of the Victorian medievalist revival. Although these styles remained relatively distinct in terms of their formal characteristics, the nationalist social and political associations their subjects invoked in their publics merged over time such that the

movement could comfortably take its place as the foundation of the modern British school by the end of the century.

Scattered as it was, art historian Tim Barringer notes that this approach to artistic production was “underpinned by a *fin-de-siècle* anxiety about the end of tradition”<sup>45</sup> brought on not only by various political and social crises, but by the confusion of the modern art world as well. Artists’ active adoption of earlier styles must be seen in the context of a deliberate “strategy of revival”<sup>46</sup> of these modes of expression by British artists and critics in search of a homegrown art tradition. This revival was an explicitly nationalist and imperialist project: an attempt to locate and celebrate an authentic and exclusively British art in the face of French dominance of the art world. The varying aesthetic characteristics of these styles were, as art historian Julie Codell argues, also understood as national characteristics: this was an art that was democratic and morally sound, worthy of colonizers, not the colonized (unlike, it was perceived, the increasingly primitivized abstraction of modern French painting).<sup>47</sup> That many of these styles had themselves been belittled as overly French not even a decade earlier was evidently not a problem, and this Aestheticized and vastly expanded Pre-Raphaelitism was, in the end, welcomed by audiences throughout the British World. By 1907, even Stanhope Forbes had apparently changed his views: an article from that year reveals that a “choice set of Whistler etchings formed the chief decoration” of one wall of the Newlyn artist’s studio. The accompanying photograph shows that the prints were joined by his wife’s *Will O’ the Wisp* hanging above the mantel.<sup>48</sup>

### ***King Arthur’s Wood: Representing Empires Past and Present***

Elizabeth Forbes’s engagement with British historical and literary subjects in the later stages of her career must be understood as actively participating in the construction of this “consensual, celebratory”<sup>49</sup> history and art history of the British World. Indeed, the artist deliberately inserted herself into this genealogy by linking herself to several of the most pre-eminent figures involved in the concerted effort to secure a national art tradition; those singled out for mention in her autobiography include John Ruskin, Frederic Leighton, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>50</sup> This self-identification with her forebears continued in her work: Forbes’s *The Leaf* (before 1906, private collection), for example, is subtitled with lines from a Rossetti poem, while *Will O’ the Wisp* illustrates PRB associate William Allingham’s 1850 poem “The Fairies.”

*King Arthur’s Wood* was Elizabeth Forbes’s most sustained effort in this arena, taking up recognizably British cultural traditions in both its Arthurian content and Pre-Raphaelite-influenced style. The book was just

one of innumerable nineteenth-century reimaginings of Sir Thomas Malory's 1485 *Le Morte Darthur*, the first compilation, translation into English, and printed publication of a variety of earlier texts about the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. After falling into disfavour in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Arthurian tales burst back into fashion in the early nineteenth century when Malory's volume was re-printed in 1816–17; the vogue heightened at mid-century, encouraged by the prolific contributions of poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.<sup>51</sup>

Materially speaking, *King Arthur's Wood* was very much a product of its era and speaks to a Pre-Raphaelite influence in medium as much as it does in content and pictorial style. Created during a golden age of book illustration, Forbes's adaptation would have circulated in the same market as several other high-profile editions of the tales. William Morris's Kelmscott Press, established in 1891 with the goal of producing not simply reading material, but beautiful objects in the model of medieval illuminated manuscripts, intended to publish an edition of Malory with illustrations by Edward Burne-Jones as its first project, and contributed a copy of Morris's own Arthurian poem "The Defense of Guinevere" (1858) in 1892.<sup>52</sup> Publisher J.M. Dent, in competition with the prospective Kelmscott version, produced what is now the best-known *fin-de-siècle* version when he released an edition of Malory illustrated lavishly by Aubrey Beardsley in that same year.<sup>53</sup> Innovative illustrator Arthur Rackham released 500 copies of his own *The Romance of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* in 1917. These versions were joined by dozens more, including several by other female artists.<sup>54</sup> These objects, advertised as gift books (and often released during the Christmas season, as Forbes's was), offered artists a wide audience for their work; Forbes further increased her public visibility by showing the original illustrations for *King Arthur's Wood* at a solo show at London's Leicester Galleries in 1904.<sup>55</sup>

The illustrated book was perhaps the ideal medium for medievalist subject matter. The format allowed medium and style to support the subject matter and create an aesthetically cohesive object. This had been the primary aim of the PRB at mid-century, who believed that British art would be rejuvenated through this "return to artistic integrity."<sup>56</sup> In the service of this goal, *King Arthur's Wood* includes decorated letters throughout the text, visually uniting word and image in a way that recalls illuminated manuscripts, while the cover's simple woodblock print calls to mind earlier forms of printing. Forbes showed interest in these goals in her painting as well. *Will O' the Wisp*, for example, takes the form of a triptych, visually recalling an art form of an earlier era, while the elaborately decorated wood frame, designed by Forbes herself, extends the painted tree branches beyond the limits of the canvas, uniting the latter with its surroundings.

The enormous popularity of all things Arthurian in the nineteenth century is unsurprising. As a figure who could be retroactively seen as transcending ethnic and religious divisions in the British Isles, King Arthur was a convenient nationalist icon in the era following the Act of Union in 1800 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829, which reunited the British community in ways unseen in several centuries, but which were not without controversy.<sup>57</sup> Malory's own version of the tales had appeared at the end of the Hundred Years' War and during the Wars of the Roses – another era of anxiety about Britain's status as a united entity. Malory's nostalgic expression of desire for a more stable and glorious past clearly found a sympathetic audience in the similarly concerned Victorian era.<sup>58</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the myth of Camelot was invoked not only as a romantic referent to an earlier golden age, but as an effective model for the contemporary social, political, cultural, and racial ideals associated with the unifying impulses of Anglo-Saxonism and the extended British World. In return, the British World was itself reimagined as a revival of the medieval feudal order, a metaphor that conveniently placed metropole and colony in a harmonious relationship in which the latter was dependent on the former, and the former duty-bound to the latter; such rhetoric explained and validated the decidedly unequal status between members, even as it masked this inequality under the veil of a fiction of a round table with no head.<sup>59</sup> The increasing desire for a social order that mimicked the feudal order of dependence ran parallel to a society forced to come to terms with a changing empire and to rethink how best to administer and structure it, as the slavery system that had previously supported an enormous territorial expansion was phased out over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century. This desire only heightened in the second half of the century, when the continued extension of the Empire seemed, to some, poised to destroy it.<sup>60</sup> While the eventual destruction of Arthur's kingdom served as a warning about this overreach, the mythical promise of the King's return to Britain was ultimately a reassuring justification for current policies. That Arthur and the golden age of his reign were largely fictional was not a hindrance to their deployment as metaphors; to the contrary, the lack of solid historical sourcing made the legends easily adaptable and extremely durable.<sup>61</sup>

Forbes's book frames a specific Arthurian legend – the tale of Sir Gareth – within a second narrative of her own creation. The latter takes place in a contemporary rural setting: a young boy named Myles moves into a new house with his mother and sister after his sailor father has been lost at sea. He seeks solace in the mysterious forest nearby (the eponymous “King Arthur's Wood”), where he finds an old book and an unusual creature that claims to have known the Knights of the Round Table and who tells him Gareth's



4 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *So then in sign of peace and good fellowship they clasped hands*, Plate XIV in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

story. The framing device captures the sense of being haunted by the past that Canadian tourists sought and found in the British landscape.

Forbes's interpretation of the legend is a straightforward narrative of knightly chivalry and courtly love. It begins with the arrival of a young man at the court of King Arthur; refusing to give his name and origins, he asks only for food and drink for one year, and the promise of two other favours at the end of that time. Intrigued, Arthur grants these wishes, and the boy is sent to the kitchen to live as a servant. On the anniversary of his arrival, a mysterious woman comes to the court to plead for help in rescuing her sister, the Lady Liones, from a tyrant. Seizing his chance, the young man asks for his two favours: that he be permitted to undertake this quest and that he be knighted by Sir Launcelot. Much to the dismay of the woman, who sees him only as a servant, his wishes are granted and the two set out on the adventure.



5 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *At that word Sir Gareth put forth a mighty effort*, Plate xxii in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Now revealed to the reader (if not yet to his companion) as Sir Gareth, son of the King of Orkney, our hero gallantly fights one enemy after another, proving not only his skill and strength, but also his patience, as the woman – the Lady Lynette, dubbed here “La Demoiselle Sauvage” – repeatedly insults his character and status. Gareth further demonstrates magnanimity and loyalty by sparing his enemies’ lives at the request of the lady and at the promise that they will serve Arthur. Having thus proven his true chivalric nature, the knight and lady reconcile and carry on with the quest (Fig. 4). After a final battle (Fig. 5), Gareth releases Liones from her captor and a happy ending is given to all as the defeated knights are brought together at court, true identities are revealed, and Gareth and Liones are married.

In the revivalist spirit of Pre-Raphaelitism, Forbes’s figures show considerable debt to her artistic predecessors. The numerous images of Gareth (Fig. 6) would no doubt have called to the minds of contemporary



6 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *And then came riding Sir Gareth*, Plate xxvi in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

audiences other popular representations of knights, especially George Frederic Watts's ubiquitous *Sir Galahad* (1862, Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge), which had, by the turn of the century, been reproduced widely in painting, print, and stained glass. Forbes's version follows the iconography set by the elder artist, striking the same balance between the powerful masculinity of an armoured body and a youthful and thoughtful facial expression. Likewise, Liones and Lynette are reminiscent of any number of icons of Aesthetic femininity as filtered through the late work of the Pre-Raphaelites rather than through Whistler. Liones (Fig. 7) seems a clear call back to Rossetti's sensual heroines: the figure's long, flowing red hair circling her head like a halo, white neck revealed by the pose with her head back, and slightly parted pink bow lips all repeat features done memorably in works like *Bocca Baciata* (1859, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); the flat, decorative background is also a device frequently used by Rossetti.



7 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *The Lady Liones*, Plate XVI in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)



8 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *La Demoiselle Sauvage*: “You are an uncourteous knight,” said she, Plate XII in *King Arthur’s Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Lynette (Fig. 8), in appropriate contrast, recalls one of Edward Burne-Jones's more sinister female figures, with heavily shadowed contours in her face and hands that contrast her pale skin and the strong features and slim, angular body that characterize the Aesthetic female figure; compare, for example, his own Arthurian subject *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1872–77, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool).<sup>62</sup> While Rossetti's "fleshly" study of sensual beauty would have been an appropriate source for Forbes to draw on for her depiction of Gareth's true love, Burne-Jones's enchanting *femme fatale* was an equally well-suited model for Gareth's hot-tempered nemesis.

Although the illustrations clearly owe much to their nineteenth-century context, Forbes's text draws specifically on Malory's version of the tale (rather than Tennyson's popular update). However, by choosing to return to the medieval source, Forbes was once again following in the steps of the PRB, who also looked to the past for inspiration.<sup>63</sup> *King Arthur's Wood* clearly acknowledges its debt to Malory. The creature that tells the story also appears in the original version as a dwarf who accompanies Gareth on his adventures; in the later story, this character explicitly mentions the poet, telling Myles as he begins his tale: "So the folk still talk of the Great King and his Knights? That is well. I remember to have heard that their feats of arms and great adventures were worthily set forth by a Knight of later days, in the time when the fourth Edward was King in this land."<sup>64</sup> In addition to lending authority to her narrative voice, Forbes's references to Malory again function to link the colonial artist-author to a long British cultural tradition.

Gareth himself was not a character frequently tackled by artists. Art historian Christine Poulson attributes this partly to the relatively late 1872 publication of Tennyson's "Gareth and Lynette," and further argues that artists and their publics viewed the didactic nature of the narrative as being more suitable for children than for their art-purchasing parents.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Gareth was an ideal role model for Victorian boys: a true-hearted youth who becomes a man through his modest behaviour and heroic deeds, he embodies the archetype of the "bright boy knight" that emerged in the final decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Positioning Gareth as a role model seems to have been the explicit purpose of Tennyson's poem, which his wife Emily remarked was written to "describe a pattern youth for his boys."<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, Gareth's story was more often used to decorate the walls of schools than those of art galleries. British artist Mary Sargeant-Florence's 1903–10 frescoes for the Oakham School in Rutland, for example, illustrated the tale using depictions of the schoolboys themselves in the crowd scenes and the identifiable architecture of the school buildings as the setting. *Gareth and Lynette* was also the subject of a series of stained glass windows at Trinity College, Glenalmond, in Scotland. Gareth even became a popular boy's name in the last decades of the century.<sup>68</sup>



9 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *The Black Knight of the Black Lawn*, Plate xx in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

A quintessential role model, Gareth was, then, an obvious choice for Forbes's children's book, which she dedicated to her son Alec; Alec also served as the model for the illustrations of Myles. Indeed, the framing narrative of *King Arthur's Wood* makes the intended didacticism of Gareth's tale very clear. From the start, the story is positioned as a lesson for Myles: the dwarf tells the boy to pay attention, "for though you are but a simple country lad, you may yet learn something from so shining an example."<sup>69</sup> And learn he does: on one occasion after another throughout the book, Myles takes inspiration from the knight he so admires. In the final sentences, the ancient dwarf takes credit for his tale's transformation of the boy into a proper gentleman: "I had a hand in making him," he says, "I and Sir Gareth of Orkney."<sup>70</sup> Published in the year that Alec left for boarding school, Gareth's

coming-of-age story must have resonated with the Forbes family on a personal level.

The lessons of *King Arthur's Wood* circulated beyond the Forbes household however. If, as historian Stephanie Barczewski points out, “the image of the solitary, vulnerable knight confronted with one life-threatening danger after another became one of the most frequently employed symbols of the British imperial experience,”<sup>71</sup> then Gareth’s adventure is matched in Arthurian legend only by the quest for the Holy Grail as a metaphor for and celebration of the imperial project. The bulk of Forbes’s narrative concerns Gareth fighting a sequence of other knights, known as the Black, Green, Red, and Blue Knights, and Sir Ironside, the Red Knight of the Red Lawns (Fig. 9). The brave Gareth’s work is done when the men he has defeated arrive at Camelot to fulfill their promises to abandon their “shameful customs” and unite to serve the king.<sup>72</sup> Gareth’s conquest and collection of men from across the land, and their union under one strong central force has a clear analogue in the British imperial project, while the clear colour symbolism cannot be ignored in the context of the nineteenth-century science of race. Further details – the Blue Knight’s name is Sir Persante of Inde (India); the Red Knight of the Red Lawns has an elephant tusk as a horn – support this interpretation and, although both descriptions are included in the fifteenth-century Malory version as well, would no doubt have conjured up vague visions of contemporary foes-turned-fellows in the minds of *fin-de-siècle* readers.

One notable feature of the story’s conclusion is the “strange” Sir Ironside’s promise to Gareth and Arthur to abandon his “shameful customs,” and our heroes’ subsequent forgiveness of his previous deeds. These “shameful customs” include hanging the bodies of defeated knights at the entrance to his lands as a warning to those who enter, a practice illustrated by Forbes in a large charcoal drawing (Fig. 10). Forbes represents Gareth and Lynette riding high on horseback through a dark, dense forest; surrounding them are the bodies of several knights hanging from the trees, which emerge gradually out of their dark surroundings to gruesomely surprise the viewer. In the immediate foreground, two large black carrion birds hover over a disembodied head with their claws and beaks at the ready. In contrast, we see Gareth’s reluctance to kill his enemies unless absolutely necessary. The narrative and illustration portray the enemy knight as a barbarian who operates outside the codes of civility maintained by Arthur and his Court. Gareth’s efforts to convince Ironside to abandon these practices reveal the civilizing aims of both Arthur’s Court and the modern British Empire, and by extension, provide a justification for the colonization of other lands and peoples. Gareth’s and Arthur’s generous forgiveness of Ironside’s



10 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *Sir Gareth and the Damsel in the Wood Perilous*, Plate XIII in *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* (London: Edward Everard, 1904), Imprint no. 152. (Photo: © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

previous misdeeds further show that both Court and Empire were built and maintained not only through strength, but mercy. This beneficent ideal, however, also required an imaginative erasure of British involvement in their own “barbaric” practices.

The theme of a harmonious, united empire underlined in the conclusion of *King Arthur's Wood* runs through Arthurian legend. Present in earlier versions of the tales, it was nevertheless one element of the story that required considerable adaptation to its nineteenth-century context, especially in light of contemporary concerns about race, ethnicity, and ancestry in the extended British World. Specifically, the “real” Arthur – a Celtic leader who made his name fighting *against* the Saxons – and his followers had to be smoothly integrated into the popular mythology that glorified Anglo-Saxons as the heroic ancestors of modern Britons. This racial conversion was an important feature of the adaptation of medieval sources for modern times, and key to making them palatable to a nineteenth-century public for whom definitions of Anglo-Saxonness, whiteness, and Britishness were frequently

conflated. Nineteenth-century adaptors of the Arthurian stories justified their use of the Celtic Arthur as a national hero by rewriting history as fiction to show that his revolt against the Saxons ended in peaceful reconciliation and a harmonious, integrated community that was strongly united against the outside world, a resolution that would no doubt have called to mind the current British World.<sup>73</sup> As a Canadian who had previously found her membership in this community contested, perhaps the story held particular resonance for Forbes.

## Conclusion

Two decades after her too-early death from uterine cancer in 1912, Canadian critic Albert Robson described Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes as “a brilliant painter and etcher.” He qualified this praise, however, by remarking that her work “shows little Canadian background, and though by birth a Canadian, she takes her place as an eminent English artist.”<sup>74</sup> Robson succinctly expresses the frustration of categorizing Forbes and her work within the traditional boundaries of nationalist art historical narratives. In her later career, this “wanderer at heart” made a shift from an Impressionist style that was characterized as “foreign” to an engagement with historical and artistic traditions that were specifically identified as British. In light of this shift, *King Arthur’s Wood* might be seen as a claim of belonging in the British World and the British art world made by a colonial-born artist who had begun her career in a liminal position in those same worlds. Viewing issues of race, culture, and heritage through the lens of Victorian medievalism, Forbes effectively resolved the confusion about her identity that marked her early career by looking to the past.

The contemporary popularity of Pre-Raphaelitism did not ensure art historical longevity for the movement. Considered unfashionable for much of the twentieth century, historical and literary subjects were seen as overly narrative when art was moving towards abstraction, as sentimental when shock was valued, and as overtly anti-modern when urban modernity was prized above all.<sup>75</sup> Art historians Elizabeth Prettejohn and Tim Barringer have both noted that a critical and popular distaste for these subjects appeared at the time of the First World War, and continued throughout the twentieth century, a circumstance that they attribute to the powerful hold of modernism – and especially French modernism – on art historical writing.<sup>76</sup> When seen in context, however, it is clear that Forbes’s turn to the past was operating within a contemporary art historical discourse that was engaging with the definition and redefinition of what modern British art was, what it should be, and what she, as a Canadian, could contribute to that tradition. Indeed, this concerted attempt to establish a national school was so successful

that it was to its own detriment when the tide turned once again in the early twentieth century. The victory of French modernism as the only modernism of value meant that this British art was dismissed as provincial and unimportant, an attitude expressed by the painter Vanessa Bell, who (echoing Whistler's own distinction between "the artists" and "the British") wrote that the only cure for what she perceived as the dismal state of the British art world would be for "the English to get outside of their island pretty often."<sup>77</sup>

Likewise, the after-history of *King Arthur's Wood* is a sad one. In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Sir Gareth dies in the final tale: killed by Launcelot accidentally, his death precipitates the dismantling of the Round Table, and the eventual fall of Arthur's realm. A decade after the publication of *King Arthur's Wood*, nineteenth-century medievalism itself fell casualty to the First World War, which was ultimately, as Mark Girouard has called it, "a nightmare parody" of the ideals of Victorian medievalism.<sup>78</sup> Like Myles, Alec Forbes appears to have learned the lessons taught by Sir Gareth of Orkney: in 1915, at the age of twenty-one, he left architecture school and enthusiastically enlisted in the British Army. After a year spent in an officer's post in Britain, Alec was sent to join the fighting on the continent. He was killed after only three weeks at the Western Front.

Stanhope Forbes marked this sad occasion by donating one of his late wife's Shakespearean oil paintings to the young National Gallery of Canada, along with a sizable collection of watercolours, drawings, and etchings, with the agreement that the purchase price of the painting would be given to YMCA and Red Cross war efforts. *The Winter's Tale: When Daffodils Begin to Peer* (1906) (Fig. 11) was received in the land of her birth with excitement: the exchange was reported in the press, which expressed happiness that the work of this "Canadian girl" was being returned to her home, with one reporter writing that "it is gratifying to know that the National Gallery of Canada now possesses a fine representation of the work of one of its greatest artists."<sup>79</sup> With this act, Forbes united the British World through an art object that celebrated a shared white, Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage. At this heightened moment of shared imperial identity between the two countries, he was sure, as he later wrote to the Vancouver Art Gallery when he donated his wife's 1905 *The Woodcutter's Little Daughter* – yet another medievalist painting – that the Canadian "public will love it."<sup>80</sup>

But perhaps Forbes should have not been so confident: the First World War also transformed the relationship between Canada and Britain significantly by providing the opportunity for a uniquely Canadian identity to be expressed on the international stage. This had ramifications in the Canadian art world, which shifted away from the internationalism of the pre-war period to see the rise in prominence of the Group of Seven and the founding of a discipline that could be called "Canadian art history" with



11 | Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *The Winter's Tale: When Daffodils Begin to Peer*, 1906, oil on canvas, 123.9 × 98.4 cm, Purchased 1916, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © National Gallery of Canada)

the 1925 publication of Newton MacTavish's *The Fine Arts in Canada*. It is no coincidence that it was at this same time that Canadian women began to be written out of art historical narratives. This erasure was partly because they were women at a time when the rugged masculinity of Canadian art was held up and celebrated in comparison to what was seen as an overly feminized pre-war tradition. However, the omission of a woman like Forbes from Canadian art history was not simply because she was not seen as the right kind of *artist*, but also partly because as an expatriate, she was not the right kind of *Canadian*. The nationalist approach to Canadian art history discounts the work of artists who worked in the transnational context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperialism. A model of study that examines their work within the context of the "British World," rather than as Canadians or Britons dismantles these boundaries and provides an expanded field of analysis that allows for the inclusion of artists like Forbes who might otherwise slip through the cracks.

#### NOTES

- 1 Review of *King Arthur's Wood*, *Studio* 33 (1905): 270.
  - 2 The book has been digitized by the Hypatia Trust and is available for online purchase. Proceeds from the sale of the book support the work of the Trust. Accessed 30 Sept. 2013, <http://hypatia-trust.org.uk/2013/09/10/king-arthurs-wood-available-again-after-109-years/>
  - 3 Mrs. Lionel BIRCH, *Stanhope Forbes, A.R.A. and Elizabeth Stanhope Forbes, A.R.W.S.* (London: Cassell and Company, 1906), 61.
  - 4 The general facts of Forbes's life are recorded in a dual biography of the artist and her husband; the author, Constance Birch (writing as Mrs. Lionel Birch), was a student at the Newlyn School of Painting, which was founded and run by the artist and her husband (not to be confused with the informal "Newlyn School" group). Forbes herself wrote the chapter covering the years before her marriage; the section about her also includes reprinted articles and reviews, as well as commentary on her life and work written by Birch. A modern biography of the artist, written by Judith Cook and Melissa Hardie, adds considerably to the information contained in the Birch biography. Unless otherwise noted, the dates, titles, locations, and exhibition details given for Forbes's work throughout are those listed by Cook and Hardie in the catalogue raisonné that accompanies their biography. See Judith COOK and Melissa HARDIE, *Singing from the Walls: The Life and Art of Elizabeth Forbes* (Clifton, Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2000).
- Forbes's life can also be traced through the large archive of material left by her husband, now in the collection of the Tate Gallery Archives (London, UK). While her own letters were burned after her death, hundreds of his letters are extant, and give insight into the couple's professional and personal relationships in the years leading up to their marriage.
- 5 M.W., "Lady Artists," *Lady's Pictorial* (April 1891): S26.

- 6 Quoted in COOK and HARDIE, *Singing from the Walls*, 94.
- 7 BIRCH, *Stanhope Forbes*, 60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 55 and 62.
- 9 Elizabeth ARMSTRONG FORBES, “On the Slope of a Southern Hill,” *Studio* 18 (1900): 25–34, and “An April Holiday,” *Studio* 43 (1908): 191–99.
- 10 Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes to Mrs. Brooke Alder, 18 Dec. year unknown. Elizabeth Forbes artist file, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK.
- 11 Marion H. DIXON, “The Art of Mrs. Stanhope Forbes,” *Lady’s Realm* (1904–05).
- 12 Geoff QUILLEY and Kay Dian KRIZ, eds., “Introduction: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660–1830,” *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660–1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 6.
- 13 For Canadian approaches to the theoretical model of the British World, see especially the edited works of Phillip BUCKNER and R. Francis DOUGLAS, including the collections *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration, and Identity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006) and *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005).
- For art historical work dealing with similar issues, see, for example, Julie CODELL, ed., *Transculturation in British Art, 1770–1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); Tim BARRINGER, “A White Atlantic? The Idea of American Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 9 (2009): 1–26; Tim BARRINGER, Geoff QUILLEY, and Douglas FORDHAM, eds., *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); and QUILLEY and KRIZ, *An Economy of Colour*.
- 14 See especially Radhika MOHANRAM, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 15 BIRCH, *Stanhope Forbes*, 60.
- 16 Anne KOVAL, “The ‘Artists’ Have Come Out and the ‘British’ Remain: The Whistler Faction at the Society of British Artists,” in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 93.
- 17 Studies of Forbes and the Newlyn School include Tom CROSS, *The Shining Sands: Artists in Newlyn and St. Ives, 1880–1930* (Tiverton, Devon: Westcountry Books, 1994); Caroline FOX, *Stanhope Forbes and the Newlyn School* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1993); Caroline FOX and Francis GREENACRE, *Painting in Newlyn, 1880–1930* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1985); and Caroline FOX and Francis GREENACRE, *Artists of the Newlyn School, 1880–1900* (Newlyn: Newlyn Orion Art Galleries, 1979).
- 18 Anna Greutzner ROBINS, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 19 Quoted in ROBINS, *A Fragile Modernism*, 36. A decade later, critic Evelyn Blantyre Simpson again turned to the older artist as a point of comparison in his praise of Armstrong’s 1884 etching *The Girl at the Window*, proclaiming that: “To find one to measure it against, you must turn to one of Whistler’s Venice etchings” (“The Paintings and Etchings of Elizabeth Stanhope Forbes,” *Studio* 4:24 [1895]: 191).
- 20 And even Forbes’s contribution was, in 1885 London, seen as too explicitly un-British: the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest declined to purchase the work, claiming that it was “too positively the outcome of a foreign school” (quoted in COOK and HARDIE, *Singing from the Walls*, 72). Forbes had to wait until 1889 to have his *The Health of*

*the Bride* accepted by the Trust, which in turn allowed him the financial stability to marry Armstrong, three years after their initial engagement. Perhaps this initial rejection explains some of Forbes's resistance to the perception of foreignness in the work he was associated with.

- 21 Stanhope Forbes to Elizabeth Armstrong, 26 Dec. 1887. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/89, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA).
- 22 Forbes to Armstrong, 23 Nov. 1886. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/12, TGA; and Forbes to Armstrong, 6 Dec. 1886, Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/18, TGA.
- 23 Forbes to Armstrong, ca. 4 Apr. 1888. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/100, TGA.
- 24 Forbes to Armstrong, 14 Apr. 1888. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/107, TGA.
- 25 Forbes to Armstrong, ca. 4 Apr. 1888. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/100, TGA.
- 26 Forbes to Armstrong, 23 Nov. 1886. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/12, TGA.
- 27 Gabriel P. WEISBERG, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 7–8. For studies of the British reaction to French Impressionism (both negative and positive), see Kenneth MCCONKEY, *Impressionism in Britain* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1995); Kenneth MCCONKEY, *British Impressionism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989); and Anna Greutzner ROBINS, “Two Reactions to French Painting in Britain,” in *Post-Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European Painting*, ed. John House and Mary Anne Stevens (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1979), 178–82.
- 28 KOVAL, “The ‘Artists’ Have Come Out and the ‘British’ Remain,” 93–94.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 30 ROBINS, *A Fragile Modernism*, 34.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 32 Quoted in KOVAL, “The ‘Artists’ Have Come Out and the ‘British’ Remain,” 107.
- 33 Forbes to Armstrong, ca. August/September 1887. Stanhope Forbes collection, 9015/2/2/61, TGA.
- 34 In addition to innumerable studies on specific artists and authors, solid general surveys of the medievalist revival in Britain include classic texts such as Mark GIROUARD, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); and Alice CHANDLER, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).
- 35 Cecilia MORGAN, “A Happy Holiday”: *English Canadians and Transatlantic Tourism, 1870–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 109. This was also true of American travellers to Britain: see especially Christopher MULVEY, *Anglo-American Landscapes: A Study of Nineteenth-Century American Travel Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Alex ZWERDLING, *Improvised Europeans: American Literary Expatriates and the Siege of London* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
- 36 FORBES, “An April Holiday,” 197.
- 37 Emily MURPHY, *The Impressions of Janey Canuck Abroad* (Toronto, 1902), 48.
- 38 ZWERDLING, *Improvised Europeans*, 34–35.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 44–45; see also MULVEY, *Anglo-American Landscapes*, 267.
- 40 See Katie PICKLES, *Female Imperialism and National Identity: Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
- 41 Catherine HALL, “At Home with History: Macaulay and the *History of England*,” in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

- 42 Eric HOBBSBAWM and Terence RANGER, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 43 Inga BRYDEN, *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 6.
- 44 Tim BARRINGER, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13. I employ the term “Pre-Raphaelitism” throughout for consistency, but Elizabeth Prettejohn makes a convincing case to subsume these later developments in British art under the umbrella of Aestheticism (Introduction to *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999], 2–3), while John Christian has called the artists who worked with these subjects and in these styles the “Last Romantics” (*The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art, Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer* [London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1989]).
- 45 Tim BARRINGER, “‘Not a “Modern” as the Word Is Now Understood’? Byam Shaw, Imperialism, and the Poetics of Professional Society,” in *English Art, 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, ed. David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 72.
- 46 BARRINGER, “‘Not a “Modern” as the Word is Now Understood’?,” 76.
- 47 Julie CODELL, “The Artist Colonized: Holman Hunt’s ‘Bio-History’, Masculinity, Nationalism, and the English School,” in *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Ellen Harding (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 221–25. See also BARRINGER, “‘Not a “Modern” as the Word is Now Understood’?,” 76–77; and Laurel BRADLEY, “The ‘Englishness’ of Pre-Raphaelite Painting: A Critical Review,” in *Collecting the Pre-Raphaelites: The Anglo-American Enchantment*, ed. Margaretta Frederick Watson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 199–208.
- 48 “Houses of Today,” *The World*, 10 Sept. 1907. On the popularity of Pre-Raphaelitism in the extended British World, see David LATHAM, ed., *Scarlet Hunters: Pre-Raphaelitism in Canada* (Newcastle, ON: Penumbra Press, 1998); Katharine A. LOCHNAN, Douglas E. SCHOENHERR, and Carole SILVER, eds., *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and his Circle from Canadian Collections* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993); and the essays in Margaretta FREDERICK WATSON, ed., *Collecting the Pre-Raphaelites: The Anglo-American Enchantment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).
- 49 Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.
- 50 BIRCH, *Stanhope Forbes*, 58–59.
- 51 Christine POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art, 1840–1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 9–12.
- 52 The Kelmscott edition of *Le Morte Darthur* was ultimately only published in 1913, after the deaths of both Morris and Burne-Jones.
- 53 Muriel WHITAKER, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 259–65.
- 54 In addition to Forbes, these women include Julia Margaret Cameron, Eleanor Fortesque-Brickdale, Jessie M. King, and Florence Harrison, who all produced elaborate editions of the legends, some on more than one occasion (in 1875, 1905 and 1911, 1903 and 1904, and 1912 and 1914, respectively). Debra Mancoff includes a list of

- published illustrated books with Arthurian subjects, but does not include Forbes's iteration. See Debra MANCOFF, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 330–31. See also WHITAKER, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, Chapter II.
- 55 This exhibition, entitled *Model Children and Other People*, included over sixty works and a catalogue that featured a short essay written by Forbes herself (*Catalogue of an Exhibition of Water-Colours, entitled Model Children and Other People, By Mrs. Stanhope A. Forbes, A.R.W.S.* [London: The Leicester Galleries and Ernest Brown and Phillips, 1904]).
- 56 Jan MARSH and Pamela GERRISH NUNN, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1997), 54.
- 57 BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 5–6; POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail*, 21–22.
- 58 MANCOFF, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*, 3–4; POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail*, 3–4.
- 59 GIROUARD, *The Return to Camelot*, 220–26.
- 60 BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 214–23.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 62 Forbes would presumably have been familiar with Burne-Jones's work, given that his *King Cophetua and the Beggar Girl* (1884) was exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1889, where Forbes won a medal for her own work.
- 63 MANCOFF, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*, 178; POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail*, 77.
- 64 FORBES, *King Arthur's Wood*, 24.
- 65 POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail*, 68–70.
- 66 The phrase is Tennyson's, used to describe a young Sir Galahad, but taken up by Debra Mancoff to describe a larger subset of Arthurian imagery, including representations of Gareth. See Debra MANCOFF, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 102.
- 67 Quoted in POULSON, *The Quest for the Grail*, 68.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 68–69 and 117; GIROUARD, *The Return to Camelot*, 184; and WHITAKER, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, 311.
- 69 FORBES, *King Arthur's Wood*, 25.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 71 BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 215.
- 72 FORBES, *King Arthur's Wood*, 56–57.
- 73 BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 144–50; and BRYDEN, *Reinventing King Arthur*, 34–35.
- 74 Albert ROBSON, *Canadian Landscape Painters* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1932), 92.
- 75 CHRISTIAN, *The Last Romantics*, 18.
- 76 PRETTEJOHN, Introduction to *After the Pre-Raphaelites*, 6; and BARRINGER, “Not a “Modern” as the Word Is Now Understood?,” 64–65.
- 77 Quoted in CHRISTIAN, *The Last Romantics*, 20.
- 78 GIROUARD, *The Return to Camelot*, 289.
- 79 “Group of Pictures to National Art Gallery,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 13 Jan. 1917.
- 80 Stanhope Forbes to the Vancouver Art Gallery, 9 Mar. 1934. Elizabeth Forbes artist file, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

## Une artiste canadienne dans la cour du roi Arthur : Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes et l'invention coloniale de la tradition britannique

SAMANTHA BURTON

En 1904, Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes (1859–1912), peintre et graveuse née au Canada, publie à Londres un livre-cadeau de luxe pour enfants. Intitulé « *King Arthur's Wood: A Fairy Story* » (« la forêt du roi Arthur : un conte de fées »), ce livre, inspiré de l'histoire de Gareth de Sir Thomas Malory, est acclamé par la critique. Malgré les origines coloniales de l'auteure, l'œuvre incarne les traditions typiquement britanniques que sont les légendes arthuriennes et le Préraphaélisme fin de siècle. En effet, le livre représente peut-être l'engagement le plus soutenu de la part d'une artiste canadienne envers les débats entourant la race, la culture et l'empire au Royaume-Uni ainsi que le monde de l'art britannique au tournant du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'ouvrage est également très révélateur de la position de l'artiste à l'égard de ces polémiques. Cette approche ouvertement britannique est d'autant plus remarquable que Mme Forbes passe une grande partie de sa jeunesse sans domicile fixe et entretient, durant les cinq premières années de sa carrière, des liens étroits avec J.A.M. Whistler, artiste controversé antibritannique. Un examen de l'œuvre *King Arthur's Wood* sous l'angle de ces allégeances changeantes permet de mettre au jour un aspect peu étudié de l'œuvre de l'artiste. Il donne également la possibilité de repousser les frontières disciplinaires de l'histoire de l'art des femmes canadiennes durant la période précédant la Première Guerre mondiale, et ce, en situant le champ artistique dans le cadre d'un « monde britannique » élargi.

Née en Ontario en 1859, Elizabeth Armstrong quitte le Canada quatorze ans plus tard pour aller étudier les arts au Royaume-Uni, où elle finit par s'établir de façon permanente, au terme de longues années à voyager en Europe et en Amérique du Nord et après son mariage avec l'artiste Stanhope Forbes. De son vivant, elle jouira d'une solide réputation des deux côtés de l'Atlantique. D'ailleurs, Armstrong et ses critiques reconnaîtront ce style de vie cosmopolite dans des lettres, des articles et d'autres sources, et souligneront fréquemment l'ambiguïté de sa nationalité, la présentant tantôt comme une artiste canadienne, américaine, ou britannique, ou simplement comme une « nomade ».

Dans les années 1880, la participation d'Armstrong au groupe d'avant-garde « Whistler circle » sème une grande controverse. Soutenant le

point de vue esthétique de J.A.M. Whistler et partageant un intérêt pour l'impressionnisme français, ce groupe à caractère non officiel rassemble des artistes qui, tout comme Armstrong et Whistler, sont des expatriés vivant au Royaume-Uni. Durant cette période, les scènes rurales et les représentations de personnages féminins esthétiques décoratifs dans les œuvres d'Armstrong présentent une ressemblance marquée avec le style et l'intention des membres du Whistler circle. Or, cette similarité n'est pas toujours bien perçue. Même lorsqu'ils tentent de se tailler une réputation et de faire accepter leur style comme étant l'école dominante au Royaume-Uni, Armstrong et ses collègues se heurtent à l'hostilité de la critique, du public et du milieu artistique, qui perçoivent dans leurs œuvres un caractère étranger. L'un de ces artistes antagonistes est le futur mari d'Armstrong, dont l'école « Newlyn » prône un naturalisme plus conservateur que le style national moderne. À ce titre, les liens personnels et professionnels qu'entretient Armstrong avec le Whistler circle et le groupe de Forbes durant les premières années de sa carrière placent l'artiste en plein centre des débats contemporains sur le style artistique et l'identité nationale au Royaume-Uni.

Au cours des décennies suivantes, Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes apaise les vives appréhensions du public à l'égard de son identité et de son œuvre en abandonnant la modernité convenue de ses collègues du Whistle circle pour se tourner vers le passé. Néanmoins, les changements survenant dans le monde des arts font en sorte que l'artiste d'origine canadienne demeure au cœur des débats sur la « britannicité » de l'art britannique. Plus précisément, *King Arthur's Wood*, de par son thème littéraire et son style visiblement inspiré de prédécesseurs tels que Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones et George Watts, s'inscrit dans un mouvement artistique considéré par les contemporains comme étant typiquement britannique : le Préraphaélisme fin de siècle. Ce retour en force éclectique des styles et des sujets propres au milieu du siècle est une tentative délibérée – et très réussie – d'instaurer une tradition artistique nationale authentique, « du terroir ». Le livre est aussi manifestement influencé par une tendance plus large, celle du médiévalisme victorien. La célébration de l'époque médiévale et du début de l'ère moderne, considérées comme des périodes de stabilité des classes, des genres et des races, constitue une réponse réactionnaire à l'alarmante confusion sociale du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et évoque une riche mythologie capable de réunir un public de plus en plus hétérogène autour d'un héritage culturel commun. Pour les Blancs coloniaux membres du monde britannique élargi, comme Forbes, l'engagement à l'égard de ces récits populaires inspirés par l'histoire et l'histoire de l'art sert également à affirmer leur propre place dans cette lignée.

Le thème arthurien exploité dans *King Arthur's Wood* occupe une place importante dans ces discours. À cette époque centrée sur l'unification, le roi Arthur devient une icône nationaliste pratique, alors que le mythe de

Camelot sert de solide modèle de fondation pour l'Empire britannique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Le caractère essentiellement fictif de l'histoire entourant le roi Arthur et l'âge d'or de son règne n'est pas un obstacle à l'utilisation métaphorique de ces récits. Au contraire, le manque de sources historiques fiables rend ces légendes facilement adaptables et extrêmement durables.

En particulier, la légende de Sir Gareth, adaptée par Forbes, est employée encore plus ouvertement à titre de métaphore pour symboliser le projet impérial et la célébration de ce dernier. La plus grande partie du récit décrit le combat de Gareth contre d'autres chevaliers, alors que celui-ci tente de les convaincre d'abandonner leurs coutumes barbares et de les rassembler sous la grande force unificatrice de la Table ronde. Le thème de la réconciliation entre divers peuples et de la création d'un empire harmonieux et uni contre le monde extérieur, mis en relief dans *King Arthur's Wood*, aurait sans doute évoqué pour les gens de l'époque l'état actuel du monde britannique. Cette histoire revêt une signification particulière pour Armstrong qui, en tant que Canadienne, avait auparavant trouvé sa place dans cette communauté contestée.

Si Elizabeth Armstrong centre sa pratique sur des traditions historiques et artistiques résolument britanniques, tentant ainsi de résoudre les premières interrogations sur la place qui lui revient dans le monde de l'art britannique, la carrière transnationale de l'artiste présente néanmoins des difficultés persistantes pour l'historien de l'art du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Notamment, sa vie et son œuvre mettent en évidence les lacunes fondamentales des rouages nationalistes du récit de l'histoire de l'art moderne au Canada. Bien que son lieu de naissance nous permette aujourd'hui de considérer véritablement Armstrong comme une *artiste* canadienne, il demeure beaucoup plus complexe de déterminer si l'on peut désigner une œuvre telle que *King Arthur's Wood* comme étant de l'*art* canadien. Par ailleurs, il est encore plus ardu de juger de la pertinence et de l'utilité de ces catégories lorsqu'on étudie un artiste travaillant dans le contexte transnational propre à l'impérialisme du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il est donc nécessaire d'adopter un cadre méthodologique qui prend en considération ces frontières mouvantes et qui tient compte du fait que les artistes comme Elizabeth Armstrong, plutôt que d'être confinés à des limites territoriales, évoluent dans des réseaux qui s'étendent au-delà de l'Atlantique et à l'échelle du territoire que l'on allait nommer le « monde britannique ». Pour saisir le modèle théorique du monde britannique, il faut visualiser un ensemble de sites représentés par des points mobiles, répartis sur un réseau élargi formé de connexions (souvent inégales) entre les classes, les races et des aspects sociaux, culturels, économiques, linguistiques et autres. Étant donné la situation précaire du Canada entre la Confédération et la Première Guerre mondiale, ce pays offre

des pistes particulièrement intéressantes pour explorer de nouveaux modèles permettant de concevoir l'histoire de l'art autrement que dans un cadre nationaliste classique.

Le livre *King Arthur's Wood* ainsi que son auteure constituent des objets d'analyse idéaux dans ce contexte. Elizabeth Armstrong, ainsi qu'un grand nombre de ses collègues durant la période précédant la Première Guerre mondiale, n'occupent pas la place qui leur revient dans l'histoire de l'art canadien. En effet, non seulement n'entraient-elles pas dans la bonne catégorie d'*artiste* en raison de leur statut de femmes, mais aussi n'appartenaient-elles pas, en tant qu'expatriées, à la bonne classe de *Canadiens*. Notre modèle d'étude, qui permet d'examiner leurs œuvres sous l'angle du « monde britannique » plutôt que de les considérer comme étant soit « canadiennes » soit « britanniques », abolit ces frontières et propose un champ d'analyse élargi incluant des artistes qui seraient autrement négligés.