



## Painting Place: The Life and Work of David B. Milne



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# Painting Place

The Life and Work of  
David B. Milne

DAVID P. SILCOX

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This book is part of a multi-volume project on the work of David B. Milne that also includes a two-volume *Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, a CD-ROM version of the catalogue with all the works in colour, and a volume devoted to Milne's writings. Many individuals, corporations, foundations, and government agencies have contributed to this large undertaking. Their generous support of the project has made publication of this book and its companion volumes possible.

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# Preface



**D**URING HIS CAREER, which spanned the first half of the twentieth century, David Brown Milne created three thousand paintings and as many colour drypoints, etchings, and drawings, and wrote over a million and a half words. His paintings and his writings made a major contribution to Canadian and American art of his time, yet neither are as well known as they deserve. This book, which is both a biography and an analysis of Milne's art, is an introduction to Milne the man, the painter, the printmaker, and the writer, and a tribute to his splendid gifts. I hope it will help to draw attention to him and give his particular genius the prominence it warrants.

In this study I have included as much detail about Milne and his work as good sense and curiosity, braced by admiration, allow. Artists and collectors are eager to know as much as possible about Milne, and their enthusiasm has persuaded me to think that more, not less, is better. Thus, I have quoted liberally from Milne's writings – his painting notes, letters, articles, diaries, and an unfinished autobiography – both because they illuminate his paintings and his ideas better than I can, and because, rare among painters, he is such a fine writer. One of Milne's unrealized ambitions was to collect his views and theories about art into a book so that his ideas, and the works that illustrate them, might be studied. His own revealing images and words have made it possible to draw a portrait of Milne's work and life. Few painters have documented their work so informally and candidly, and so profusely, as Milne and, at the same time, have been talented enough to engage our interest. The journals of Delacroix and van Gogh's letters come to mind: Milne is in this company.

Most of Milne's works were modest in size, and his method was intimate. His paintings reflect a sharp intelligence in organization and a rare sensibility of spirit in execution. They are meant to be seen and lived with privately; there are few weighty 'exhibition paintings,' such as many artists attempt, and by which they sometimes gain attention. Milne believed that large paintings were seldom successful, just as Edgar Allan Poe believed that there was no such thing as a long poem. Milne strove for power and simplicity, preferring to get a few elements absolutely right rather than a host of details almost right. 'In painting,' he wrote, 'I only count up to five.'<sup>1</sup> Milne admired the vitality of the new American art of the early twentieth century but, like John Marin, he was not in tune with the mid-century ambition for largeness of scale.

Milne also felt acutely that the painting tradition that he committed himself to serve demanded from him, in the twentieth century, pictures of immediate impact and rapid execution. The Old Masters created 'browsing' pictures that could be wandered through at leisure and whose secrets

and delights were only slowly divulged. For his times Milne thought that instant and total impact was called for. He considered painting 'the lightning art,' 'a drawing speeded up, intensified.'<sup>2</sup> He defined it best in a letter to a friend: 'The thing that makes a picture is the thing that makes dynamite – compression. It isn't a fire in the grass; it's an explosion. Everything must hit at once.'<sup>3</sup> Three-dimensional perspective, another established convention, was not 'a necessary element in picture making.' The convention was useful or important only if it contributed to the aesthetic effect. The same was true of colour: Milne thought that 'harmonizing and contrasting colours [were] a physical, not an aesthetic classification, of minor importance in painting.'<sup>4</sup> Milne saw in Cézanne's paintings that it was the shapes that were emphasized, not the colour, not the perspective, not the illusion of three dimensions. While the convention of perspective is 'sometimes used effectively,' Milne wrote, 'more often it has been not an inspiration but a dead weight dragging on the imagination. It has too often been used to create an illusion, not a reality.'<sup>5</sup>

Milne gave a higher priority to the processes of his imagination than to the products of it. Frequently he referred to his paintings, not as his first object or concern, but as the by-products of his aesthetic and imaginative life, the tangible record of mental and emotional experiences. His paintings flowed from living and working in accordance with his aesthetic beliefs, and they were both a record and a metaphor of these beliefs, rather than something separate. 'Painting,' Milne believed, 'isn't a matter of skill, a thing learned, but the outcome of one's life.'<sup>6</sup>

Milne also believed that art was like gold, or religion: it was there for those who took the trouble to find it. The search, with its rewards, was a lifetime's commitment, and depended upon one's 'conception of life.' 'Art is not a means of documenting or recording something other than itself, for art works from the known to the unknown ... it is a journey in an unknown land without an objective.'<sup>7</sup>

Milne was a man of both passion and intellect. For him thinking clearly and feeling deeply were both necessary to the production of great art. He had to get 'horsepower behind [his] emotion and intelligence,' he wrote. And he believed that the 'greatest qualities in art [were] courage, feeling, intelligence.'<sup>8</sup> His later work conveys a droll benevolence that is absent from his earlier work. He had a good sense of humour and he was a compelling conversationalist who dominated any discussion with original ideas and shrewd criticisms. His breadth of understanding was remarkable, and underneath his discourse ran a passion for life illuminated by art.

My own awareness of Milne began in 1957 or 1958. While I was still a student at the University of Toronto, I came to know Douglas Duncan and Alan Jarvis, two people central to Milne's reputation. Duncan was still Milne's agent and dealer and was then in the last decade of his life, a string-bean of a man, over six feet tall and thin, with wire-rimmed glasses and shaggy eyebrows. An unredeemable eccentric, his mail accumulated, unopened, in the back room of the Picture Loan Society, which he ran for most of his life, and lay over four feet deep across most of the room when he died. He encouraged me to write about Milne and to believe that I could help him finish his catalogue of Milne's work. Jarvis, often described as the most gifted and charming man of his generation, had just left his position as the director of the National Gallery of Canada, and he was unequivocal about Milne's superiority and durability – he was probably the

first person in Canada to recognize Milne's genius and appraise it accurately. He spoke of Milne's intelligence and passion, and he was no less enthusiastic about Milne's originality, toughness, and scope. Jarvis also encouraged me to write about Milne.

At Hart House at the University of Toronto in 1962 I administered a retrospective exhibition of Milne's paintings selected by Duncan. I was in charge of borrowing, insuring, advertising, hanging, and publicizing the exhibition. The show was stunning, and I spent hours, usually after the gallery was closed, basking in the aura of Milne's paintings. The enormous range of his work over nearly forty years of production was impressive, and all of it captivated me. Artists I was then getting to know were more enthusiastic about Milne's work than about any other painter of his generation, save, perhaps, Tom Thomson.

While I was working at the Canada Council in 1966, Ralph Allen, a fine painter and director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, invited me to write a substantial introduction for a travelling exhibition of Milne's work that the gallery was mounting to mark Canada's centenary in 1967. In the course of my research my appetite for further and deeper knowledge of Milne was whetted.

At the Canada Council between 1965 and 1970 I was in daily touch with Canada's best artists, who thought that Milne was the best painter Canada had ever produced (usually themselves excepted). Having one's opinion confirmed was pleasant, but their near-unanimity on this point was not lost on me. It wasn't only that Milne produced paintings that excited the people who painted professionally, but it was quite clear that, for painters, Milne was *the* great achiever, *the* great practitioner – he represented the essence of what it meant to be a painter. Always, even in his less than great works, Milne's line was energetic, his colours odd, but original and appropriate to the task at hand, and his purpose true. It was as if, had he been a singer, he had the clearest and most moving voice, the greatest musicality, and absolute pitch. His work appeals to artists because in it they recognize the quintessence of their craft and their art.

Duncan had mentioned my interest in Milne's work to the artist's son. After Duncan died in June 1968, David Milne Jr asked if I was still interested in completing Duncan's catalogue of Milne's work. We met to discuss the matter, and at the end of 1969 I started in, beginning with transcriptions of the letters and documents in the Milne family papers and those in the Dominion Archives (now the National Archives of Canada). But of course I was blissfully ignorant of the pitfalls and obstacles that lay ahead, to say nothing of the vast quantity of material available and the incredible complexity of the issues inherent in it. Before the next year was out, David Jr had become so interested in his father's work, an interest he had not been able to pursue while Duncan maintained firm control over the estate, that we agreed to throw out the earlier agreement and do the work on the catalogue raisonné together. He was just as blithe as I was about the extent of the mission we were launched upon: we confidently expected to complete it by 1972.

I began to write what eventually turned out to be this book in the summer of 1973, working with little more than a vague idea of what scope, level of detail, or interpretation of the material might be desirable. All I knew then was that Milne's life was an exemplary one for artists, and that how he developed and applied his aesthetic ideas was worth writing about. With a week or two of work here and there in the intervening years, I had

assembled a manuscript of fair proportions by 1980, but I wasn't at all happy with it. The late Alvin Balkind, Ronald Bloore, Shirley Gibson, John Newlove, and Craig Oliver, to all of whom I am indebted for comments about this earliest version of the manuscript, convinced me to throw out what I had and start again. I have received much editorial assistance in my work on this biography, beginning with that of Paula Goepfert in 1982 and Diane Mew in 1992.

My friend William Toye, retired Editorial Director of Oxford University Press Canada (who knew Douglas Duncan, from whom he bought a Milne watercolour and a drypoint in the 1950s), helped me greatly in the long, final stage of finishing this book. His suggestions were invaluable.

Over the last twenty-five years, on and off, David Milne Jr and I have worked together, gathering, analysing, and checking all the material to prepare the vast two-volume *Catalogue Raisonné* of Milne's paintings, the first such work for any Canadian artist. We are the first people to have gone through all the documents pertaining to Milne, most of it unpublished and generally unavailable, and to have seen nearly all the paintings. We have been able to correct mistakes in dates made by Milne himself and by Duncan, his agent and apologist for thirty years. In this book I have been at pains to indicate doubt when there is doubt, and to make assertions only when there is evidence. I have tried to compensate for my unabashed adulation of this fine artist, but like an earlier critic, Graham McInnes, I find it 'difficult to speak in moderation.'

The Milne family has been generous in making all the material left by Milne (over seventy-five big three-ring binders) available to me and to other researchers. They have insisted that any account of Milne's life be as truthful and direct as possible and have not asked to have any facts suppressed or interpretations changed. I wish to express my thanks to them for this freedom.

Hart Massey, who, when he was a boy of sixteen, was inspired by Milne, generously made the Massey family records available without restriction and he and his wife, Melody, encouraged me at every stage.

My students at York University, where I gave a seminar on Milne in 1976–7, were challenging and stimulating and I owe them more than they perhaps imagine they owe me: especially John O'Brian, who has since written perceptively about Milne and contributed substantially to my ideas about Milne's work; and Liz Wylie, who assisted with the *Catalogue Raisonné* for five years, and made myriad wise and useful suggestions.

Elizabeth Driver, who also laboured for years on the *Catalogue Raisonné*, was kind enough to add to her bibliographic and cataloguing duties by reading the biography, editing the notes, and making many corrections and helpful improvements.

I owe a debt larger than I can ever express or repay to cherished friends who, through their constant belief in, and encouragement of, my work on Milne, propelled me on, night after night, weekend after weekend, year after year: Iain and Louise Baxter, Hugh and Jane Faulkner, Douglas and Maudie Fullerton, Charles and Michiko Gagnon, Yves and Germaine Gaucher, Ted and Phyllis Godwin, George Anderson and Charlotte Gray, Peter Herrndorf and Eva Czigler, Joseph and Marie Intaschi, Tim and Susan Kotcheff, Ken and Joanne Lochhead, Gerd Mairandres, Neil and Laurie McPhail, Iris Nowell, Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt, Rose Regal, Robert and Cecil Rabinovitch, Jack and Doris Shadbolt, Gordon and Marion Smith, Takao Tanabe, Shirley Cull Thomson, Irene Turrin, Don Wall,

Norman and Nina Wright; the late Joan Coleman, Betty Wall, and Johnny and Bea Wayne; and the many collectors, dealers, and art gallery officials who admire Milne almost as much as I do. I particularly want to thank Fraser Elliott, Arthur Gelber, Tim Griffin, Ruth McCuaig, Bill McLean, Robert Ramsay, Kathleen Richardson, and Gerry Sheff for their support, spiritual and material, when it was most needed. Stan Bevington of the irreplaceable Coach House was always there to discuss design issues and to make sure that my aim never dropped below the highest standards. Mimi Fullerton also helped set the ambition to do things the way Milne deserved. The Milne and Feheley families invited me to retreat to their summer cottages for periods of uninterrupted work.

I had my eyes opened further in discussing Milne's work with another great artist, a friend and colleague, the late Harold Town, who had as shrewd a critical eye as Milne, and as great a fondness for Milne's art as I have. Some of the observations on which I pride myself may have been stolen from him, and if he were here, he'd be sure to point them out – and claim a few others. Noting Milne's unequalled ability to leave things out of a picture and still have a powerful, animated composition with all essentials, Town called Milne 'the master of absence.'

I thank my employers at the Canada Council and York University, both of whom allowed me to carry out various parts of this huge project as part of my regular work. Over the years I was helped invaluablely by my secretaries Paulette Charette, Margaret MacDonald, Judith John, and Sheila McDermott. I would also like to thank Jack Nichols of Toronto and John Boyle of Elsinore, Ontario (near Milne's birthplace), for permitting me to reproduce their portraits of Milne. The superb staff at the University of Toronto Press, Bill Harnum, Joan Bulger, Will Rueter, Peter Scaggs, and Cindy Hall, deserve my gratitude for their determination to make this a better book in every way. Their colleagues of much earlier days, Allan Fleming and Ian Montagnes, were also instrumental in coaxing the project toward a conclusion.

In a way, the long time that it has taken to complete this book (and its companion volumes) has allowed me to develop a deeper and more knowledgeable attitude to Milne and his art, tempered by greater experience and, I hope, wisdom. My admiration for his work is, if anything, more profound than ever.

My ambitions to scholarship are modest, but I would like to acknowledge the friendship and inspiration of three great Canadian teachers and scholars whom I came to know at Victoria College in Toronto: Northrop Frye, Kathleen Coburn, and John M. Robson, all, alas, now deceased. I like to think that this book is a witness to the fact that the many years they taught, guided, and encouraged students like me were not in vain. Perhaps partly because of their help years ago I eventually found myself at Massey College completing this task in the most conducive atmosphere imaginable. Professor Frye had agreed to write a foreword to this volume, and I regret that the length of time it has taken to complete the book has deprived readers of his comments on Milne's long career.

This book comes too late to offer to those I wanted most to please: my father, the Reverend A. Phillips Silcox; my mentor Peter Dwyer; and my friend Alan Jarvis, who first suggested that I write about his favourite artist, David Milne.

My wife, Linda Intaschi, a steadfast friend, spurred me on when I was flagging and inspired me if I became despondent. Her suggestions for

this volume made it much better and her help with the *Catalogue Raisonné* was also crucial. Without her constant support I would not have finished the whole task. This book is for her.

David P. Silcox  
Massey College, Toronto, 1996



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Feeling is the power that drives art. There doesn't seem to be a more understandable word for it, though there are others that give something of the idea: aesthetic emotion, quickening, bringing to life. Or call it love; not love of man or woman or home or country or any material thing, but love without an object – intransitive love.

David B. Milne, 'Feeling in Painting,' 1948



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# Mother's Garden

## Burgoyne and Paisley

### 1882–1903



DAVID MILNE BELIEVED that a child's earliest experiences set lifelong patterns. When his friend Donald Buchanan wrote a book about the painter James Wilson Morrice in 1936, Milne chided him for not delving deeper into Morrice's childhood years.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Milne wanted to know more about the early life of Tom Thomson, whose paintings he also admired.<sup>2</sup> He knew that the experiences of the child accounted in some way for the paths taken later in life. But Milne himself could not remember, or even guess, what in his own childhood pushed him along his adult track of discovery. 'There has never seemed to be any adequate explanation,' he wrote.<sup>3</sup> He felt that where one was born was probably insignificant, as he wrote later to Alice and Vincent Massey, but that 'race and family go very deep.'<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life he drew a parallel between his own Spartan aesthetic goals and his Scottish ancestry, pursuing what he called 'the Scotch motive' or 'economy of means,' by which he meant making the largest impact with the least material.

David Brown Milne was the tenth and last child of a poor family, and had the legendary advantage of beginning life in a log cabin. He was born on 8 January 1882 in a small log farmhouse near the hamlet of Burgoyne in Bruce County, Ontario. His parents had immigrated to Canada, via Boston, from Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1870.<sup>5</sup> They moved to Burgoyne after two years in Collingwood, Ontario. In Milne's memory his father William was a fleeting presence, 'coming in at noon on stormy days with icicles on his beard ... [with] waterproof boots and harness [treated] with melted tallow and lamp black.'<sup>6</sup> William's obituary, when he died in 1921 at the age of eighty-seven, noted that he was a devoted gardener, an avid reader, and had long been deaf. Perhaps his deafness or his work (he worked a nearby farm for an owner named Brown – from whom David's middle name came) kept him from having a determining role in his son's life. It was said that physically David strongly resembled his father, although the one drawing purporting to be of William does not show this. In any case, Milne's attachment to his mother was sovereign.

Mary Milne (née Divortay) was both stern and vivacious, taller than her husband and her son, intelligent, widely read, deeply religious, and, in her own domestic way, imaginative and creative. Her tableaux in dried leaves, flowers, and mosses always won prizes at local fairs, and Milne emulated her with his first paintings – 'on clam shells, and tin plates and maybe toadstools.'<sup>7</sup> To console herself, perhaps, for the early deaths of her two previous children, she kept David at home with her until he was nearly ten years old and well past the usual age for starting school. From her example Milne inherited the habit of hard work and an abiding love of flowers, qualities also credited to his father. When Mary Milne died in 1922, at the



*William Milne, Milne's father,  
c. 1893*



*Profile of a Man in a Straw Hat,  
c. 1902, ink drawing, 28.0 x 20.4  
(11 x 8), possibly Milne's portrait of  
his father*

age of eighty-one, a year after her husband, the writer of her obituary commented: 'As a rule, lovers of flowers are lovers of humanity. She was no exception to this rule.'<sup>8</sup> Milne thought his mother also had a 'repressed leaning toward literature.' In her favourite stories, he recalled, 'material success did not figure': her heroes pursued spiritual ideals and goals and did not bother with such practical things as buying insurance or making money.

David's siblings were all much older than he. The senior Milnes came from neighbouring villages in Aberdeenshire, Udney and Fyvie (where they married). William (Willie), the first son, was born in Scotland in 1862; he was followed by James (Jim), Isabel (Belle), and Charles (Charlie). Four more brothers and a sister were born in Canada: John, Frank, Robert, Mary, and Arthur. The last two died in infancy, leaving Robert (Bob), the brother next to David in age, still eight years older. David's parents were already in their forties when he was born. The differences in age between David and his brothers and sister made him the family favourite, and the apple of his parents' eyes.

Milne's recollections of his childhood in the 'grey, weather-beaten farmhouse' on lot 19, concession 10, Saugeen Township,<sup>9</sup> were unusually specific. Sharply engraved in his mind were the images and contours of the countryside:

A nice place to be born in, at least to grow in, thrilling, mysterious, exciting place. On the back [of the farm], along the edge of Black's bush, there was a hill and from the top of a stump on that hill we could see mostly everything, our own fields and barn and part of the house, Finnie's pasture and berry patch, another farm, and then the valley through which the Saugeen River flowed, Brown's farm [where his father worked] very small and faint, and beyond it sand hills and a long, straight streak of blue, sometimes with a white moving speck on it, Lake Huron. From that stump for the first time, I was brought face to face with Infinity where anything might be and anything might happen.<sup>10</sup>

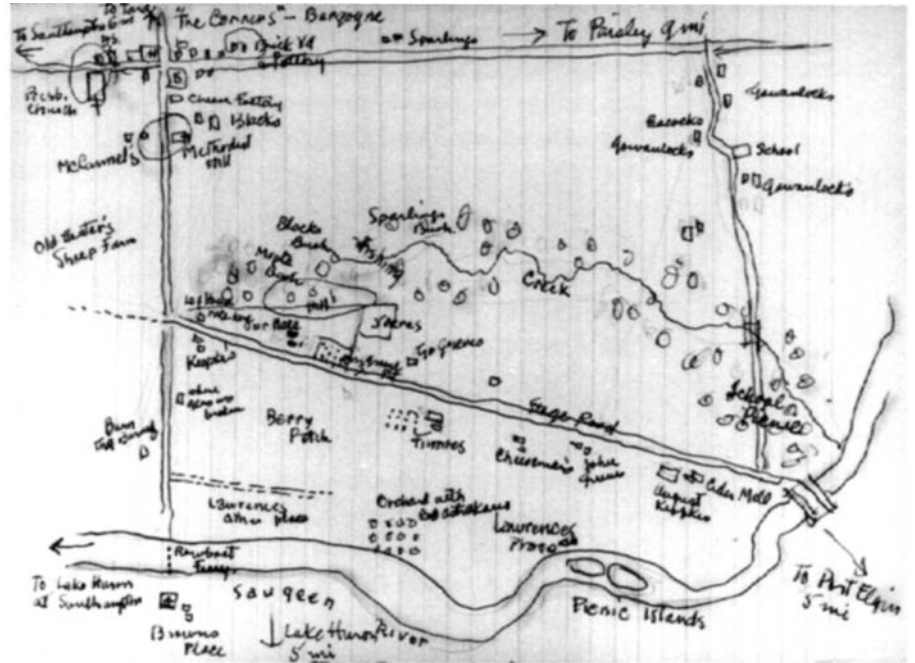
Glowing with colour, beds of flowers surrounded their house in thoughtful array. Milne's memory of them was

clear, vivid, scented and dewy. I remember where the red roses were and where the white, the paths and grass plots still hold their geometric precision. The new shoots of spiny roses and lilies of the valley push up through the ground with photographic clearness. Anything that had to do with flowers interested my mother, planting and digging and hoeing and weeding and watering. Since I did not often have other children to play with I followed my mother round a good part of the time and soon knew the flower garden well and soon found some of my mother's delight in it. I have never heard this love of flowers very satisfactorily explained. I think we go to flowers as we go to art, because both are useless. We do not reach out to either as an aid in our struggle for existence. Our devotion to either or both is a statement of faith, a declaration that for us there is more to life than mere continuance, it is good for itself, without purpose, that heaven is not far away and shadowy and unreal, but here, now and very real.<sup>11</sup>

These things – the house, the barn, the hills, the fields, the gardens, the bush, the orchard, and the creeks that made their way down to the Saugeen River – were the heart and shape of Milne's early life. Indeed, their imprint on his visual imagination lasted his whole life and moulded his way of seeing. When he was nearly sixty, and thinking and writing about his



Mary Milne, Milne's mother, c. 1893



Milne's map of Burgoyne, drawn from memory in 1940

early life, he drew a map of Burgoyne with every detail of the places and buildings he had known as a boy.

In the winter, his favourite season, flowers were the patterns etched by frost on the window panes or the structure of snowflakes. David assisted nature by pressing pennies and keys against the panes to make his own compositions. At night when he was small, despite storms and cold, he slept, secure and warm, in a wooden box behind the stove. His strongest childhood memory was not of his landscape in summer, but of the long winter days that he spent at home with his mother, when he lived in a child's fantasy world, drawing and painting as children do:

I had the usual period of children's drawings, moons and stars and houses and Jerusalem cherry trees [they had one]. Done in watercolour on the blank ruled pages of a small almanac. They had only one remembered characteristic. They were heavy, the watercolour was applied as thick as it would go. Probably no more substantial moons and suns were ever painted.<sup>12</sup>

When Milne later looked back on these early expressions of intense emotion, he considered them to be 'the most truly personal things to be done for twenty years.'<sup>13</sup>

David received his early education from his family, and from the life around him. He listened raptly to his mother's stories of her life in Scotland, recounted in her Celtic accent. When the Milnes' Scots landlord at Burgoyne, Will Hogg, lodged with them for a while, he added his own yarns about Scotland. David recalled that Hogg taught him to read and write – although his mother must have had a hand in this. Each day David waited for the return from school or work of his brothers and sister. His speech imitated his mother's, and when he announced that 'the loons aire coomin' hame ta nicht' (the boys are coming home tonight), his brothers, who had learned North American inflections, teased him about his accent. From then on he spoke 'Canadian' English, charmed though he always



*David Milne, about age eleven, c. 1893*

was by the Scottish burr.<sup>14</sup> The local people pronounce the name 'Milne' as 'Mil'un,' but when he was in Scotland after the First World War, Milne noted that his name was pronounced 'Mill' or 'Mills' there, as it had been by the 'country folk in Canada.'

In the fields and woods David learned about flowers, mushrooms, and wild animals; he caught frogs and fish in Snake Creek or Burgoyne Creek, both nearby;<sup>15</sup> on the farm he watched calves, colts, and piglets being born and raised. Even the gravel pit was a museum where David saw 'more strange and interesting things' than when he later visited real museums. His brother Bob took him to a nearby tract where land clearing was going on, and

showed me about elm root smoking. There were great piles of logs and brush burning for days and he took me back to see them. Dried roots of the elm have pores running through them and smoke can be sucked through them. He picked a section of elm root about the length and thickness of a small cigar, lit it at the burning logs and set about some furious smoking. Me too. Very nice and very smoky and doesn't make anybody sick. I suppose he introduced me to other bits of childhood lore, though such things as basswood whistles, pea shooters and catapults seem to me to have come later, in school days. Anyway, there always seemed to be some trifling with the forbidden in Bob's leading.<sup>16</sup>

Bob was also blamed for taking David fishing on the Sabbath (a taboo) and setting him on a precarious log from which he fell into the creek, for which both were punished.

The neighbours on either side of the Milnes' rented farm near Burgoyne provided a dramatic contrast in living. The Scottish Finnies were church-going, stalwart, lawful, organized, and dull, but on the wall in their front room hung a Sir Edwin Landseer print of a stag and a depiction of the Battle of Waterloo – both of which piqued David's curiosity and provided one of his earliest encounters with art. The Low Dutch Koepke household, on the other side, was exotic and outlandish by Scottish Presbyterian standards.<sup>17</sup> Alien foods – such as sauerkraut, schmeercase, stinkcase, and spicy wursts – could be sampled there. (What the Koepkes, being German, thought of porridge and haggis, or of the oatmeal bread Milne's mother made on top of the stove, is not known.)<sup>18</sup>

Games at the Koepkes' were more exciting and fearful [than at the Finnies']. Windows in vacant houses might be broken and cats were occasionally hanged over beams in the barn. These were thrilling adventures. There was no feeling of guilt or pity at the time, not until retribution caught up with us. I don't remember what my punishments for these affairs were when they became known, but the punishment of the Koepke boys made a deep impression on my mind. The offender was sent out to the orchard to cut a switch and with this he was whipped, while the rest of us looked on in delicious terror.<sup>19</sup>

From the Finnies David learned about conformity and regulation; from the Koepkes about freedom and danger. He sensed the value in both these approaches to life, and both guided him as an artist. Rules sometimes had to be broken, and in his childhood some form of punishment 'might always be expected.'<sup>20</sup> He also knew about hard work and he remembered 'hoeing potatoes while other boys played lacrosse.'<sup>21</sup>

When he was ten, David began his formal education by attending the



*The Milne home on Orchard Avenue in Paisley, built c. 1893*



*Dove, c. 1902, ink drawing, 5.2 × 9.5 (3 3/4 × 2), in Milne's copy of the New Testament*

Gowanlock school – or u.s.s. (Union School Section) No. 7 Saugeen and Arran to use the municipal nomenclature – about three kilometres (two miles) away. Although the building still stands close by lands owned by the Gowanlock family, its records have been lost and the length of David's attendance there cannot be verified. At that time the school year began in January, and in the wintertime David's feet were bundled into several pairs of socks, without shoes or boots – an odd but sensible protection against dry snow. On special occasions, and in warmer weather, he often wore a kilt. 'I have no reason to believe that I sprung into life as a full-fledged Scotchman,' he wrote later, 'though both my parents were Scotch and the first memory I have of myself I was wearing kilts and proud of them.'<sup>22</sup>

David could not have attended the rural school for long because his family soon moved a few miles south to the town of Paisley,<sup>23</sup> where his brother Jim had built a successful business as a painter and paperhanger. The older Milne sons built for their parents a commodious brick house with a small brick cottage or workshop behind it (where Jim Milne later lived), at what is now 315 Orchard Street at the corner of George Street on the edge of town, and on the west bank of Willow Creek, which is no longer in evidence. The house was split down the middle as a duplex so the senior Milnes could live on one side and earn rental income (\$12 a month in 1912) from the adjoining half.<sup>24</sup>

The Milnes were rigorous Presbyterians. Stern discipline, hard work, moral uprightness, daily readings from the Bible, and mandatory attendance at three church services every Sunday were the family's staple diet at Burgoyne and later in Paisley. In 1889 David received as a Christmas gift from his brother Frank a copy of the New Testament, in which he drew a dove of peace.<sup>25</sup> As a young adult, Milne taught Sunday School and was also a leader of the Young People's Association in the congregation at Paisley. But, according to his wife Patsy, he 'wouldn't go near a church after he got to New York.'<sup>26</sup> Later he himself admitted: 'I never go to church and seldom vote.'<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the adult Milne was a profoundly religious man, with a slight penchant for the sterner justice of the Old Testament in his attitudes, although he linked the spirit of the New Testament to aesthetic excitement and in a late fantasy painting depicted Christ gazing (approvingly) at a Milne painting. Like his mother, Milne could recite Scripture freely and at great length. Out of this familiarity grew his staunch belief that the parables of the Bible were not meant to describe the past but to inform the present.

Milne had blunt, thick fingers, a snub nose, and the short stocky frame of his Scottish ancestors – his height was about 165 centimetres (five feet, five inches). His voice was soft and high in timbre. He thought of himself as timid and sensitive, and as a 'slow ripener,' but he was capable of being easy and gregarious.<sup>28</sup> From his family he inherited a keen sense of frugality and a stubborn grip on life at the precarious edge of poverty. Mary Milne's tales of her life in Scotland, no doubt recounted with detailed relish, stirred his interest in his origins. When Milne visited Aberdeenshire in 1919, he found himself (he said) as much at home as if he had lived there. He walked along footpaths his mother had taken and, as much for his own interest as his mother's, made notes on various Milnes and Divortays buried in the churchyards at Fyvie and Udney.

Perceiving exceptional qualities in her son, Mary Milne insisted that David receive a more extensive education than her other children. With financial assistance from his older brothers, especially Jim, he was able to



George A. Reid, *The Berry Pickers*,  
c. 1890, oil, 167.6 × 127.0 (66 × 50)



*The Model School class, Walkerton, 1900, David Milne in the back row*

finish high school, he and his brother Charlie being the only ones to do so. David quickly made up for lost time. His success at the junior high school in Paisley was recorded in the *Paisley Advocate* on 26 August 1897:

Davy Milne, of Paisley, made a record of which any boy should be proud at the late departmental examinations. He succeeded in capturing honors, notwithstanding the fact that he has attended high school only six months. He received his primary training at Paisley public school, and while there established a reputation as a very clever student.<sup>29</sup>

At about the age of fifteen a 'desire to excel' became a mark of David's character. The nearest senior high school was in Walkerton, about seventy kilometres (forty miles) south of Paisley, and Milne enrolled there in 1897. He boarded in Walkerton for \$1.50 a week, returning home on weekends. The science option he chose for his studies led him to fill pages and pages with drawings of plants for his botany courses, an activity that rekindled his love of drawing. Ironically he had once failed drawing in public school, being unable, or unwilling, to maintain proper perspective.

In 1899, when he was seventeen and about to graduate from Walkerton High School, Milne decided to enrol in the teachers' course in the Model School at Walkerton, as Charlie had done. His class was predominantly male, unusual at a time when many women were entering the profession.<sup>30</sup> On a visit with his class to the Normal School in Toronto Milne was stirred by one of the first real paintings he ever saw. Of *The Berry Pickers* by the Canadian painter George A. Reid (1860–1947) he later wrote: "The thing that impressed me ... was the vividness of the red raspberries reflected on the new tin pail. This was my first real kick from an oil painting and my first enjoyment of texture in art."<sup>31</sup> His attitude to art, which he probably equated with illustrating, was still only casual, but he devoted his leisure time to contributing to school yearbooks and making sketches of people and places around Paisley. Milne's fascination with botany contin-



*Milne and his pupils in front of their school north of Paisley, c. 1900–3*

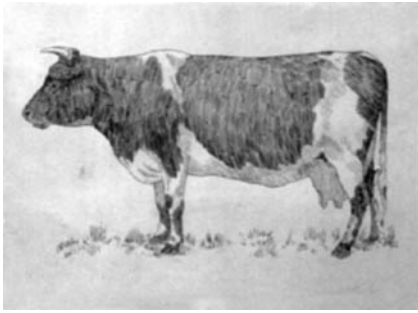
ued, for in the year or so after his graduation he exchanged plants and information with J.G. Wilton, one of his teachers.

Milne's principal at Walkerton, Joseph Morgan, wrote of him that he was 'a student of very exceptional ability. In all my experience, I have met very few to equal him in this respect.'<sup>32</sup> Coming from a man with decades of experience running one of the best schools in Ontario (and one that retained Latin and Greek on the curriculum longer than most), this was high commendation. When Charles Milne revisited the school thirty years after graduating, Morgan remembered him immediately and told him bluntly: 'You weren't the smartest one of your family to attend Walkerton High School. Your younger brother, Dave, was a better student than you in my opinion.'<sup>33</sup>

Milne accepted the post as teacher at the little school known as U.S.S. No. 7 Elderslie and South Saugeen, five kilometres (three miles) north of Paisley on what was then the Elora Road North, as the *Paisley Advocate* reported on 14 December 1899. He began teaching in January 1900, and was the master of a one-room schoolhouse for the next three-and-a-half years. He walked or cycled from his parental home each day, and sometimes trekked on snowshoes in the winter. Although he had in his care about forty-five children in all grades, if one judges from the photograph of Milne the teacher with his class, he enjoyed the work and had a natural and easy relationship with the children. Professionally, however, he was restless and unfulfilled, and later noted that he was only 'saved by interest in the children's performance.'<sup>34</sup> His later thoughts about the creativity of children, his interest in their development, and his belief that early influences are crucial to later achievements doubtless came from his experiences as a young teacher.

At this point Milne took his first hesitant step toward becoming an artist. 'I don't know what turned my thoughts in this direction,' he wrote; 'there never seemed to be any adequate explanation. I always liked pictures, and remember particularly the pictures in a book called *Picturesque*





David Bell's Cow, 1902, ink drawing,  
28.7×39.5 (11 $\frac{1}{8}$ ×15 $\frac{1}{2}$ )

Canada.’<sup>35</sup> In 1901 or 1902 he subscribed for a period of time to an American art course by correspondence – although he was later to claim that it took him years to unlearn the pedestrian habits this engrained in him. An example of his work for this course is preserved in *David Bell's Cow*, which is inscribed in the lower right corner: ‘Lesson 8.’ (Dave Bell's pasture was the site of the local swimming hole, which was inaugurated annually on the 24 May holiday weekend.)<sup>36</sup> At about the same time Milne sought out opportunities closer to home: he drew illustrations for a new publication from Guelph, Ontario, called *The Canadian Boy*, a slight periodical put out for a short time by the Turnbull-Wright Company, a printing firm which also published *The Confederate*, from Mount Forest. Milne submitted a cover drawing for *The Canadian Boy* in July 1901, but he had to redraw it when the format was changed.<sup>37</sup> He did artwork for different departments of the magazine. ‘You seem to be quite useful with the pen,’ O.E. Turnbull wrote to him. ‘Would you please tell us something about yourself, how old you are, what business you are at present engaged in and if you would care to take up illustrating for us more extensively. We will have considerable illustrating to be done and if we knew what your special adaptations or choice in the creative world was, we could talk to you better. About remuneration, we will be willing to do what is right with you.’<sup>38</sup> A month later Turnbull was writing to ask for a photograph of Milne for publicity purposes; he enclosed a short story and asked for a 4"×5" illustration ‘of the part of the story I have marked X, where the ghost appears to the boy in the graveyard.’<sup>39</sup> A.W. Wright, the publisher of *The Confederate*, wrote a year later that Milne's sketch and drawings of a battle scene were ‘superb.’<sup>40</sup> In 1902 Milne contributed drawings and another cover design, and in 1903 two more drawings, to *The Canadian Boy*. The January 1903 issue, which came out late, touted the publication's virtues: ‘Bright, Patriotic, Helpful, Entertaining.’ Milne's contributions included two signed decorative panels of maple leaves and two beavers for the cover and, for a story, a drawing of ‘a half-frenzied squaw’ about to set fire to something with ‘a burning brand’ and another of a hunter named Joe ‘gliding through the poplar bush’ about to shoot something or somebody. The examples that exist of some of these first hesitant steps of Milne as an artist are now painful to look at.

A little sketchbook of Milne's, now preserved in the National Archives of Canada, shows how prolific and diverse his interests were at this time, for its sixty pages are crammed with drawings, often signed (an early indication of a strong ego), of trees, animals, birds, boats, occasional figures, later sketches for signs in New York, and notes for ideas and books to read. There are also several references to show that he experimented with photography, for he lists subjects, exposures, and chemicals needed for developing film, although no photographs from this time are known.<sup>41</sup> During the summers in these opening years of the new century Milne made extended sorties on his bicycle around southern Ontario, visiting Toronto several times. On one long summer trip in 1902 he made an elaborate drawing of the Niagara Gorge at Queenston. In addition, he did a number of portraits of people around Paisley, sketched in pencil. Although these are not of much interest in themselves, they indicate his ambition and the strong pull of the graphic arts. Milne was seen in his community as someone with a special talent. In the notes for his autobiography he cryptically mentions the excitement of ‘all-night sessions.’<sup>42</sup>

A decade or so after Milne's death in 1953, a number of works from his





*Dutch Woman in Clogs*, c. 1902–3,  
oil, 47.0 × 31.1 (18½ × 12¼)

adolescent years, along with letters to his mother and family from New York and Europe, were destroyed when new owners cleaned out the attic of the Milne home in Paisley.<sup>43</sup> The loss of the letters is especially unfortunate because of the light they might have shed on Milne's early career. But enough early drawings and paintings still exist to show an almost compulsive amateur, someone who was able to catch a crude likeness, and even sensed the mysteries of drawing, while lacking discipline, understanding, and skill. One or two of these drawings suggest that young David may have seen reproductions of Rembrandt drawings or etchings in a magazine, but most are unlike the work of artists Milne might have known and copied. His lack of sophistication was evident. 'Art was all one to me' then, he later candidly recalled.<sup>44</sup> These early works, however, foreshadow Milne's later insistence on originality.

Milne's youthful talent was his ability to 'see' with acumen and penetration, and almost everything he saw he retained as a visual image and stored for future use. Even at the age of sixty-five his memories were accurate, specific, and clear. When he looked over his old paintings, he could sometimes recall the weather, the temperature, the strength and direction of the breeze, patterns in the grass, and the whole look and feel of the place where he had painted.

From Milne's adolescent period two major efforts in oil have survived. The earlier one, *Irish Waterfall* (c. 1901), he copied from a book, although the model was in black and white and Milne supplied his own colour scheme. He mounted it in an extravagantly gilded frame and gave it to his mother, who hung it over the mantel in the livingroom, where it remained until her death. It is awkwardly done, but it shows ambition, and a predilection for a subject, a stream rushing over rocks, that would interest him periodically throughout his life. The other, a *grisaille* of a woman wearing clogs and carrying milk pails, *Dutch Woman in Clogs*, was either an exercise for the correspondence school or work from his earliest New York student days.<sup>45</sup> It shows that Milne had a delicate touch and a natural facil-

*Irish Waterfall*, c. 1901, oil, 55.9 × 79.7 (22 × 31⅞)





David Milne as a young man, c. 1903

ity for laying down paint, but otherwise the work is nothing more than one might expect from a beginner. That it is entirely in black, white, and gray is noteworthy, however, for a significant aspect of Milne's later art theory and practice hinged on his extensive use of these values, or 'non-colours.'

On 9 July 1903 the *Paisley Advocate* announced that David Milne had 'decided to abandon pedagogy and will take a course in art at a New York studio, to develop his natural talents in that line, for which there is nowadays a wide field for practical application.'

What led Milne to pursue his studies in New York, rather than Toronto or Chicago, or even somewhere in Europe? In a note for his autobiography he called it simply a 'jump in the dark.' However, one of his teachers may have urged him in this direction.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the correspondence school, which had flattered him by reproducing one of his drawings in its magazine, had announced that it was going to open a school in New York.<sup>47</sup> Thinking that he was primarily interested in becoming an illustrator, Milne may have believed that New York, the mighty North American centre of the time, offered more scope. Or it may simply have been the magnetic tug of 'the periphery to the centre,'<sup>48</sup> as he wrote later. He set off in September 1903.<sup>49</sup>

Milne boarded the train to Toronto, sailed across Lake Ontario to Queenston, made his way by train to Buffalo and Albany, and then steamed down the Hudson River to Manhattan. His path seemed promising and fair, for Milne was young, doughty, and resolute. His mother, he sensed, knew that many difficulties would lie along his path, yet she did not attempt to dissuade him.<sup>50</sup> And he had behind him the support and encouragement of his little community. Much later he wrote that if he had been able to foresee the hardships ahead, he would have been too discouraged ever to begin his prodigious journey.<sup>51</sup>

# The Defiant Maple

## New York

### 1903–1910



TO A YOUNG MAN of twenty-one from Paisley, Ontario, whose previous experiences of a city were two or three brief visits to Toronto, New York City in 1903 was a vast, noisy, and bewildering crucible. Milne fell into it, as he wrote later, 'knowing no more about my destination than if I had been plunging into the sun.' He also described his arrival as a less than irresistible force meeting an immovable object.<sup>1</sup> His first timorous but exciting night, after his arrival by steamer down the Hudson River, was spent at the Broadway Central Hotel on 11th Street, and the next day he visited the only people he knew in New York, John (Jack) and Jean Riddell. Jack Riddell was a brother-in-law of Milne's brother Charlie, and the son of a family the Milnes knew in Collingwood, Ontario. Milne was relieved when they spoke with the same Scottish lilt as his parents (they were more intelligible, at first, than their American children). The Riddells steered him to a boarding-house at 323 East 84th Street – the first of Milne's many addresses over his thirteen years in Manhattan and the Bronx – and invited him to family dinners on Sundays and to gatherings at Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party's Irish social club. They also provided occasional cigars, as Milne remembered.<sup>2</sup> He later repaid their kindnesses with the gift of *Pier on the Hudson*, an early oil painting done upriver near the Catskill Mountains.

Milne's track through these early years of artistic development and economic hardship is difficult to trace. A few facts, however, are known about his personal life, his formal training, his commercial work as an illustrator, and his first exhibitions. Milne's own brief, and much later, reminiscences about this period are sharp but not sequential: they tend to telescope the years and to collapse his experiences as student, illustrator, businessman, etcher, painter, and ardent suitor into one compact unit.<sup>3</sup>

For the first seven of the nearly thirteen years that he lived in New York, Milne was practically invisible among the legions of immigrants who pressed into the city during the first decade of the century, the period of highest immigration ever in America. He was poor, uncertain, and frequently dismayed by his lack of financial success. On nights and weekends he sought commissions as a window-dresser and poster or showcard maker – trudging down Second Avenue 'to the Battery and back,'<sup>4</sup> soliciting orders from shops. In the process he developed a prejudice against Jews, particularly Jewish tailors who, according to Milne, bargained hard and took undue advantage of his need to earn a living. Milne had no previous encounters with anyone Jewish and he did not pause to consider that this huge wave of immigrants was trying to cope with the same hard circumstances as he was. During the period he adopted some of the anti-semitic stereotypes so characteristic of the age, and later in his life this

prejudice occasionally surfaced in offhand comments that seem jarring today. Yet Jewishness was not an issue when it came to his admiration of the Jewish photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, and he included among his circle of close friends after 1911 the Jewish artist William Zorach and his wife Marguerite.<sup>5</sup>

Although Milne's first disappointment in New York, on the evening of his arrival, was the discovery that pretzels were not as sticky and sweet to the taste as they initially appeared to his wide and innocent eyes, 'just dry and seedy,'<sup>6</sup> a more serious disillusion came when the commercial school he had come to attend – the Arcade School, Milne called it, since it was in the Lincoln Arcade Building at Broadway and Columbus<sup>7</sup> – closed abruptly after a few weeks, swallowing up his and the other students' prepaid fees in the process.<sup>8</sup> Undaunted, and with either good advice or better luck, he transferred his allegiance to the Art Students' League of New York on West 57th Street, and was enrolled there for two years (he took night classes for a third year).<sup>9</sup> His brief tenure at the Arcade School gave him one advantage: the prerequisites for entry to the League were waived for him, and before he knew it, '[t]here I was in Frank DuMond's life class, portfolio propped between the legs of an upturned kitchen chair, a piece of charcoal in one hand and a "shammy skin" in the other, putting down on a sheet of Michelet paper my slightly distorted and feeble version of God's noblest work.'<sup>10</sup> Milne would, of course, have done this in the men's class; the women had separate classes, especially when there were models.

'I don't think my day was one of the Golden Periods of the League,' Milne wrote later, and indeed it was not.<sup>11</sup> None of those who attended with him achieved national or international prominence later as painters. Had he attended the League a few years later, he might have encountered Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) or the precocious Stuart Davis (1894–1964). In retrospect, perhaps even at the time, Milne thought he might have been happier elsewhere – at the New York School of Art, for example, which he called the Chase School after its founder, William Merritt Chase, who still taught there with Robert Henri. Both were notable painters and inspiring teachers. At the New York School Milne might have trained with Edward Hopper (1882–1967), George Bellows (1882–1925), and Rockwell Kent (1882–1971): they were all born in the same year as Milne, and they all went to the Chase School. Hopper, from nearby Nyack, New York, started there in 1900 (and stayed for a lengthy six years), and Bellows and Kent arrived in 1904. Bellows, like Milne, started late after several years of college and after deciding against a career in sports in Columbus, Ohio; and Kent, already aware of his talent, had made a first start in architecture in the same Ohio college.

A block away from the League, at 6th Avenue and 57th Street, was the Chase school. I might have liked it better, I think, perhaps they even taught art there [Milne means rather than illustration or technique]. At least they taught a lusty way of drawing and painting, as limited maybe as the League's way, but more vigorous and inspiring. I have an idea – just an idea, and not based on any very intimate knowledge of the subject – that the Chase school was responsible for the most distinctively American art of that period and several succeeding decades. That was due, of course, to the teachers who had more of out-of-school accomplishment to their credit than the League teachers. The two leading ones – or at least the ones I knew about – were William M. Chase and Robert Henri. Both were well-known and accomplished painters – and inspiring teachers.

Chase was of the Sargent school. He had known both Whistler and Sargent and there had been some portrait painting back and forth. I am not sure now who painted whom, but I remember a very effective Sargent portrait of Chase and a rather less effective – but equally well-known – Chase portrait of Whistler, both probably seen at the Metropolitan Museum. Chase, I think, was an inspiring teacher. Once in a while he gave a demonstration – painted a quick portrait before his class and may, at other times, have painted a still life – fish. I am not sure about the fish, though they were among his favourite subjects. This practice may have had a tendency to keep his pupils trailing along behind him instead of travelling along paths of their own, but it was worth taking a chance on. He also gave talks – particularly about Whistler. These would be at the Chase school but League students were invited, because I remember hearing the Whistler lecture.<sup>12</sup>

Of Henri Milne also had recollections, for he was impressed by the spirit of adventure and independence that Henri championed:

Robert Henri was different [from William Chase], of the lusty school, a follower of Franz Hals. Slam it on and don't spare the subject. He could have organized a Salvation Army in paint, did I think, the Bellows-Luks-Glackens American school. I don't think I would have been much interested in the 'Hallelujah, I'm a Bum' side of this. I knew too much about poverty to be impressed by it – but I would have responded to Henri's drive and enthusiasm. There was nothing of all this at the League: there was a steady devotion to work without any promise of short cuts. That was alright for me but I would have liked something more exciting with it, and the faint Bohemian scent of the Paris schools that clung to the place didn't furnish it.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Milne learned the basics of his profession at the League, and was thrust into the company of others who were trying to become artists. He remembered fondly some of the cheerful camaraderie there:

Each student when he joined the men's life class was supposed to treat the class. Treats may have been doubled up sometimes but there were at least three or four each term, always following the same pattern. Work was stopped for a couple of hours, the model allowed to go home. A small keg of beer and sandwiches made of pumpernickel (very dark solid bread) and Swiss cheese were the refreshments. There was singing and talking and noise-making but I don't remember any particular hazing or roughhouse. It was entirely a men's affair. I don't remember, or maybe never knew, whether the women had any similar performance.<sup>14</sup>

And he also remembered that the city's commercial galleries, few as there were, provided an indispensable part of his education:

With other students at the Art Students' League in New York I used to visit all the Art Galleries – not many then, a dozen or less – these visits were made late in the afternoon and on Saturday mornings. I think we were less welcome in the afternoons when more important visitors were present than in the mornings when we had the galleries pretty much to ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

The companionship of these students and the art life of the city made up for any deficiency in the school. The discussions of art subjects – all of them, I think –

and the visits to museums and galleries were stimulating as well as informing ... We may have been a nuisance to the dealers, but they put up with it, they never knew where their next crop of young artists might come from.<sup>16</sup>

The League shared its building with some art associations, including the National Academy of Design. Milne also recalled

echoes from the National Academy School, haunted by the ghost of Kenyon Cox – in flesh and blood. I remember seeing the lanky figure at an academy exhibition (downstairs). Even there he was a bit other-worldly – but he could talk – was talking. He was standing with some other academy greats in front of Winslow Homer's picture of the sea with a negro and some banana stalks on a dismasted boat [*The Gulf Stream*]. He thought the reds in the lower left hand corner (where the sharks were) was a bit overdone. So it was, even to me. To Kenyon Cox it must have been a terrible shock.<sup>17</sup>

Cox was both an academic painter (he had painted classical murals for the Library of Congress in Washington) and an ultra-conservative art critic, and at different times an influential teacher, particularly at the Academy. The exhibition spaces in the League building were used throughout much of the year by various art associations and thus gave a broad view of current American painting activities.

Milne's teachers at the League were well-known, if not particularly distinguished, painters: Henry Reuterdahl, George B. Bridgman, and Frank V. DuMond (who also taught at the Chase School). Milne remembered seeing Edwin Blashfield, another prominent artist, at work on large murals in one of the lower exhibition rooms. In retrospect, he thought little of his teachers: 'From the work of the instructors at the league I learned nothing of value to me in painting. The instructors were craftsmen, competent, practical: art, to them, was [like] brick-laying, only more complicated and difficult.'<sup>18</sup>

Some of the teachers were so popular and were there so long that they almost came to symbolize the place. Yet they were purely school men with no marked accomplishment outside the school. Admittedly they were there to teach us to use the tools of the trade, to draw and paint. Craftsmanship was their concern and I don't think they went much beyond that, were little concerned about art itself. Students and teachers alike seemed to hold that view. But it doesn't seem possible to teach people to paint without teaching them to paint in a certain way, to teach craftsmanship without teaching art or some substitute.<sup>19</sup>

All Milne later claimed to have learned at the League was to smoke cigarettes, while gazing out the window. The truth is that he received a thorough grounding in all the basic skills needed by an artist: drawing, design, etching, mixing paints, and colour theory. And despite all his retrospective reservations, he also remembered the League affectionately:

For a year I attended a DuMond life class in the morning and a Henry Reuterdahl illustration class in the afternoon, and some days a half hour sketch class without criticism after that. DuMond did some painting and illustration. What I saw of it was conventional, fluent and slightly mannered, rather weak, not at all like the teacher we saw, strong, alert, sympathetic and with a remarkable ability to make the student brace up and tackle the thing all over again. I think in other

circumstances if I had spent longer with him, particularly in painting, I could have got hold of the thing, to my great advantage.

George Bridgman was a decorative mural painter. When I was in his class he did scene painting. I never saw any of his work. He lived, and maybe worked, in New Rochelle and came in evenings twice a week for the classes I attended – not in my first year, later when I worked days at the drug store. He was the anatomy man but didn't impress much of it on me. He was particularly popular, jolly, talkative, every once in a while breaking out into some jingle left over from his Paris art school days.

Henry Reuterdaahl was an illustrator carried to fame by the Spanish-American War. His naval illustrations for *Colliers* probably were very good. He worked rapidly in oil or gouache with lots of freedom and fluency. Big, bluff, hearty, he looked like a sailor, and a rough one. In his own field, aside from the teaching, I think he outclassed the others. He was an illustrator and a good one.<sup>20</sup>

Friendly and helpful as these teachers may have been, what excited Milne most was a sketching class where quick, animated work was called for:

I was nearer coming to life in the half hour sketch class at the end of the day than in anything else. There wasn't time then to get mislaid in strange corners. Work was from models in street clothes and was usually done in charcoal, broadly treated and vigorous, put on in large areas, rubbed with the thumb, put in and taken out, marked with the point or with squeeze rubber. This was the nearest to picture making anyone got in the school.<sup>21</sup>

Above all, the League furnished a concentrated, creative ambience where students made art, saw art, and – most of all – talked about art incessantly. 'We saw everything, discussed everything, criticized everything.'<sup>22</sup> The ambition to become an artist would have taken root then, when hopes were high, impediments seemed small, and artists such as Monet and Whistler gave a young student a mark to aim at. The League's year-end exhibitions were exciting for Milne, and at the end of his third year he exhibited a work called (with a nod to Whistler, perhaps) *Opus 3*.<sup>23</sup>

Milne's savings from teaching and the money he had borrowed from his brother Jim to come to New York were soon depleted. With no regular source of income, Milne found the first two years in New York onerous and grinding. His work as a poster artist, however, soon brought him into contact with two people who were to be important in his life.

In 1906 Milne met his future wife, May Frances Hegarty, known to all as Patsy. She was sixteen, a cashier and the assistant bookkeeper who assembled the payroll for about thirty employees at Julius Jungman's two drugstores, one at 81st Street and Columbus Avenue on the West Side and the other across Central Park on Third Avenue – where Milne was earning \$18 a week dressing the windows and making showcards in the fourth-floor storeroom on a long table. Patsy remembered their first meeting:

One day, when I was at the desk downstairs, a young man who came three times a week to make window 'displays' stopped at the desk and said 'Could I borrow a pencil?', and to my surprise he brought it back after a while (people sometimes forget to return them). That was the first time I spoke to Dave – but I did not pay much attention when he was busy in the window or upstairs. One afternoon, about 6 o'clock, on my way across 81st St. (just at the corner near the





May Frances Hegarty, known as  
'Patsy,' Milne's fiancée

store) to the Park to walk home, Dave came up and asked if he could walk with me – so we went through the Park. At first I was not overjoyed to have him come, but I soon felt quite at ease, because he was natural and quiet, and I thought he seemed very nice.

We walked home often after that ...<sup>24</sup>

With the ice broken, life at Jungman's drugstore took on a different rhythm:

We had endless fun up on the 3rd floor. Sometimes H. the photographer would shut the adjoining office door and roll the safe against it – and the only way I could get out was to open the window and go up the fire-escape to the 4th floor. Dave was the only one who figured that out (what I would do) so he went up the stairs – where he lifted me down – so I was beginning to know him much better by then. Walking along, a huge flag would suddenly drop on me from the 4th floor balcony – and I was all tangled up for a while, laughing and getting [out] from underneath, while people sat around laughing and enjoying it. There were so many things, and so much fun and laughter.<sup>25</sup>

One thing did bother her at first, however, and that was that 'the suit he [Dave] wore had at one time been a dark green. It was faded so badly, I wished he could have something better. After a while he did get a dark blue suit, and looked pretty nice.'<sup>26</sup> Patsy was also bemused by his heavy woollen socks, which his mother still knit for him, for she had never seen any like them.<sup>27</sup>

Milne courted Patsy for six years: the courtship ebbed and flowed with the usual ecstasies, vagaries, tears, and reconciliations that attend many an early relationship. The earliest correspondence between them dates from the summer of 1906 when Patsy was out of the city all summer, at Haines Falls, New York, at Asbury Park, New Jersey, in August, and at Stamford, Connecticut, in the fall. The other correspondence dates from 1908 and 1909, again when one or the other of them was out of New York – Patsy visiting relatives or working at resorts (Givens Park in Connecticut, the Grave House in Kaatskill Bay on Lake George, or at Haines Falls, near Saugerties, on the Hudson River), or Milne on a painting trip or visiting his family in Paisley.<sup>28</sup>

Patsy reported an early attempt by Milne to do a portrait of her: 'Dave started a full length sketch of me. After working on it for several weeks, he put it aside. I asked why he didn't finish it, and he said "I can't do it, I love you too much" and painted it out.'<sup>29</sup>

Patsy had been born of Irish parents in Brooklyn on 1 May 1889 or 1890.<sup>30</sup> Her Catholic father, Dennis F. Hegarty, was from County Cork and was well educated, but had immigrated to the United States because of a family quarrel. His business in New York was selling printing inks, but apparently he immersed himself rather more in alcohol and died in an accident a year or so before Milne and Patsy met. According to Patsy, her father was only 'interested in us [Patsy and her sister Maude] when he was normal.'<sup>31</sup> The family had lived first in Brooklyn near Tompkins Park; then in Lyndhurst, New Jersey; then back in Brooklyn, where the girls attended a Catholic school on De Kalb Avenue; and then near Bloomfield, New Jersey, in a large suburban house with an orchard. When success finally left Mr Hegarty for good, the house was lost – a humiliation for Patsy and her mother:

I often sat in the sun, when home from school, and tried very hard to think of



some way we could save the place. I was about fourteen then. Once I saw an advertisement in the paper for a girl to begin in an office in Newark. I walked there and found the position had been taken, and they said I wasn't old enough anyway, so I had to walk the five miles back, feeling very unhappy. My mother was so ashamed to think that we were losing our home, that she would not go anywhere.<sup>32</sup>

Patsy always seemed to prefer the country to the city, and already had spent a happy year at Ilion in upstate New York working as a cashier in a grocery store before returning to New York and Jungman's. Her recollections of rural living, both in her early letters and her later memoir, are nostalgic and constant.

Patsy's mother, Caroline Collins, was born in County Down, one of six daughters and two sons of a naval captain, and a Protestant. She was apparently a fetching beauty, with blue eyes, auburn hair, and 'a wonderful pink and white complexion' that Patsy inherited, but with a 'shy and quiet' disposition. When her husband died she moved to Manhattan. Mrs Hegarty seemed always to defer to Patsy's plethora of aunts when it came to questions about Patsy's life and prospects, and they were all opposed to Patsy's marriage to Milne, considering him a dubious choice as a husband.<sup>33</sup> This may have been, for the aunts especially, as much on religious grounds, Milne being thoroughly Presbyterian, as because of the doubtful likelihood of his providing a stable home and an adequate income.

Milne wrote reams of lovestruck letters to his 'little girl,' as he persistently called her during his courtship years. Those written in 1906, 1908, and 1909 are the only first-hand accounts of this period now extant. Although extremely saccharine, and revealing scant and mostly incidental information about Milne's work and habits, the letters offer the only authentic glimpses we have into his life and circumstances. Milne was hopelessly in love with Patsy. He worried constantly about her travelling alone and wondered about her competence to manage on her own. He called her 'Dear Little Girl,' 'Pats,' 'Sweet Little Girl,' 'Darling,' 'Dearie,' 'Dear Little Sweetheart,' and 'Patsy, Patsy, Patsy, darling.' He signed off one letter with: 'Patsy, you're the loveliest little girl in the whole world. Good-bye, darling, Dave.'

Of their New York years, Patsy remembered the excitement of attending the theatre and concerts, reading books together, and visiting exhibitions and other artists' studios. On Broadway they saw the celebrated performance of Maude Adams in *Peter Pan*, either soon after it opened in 1905 or more likely at the Empire Theatre revival in 1916; a revival of *If I Were King*; and numerous other plays. Milne read *Lorna Doone* aloud to her, and gave her copies of *Treasure Island*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Balfour*, and Bret Harte's *His Letter and Her Letter*. Patsy's formal education, which had stopped when she was about fourteen, was extended by Milne's informal curriculum. Limited though it was, it gave her a degree of familiarity with things artistic, and it provided her throughout her life with the habit of using public libraries wherever she was – a habit that Milne shared with her.

The couple took day excursions up the Hudson River as far as Croton-on-Hudson, and had picnics at various sites in the New York City region. Patsy remembered some of these:

Then Dave asked me to go to Coney Island (on the boat) one evening. While we were sitting outside, looking at the sea, he said 'Have you any money with you?'



*Amos W. Engle, Milne's painting and business partner, and Milne in New York, c. 1908*

Wondering why he asked, I said 'No.' He slipped fifty cents in the pocket of my 'sailor-suit' and said 'Just to be sure that you will have the fare back in case we become separated in the crowd.' I remember the first dinner Dave and I had together – a small restaurant somewhere in the 40's, very nice, but with tables close together and crowded. Conscious of the people sitting so close to me (and probably shy) I was ill at ease, but felt like myself again when we got outside. Another time we had a fine dinner at Coney Island, steak, potatoes, vegetables and dessert. It cost one dollar each. Also I knew Dave better then, and enjoyed it greatly.

Our favorite place was 'Palisades Park.' On a Sunday morning, or a holiday, we took the small ferry from Yonkers across to the Palisades – brought our lunch along, walked to the top, and turned right for a mile or so until we came to the woods. There was a small stream running down to the Hudson [River]. We sometimes forgot the coffee pot and had to hunt a long time until we found an empty can to sterilize and boil water for coffee. We also made long sticks with a 'prong' for making the toast.<sup>34</sup>

Milne was very resourceful with his hands. On one trip, as Patsy recalled, 'it began to rain, and Dave and I were half way up the mountain, so he made a "shelter" with branches, and we sat there, enjoying the little place, while it poured rain outside.'<sup>35</sup>

The sorry state of Milne's finances was the usual excuse he proffered for postponing their marriage. The opposition of Patsy's family, or his own unspoken doubts about whether she really was the lifetime companion he was looking for, may also have accounted for the delay. Patsy recalled that her mother 'had a difficult time with my father in later years, and was not anxious to have me marry.'<sup>36</sup> The financial reason Milne offered was compelling enough, for on one occasion Milne tried, without success, to borrow money from one of his brothers in order to get married.<sup>37</sup> Patsy remembered that when they first met he was so poor that to prepare his dinner he stood on a chair to make toast and cook an egg over the gas jet that served as the light in his studio.<sup>38</sup>

The other key figure in Milne's life during the New York years was Amos W. Engle. He attended the Art Students' League at about the same time as Milne, although he was two or three years ahead, and he was interested in Milne's showcards. In 1906 he and Milne established a showcard studio at 8 (now 20) West 42nd Street, over Daley's Restaurant<sup>39</sup> – a commercial art enterprise that sustained both of them, precariously at times, until 1916. They ate at 'Cheap Charlie's' and 'Beefsteak John's,' took turns hocking their valuables when cash ran low, moved often, and sold their business to each other from time to time at a set price of \$50. Occasionally they splurged at Charles and Company, a nearby gourmet store – 'Engle and I practically put them on their feet. Bought a pound of coffee every two weeks, butter once in a while, maybe only half a pound at a time, bread, good customers, paid cash, had to.'<sup>40</sup> Engle loved music and had a phonograph and a good collection of records; he also took up the concertina, which Milne had to be careful not to call an accordion. They lived at their studio illegally sometimes, sleeping in a little alcove on two cots, and for about two years they shared a front room in a boarding house at the edge of Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan's west midtown, near Ninth Avenue and 25th Street. Every Sunday their landlady, Miss Brady, cooked up 'two of the finest breakfasts [Milne had] ever set eyes on' before she went off to her Catholic mass. The



Engle Seated, 1908–11, ink drawing,  
33.1 × 22.3 (13 × 8¾)

breakfasts were consumed and the boarders were back in bed by the time she returned, ‘confessed, penanced and absolved.’<sup>41</sup>

Engle was really Milne’s intellectual, spiritual, and artistic guide during the crucial years of his artistic formation. He had already been to Europe and back on cattle boats, after getting himself thrown in jail for returning on a false passport. Two years older than Milne (who remembered him being two years younger), he was the son of Quaker parents whom Milne knew and visited in Masonville, New Jersey, near Philadelphia. No examples of his work have been found, and Milne (surprisingly) kept none. But the titles of his paintings, found in exhibition lists and catalogues, are evocative of the early work of the futurists or of Kandinsky: *Experiment in Movement*, *Rain Motif*, *Storm Pattern*, *Waterfall Pattern*, *Brook Pattern*, *Rainy Night*, *Sunlight*, and *Wind*. *Floral Pattern* was described by one critic as ‘streamers and buttons of rich color.’<sup>42</sup> Another described Engle as practising ‘a sort of onomatopoean [sic] in his “Confetti,” so much do his bright dots of color resemble the gay missiles.’<sup>43</sup> And yet another critic was enthralled by a work on black paper of a theatre interior, *Opening Overture*, *Century* [Theater], which was shown at the New York Water Color Club’s exhibition in 1913.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the value of his technique and style may have been to Milne, Engle was a man of unusual mind, open to advanced ideas and to spiritual theories – he later had a strong interest in theosophy. He was one of the chief catalysts in Milne’s transformation from a Sunday dauber into a profoundly committed painter. The two went off together on painting holidays: in 1907 and 1908 to Ashley in the Wilkes-Barre region of Pennsylvania, where Patsy joined them for two weeks; in 1913 and 1914 to West Saugerties, north of New York; and up the Hudson River valley after Milne was married. Many of the exhibitions to which Milne submitted also showed paintings by Engle.

An early but unidentified newspaper clipping (titled ‘WHY SHOULDN’T A HALF MOON BE SKYED? And Then Again Are Not Autumnal Tints on the Line? What’s the Answer?’), hand-dated 29 October 1910, sheds some light on Milne’s status at that time. It is mostly the report of a trumped-up altercation between Milne and Engle as to who fared better in an exhibition: Milne, whose smaller picture *Autumnal Tints* was hung ‘on the line,’ as academy or salon pictures that were favoured then were, or Engle’s *The Half Moon at Night*, which, while larger, was ‘skyed’ or hung high up on the wall. No reference to such an exhibition has been found. This tongue-in-cheek article was obviously an attempt on the part of the two artists to get some publicity. However, the reporter notes that their ‘paintings have adorned most of the recent exhibitions.’ Whether this is an exaggerated statement, coming so early in their exhibiting careers as it does, or whether they indeed exhibited earlier and more frequently than we now know, is an unanswered question. Milne later wrote that he had started exhibiting in 1907, but no record before 1909 can be found.<sup>45</sup>

The other piece of useful information in the article is that ‘Milne and Engle share a studio in Forty-second street, and there they act as hosts to nightly gatherings of other artists and art “appreciators.”’<sup>46</sup> Milne later refers to this salon-like activity of theirs nostalgically: ‘our shop came to be a meeting place,’ where ‘the battle of art raged, while my partner and myself feverishly plied the lettering brush, at the same time never failing to keep up our side – rather our two sides – of the aesthetic war.’<sup>47</sup> Issues of the day, art news, and gossip about other artists were no doubt as much part of the lively exchanges as aesthetics. One comment by Patsy confirms



*Milne in his New York studio, c. 1909*

this: 'As a rule, Dave did not have much to say to people, but he would talk for hours about the painting and everything in regard to it.'<sup>48</sup>

A photograph of Milne in their 42nd Street studio at about this time, possibly taken by Engle, shows the aspiring illustrator in shirt, tie, and suspenders, surrounded by some of the objects of his trade: an easel, a plaster miniature of the Venus de Milo, a pair of Chinese vases *à la* van Gogh, reproductions of works of art stapled to the wall, photographs propped on the mantel of the fireplace, and a guitar.<sup>49</sup> At this time Milne still had hair, but it was rapidly beginning to recede at the temples, and within a short time he would be bald, except for a fringe around the sides of his head.

Milne later described Engle's odd combination of temperaments as 'Quaker, Yankee, Scotsman'<sup>50</sup> – a kind of Vincent van Gogh, who had his torments and talents in about equal proportions:

I am not a Van Gogh, though I can understand him. Engle *was* Van Gogh. Physically and spiritually the likeness was startling. Even in his life up to the time I lost touch with him, there were amazing parallels. Almost all of Vincent's self-portraits might have been painted from Engle, blond, gaunt, and with the same look in his eyes. He was a Quaker, at least the son of Quakers – with his mother he used the 'thee' and 'thy.'<sup>51</sup>

Some time after Milne left New York City in 1916, Engle seemed to lose a sense of purpose in his life. As soon as the Americans entered the First



New York Girders, c. 1906–9, water-colour, 50.8×37.2 (20×14 $\frac{5}{8}$ ), an early illustration by Milne



An illustration for Uncle Sam's Magazine, June 1909

World War, in July 1917, he signed up and was off to Europe with the Engineers. After the war, in 1919, he drifted west to Seattle, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles – keeping in touch with Milne occasionally, and reporting that he was ‘suffering from a slight or considerable dose of dog rot,’ ‘going through quite a bonehead period of my very mildly distinguished career,’ and not doing much painting. He was delving more deeply into theosophy, working at the Lucky Jim silver mine, and proposing to study geology, chemistry, and mineralogy for three years to become a prospector.<sup>52</sup> Then correspondence between them faltered. Engle died a few years later, in 1926, at the age of forty-six. None of Milne’s letters to him, nor any of his paintings, has surfaced as yet.

Milne left the Art Students’ League in 1905 or more likely 1906. There is reason to believe that he was not very serious about his painting until about 1909 or 1910, despite his own later claims to the contrary. His primary objective in coming to New York was to be an illustrator for magazines, and it was this aim that absorbed his time in the years immediately after art school. In 1908 he wrote to Patsy: ‘I haven’t really been out painting for a good while.’ A year later he wrote to her: ‘I have been out painting just once – Sunday – in over a month.’<sup>53</sup> Painting was, apparently, only an incidental and recreational activity. And there are hardly any paintings, and no exhibition records, before 1909.

Almost none of Milne’s commercial work has survived. Throughout the New York period, except for the summer excursions he took most years, Milne supported himself with his work either as an illustrator or as a sign letterer and showcard maker. What he actually did, what his work looked like, or how much he earned, is vague or is not known. A receipt for \$75, dated 27 July 1908, is evidence of a sale to *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, although the acknowledged five illustrations of ‘N.Y. scenes’ were apparently never published. *New York Girders* is an example of the sort of work Milne probably did at this time, showing the deft creation of a striking image. A poster by Milne for *Cosmopolitan*, undated, was kept among his effects; it incorporates a proposed cover showing a speedboat at full throttle. The June 1909 issue of *Uncle Sam’s Magazine* used three competent pen sketches to illustrate ‘How the First Medal of Honor Was Won’ in the series ‘American Deeds of Valor.’ No others are known, despite extensive searches, and although Douglas Duncan, Milne’s agent and dealer many years later, wrote a note obviously based on a conversation with Milne saying that Milne’s ‘drawings appeared in *Cosmopolitan* & *Pearsons Weekly* about 1909–10.’<sup>54</sup>

In 1909 Milne also was busy for some time working on an illustration for the Hudson-Fulton celebration: the 300th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s discovery of the river that bears his name, and the belated 100th anniversary of Robert Fulton’s navigation of the Hudson River by steamboat in 1807. The celebrations went on all through 1909, culminating in the autumn of the year, with massive pageants and parades, a regatta of great sailing ships from round the world (including the arrival from Europe of a replica of Hudson’s ship the *Half Moon*), and the unveiling of the Hudson Monument. Over a million visitors poured into New York to attend the festivities. But Milne’s contribution, whatever it was, has not been found.

Nevertheless, Milne’s letters to Patsy confirm that he stubbornly sought to make his reputation as an illustrator, sometimes against discouraging odds. Through the summer of 1909, for example, he toiled at nearly a

dozen different illustrating jobs for *Munsey's Magazine*, *Cavalier*, *Army and Navy Life* (later *Uncle Sam's*), and *Pearson's*. Capricious and fussy art directors hemmed and hawed, changed their minds, asked for changes. In August 1909 Milne wrote to Patsy: 'However, I do not want to get mixed up in commercial work [lettering and showcards] at all. One cannot do both, and I am going to stick to the magazines. I know I can make it go now and can make more money at that than anything else.'<sup>55</sup> A month later he reported stoically the collapse of one of his potential clients: 'The Uncle Sam's incident is closed. I got a letter from the collecting agency today saying that the magazine had gone out of business with assets of \$50 and liabilities of \$8,000 so that it was impossible to collect the claim.'<sup>56</sup>

Frank Munsey, the 'lonesome and frostbitten' publisher, commissioned a cover for *Cavalier*:

Munsey's sent me a letter asking me to call and I went down today. I have to make some important changes in the Cover yet. Mr Munsey wants it stronger, and he suggested the things to change. I shall try to get it done this week, as it must be done within two weeks. They want it for the February *Cavalier*. I suppose it will finally go through all right, but it has been a lot of bother. I am going to get at it tomorrow morning. In a sense it is a disappointment, and in a sense a relief. After all we won't worry so much if we finally get the thing through and get the money for it.<sup>57</sup>

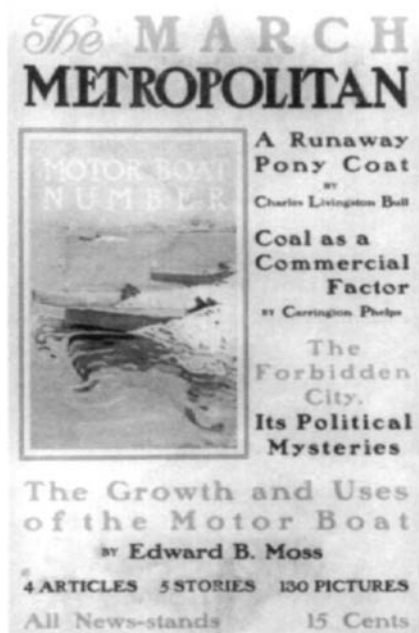
Munsey never used the cover and Milne probably never got paid for it.<sup>58</sup>

Milne was first intrigued by illustrating, then challenged by it; when his ambition was thwarted, he was finally disgusted by it. He concluded that it interfered with his painting. One is left to wonder if he felt this way because he was less successful as an illustrator than some of his acquaintances: the off-hand treatment he received from his clients surely discouraged him. Later in life he was vehement about the separation of commercial and creative art, writing that 'there is more difference between commercial art and creative art than between a bishop and a burglar.'<sup>59</sup> When the two were too close, he wrote in 1951 to Donald Buchanan, who was then promoting industrial design at the National Gallery of Canada, people get cross-eyed.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, it was during the winter of 1909–10 that Milne resolved to be a painter rather than an illustrator. Whether this conversion was prompted by one event, or was simply a moment of self-illumination, is not known. Engle's constant encouragement would have been persuasive, for his praise of Milne's work was always enthusiastic, and his belief in the higher calling of painting came to be shared by Milne. Ultimately Milne felt as if he were 'driving two horses in opposite directions,'<sup>61</sup> and he made the decision to follow the muse of painting rather than the siren of commerce.

Engle's memory of his and Milne's early years was nostalgic. Writing to Milne in the 1920s of earlier times and their adventures together, he recalled:

I surely have the most pleasant recollections of these – wondering whether they might not have been after all – very nearly our golden age – when hopes are high and our first nibbling at the art game gave us one of the few real thrills of life ... Some of the those first sketches you made were corkers though ... you turned out some beauties about that time – strange that you never realized on



Poster for the March Metropolitan magazine, c. 1909–10, colour offset lithograph, 56.0 × 35.3 (22 × 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ )

them – what you have done later are no doubt richer, rounder, deeper – and I can understand how the general run didn't quite get you.<sup>62</sup>

Sweeping changes were taking place in society and in art during Milne's formative years in New York. The world order changed fundamentally in those early years of the century. While Milne began to move toward his true stature as an artist, he witnessed both the crumbling recession of the old and the emergence of the new. After Queen Victoria died in 1901, the symbols and images of her age began rapidly to be replaced by those of the new century, as colossal industrial, social, and cultural changes occurred in relatively short order. Gas-driven taxis and buses began to replace horses in large cities; the Wright brothers flew an airplane in 1903; in 1904 the Americans embarked on building the Panama Canal; in 1905 Einstein published his special theory of relativity; plastics were invented in 1910; international wireless radio was a fact of life by 1913; and steel-reinforced concrete construction made possible 'skyscrapers' that would reshape the twentieth-century city, especially in America. During this short period the way people saw and experienced the world was drastically and irrevocably altered.

In the arts the revolution was no less overwhelming. The first decade of the century saw major achievements by Giacomo Puccini, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel; by George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, Henry James, Anton Chekhov, Rudyard Kipling, and Thomas Mann. The influence of their works and ideas was inestimable. In 1903, in New York, the photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz began his seminal magazine *Camera Work*. In 1905, reviewing the Salon d'Automne in Paris, the critic Louis Vauxcelles called the first major avant-garde painters of the new century *Les fauves* ('the wild beasts'). In the same year, when his career was nearing its end (although his influence was just emerging), Paul Cézanne finished *Les Grand Beigneuses*. In 1907 Pablo Picasso completed *Les Femmes d'Alger*, achieving a departure from the forms of impressionism, much as the fauves departed from its colour. In 1908 Picasso and Georges Braque launched their adventures in cubism. In 1909 the futurists' manifesto blared out that the new age in art had begun. No one with sensitivity to the changing order, the *Zeitgeist*, could help being caught up by the dynamic possibilities of modernism. It was a heady time in the world of art, and Milne's arrival in New York could not have been better timed.

If Milne was naive and inexperienced, so was American art itself. New York was just beginning to ferment with the radical examples of modernism brought from Europe, especially from France. The close kinship between France and America during the political upheavals of the late eighteenth century was renewed as both countries entered upon the artistic revolutions of the twentieth. The bohemian reaches of Paris – where, in 1908, the New Society of American Artists in Paris was formed – were a spawning ground of new American art. At the same time the life and spirit of Europe migrated to the semi-bohemian but increasingly cosmopolitan setting of New York.

In 1903, the year of Milne's arrival in New York – the year J.A.M. Whistler, Camille Pissarro, and Paul Gauguin died, and Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb were born – forces were already at work that would make New York a major world art centre. A great many aspiring or potential artists were gravitating to the market centre of American publishing – attracted,

like Milne, by the opportunities for illustrators. They formed a critical mass of creative people who attended lectures, organized exhibitions and societies, and helped to develop a responsive audience. The American painter Robert Henri (1865–1929), who taught at the New York School of Art, had studied under Alphonse Bouguereau in Paris, but he and his followers from Philadelphia – nearly all trained and experienced illustrators – abandoned French and American impressionism to paint real life as they found it in New York, where they were the most vocal and visible of the recent arrivals. As The Eight (they later were referred to as the Ashcan school),<sup>63</sup> they exhibited at the Macbeth Galleries with great *éclat* in 1908. Milne later exhibited with them at the N.E. Montross Gallery. The Montross Gallery, the Daniel Gallery, and the Macbeth Galleries, to which Milne later submitted work, were sympathetic to modernist work, as was the Whitney Studio, which opened in 1908. With Machiavellian strategy and unflagging energy Henri gave The Eight prominence by attacking the conservatism of the National Academy of Design, of which he was a member. Milne was impressed by The Eight's spirit of adventure and independence, although he did not think much of their painting. In a similar vein, although Milne thought Whistler's etchings and paintings had qualities to emulate, it was Whistler's attitude to life and art he found most admirable.

Also in 1908 Stieglitz began to show art as well as photography in the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, now commonly known as the 291 Gallery after its address on Fifth Avenue. Milne not only dropped in to see and study what Stieglitz was promoting, but he chatted with him and came to know him casually, especially later in the New York period when Milne had established a reputation.<sup>64</sup> Some of the most advanced art of Europe soon found its way there, and Milne later recalled the 291 with particular affection. 'For the first time we saw courage and imagination bare, not sweetened by sentiment and smothered in technical skill.'<sup>65</sup> In 1908 he would have seen the exhibitions of works by Henri Matisse and Auguste Rodin, and a year later by the American painters John Marin (1870–1953), Alfred Maurer (1868–1932), and Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), and by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.<sup>66</sup> In his notes for his autobiography Milne listed 'Exhibitions: Rockwell Kent, The Ten, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne (consider each in his place), John Marin.' The only one of these painters he wrote anything about was Monet, whose work he saw and admired at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in 1903,<sup>67</sup> although in a much later letter he admitted that Rockwell Kent's exhibition of Newfoundland landscapes in about 1905 'made a big impression on me and on most of the students [at the League].'<sup>68</sup>

The new wealth of America also made New York a Shangri-La for American portrait painters. John Singer Sargent (1856–1931), William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), and Childe Hassam (1859–1935) were then the darlings of a newly rich New York society that wanted to be immortalized in paint. The work of these artists, fine as it was, looked backward to the era that was passing, rather than forward. Even Henri, an apostle for the future, earned a comfortable living doing competent portraits, and painted for the most part in a safe and unadventurous way that was almost antithetical to his heated rhetoric. The Metropolitan Museum of Art added to the cultural richness of the burgeoning city by exhibiting non-Western art, especially Egyptian art, as well as Old Masters. Its grand expansion in 1902 not only allowed the public and artists alike to see a great deal more art, but made possible the mammoth exhibition of the popular Spanish painter



Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida (1863–1923) in 1909, and the large Whistler retrospective in 1910, which Milne undoubtedly saw but did not mention in later writing.

Art critics took note of the various new movements and helped to focus public attention on American initiatives. With the increase in exhibitions and the proliferation of artists' societies in the pre-war years, newspapers and magazines began to treat artistic events as news – and also as society affairs. For America art was becoming a way to display sophistication and urbanity. Who was exhibiting, who was buying, and whither art was going became subjects for journalists to grapple with; and, not surprisingly, they soon became aware of the rise of a distinctly American expression. Henri, particularly, spoke out forcefully for the native sons and daughters in art.

In the midst of all this Milne found the polar star to set his life's compass by: he first discovered Claude Monet's paintings in New York in 1903, when he was just beginning his studies at the Art Students' League. The experience was still vivid when he wrote about it in 1942:

I got my second thrill from painting [the first was in Toronto when he saw George A. Reid's *The Berry Pickers*] at the Durand-Ruel Galleries, then somewhere on 34th or 35th Sts. There was an exhibition of Monet's Haystack series – about half a dozen pictures I think. This was a new idea of painting to me, revolutionary. I had no particular interest in colour theories on which they were said to be based (I am not sure that I knew about these theories at the time) and none in the pointillist handling. It was the amazing unity of the pictures that impressed me, a unity gained by compression, by forcing all detail to work to one end. In all other pictures I was conscious of parts, in these I felt only the whole.

For a while they influenced my painting, directly; perhaps they still do very indirectly. I think it would be impossible for anyone to trace the influence by looking at my pictures. I soon found that Monet's way of achieving unity was Monet's way, and impossible for anyone else to follow directly. I still look for unity in painting, for singleness of purpose in painters above all things, but whatever efforts I have made in this direction have been along other lines than Monet's.<sup>69</sup>

In a later essay about Monet Milne gave a slightly different version of this critical encounter:

My introduction to Monet's pictures came shortly after I went to New York over forty years ago. Three, maybe more of his haystack series, were shown at Durand-Ruel's old gallery on Thirty-Fifth street near the Waldorf Astoria. I knew nothing of colour theories or pointillism or of Monet's contemporaries. I had heard of the impressionists but the word had no particular meaning for me. I didn't know whether Monet painted in the open air or in the studio. All of which was fortunate, for I had no misleading ideas about his work. I was thrilled by just one thing, his singleness of heart, the unity of his pictures. There was no straying into bypaths. He clearly aimed at one thing and one thing only. Later I saw one of the London series, and much later some of the Cathedrals, Cliffs, Rivers, Venice and the Waterlilies. The Cathedrals, Cliffs and Westminster Bridge seemed to me the high point in his painting. In these we got no return to the world around him, no story except the barest of recognition. We can tell they come from cathedrals or bridges or cliffs and that is about all. Their appeal is aesthetic.<sup>70</sup>

Although his recollection was that the influence of Monet was immediate and strong, it was not until five or six years later that any of Milne's paintings showed any influence of Monet. Only half a dozen from about 1909 or 1910 have the flickering brushstrokes and the closeness of hue (pea greens or blue-greens) that characterize Monet's canvases. 'Of all the painters of our time Claude Monet seems to me the most difficult,' Milne wrote. Monet was the one painter whose work was 'purely aesthetic, abstract,' and therefore the one closest to the heart of Milne's concerns.<sup>71</sup> The lesson Milne learned from Monet's example was structural and organizational, not technical. By contrast, Milne had little interest in Picasso's work, although later he had more interest in Matisse's, and a great deal in Cézanne's. Cézanne, he thought, was much less abstract than Monet, much more determined to get at the gritty reality of things, rather than at their aesthetic essence.<sup>72</sup>

The first recorded exhibition of Milne's art, apart from his participation in student shows, was in the 1909 American Water Color Society's spring exhibition, to which he submitted a pastel called *Clason Point Road* (now Clason Point, in the Bronx on the East River, between Winchester Creek and the Bronx River). The following year, 1910, Milne received his first critical notice from J. Nilsen Laurvick, who said of his entries in the New York Water Color Club exhibition:

the contributions by David B. Milne are deserving of special mention. Rather impressionistic in handling and brilliantly colorful, though somewhat lacking in that fundamental mastery which a synthetic treatment demands, this work is a welcome and refreshing note in the midst of so much that is commonplace.<sup>73</sup>

He was brought sharply to earth in the same year, however, by the critic of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, who gave a one-line review of one of his pastels: 'The *Defiant Maple* of David Milne is clever, if bilious.'<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, by the fall of 1911 his work had progressed sufficiently for him to be 'selected to be placed on the observation list' of the New York Water Color Club as a potential member.<sup>75</sup>

Up to 1910 it is possible to formulate only an approximate sequence of what Milne painted, and when. The stylistic leaps and shifts throughout these years are so erratic that any attempt at imposing order has to be arbitrary. Only two works in this early period, out of nearly a hundred that survive, are dated: one in 1904, the other in 1910. Those that are signed – an indication that Milne submitted them for exhibition – are few, and their titles, when known, do not correspond comfortably with those found in exhibition catalogues. But if the missing works for these years were found, they would probably not illuminate Milne's path much. One known work is marked, enigmatically, 'Second picture painted after art school'. Whatever its date, it merely proves Eugène Delacroix's sage dictum that every artist is first an amateur. Milne claimed, probably inaccurately, that he did not begin to paint until 1906 or 1907 and that he began to exhibit immediately.<sup>76</sup> The National Academy of Design was not easy for any young artist to get into, but the watercolour societies were both lenient and large enough to take nearly all submissions. Milne's nationality was usually irrelevant, but not always: 'being a Canadian didn't make any difference in these exhibitions, but the Carnegie Institute and Corcoran Gallery shows were barred to me.'<sup>77</sup>

Many years later Douglas Duncan (Milne's agent after 1938) went over

the New York paintings with Milne and made the following notes, which ultimately provide little help:

1st after art school gone; but 2nd is here, N[orth] of N.Y. City  
 Brownish ones most around Bronx Park  
 Waterfront, Erie Basin, at time when doing pencil & ink illustrations, Munsey's  
 Mag. covers  
 Pale blue & green, Monet period, along Hudson, 129th St. & above.  
 More definite blue & green, a few, mostly winter ones, Jan. 1912.  
 Brown & green, sometimes lemon yellow, with broader strokes, spring 1912,  
 mostly Spuyten Duyvil  
 Miscellaneous lot done below & above Harlem – between Wash. Hts &  
 Yonkers<sup>78</sup>

In his earliest work Milne shows a heavy hand, a crudity in the handling of paint, and a choice of murky colours that was to persist for some time. A determination to illustrate is evident; but any burning ambition to paint for its own sake is not. Milne's hesitancy and awkwardness in oils can be seen in his attempts, as in *Van Cortlandt Park*, to try to create texture with the brush handle, and to use the palette knife to lay down a thick impasto of white as a central highlight. Colours range through brown, beige, gray, gray-blue, and dark green – but all are mixed with white. The effect, instead of giving definition and clarity, succeeds only in smothering everything with a dull and muddy tone. The earliest watercolours, however, point toward sharper definition and clearer form than the oils. The only attractive feature of the earliest paintings is a commitment to skies and clouds, trees and fields, water and reflections – the subjects of most of Milne's work, although they are treated tentatively.

The style of this earliest group of paintings follows the prevailing and pervasive examples of American impressionism. The giants of the day – Childe Hassam, J. Alden Weir (1852–1919), Willard Metcalf (1858–1929), and John Twatchman (1853–1902),<sup>79</sup> who were members of a group known as The American Ten – influenced Milne considerably, for the work he is known to have shown in 1909 and 1910 sometimes approaches their impastoed and fuzzy landscapes. His winter landscapes took something from Edward W. Redfield (1869–1965), a Philadelphia painter of note, with whom Milne soon served on juries for the Philadelphia Water Color Club. Decades later, in a letter to Alice and Vincent Massey, he mentioned Charles H. Davis (1856–1933) as a painter who was 'in the galleries' while he was a student. Weir was particularly close to Milne, and supportive of him and his work, certainly in Philadelphia where he had considerable influence, and probably in New York at the time of the Armory Show, when he was briefly the chairman of the organizing association. (In 1919 Milne felt no hesitation in asking him to write a letter of recommendation to the Canadian War Records.) Like the members of The Ten and those close in spirit to them, Milne worked in oils, pastels, watercolours, and etching. Pastels were also used extensively by Chase and Whistler, and in following them Milne was doggedly adopting the conventions of the day, and hoping for some sales and recognition. In 1910 or 1911 he gave up pastels and soon after jettisoned his etching, which perhaps had been an adjunct of his budding career as an illustrator and the focus of some of his early (and successful) creations. As a student he had been inspired by Whistler's etchings and was familiar with those of Joseph Pennell (1857–



Spuyten Duyvil Pastel, c. 1909–10,  
pastel, 37.5 × 46.1 (14 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ )

1926), many of which had been published in *Munsey's Magazine* in 1907. In a letter of 1909 to Patsy he mentioned that Pennell's etchings, which were being exhibited at the Frederick A. Keppell Gallery that fall, were much like his own, except better and more expensive.<sup>80</sup> Only twenty-two single-copy examples of Milne's etchings of 1911 have survived, but they are indicative of his preoccupation with city subjects.<sup>81</sup>

*Spuyten Duyvil Pastel*, done in 1910 in the area immediately north of Manhattan, where the Harlem River meets the Hudson, is a good example of Milne's level of achievement at this time. Here, and in his painting, Milne shows a debt to the earlier generation of American impressionists in the way he provides a well-organized composition that is simplified into a few elements: a foreground, the house in the middle ground, the river reflecting the palisades in the background. The earlier tradition is there, too, in the way Milne diffuses and breaks up colours, creating an impression of atmospheric haze and vague definition. And he uses far more colours – nine or ten – than he would normally use throughout much of his later career. Yet he has put to work several effective techniques that would develop later in his work. The most obvious one is the use of vertical strokes, smudged a little to create a sense of texture. Another is the creation of fine and only slightly broken white lines running horizontally across the picture to divide it into the portions required by sky, palisades, reflection, river, and what may be the wake of a barge close to the near shore. Most important, this work shows a sense of freedom, a looseness, that Milne's earlier work did not have. It shows him on the verge of finding his own manner of expression.

The painters around Henri were also a source of encouragement to Milne in several ways. They, too, were essentially impressionists and some of them had fixed their gaze on the seedier side of New York rather than on pastoral uplands. Their subject matter, more than their style, was pounced upon by the critics, especially when they exhibited as *The Eight* in 1908. Two members – Canadian-born Ernest Lawson (1873–1939) and the Bostonian Maurice Prendergast (1859–1924, born on a yacht off Newfoundland) – attracted Milne's interest for brief periods.<sup>82</sup> Milne never mentions Lawson, but some of his early work suggests that they may have known each other and perhaps even painted together.<sup>83</sup> The same build-up of pigment and pulverizing of colour, and even the same stretch of the Harlem River (as well as the Hudson), can be seen in works by both artists at roughly the same time.<sup>84</sup> But it was the belligerent, rebellious stance of *The Eight* that attracted Milne, more than a specific style. How well he knew each of them he does not say, but for nearly a decade he showed with Newman Montross, who was their dealer, and he must have known them all to some degree. He definitely knew George Luks (1867–1933), with whom he served on a jury for the New York Water Color Club in 1915, and he records talking with Luks again in New York in 1917. The Armory Show of 1913 would have brought him together at least with Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928), Walt Kuhn (1880–1949), and William Glackens (1870–1938): Davies was its president; Kuhn a chief organizer (although he was not a member of *The Eight*, he exhibited at the Montross Gallery); and Glackens was chairman of the selection committee for all American participants (and Milne was represented far better than most American artists).

One skill Milne learned from, or had reinforced by, Henri and Chase was that of painting rapidly. Milne was impressed by Chase's annual lecture-demonstration of a quick still life or portrait.<sup>85</sup> Speedy execution became one of the hallmarks of Milne's painting; he usually, although not