Erindale's Own Artist: Charlotte Schreiber

(1834-1922)

by Myrna Friend

Charlotte Mount Brock Schreiber, née Charlotte Morrell, was born at Woodham Mortimer, Essex, England, in 1834, the daughter of the Anglican rector of Woodham Mortimer, the Reverend Robert Price Morrell, M.A., who among other interests had a strong love of art.

Charlotte, who inherited her father's artistic inclinations, studied in London, where she received friendship and instruction from J.R. Herbert, R.A., known for his frescoes in the House of Lords, and where she attended Mr. Carey's School of Art. She exhibited at the Salon d'Automne, Paris; and between 1855 and 1874, at the Royal Academy, London. During that period, she prepared illustrations of Chaucer, and made drawings for an edition of a work by one of her acquaintances -- an edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "The Rhyme of the Duchess May", published in 1874. Her strongly realistic paintings were in the British Royal Academy tradition. She favoured genre and historical subjects (for example the "Execution of Lady Jane Grey").

In 1875, in a dramatic change of her life's circumstances, Charlotte Morrell became the second wife of Weymouth George Schreiber of Toronto, and in August of that year emigrated with him to Canada.

They lived briefly at Deer Park, which she named, and which at that time was considered to be near, rather than in, Toronto. Then
they moved to "Mount Woodham", Springfield-on-the-Credit, the
place whose name Charlotte is said to have changed to Erindale.
Their house, "Mount Woodham", no longer exists, as it was torn
down by Reginald Watkins when he bought the property in 1928;
but it was on the grounds near another house, "Lislehurst", and
"Lislehurst" formed the nucleus of what is now the house of the
Principal of Erindale College. It is known that Charlotte
Schreiber spent much time at "Lislehurst" (and some of her
paintings still hang in the Principal's residence); but she
lived at "Woodham", where she had her studio and did most of her
work.

Life at "Woodham" was busy, as Charlotte had become
stepmother to Weymouth Schreiber's three children, the children
she depicted in her painting of the sledding scene,
"Springfield on the Credit".

Everyday life is featured in many of her paintings, such as
in "Olivia Paring Applies", and "Story Hour at Iverholme". The
local scene is also depicted, as well as the local characters,
both human and animal (e.g., "Local Character I", "The Gypsy",
"Springfield Rabbits", and "Feeding the Goat"). In fact, she
raised animals not only as pets, but to have as models for her
paintings.

Charlotte Schreiber was a great worker for St. Peter's Church,
where she was the organist. She sold many paintings to raise
funds for the rebuilding of the church which is today (after other
changes and enlargements) St. Peter's, Erindale, the Anglican
church on the hill at the corner of Dundas and Mississauga Road.
She lettered and painted "The Lord's Prayer", "The Creed", and
"The Ten Commandments" in the chancel of the church, where they still may be seen. Charlotte organized concerts and pantomimes which were given in the church hall. For a time, she raised birds, which were sold to help parish work, also raising pheasants in a pen near the house. (A contemporary account mentions that this effort had to be abandoned as the pheasants were preyed upon by animals.) On the grounds of what is now the Principal's house, a platform used to be raised in a big, spreading beech tree, to accommodate musicians playing at her church-benefit parties.

Charlotte Schreiber was noted principally for her paintings of landscapes with figures, mostly in oil but some in watercolour, and for her illustrations. She was one of the first (if not the first) woman illustrators in Canada, and her works include the illustrations for three children's books published in Toronto.

Mrs. Schreiber was influential in Toronto art circles. The artist-naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946) was for many years her special student and protégé. When he was a young man, the author of Wild Animals I Have Known was a frequent visitor at the artist's home, and she sometimes used him as a model, as in her painting, "The Courtship of Miles Standish". She assisted and encouraged other Canadian artists, including Lucius O'Brien and T. Mower Martin.

Charlotte Schreiber is remembered today largely in connection with the Royal Canadian Academy. At an organization meeting held in September, 1879, in the gallery of the Ontario Society of Artists, with his Excellency, the Governor General, the Marquis of
Lorne, in the chair, the Royal Canadian Academy was founded, and Charlotte Schreiber, along with thirteen others, was named an Academician. (It may be mentioned that the consort of the Governor General, the Princess Louise, was something of an artist, and both of them had a large share in organizing the academy and in determining the members.) Charlotte Schreiber was the first woman elected to the Royal Canadian Academy, and was the only woman elected full academician until 1933. From the time she was named a charter member of the R.C.A. in 1880, up to her retirement in 1888, she frequently exhibited her paintings there.

Another honour for Charlotte Schreiber was her election to the Ontario Society of Artists in 1876. She remained a member of the Society until 1889, and exhibited frequently there from 1876 to 1893.

She was an instructor at the Ontario School of Art and Design (the forerunner of the Ontario College of Art) and served (as the only woman) on its board in 1876.

Her work was represented in the Philadelphia Sesqui-Centennial exhibition in 1876. Between 1879 and 1893, she exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal (later called the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts); in 1892, at the Lyceum Club, Toronto; and in 1893, at Chicago.

Much of what we know of Charlotte Schreiber derives from a long newspaper account which appeared in The Saturday Globe of Toronto on March 2, 1895. The interviewer described the chilly winter ride in a horsedrawn stage from Streetsville to "Woodham", the impressions at meeting the aging but handsome and vigorous artist, and the walk taken with her along the Credit river, and
down the long flight of wooden steps which she had personally constructed (all one hundred and five of them) into the hill down to the river. It was during that interview that she stated her philosophy of art, part of which was, in her words:

"The human hand, the finger nail, the foot, every portion of the living body, the parts of a flower, are divinely beautiful. It is a joy to paint them as they are in reality. Is it not better to do so than to use that method which gives any structure when viewed near at hand the appearance of an undistinguishable blotch?" Though it rather sells the Impressionists short, realists of all times will relish that statement.

The nature and extent of Charlotte Schreiber's influence on subsequent Canadian art was eventually made clear. Paul Duval, in his book, *High Realism in Canada* (Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1974), wrote that Schreiber, along with other emigrant-artists like William Cruikshank, John Fraser, and F.M. Bell-Smith, imported into Canada the high level of draughtsmanship and realism which they had been taught by artists in the Royal Academy of London during the Victorian era. Schreiber, like Cruikshank and others, perpetuated this kind of art through teaching as well as through works, and their influence was considerable.

After the death of her husband, and after nearly a quarter-century spent in Canada, Charlotte Schreiber returned to England in 1898 or 1899 (authorities differ on the date), and lived after that at Paignton, South Devon. After she left Canada, her work continued to be exhibited -- in the Canadian National Exhibition of 1903 in Toronto. She died at Paignton in 1922 at the age of 88.
In 1966, Mr. Howard Schreiber held an exhibition in Toronto of thirty of his great-grandmother's paintings. The following year, from October 30 to November 18, 1967, again with Mr. Schreiber's help, the largest collection ever assembled of the oils and watercolours of Charlotte Schreiber (including forty-seven works) was displayed at Erindale College, in the year of its opening.

In the Erindale exhibition were shown works of various kinds, drawn from private collections. Some of the landscapes were scenes of the area where Erindale College now stands, such as: "Woodham", of the artist's house and studio; "A Scene at Erindale", and "St. Peter's Church". There were the scenes from everyday life, the portraits ("Mrs. Martin Grahame", and others), and representations from her historical subjects (e.g., "Joan of Arc").

One of her best works is "The Croppy Boy" (oil on canvas), which was her diploma picture on her election as a Royal Academician in Canada, and which was deposited, as a Royal Canadian Academy Diploma Deposit, in 1880 to the National Gallery in Ottawa, where it is still held. Subtitled "The Confession of an Irish Patriot", the painting represents an episode described in an Irish revolutionary ballad. Irish revolutionaries toward the end of the 18th century, croppy boys were so named because of their close-cropped hair, as shown on the subject of the painting.

While many of her works were done without distinction and in the sentimental mode of the day, at her best, Charlotte Schreiber typifies the kind of realism in art that is always valid, and which
never goes out of style. Apart from that intrinsic merit, her works, as well as the details of her life, are of special and lasting interest to members of the Erindale College community who live and work amid the scenes she memorialized.

Some Newspaper Articles on Charlotte Schreiber

Canadian Illustrated News (Montreal), April 24, 1880.
Kritzweiser, Kay. "A Tale of Two Women with Power to Communicate", Globe and Mail (Toronto),
April 22, 1967.

Saturday Globe (Toronto), March 2, 1895.

Myrna Friend,
Erindale College Library,
1983.