Ken Kirkby: A Painter’s Quest for Canada  
by Goody Niosi  

Reviewed by Graeme Voyer

Ken Kirkby is a Canadian painter driven by a passion for Canada’s North and its indigenous people, the Inuit. His remarkable life story is here related by Goody Niosi, a writer living in British Columbia. Kirkby was born in England in 1940. In 1946, his family moved to Spain, eventually settling in Portugal. His gift for drawing was evident early in his childhood. Niosi writes that “drawing was something he had to do – like breathing” (65). As a young boy Kirkby met a Portuguese fisherman who became his mentor. The fisherman had participated in whaling expeditions to the Canadian North; Kirkby was thrilled by the fisherman’s tales of these expeditions, and determined that he, too, would explore the Canadian Arctic. This was the origin of Kirkby’s lifelong fascination with Canada’s northern regions.

Kirkby’s family moved to British Columbia, and he made his way north. He experienced several personal tragedies. Eventually he was taken in by a group of Inuit, and he learned their way of life, sharing their hardships as they eked out a nomadic existence on the land.

Having realized his childhood dream of seeing the North, Kirkby embraced a new purpose: he would return to his own culture in the south of Canada and, through his art, raise public awareness of the plight of the Inuit.

The rest of Niosi’s account depicts Kirkby’s pursuit of this aim. His main task was an enormous canvas: a 152-foot-wide,12-foot-high painting of an Arctic scene. Part of this painting was unveiled at the Canadian Parliament in 1992.

This biography is clearly intended to be a sympathetic portrait of Kirkby. And certainly, his single-minded devotion to the cause of the Inuit is admirable. But both Kirkby and this book are flawed.

Kirkby has a self-confidence bordering on megalomania. He conceives of himself as a mighty warrior and individualist; in fact, he is an establishment figure, lionized by political and media elites. Indeed, he has a genius for self-promotion and manipulating the media, which is somewhat mitigated by the fact that his efforts are directed toward the betterment of others.

One of his many lovers observes that he has “delusions of grandeur” (195), and she is right. He announces to a federal cabinet minister, “one day I am going to march in here [Ottawa] and take this place over” (275). He explains, at the unveiling of his painting in Parliament, that he represents the voice of the Canadian people: “I – a single individual – am actually here as ‘the people’ and I wanted you to hear the people’s voice through me” (284).

Parts of Niosi’s account simply do not ring true. She relates that the eleven-year-old Kirkby describes Pablo Picasso as a “misogynist” (37). There are also stylistic flaws. Misplaced commas permeate the narrative. And she occasionally misuses words; for example, “disinterested” (65) when she means “uninterested.”

This biography will enhance Kirkby’s self-esteem, something that hardly seems necessary.

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