

Art & Artists in Exhibition: Vancouver 1890 - 1950

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Allan Cyril Brooks (Major, D.S.O.)**February 15 1869 - January 3 1946****B.C. Society of Fine Arts (Charter Member)**

Allan Brooks was born in Etawah, India in 1869, where his father was working as an Engineer. Brooks was sent to England for schooling when he was five. In 1881 the family moved to Quebec, then to Milton, Ontario, where his father took up farming. In 1887 the family moved to Chilliwack, B.C., where they purchased a farm from the pioneer Charles Young, a property known as the Cruikshank Place. In 1891 Brook's father sold the farm and returned to Ontario. Although Brooks at first moved with the family to Ontario, he was now of an age to strike out on his own, and after three years on the farm in Ontario he left for the west.

In the fall of 1894 Brooks and his brother Ted returned to Chilliwack in time for fall duck hunting. Brooks then began one of the most amazing mixed careers in the history of British Columbia. He shot birds for food, for the market, and for collectors. He also hunted and trapped mammals, ranging in size from the smallest of shrews up to big game. He drew and painted birds and wildlife, and began selling his artwork as illustrations for a number of major publications on birds, as well as for sporting and recreational periodicals.

British Columbia was almost a scientific wilderness at this time, and Brooks discovered many new species of animals that he sold to collectors as far away as England, who published the information in scientific journals. He sold fleas, for example, to Charles Rothschild at the Tring Zoological Museum, in Hertfordshire, and is credited with providing material either wholly or in part responsible for the identification of fifteen new species of fleas. One of these species, that Brooks curried from the fur of a weasel, is named *Nearctopsylla brooksi* after him.

He was a charter member of the [B.C. Society of Fine Arts](#) when it was founded in 1908, and had four paintings in its [First Annual Exhibition](#) in April 1909.

In 1911 Brooks loaned nine paintings on request of the Provincial Museum of B.C. for exhibition in the International Sportsman's Exhibition in Vienna. One of the paintings was stolen, perhaps because none of them were for sale.

Brooks also prospected and ran trap-lines, travelling extensively throughout southern British Columbia, on foot and by horse. He was an extremely accomplished hunter, with a large collection of rifles and shot-guns, and competed regularly in shooting matches, eventually culminating with shooting as a member of the Canadian team in the championships at Bisley, England, just as World War One broke out.

The war started just as Brooks was reaching full maturity as an ornithologist, an illustrator, a painter, a hunter, a collector and trapper, and a "crack shot". He had by that time illustrated the major work

"*Birds of Washington*" and others, and was poised for a top-level career as an illustrator. Regardless, at the age of 45 he immediately volunteered into a Scottish regiment. He was soon sent back to Canada, though, when it was discovered that he already held an officer's commission in the Canadian Militia.

He sailed back to Europe in October 1914, going to war. He was promoted from Lieutenant to Captain in April 1915, and a month later to Major, a rank he held until the end of hostilities. December 21 1915 he was appointed Instructor of Snipers School, 1st Canadian Division. In March 1917 he was appointed Chief Instructor of the 2nd Army Sniping School.

Brooks did not simply teach behind the lines and stay out of harm's way during the war. He was mentioned in dispatches three times, on November 30, 1915, November 13, 1916, and March 16 1919. He was awarded the D.S.O. for his actions ahead of the front lines during an assault on the Drocourt-Queant line in Arras, with the 11th Brigade of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, in 1918, as the Allies began their final offensive against the German army.

The citation of the Deed of Action for which Brooks received the Distinguished Service Order reads as follows:

For conspicuous gallantry in the operations of 2nd and 3rd September 1918 in front of Arras. As brigade observing officer he showed great daring and initiative, pushing forward at all times with the most advance troops under the heaviest fire. Taking a wire with him he kept brigade headquarters well informed of the situation and enabled the commander to make decisions that saved many lives. When the enemy was retiring he pushed forward 500 yards in front of the infantry and telephoned back information from a long distance in front of our advance. During the two days he personally killed twenty of the enemy by sniping shot.

Another conspicuous action was a two-day sniping episode where Brooks and his bat-man hid themselves in a slag heap closely overlooking the German lines in order to snipe at them. They each took 100 rounds of ammunition. The bat-man was killed almost immediately by return fire, but Brooks remained there for two days until he had fired all 200 rounds of ammunition they had taken with them. With his accuracy one can only imagine that he killed a large number of the enemy.

Brooks almost "went west" when he walked into a trap set by the Germans in 1917. He was caught in relatively open ground, but the Germans saw that he was a staff officer and decided to take him prisoner. This gave Brooks time to drop to the ground and crawl towards a nearby bombed-out tank. He was able to crawl into it, and using it as a sniping position defended himself successfully until a shell apparently exploded on or near the tank. He was knocked unconscious, but was relatively uninjured except for damaged hearing. The advance had by this time gone by him, and he was taken to the field hospital, where he asked a friend of his to go back to the field and see how many dead enemy soldiers he could find. Apparently there were at least twelve dead Germans, every one of them shot through the head.

Brooks, however, was now "safely wounded", and was out of the war for good. He began to make his way out of France, to England, and finally back to Canada, landing on March 30, 1919. He arrived back at his home in Okanagan Landing on April 15, 1919, to take up his life exactly where he had left off four and a half years ago. It seems amazing that he went from being an excellent hunter and painter to being a deadly killer of men, and then seemingly effortlessly taking up the paintbrush again.

Brooks continued to illustrate extensively, including the massive four-volume *Birds of California*, issued in 1923 with 110 colour plates by Brooks. He also illustrated *Ducks of the World*, *Birds of Western Canada* and *Birds of Canada*, and contributed many illustrations to other books and to National Geographic magazine.



Some of his paintings were printed lithographically during the 1930s, including *Ring Necked Pheasant* (above) dated 1931, and *Ruffed Grouse* (below) dated 1934.



Brooks was also an expert taxidermist and prepared many thousands of birds for his own collection and for museums and other collectors. It was noted that he had a vast collection of birds, numbering in the thousands, which he used as study models for his bird paintings. This collection is apparently now at the University of California at Berkeley.

He won a gold medal at the C.N.E. in 1926; exhibited with the [Island Arts and Crafts Society](#) in 1928; at the Art Association of Montreal in 1934; and was given a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Vernon Museum and Archives in May 1963. He died in Comox, B.C. in 1946.

Allan Brooks was, in sum, an amazing man. Not only was he a man of almost continuous action and energy, he left behind a large number of detailed notebooks, daily and annual bird count summaries, daily diaries, detailed sketchbooks, and a large number of personal letters. It is possible to track his movements through the forests and rivers of B.C. almost day to day for a number of years. The species and quantities of wildlife that he saw and recorded are to a large part now gone, with his detailed records alone remaining to tell us what we have lost.

A number of short biographies and memorials were written on Brooks through the years, but by far the most comprehensive is *Allan Brooks - Artist Naturalist*, by Hamilton M. Laing, 1979, B.C. Provincial Museum Special Publication 3. Laing was a friend of Brooks' for a number of years and so is able to speak of him personally as well as from his records and artwork.

Exhibitions

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

| DATE | EXHIBITION | LOCATION |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1949 Aug. 2 - 21 | Solo Exhibition (Memorial?) | Vancouver Art Gallery |

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

| DATE | EXHIBITION | ARTWORK |
|------------------------|---|---|
| 1909 April 20 - 28 | BCSFA First Annual Exhibition | Heron Study of Young Cougar Summit of the Selkirks, Caribou Morning Mists, Wapiti |
| 1929 May 18 - June 8 | BCSFA 21st Annual Exhibition | The Raven |
| 1929 October | BCAL Citizens' Loan of W/C | The Raven The Gerfalcon |
| 1950 April 25 - May 14 | BCSA 40th Annual Exhibition | Mallards |

References - BIBLIOGRAPHY

Refer to [BIBLIO](#).

References - GROUP EXHIBITIONS

100 YEARS OF B.C. ART

"An Exhibition Held at the Vancouver Art Gallery to Celebrate the B.C. Centennial Year" 1958, (130 pages), no ISBN, illustrated with black & white photographs of works.

Brooks had two paintings (132 and 133) in the exhibition.

See also [VAG58](#)

PROFILES OF A HERITAGE - Images of Wildlife by British Columbia Artists

Published by Centennial Wildlife Society of British Columbia and Liane Davison
 1987, no ISBN, Traveling Exhibition Curated by Liane Davison
 Sofcover, not paginated, works illustrated in colour and black & white
 Includes Foreword by Patricia Bovey, Introduction, biographies, artist statements
 Includes early artwork by **Alan Brooks**.

References - GENERAL**WHO'S WHO IN NORTHWEST ART** edited by Marion Brymner Appleton

"A Directory of Persons in the Pacific Northwest Working in the Media of Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts, and Handicrafts".

1941; published by Frank McCaffrey, Seattle Washington.

Brief reference to Brooks

ISLAND ARTS AND CRAFTS SOCIETY - LIST OF EXHIBITORS**BROOKS, ALLAN**

A Dictionary of Canadian Artists, Volume 1, A - F, 5th Ed. Revised & Expanded 1997
 Colin S. Macdonald, Canadian Paperbacks. ISBN 0-919554-21-0

BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX OF ARTISTS IN CANADA

2003, Evelyn de R. McMann, University of Toronto Press, ISBN 0-8020-2790-3

250 pages; 9 pages of *works cited* referenced to 8,800 artists

4 references cited for Brooks.

VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY - B.C. ARTISTS FILES (refer to [VPL](#))**Clippings**

"Allan Brooks, another member of the [B.C.S.F.A.](#), is a painstaking and exceedingly able painter of birds and game subjects. As an explorer of the mountain recesses, as a hunter and prospector, he has made a record. The clearness of his observation and the ability of his pencil are seen in his masterly book illustrations as well as in many separate paintings. His illustrations in the large and important work, "The Birds of Washington," by Dawson & Bowles, are a sufficient testimony to his great ability in this particular line."

From "[Art in British Columbia](#)", by [Bernard McEvoy](#)
Opportunities Magazine, 1910

Allan Brooks - Audubon of the West

by G.E. Valentine, "*Vancouver Province*", November 22, 1946