

Barker Fairley (1887-1986)

Brief biography

Artist, writer, scholar, teacher and poet Barker was born in 1887 on Park Road, Barnsley to Barker and Charlotte Fairley.

Barker Snr. came from the north east to be master then head of St. John's School Barnsley, a post he held for nearly forty years.

Educated at St. Johns, Leeds Central High School, Leeds and Jena Universities, Barker spent his adult life in Canada becoming Professor of German at the University of Toronto and the foremost authority on Goethe of his day. But there was more to Barker than brilliant scholarship. As Canada strove to find its own identity, Barker's other great talents began to flourish.

Recognizing the birth of a new country he saw that art would give that country its own identity away from European traditions and he became a supporter, promoter and friend of a group of artists called The Group of Seven.

This group, exhibiting as a group for the first time in 1920, portrayed Canada's landscape in stark reality. Barker's articles about the group, particularly in "The Canadian Forum" a magazine he co-founded, and his support at the University helped the group achieve international success. He has been called the ninth member of the Group of Seven. The work of the group was the subject of a major exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2011.

Barker married firstly, Margaret Keeling the daughter of the Headmaster of Bradford Grammar School. Margaret was a writer, educator and political activist who was deported from the U.S.A. in 1949 for her Communist leanings – Barker himself was refused admission to the U.S.A. during his lifetime.

Slowly from about 1931 Barker picked up a paint brush. He retired from the University in 1957 and devoted more time to painting. His very spartan landscapes and still lives, were supplemented by sometimes disturbing and sometimes joyful portraits.

He held numerous honours and was awarded the Order of Merit of Canada. He died in Toronto in 1986.

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