

PREFACE

Victoria was in lush summer bloom the day I met Ted Harrison. I arrived at his home at the appointed hour, but no one answered the doorbell. Suspecting he might have a studio tucked away on the property, I followed a path to the rear of the modest house. There I saw a small wooden gate. Beyond it lay a garden dizzy with colour, scent, and motion. This was certainly a painter's garden and, as I was to learn, very much a Ted Harrison garden. Waves of crimson, yellow, and lavender blooms offered up late summer scents of cinnamon, vanilla, and musk. Overhead a Yukon flag billowed in the light breeze. Gnarled oak trees shaded beds of hostas, violets, and sword ferns. Climbing roses twisted over aging trellises and hummingbirds darted among pink phlox and large, luscious dahlias. Chirps and twitters from unseen songbirds sprinkled the air. Tucked into a corner I saw a salad patch of plump tomatoes, green onions, and rows of lettuce.

Ted Harrison first popped into my life through the pages of a book. During the 1980s, I taught elementary school in Edmonton. When winter had settled around us, I would transport my young students to the even colder Yukon wilderness by reading *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, the grand old poem reprinted with illustrations by Ted Harrison. Little eyes would widen as Robert Service's words worked their magic and Harrison's bright waves of colour carried teacher and students to the Land of the Midnight Sun.

I had often wondered about the man behind the cheerful pictures. What, or who, inspired those vibrant colours and the playful, optimistic style? What determined Harrison's carefree, poetic prose? What were the influences, experiences, and people that shaped him? Now, I was to find out.

As I wandered through the blossoms and birdsongs, I noticed a small addition to the main house overlooking the garden. Sounds of Beethoven thundered from inside. I looked through a window into a studio and caught a side glimpse of a portly gentleman contemplating an unfinished painting. I raised my hand to knock on the door but then hesitated, unable to resist watching the Master at work.

In his left hand he held a makeshift palette — a white paper plate blotched with creamy yellow, pinks, and several shades of blue. In his right hand, a brush poised mid-air. This hand shook slightly, but when it met the canvas, a clean, strong line appeared, sweeping upward to form the apex of what appeared to be a cloud. He sat back, scrutinized his work, and then started again. His pause-and-paint rhythm was hypnotic. Even from outside, I felt his intensity.

After several minutes, I pounded on the door. He didn't hear me. Clearly, I was no match for Beethoven. I tried jumping about outside the window, waving my arms. Eventually he looked up from the easel, caught sight of me, smiled, and waved. He turned away from his work and approached me with a lively grin, beckoning me inside.

Ted Harrison appeared every inch an artist in his paint-splattered apron and rumpled trousers. Snowy hair framed an open, honest face. A gentle face, remarkably unlined for a man approaching eighty. His blue eyes sparkled and his hands exuded the grace of a pianist or a surgeon. They, too, defied the decades and looked as if time and toil had passed them by.

Sunlight streamed from rooftop windows into the studio. I knew at a glance this was an intensely personal space — one that mirrored the man who worked here. "Please, sit while I make tea," he said in a lilting Durham accent, motioning me to an easy chair hidden beneath a tartan blanket. I studied the room as he bustled about in the adjoining kitchen. Handmade cards from school children dangled on a string, hung diagonally across the room. A stuffed raven, the ubiquitous bird of the Yukon, peered down from its perch overlooking the easel.

Along the cluttered window ledges leaned a framed Order of Canada medal, four honorary degrees, and a Boy Scouts' Medal of Merit. A jumble of magazines and letters covered a massive oak desk. History, politics, and philosophy books (many in German), crammed shelves. Paint tubes and a Bick's sauerkraut jar stuffed with brushes littered the top of a small table. Lying on a paint-splashed carpet were stacks of paper-plate palettes, each a miniature testament to the joyful colours that define Ted Harrison's work.

The studio walls told his story better than any résumé. Paintings danced with tender, understated strength. Ribbons of scarlet, orange, azure, and gold, swirled and dipped to suggest mountains, sky, and the sea. Ruby red, amber, and lime-green houses rocked upon flowing landscapes. Chimneys streamed multicoloured smoke and children chased village dogs. Each painting radiated whimsy, innocence, and fun.

Ted Harrison's work is difficult to categorize. "When folks first saw my paintings some called it folk art," he chuckled, handing me a mug of Chinese tea. "Others just shook their heads and thought I was off my rocker. I call it the School of Cheery!"

Whatever the label, his work is refreshing, in great demand, and, yes — very, very cheery. "The world has enough pain without putting it on our walls," he explained, his voice darkening. "I lived for many years in the worst possible conditions. I grew up in the Depression. I know the world of poverty. I've seen people reduced to living like animals. Not only in England, but also in Asia and Africa. I've experienced destruction and riots. I don't want that part of life now and so I paint only happy subjects. I paint *my* imaginary world because it's the only perfect world I have."

As we talked, he told me how he feels most content when he paints. When not at his easel, he likes to observe nature. "I like to catch sight of a bee on a flower," he said. "To study a single leaf. To see the iggly, wiggly things that walk around." He spoke of an ant farm he constructed in a glass container. "I wanted to understand their little society. Then I felt sorry for the creatures and let them go. They seemed pleased."

He described his advancing years as "standing on the top of a mountain where the forest once was thick but now has thinned." This thinning lets him focus on what he has overlooked, he said. He fell quiet, sipping his tea. "I want to tell my story, to let others know how a miner's son from County Durham came to Canada and got on in life."

I pick up my pen.

He leans forward.

And we begin.

