

René Richard: Cold Laker, Québécois, and the Tom Thomson of the North

Posted on [August 25, 2020](#) by [Jeff Gaye](#)

It's hard to imagine that the young son of a Swiss watchmaker (in fact, a descendant of the founder of the Swiss watchmaking industry) would move with his family to Cold Lake, learn the ways of the bush, work as a trapper, gain a formal education as a painter, return to the bush, move to Quebec, and there become a beloved artist on a par with Canada's famous Group of Seven—and somehow not be a household name here.

Cold Lake, meet René Richard.

René was born René Jeanrichard in Switzerland, where his father Paul was a watchmaker. The family is descended from Daniel Jeanrichard of Le Locle, Switzerland, where a statue stands commemorating Daniel's role as the founder of the grand Swiss watchmaking tradition. The "Jeanrichard" name survives today on a brand of luxury watches.

Paul sold his business in Switzerland and sailed to Montreal in 1909. Attracted by the promise of free land from the Canadian Pacific Railway, the family moved west and eventually settled in Cold Lake – not even a village at that point—in 1911.

His homestead was where the M.D. of Bonnyville's Cold Lake campground is now. Paul, by this time known locally as P.J. Richard, operated a store and post office there until the village took root a little farther east along the lakeshore, centred on the site where the marina stands now.

Paul moved to the emerging new village and bought the R.Chartier general store across the street from the present marina location. He also operated four tourist cabins. The store and the cabins are long gone, but the family home still stands on 8th Street.

Paul's nephew Charles "Charlie" Demeyriez came to Cold Lake with the family. Charlie had been apprenticing as an engraver in the watch factory, but Paul invented an engraving machine that made hand-engraving obsolete.

In Cold Lake, Charlie and his brother Dick were close friends with young René Richard—together they learned the ways of the land from their First Nations friends, and they became capable bushmen in their own right.

Starting in 1922, the three of them travelled the North extensively together as trappers. Their travels took them across the northern regions of the prairie provinces, into what is now Nunavut, and down the Mackenzie River to its delta on the Beaufort Sea. On these

travels René would draw and paint. He had a keen eye, a capable hand, and a profound, unsentimental vision of the landscape.

Burt Demeriez is Charlie Demeyriez's son, and a longtime Cold Laker now living in Edmonton. In his 2016 book *A Swiss Pioneer And His Family In Canada*, Demeriez recounts the travels of his father and uncle with Richard throughout the north. The trapping life involved plenty of work, but the men had their pastimes as well.

"René focused on his passion for sketching northern sights," Demeriez says.

Charlie left the north in 1924, but Dick stayed with Richard, who eventually returned to Cold Lake and took art lessons in Edmonton in 1926.

Meanwhile, Richard's father had been writing from Cold Lake to a famous Quebec artist, asking if young René had potential.

Alan Klinkhoff, a Canadian art expert and owner of the Alan Klinkhoff Gallery in Montreal, says "there exists a fascinating correspondence of letters written by his father to a highly-regarded Canadian artist living between Paris and Baie-Saint-Paul [Quebec], by the name of Clarence Gagnon. Mr. Richard is essentially asking this celebrated artist what he thinks of these drawings that this son is doing, and is there anything he should do about it? And the exchange is essentially that Gagnon does encourage the father to have René pursue this, but to go and study in Paris."

So from Cold Lake, René Richard made his way to study art at L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris.

While Richard was in France, Gagnon championed his career. In March of 1928, Gagnon wrote to Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery of Canada, favourably comparing Richard to celebrated Canadian artist Tom Thomson:

"He knows what he wants to do and his love for the wilds will make another Tom Thomson of him," Gagnon wrote. "There is not a Canadian artist, dead or living, who has drawn or can draw in five minutes sketches to compare with those of Richard."

By this time, wrote Gagnon, Richard was already thinking of leaving Paris to return to Canada.

"He ignored the art schools, because after a month here, he could draw better than any of the masters who were teaching him. [...] The 'call of the wild' is getting the best of him, and he has made up his mind to return to the Barren Lands where he came from, to resume his trapper's life and to paint what he had been dreaming of for years up in the Delta of the Mackenzie.

"I'll be damn mistaken if he doesn't turn out a greater artist than Tom Thomson, I wish you will keep in touch with him so that we may see some of his things on exhibition."

When he got back to Canada, Richard reconnected with his friend Dick Demeyriez, who was working for the Churchill River Power Corporation (and running mail by dogsled) north of

Flin Flon, Manitoba. Demeyriez and Richard did some trapping out of the latter's cabin between Flin Flon and Island Falls, and Richard busied himself with his art.

Burt Demeriez shares a story told by his Uncle Dick about Richard's artistic temperament.

"Dick recalled that René could be quite temperamental while engaged in the act of painting," Burt said. "As the story goes, René had been commissioned by an upper executive of the power corporation to render a portrait of his wife.

"Unfortunately, [the executive] made the mistake of a surprise visit to view the painting before it was finished. After looking over René's shoulder at the nearly finished portrait, René abruptly stood up and tossed it into the stove.

"Dick ended up by saying the painting would have fetched a good sum... and they could have used the money!"

Dick and René visited Switzerland together in 1932—Dick came home with a new bride, Gabrielle.

Later that year, Richard embarked from Cold Lake to paddle the length of the Churchill River. Charlie Demeyriez helped him launch his birchbark canoe in the Beaver River, which flows into the Churchill River system. According to Burt Demeriez, Charlie recalled that "aside from his basic gear and clothing he left with only a sack of potatoes and a rifle." He set out in August of 1932, and returned in 1933. He navigated the river and spent the winter with the help of First Nations people along the route.

When drawing and painting around Cold Lake, Richard worked on small wooden shingles which he later threw away. Burt Demeriez has some that his family saved.

In the bush, he would draw on squares of butcher's paper. Many of his sketches and studies drawn on his travels in western Canada would inspire works that he finished much later from his home in Baie-Saint-Paul.

"While he's out there, he's drawing," Klinkhoff said. "That's the basis of many of his later paintings. There are some paintings that have portaging and there are others that are of dogsleds and this kind of thing.

"These are all from the little drawings that he did in the bush. And then he recreates some of these later in life when he has a fixed address and a place to put oil paintings, rather than schlepp them around which of course is just not possible."

In 1938, Gagnon suggested Richard should move to Montreal. That summer, the two undertook a project cataloguing the work of another artist, the recently-deceased Horatio Walker, on Île d'Orléans near Quebec City.

They made a visit to Baie-Saint-Paul further downstream on the north shore of the St Lawrence, where they were guests of the Cimon family. Through Gagnon, Richard landed a job as a game warden on the Gaspé Peninsula, but that position was eliminated in the fall. Richard returned to Baie-Saint-Paul and the hospitality of the Cimon family, for whom he performed odd jobs to earn his keep.

In 1942 he married the Cimons' daughter Blanche and at the age of 47 became a full-time artist for the first time in his life.

"Then he pursued any opportunity to show his pictures," Klinkhoff said. Important galleries in Quebec City and Montreal took an interest in his work.

"I think he did pretty well by these people," said Klinkhoff. "You know, he wasn't a man of great needs. In the days that I knew him, he was just a guy walking around with his red characteristic lumberjack shirt."

This genuine rustic quality, and Richard's extensive work painting Quebec subjects, established him as a Quebec folk hero. In fact, most Quebecers just naturally assumed he was a native son.

"His reputation grew as a Quebecer, which is kind of interesting because most people in the day—and certainly in the early part of my career—they never thought of him as being anything but a Quebecer," Klinkhoff said.

"René Richard, you know, sort of sounds Quebec, and his legacy in terms of his artwork in Ungava and the far north, people just assumed that this was a Quebecer. And he became a bit of a folk hero, in part because there's a very well-known book written by celebrated Quebec author Gabrielle Roy."

There is a definite parallel between Richard's life and that of Gabrielle Roy. Roy is also a cultural icon in Quebec, and like Richard, she came to Quebec from western Canada—Manitoba, in her case.

Richard and Roy were friends. René and Blanche Richard went on a road trip to Mexico with Roy in 1957.

"Pierre Cadourai," the fictional hero in Roy's 1961 novel *La Montagne Secrète*, is based on Richard. (*La Montagne Secrète* is available in English translation as *The Hidden Mountain*.) The book's success added to Richard's reputation and his status as a beloved Quebec artist. Richard contributed illustrations to the 1975 edition of the book.

That Richard never gained the same elevated stature outside of Quebec is partly the artist's own doing, according to Klinkhoff. Richard was happy at home in Baie-Saint-Paul, and didn't like travelling to faraway cities to promote himself and his work.

"When René Richard was active, he was not a person who cared about sending things to a gallery in Toronto. There was no ego in the man from that perspective. Any sort of marketing would have been foreign to his vocabulary," Klinkhoff said.

"And also, it need be said that generally speaking, to get any René Richard painting, you had to go to Baie-Saint-Paul. If you were lucky, maybe Blanche would sell three or four, maybe five or six. And that was it."

Burt Demeriez corroborates Klinkhoff's observation that Blanche carefully managed Richard's reputation.

"She was very protective of his image," he said. "When she writes about his early days as a trapper, she mentions nothing about my uncle Dick. She did mention my father, in an indirect way, who was really an older brother to him.

"But she wanted to write all about his art down east. She did come to Cold Lake. I remember seeing him and her walking down the street one day and I never really got to talk to them, I just saw them going by. They were a strange couple obviously, but he was a great artist, no question."

Klinkhoff recalls that in the days before 1970, a large-format René Richard painting would sell for around \$1,000 retail. There was little incentive for a gallery owner in Toronto to make the 20-hour drive on poor roads to Baie-Saint-Paul, and return four days later with a few large paintings which would not get a favourable price.

And as for Richard himself, Klinkhoff says, "he didn't care. He just didn't care."

It's nice to think that the quality of an artist's work speaks for itself. But Klinkhoff says there is a "political" aspect to the art world. Richard wasn't interested in playing the game, so to speak, and curators preferred to do business in either "blue chip" artists or the next rising star.

"If people don't see them in Vancouver, they're not going to ask for them. The reputation of an artist has to be developed through ongoing marketing, and it never happened outside of Quebec," he said.

Richard did receive national recognition in his lifetime. He was named to the Order of Canada in 1973 and elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1980. But considering that so much of his life and work—even his later work—are rooted in western Canada, Klinkhoff feels he should be celebrated beyond Quebec.

"There's no question he should be because, as you know, some of his work describes the west and some describes the northwest and it described northern Manitoba," he said.

"And he's the only genuine Canadian trapper who painted. I know there are all kinds of artists who have done paintings, maybe romantically looking at the life of a trapper, but none who were such. And so his [work] has an integrity and a rawness to it. That's a man who can feel the elements, he knows what it's about."

René Richard died in Baie-Saint-Paul in 1982. Burt Demeriez was visiting his Uncle Dick and Aunt Gabby when Dick got the news, and he describes the moment in his book:

"You could see his burly shoulders sag and by the look on his face it was apparent his mind was being flooded with memories of earlier years. His reaction that morning was much the same as when he came down to see us at the cabin just after his brother passed away in the summer of 1977. With the loss of his two closest friends, it appeared he was thinking about the chain of life that linked them together over many years in Switzerland and Canada was now broken..."

Dick Demeriez, the last of the three Swiss-born adventurers, died in Cold Lake in 1992.

Klinkhoff hopes René Richard's Cold Lake roots are not forgotten.

"If they understood the importance of this man and the body of work he did, my guess is that the local mayor would want to find the house he developed from when his family originally came, and put a plaque there," he said.

"If you tell [people] about it, they may inform themselves and find that this fellow is very much of heroic stature—and emanated from Cold Lake when he originally came to Canada."

<https://respectnews.ca/news/rene-richard-cold-laker-quebecois-and-the-tom-thomson-of-the-north/>



Ungava. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Trapper's cabin – Burt thinks this might actually be Dick Demeyriez's cabin in Manitoba.. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Old house in Charlevoix. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Trapper with canoe. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Baie-Saint-Paul. ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY



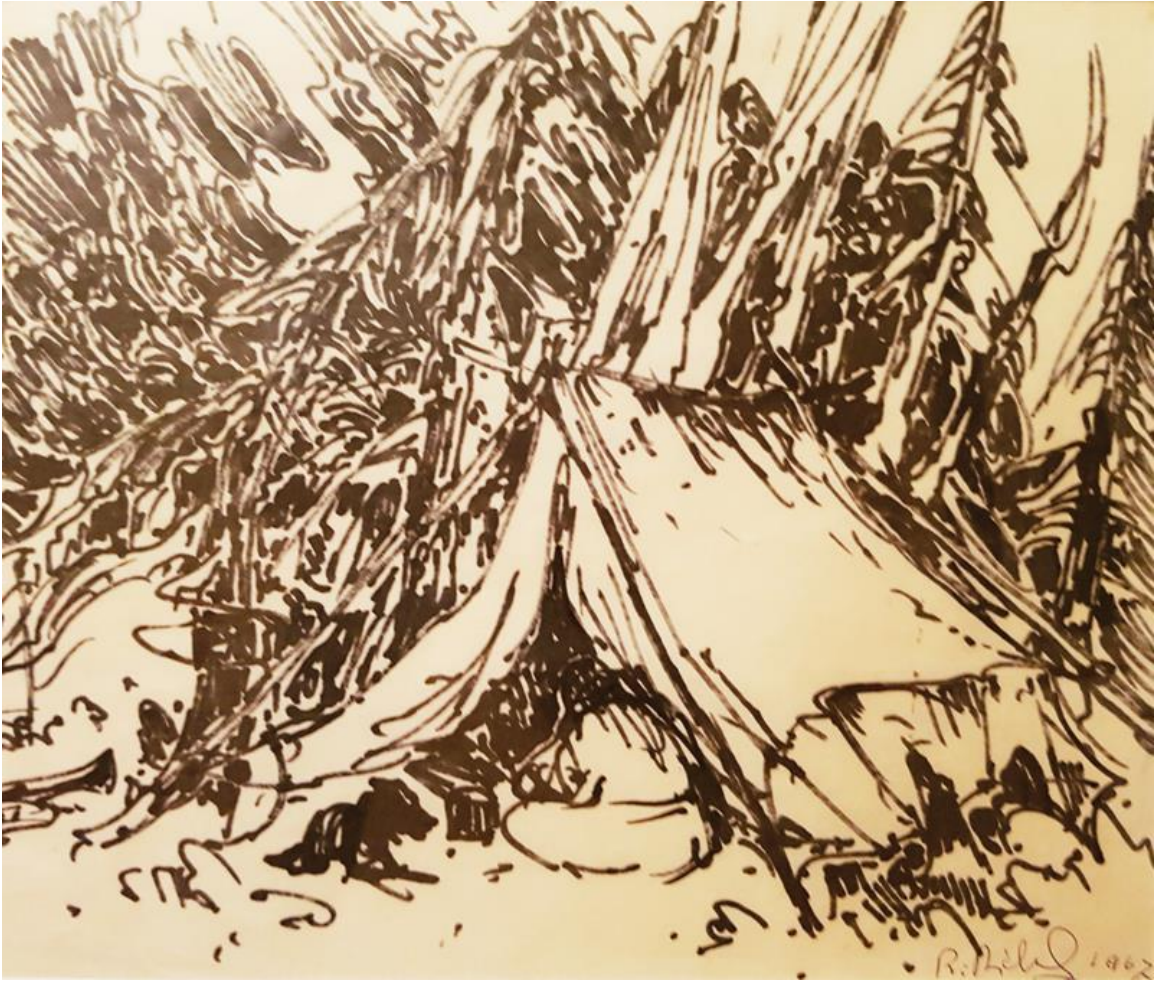
Trappers and their trail companions. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Trappers in the North. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Baie-Saint-Paul landscape, 1955. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



Evening meal, 1967. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**



“La goélette,” Fjord Adluylik, Ungava. 1951. **ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY**