

By the mid 1930s there were signs that the Island Arts and Craft Society was losing some of the vigour of its golden years of the 1920s. The excitement of the 1932 Modern Room venture now seemed a distant memory with the stars of that “modernist” surge – Carr, Maynard, Shadbolt, Hembroff and Uhthoff – having now moved in other directions. Furthermore, there was a vacuum in leadership now that many of the pioneers of the organization like Gore, Maclure and Pemberton had passed away.

More evidence of a crisis came in 1937 when a special meeting was convened to confront the fact that the Society was unable to meet the cost of maintaining its clubrooms. A motion for the organization to continue was passed, albeit on a split vote, and the stalwart Josephine Crease was tasked with seeking out someone of the stature needed to lead the quest for revitalization. Her choice fell on the Reverend Robert Connell, a public figure in his own right, no stranger to the Society and, due to various twists of fate, now readily available for a new mission.

Connell was born of Scottish parents in Liverpool, England, in 1871, and came to Canada at the age of 17. After work in various short-term jobs, he was ordained into the priesthood in 1895 and, following his marriage, moved to Victoria in 1901 as a vicar, thence retiring from the pulpit in 1923.

Connell, an accomplished artist, enjoyed a wide range of interests and displayed a breadth of talents. He taught botany at Victoria High School and he taught art at St. Michael’s private boys’ school. He had already become associated with the Island Arts and Crafts Society, having exhibited for the first time in the 1913 annual show.



Subsequently, he turned to a career in politics, joining the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the predecessor of the New Democratic Party. In 1932, after successfully running for the provincial legislature, he became leader of the Official Opposition in the BC Legislature until 1937. His ambition was to bring Christian principle into politics, but at a time of internal party strife, he was displaced by its militant faction who had become impatient at Connell's desire to bring about reform via constitutional rather than revolutionary means. Subsequently, standing as a candidate for a splinter party he failed to be re-elected.

At this point, he was sought out by Josephine Crease, Honorary President of the now ailing Island Arts and Crafts Society, to lead the Society and assist in its reorganization.

During the tenure of his presidency, 1937-1939, Connell was able to reactivate his painting skills, and his work was on show at the Society’s exhibition in 1937 and 1938. His depiction of Christ Church Cathedral is in the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Self-educated, he was a prolific reader and writer, contributing weekly columns on nature and geology to the Daily Times in the 1920s and 1930s and subsequently to the Daily Colonist until the late 1940s.

The Reverend Robert Connell began the last phase of his career by returning to the spiritual world, and in 1940 became Archdeacon of Comox on Vancouver Island. He died in 1957.

*Illustrations: Christ Church Cathedral, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, K03280*

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