

Members who attended the reception for our Government House exhibition will recall the reference made by curator Martin Segger to Club member Archie Fairbairn and his connection to Government House. Martin was also kind enough to let Nirmala photograph a Fairbairn painting in the Government House collection.

Archibald MacDonald Duff Fairbairn was born in 1883 in East London, Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, where he articted as a law student and qualified as an attorney-at-law. Arriving in Canada in 1913, he secured a post with the provincial government of British Columbia.

A talented freelance artist, he painted in watercolour, tempera and oil, as well as drawing in pen and ink and charcoal. In Victoria he connected with the Island Arts and Crafts Society, contributed eight of his watercolours to the Society’s annual exhibition in 1916 and subsequently exhibited on eight more occasions up to 1935. He also exhibited at the Vancouver Exhibition in 1930, representing the IACS, and at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1941.



Fairbairn was the subject of a chalk portrait displayed at the 1929 annual show of the BC Society of Fine Arts by Scottish artist Ina Uhthoff, another society member then establishing a reputation in the region. More light-heartedly, he featured in a self-portrait entitled “Archie by Archie.” (pictured at right)

He studied painting in England, Germany and America, and exhibited widely, becoming an appointed member of the American Water Colour Society in 1929. His individual watercolour exhibition in Victoria’s Alexandra Ballroom in 1926 was described by a critic as “unquestionably one of the most interesting individual exhibitions ever shown locally.” This collection numbered about 80 pictures, and while the majority represented scenes within the province, notably in the Rockies region, others captured scenes from France and Egypt.



An inveterate traveler, he undertook many sketching trips in the 1930s and 1940s, from which he depicted First Nations villages



and totem poles in Haida Gwaii and in the Skeena and Bulkley valleys. His interest in indigenous culture was profound and led him to publish a series of plays and short stories about native life on the Pacific coast.

In 1930 he was appointed by Order in Council as private secretary to His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia. Later, in 1932, a nearby residence, at 960 Joan Crescent, was built for him in Tudor Revival style.

Archibald Fairbairn was clearly not only a fine watercolourist but a man of many talents. But it is maybe fitting that when he sailed for England in 1956, his registration at Southampton shows his occupation as “artist.”

He died in California in 1979.

~John Lover