

An English landscape painter living in Tavistock?



VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

Why would an English-born landscape painter, who lived a short train ride from London, with a population of 7.8 million in 1924, move to live and work in Tavistock with a population of about 1,000 at this time? The market for his landscape paintings was infinitely smaller here but Reginald Franklin Selfe (the "e" is silent) chose to make the village his home for the last 36 years of his life.

This is a mystery that remains to this day, which I tried to solve in 1994 when I was a student at the University of Guelph researching Selfe's life and work. I'd heard about him and had seen a few of his paintings while growing up in Tavistock, but it appeared that no in-depth research had been done on this enigmatic figure.

The final result was contacting numerous owners of Selfe's paintings and very interestingly, interviewing many of the older residents around town and beyond to discover what they remembered about Mr. Selfe and recording it all in a thick binder in prose and photos. Sadly, almost all of my interview subjects of 34 years ago are now deceased.

Reg Selfe was born in 1888 and spent his early years in Guilford, a small town southwest of London, England. He attended primary school with two children of an English family who had lived in Tavistock, Ont. (not to be confused with Tavistock, England), Fred and Ralph Hotson. (Fred was the subject of the Vintage Views article #22, Oct. 30, 2025, when at age 17 he won the Canadian National Oratorical contest in 1927). The Hotsons had previously operated a shoe store in Tavistock and returned to Guilford for a short time and told Selfe about life in Canada.

Post World War I, England was in an economic slump and unemployment was high. The New World beckoned, so 36-year-old Selfe accompanied the Hotsons when they moved back to Tavistock in January 1924 on the steamship Pittsburg.

Hugh Hotson set up his shoe store again in the present-day location of Josslin Insurance in Tavistock and Selfe's first studio was Jack Lemp's photo studio, today a private apartment behind the for-

mer Lemp's Pharmacy next door to Josslin's. Selfe moved from a land of ancient cobbled, winding streets, tea and crumpets to the long, arrow-straight concessions, rich farmland and sauerkraut and kuchen of Tavistock – mid-winter!

John 'Jack' Lemp, local pharmacist and photographer, was Selfe's first sponsor (the Lemp Studio Collection of 4,000 negatives forms the basis of this series of articles). Selfe first resided with Jack's parents in their spacious Italianate home at 218 Woodstock St. N. Over the decades, Selfe lived above the Glasgow Warehouse (presently Home Hardware) and boarded at about eight locations around the village.

The Waldies and Schiplings became close friends as did Fred Schaefer and Fred Funk, who took hand-lettering and design lessons from Selfe, which Funk used throughout his career decorating local homes. Shortly after arriving, Selfe found employment in Stratford as the Tavistock Gazette noted in the May 1, 1924 edition. He was contracted for "all poster and card painting in connection with advertising for the Classic Theatre."

Three weeks after arriving, Selfe purchased a small advertisement in the Gazette noting that "The Tavistock School of Art" was now open and ready for students to enroll. He listed services both as a fine artist (mostly with oil paints and watercolours) and as a commercial artist (primarily hand lettering and graphic design).

Over the decades, Selfe had innumerable art students of all ages, sometimes in groups but also one-to-one. The Kalbfleisch Furniture store (later Francis) in Tavistock became a pseudo-gallery for him as they allowed Selfe to hang large oils there for sale.

During Selfe's first few years after he arrived, he was actively involved in the civic life of Tavistock, judging various competitions. He also won the local chamber of commerce contest to write a slogan for the village: "Tavistock is our town. Make it yours."

Selfe was hired by the town council to hand-illuminate a special greeting addressed to the people of Tavistock, England (illumination is an ancient skill

illustrating certificates and the like). Thirty years later, in 1960, when Reeve Robert Rudy and his wife, Helen, visited the town, they noticed the colourful certificate hanging in the council chambers in this 1,000-year-old community in Devon. A second illumination was commissioned to congratulate the aforementioned Fred Hotson for winning first prize in a Dominion-wide speech contest.

Lemp's photo studio was an ideal location for Selfe's first atelier, where he painted mostly landscapes and gave art lessons. Here, he took advantage of the east-facing, large skylight that Mr. Lemp also used to light innumerable people, products and poultry over several decades.

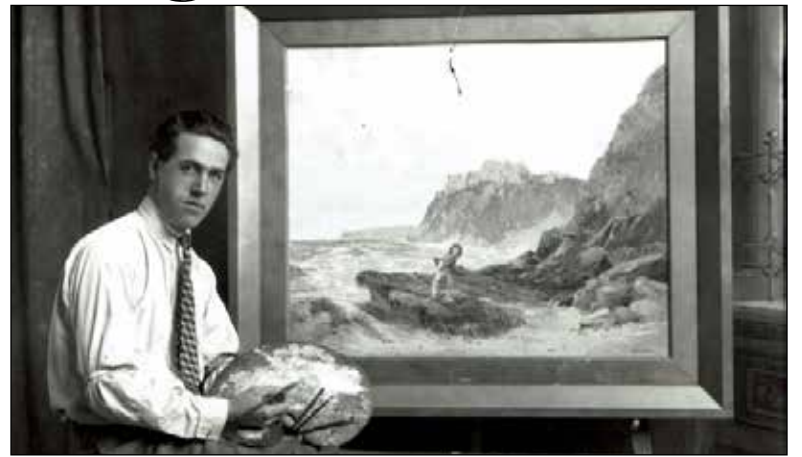
Selfe found rented accommodations on the upper floor of the Glasgow Warehouse (today's Home Hardware) and over the years boarded with several families in Tavistock, the longest was for 14 years with Fred and Anna Funk on Jacob Street, where he lived, taught and received clients from as far away as Toronto. Fred Funk was a travelling salesman and so he had many business contacts around the province, which proved beneficial for Selfe.

Apart from Ontario landscapes, Selfe painted a few portraits, still life subjects, seascapes, pastoral scenes and scenes of old Britain usually using oil paints, but he was a particularly skilled watercolourist. The watercolour technique is more difficult than oil painting because, in part, it has a mind of its own as gravity pulls the water down the stiff paper surface, whereas oil paints are very thick and don't usually move on their own once applied to the traditional stretched canvas surface.

Selfe's business card notes the letters "B.W.S." following his name, as he was a member of the British Watercolour Society.

Another love of Selfe's was plein air painting (working outdoors) where, at first, friends would drop him off in the early days by horse and carriage. Later, he became a familiar sight during warm weather cycling out of town to Harmony, Punkydoodle's Corner, New Hamburg and the local pastures and forests to paint, sometimes camping overnight.

Otto Wilker recalled to me in 1994 that his father (and others) delivered food and cut tobacco to Selfe at his campsites. By the late 1940s, Selfe acquired a second-hand 1930 Ford Model A and despite the wheels being humorously out of alignment, he ventured to Haysville, Elora, Bala, Muskoka and Georgian Bay, taking his paints and a tent. Selfe was often joined by friends and his art students but oddly, he never learned to drive himself; someone



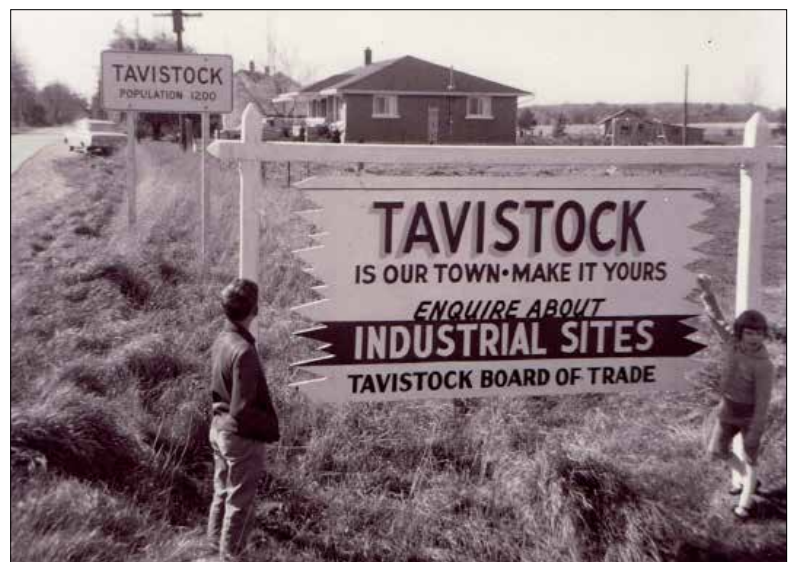
(PHOTO BY 'JACK' LEMP)

This formal posed portrait was taken in 1925 by 'Jack' Lemp in his photo studio in Tavistock, which he shared as a studio with Reginald Selfe. This oil painting has never been found.



(PHOTO COURTESY OF JEANNE AND RONALD WETTLAUFER)

This is a rare view of the back of Lemp's Pharmacy showing the combined photo studio/painting atelier of Selfe's. The two girls at the fountain are Mr. Lemp's daughters. Anna 'Girlie' Lemp took this painting to Texas where she lived.



(PHOTO BY ELEANOR MOSHER)

Selfe's winning slogan for the village was used in a variety of places, including this large sign on the north edge of Tavistock. The author is on the left and his sister, Lori, on the right. Note the population of Tavistock, behind, in 1967 when my mother took this photo.

else always took the wheel.

Part two: Be sure to read the end of Selfe's story in two weeks. Then, I'll reveal a very strange thing about his grave that remains so, after visiting it in Guildford, England in 2007.

The last History Mystery: was published on Jan. 22. "What rare physical ailment does one of the people posing have?" The answer

will be revealed in the next Vintage Views article.

This article's History Mystery: What detail is artificial in the setup of things in the main photo with this article? The first reader to answer this correctly will have their name and community or rural route number published in the next edition. Email your answer to me at tim_mosher@hotmail.com.