

A Canadian violin by John Smith, Winnipeg, 1938

Catalogue Number: RKT-0615 \$7,000

Labeled: “Made by John Smith, Dec. 9, 1938, 617 Furby St. Winnipeg, Late of Glasgow & Falkirk, Scotland” Also hand numbered: 170

Also branded: “J_n. SMITH” below the button of the back.

Repairs: The upper bass side corner has been repaired and a new setup done in our shop.

Condition: This instrument is in very good condition having been played very little since 1950.

Comments: John Smith is an important figure in the history of violin making in western Canada. During his time in Winnipeg he was widely regarded as the best maker and repairer in the region and supplied symphony players and fiddlers alike. The wood of his instruments is always excellent, usually with one piece backs. It is our belief that he generally did not make scrolls during his Canadian period, preferring to order quite beautiful ones from wholesale suppliers. This violin from 1938 is still the property of the original owner. He has given us the history of this instrument from the time his mother bought it for him in a music store in Medicine Hat, Alberta c. 1943. John Smith was over 78 when this violin was made and it shows some evidence of this. Details of workmanship such as sound holes and edges are not so fine as described in William Henley’s reference, but still it is a handsome instrument.

SMITH, JOHN.

Born at Fauldhouse (West Lothian), 1859. Served apprenticeship as a joiner and cabinet-maker. Practised the violin every evening after workshop hours. While resident at Bathgate (West Lothian), became interested in violin construction, some inherited talent (father and uncles were all more or less fanatics in the art) impelling him to create anything that could be played upon. Produced first proper instrument, 1878. Went to live at Falkirk and decided on becoming a professional maker, 1880-1904. Worked at Glasgow, then migrated to Winnipeg (Canada) where, in 1928, he was still enjoying great activity in his pursuit. Died 1941. Most of the violins of early period constructed on the Stradivarian ideas incorporated in Davidson’s text book. Later instruments more individualistic—outline reminiscent of a Guarnerius, but arching rises direct from purfling and

tapers out very gracefully. Viewed from the front they appear to be almost flat, but when held sideways the peculiar depth of arching is very observable. Full proportions, and general appearance rather massive. No tiniest detail loosely executed. Admirable scroll equipped with personality, fluting well defined, and perfect bossing. Inside-work has all the propriety of scientific minuteness. Sound-holes not deficient in pose, curves, wings, gradation of stem, and notches, all being treated with the utmost respect. Purfling also splendidly steady and perfection of width maintained all round. Spent “a little fortune” in procuring finest woods. Did not believe in American material of any kind. Used Italian sycamore (felled at least 100 years), for backs and ribs, Italian pine for tops, and cedar of Lebanon for reinforcement of sides. Total productivity up to the year 1928 amounted to 130 violins, 3 violas, 6 ‘cellos, and 2 quartets (one made for the Glasgow Exhibition, 1901, and the other for the Winnipeg Exposition, 1921). Personal friend of James Whitelaw of Glasgow, and exclusively used his amber varnish until moving to Winnipeg. Began experimenting in that problematical affair and ultimately formulated one which, when applied and polished by an artist such as he, gives the effect of sunrise or sunset according to the different shades. Effect obtained by application of eight coats—two of pale amber, two of orange, two of dark orange, and two of dark brown. Tonal quality particularly good, large and penetrating, with the elements of sympathetic sonority, a tone of which the maker was justifiably proud, and, without being accused of undue conceit, or “knocking” at others, claimed at least an equality with any contemporary maker. Made a violin for the National Museum of Wales. Believed in leaving plenty of wood in his instruments, and if graduations are properly equalised to the capacity, smooth tone must emanate, irrespective of the quality and thickness of varnish. Advocated that the modern violin is made as perfectly as the old, and will yield similar results with the necessary hand of time.

Made by
John Smith
Falkirk
No. 1893

Made by
John Smith
617 Furby St. Winnipeg
Late of Glasgow & Falkirk, Scotland

- From: “Universal Dictionary of Violin and Bow Makers” by William Henley

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Description: This violin has a one-piece maple back showing beautiful medium flame descending slightly from the bass to treble. The sides and neck are of similar material. The front is of two pieces of spruce showing medium grain, becoming slightly broader towards the edges. The fittings are ebony. The varnish is of an orange/brown colour over a yellow ground with minor re-touching. A small crack at the lower eye of the treble sound hole and another at the upper base side corner of the front have been repaired. There are no other visible repairs.

Back measurements:

Length: 359mm. Upper bout: 171mm. Middle bout: 117mm. Lower bout: 209mm.

July 16, 2010