

**'OUR IDEAL OF AN ARTIST':  
TOM THOMSON, THE IDEAL OF MANHOOD AND THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL ICON  
(1917-1947)**

by

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with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts**

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## ABSTRACT

Tom Thomson's paintings are frequently reproduced as icons of Canadian nationalism. His best known works, such as "A Northern River," "The Jack Pine," and "The West Wind," have been reproduced in such various forms as postage stamps, coins, coasters and posters. They are by now thoroughly layered over in generations of nationalist gloss. But Thomson himself is a legendary figure in Canadian culture. A mythology of Tom Thomson was produced by members of the nationalist intelligentsia just after his tragic death in 1917. This idea played upon many existing ideas of Canadian national identity, including the notion of Canada's wild and northern essence. The inter-war period was a particular fecund moment in Canadian nationalism. This exuberant nationalism underlay much of the Thomson mythology.

However, this mythology was also informed by sentiments of antimodernism. As much as the Thomson mythology presented a figure celebrating the development of Canadian art and the Canadian nation, it expressed a certain anxiety about the various and dynamic conditions of modernity. Antimodernists yearned for the simple life and a more meaningful existence, and many of them thought they saw this in the figure of Tom Thomson. At a time when men's roles and attributes were being redefined, some of the cultural producers represented Thomson as an exemplar of true manhood. Those who created the Thomson legend, then, looked backwards to a supposedly simpler time as much as they welcomed and fostered Canada's commercial, industrial, and political development. Fundamentally, however, they created an idea of Tom Thomson that supported, rather than challenged, many of the existing hierarchies and structures of Canadian society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AGT	Art Gallery of Toronto (after 1926)
ALC	Arts and Letters Club, Toronto
AMT	Art Museum of Toronto (until 1926)
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CWMF	Canadian War Memorials Fund
NAC	National Archives of Canada
NACSB	National Advisory Council on School Broadcasting
NGC	National Gallery of Canada
OSA	Ontario Society of Artists
RCA	Royal Canadian Academy
YCL	<i>Young Canada Listens</i> radio series

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## PROLOGUE: LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF THE ARTIST

Every experience of Thomson's from childhood added something to his equipment. His knowledge, his assurance, his integrity were as important as a medium and a technique.

Blodwen Davies<sup>1</sup>

In *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*, historian Daniel Francis turned his iconoclastic eye, in 1997, to a variety of Canadian mythologies. His chapter, 'The Myth of the Canoe,' punctured some of the painters-in-the-wilderness tales of those legendary Canadian artists, the Group of Seven. His debunking of the Group-of-myth was clear, well developed, thorough, and, ultimately, convincing.<sup>2</sup> Yet revealingly, Tom Thomson escaped Francis's efforts to bring these legends back into reality. A legendary idea of Thomson persisted in his account:

His style, with its audacious use of vivid colour and blunt brush strokes, was seen to embody the raw energy of the northern landscape. All the better that he was self-taught and completely ignorant of modern painting. The others considered him the prototype of what the new Canadian artist should be: an untutored genius whose art sprang from an intuitive understanding of the land. The others all came from cities, but Thomson was a country boy, raised on a farm near Georgian Bay where he learned to handle a paddle, a hunting rifle and a fishing rod with equal facility.<sup>3</sup>

Here, the Thomson mythology remained intact after all these years.

The legend of Thomson had been created 70 and 80 years earlier, shortly after his death in 1917. It is the story of a man who gained intimate knowledge of the Canadian wilderness. It is the story of a Canadian backwoodsman, who had partaken of the wilderness lifestyle since childhood, who had unparalleled outdoors skill and ability, and who supported himself as a ranger

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<sup>1</sup> Blodwen Davies, *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man who Looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness*, [1935] rev. ed. (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1967), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 1997), Chapter Six, 129-151.

<sup>3</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 137-138.



and guide in Algonquin Park. Thomson's thorough understanding of the wild, the myth has it, enabled him to render in paint and board and canvas the raw essence of the Canadian experience in landscape paintings of northern Ontario's Canadian Shield.

The Thomson legend tells the story of an untutored, self-taught painter who was ignorant of any formal style, school or technique, especially any which had come from the European Salons. Unheralded and unsupported in his time, he simply experimented and created techniques to suit his purpose. He led into the Canadian wilderness a collection of artists who would become the Group of Seven. The myth notes that, like many heroes, Thomson was tall, handsome, solitary, quiet, reserved, stoic and virile. The tale ends with a death that remains a mystery.<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Joan Murray described the qualities that

[f]ixe[d] him in the Canadian imagination. It is his link to the cold pure North, to the great dreaming that underlies the Canadian psyche. He was the first painter to give us a memorable image of our spiritual heartland.<sup>5</sup>

Francis thus comes by this mythic Thomson honestly. He has inherited an image lodged deep in the national consciousness. It is the Thomson of 'The Ten Greatest Canadians,' of *Great Canadians*, of postage stamps celebrating the Canadian Centennial. Thomson is, for many, *the* important Canadian artist, a seemingly obvious reference point in Canadian art.<sup>6</sup>

One's ability to interrogate this Thomson mythology is limited. There are very few

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<sup>4</sup> This legendary depiction is present in Hugh MacLennan's 'The Ten Greatest Canadians,' *New Liberty* 26:9 (November 1949), 7-13; Pierre Berton, ed., *Great Canadians: A Century of Achievement*, Canadian Centenary Series (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), 107-110; and *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1988), 2153-2154.

<sup>5</sup> Joan Murray, *The Best of Tom Thomson* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986), 1.

<sup>6</sup> In 1949, Hugh MacLennan included Thomson along with Samuel de Champlain, the Comte de Frontenac, Joseph Howe, Donald McKay, Sir John A. Macdonald, Sir William Osler, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Sir Frederick Banting and William Lyon MacKenzie King as 'The Ten Greatest Canadians.' MacLennan, 'The Ten Greatest Canadians,' 7-13. Pierre Berton included Thomson among the 25 Great Canadians in a volume of the Canadian Centenary Series. Berton, ed., *Great Canadians*. Canada Post featured 'The Jack Pine' as one of seven Centennial stamps featuring Canadian art. National Gallery of Canada [hereafter NGC], Curatorial File, Thomson, Tom, The Jack Pine, #1519. Joan Murray presented a group interview with Canadian artists John Boyle, Greg Curnoe, Harold Town, Joyce Wieland and Charles Patcher discussing Thomson's artistic talents and his influence on other Canadian artists. Joan Murray, 'The Artist's View: The Tom Thomson Mystique,' *Artmagazine*, *Artfocus* 37 (March/April 1978), 2-5.

samples of Thomson's writing, and the letters that do exist are rarely introspective.<sup>7</sup> Most of what is known about him comes from the letters of his friends and colleagues, and from the books and articles written about him after his death in which his legend was born. However, as the layers of this mythologizing literature have built up, it has become difficult to separate fact from conjecture and invention. Even that which is literally true has been selected and emphasized by his celebrants. By examining that which is known about Thomson, one can begin to examine what has been selected and to think about the reason that lay behind this selection.

While Thomson himself left few letters, many more exist from his friends and colleagues who frequently joined him in Algonquin. A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer and Lawren Harris – men who would become famous as members of the Group of Seven – reported the events of trips to the wilds with Thomson to artist-colleague J.E.H. Macdonald and to their avid patron Dr. James MacCallum. Frequently they commented on the development and activities of their protégé.

A second source of information is the series of articles and books his friends and associates published following Thomson's death. This body of writing publicized much of Thomson's life history, especially concerning the five or six years of his most prominent artistic activity, which were the final years of his life. For information about Thomson's earlier years, there are still fewer sources. Blodwen Davies, in 1930, solicited the recollections of people who knew Thomson for her two books and a series of articles about him. More recently, Joan Murray has worked to excavate the details of Thomson's life through a series of oral and written interviews conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s with acquaintances of Thomson. Both

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<sup>7</sup> The National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Tom Thomson Papers, MG30 D284, includes two letters from Thomson, and four to him. Two others were published by William Colgate in 1946. William Colgate, 'Tom Thomson Writes to His Artist Friends,' *Saturday Night* (November 1949), 20. Joan Murray notes one other letter written by Thomson at the McMichael Canadian Collection, and one in a private collection. Joan Murray, 'The World of Tom Thomson,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 26:3 (Automne 1991 Fall), 50. Ann Davis notes one other at the McMichael. Davis, 'An Apprehended Vision: The Philosophy of the Group of Seven' (Ph.D. diss., York University, 1973), 149. Some others are in private hands, notably the Thomson and MacDonald families. Notwithstanding the actual numbers of letters, they contained little revealing information. He was, as Joan Murray describes, 'as nearly non-verbal as a normal man can be. His flat letters convey only bare information. He hardly ever said anything quotable, and he never tried to explain himself.' Murray, *Best of Thomson*, 3.

collections provide invaluable information about Thomson's life.

From these sources one can cobble together the basic established information about Tom Thomson. He was born the third son of John and Margaret Thomson in Claremont, Pickering Township, Ontario County, Ontario, on 5 August 1877. Tom's family moved to Rose Hill farm in Leith, near Owen Sound two months later, and here he grew up. John Thomson appears to have been more interested in being a gentleman farmer than in actually farming. He preferred gardening, fishing, and the poetry of Burns and Byron. Tom took music and singing lessons as a boy, and one source indicates that his father helped finance a brass band in which Tom and his brothers played.<sup>8</sup> Tom spent as much time fishing and roaming the countryside as going to school or doing chores. David Silcox and Ann Davis both state that Thomson was rejected three times for service in the Boer War due to fallen arches.<sup>9</sup> Seeking a trade, Tom apprenticed as a machinist at William Kennedy and Sons in Owen Sound in 1899. He lasted only a few months. Most accounts insist he enjoyed the work, but did not get along with his superior.<sup>10</sup>

Thomson's life path is unclear until he turned up in 1901 at the Canada Business School in Chatham, Ontario, with his older brother, George. With F.R. McLaren, a penmanship instructor at the Chatham school, George established the Consolidated College Company, later Acme Business College, in Seattle, Washington. Tom followed in 1902 to attend penmanship classes, but stayed only a short time at his brother's school. Still in 1902, he began work at a Seattle engraving company, Maring and Ladd. Two years later he moved to the Seattle Engraving Company. At both, Thomson did lettering and provided sketches and designs for the advertisements of local companies.

Thomson is reported to have fallen in love in Seattle, although his romance with Alice

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<sup>8</sup> Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 9, 12.

<sup>9</sup> David P. Silcox and Harold Town, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1977), 51; Ann Davis, 'Thomson, Thomas John (Tom),' in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography: Volume XIV: 1911-1920*, Ramsay Cook, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 996.

<sup>10</sup> Joan Murray, *The Art of Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971), 9.

Lambert usually went unreported in the literature. While both Blodwen Davies, in 1935, and Dennis Reid, in 1971, mention that Thomson was said to have fallen in love in Seattle, no details of the affair came to light until the accounts of Silcox and Town in 1977 and Joan Murray in 1986. By then the ability to determine the exact details was limited. Most recent accounts insist that it was Lambert's rebuff of a marriage proposal that led to Thomson's hasty flight to Toronto from Seattle in 1905.<sup>11</sup>

Here Thomson found himself in a much larger city of 226,000 people. The first few years in Toronto are again obscure. Little is known about Thomson's activities from 1905-1908. An anonymous writer at the National Gallery of Canada [NGC] (likely Director Harold McCurry) stated simply in 1944 that Thomson during this time '[w]orked in obscurity in [a] mediocre engraving house in Toronto.'<sup>12</sup> It appears that he took drawing lessons starting in 1906, probably from William Cruikshank, a leading Canadian painter of the late nineteenth century, then at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design.<sup>13</sup> The extent of Cruikshank's influence on the budding artist is unclear. Thomson joined the design firm of Grip Ltd. in 1908. There he met Albert Robson, who was the art director when Thomson arrived. Robson moved on to another Toronto graphic art firm, Rous and Mann, in 1912 taking many of his workers, including Thomson, with him. He encouraged his staff's weekend sketching trips on which Thomson first learned to make outdoor oil sketches. Robson wrote two books on this circle of Toronto graphic artists, *Canadian Landscape Painters* in 1932, and a biography, *Tom Thomson*, in 1937. In both he insisted that

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<sup>11</sup> Dennis Reid, *Le Groupe des Sept/The Group of Seven* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1971), 26; Davies, *Story of a Man*, 30; Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 52; Murray, *Best of Thomson*, 16; Murray, 'The World of Tom Thomson,' 19-20; Joan Murray, *Tom Thomson: The Last Spring* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 22. Most of the accounts of Thomson's move from Seattle to Toronto use the word "return" to describe it, though there is no evidence of Thomson ever having visited, much less lived, there.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Thomson Biography for The Adventures of Canadian Painting Series, National Gallery of Canada Archives [hereafter NGCA], National Gallery of Canada Fonds [hereafter NGCF], Box Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4 Canadian Arts Council, CBC (Files 1-4), File 7.4C Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, File 1.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Lord, *Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 119; Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 59.

commercial art training was crucial to the landscape painting of Thomson and the Group of Seven.<sup>14</sup>

Robson's staff of designers would eventually include future members of the Group of Seven, men vitally important to Thomson's development as an artist. Before 1920, this collection of artists were collectively called the Algonquin School. J.E.H. MacDonald was the chief designer at Grip Ltd. when Thomson arrived. Of the artists who would make up the Group, MacDonald was the oldest and had the deepest roots in the Toronto art scene. He had studied at the Hamilton Art School and at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design under William Cruikshank. MacDonald had been a member of the Graphic Arts Club and the Toronto Art Students' League, which from its inception had promoted a vision of a nationalist landscape art. MacDonald also sought to express a love of nature in part inspired by his admiration for Thoreau and Whitman. He was also enthused by a 1913 exhibition of Scandinavian art, which reinforced his belief that the artist should start from nature rather than art in his/her landscapes. He led the defence against the criticisms of H.F. Gatsby and Hector Charlesworth, who thought his paintings were rough and crude modernist departures from the established landscape styles of Turner and Constable. MacDonald responded that his paintings, and those of his colleagues, were sincere reflections of the national environment and character. MacDonald contributed to publications such as *The Rebel* and *The Canadian Forum* in an effort to stir public interest in Canadian art.<sup>15</sup>

Another future Group member, Arthur Lismer, began working at Grip Ltd. in 1911 after emigrating from Sheffield, England. Lismer had studied at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp in 1906 and 1907. After a stay at Grip Ltd., he moved into teaching. He accepted the principalship at the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax in 1916, where he stayed until

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1932); and *Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937). See also Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 49; Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 49.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 24, 74-76; Lord, *Painting in Canada*, 123; Mary Vipond, 'National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada in the 1920s: Seven Studies' (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1974), 469-470; Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1995), 17-24.

1919. As a painter for the Canadian War Memorials Fund [CWMF], he depicted military activities in and around Halifax in 1918 and 1919. In 1919, he became Vice-Principal of the Ontario College of Art. Lismer was educational supervisor at the Art Gallery of Toronto from 1927 to 1938, becoming one of the country's most prominent figures in the teaching of art appreciation. He wrote several texts on art and art appreciation, including *A Short History of Painting: With a Note on Canadian Art* in 1926, *Canadian Picture Study* in 1930, and *Education Through Art for Children and Adults at the Art Gallery of Toronto* in 1936. All of these works placed Thomson and the Group members prominently in the development of Canadian art.<sup>16</sup>

Lismer joined Toronto's Arts and Letters Club [ALC] in 1911 where he met future Group colleague Lawren Harris. A founding member of the ALC, Harris connected his fellow-artists to members of Toronto's elite such as Dr. James MacCallum, Vincent Massey and Byron (later Sir Edmund) Walker. Harris was an inheritor of a family fortune built through the Massey-Harris company. He received his art education in Berlin where he was exposed to Jugendstil, a German variant of the Arts and Crafts movement. The Arts and Crafts movement rejected the machine-made goods of the industrial age in favour of artisanal production and an organic relationship between the arts and crafts in its goal of creating products people used would be aesthetically pleasing, and contemporary art would reflect the manner in which people lived their lives. It was very influential in Harris's work. He was also an ardent nationalist, who believed that foreign techniques were holding back a unique Canadian artistic expression. A fervent theosophist, Harris drew upon that religion's spiritualism in his landscape aesthetic.<sup>17</sup>

While his artist-colleagues at Grip Ltd. were fundamentally important to Thomson's

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<sup>16</sup> Arthur Lismer, *A Short History of Painting: With a Note of Canadian Art* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1926); *Canadian Picture Study* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1930); *Education Through Art for Children and Adults at the Art Gallery of Toronto* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1936); 'Arthur Lismer,' *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, ed. Colin S. MacDonald, 3rd ed., v. 4 (Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks, 1975), 860-869; Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 17-19; Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 122-123, 146; Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' 477. The English origins of the Arts and Crafts Movement are usually attributed to William Morris. This movement had many followers throughout the industrial world of the early twentieth century, especially in the northeastern United States.

development as an artist, an equally profound influence made itself felt in 1912 when Thomson was introduced to the landscape of northern Ontario. He canoed through the region with his Grip Ltd. colleague William Broadhead. An account of their journey was published in the *Owen Sound Sun* of 27 September 1912, immediately after their return, under the title 'Local Man's Experience in the Wilds.' In this account, the two men began their journey in the final week of July at Bisco, near Sudbury. They ventured up the Spanish River, portaging to Canoe Lake (this appears to have been Thomson's first trip to Algonquin Park).<sup>18</sup> From there they traveled through the Mississauga Forest Reserve to Bruce Mines, then took the train home to Toronto. The region was by this time a fairly well-established, though rustic, tourist area. In a 1912 letter quoted by Joan Murray, Thomson, sounding a little like a tourist, commented to a friend, "The Mississauga is considered the finest canoe trip in the world."<sup>19</sup> On the trip both men sketched and took many photos, most of which were lost in a canoe accident near the end of their expedition.<sup>20</sup>

Thomson met his future patron soon after returning from his canoe trip. Dr. James MacCallum reported meeting Thomson for the first time at MacDonald's studio in October 1912.<sup>21</sup> MacCallum was a well-known Toronto optometrist and had an appointment at the Medical College of the University of Toronto. He had spent his childhood summer vacations in and around Georgian Bay cottage country. He was a member of the Madawaska Club, a collection of University of Toronto professors who established a cottage colony at Go Home Bay in Georgian Bay. When the Club purchased a block of Crown Land in the area, MacCallum was

<sup>18</sup> Ann Davis's recent account presents Thomson as travelling to Algonquin Park for two weeks in May 1912 with another Grip Ltd. colleague, H.B. Jackson, before his trip with Broadhead.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 25. On tourism in this region, see Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> 'Local Man's Experience in Northern Wilds,' *Owen Sound Sun*, 27 September 1912. Davis, 'Thomson,' 996; Dennis Reid, *Tom Thomson: The Jack Pine* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 3.

<sup>21</sup> J.M. MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson: Painter of the North,' *The Canadian Magazine* 1:5 (March 1918), 375-385; Reid, *The Jack Pine*, 4.

one of the first of its members to build his own cottage there. He included Thomson and his fellow-artists among his guests. He commissioned Thomson, Lismer and MacDonald to paint decorative walls for the living room of his cottage in 1915. MacCallum was one of the people art historian Barry Lord describes as ‘patrons with a nationalist outlook.’ He favoured a “national” art depicting the unpeopled landscapes of Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park vacation areas over urban or pastoral scenes. In Thomson, he saw the man who could realize his vision of how this “Canadian” space should be painted.<sup>22</sup>

Thomson painted his first canvases in the winter of 1912-1913 from one of the sketches that were supposed to have so impressed MacCallum.<sup>23</sup> This effort met with remarkable success. Thomson showed this canvas, entitled “A Northern Lake,” at the 1913 Spring exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists [OSA]. The Ontario government purchased it for \$250, a reasonable price relative to other works purchased at this time. Encouraged by his success, Thomson quit his job as a graphic artist and, in May, returned to Algonquin Park for the summer to sketch. There is no indication that he had any contact with other artists before returning to Toronto in November.<sup>24</sup>

Thomson met A.Y. Jackson in 1913. MacCallum had persuaded Jackson to move to Toronto from Montréal. Jackson had worked as a commercial artist in various Montréal firms from 1895 to 1906, and in Chicago in 1906, while taking evening classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1907, he had saved enough money to study at the Académie Julian in Paris. Jackson left Montréal dismayed at the preference of local collectors for works painted in European styles. Like Harris, he felt that foreign styles of painting had stunted the growth of Canadian art. He also

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<sup>22</sup> Lord, *Painting in Canada*, 120-127; Murray, ‘World of Tom Thomson,’ 45; Davis, ‘Apprehended Vision,’ 74; MacCallum, ‘Tom Thomson’; ‘Arthur Lismer’ in *Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, 862-863. The panels from MacCallum’s cottage are now displayed at the National Gallery of Canada. MacCallum wrote a panegyric of Thomson for *The Canadian Magazine* in March 1918.

<sup>23</sup> J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 272.

<sup>24</sup> Murray, ‘World of Tom Thomson,’ 27. Murray notes Thomson’s name on the Ontario Government pay-list for that summer.



shared the view that a Canadian national art should be based on the Canadian land. Both of these views were evident in his support of a group of young Montréal artists, the Beaver Hall Group. After he had served in the trenches in the Great War, Jackson was recruited as a CWMF artist.<sup>25</sup>

Jackson shared a studio with Thomson in early 1914 in Studio Building in Toronto financed by their patron, Dr. James MacCallum, and fellow-artist Lawren Harris. MacCallum had offered studio space to both of them along with his support. Jackson taught Thomson about art, while listening to Tom's stories of the northern Ontario wilds. They shared this studio until mid-February 1914 when Jackson left for Canoe Lake, then the Rockies. He returned to Canoe Lake that autumn, meeting Thomson, Lismer and Varley there.<sup>26</sup>

Thomson left the Toronto studio for Algonquin Park in late April or early May 1914, accompanied by Arthur Lismer. Lismer stayed only a few weeks, but returned in the fall with Jackson and Varley. Thomson canoed from Algonquin to MacCallum's cottage on Georgian Bay at the beginning of June. He returned to Algonquin in mid-July where Jackson met him in mid-September. His letters to MacDonald and MacCallum place Jackson at Canoe Lake in October 1914. Thomson returned to Toronto early in November that year. Six weeks later Jackson returned to Montréal, enlisted in the army and went off to war.<sup>27</sup>

Early in 1915, Thomson moved into the shack behind the Studio Building.<sup>28</sup> Harper describes Thomson's time in this shack in the familiar terms of the Thomson mythology:

Thomson spent his last two winters in a small abandoned builder's shack behind the Studio Building, which previously had served temporary duty as a hen house, because he felt financially unable to live in the more luxurious quarters where he had formerly painted. Here he "camped" in two tiny rooms, cooking "mulligatawny stew" and frying bacon and eggs on a minute box stove as he

<sup>25</sup> Lord, *Painting in Canada*, 127; Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 184-200; Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 17-19, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Lord, *Painting in Canada*, 127; Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 26; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 278.

<sup>27</sup> NGCA, NGCF, James MacCallum Papers, 1-71-M, A.Y. Jackson to MacCallum, 13 October 1914; NAC, J.E.H. MacDonald Papers, MG30 D111, v. 1, Jackson to MacDonald, 5 October 1914; Reid, *The Jack Pine*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Reid, *The Jack Pine*, 11. This shack is now reproduced at the McMichael Canadian Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario.

would have done on the trail; he served his “chow” to Curtis Williamson and other artist friends.<sup>29</sup>

Other writers say the shack was simply left over from the construction of the Studio Building.<sup>30</sup>

That spring, Thomson painted the large canvas “Northern River” in his new studio. At the Spring OSA of 1915, the NGC purchased the canvas for \$500. This was the first of several purchases of Thomson’s work orchestrated by Eric Brown and Sir Edmund Walker. Walker was a prominent Toronto figure, who had worked his way up to President of the Bank of Commerce, and had served as Chancellor of the University of Toronto, director of the Toronto Conservatory of Music, and President of the Royal Canadian Institute. He was one of the eleven prominent Toronto Liberals who turned against Laurier over the issue of Reciprocity in 1911. His economic nationalism paralleled his cultural nationalist views.<sup>31</sup> Walker oversaw the reinvigoration of the NGC. He became Chair of the federal government’s Arts Advisory Council [AAC] in 1909, two years after its creation. Through the AAC, the NGC received an increased budget and the Victoria Memorial Museum was built to house and display the collection. Walker hired Eric Brown as NGC curator in 1909 and as Director in 1910, and became Chair of the NGC’s Board of Trustees when it was established in 1913. The two men pushed the NGC towards collecting and promoting Canadian over European art. They sought innovative, dynamic and nationalistic contemporary artists, but not radicals. Brown explicitly distanced Canadian modernism from what he saw as decadent, immoral European art. Both men were comfortable with the post-Impressionist, romantic aesthetic of the northern Ontario landscapes of Thomson and his fellow-artists.<sup>32</sup>

After the sale to the NGC, Thomson returned to Algonquin. Exactly when is uncertain, but Harris is reported to have visited Thomson at Canoe Lake in late April. That fall, Lismer and

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<sup>29</sup> Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 279. The previous two winters would have been 1915-16, 1916-17 – after MacCallum’s year of expenses paid had expired.

<sup>30</sup> A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter’s Country* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1958), 31; F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1926), 115; Davis, ‘Thomson,’ 998.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, ‘Apprehended Vision,’ 20-23.

Varley again journeyed to the Park. Thomson took out a guide's license for that season, dated 27 April 1915. Late that autumn Thomson, working as a fire regulation inspector, accompanied river drivers of the Booth Lumber Company down the Mattawa River.<sup>33</sup> Thomson painted what is now called "In the Northland" in the winter of 1915-16 (it appears to have been shown as "The Birches" at the Spring 1916 OSA exhibition). "Spring Ice", painted the previous winter, was purchased by the NGC at the Spring OSA show that year. Little else is known about Thomson's activities that winter. He is reported to have been with Harris in Algonquin Park in late April 1916. It was then that, according to Dennis Reid's 1975 booklet, Thomson painted the sketches for what would later become "The Jack Pine" and "The West Wind".<sup>34</sup> Again he worked as a fire-ranger from late May or early June. As in the previous year, this involved accompanying log drives down river to ensure fire regulations were observed.<sup>35</sup> That winter of 1916-17 appears to have involved something of a flurry of activity in Thomson's studio. He painted several large canvases including "Petawawa Gorges", "The Pointers", "The Drive", "Birch Grove, Autumn", "The Jack Pine" and "The West Wind".

As spring returned in 1917, Thomson once again set out for the North. He undertook that spring to sketch the unfolding of the season. Reports about the number of sketches in this series vary. Joan Murray, who puts the total at 62, has only been able to account for about thirty.<sup>36</sup> Thomson was rumoured to have been engaged secretly that year to a local woman, Winnifred Trainor, whose father was foreman of a local lumber camp and whose family had a cottage on

<sup>32</sup> Davis, 'Apprehended Vision,' 20-23, 367; Lord, *Painting in Canada*, 122; Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 27-30.

<sup>33</sup> Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 278.

<sup>34</sup> Reid, *The Jack Pine*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Addison describes the fire ranger's job as following timber company drives down river, watching for carelessness with fire. This involved watching and educating timber workers and railroaders, and fighting what fires started with the limited tools – axes, shovels and buckets – that they had. Ottelyn Addison, *Tom Thomson: The Algonquin Years* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), 51-52.

<sup>36</sup> Murray, 'The World of Tom Thomson,' 37.

Canoe Lake. Murray asserts that Trainor wanted to marry, but that Thomson had some reservations, though she provides no evidence of either assertion.<sup>37</sup> Ottelyn Addison reported that there was a rumour of their engagement around Mowat in 1916-17, though this rumour was chiefly attributed to Annie Fraser, who, with her husband Shannon, ran the Mowat Lodge.<sup>38</sup>

Tom Thomson set out across Canoe Lake for the last time on 8 July 1917. His canoe was found overturned later that day. His body was found in Canoe Lake on July 16<sup>th</sup>. At the scene, he was pronounced dead due to accidental drowning and buried. His body was soon thereafter disinterred and transported back to Leith, where it was reburied at his old Presbyterian Church. The mysterious circumstances of Thomson's death and burial are very much a part of his legend. Rumours of murder and suicide were present, though unsubstantiated. Adding to the mystery was the story that his body was never removed to Leith and still rests in a grave near Canoe Lake. So seriously have these stories been taken that a group of men unearthed a grave in Algonquin Park in 1956 searching for Thomson's body and for some answers to the "mystery" of his death. So much is he part of the public domain that calls were made to exhume the body at Leith.<sup>39</sup>

Jackson organized a memorial exhibition of Thomson's paintings at The Arts Club, Montréal in March 1919. His work was shown at the Art Museum of Toronto in February 1920.<sup>40</sup> After Thomson's death, MacCallum arranged the sale of Thomson's paintings on behalf of his family. The NGC bought 25 sketches along with "The Jack Pine" and "Autumn Birches" in

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<sup>37</sup> Murray, *The Last Spring*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Addison, *The Algonquin Years*, 93.

<sup>39</sup> Addison, *The Algonquin Years*, 74, 79; William T. Little, *The Tom Thomson Mystery*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1970), xiv-xv, 156-167; Murray, *Best of Thomson*, 16-17; Dennis Reid has catalogued some of the newspaper coverage and debates about Thomson's death and the calls for exhumation from 1956 to 1969. Reid, *A Bibliography of the Group of Seven* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1971), 40-42.

<sup>40</sup> The Arts Club, Montréal, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Tom Thomson, March 1 to March 21, 1919*, Appendix 1; Art Museum of Toronto [hereafter AMT], *Catalogue of a Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by Tom Thomson, and of a Collection of Japanese Colour Prints, Loaned by Sir Edmund Walker, February 13 to 29, 1920*, Appendix 2.

1918.<sup>41</sup> In 1925, the renamed Art Gallery of Toronto opened, prominently exhibiting “The West Wind,” which had recently been donated to the Gallery by The Canadian Club. Several years of effort by Thomson’s supporters to have the painting placed in the Toronto institution had finally met with success.

The biographical books and articles written during the twenty years after Thomson’s death did much more than record these meagre facts of his life and times. They established the legend of Tom Thomson and purposefully built him into a national icon for successive generations. According to this legend, Thomson lived the critical portion of his life in the northern wilderness from which Canada took its identity. The life he led there was the essentially Canadian one, in intimate contact with the distinctive and unique Canadian environment. His art, completely uninfluenced by the styles and techniques of the contemporary art world, reflected his lifestyle and therefore the truly Canadian experience. Thomson set down in paint the rough and raw reality of the pure Canadian experience, giving artistic form to an emotional contact with the Canadian landscape that Canadians share and know but cannot express for themselves.

It is possible to imagine Thomson differently and competing imaginings do exist. If one were to seek an understanding of Thomson simply according to how he is described in his colleagues’ letters from their Algonquin Park sketching grounds, one would find a working artist. These letters draw a picture of Thomson as a developing artist, learning from his formally-trained colleagues. In them, the artists described their experimentation with a subject they all found exciting, their enthusiasm about sales and the growing popular interest in their work, and their developing movement.

Esther Trépanier notes that while Thomson is a national icon in English Canada, he is regarded in French Canada as a strictly regional figure, one representative of an Ontario-centred landscape school. His work is seen as Ontario-regionalist, just as the landscapes of contemporary

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<sup>41</sup> The NGC paid \$750 each for the large canvases and \$25 each for the sketches. Eric Brown and Sir Edmund Walker, NGC, to MacCallum, 26 August 1918, NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, The Jack Pine. See also correspondence in NAC, Thomson Papers, Estate Papers.

Québec artists Marc Aurèle de Fois Suzor-Côté, Clarence Gagnon, and Maurice Cullen are regionalist. Trépanier explicitly rejects the idea that Thomson's life and work appeals to Canadians from coast to coast, and speaks for the experiences of all Canadians. Thomson does not have the same appeal among Québécois, neither in the popular mind nor in the academy, as he does in English-speaking Canada.<sup>42</sup>

Writing in 1974, Barry Lord attempts a different imagining. Lord agrees with the popular conception that Thomson was an ardent nationalist. But his Thomson is almost a proto-Maoist, who creates realist representations of and for working peoples. He writes of 'The West Wind':

The tree in the wind is a symbol of the tenacious grasp on the land and on life that our nation has maintained. Like the tree, Canadians have had to fight to survive. ... In our basic struggle for production with nature, Canadian farmers and workers have had to overcome great hardship. And in the struggle to build our nation under the dominance of a succession of the world's leading imperialist powers, we have similarly had to dig in and hold on, to become and remain who we are.

For Lord, Thomson's work represents the desire and ability of Canadians to preserve their national autonomy in the face of external forces and internal temptations.<sup>43</sup>

Albert Robson suggests that Thomson could also be associated more closely with the commercial art world. Thomson worked as a graphic artist for significantly longer than his time spent in Algonquin Park. Robson stresses the influence of commercial art training on Thomson's work, and that of his associates in the Group of Seven.<sup>44</sup> J. Russell Harper describes Thomson as 'abandoning' commercial art in 1914.<sup>45</sup> It was a job he left only after encouraged to do so by his friends and after promised a year's financial support by . With MacCallum's backing, Thomson moved in January 1914 into the Studio Building. As a commercial artist, Thomson moved in the

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<sup>42</sup> Esther Trépanier, 'Nationalisme et Modernité: La réception critique du Groupe des Sept dans la presse montréalaise francophone des années vingt,' *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'Histoire de l'Art Canadien* 16:2 (1996), 29-57. Such a regionalist imagining is supported by Harold Town in his 1977 text. Harold Town, Introduction to *The Silence and the Storm* by Silcox and Town, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Lord, *Painting in Canada*. Quotation is from p. 128.

<sup>44</sup> Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters and Tom Thomson*.

<sup>45</sup> Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 278.

world of petty-bourgeois Toronto more than the dominant mythology portrays.

None of Thomson's biographers have commented upon the coincidence of Thomson's decision to move into the shack behind his friends' Severn Street Studio Building and the expiration of MacCallum's guarantee of support that had been extended the previous winter. Thomson may have been left unemployed for the winter of 1915-1916 by a downturn in the graphic arts industry resulting from the Great War.<sup>46</sup> He may have been close to, if not actually being, destitute. One could go so far as to describe Thomson as something of a vagrant. Here was an unemployed commercial artist in his late thirties, unmarried and with rather limited prospects. He was apparently unable to house himself in Toronto, resorting to living in a shack. This condition may have contributed to Thomson's decision to stay as late in the year as he could in Algonquin Park where he could live in a tent, and survive on odd jobs and the fish he caught.

However, this is not the legendary Tom Thomson. His myth was purposefully created by a particular group of admirers and says as much or more about a group of urban middle-class Torontonians and their lifestyles and values as it does about the life and work of a particular artist. The mythology reflected their anxieties about modern living, their cottaging lifestyle and a long-standing definition of Canada as a northern wilderness. The myth asserted that the experiences of a particular group of people encapsulated the national essence. One can look to the social and cultural conditions of early twentieth-century Canada to begin to understand the anxieties and ideals of Thomson's celebrants. One is then able to consider how the Thomson legend supports and corresponds to established but threatened forms of social organization – class, ethnic and gender ideals and hierarchies – as “natural” to Canadian society. The Thomson mythology was a carrier of such cultural values.

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<sup>46</sup> Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 84.

CHAPTER 1: THE AGE OF THOMSON:  
 ANTIMODERNISM, NATIONALISM AND CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN  
 EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH-SPEAKING CANADA

All art is more or less of a convention, and the vitality of the art impulse demands that new conventions should be found and that each age should express itself....

*Mail and Empire* review of the 1920 Tom Thomson Memorial exhibition at the Art Museum of Toronto<sup>1</sup>

Tom Thomson as icon contributes to, and is inspired by, a great variety of notions of the Canadian essence. His image plays on the long-standing conception of Canada as a northern nation, one that looks to the northern forests and tundra for its identity, against the all-but-irresistible pull to the south. He displays the virile and rugged masculine virtues of the wilderness experience and of a young growing nation just reaching maturity. The idea of Tom Thomson captures all of these as essences of life in Canada; he was able to capture these things in paint because his knowledge of the northern wilderness came from his lived experience.

For all its general acceptance and enduring strength, this idea was the historically contingent expression of a particular time and place. It was a product of the predominantly Anglo-Canadian, Toronto-based intellectual and cultural elite. The creation of this legend was structured by a variety of influences. Many members of the Anglo-Canadian elite exhibited anxiety about the effects of the urban growth, industrial development, cosmopolitan immigration, and corporate consolidation that were features of modernizing Canada. This elite sought in a variety of activities the means to reinforce their social leadership. Urban reform was partly a response to this desire, as was the growing cultural nationalist movement. Early twentieth-century Canadian nationalism also grew from an enthusiasm about Canada's growth and from a pride in Canada's contribution to the Great War. A cult of wilderness grew from the desire among the urban middle class to escape the city. It reinforced a self-definition of Canada as a northern

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<sup>1</sup> 'Thomson and the Algonquin School,' *The Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 21 February 1920.



wilderness. The cultural nationalist art movement, the Great War commemoration, and the sentiment of antimodernism all featured a romantic cast of mind. All of these factors contributed to the mentality of the cultural nationalists who turned Tom Thomson into a national icon.

#### THE MODERN CITY AND ANTIMODERN ANXIETY

In *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, a study of the culture of the United States at the turn of the century, T.J. Jackson Lears introduces the concept of “antimodernism.”<sup>2</sup> Believing themselves to be the silent victims of the ill effects of modern culture, though in many ways the material and status beneficiaries of modern society, the educated and affluent moral and intellectual leaders of the United States developed sentiments of “antimodernism.” Lears defines this as ‘the recoil from an “overcivilized” modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures.’<sup>3</sup> Reacting against their secular modern society and what they perceived to be its enervating effects, American elites, particularly those of the northeastern United States, yearned for the simple life. They sought vigorous, intense experience and the meaningful work of artisanal craftsmen. A cult of the wilderness and the Arts and Crafts Movement were in part expressions of this mentality. Lears argues that this sentiment, which permeated the American and European upper and middle classes, was not simple escapism or nostalgia, but was instead a complex blend of accommodation to and protest against social change, often coexisting with an enthusiasm for material progress.<sup>4</sup>

The antimodern impulse grew from two sources. One source was anxiety within this leading social segment about the changing urban environment. The other was the process of

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<sup>2</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xiii.

material and organizational rationalization described by Max Weber. Modern work became increasingly bureaucratic, monotonous, deskilled and vaguely unreal – workers had less control than before over the products or conditions of work, whether bureaucratic or industrial,<sup>5</sup> and in their minds ‘individual causal potency had diminished.’<sup>6</sup> Antimodernists feared that what they perceived as the enervating effects of modern urban living would lead to a general condition of overcivilization and to the decline of their society. The antimodernist could attain in his cottage or in his craft activity a proximate re-creation of a supposedly fulfilling premodern existence. While maintaining many decidedly modern attributes, physically and spiritually – an urban sense of the countryside, the notion of a vacation, the ability and opportunity to travel over significant distances at will – the antimodernist nonetheless sought in the simple life and in nature the vigour and virtue that had once formed the basis of American society.<sup>7</sup>

The structural changes that caused shifts in the occupational order of the growing modern city were not just passively observed and accepted. The urban social elite was anxious about these changes. The face of the Toronto they knew was changing. With the growing city came the problems associated with urbanization and industrialization. Not only was the urban lifestyle often perceived to be enervating for the middle and upper class intellectual and cultural elites,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 9, 60.

<sup>6</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> It should come as no surprise that F.J. Turner should at this time develop his frontier thesis. This thesis argued that the virtues of American democracy and of the American race had grown from the freedom and self-reliance Americans had experienced on the frontier as it moved westward. Turner’s 1893 thesis lamented the closing of the frontier and depicted the frontier experience as confined to a past era. It addressed many of the concerns of the American intelligentsia about the contemporary United States, which Lears describes as antimodern. As Stephen Daniels points out, the development of the frontier thesis is directly connected to contemporary social trends such as the perceived threats to social order and anxiety about social disunity. It helped to reassure its readers of the power and virtue of the pioneering Anglo-American culture. Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 195; George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, 3rd ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xv; Allan Smith, ‘Farms, Forests and Cities: The Image of the Land and the

but cities were the increasingly obvious sites of tenement slums, urban poverty, and filth. The urban elites sought regeneration, personally and socially.

The antimodernist temper had distinctive Canadian elements. Canadian elites were particularly committed to an organization of society based upon the British inheritance. Non-British immigrants were perceived as potential threats to the persistence of British values. At the same time, the European, as the contemporary Thomson literature reveals, was often a code-word for the decadent, effete, over-civilized and unmanly consequence of the ills of modernity.

Though still a minority of the total, increasing numbers of immigrants were coming from places other than the British Isles. Anxieties among the upper classes of Toronto about the problems of industrialization and urbanization were projected upon immigrant working-class populations. This reinforced and moralized perceived “racial” differences and class divisions. It brought about a many-sided elite response, including calls for the suppression of vice and the imposition of “higher” (i.e., their own) moral standards, and efforts to improve the urban environment. Certainly the leaders of Toronto society were motivated to social reform by the lurking shadow of social chaos which they associated with slums, poverty, and “foreign” immigration. At the same time, their social activism was a means by which the new urban elites could establish their community leadership.<sup>9</sup>

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Rise of the Metropolis in Ontario, 1860-1914’ in *Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of J.M.S. Careless*, ed. David Keane and Colin Read (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1990), 78; Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1974), 105-107.

<sup>9</sup> While generally discussing the concern for order in late-Victorian Toronto, Keith Walden observes the transfer of anxiety over the problems associated with urbanization to immigrant populations as reinforcing and moralizing “racial” differences and class divisions in late nineteenth century Toronto. The perceived threat to social order is a persistent theme in his study. Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 225. For an example of how the aspiration of elites to social leadership manifest itself, see Lynda Jessup, ‘Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven,’ in *Policing the Boundaries of Modernity/Antimodernism and Artistic Experience* (forthcoming),’ 13-18. Lears argues this racialization re-asserted the hegemony of the dominant Anglo-American culture in the contemporary United States. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 107-108. On a corollary development in the Victorian British middle class, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 5, 52-55. On social reform in Canada, see, for example,

## OCCUPATION AND STATUS IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY TORONTO

A new and activist middle class sought to establish and to maintain its status by finding ways to set itself apart from other residents of the city. Consumer magazines served to homogenize the tastes and values of the new urban middle class, as well as to set it apart from the rest of society through its consumptive habits.<sup>10</sup> The nationalist organizations Mary Vipond describes promoted a fairly consistent, if not homogenous, set of social values as social norms. Further, many of these new volunteer organizations were directed towards alleviating and solving the urban “problems” commonly attributed to working-class people and non-British immigrants. The status of membership in social clubs such as the ALC helped middle-class people to distinguish themselves from the seemingly teeming masses.<sup>11</sup>

Occupation was the most prominent means to determine social status. Increasingly, university education was the means to access a set of new and redefined occupations. The face of Toronto had changed markedly over the turn of the century, due to industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Economically, by the end of World War I, it was the industrial centre of Canada – the metropole for the hinterland that was the resource-rich Laurentian Shield. Its population almost tripled from 181,000 in 1891 to over 520,000 in 1921. Large-scale industrial production overwhelmed small-scale artisanal production in the nineteenth century. Developing transportation systems took industrial and consumer products to previously remote markets. The smaller towns and villages that had defined “community” for many Canadians lost population and

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Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Russell Johnston, ‘Selling Themselves: Professionalizing Adworkers and the Business of Culture in Toronto, 1900-1930’ (Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University, 1997), 15-17.

<sup>11</sup> See Vipond, ‘National Consciousness’ and ‘The Nationalist Network: English Canada’s Intellectuals and Artists in the 1920s’ in *Interpreting Canada’s Past: Volume II: After Confederation*, ed. J.M. Bumstead (Oxford University Press, 1986), 260-277; Karen Leslie Knutson, ‘“Absolute escape from all that otherwise made Toronto”: Antimodernism at the Arts and Letters Club, 1908-1920’ (M.A. thesis, Queen’s University, 1995), 22.

changed from independent towns to hinterlands of the metropolitan centre.<sup>12</sup>

Such structural changes brought with them fundamental shifts in occupations and employment patterns. The horizon for economic independence diminished from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. While self-employment had previously been considered a marker of mature manhood, working for a wage, either in expanded factories or in bureaucratizing corporations, became a much more likely lifetime condition for most people.<sup>13</sup>

New occupational groups expanded to service the increasingly concentrated corporate world and to manage the associated social changes in major centres. Opportunities were available in the bureaucratized workplace and in new service professions, like public health, applied science, and social regulation. Many of these new types of workers were being educated in the expanded universities. However, while professions began to become lodged in the university environment, the majority of students still undertook studies in the arts and sciences. University officials and their middle-class constituency still saw these institutions as centres of moral and cultural education, as well as providers of skills for the new economy.<sup>14</sup> This tendency is shown in the range and depth of cultural activity undertaken by students and faculty. After the Great War, cultural production grew markedly. Universities, their attendance doubling in some instances, were nurturing a native Canadian intelligentsia – a literate, leisured, urban middle class.<sup>15</sup> The University of Toronto became home to cultural centres like Hart House, and to publications such as *The Rebel*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' 50; Brown and Cook, *A Nation Transformed*, 83-107; Knutson, 'Absolute escape', 14-15; David G. Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment and Social Mobility in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario* (Kingston & Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>13</sup> For an example drawn from one Ontario town, see Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life*, 5-7, 51, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada During the Thirties* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 7, 43.

<sup>15</sup> John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart Limited, 1985), 158-161; Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 12-15, 39-64.

<sup>16</sup> *The Rebel* was the University of Toronto forerunner to *The Canadian Forum*. The importance of *The*

A shared university experience became a central facet in the creation of the nationalist network of post-World War One Canada. The universities largely preserved the social order. In fact, by focusing on the needs of the upwardly-mobile children of members of the middle class, the universities of the early twentieth century did much to preserve the various social hierarchies – racial, class, religious, and gender – of the day. Its students were preparing for middle-class lives. They sought to take advantage of an opportunity closed to the majority of the population. Finally, at university they were inculcated in the values of the modern age – hierarchy, conformity and group solidarity. Though most of them would not enjoy nineteenth-century opportunities for economic independence, they still internalized the qualities of middle-class identity: the self-restraint, high-mindedness, and social responsibility associated with character and gentility. They learned the skills that would help them to succeed in their world.<sup>17</sup> Urban reform, in one regard, was a product of the achievability-ethos of these new managers and professionals. They articulated through the urban reform movement a sense that they actually could alleviate these problems and build good citizens despite the city's squalor. Far from simply being the locations of social and economic problems, slums were seen as symptoms of a moral malaise. Reformers hoped to heal the urban blight on an individualistic basis. They stressed an individual's need to develop moral fibre.<sup>18</sup> Many social reformers saw education as a vital tool in overcoming the problems – based on regional, class and ethnic divisions – that faced contemporary Canada.

However, the urban middle-class reaction to the underside of the modern city was firmly rooted in antipathy to the squalor of tenements and anxiety about potential threats to “traditional”

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*Canadian Forum* in promoting the nationalist cultural views of Toronto's cultural elite and to the success of the Group in insinuating itself into the national consciousness is discussed in Margaret F. R. Davidson, 'A New Approach to the Group of Seven,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 4:4 (1969), 9-16. Also see Vipond, 'Nationalist Consciousness,' and 'Nationalist Network.'

<sup>17</sup> Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 279; Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 17, 102, 162

<sup>18</sup> Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 106.

social values, including those which ensured the continued social leadership of the urban elites.<sup>19</sup> The era's social reform movements were an expression of the desire to suppress vice and impose a "higher" moral standard. While it would be a gross oversimplification, as well as an insult to contemporary activists, to suggest that social reform was little more than an attempt at social control by an anxiety-ridden, urban, upper middle class, it would be equally erroneous to suggest that a middle-class impetus to remake society according to its own vision was not part of the social reform movements. However sincere their desire to offer aid to the urban working class, social reform activists consciously promoted their own vision of how society should be organized, and how best to alleviate the problems of the city setting. They had a vision of how Canada ought to look and acted upon it.<sup>20</sup>

The urban reform movement contained an ambivalent attitude towards urban development. Certainly, reformers were very concerned about issues of social integration and urban poverty. However, cities sought to attract and expand the industrial activity that lay at the heart of the recognized problems of urbanization. As Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook observed in 1974: 'And the confident materialism of the age reigned supreme.'<sup>21</sup> But antimodernists also regarded the naked bourgeois materialism of the modern age as a culprit in the degeneration of the city environment. The city park movement was partly inspired by the idea that parks could provide an aesthetically-rich counterweight to the dominant bourgeois materialist values. Parks, as Keith Walden has remarked, are examples of a landscape ordered for human needs. While advocated in part as evidence of the city's evolution beyond crude materialism, city

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<sup>19</sup> Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 33, 225-226, *passim*. In his study of the invention of invented traditions in the modern period, Eric Hobsbawm also implies the lingering concern about potential threats to social cohesion, and seems also to point towards anxieties about mass politics as contributing towards this general concern. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914' in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263-280.

<sup>20</sup> Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 15-17; Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 33, 225.

<sup>21</sup> Brown and Cook, *A Nation Transformed*, 106-107.

green spaces also helped fulfil the reformers' desire to encourage rational recreation. Parks were seen by advocates as providing some psychological satisfaction to urban residents who had neither the leisure nor the income to take wilderness vacations.<sup>22</sup>

It is not surprising that the increased size and centrality of cities fed a quest to rediscover the wilderness. One stream of thought viewed such trips into the wilds as the means to relieve the stresses and strains of urban living, and to help regenerate tired mind-workers. The expansion of rail lines made access to these "wilderness" areas considerably easier. But the rediscovery of a virile manhood was the key aspect of the cult of wilderness. Through the wilderness vacation, middle-class men could get in touch with a more primal masculinity that, it was thought, would counteract the enervating effects of the modern, urban lifestyle. Men could rest their tired nerves, get in touch with their inner "wild man", and return better able to do their jobs.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the wilderness was not only rediscovered by modern society, but was redefined as an essential part of the metropolitan lifestyle for the self-described central players in the city's economic and social activities. By counteracting the enervation of modern "man", the wilderness vacation could inoculate men against the supposedly European ailments of degeneration and overcivilization. The effete, dandy, staid European was a frequent object of derision in the Thomson and Group literature; the American figures Whitman and Thoreau, the woodsman-writers, were, conversely, praised.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 33, 226. Allan Smith connects the general trend of creating city parks to the need to adapt to the spirit of restructured life patterns. 'The adoption by city dwellers of values consistent with the character of the new urban order – a world of planning, organization, systems, limits and confinement – could, it was occasionally thought, be explicitly encouraged by placing them in touch with a kind of green space specifically set up for that purpose.' Smith, 'Farms, Forest and Cities,' 85.

<sup>23</sup> Jasen, *Wild Things*, 132; Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery, 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> John Higham underlines the significance of the invocation of nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman as a signal of the growing cult of wilderness. Whitman's poetry spoke to a largeness and virility which Americans sought in order to overcome the conditions of late nineteenth-century life. John Higham, 'The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s' in *The Origin of Modern Consciousness*, ed. John Weiss (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 44. The esteem in which the "Canadian Art Movement" held Whitman is trumpeted by the frontispiece of Frederick Housser's crucial text, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*. His frontispiece quotes from Whitman's 'The Leaves of Grass.' MacDonald, Lismer, Harris, Housser, and MacCallum



## COMMERCIAL ARTISTS IN THE WILDS

Most of the future members of the Algonquin School worked in one of the new modern industries: the graphic arts. The consumer society created a much larger demand for the services of printers and graphic artists, and, through mechanization, a trade and an industry were created where once a craft had been. Large retailers and producers of consumer goods advertised their wares in the daily papers to a mass audience. Consumer magazines, such as *Busyman's Magazine*, modelled on the American *Saturday Evening Post*, targeted an urban middle-class audience, and helped to form its taste. All of this required new and increasingly involved graphic art activity.<sup>25</sup>

In his recent dissertation, Russell Johnston describes adworkers as seeking middle-class respectability. An overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic group, adworkers were one of the new occupational groups in early twentieth-century Toronto which sought to mark the boundaries of its middle-class position.

At work, at lunch, and at play, adworkers surrounded themselves – both consciously and unconsciously – with people like themselves. ... [U]nderlying all of these pursuits were notions of sociability, public service, and athleticism typically reserved to the leisure[d] classes, but increasingly claimed by a professional-middle class keen to stake out its place in the new urban landscape.<sup>26</sup>

Their aspirations for social involvement fed quite naturally into the burgeoning social organizations of Vipond's study. The ALC was one such outlet for their social activities.<sup>27</sup>

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especially were moved by the wilderness spiritualism of Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. MacDonald, for example, named his son Thoreau. See also Ann Davis, 'An Apprehended Vision.' In this, the Group and its circle revealed a deep spiritual affinity with the wilderness movement of the era.

<sup>25</sup> Johnston, 'Selling Themselves,' 14; Angela Davis, *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 56-72

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, 'Selling Themselves,' 87. On the turn of the century commercial art scene in Toronto, see Angela Davis, *Art and Work*.

<sup>27</sup> See Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' *passim*; Knutson discusses these activities in the ALC. Knutson, "Absolute escape", 5-10, 22.

The commercial artists of the Algonquin School and their associates were of the segment of Toronto society that took the then-fashionable wilderness vacations. MacCallum welcomed several of his colleagues from the University of Toronto to his cottage on Georgian Bay. He invited Thomson and all of the future members of the Group there on several occasions, and commissioned MacDonald, Lismer and Thomson to create decorative panels for his living room. Most of the members of the Group visited Algonquin Park as well, usually with Thomson. NGC Director Eric Brown was also known to vacation there with his family. On at least one occasion, Lismer brought his wife and their infant with them on the adventure.<sup>28</sup> The wilderness vacation – be it canoeing through Algonquin or having a cottage in Muskoka or on Georgian Bay – was increasingly popular with the urban middle class from the late nineteenth century.

Most of the members of the audience for Thomson's paintings "knew" this region of northern Ontario in one sense or another. For many, it was a vacation site. As Paul Walton reminds us, by 1907 Toronto already regarded itself as a tourist transit point: "the gateway of the summer paradise of North America" in Muskoka, Georgian Bay, and Algonquin Park.<sup>29</sup> Douglas Cole observes that by the last decade of the nineteenth century, railway development, urban growth, and economic affluence came together to foster a broad summering movement.<sup>30</sup>

Aside from the cataclysmic nature of their conversion to the wilderness, there was nothing to differentiate the rush of these painters to the woods from that of thousands of other Canadian who joined in the great escape from the city by going back to a nature that was wild and adventurous.... It was the commonality of the experience that made possible the profound effect which the group's

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<sup>28</sup> It was from the kitchen window of this cottage that Lismer made the sketch which was later worked up as 'Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay' (now in NGC). The NGC now also displays the interior walls of the MacCallum cottage, the various panels of which were designed and painted by Thomson, MacDonald, and Harris. 'Arthur Lismer,' *Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, vol. 4, 862-864.

<sup>29</sup> C. Price-Green, 'Toronto's Progress – The Advent of the Canadian Northern,' *Canadian Magazine* (January 1907), 31. Cited in Paul H. Walton, 'The Group of Seven and Northern Development,' *Revue des Arts canadiens/Canadian Art Review* 17:2 (1990), 173. As early as 1894, one writer remarked of Algonquin Park that there could be found 'recreation and restoration in a closer approach to nature than can be found in [a] busy street or crowded mart.' Thomas W. Gibson, 'Algonquin National Park,' cited in Murray, *Best of Thomson*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Cole, 'Artists, Patrons and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 13:2 (Été 1978 Summer), 70.

conversion had upon Canadian art. They began to paint the wilderness at just the right time to catch the enthusiasm of a generation of cottagers and wilderness buffs.<sup>31</sup>

While Cole overstates the suddenness of the turn towards the wilderness as an appealing vacation locale,<sup>32</sup> he is quite right to make this connection between “the North” as vacation site and as subject for artistic representation.

By 1915, Algonquin Park itself was serviced by two railroads. It was home to four hotels and contained the small town of Mowat, home of the Mowat Lodge (it advertised itself as ‘Camp Mowat’: ‘A Family Resort’ with ‘First-class Canoe and Boat Livery’). It was easily accessible through ‘Canoe Lake Station on the Ottawa Division of the Grand Trunk Railway’, and featured the ‘Best Trout Fishing in Ontario’ with ‘Several Good Bass Lakes.’<sup>33</sup>

This vacation land was esteemed by antimodernists for its purported therapeutic value. Arthur Lismer’s lecture on Canadian art to the Toronto Canadian Club in 1926 reflected the area’s therapeutic aspects as well as describing the Shield in general as a new and expansive resource frontier: ‘It contains the hoarded treasures for the sustenance of countless generation. It is a recreational background to which we go gladly for our physical well being....’<sup>34</sup> The region almost seemed to be all things to all people, as Lismer did not see any contradiction or conflict between the wilderness vacation and resource exploitation. The *Owen Sound Sun*’s 1912 article about the trip Thomson and Broadhead took through the region, captures the association of the wilderness and the wilderness experience with the rich resource frontier of New Ontario:

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<sup>31</sup> Cole, ‘Artist, Patrons and Public,’ 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Cole does not really explore the selection of northern Ontario as subject for the paintings of Thomson and the Group beyond the coincidence of such subjects as vacation locations. See Jasen, *Wild Things*.

<sup>33</sup> Cole, ‘Artist, Patrons and Public,’ 74. These descriptions were featured on the Mowat Lodge letterhead upon which many of the letters from Thomson and his friends to people back in Toronto were written.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Lismer, manuscript for ‘Canadian Art,’ lecture given to Canadian Club Dec 13 1926, National Archives of Canada, Arthur Lismer Papers, MG30, D184, file 1-14. Douglas Cole observed the popularity of the wilderness experience for its therapeutic value: ‘The wilderness cult extended especially toward children. An outdoor environment and wilderness values, so prized by the urban middle class, were seen as useful for the development of clean minds and healthy bodies.’ Cole, ‘Artists, Patrons and Public,’ 70-71.

The young artists think it is a grand country and are only waiting until next year when the call of the wild will take them back to that land of rich resources and scenic beauty – rich in mineral wealth, because iron and copper have already been discovered and the time may not be far distant when some lucky prospector will strike something that will make of it a second Cobalt – rich because of its forests and red and white pine and spruce – rich because of its immense waterfalls and consequently water-power, and rich because of the abundance of fish and game to be found there.<sup>35</sup>

The region was described as waiting to have its resources tapped, and the article's author all but ignored the beauty of the region that would feature so prominently in later descriptions of Thomson's representations of it.<sup>36</sup>

This pattern of vacationing in the "wilderness" of northern Ontario reinforced the existing landscape aesthetic among Canadian artists. Thomson and his friends were not the first artists to paint the Canadian landscape. Since the late nineteenth century, a series of Canadian artists had sought to express the defining national characteristics in landscape paintings, just as French and English landscapists had done. This was part of the effort to express a national cultural maturity.<sup>37</sup> Canadian artists had been drawn to the landscape as the source of a nationalist art from the earliest days of the country. But in the years after the First World War, the combination of a

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<sup>35</sup> 'Local Man's Experience in Northern Wilds,' *Owen Sound Sun*.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Walton underlined the new appeal of new Ontario – northern lands transferred to the province in 1912 – as a boundless source of material wealth: 'Ontarians had by then learned to see the North as a cornucopia overflowing with natural resources, no matter how forbidding its aspect might have been in the past.' Walton, 'The Group and Northern Development,' 176. A parallel does exist, though it is easy to overstate, between the locales of Group activity and that of resource exploitation. This was spelled out in an article published by Arthur Lismer in 1925. He referred to the development of natural resources as the primary means by which the material foundation for nationhood was being created. Similarly, he saw the artist as able to draw on "a powerful reserve of national beauty" in the same regions of the North exploited by industry and to use his discoveries to "sustain the spiritual and aesthetic life of the inhabitants of this country." Arthur Lismer, 'Canadian Art,' *The Canadian Theosophist* (February 1925), 179. Walton, 'Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 174. See also Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities.' Scott Watson insists that the financial interests of Sir Edmund Walker and Lawren Harris essentially determined the locations of Harris's painting: 'In short, political and financial connections bound Walker and Harris to common interests, interests that shaped their view of the national landscape school they helped to establish.' Scott Watson, 'Race, Wilderness, Territory and the Origins of Modern Canadian Landscape Painting,' *Semiotext(e) Canadas* 6:2 (1994), 96.

<sup>37</sup> The entries in *The Art of the British Empire Overseas* provide examples of these. The four articles describe the state of art in the dominions of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada respectively (the Canadian entry was penned by Eric Brown), and each looks to the development of an indigenous school of landscape painting as the marker of an artistic national maturity. Charles Holme, ed. *Art of the British Empire Overseas* (London: The Studio, 1917).

growing nationalist intelligentsia, antimodern enthusiasm for the wilderness, and the rise of mass communications brought this nationalist cultural expression and movement to a new crescendo.

Another trend that this collection of artists adopted was the practice of *plein air* sketching. *Plein air* was an offshoot of the Romantic movement and sought to record an artist's sincere emotional connection with the environment. Antimodernists, as Lynda Jessup observes, associated the authenticity of the emotional response to the landscape with the strenuous physical activity of the encounter.<sup>38</sup> The *plein air* sketch was a visual representation of the scene being viewed as well as a record of the artist's reaction – it recorded the moment of the artist in the landscape.<sup>39</sup> This conception of the artist's work and of the artist at work was fundamental to the created mythology of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. Lynda Jessup notes the necessary connection of the experience on the land, and the associations of that experience, with the paintings themselves. The words repeatedly used to describe the works of the Algonquin School painters include 'bold', 'virile', 'vibrant', 'emphatic', and 'strong.' In this, the works themselves, as they are described for the viewer, reflect the symbiosis of art, artist and subject.<sup>40</sup> Thomson's rugged virility, determined by his life in a rugged and virile wilderness, results in his creation of rugged and virile paintings.

#### DEFINING THE NEW MAN

The adjectives applied to Thomson's life and work went to the heart of contemporary concerns about manhood. Along with describing the urban middle-class lifestyle, with its wilderness vacations, as the Canadian norm, these writers created a normative description of

<sup>38</sup> Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery,' 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> See Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 128.

<sup>40</sup> Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery,' 8-10; and 'Canadian Artists, Railways, the State and "The Business of Becoming a Nation"' (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1992), 24-30.

Canadian manhood. Just as the structural changes in the economy of Canada and the western world in general were creating new occupational categories and career paths, they were relatedly creating a need to redefine manhood. The consolidation of the economy generally, the rise of corporate dominance, the ancillary development of new and redefined occupational groups to serve the corporate economy meant a loss of personal economic independence for men. The self-employed businessman who had been the norm of the localized bourgeois world had become less common. The variety of ways for a young man to “get on in the world” was increasingly limited.<sup>41</sup> Such a basic alteration in men’s expectations for employment, a fundamental aspect of their self- and social-definition, has led some historians to describe this as a “crisis of masculinity.”<sup>42</sup> But the “crisis” talk is overstated.<sup>43</sup> Gail Bederman observes that there is no evidence that contemporaries had lost faith in the power of the male body or forsaken male power as informing social organization.<sup>44</sup> Instead they appealed to manhood as a source for the necessary regeneration of society. Indeed the desire and ability of contemporary men, and contemporary society generally, to reformulate and reinvent manhood in the early twentieth century may provide the best evidence of the persistent faith in manhood as an organizing principle in society.

Michael Roper and John Tosh assert that there was in the late-Victorian era a contestation

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<sup>41</sup> See Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life*, 62, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Steven Maynard is among those who used the term “crisis” in describing the effects of the development of industrial capitalism on gender relations around the turn of the century. Steven Maynard, ‘Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History,’ *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (Spring 1989), 160. He borrows the term from M.S. Kimmel, ‘The Crisis of Masculinity in Historical Perspective,’ in Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities* (Boston, 1987).

<sup>43</sup> Joy Parr has argued that ‘the raising of a “crisis” alert each time masculinity is found to be mutable or to exist in mutuality with other parts of the social life, when “change” or “response” might seem adequately to serve as descriptors, show how ordinary and commonsensical the fixity of masculinity has remained even among those who have undertaken its critical study.’ Joy Parr, ‘Gender History and Historical Practice,’ *Canadian Historical Review*, 76:3 (September 1995), 368. See also Clyde Griffen, ‘Reconstructing Masculinity from the Evangelical Revival to the Waning of Progressivism,’ in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, ed. Mark C. Cairns and Clyde Griffen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 200.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States*,

of notions of masculinity. Christian values of intellectual energy, moral purpose and sexual purity were being challenged by an advocacy of the superiority of the will and rugged independence fueled by the new Imperialism.<sup>45</sup> Gail Bederman separates manhood into masculinity and manliness. Masculine qualities are those of men by nature, which are most in evidence where there is the least “manly” restraint placed upon them: among “primitives” and “savages”, frequently racialized as Africans or as Aboriginal Americans. These emphasize male power, physical size, aggression and (hetero)sexuality. Qualities described as “manly” reflect a moral dimension: those qualities worthy of a chivalric gentleman. In Canadian society, this racialized model of behavioral norms typically privileged white, middle-class men as superior to those whom they defined as members of less civilized races.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, looking at manhood as historically structured and as historically relative leads us to consider how manhood was redefined in the early twentieth century to encompass its changing social reality. As the nature of many men’s occupations (and realistic life expectations) changed from self- to paid employment, their loss of independence was coupled with increased leisure. It is not surprising, then, that definitions of manhood changed to include increased domesticity and the increased consumption which would drive the new economy.<sup>47</sup> George Mosse reminds us that definitions of manhood are prescriptive norms that include social ideals and aspirations as well as social reality.<sup>48</sup> Graham Dawson describes this as an “imagined identity” arguing that manhood is

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*1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Roper and Tosh, introduction to *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1991), 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 18-22; Michael Dawson, ‘“That Nice Red Coat Goes To My Head Like Champagne”: Gender, Antimodernism and the Mountie Image, 1880-1960,’ *Revue d’études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 32:3 (Automne 1997 Fall), 131, 138; Dawson, *The Mountie From Dime Novel to Disney* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998), especially Chapter 2.

<sup>47</sup> Griffen, ‘Reconstructing Masculinity,’ 196-201.

<sup>48</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

defined as much conceptually as through lived experience.<sup>49</sup> Manhood, thus, is as much about how one sees and interprets one's activities in the world, as it is about what one actually does.

Mosse argues for the central role played by nationalism in supporting ideas of respectability as social norms beyond the middle class alone:

It absorbed and sanctioned middle-class manners and morals and played a crucial part in spreading respectability to all classes of the population, however much these classes hated and despised one another. Nationalism helped respectability to meet all challenges to its dominance, enlarging its parameters when necessary while keeping its essence intact.<sup>50</sup>

Defining itself as the epitome of the nation, the nationalist intelligentsia presented its own image of manhood as a norm for social behavior. Their created idea of Tom Thomson was of a piece with this image. Thomson's life experience was bound up in aspirations for a more virile manhood as much as it was in the quest to define the national essence.

#### THE NATIONALIST IMPULSE

The interrelated elements of modernization – industrialization, urbanization, immigration and corporatization – were also seen as signs of the progress of Canadian society and fostered a nationalist enthusiasm. The urban and industrial growth of Toronto signaled the continuing economic development of the country as a whole. While Canadian universities were producing an indigenous intelligentsia, the country's military and diplomatic achievements of the Great War represented a national coming-of-age to the nationalist elite. Such developments inspired the desire among this elite to foster a distinct national culture, which, they felt, would be a marker of national maturity for Canada. They sought cultural icons and Tom Thomson fit, and was made to fit, the Toronto cultural elite's emerging sense of nationhood.

Canada's young cultural elite was in part tied together through personal contacts forged

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<sup>49</sup> Graham Dawson, 'The Blond Bedouin: Lawrence of Arabia, imperial adventures and the imagining of English-British masculinity,' in *Manful Assertions*, 118.

<sup>50</sup> George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 9.



in the Great War and in the universities. Such informal networks underlay the series of clubs and organizations that formed and grew in and through the 1920s, including the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the Canadian League, in addition to such established organizations as the Arts and Letters Club. It was a set of institutions and social organizations that came to dominate cultural matters in Canada. In 1980, Mary Vipond dubbed it “the nationalist network.”<sup>51</sup> A transition was taking place regarding who would set the national cultural agenda, and it was the intellectual and cultural elites of Toronto who were in the ascendancy.<sup>52</sup>

Barker Fairley, one-time president of the Arts and Letters Club [ALC] and friend of the members of the Group of Seven, was explicit in his call for cultural leadership. Writing in praise of Thomson’s work displayed at the 1920 Toronto memorial exhibition in the pages of *The Rebel*, he described the need for the leadership of a small segment of society to help support a national art movement:

If the present appreciation of Tom Thomson were to lead to some real sympathy with the movement to which he belonged and without which he cannot be understood, it would be such as Thomson himself would have accepted as fitting and sincere. ...It is not a matter of stirring the masses, but merely of finding a small community, measured in hundreds rather than in thousands, who are willing to spend on art a small fraction of what tens of thousands spend on vitrolas [sic].<sup>53</sup>

Almost inadvertently, Fairley described how this nationalist elite was operating. A small group sought to foster the national landscape school and with it to develop the national culture they sought for all Canadians.

And the evidence suggests this was indeed a small, tight circle. Mary Vipond has done

<sup>51</sup> Vipond, ‘Nationalist Network.’

<sup>52</sup> Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). Tippett makes the point that private patronage of businessmen, civil servants, and philanthropists was becoming dominant, making these people increasingly the arbiters of public taste. See, for example, p. 82. See also Vipond, ‘National Consciousness’ for her description of the activities of such organizations as the Canadian Club, the Canadian Authors Association, the Native Sons of Canada, among others, in promoting a nationalist sentiment.

<sup>53</sup> Barker Fairley, ‘Tom Thomson and Others,’ *The Rebel* 6:6 (March 1920), 247-248.

much to define the small group involved in the Toronto nationalist intelligentsia, suggesting their “network” may have included only 100 people in the various organizations.<sup>54</sup> Robert McMichael seems to corroborate this impression, describing the limited readership of Newton MacTavish’s *The Fine Arts in Canada* when it was released in 1925: ‘Probably limited to less than one thousand copies, the first edition sold slowly to the relatively small number of Canadians who had an abiding interest in the visual arts and particularly in those works produced in their own country.’<sup>55</sup> A.Y. Jackson’s comment in his foreword to the 1967 reissue of Blodwen Davies’s 1935 text, *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man who looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness*, made a similar point: ‘She could not find a publisher and sold most of the one hundred copies through friends.’<sup>56</sup> While there is no doubt this was a small social segment, it also seems quite clear that, in their efforts to develop and to promote the idea of Tom Thomson, they saw themselves as cultural leaders in Canadian society.

However, this aspiration to cultural leadership was fraught with elitism. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the comprehension and appreciation of cultural products must be learned and taught. Education is central to this process of cultural appropriation.<sup>57</sup> Members of such a social segment considered such knowledge to establish them “naturally” as cultural leaders for the rest of society. More importantly, experiential factors, rather than aesthetic ones, were defined as

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<sup>54</sup> Mary Vipond, in ‘National Consciousness’, 539, cites a 1969 interview with Graham Spry as the source for this number.

<sup>55</sup> Robert McMichael, introduction to *The Fine Arts in Canada* by Newton MacTavish [1925] (Toronto: Coles Publishing Co., 1973), iii.

<sup>56</sup> A.Y. Jackson, foreword to *The Story of a Man* by Davies, 1. The print run was about 450.

<sup>57</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel with Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public* [1969] trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman (Cambridge [U.K.]: Polity Press, 1991). Raymond Williams reminds us that examining the cultural meaning of a work of art includes uncovering ‘the true conditions of [artistic] practice – whether as literary [or aesthetic in our case] conventions or as social relationships – which have been alienated to components or to mere background.’ (16) Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,’ *New Left Review* No. 82 (November-December, 1973), 15-16.

fundamentally informing Thomson's work. Thus, as people who shared much of Thomson's experience in northern Ontario, these aspiring members of the cultural elite would be the people who would best be able to access and to understand his work as it was presented in a growing body of literature.

The artists who would form the core of the Group of Seven moved in many of the same social circles as this nationalist elite. At the centre of these circles was the ALC. Art historian Dennis Reid, for example, describes the ALC as 'the centre of living culture in Toronto after 1910.'<sup>58</sup> Not only was the ALC establishing itself as the centre of cultural activity, but it was asserting itself as a nationalist centre promoting Canadian cultural autonomy and development.<sup>59</sup>

Through this structure of personal and institutional relationships, the future Group members built the vital support network for their nationalist movement. The future members of the Group – J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer – were members of the Arts and Letters Club, as was their patron and advocate Dr. James MacCallum. MacCallum also had an appointment at the Medical College of the University of Toronto. Toronto philanthropist Sir Edmund Walker also belonged to the ALC. Harris, Varley, and Lismer worked with Vincent Massey – industrialist, philanthropist, charter ALC member, and donator of Hart House at the University of Toronto – at the ALC's and at many of Hart House's cultural events.

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<sup>58</sup> Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Osborne, for example, argues effectively that the nationalist vision of Canadian landscape artists paralleled nationalist ideas being advocated in other social circles from the late nineteenth century. Brian S. Osborne, 'The iconography of nationhood in Canadian art,' in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environment*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 162-178. Maria Tippett describes the Arts and Letters Club as the leading organization bringing patrons and artists together, and contrasts it with other contemporary organizations which continued to insist upon the superiority of traditional British culture, usually conceived of as the culture of the late-nineteenth-century English middle class. Tippett, *Making Culture*, 9. Mary Vipond also asserts that members of such cultural organizations advocated a uniquely Canadian cultural expression as distinct from either British or American ideas. Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' 521.

## DEFINING THE CANADIAN IDENTITY: THE ANTIMODERN RESPONSE TO MODERNITY

Canadian nationalism in the inter-war era was characterized, to a marked degree, by romanticism. John Herd Thompson notes that Canadian literature was bogged down in an essentially late-Victorian romanticism.<sup>60</sup> The commemoration of the Great War exhibited the persistence of a romantic sensibility. Unlike our own time, this was an era, as Paul Fussell describes it, 'where values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant.'<sup>61</sup> Largely isolated – by geography, by the censor's pen, and by the internalized values and limited vocabulary of Canadian soldiers – from the actual conditions of the War, Canadians considered it in a language they could readily understand: the discourse was one of glory, of noble sacrifice, and of national achievement.<sup>62</sup> This maintenance of High Diction in the World War I period helped make this chaotic war seem understandable and rational, and left room for individual action and heroism. The soldier personified Canada's virtuous health, vigorous individuality, and devotion to a mother figure. Even in their responses to and memory of the Great War, Canadians set themselves apart from the corrupt, anxiety-ridden, mechanistic European societies.<sup>63</sup> Thus the use of High Diction helped to create a memory of the War experience which reinforced the middle-class values and intellectual currents that had called for its use in the first place. In this manner, the Great War came to be described popularly as consistent with, even the culmination of, Canadian history: the nation, informed by a universal moral code, was vigorous, healthy and

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<sup>60</sup> Thompson, *Decades of Discord*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 21-2.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 89-110; Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), *passim*.

<sup>63</sup> Vance, *Death So Noble*, 136. Jeff Keshen's argument in *Propaganda and Censorship* supports this construction. He argues that the formula of High Diction was so powerful that soldiers at the front would write home in terms consistent with the formula, instead of relating an accurately grim picture of what their daily lives were actually like.

reaching maturity.<sup>64</sup>

Of the Canadian War Memorials Fund [CWMF] paintings – the products of Lord Beaverbrook’s desire for records of ‘the great deeds and sacrifices of the Canadian Nation in the war...’<sup>65</sup> – the most popular paintings with the press and public were those most consistent with Victorian High Diction. The painting of this program that Jonathan Vance describes as the most popular in the exhibition tour was James Byam Shaw’s “The Flag.”<sup>66</sup> The works of the modernist painters, such as Wyndham Lewis, Paul Nash and C.R.W. Nevinson, were regarded as having little value as historical records of the Great War, and they were generally ignored by viewers and reviewers. Paintings of heroic battles and picturesque landscapes, despite often having no correlation to actual events or scenes, were interpreted not as mere personal perceptions of the War, but as objective records of its events.<sup>67</sup>

Arthur Lismer was not one of those praising these works. In what appears something of a paradox given the romanticism of Lismer’s descriptions of Tom Thomson and his own Group colleagues, Lismer railed against Shaw’s painting and other works depicting the glories of the War. His 1919 article in *The Rebel* described Shaw’s “The Flag” as ‘a decorative illustration in drab tones, uninspired, totally lacking in warmth of feeling.’ He praised the work of Nash and Lewis, then singled out for praise the work of one A.Y. Jackson. Lismer’s article cannot,

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<sup>64</sup> Vance, *Death So Noble*, 152. The combination of some definable military success and the debt to the fallen became an extremely potent mix. The use of General Wolfe in a 1919 Victory Loan campaign gave comparative meaning to the deaths of Canadians in Passchendaele or at Vimy Ridge. The idea that no death is more heroic – or more romantic – than a death in the field of honour at the moment of victory persisted in the popular mind. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 154.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Vance, *Death So Noble*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Vance describes Shaw’s painting in his recent book. ‘This richly coloured oil depicts a Canadian soldier, draped in the Red Ensign, lying across the feet of an immense lion. He is intended to be dead, though his attitude is more reflective of a peaceful repose. Beneath him, a crowd of women, old men, and boys are seen in traditional attitudes of mourning. ... The image, so redolent with symbolism, struck a chord with Canadians.’ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 108. The painting is reproduced on page 109.

<sup>67</sup> Vance, *Death So Noble*, 102-109. This sentiment is consistent with accounts of the time. Even Margaret Fairbairn – a consistent supporter of the work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven – was caught up in enthusiastic support for the CWMF paintings when they were exhibited. See her ‘Triumphs of War shown by Pictures,’ *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 August 1920.

however, be interpreted as an embrace of modernism as an artistic approach, much less as a condition of society. His focused praise of Jackson, whose ability Lismer explicitly linked to his experience painting ‘the rugged north country of Canada,’ was clearly an attempt both to separate the most promising of Canada’s artists from the machinations of the European conflagration and to set him apart from the traditional art paradigm of the Canadian Academy. In this article, Lismer praised those who expressed the authentic human experience of the War over those who presented it in a manner consistent with traditional battle paintings.<sup>68</sup> Lismer sought to encourage and to support a populist art in Canada.

#### THE MODERNIST “OTHER”

In contrast to the dominant late-Victorian romanticism, modernist divergences were generally pilloried as the “Other” in Canadian culture. Reaction to Morley Callaghan’s novels demonstrates the critical response to modernist literature. Though exhibited in a novel set in Toronto, his urban realism was dismissed as ‘American’ in one instance. A speaker to a London, Ontario, literary society elaborated on what this meant: “The American novel ...[was] a tainted mass of sordid life, reeking with [the] filth and mire of a corrupt society.... The much-vaunted realism of modern fiction is usually vulgar and frequently immoral.” Not only were realistic depictions of the urban environment of dubious morality, but they were un-Canadian.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Arthur Lismer, ‘The Canadian War Memorials,’ *The Rebel* 4:1 (October 1919), 41.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson, *Decades of Discord*, 166-169. Callaghan’s work was pilloried in *The Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1928-1929* for his choice of subject. William Deacon commented:

His absorption in the hitherto almost neglected drab and sordid side of Canadian life may have wider consequences than the development of his individual career as an author, which will certainly not be commensurate with his gifts unless he learns to see life with a more penetrating eye than that of a police reporter. While the critic exceeds his function in dictating subject matter to the creative writer, criticism would be renegade to its responsibilities towards this brilliant debutant [sic] if it did not point out that Mr. Callaghan has neither in *Strange Fugitive* nor in *A Native Argosy* said anything much that justifies the skill with which he says it. The effectiveness with which he uses words is an object lesson. May he get an idea to match his craftsmanship.

William Arthur Deacon, ‘Literature in Canada – In its Centenary Year’ in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*

This reflects one strategy for coping with the negative aspects of the urban environment. The problems of the urban environment existed in Canadian cities like Toronto as in other centres of the industrial world. They were, however, frequently conceptualized as the problems of American or European (mostly English) cities – that is, as somewhat “foreign” to the Canadian context. As Mariana Valverde observes,

Urban growth ... was linked not only to the rise of middle-class suburbs and department stores but also to the development in Canada of urban poverty. This type of poverty was conceptualized through the lens provided by European, and in particular English, studies of industrialization and poverty, which centred on the social construct of the slum.

Slums were in a sense conceived of as a problem of Europe and New York that Toronto and Canada were importing, but that could be resisted at the border. Much of the highly visible urban reform movement in Canada into the 1920s was motivated by the desire to avoid the conditions of English slums and American tenements and to alleviate those conditions where they did exist.<sup>70</sup> This strategy had the additional advantage of rationalizing the imposition of the standards of their own particular morality onto the urban poor. Having defined themselves as the nation, the Anglo-Canadian reformers came to see their own values and interests as encapsulating those of Canada. The urban poor and recent non-British immigrants needed only to be taught to be Canadian.

While the ills of modernity were associated primarily with the urban lifestyle, Canadian identity was being increasingly defined in nature and wilderness. This was not new in the post-war era. Patricia Jasen comments upon the persistence of nature and wilderness as primary to Canadian identity in the late nineteenth century:

Canadian literary culture ... reflected the same urban anxieties as that of the United States or Britain, but to some extent it adhered to a different national agenda, that of discovering the meaning of Canadian nationhood and nationality in the alleged relationship between “northernness” and racial health. ... In tourism literature the back-to-nature and northwoods themes were wedded to the

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1928-1929, ed. Bertram Brooker (Toronto: MacMillan Co. of Canada, 1929), 28.

<sup>70</sup> Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 131-132.

rhetoric of nationalism, as they were in many other forms of English-Canadian cultural expression in the period after Confederation.<sup>71</sup>

This notion of Canada as a northern nation was very popular in the late nineteenth century. In his article, 'The True North Strong and Free', Carl Berger argues that many turn-of-the-century Canadians believed the northern land, the severe winters and the heritage of northern races contributed to the building of a distinct racial character. It was necessarily imbued with the characteristics of self-reliance, strength, hardiness, moral strenuousness and liberty. This perceived race had the qualities that would mark it for success in a Darwinian struggle with the other races of the world. There was a clear certainty about the resultant *Canadian* race in the minds of many members of the leading groups of society.<sup>72</sup>

By emphasizing the effects of climate, geography and a northern racial heritage, these Canadian nationalists were able to develop a version of Canadian nationalism somewhat inclusive of French Canadians. Both English and French Canadians were being welded together into one by the climate. This is not to say that all French- and English-speaking Canadians accepted this vision of their essential unity. As John Thompson argues, English-Canadian nationalism also had to compete with that of French Canada:

Their nationalisms were different in content and mutually exclusive in their objectives; the English-Canadian goal of building a "Canadian national spirit" was the antithesis of the French-Canadian resolve to survive as a French Catholic nation.<sup>73</sup>

Both cultures, however, generally exhibited a nostalgic and romantic turn of mind and an anxiety regarding modern industrial urban society common to the antimodern impulse. As Lynda Jessup argues, the English-Canadian nationalists sought a homogenous national cultural expression;<sup>74</sup> in

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<sup>71</sup> Jasen, *Wild Things*, 109.

<sup>72</sup> Carl Berger, 'The True North Strong and Free' in *Nationalism in Canada*, University League for Social Reform, ed. Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co., 1966), 4-27; Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 129.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, *Decades of Discord*, 173-174.

<sup>74</sup> Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery,' 22-30.



fact, they could not comprehend a national culture taking another form. Under elite leadership, more recent immigrants would be able to “learn” to be Canadian, but the obvious cultural dualism would need to be bridged in order for Canada to have a culture it could truly call national.

Paralleling the American symbol of the West, the North in Canadian mythology subsumed a series of ideas and beliefs about Canada’s exalted past, the national character, and a certain future. It is a central part of the Canadian *mythomoteur* – the organizing myth of the national culture, which gives meaning and coherence to the national experiences and defines the national essence.<sup>75</sup> It seemingly provided the means to overcome the most conspicuous rift in Canada, that between English and French Canada.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

While privileging a particular class’s experiences and definitions of manhood as the national essence, the Thomson mythology was also underwritten by a frontier experience. On an early sojourn in Algonquin Park with some of his colleagues, A.Y. Jackson wrote to his patron Dr. James MacCallum about the trip. He wrote of his colleague and Group oddball Fred Varley: ‘Varley would be a hot musher in a few weeks if he could live outside.’<sup>76</sup> In this off-hand remark, Jackson revealed an understanding of the effects of environment on an individual. The ‘hot mushers’ had become the key interpreters of the Canadian experience due to their intimate contact with the primeval Canadian wilderness. Seemingly Varley would have been able to access this spirit if he could have lost himself in the woods. A current of environmental determinism ran through these depictions as the central factor in the development of the Canadian race. Contact

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<sup>75</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1986), 24-25, 61-62.

<sup>76</sup> Jackson to Dr. J. MacCallum, 13 Oct. 1914. NGCA, NGCF, MacCallum Papers. The moniker ‘hot musher’ was adopted by these painters after the famous H.F. Gatsby review of J.E.H. MacDonald’s show in December, 1913 in which he described MacDonald’s work as ‘hot mush.’ H. F. Gatsby, ‘The Hot Mush School, or Peter and I,’ *Toronto Daily Star*, 12 December 1913. MacDonald’s response came eight days later. J.E.H. MacDonald, ‘The Hot Mush School, In Rebuttal of H. F. G.,’ *Toronto Daily Star*, 20 December 1913.

with the pristine wilderness was a central image in both the general pioneer trope and, more specifically, in Thomson biographies. The desire for authentic experience was a strong undercurrent in the temper of antimodernism that animated the leading cultured groups of urban Toronto. They were responding to threats to a social order they viewed as stable and eternal. The appeal of the frontier thesis was intrinsically related to this outlook. Developed by Frederick Jackson Turner, it attributed to the American environment a strong influence on the development of American society. The frontier thesis

saw the American West as a great crucible, the original melting pot in which the European was stripped down to his vital essences, these essences then being collected to form a new and better being – the American. ... The pioneer in going to the frontier was overwhelmed by nature, his European social nature torn away. He reverted to savagery. But, in a generation or less, civilization was re-established.<sup>77</sup>

The essential characteristics of the American people could be found in the experience of pioneer settlers in the pure American environment.

In American history, the frontier experience had produced a distinct and superior race of people – the *American* race proudly in possession of unique virtues they owed ‘not to their European inheritance but to the American environment itself.’<sup>78</sup> Though they shared the ancestry and the “blood” of the English, the Americans had been transformed – in fact, created – by the frontier experience.<sup>79</sup> The frontier had the power to improve their physical characteristics and their moral qualities, though as we shall see, they would need to be the right sort of people.

The pioneer was pictured as an autonomous figure having to rely on his own abilities and skills to survive in his wild environs.

Among the core elements of the frontier myth was the powerful sense among certain groups of Americans that wilderness was the last bastion of rugged individualism. Turner tended to stress communitarian themes when writing

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Cross, introduction to *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas: The Debate on the Impact of the Canadian Environment*, (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing Co., 1970), 2; Taylor, *The Turner Thesis*.

<sup>78</sup> Cross, introduction to *Frontier Thesis and the Canadas*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 179-180.

frontier history, asserting that Americans in primitive conditions had been forced to band together to form communities and democratic institutions. For other writers, however, frontier democracy for communities was less compelling than frontier freedom for individuals. By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society – so the story ran – an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life.<sup>80</sup>

While Cronon sees these differences in emphasis as contradictory, they could be seen as corresponding to Lockean ideas. The rugged individual frontiersman contracts with others to form society. While he loses some of his independence in so doing, nonetheless, he is “essentially” independent and autonomous.

Antimodernists exalted the pioneer, his experiences and his qualities as the keys to the American experience. It is not a coincidence that the frontier thesis emerged at this time in American history. It connected closely to the antimodern sentiments of elite New England society. Roderick Nash links the antimodernist quest for a re-invigorated man with the appeal of the wilderness experience.

Whitman was a precursor of the American celebration of savagery. In full stride by the second decade of the twentieth century, it contributed to the rising popularity of wilderness. While related to the attraction of the frontier and pioneer, this aspect of the cult had more to do with racism, Darwinism, and a tradition of idealizing the noble savage in his wilderness setting that ran back several thousand years. ...But it owed much more to a general feeling that the American male was suffering from over-civilization.<sup>81</sup>

As Cronon suggests, at root the frontier experience is about bringing a particular order to the wilderness. Nash captures this ordering process: ‘If men expected to enjoy an idyllic environment in America, they would have to *make* it by conquering wild country.’<sup>82</sup> The frontiersman defined himself in his struggle with his environment. His ability to affect his environment as an individual encapsulated the meaningful labour of the antimodernist’s dream.

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<sup>80</sup> William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 77.

<sup>81</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 151-152.

<sup>82</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 26.

The frontier thesis became popular with Canadian historians in the 1920s. Its influence can be seen in the work of A.L. Burt and in the environmentalism of W.A. Mackintosh's staples theory, which in turn underwrote Donald Creighton's Laurentianism. Arthur Lower made the most of Turner's thesis to underline geographical factors in Canadian development.<sup>83</sup> Most important, though, these historical works articulated a trend in Canadian intellectual circles that sought North American explanations for the development of Canada and things Canadian, rather than insisting upon a British or European inheritance.

The North had been the source of Canada itself, through economic exploitation of the fur trade and through lives spent living off of it; "New" Ontario held the key to a bright and prosperous future. At the same time, mystical qualities were ascribed to a North imagined as an inexhaustible source of spiritual nourishment and contrasted to the finite American western frontier. This notion of the North as a spiritual reservoir extended beyond Lawren Harris and F. B. Housser to include historians such as Lower, an important popularizer of Turner's frontier thesis.<sup>84</sup> Yet the virtues of the frontier were tempered in Canada and among Canadian elites by metropolitanism. The activities of Thomson and his colleagues, like those of earlier fur traders, were determined by the demands and values of urban society.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Cross, *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas*, 3-4, 11; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 43, 91, 118-121.

<sup>84</sup> Carl Berger, 'The True North Strong and Free,' 24. The influence of Turner's thesis in Canada is explored in Cross, *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas*, 3-4, 11; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 43, 91, 118-121.

<sup>85</sup> See Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities,' 82; Cross, introduction to *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas*, 3-4. Roderick Nash has drawn several of these threads together – anxiety about the urban environment, ideas about the frontier as the source of national character and virtue – to help explain the appeal of the wild and uncivilized in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American society. A strong Darwinistic streak of the survival of the fittest is also present in the wilderness experience. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 145. Belief in the power of the environment to shape character and personality run through this somewhat frontierist vision of the new Canadian type. Not only would the country's geography form a unique personality but the vigorous Canadian experience would weed out the unfit and reform the lazy in a Darwinistic struggle which would accelerate individual evolution towards self-restraint, hard work and the development of individual character – the values of the white, urban middle class. The position of Tom Thomson in this system of thought is taken up below in Chapter 2. See Vance, *Death So Noble*, 159; Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' 476, 486, 521-529.

Until the late nineteenth century, landscapists in Canada preferred the pastoral scene to depictions of the wilderness. They shared the settlers' view that the raw and untamed environment was an embarrassment because it exposed the limitations of progress and cultivation.<sup>86</sup> Yet, into the twentieth century, the Canadian ideology of northern distinctiveness coincided with various and generalized nationalist trends to change the perception of the Shield as a region of Canada. Brian Osborne observes that Thomson and the Group aided 'the development of a national identification with a distinctive sense of place.'<sup>87</sup> Representing that which made Canada a distinct space and nation, these paintings of northern Ontario fed into the renewed nationalist preoccupation of the Toronto elite.

Through his work, Thomson contributed to the creation of what Rob Shields calls 'imaginary geographies', a culture's common spatial perceptions. 'In these recordings of geographic space, sites become associated with particular values, historical events, and feelings.' The imagined geography of northern Ontario became, using Anthony Smith's term, a 'poetic space' which locates the nation within a particular environment and privileges the particular settlement, and living and work patterns of that environment as definitive of national characteristics: 'While crude geography may set limits to certain ways of life and encourage particular modes of production and patterns of settlement, national identity and "national character" is more directly influenced by collective perceptions, encoded in myths and symbols, of the ethnic "meanings" of particular stretches of territory, and the ways in which such stretches (and their main features) are turned into "homelands" inextricably tied to the fate of "their" communities.' The elite-constructed idea of Thomson played upon a variety of tropes of Canadianness which were current in contemporary Toronto circles. The *coureur-de-bois* and frontiersman images, for example, often used in initial descriptions of Thomson, situated him in an existing Canadian mythology. Yet in conflating the tamed forests of Ontario cottage country

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<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Osborne, 'The iconography of nationhood in Canadian art,' 166.

<sup>87</sup> Osborne, 'The iconography of nationhood in Canadian art,' 169.

with a primeval, untouched, un-peopled wilderness, this conception of Thomson also mythologized the particular values and habits of his Toronto community.<sup>88</sup>

Since before the turn of the century, in the face of urbanization and its related social changes, elites in places such as Toronto were very concerned about order. The sketches and paintings – raw, rough, and brightly-coloured though they might be – spoke of this very urban concern. The landscapes of Thomson and the Group coincided with the era's preoccupation with parks. Parks such as Algonquin (1893) were created, in part at least, to preserve wilderness areas for the enjoyment and recreation of an increasingly urban population. This coincided directly with the impetus to create urban parks for the recreation of urbanites in a more immediate sense.<sup>89</sup> They were, in their contained way, experiences of wilderness that suggested the possibility of an orderly relationship between the city and the Other. In representing this wilderness as the essential Canadian environment, Thomson helped to construct this region of Ontario as a distinctive national landscape, to imagine a wilderness useful to the immediate needs of an urban society, and to make sense of a landscape otherwise and previously seen as a desolate obstacle to national development.<sup>90</sup>

It was clearly northern Ontario's use for wilderness vacations and cottages that defined it as a national space. It thus became a lived space in this imagined geography. Thomson was portrayed as having intimate knowledge of the region, yet only spent portions of five years in it, wintering in Toronto. His colleagues spent even less time in it, as Frank Underhill pointed out in 1936.<sup>91</sup> In this construction, it was the sojourner who really understood this environment and who

<sup>88</sup> Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 29; Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 183.

<sup>89</sup> See Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities,' 83-86; Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision*, 220.

<sup>90</sup> Brown and Cook, *A Nation Transformed*, 87; Walton, 'Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 175.

<sup>91</sup> Frank Underhill, 'False Hair on the Chest,' *Saturday Night*, 3 October 1936, 1. Cited in Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities,' 90; and Vipond, 'National Consciousness,' 517.

could really comprehend its connection to the modern world.<sup>92</sup>

#### THE CANADIAN TYPE: THOMAS JOHN THOMSON

In creating the idea that Thomson's life and work represented the national essence, Thomson's celebrants connected that essence to a set of experiences in which they had participated themselves and with which the Toronto elite could identify. Accessibility was a central issue in turning Thomson into a nationalist icon. His art could be passed off as the expression of Canadian popular culture and could be distinguished from the increasingly remote artistic avant-garde.<sup>93</sup> The persistent insistence that Thomson's sketches and paintings represented faithful depictions of the authentic Canadian experience echoes Pierre Bourdieu's argument that artistic tastes are learned. It also brings to mind Lynda Jessup's point that these depictions infused nature with the qualities – the essential Canadianness – that Canadians are supposed “naturally” to recognize.<sup>94</sup>

No painting could be “naturally” viewed in this manner. The attributing of nationalist qualities to a landscape painting has to be learned. The idea of Tom Thomson played on a variety of current notions – Canada's national maturation, its northern identity, its wilderness essence, a romantic turn of mind, the quest for authentic experience – all of which were congruent with antimodernism, and which were proper to a particular urban central Canadian class. Thus very particular landscapes became the natural and obvious expression of the Canadian experience. This stretch of territory and the characteristics of one who (episodically) lived there became collectively perceived as encapsulating the national identity and the national character. The Thomson of legend and the paintings he left could be reinvented as national icons, as myth and

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<sup>92</sup> Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities,' 80-82.

<sup>93</sup> On the issue of the schism between the general public and modern artists which was developing generally and in Canada in particular, see Andrew Nurse, '“A Confusion of Values”: Artists and Artistic Ideologies in Modern Canada: 1927-1952' (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1991).

<sup>94</sup> See Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*; Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery,'

symbol of the national experience, rather than merely as paintings.

At the same time, such descriptions of Canadian characteristics also reinforced the notion of the “Canadian type.” In his remembrance of the Great War, *The Canadian Corps and its Part in the War*, General Arthur Currie insisted that experience in the Canadian environment had produced a distinct Canadian type – a man of strength, endurance, mental alertness, courage and independence. In Canada, ‘The unfit were weeded out by the harsh climate, the weaklings turned away by hard work, and the lazy reformed by the “incessant activities” of the community.’<sup>95</sup> This image not only referred back to the effects of climate and geography, especially for those of pioneer heritage, but also to the activities of the urban reformers who sought to create an industrious, sober, thrifty class of workers, one person at a time.

Tom Thomson epitomized this “new man” – the prototypical Canadian. His paintings came to be defined as capturing the essence of his experience in what was defined as the essential Canadian environment. He represented the lasting influence of the frontier experience, and connected a variety of (real or imagined) Canadian pioneers to the national identity. Most of all, the depictions of Thomson created in the twenty years after his death presented him as embodying the essential Canadian experience. This was, though, a set of experiences with which this nationalist intelligentsia could identify, as an antithesis to the city and as a reflection of their cottage lifestyle.

It was according to these habits and this identity that the myth of Thomson was created. His major celebrants set the terms upon which the Thomson mythology would be based. Six people stand out as pivotal inventors of the Thomson mythology: Eric Brown (1877-1939), J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932), Dr. James MacCallum (d. 1943), Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), Blodwen Davies (1897-1966) and Frederick B. Housser (1889-1936). Not all of these writers knew

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8; Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 183.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Vance, *Death So Noble*, 159.



Thomson, but they all sought to make him into a symbol of the essential Canadian artist. Limited at first to the nationalist circle, their writings came to form the basis of the Thomson legend as it was spread across the country.

Eric Brown, Director of the NGC from 1909 until his death in 1939 (he was succeeded by his long-time assistant Harry McCurry), provides a case in point. His 1916 article in *The Studio*, reprinted in 1917, focused upon the question of whether a distinctive Canadian school of painting was emerging. Not only did Brown insist that such a school was emerging, but he placed Thomson as a leading figure of it.<sup>96</sup> This assessment of the artist was quoted by both *The Globe*, in its 18 July 1917 edition, and by *The Owen Sound Sun*'s in their reports of Thomson's death.<sup>97</sup> More importantly, though, Brown and his assistant and successor Harold McCurry brought attention to Thomson and his work by their purchases of his work and by featuring him prominently at the 1924 Wembley Exhibition and in a variety of NGC programs.

A 1917 article by J.E.H. MacDonald, future member of the Group of Seven and friend of Brown, had a significantly narrower audience. He described a new 'Landmark in Canadian Art' in the November 1917 edition of *The Rebel*. At Canoe Lake, MacDonald and his friend and OSA President J.W. Beatty erected a cairn to Thomson's memory. On it, they had a bronze plaque placed with MacDonald's inscription:

To the memory of Tom Thomson, artist-woodsman and guide who was drowned on Canoe Lake, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917; who lived humbly and passionately with the wild. It made him the brother to all untamed things in nature. It drew him apart and revealed itself wonderfully to him. It sent him out from the woods only to show these revelations through his art; and it took him to itself at last.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Eric Brown, 'Landscape Art in Canada' in *Art of the British Empire Overseas* Charles Holme, ed. (London: The Studio, 1917), 3-8.

<sup>97</sup> 'Toronto Artist Missing in North,' *The Globe*, Toronto, 13 July 1917; 'Toronto Artist Drowns in North,' *The Globe*, Toronto, 18 July 1917; 'Tom Thomson's Body Found, Was Missing More than a Week,' *Owen Sound Sun*, n.d. July 1917. Brown's article was reproduced in 1917 in Holme, *Art of the British Empire Overseas*, 3-8.

<sup>98</sup> J.E.H. MacDonald, 'A Landmark in Canadian Art,' *The Rebel* 2:2 (November 1917), 45-50. Quoted in Housser, 124. *The Rebel* was published by students and faculty at the University of Toronto. Members of the University of Toronto community advocated a variety of national and nationalist causes in it, including the cause of a national art. Reviews of exhibitions of the Algonquin painters were not uncommon.

This text, published in *The Rebel*, spoke directly to the University of Toronto members of the nationalist intelligentsia. Both in his article and in the construction of the cairn itself, MacDonald took the Thomson legend mostly to those who already shared his natural/national sensibility. Throughout there is a subtext, wherein MacDonald connected Thomson's work to that of Chinese landscape art, devoted to discovering the universal immanent divinity in nature. MacDonald shared this sentiment with contemporary celebrants of Thoreau and Whitman. In this he exhibits the antimodernist's quest for essentialized knowledge, sought in the primeval wilderness.<sup>99</sup>

MacDonald's friend, supporter and ALC colleague Dr. James MacCallum published an article in 1918 that appears to have had a significantly larger audience. The *Canadian Magazine* was widely read by members of the urban middle class. In MacCallum's article one finds the cult of wilderness and of "cottage country" that seemed to reflect the sensibilities of the University of Toronto's Madawaska Club with its Georgian Bay cottages. The themes of MacCallum's article would be picked up by future writers to the point that MacCallum in 1930 would claim that the Thomson legend had grown out of his article. So effectively did MacCallum's article exemplify what would become the firmly established legend of Tom Thomson that this article would be reproduced in whole as the introduction to the catalogue of a Thomson exhibition at Toronto's Mellor's Gallery in 1937, the first major Thomson show after 1920. MacCallum's final act in support of his national artists was the donation of the Thomson and Group of Seven paintings from his estate to the NGC upon his death in 1943.<sup>100</sup>

The first of two memorial exhibitions of Thomson's work was held at The Arts Club in Montréal in 1919. A.Y. Jackson wrote a foreword to the exhibition catalogue for the show. The exhibition seems to have garnered little attention, and apparently none from the local newspapers.

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<sup>99</sup> MacDonald, 'Landmark in Canadian Art,' 45-50; Higham, 'Reorientation of American Culture,' 25-48.

<sup>100</sup> MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson,' 375-385; NAC, Thomson Papers, MacCallum to Bobby, 24 January 1930, cited in Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 45. MacCallum's article was reproduced in *Catalogue: Loan Exhibition of Works by Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Mellors Galleries, 1937). Dennis Reid agrees with this assessment of the influence of MacCallum's article. Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 90.

The memorial exhibition in 1920 at the Art Museum of Toronto brought much more notice. The exhibition catalogue featured an anonymous introduction that described not only Thomson's work, but also highlighted his lifestyle. There were several reviews in the Toronto papers. *The Globe* ran reviews on subsequent weeks, and other articles appeared in *The Star*, *The Mail and Empire*, and *The Rebel*.<sup>101</sup>

Also a future Group and ALC member, Arthur Lismer spread the Thomson mythology in more direct ways. He served as Education Director of the Art Gallery of Toronto from 1927 to 1928, frequently also working for or with the NGC in its educational efforts. He established himself as the leading art and art appreciation educator in Canada in that time and was even privileged to serve in a similar capacity for the schools of South Africa. *Canadian Picture Study*, Lismer's 1930 text (reprinted in 1940), was one of the most widely used art textbooks in Ontario schools through the 1940s. His texts featured Thomson, and the members of the Group of Seven, prominently, even suggesting he was the very culmination of Canadian art. Lismer was also intimately involved in the NGC's educational programs, writing art appreciation lesson plans to accompany NGC reproductions, and going on lecture tours across the country.<sup>102</sup>

Little was written about Thomson after these initial articles until the publication of F.B. Housser's text, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*. Housser was the financial editor of the *Toronto Daily Star* from 1923 to 1927 and 1934 to 1936. A collection of his columns was published in a posthumous collection in 1937, *Views and Reviews of Finance and Economics*. The editor of this volume, E. Burnham Wyllie, states that Housser's columns

<sup>101</sup> 'Beauty of North Shown in Color, Memorial Exhibition of Paintings of Late Tom Thomson, At The Art Gallery, Fine Collection of Scenes Portraying Canadian Northland,' *The Mail and Empire* (Toronto), February 14, 1920; 'Thomson and the Algonquin School,' *The Mail and Empire*; MLF [Margaret Fairbairn], 'Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North,' *Toronto Star*, 18 February 1920; Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 244-248.

<sup>102</sup> Lismer, *A Short History; Canadian Picture Study; Education Through Art for Children and Adults*; 'Arthur Lismer,' *Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, v. 4, 860-869; Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 9; Bertram Brooker, ed., *Yearbook of the Arts, 1928-1929*, 58.

were 'known to thousands as "Housser in The Star." ' The 'Foreword' describes him as having had the 'general recognition as one of Canada's foremost financial writers.' Housser's columns express a basic distrust of *laissez faire* economics and advocated the control of credit by central banks, which would be operated in the public interest, rather than by the 'money powers.'<sup>103</sup>

Housser supported a democratic Canadian economic nationalism and his nationalism was evident in his support for the work of Thomson and the Group of Seven. He caught the height of the Group's wave with *A Canadian Art Movement*. The tremendous success of their works at the Wembley exhibition had brought considerable fame. Housser presented this movement as ultimately expressive of the authentically Canadian experience, and thus of Canadian culture itself. Charles Hill describes Housser as Lawren Harris's 'old friend' and fellow theosophist.<sup>104</sup> His book was thoroughly soaked in his spiritualism. It was also affected by his close proximity to members of the Group. He had little detachment from, and much enthusiasm for, their work. He placed Thomson at the origins of the movement he described as nationalist first and artistic second (Housser seems never to have met Thomson, who was never in actuality a member of the Group).<sup>105</sup> By far the most widely-read book concerning Thomson and the Group, Housser's book sold 2700 copies in two years, becoming, as Charles Hill describes, 'the most-quoted source in the defence of the Group of Seven,' along with the reviews of the Wembley and Paris exhibitions. So extensive was the influence of this book that Charles Hill, in 1995, was still at pains to contest the notion that it captured and expressed the ideas of all of the members of the Group of Seven.<sup>106</sup>

The final texts in the development of the Thomson legend were written by Toronto writer and folklorist, Blodwen Davies. She summarized the various reports of the Canadian Youth Commission in 1948 in a popular text, *Youth Speaks its Mind*, and co-wrote a text advocating

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<sup>103</sup> Frederick B. Housser, *News and Views of Finance and Economics*, ed. E. Burnham Whyllie (Toronto: MacMillan, 1937), xii.

<sup>104</sup> Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> Murray, 'The World of Tom Thomson,' 45.

Scientific Humanism as the guiding philosophy for human society in general.<sup>107</sup> However, she mainly wrote folklore books about Quebec pioneers, about early Quebec City and early Toronto, about Saskatchewan aboriginal peoples, and ultimately of early Ontario Mennonite settlers, along with a tourist book to accompany the Canada Steamship Lines trips up the Saguenay.<sup>108</sup> Through these books, there runs a current of admiration for people she viewed as living the simple life. She celebrated the folklore research of Dr. Marius Barbeau, of the Museum of Man, to whom she dedicated her book, *Ottawa: Portrait of a Capital*. Her description of him working to record Canadian folkloric traditions sounds somewhat familiar to one who has read her biographies of Thomson. She describes him as both folklorist and anthropologist.

[E]very spring he abandoned city life and city ways, put on his field clothes and set out for some corner of Canada where there is some rich deposit of unwritten human history. He has lived with Indians, with fishermen, with farmers, with craftsmen and artists of all kinds, spelling out their customs, their folkways, their skills, their crafts, their arts, and their music. ... Canada's art, music and literature have been enriched as a consequence of his discoveries and interpretations.<sup>109</sup>

This description celebrates Barbeau's efforts to uncover the basic experience of Canadian life in its seemingly premodern expressions: the cultures of 'Indians', French-Canadian farmers, and fishermen, for example.

This envisioning of the roots of Canadian culture also appears in her biographies of Thomson. Davies ran an advertisement in 1930 soliciting the recollections of friends and associates of Thomson and built an impressive body of notes and letters, now held at the National Archives of Canada. From these recollections she wrote two books: *Paddle and Palette: The*

<sup>106</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*; Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 171.

<sup>107</sup> Blodwen Davies, *Youth Speaks its Mind* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1948); Oliver Leslie Reiser and Blodwen Davies, *Planetary Democracy: An Introduction to Scientific Humanism and Applied Semantics* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1944).

<sup>108</sup> Blodwen Davies, *Saguenay: "Sâginawa": The River of Deep Waters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart; Montreal: Canada Steamship Lines, 1930).

<sup>109</sup> Blodwen Davies, *Ottawa: Portrait of a Capital* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Company, 1954), 146-147.

*Story of Tom Thomson*, in 1930, and *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man who Looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness*, published in 1935. Along with these collected letters, Davies's two books became important sources of the growing legend of Tom Thomson, emphasizing his deep spiritual connection with the Canadian environment. Davies also helped to mount a Tom Thomson festival at Canoe Lake in 1930 with the help of Taylor Statten and the children at his Camp Ahmek. She arranged a display of some of his sketches for the celebration. The festival culminated in the erection of a totem pole honouring Thomson beside the memorial cairn overlooking Canoe Lake.<sup>110</sup> While her books on Thomson had a limited initial readership – indeed A.Y. Jackson stated all of the copies of her 1935 biography were sold to or through friends – they were widely cited in other literature. It was an important source for the later CBC radio broadcasts as well as for Richard Lambert's and William Colgate's later art history texts. The letters she gathered have been an important source of information for Thomsonians to this day.<sup>111</sup>

All of these writers were members of the central Canadian intelligentsia of the inter-war era. They were well connected to the nationalist network of that time. They shared a landscape aesthetic and an antimodernist sensibility, both of which drew them to the northern Ontario wilderness. All expressed a yearning for the simple life in an uncivilized existence whether it was Thoreau and Whitman's back-to-nature aestheticism or the seemingly idyllic existence of Canadian aboriginal peoples and early settlers. And all of them were predisposed to see in Thomson something much more than a tourist-cum-painter who had had a boating accident.

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<sup>110</sup> Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 194-195; Blodwen Davies, *Paddle and Palette: The Story of Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930); and *Story of a Man*; 'Bark Canoe Carries Memorial Flowers,' *The Globe* (Toronto), August 19, 1930.

<sup>111</sup> NAC, Blodwen Davies Collection, MG30 D38; NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/ Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 1, 'The Adventures of Canadian Painting (5): Tom Thomson.' Blodwen Davies's other books include *Romantic Québec* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1932), *Ruffles and Rapiers: Being the Half-Forgotten Romances of the Gallant Women and Doughty Men in the Days of Colonial Adventure* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930), *The Storied Streets of Québec* (Montréal and New York: L. Carrier & Co., 1929), *Storied York: Toronto Old and New* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937), and *A String of Amber: The Heritage of the Mennonites* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1973). She collaborated on Abel Watetch as told to Blodwen Davies, *Payepot and his People* (Regina: Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society, 1959).

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

These initial texts determined the idea of Tom Thomson that has been securely installed in Canadian mythology. This mythology has appeared in a variety of texts aimed at a popular audience, with his mysterious death usually figuring prominently. William Little re-examines Thomson's death in his 1970 book, *The Tom Thomson Mystery*. Unsatisfied with the accidental drowning story, he attempts to uncover the circumstances of Thomson's death.<sup>112</sup> Ottelyn Addison, the daughter of Mark Robinson, an Algonquin Park ranger and friend of Thomson, also reiterates the well-established Thomson mythology, though curiously her text reads almost like a tourist brochure for Algonquin Park.<sup>113</sup> In the mid-1960s, Thomson received the all-but-official designation, as part of the Canadian Centennial Library and from a Pierre Berton-led committee, as one of 25 *Great Canadians*.<sup>114</sup> Certainly by the 1960s, Thomson had been securely fixed as an icon in the Canadian folk nationalism, but one whose outlines were vague and ill-defined.

Thomson is considered in slightly different terms in the canon of Canadian art history. For the most part, the mythology rests in the background as art historians consider his work, its origins, and its influences. Art historians generally seek to understand and to explain the development of artistic forms and styles. This usually leads them to focus on the trends and artistic milieu of particular moments in order to contextualize a particular artistic development. Their discussions usually consider styles and techniques more prominently than social contexts in explaining the development of artistic expression. In the case of Thomson, this leads to discussions of his style and to debates over his influences and direction. Naturally examined

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<sup>112</sup> Little, *The Tom Thomson Mystery*. The focus upon the mysterious death of Thomson is also the basic idea in Lorraine Devorski's adult education text on Thomson, *Tom Thomson: The Man and his Legend* (Ottawa: Canadian Library Association, 1986), though, despite the title, the book has less to say about Thomson, the man and the legend, as it has to say about Blodwen Davies's efforts to investigate Thomson's life and death.

<sup>113</sup> Addison, *The Algonquin Years*.

<sup>114</sup> Berton, ed., *Great Canadians: A Century of Achievement*.

closely with that of the members of the Group of Seven, Thomson's work is generally discussed in such texts in terms of the art of his era and the effects of his work on others.

Thomson generally is dealt with as part of the Group of Seven in most Canadian art history texts. As is common to many texts that discuss Thomson and the Group, J. Russell Harper takes their conscious nationalism as the starting point of his discussion in his 1966 volume *Painting in Canada: A History*. While identifying the Canadian antecedents for the landscape school – the landscapes of Canadian artists since the 1880s, the Scandinavian influence on the work of Thomson and Group members, and the importance of the general praise for their work by critics in London and Europe following the 1924 Wembley Exhibition – Harper's discussion of these ideas appears incidental to that concerning the nationalist discourse surrounding this art movement. He does not discuss the social and intellectual context of this work, attaching no sense of value to the insistence upon the landscape as the only authentic Canadian subject matter. While insisting that the paintings of these artists captured or embodied the spirit, mood or character of the country, Harper ignores the relationship of this particular Ontario landscape and region to the nationalism that is the starting point of his discussion<sup>115</sup>

Similarly, Dennis Reid, in his *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, maintains the idea of Thomson as the untutored genius who responded directly and emotionally to the roughness and coarseness of the northern Ontario landscape. While he approaches an interesting social commentary in suggesting that artists of the early twentieth century had sought a method of expression which would unite artist and viewer, he leaves the nature of this proposed relationship unexplored.<sup>116</sup>

In his 1970 work, *The Group of Seven*, Peter Mellen focuses on one of the main debates of contemporary art history about Thomson – the extent of his knowledge and training in artistic

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<sup>115</sup> J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada*.

<sup>116</sup> Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988). His discussion on the search for a unification of artist and audience appears on p. 140.



styles, schools and techniques. He criticizes the overly romantic depiction of Thomson in his legend, arguing that it ‘lessen[s] the importance of his art and of his impact on those around him.’ He does not explore the socio-cultural context in which the over-romanticized Thomson makes sense.<sup>117</sup>

Also in 1970, Dennis Reid wrote *Le Groupe des Sept/The Group of Seven*, an exhibition catalogue for the National Gallery exhibition of Group paintings. Reid makes clear that the ideas of the Group were part of a long history of Canadian landscape painting, and, more importantly, part of an intellectual climate which commonly connected the Canadian identity with the landscape, especially a northern one. He acknowledges that this school had to be promoted as being the expression of Canadian identity and examines the cultural agencies through which this was accomplished: the Arts and Letters Club, *The Rebel/The Canadian Forum*, and the educational and promotional work of people like Arthur Lismer and Eric Brown. Like Mellen, Reid emphasizes Thomson’s work as a painter and his artistic relationship with the rest of the Group, and thus does not interrogate the mythical conceptualization of Thomson which was created shortly after his death.<sup>118</sup>

Charles Hill continues this trend. His narrative does not explore the creation of the Thomson mythology as a problematic, selective interpretation of reality. He hesitates to ascribe meaning to the manner in which Thomson has been presented; nor does he explore the roots of these particular imaginings and the manner in which they created a Thomson accessible to the consuming public. He therefore does not question the attributes of the mythological Thomson.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 63. In order to preserve its mythological wildness, Mellen maintains that, despite the fact that Algonquin Park had been served by two railroads since 1900, that it was ‘far from fashionable in 1912’ for American and Torontonians nature seekers (39).

<sup>118</sup> Reid, *The Group of Seven*, 90.

<sup>119</sup> Hill, *Art for a Nation*, 22-25. Hill has recently been criticized for overemphasizing the importance of the Gallery in its support and promotion of the Group of Seven, to the point of ignoring the support from other quarters. Jessup, ‘Bushwhackers in the Gallery.’ Two other works highlight the role of the National Gallery in establishing the Group’s image. Jean Sutherland Boggs’s history, *The National Gallery of Canada*, emphasizes the key individuals – Vincent Massey, Sir Edmund Walker, Lawren Harris, Harold McCurry,

The general accounts tend not to discuss Thomson after his death. Although they concern themselves with the new productions and exhibitions, and the growing popularity of the Group, writers such as Mellen, Reid, Harper and Hill rarely mention Thomson again. They limit themselves to reporting comments on the reaction to his death. In chronicling the emergence of the Group as nationalist icons, they do not explore the impact of the growing legend of Thomson on this iconography, or of the efforts of the cultural elites to build this mythology.<sup>120</sup>

Similarly, most of the art history literature focused on Thomson alone emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of his work. Much of it debates whether Thomson should be viewed as a realist or as tending towards abstraction. This has been debated since the 1970s. Joan Murray in 1971 plays up the romantic image of Thomson, describing him as communing with nature. Murray not only insists that Thomson was leaning towards abstraction, but that this tendency was not the result of an intellectual mindset, as was purportedly the case with Lawren Harris, but the development of an emotional concern for colour. Thus, she attempts to have Thomson both ways: as a painter developing advanced forms of representation, and as the backwoodsman searching for a means to express, artistically, his knowledge of and experience in Nature.<sup>121</sup>

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and the ubiquitous Eric Brown. Her text is a chronological narrative which features no real analysis of the ideas of these individuals in their activity, nor of the effects of these ideas on their efforts. Jean Sutherland Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971). Extremely valuable in examining the role of the National Gallery in fostering the fame of Thomson and the Group is Joyce Zemans's 1995 article, 'Establishing the Canon.' This article covers the initial NGC reproduction programs and the broad distribution of prints extensively across Canada and even around the world. Joyce Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery's First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art,' *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'Histoire de l'Art Canadien* 16:2 (1995): 6-35.

<sup>120</sup> The other major debate in the art history of Thomson and the Group focuses on the influence of the earlier Scandinavian example. The best works on this subject are the monograph of Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North*, and Hanna Martinsen's 1984 article, 'The Scandinavian Impact on the Group of Seven's Vision of the Canadian Landscape.' There are strong parallels between these two movements – each is slightly removed from the most current trends in modern art, each tends to view these and other modern trends with suspicion, each seeks to reflect the essence of their national character in similar landscapes. However, this field has yet to explore the social and cultural contexts of these parallel ideas and forms of representation, nor the expression of this national essence represented in these paintings. Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America 1890-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Hanna Martinsen, 'The Scandinavian Impact of the Group of Seven's Vision of the Canadian Landscape,' *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 53 (1984), 1-17.

<sup>121</sup> Murray, *Art of Thomson*.

Dennis Reid's 1975 booklet, *Tom Thomson: The Jack Pine*, part of the National Gallery's *Masterpieces in the National Gallery of Canada Series*, takes issue with Murray's insistence on Thomson's abstract tendencies. Though his text is mostly narrative, Reid insists upon Thomson's conscious talents as an artist and upon his realism. He describes Thomson's paintings as recorded moments of contact between a man and nature and as reflections of Thomson's deep and intense connection with the landscape he painted. He places Thomson and his associates within a vaguely defined movement that sought a uniquely Canadian art, one that would reflect the Canadian experience.<sup>122</sup>

In 1977, Harold Town and David Silcox spun the Thomson-as-modernist notion in a slightly different direction than had Murray. Town argues that Thomson stood on the threshold of non-representational art. Claiming to be tired with the legendary insistence on Thomson being an un- or native-trained artist, Silcox and Town insist his talents can withstand the scrutiny of informed, critical examination. Their study, however, suffers from much of the same selective reading of which they accuse previous authors.<sup>123</sup> This volume claims to be a rewriting of the legend of Thomson, but, as with Mellen's earlier text, does so only as a means to recover the work of the artist from his legend. These authors avoid discussion of why Thomson achieved such renown. Silcox and Town are unwilling to abandon the most tenacious of the Thomson legends, that his paintings express the Canadian imagination and provided 'a definition of the country both literally and figuratively.'<sup>124</sup>

In her 1991 article and 1994 exhibition catalogue, Joan Murray seems to have modified her approach to Thomson since 1971. She holds to the romantic Thomson of legend emphasizing

<sup>122</sup> Reid, *The Jack Pine*.

<sup>123</sup> Silcox's assertion 'After Thomson's death it became fashionable to say that he emerged wholly formed from the Canadian soil...' is at best mistaken, and at worst misleading. It appears to betray an only cursory examination of the literature. Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 97.

<sup>124</sup> Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 209.

his naturalism, his expansive knowledge of Algonquin, and his intimate relationship with Nature.<sup>125</sup> She pulls back from her earlier insistence that Thomson was working towards abstraction. Murray seems still to want to have Thomson both ways at once – as the unschooled artist feeling his way through artistic styles, and as the determined, daring, technically and conceptually competent artist who sought to develop a means to express what he saw. She wants the romantic outdoorsman – quiet, stoic, lonely – at one with nature, and the equally romantic volatile artist – given to despondency, fits of rage, and excessive drinking. She asserts that his reputation had been constructed by his associates, the future members of the Group of Seven, yet also validates his “greatness” brought eventually to public knowledge. Murray does not consider the values expressed or reinforced in creating the traditional mythology, nor question whether the myth makers may have modified his legend rather than directly expressing his “character.”

Rarely are myths and interpretations probed in art history writings as carriers of cultural values, hierarchies and exclusions. Such a position of ostensible historical objectivity, Ann Bermingham argues, reinforces the very cultural values outside of which art history purports to stand.<sup>126</sup> The most notable early example of someone seeking to question these carried values was Barry Lord in his 1974 survey, *Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art*. Lord insists that Thomson be considered a realist, though for different reasons than have so far been explored. Lord's Thomson is a hero of the working class. To his credit, Lord explores the intrinsic

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<sup>125</sup> Murray provides a detailed and thorough account of Thomson's life and activities. At times, her reworked assertions about Thomson appear supported by second-hand stories contained in letters written at a distance of 15 to 50 years from Thomson's death, but which Murray presents as literal and verifiable accounts. Some assertions appear to be bold speculation. In both texts, Murray claims an uncanny knowledge of Thomson's thoughts, purposes and meanings while he was working. For example, she frames much of her argument in a 1991 article and 1994 book around what Thomson 'meant' by his use of the word "records" to describe a series of his sketches he did in the Spring of 1917. As the only evidence of his use of this word, she has a letter from Algonquin Park ranger Mark Robinson to Blodwen Davies written in 1930. With no clear evidence that Thomson actually used this word to describe his sketches, and much less what he may have meant by it, Murray's reliance on the use of this word in developing her argument would seem problematic. Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 6; and *The Last Spring*, 1.

<sup>126</sup> Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 2. Murray makes reference to Bermingham's book though she does not integrate Bermingham's fairly economic theory on the represented landscape. She attempts only a comparison of Thomson with Constable. Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson,' 6, 38.

relationship between the landscape Thomson depicted and the intellectual elite to whom it appealed, and concurs with earlier writers that Thomson's work was a marker of national growth. As befits his study, Lord does not make connections between Thomson and the Group and the long-standing aspiration for a national school of landscape art. In his somewhat confused account, Thomson is described as painting the empty landscape which appeals to the bourgeois class, yet also as depicting the national landscape (again, ill-defined). Nonetheless, in Lord's analysis, Thomson was also heading towards depictions of heroic working people and making a democratic art – an art that serves proletarians in their nationalist struggle against imperialism.<sup>127</sup>

One of the best discussions of the social and artistic contexts of Thomson and the Group is Ann Davis's 1973 dissertation, 'An Apprehended Vision: The Philosophy of the Group of Seven.' Her analysis accounts for a broader range of artistic precedents and influences for these artists than most others. She makes reference to Harris's exposure to the German Arts and Crafts movement, Jugendstil, and to contemporary American movements like 291 and the New Hope School. More importantly, she successfully excavates the nationalist landscape vision of central Canadian artists of the late nineteenth century. Although she connects this insight to currents of environmental determinism, she fails to use this contextualization to question the basis of the Thomson mythology.<sup>128</sup>

Douglas Cole's 1978 article, 'Artists, Patrons and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven,' stands with Davis's dissertation as one of the best works on the social, political and intellectual connections between the Group, its patrons, and the public. Cole underlines the fundamental importance of the shared wilderness ethos among the Group members and their public. Lacking an awareness of the significance of antimodernism, Cole lacks the conceptual framework that would aid in making this scenario more understandable generally.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Lord, *Painting in Canada*.

<sup>128</sup> Ann Davis, 'An Apprehended Vision.'

<sup>129</sup> Cole, 'Artists, Patrons and Public.'

Recently, a new sort of criticism – drawing upon the relation of the Group members and their art to the new resource industries in the region they depicted – has been directed towards Thomson’s creative output. Allan Fletcher’s 1989 thesis uses an economic approach to explain why the Group members selected the Algoma landscape as representative of the national identity they sought to foster. He makes a materialist argument that the pure economic interests of tourism and resource extraction “explain” the artists’ decision to use Algoma. Fletcher presents economic development here as the key, indeed sometimes only, factor in developing a national identity. His reductionism causes him to overlook the notion that the appropriation of the landscape that these paintings represent is as much about developing an intellectual, cultural and psychological identity as an economic one. Such an aspiration to a national identity was shared by the contemporary writers of the Thomson mythology in their efforts to foster a national culture.<sup>130</sup>

Paul Walton, in his 1990 article, ‘The Group of Seven and Northern Development’, also focuses upon resource development as the main animating concept behind this landscape school. Walton juxtaposes an older pastoralism (informed by an agrarian myth which places pioneer farmers as the vanguard of civilization) with an image of the Group as humanizing the new ‘extractionist myth’ (a modern myth of progress rooted in the materialistic urban society, which designates wilderness areas as resource storehouses). Walton significantly overplays this comparison. While the extractionist myth appears appealing, it has little substantive basis and Walton is not able to connect the extractionist myth adequately with Canadian, Ontario or Toronto society at this time. Walton does not accommodate the wilderness mythology that made northern Ontario both a desirable vacation area and a symbolic nationalist landscape.<sup>131</sup>

And recently, following the general theoretical work of Klaus Theweleit, Robert Linsley

<sup>130</sup> Allan John Fletcher, ‘Industrial Algoma and the Myth of Wilderness: Algoma Landscapes and the Emergence of the Group of Seven, 1918-1920’ (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1989).

<sup>131</sup> Walton, ‘Group of Seven and Northern Development.’ See also Walton, ‘Beauty My Mistress: Hector Charlesworth as Art Critic,’ *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d’Histoire de l’Art Canadien* 15:1

has argued that Lawren Harris's theosophy-inspired 1920s works take their cue from a conservative nationalism that included racism and anti-semitism. Linsley seems shocked to find that ideas of racial and ethnic characteristics and hierarchies were common in this era. His assertion of a parallel between Harris's major Lake Superior landscapes and early-twentieth-century German fascism is highly problematic. First, such a comparison to German fascism carries far too much cultural baggage to be at all helpful in analyzing Harris's (or, for that matter, most contemporary Canadian) paintings. Second, Linsley's description of Harris as conservative simplifies the complex expressions of anxiety about modernity present in much of the work of Thomson and the Group. Finally, he makes little effort to acknowledge Spencerian and Darwinistic currents of thought that offer somewhat different explanations of his assertions. He seems determined to fix a Nazi swastika to Harris's portfolio.<sup>132</sup>

In 1992, Jonathan Bordo confronted Thomson's paintings directly. His fascinating article, 'Jack Pine: Wilderness Sublime or Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape,' argues that the aboriginal presence in the lands Thomson depicted had been erased in his paintings. This, he argues, facilitated the wilderness idea in which no trace of human contact may remain. The idea of wilderness, he observes, possesses an iconography and prescribes modes of conduct, such as not living in it.<sup>133</sup> Suggestive as his article is, Bordo's reliance upon a semiotic interpretation of such paintings as "The Jack Pine" leads him into difficult territory. He argues, borrowing from Barbara Packer and Guy Boulizon, that these paintings try to describe a completely unoccupied Canadian landscape devoid of signs of civilization. This is an invaluable point, yet it can be taken too far. A human presence in the "wilds" can be surmised in Thomson's art, not only from the rather narrow evidence of their symbolic presence in the work itself, but

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(1992), 84-107.

<sup>132</sup> Robert Linsley, 'Landscapes in Motion: Lawren Harris, Emily Carr and the Heterogenous Modern Nation,' *Oxford Art Journal* 19:1 (1996).

<sup>133</sup> Jonathan Bordo, 'Jack Pine – Wilderness sublime or the erasure of the aboriginal presence from the

also from the paintings themselves, which are, and were seen as, traces of contact. One does not need an elaborate unpacking of the anthropomorphization of trees to see that these paintings document human as well as natural history.

In two recent articles, Scott Watson takes Thomson and the Group to task for their racist attitude towards aboriginal peoples. His 1991 article, 'Disfigured Nature', is a fairly disorganized and forced discussion of the uses of landscape art. Quite correctly, Watson argues that landscape art serves to document the ownership of land, and that the art of the Group was as much about possession as about art. However, his assertion that the Group actively sought to override the claims to the land by aboriginal peoples is somewhere between ahistorical and erroneous. Watson makes no effort to understand the contemporary conceptualization of the wilderness or of aboriginal peoples, nor does he attempt to contextualize his assertions.<sup>134</sup>

A more fruitful take on the economic development argument appears in Lynda Jessup's 1992 dissertation, 'Canadian Artists, Railways, the State and "The Business of Becoming a Nation."' She makes an illuminating connection of the work of the Group to help define the national landscape with the growing tourist industry in northern Ontario and the connection of both of these to the Canadian railway industry. The landscape art school represented by Thomson and the Group are here represented as the expression of a desire for a national culture. The

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landscape,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 27:4 (Hiver 1992-93 Winter).

<sup>134</sup> While drawing interesting analogies between Thomson and the dead of the Great War, Watson becomes intoxicated with this analogy and wanders into error, imbuing nature with masculine qualities independently of human contact and placing the Group members back in Algonquin Park after the Great War. See 'Disfigured Nature: The Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape' in *Eye of Nature* Daina Augaitis and Helga Pakasaar eds. (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1991), 103-112. Similarly, in 1994, Watson projects his criticism of Judge Allan McEachern's decision on the Gitskan and Wet'suwet'en land claim on to the depictions of Thomson and the Group. His insistence that Thomson and the Group portrayed these Ontario parklands as empty of human presence belies an all too rudimentary understanding of Thomson's immediate social context. These depictions could not be understood if they were purely *terra incognita* to their audience. They depict spaces his audience knew in a particular way. Watson's implicit assertion that Thomson was a fraud constructed to deprive aboriginal peoples of this geographic space in a cynical territorial grab in the interests of economic development severely oversimplifies the contemporary intellectual temper – the psychological association with the land in general, the quest for national meaning and identity, and anxiety about modern social problems. Watson, 'Race, Wilderness, Territory,' 94-103.



experiential basis for the appeal of the art of Thomson and the Group also connects directly to the general antimodernist nationalism which was prevalent among the artists and patrons of the Group and which was expressed in their creation of Thomson as a nationalist icon.<sup>135</sup> She takes up the concept of antimodernism more directly and fully in her recent article, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven.' She connects antimodernism explicitly and effectively to the desire on the part of the Anglo-Canadian elite, the segment of society that manifested the most visible antimodern anxieties, to reassert its cultural leadership in Canada.<sup>136</sup>

#### "RE-PLACING" THE THOMSON MYTHOLOGY

The concept of antimodernism forms the basis for the re-examination of the Thomson mythology in this thesis.<sup>137</sup> An examination of Tom Thomson as a national icon requires a broader examination of his social and cultural contexts than that provided by most art history. Antimodernism provides an adequately complicated conceptual starting point from which to approach the culture of modern urban English-Canadian nationalism.

The Thomson legend expressed the reaction of the Anglo-Canadian elite, especially those

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<sup>135</sup> Jessup, 'Canadian Artists, Railways, the State.'

<sup>136</sup> Jessup, 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery.'

<sup>137</sup> Lynda Jessup, in 'Bushwhackers in the Gallery,' has drawn on the concept of antimodernism to account for the activities and legend of the Group of Seven. She traces the contemporary trends and movements which were manifestations of antimodernism and which informed much of the activity of the Group and its members through the 1910s and 1920s especially. Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk* connects the creation of a regional identity among rural Nova Scotia communities to the antimodern anxiety of particular urban Maritimers. This creation served to invent an original "Folk" in the Maritimes to reinforce the uncertain identity of urban Maritimers. Through tourism, these modern urbanites would be able to recapture some of the primitive simple life which had been lost in an increasingly complex modern world. See McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994). Michael Dawson has used the insights of antimodernism to trace the invented image of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The Mountie has traditionally been presented as the epitome of virtue and gentlemanly behavior, though Dawson's recent book and article explore how the image supports ethnic and gender constructs of the Anglo-Canadian cultural elites. Michael Dawson, ' "That Nice Red Coat", ' 119-139; and *The Mountie*. This concept has been used in the context of the Toronto circles in which the Group of Seven moved, as well. Karen Knutson's 1995 thesis examines the trappings of antimodernism in the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto through the 1920s. She argues that an antimodern temper was fundamental to the activities, and the physical environment of the Club. Knutson, ' "Absolute escape."'

who lived in Toronto, to the conditions of urban modernity, a reaction that strongly paralleled that of the northeastern American elites described by Lears. The cult of wilderness as a means to counteract the effects of urban living was as prominent among the Torontonians elites as their New England counterparts. While the nationalist movement in Canada of the 1920s had no exact contemporary American counterpart, the established elites of both countries were looking for ways to re-establish their respective positions of cultural leadership. The legend of Tom Thomson was created by members of this Canadian elite and expressed much of the contemporary antimodernist temper.

Benedict Anderson, in discussing the rise of nationalism generally, describes the rise of official nationalisms as a power-group's response to the potential or real threat of alternative national definitions from alternative elite or popular sources:

These nationalisms were historically 'impossible' until after the appearance of popular linguistic-nationalisms, for, at bottom, they were *responses* by power-groups – primarily, but not exclusively, dynastic and aristocratic – threatened with exclusion from, or marginalization in, popular imagined communities.<sup>138</sup>

In the Canada of the inter-war era, elite groups attempted to foster a nationalist sensibility, often through the mechanisms of the Canadian state.<sup>139</sup> The idea of Tom Thomson was the expression of one particular nationalist project of a particular segment of the urban, central-Canadian elite. Their initial ideas were frequently recycled in later formulations, often inadvertently. These various formulas took different forms and have often been contradictory, but all can be conceived of as instances of "Canadian nationalism,"<sup>140</sup> and all were heavily influenced by currents of antimodernism.

Anthony Smith illuminates the central importance of myth and symbol to the creation and

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<sup>138</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 109.

<sup>139</sup> Vipond, 'National Consciousness.'

<sup>140</sup> For what is still the most inclusive discussion of the variety of forms of Canadian nationalism in this era, see Vipond, 'National Consciousness.'

maintenance of a national polity. What he terms the “myth-symbol” complex – ‘the forms and content of a polity’s myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values’<sup>141</sup> – emphasizes not geographic, economic, military or political features, structures or institutions, but the set of beliefs and sentiments animating various myths and symbols which provide identity for a polity. Much of the writing which discusses the mythology of Tom Thomson – attempting to rewrite it, to tweak it, or to dispel it – misses this essential idea: as part of the Canadian myth-symbol complex, the idea of Tom Thomson, as the mythic epitome of the Canadian nationalist and the symbol of the (male) Canadian character, was constructed within a matrix of contingent cultural values. He is a Canadian icon – a sacred figure within a nationalist liturgy. His very location in this matrix helped extend it across the polity and across time. The particular values of this inter-war era have come to be promoted as eternal Canadian ones, and Thomson, however silent in life, has become after death their eloquent spokesman.

Anderson’s discussion illustrates the central role of power elites in creating official nationalisms and the indispensability of education in this process. The response of the Torontonians elite group was to the perceived threat of chaos from changes in the substance of the national community. Aspiring, as Vipond convincingly argues, to cultural leadership, members of the elite expressed their longings and dreams in a nationalist myth-symbol complex. While Anderson insists upon the centrality of language ‘encountered at mother’s knee’ to the nationalist project, this process could also include social constructions such as folklore or family and community history – and Smith’s myth-symbol complex – to account for a particular nationalist imagining. These make connections to the past, reinforcing the seemingly necessary teleology of why a person or a community is in a particular place – how “we” came to be “here.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 15. Hobsbawm concurs with this argument in describing the paradox of modern nations in their claim to antiquity and naturalness when they are frequently novel and constructed. The concepts of nationality, symbols and national histories contribute centrally to the subjectivity of nationhood. Eric Hobsbawm, introduction to *Invention of Tradition*, 14.

<sup>142</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 154. Anderson argues convincingly that the construction of a useable past (closely connected to the construction of a national mythology) is most effective when it appeals to the

Anderson's focus upon the centrality of education in the process of creating a national consciousness<sup>143</sup> relates directly to Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the appreciation of cultural products is learned.<sup>144</sup> This existing cultural elite already had the intellectual tools and cultural predisposition to look to art as the expression of a culture. Thomson's mythologizers re-defined the popular understanding of Thomson's paintings to coincide with their own conception of and relationship with this region of Ontario and with their ideas about artistic production. They had an existing set of conceptions about their relationship with this region and its distillation of the national identity. The idea of Thomson corresponded to, and helped legitimize, existing notions of the national identity within this social elite. The created image was subsequently spread across society through the education system, the mass media, and the other structural mechanisms. In this way, the dissemination of the mythology of Tom Thomson perpetuated the cultural values inherent in its creation. The idea of Tom Thomson, although connected to economic structures, was not, contrary to the arguments of some writers, a simple expression of capitalist economics. By incorporating Smith's ideas of the myth-symbol complex as a carrier of cultural values, and Bourdieu's insistence on the learned nature of cultural appropriation into a description of cultural hegemony, one can begin to "re-place" Thomson in Canadian cultural history.

An image was created by a small group of nationalist activists that expressed a cogent world view and promoted a set of ideas as encompassing the Canadian essence; these ideas, however, were proper to the activists' class and gender backgrounds, experiences, and ideas. By creating Thomson as the archetypal Canadian, his biographers – and in particular, the six

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natural. Such appeals appear to have a halo of disinterestedness, seeming to be outside of the realm of constructed ideas. In our example, this describes the centrality of the association to pioneers and a pioneer heritage in the Thomson mythology. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141.

<sup>143</sup> Anderson sees an intrinsic connection between the rise of popular nationalisms and the use, by new states trying to "nation-build", of the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and similar structures to instil the nationalist ideology. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 113.

<sup>144</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*; also Williams, 'Base and Superstructure,' 15-16.

celebrants noted earlier – presented the ideas and characteristics of their own social stratum as normative for Canadian society in general. By describing Thomson as capturing, in his life and in his work, the essence of the Canadian experience, this group interpreted an overwhelmingly male cultural phenomenon – the fancied lifestyle of the *coureur-de-bois*, of the backwoodsman, of the wilderness guide – as expressions of an essential Canadian identity as expounded by a particular segment of Canadian society, one whose members sought and achieved, to an extent, prominent positions as members of a national, as well as nationalist, elite. As the habits and characteristics of this iconic Tom Thomson became intertwined with the national identity, contingent class and gender definitions and relations were presented as simply and eternally “Canadian.” Wilderness and frontier tropes defined the experiences of the initial Canadian settlers, on the one hand, and of contemporary middle-class Torontonians, on the other, as *the* essential Canadian experience, as something to which, supposedly, *all* Canadians could relate and inherently understand. The cultural promotion of the Group of Seven, and of Thomson as well, was rooted in an Anglo-Canadian cultural paradigm and founded on the desire for a homogenous national culture.<sup>145</sup>

The spreading of the Thomson mythology across the country is an example of the politics of cultural selection. This is a crucial part of creating and sustaining a cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, as Antonio Gramsci defined it, is a community’s shared complex of social values and practices according to which people behave, live their lives and understand their own experiences. Raymond Williams describes it as a

set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute ... experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move, in most areas of their lives.

It is a concept that helps to evade the conspiratorial mindset of social control theories. A dynamic system, it at one and the same time adapts to and reinforces itself against new circumstances.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Jessup, ‘Bushwhackers in the Gallery,’ 27-30.

<sup>146</sup> Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure,’ 9. See also David Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), Ch. IV, 189-221; T.J. Jackson Lears,

A workable cultural hegemony is a vital part of imagining a community. As Benedict Anderson so usefully reminds us, imagining a community is a much different process than perpetuating a hoax. It plays upon and captures the entire complex of conscious and unconscious values and aspirations that belong to a particular people. But not everything in the history or practice of a group of people is useful or relevant in creating a sense of community among them. There is, as Raymond Williams argues, a 'selective tradition': certain parts of the past are passed off as 'the significant past' by the dominant culture. He describes this selectivity as

the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.<sup>147</sup>

Anderson argues that part of the creation of an imagined community is 'simultaneity': the knowledge that, as a member of a community, one shares activities and experiences with people whom one does not necessarily know, other than in an abstract sense, yet with whom one shares this community.<sup>148</sup> Part of creating a cultural hegemony within an imagined community is to select a past, and to recreate it, so that most members of the community regard it as a heritage which they share.

The selection of culture is as much affected by, as it brings into being, hegemonic values and ideas. This process is frequently facilitated by professional status. Just as a historian has a certain professional entitlement to make judgements about the past, the director of the National Gallery of Canada has a certain entitlement to make judgements about the national artistic culture, and a leading art educator, about which art and artists are worthy of study. This is not

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'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,' *American Historical Review* 90:3 (June 1985), 567-593; and McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, 40.

<sup>147</sup> Williams, 'Base and Superstructure,' 9.

<sup>148</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 23-36.

always a process of conscious decision-making.<sup>149</sup> In the process of selection, some ideas and figures simply appeal more than others do. In some cases, it is reasonable to suggest this process develops a momentum. In the case of Thomson, his earliest biographers perpetuated the idea that he had somehow captured the national essence in his life and work. By the 1930s and certainly by the 1940s and 1950s, this idea had become “common sense” and the “natural” starting point for any discussions of him.

#### ELITE CULTURAL LEADERSHIP AND THE CREATION OF AN ICON OF NATIONALISM

A desire for cultural leadership led many members of the nationalist movements of the 1920s to prominent public roles. The Group artists consistently stressed their social connectedness: they sought to help develop a national culture for all Canadians. They expressed their perception of the Canadian character in paint. But many of them did more than paint. They advanced their nationalist ideas – on industrial production and spirituality as well as art and culture – publicly and frequently in articles and published letters, in their exhibition catalogues, in speeches, and, perhaps most prominently, as educators.<sup>150</sup> In their lives, as in their art, these artists were socially engaged. They did not simply happen to make paintings that a particular upper middle-class segment of society saw as capturing something essential about Canada.<sup>151</sup> With clear ideas about their country and their own role in it, these various artists banded together, sought out the national essence in the landscape, and attempted to bring it out, through their paintings, for the consideration and illumination of the rest of Canadian society. By way of his tragic canoeing accident, they were able to personify their vision in the martyred Tom Thomson.

The idea of Tom Thomson, which is still with us today and reappears in a variety of places quite regularly, was first created in a series of obituaries and biographical commentaries

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<sup>149</sup> McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 107-108; Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure,’ 9.

<sup>150</sup> MacDonald, Lismer, Varley, Brown and McCurry all worked as art educators in Canada and beyond.

<sup>151</sup> Vipond described them as the ‘deliberate interpreters of the Canadian experience....’ Vipond,

written in the first few years after his death in 1917. This representation of Thomson crystallized specific ideas of a particular form of Canadian nationalism of the early twentieth century. This nationalism in Canada involved the antimodernists' wistful admiration for an earlier time of pioneers and voyageurs when one struggled with and in the natural environment directly to sustain oneself and to build for the future. It was a life more "real" and "meaningful" than the modern lives led by the emergent, largely Toronto-centred, nationalist elite. Antimodern nationalists sought to rediscover the essential meaning of life in Canada in the pioneer past of the country. The image of Tom Thomson they created and bequeathed to successive generations has more to say about their elite antimodern nationalism – their anxieties and fears, their aspirations, in short, their world view – than it has to say about the art, art theory, or aesthetics of this era.

The following chapters take up the idea of the aspiration to cultural hegemony of this group. Chapter 2 examines the construction, in the years from his death in 1917 until the early 1930s, of a Thomson mythology infused with the antimodern and nationalist sentiments of the Toronto intelligentsia. These writings emphasized a "backwoodsman-who-paints" image over any consideration of the relationship of Thomson's work to contemporary artistic trends. Thomson was distinguished from alienated avant-garde artists. This nationalist construction of Thomson emphasized his work as the expression of an authentic national culture that he had experienced first-hand. Chapter 3 explores some of the values and ideas carried by this mythology. Contemporary concerns about the nature of manhood contributed to the general antimodern anxiety. However, this chapter shows that the creators of the Thomson mythology maintained tremendous and fundamental faith in the power of manhood in social organization. Thomson was described as a fundamentally male inspirational figure. The quest for vigorous activity through the wilderness experience would not only restore a lost virility to men, but would lead to the capturing the essence of the national experience. Chapter 4 explores the diffusions of Thomson's image across Canada from the early 1930s to 1947. Thomson began to appear in Canadian

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'Nationalist Network,' 268.



schools, initially in art and art appreciation texts. While presented in the context of Canadian and western art traditions, Thomson still had all of his legendary trappings and was still portrayed as encapsulating the Canadian experience. In 1945, a CBC radio series carried the Thomson legend to schools across English Canada. Though technology was changing its form, the idea of Tom Thomson continued to have essentially the same nationalist and naturalist content. Animated by many of the same people who had initially helped foster the Thomson mythology, the figure of Tom Thomson still eloquently spoke of many of their values.

## CHAPTER 2: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MYTH: 1917-1935

Thomson is our ideal of an artist. The more one thinks of Tom Thomson the greater the man becomes because he was one of the first Canadians who lived in an atmosphere and a country where most ambitions were concentrated on material success and [yet he] was absolutely untouched by them.

A. Y. Jackson<sup>1</sup>

The idea of Tom Thomson that has settled into the popular mind was largely created in a series of texts written between the time of his death in 1917 and 1935. As different imaginings of Thomson initially competed, a dominant mythology emerged. It expressed the antimodernist and nationalist temper of its creators, many of whom were part of the same nationalist artistic movement and all of whom moved in the circles of the Anglo-Canadian elite. According to this imagining, Thomson, the artist and the man, could not be understood in the context of the traditions and development of modern western art. Instead, Thomson's life and work were seen as sincere reflections of his vigorous and authentic experiences in a region defined as the pure Canadian wilderness. He was said to have lived the simple life of the antimodernist's yearning. The mythology of Tom Thomson contains the antimodern anxieties and aspirations of the small group of urban, central Canadian, middle-class writers who collectively created it.

#### THE ARTIST AT WORK

It is possible to depict Thomson as a working twentieth-century artist – that is, learning from his peers and from practice and experiment, evolving in style and technique and depicting a particular landscape. Many of the habits of Thomson, and his colleagues, coincided with contemporary (and by no means uniquely Canadian) artistic paradigms and practices. The commercial art scene in which he worked in Toronto was, in many ways, the centre of the city's

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Blodwen Davies, 'Tom Thomson and the Canadian Mood,' *The New Outlook*, 27 August 1930, 826.

artistic activity. Albert Robson described this community as an informal art school.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Thomson painted within a western tradition of *plein air* sketching and the associations of this practice overlap with the antimodernist ideas about authentic experience. His work also included elements of the contemporary artistic concept of primitivism. However, despite an early emphasis on his artistic activity, the dominant image of Thomson that emerged looked to non-artistic qualities to define his work.

The catalogue 'Foreword' to the 1919 Memorial Exhibition at The Arts Club in Montreal written by A.Y. Jackson (reproduced in Appendix One), and an article written, also in 1919, for the London magazine *The Studio* by Harold Mortimer-Lamb are the most prominent writings to describe Thomson as essentially an artist. These two works represent the dialogue which occurred among the publicizers of Thomson's artistic legacy – Jackson and Mortimer-Lamb most conspicuously – and sceptics such as many members of the Royal Canadian Academy [RCA] and Hector Charlesworth, art critic for *Saturday Night*. The latter, after initially praising the Algonquin School painters, advocated the continuation of the British landscape tradition of Constable and Turner.<sup>3</sup>

In his foreword, Jackson described Thomson as having several artistic associates – 'Lauren' Harris, James MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, and himself – and described their project as a collective one. Jackson set this group of painters apart from the landscape painting normally seen

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<sup>2</sup> Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters*, 134; William Colgate, *Canadian Art: Its Origins and Development* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Charlesworth objected to painting of this region he viewed as a problem and barrier to economic and political progress (Paul Walton describes this as 'a curiously outdated view at the time.' Walton, 'The Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 175). He favoured the traditionalists whose paintings conformed to "eternal standards of poetry and beauty" and who did "not paint the wilds, but the hills and valleys that the pioneers of Upper Canada made opulent and fruitful." Quoted in Walton, 'Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 175. See also Walton, 'Beauty My Mistress.' In his 1913 comments on Jackson's pieces at the MAA Spring Exhibition, S. Morgan-Powell of the Montreal Art Association reflected the perspective that artistic experimentation had decided limits outside of which art has little value: 'Jackson is an Impressionist. He knows the line where sanity ends and the kingdom of freaks begins. He pushes the Impressionist technique and theory to the limit, but he does not overstep it.' S. Morgan-Powell, 'Montreal Art Association: Spring Exhibition,' in *The Year Book of Canadian Art, 1913*, Arts and Letters Club of Toronto (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1913), 235.

in Montréal – the European pastoral style he so frequently derided – intimating that they were more faithful to their landscape subject matter. The picture Jackson painted (so to speak) included the struggles of a man to paint – a man trying to deal with the problems and issues of becoming and of being an artist. Thomson’s growth, while spectacular and the result of his innate genius, was also due to ‘personal and circumstantial influences.’ He moved in the commercial art world, meeting trained artist-designers; ‘their experience and criticism were decidedly helpful.’<sup>4</sup>

It is the notion of Thomson belonging to an artistic community that set Jackson’s foreword apart from the dominant Thomson mythologizing. Jackson emphasizes that Thomson was part of a group of painters, who had had a decided influence on the development of his work. For example, while on a sketching trip in October 1914 Jackson wrote to Dr. MacCallum from Algonquin Park, ‘Tom is doing some good work. ... [H]e shows decided cubistical tendencies and I may have to use a restraining influence on him yet.’ Jackson implies he was tutoring Thomson, as was often suggested in later descriptions of the time in which Jackson and Thomson shared a studio. It also reveals that they were not as estranged from the paradigms of the contemporary art world as the future legend would insist. Similarly, Algonquin School colleague Fred Varley wrote in October 1914: ‘Tom is rapidly developing into a new cubist, but say, he has some great things up here.’<sup>5</sup> This idea of Thomson as an artist – learning from his colleagues, working with them to discover a mode of representation – was also consistent with the way this group of artists considered Thomson while working with him.

Harold Mortimer-Lamb, a friend of Jackson, in the August 1919 issue of *The Studio*, also described Thomson as the working artist. He emphasized Thomson’s graphic arts training,

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<sup>4</sup> In this exhibition catalogue, Jackson writes about ‘our ideas’, ‘We felt’, ‘our subjects’, and, finally, ‘our own land’ in one paragraph, describing the approach of this group of painters to the northern Ontario landscape. Jackson, foreword to *Catalogue of Thomson Exhibition, 1919*.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson to James MacCallum, 13 October 1914; Frederick Varley to MacCallum, n.d. October 1914, NGCA, NGCF, MacCallum Papers. Emphasis in text. Similarly, while on a sketching trip with Thomson in 1914, Jackson wrote to J.E.H. MacDonald expressing a concern for Thomson’s aesthetic development: ‘Tom is doing some exciting stuff, he keeps one up to time, very often I have to figure out if I am leading or following. He plasters on the paint and gets fine quality, but there is a danger in wandering too far down that road.’ Jackson to MacDonald, 5 October 1914, NAC, MacDonald Papers, vol. 1.

writing: ‘During his apprenticeship as a “commercial artist” or designer he was required constantly to solve problems of pattern, proportion, line, colour, effective massing ... *With this equipment* he went to Nature and communed with her in all her moods.’<sup>6</sup> Lamb’s description of Thomson, learning techniques, working through his apprenticeship, then taking this knowledge and ability to the representation of his subject, followed the pattern of a painter going to one of the schools. It reinforced Jackson’s description of Thomson from the 1919 exhibition. He discussed Thomson’s commercial training through which ‘he acquired a knowledge and practice which were of great service in his later work.’<sup>7</sup> Here was an artist developing his craft.

#### THE NON-ARTIST PARADIGM

In emphasizing the artistic lineage of Thomson, the articles by Jackson and Mortimer-Lamb stand outside of the general trend of Thomson commemoration. This was due in part to the fact that they were both writing for audiences removed from the general context in which the Thomson mythology would take root and grow. Jackson wrote for the Montreal art community, which knew little of Thomson and his colleagues; Mortimer-Lamb, for the international artistic audience of the London-published magazine, *The Studio*, which would identify the decorative style of Thomson’s work. The dominant idea of Thomson emerged from the community of intellectuals, organizations and institutions of the Toronto-centred nationalist elite. These descriptions insisted upon the centrality of Thomson’s knowledge of the wilderness and emphasized that his work reflected the essence of the national experience.<sup>8</sup>

This emphasis on Thomson’s life experience as central to his artistic activity was present

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Mortimer-Lamb, ‘Tom Thomson,’ *The Studio*, August 1919. Copy in NAC, Davies Collection. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, foreword to *Exhibition Catalogue, 1919*.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson later, in his “Père Raquette” incarnation, fully and enthusiastically embraced the paradigm of Thomson as the untutored wild-man artist. See Jackson, *A Painter’s Country*.

in Jackson's memorial catalogue. He described Thomson as reproducing the landscape with which he had had intimate experience:

Yearly the schools turn out scores of art students who, having learned a method of expression, then start on a vague hunt for subjects, and mostly prove they have acquired only the method, with no inner experience to express. Thomson was fortunate in that, finding a means of expression, he was able to interpret what had been to him the passion of his life.<sup>9</sup>

James MacCallum, in his 1918 obituary for Thomson, similarly attacked Thomson's urban art critics for their inability to grasp the artist's profound connection with the land:

The group of painters of which Thomson was one soon began to be bitterly attacked by artists and newspaper critics and held up to ridicule as painting things which were untrue and impossible. Thomson lived eight months of each year in Algonquin Park, often disappearing into its recesses for a month at a time, seeing no one and being seen by no one. Only one who has so lived is in a position to attack the colour or truthfulness of his pictures.<sup>10</sup>

In order to understand Thomson's work, in MacCallum's opinion, the viewer needed merely to be able to call upon similar experiences. MacCallum did not seem to recognize in this article that he and the critics were using very different standards and ideas to judge Thomson's work – they were essentially speaking different languages. Thomson was enigmatic to those who did not understand the experiences and lifestyle out of which his art developed. Yet, MacCallum asserted, he did make a connection with a segment of the art viewing public: 'The intelligent public rather liked his work, but was not quite sure whether it was the safe and proper thing to say so.'<sup>11</sup> What separated Thomson from the world of art criticism and theory was the deep essence of his works that spoke to those who beheld them. Fundamentally, MacCallum's description of Thomson emphasized that which set him apart from urban society and the artistic community, while also underlining that Thomson's independence of spirit and close association with Algonquin Park

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, foreword to *Exhibition Catalogue, 1919*.

<sup>10</sup> MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson,' 376.

<sup>11</sup> MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson,' 382.

paralleled the values and experiences of his audience. Thomson thus became one with the wild and, seemingly by osmosis, was able to paint it with a truthfulness that only those deeply in touch with this territory knew. For a segment of society that sought the national definition in the northern wilderness, it was here in Thomson's paintings. Better still, it was a wilderness with which they were familiar.

By 1919, much of the "myth of Thomson" – Thomson the primitive, the backwoodsman, the painter of a wilderness he knew with the intimacy of a lover – had stabilized. Indeed, the emphasis on Thomson's craftsmanship and training all but disappeared in future depictions of him.<sup>12</sup> The catalogue of the February 1920 memorial exhibition in Toronto (reproduced in Appendix Two) again presented the untrained, intuitive artist who captured the very essence of the Canadian landscape: 'Untrained in schools, ignorant of the theories and canons of Art, he has left behind him ... the beginning of a Canadian School.' Here once more was the knowledgeable outdoorsman who was so easily misunderstood by those who had not shared his experiences: 'The object of many criticisms, too often arising from lack of observation of nature as it really is – he avoided controversy and discussion even with artists, content if he might but live with Nature and share her many moods.' The feminization of Nature would figure prominently in the mythology. The staid urban environment was juxtaposed with the liberating wilds of Algonquin Park: 'he communed with the Spirit of the North, and straightway was freed from the shackles of the town, the petty meannesses which chafed him.'<sup>13</sup>

The most important elements in all of this were Thomson's personal characteristics. He

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<sup>12</sup> Lismer would take exception to the manner in which Mortimer-Lamb depicted Thomson: 'I did not think a great deal, myself, of the Mortimer Lamb [sic] article on Tom...', he wrote to MacDonald. '[I]t is not the ideal article on Tom. I guess personalities and influences are not the best 'motifs' to hang an article on.' Lismer to MacDonald, 21 March 1919. NAC, MacDonald Papers. Emphasis in text. Mortimer-Lamb's emphasis on Thomson's training, especially the influence of the tutoring by Jackson, and his depiction of Thomson as the artist at work, simply do not agree with the image of Thomson that Lismer thought it appropriate to present. Lismer would himself present a fairly different picture.

<sup>13</sup> Though unattributed in the catalogue, the tone of the piece suggests that either MacCallum, MacDonald or Lismer was the author. AMT, *Catalogue of Memorial Exhibition, 1920*. Joan Murray describes this text as 'probably written by Dr. J. M. MacCallum, there are certain parallels between its text and an earlier article by the doctor....' Murray, *Art of Thomson*, 7.

was not merely experienced in the outdoors, and he was not merely an artist who painted in the wilderness.

The North was not to him merely a place where he might find motifs, decorative or colourful. To him the North was a spirit which, entering into him possessed him and permeated all of his work. Modest, sensitive, shy and independent, he was a creature of the Wild and has revealed to us its wonders.

Thomson's personal attributes stemmed from his deep spiritual connection with the environment. Both he and his work reflected the essence of the region he painted, and it was only due to his independent spirit, a product of his lifestyle, that he was able to reflect nature with such 'truthfulness, compelling sincerity and emotion.' So much was Thomson one with nature that, in this description, he did not even die. The North simply 'took him to its bosom' like the much-anticipated embrace of a long-courted lover. This description of Thomson's death was steeped in a romantic conception of the wilderness.<sup>14</sup>

The 1920 Toronto exhibition catalogue showcased the essential features of the Thomson mythology that would be carried by the "backwoodsman" current of writing. It described him as a natural painter, without academic training, whose work was completely unmediated by the notions, prejudices, trends, and philosophies of the Academies. He even avoided discussing such things. He had an innate aversion to the inherently constraining, limiting and meaningless life that was the urban existence. He simply lived intimately and spiritually with Nature, learned her ways and reflected this experiential knowledge in his paintings. Thomson's lack of training in the 'theories and canons of Art' meant that his representations of nature were pure, honest and authentic expressions of the wilderness. Anyone who shared even the smallest part of this knowledge of this wild region would recognize the truth and authenticity of his paintings. His critics revealed their own ignorance of the Canadian identity. Such unmediated reflections of vast experience and intimate knowledge of the Canadian wilderness laid the base for a distinctly

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<sup>14</sup> AMT, *Catalogue of Memorial Exhibition, 1920*.



Canadian art.

Arthur Lismer, in his 1926 textbook, *A Short History of Painting: With a Note on Canadian Art*, argued that the Canadian artist was necessarily one who took in the multi-faceted life of “his” country and expresses it in his art. He contrasted the virile lifestyle of the true Canadian artist with the over-civilized, over-refined European:

A Canadian painter may be judged as being one who reflects in his work his impressions of the beauty, life, action, typical features of trees and atmosphere, seasons, energy and vitality of the country – for example, paintings of merely studio subjects that have become decadent and effete in a European atmosphere whilst they may be skilfully presented, lose all sense of touch with reality in a new world.<sup>15</sup>

Lismer’s remark starkly juxtaposed the lived experiences of the Canadian artist with those of the effete European artist and, in so doing, echoed the antimodern critiques of modern society.

In *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, F.B. Housser had earlier explored an angle similar to that developed by Lismer. In his oft-cited critique of the Academy-trained artist, Housser insisted that a new type of artist was needed to create an art truly expressive of the Canadian national experience:

This task demands a new type of artist; one who divests himself of the velvet coat and flowing tie of his caste, puts on the outfit of the bushwhacker and prospector; closes with his environment; paddles, portages and makes camp; sleeps in the out-of-doors under the stars; climbs mountains with his sketch box on his back.<sup>16</sup>

For Housser, experience in the Canadian environment, not painterly skill, was the route to genuine Canadian art. The value of Thomson’s work, for Housser, lay in its directness. According to Housser’s description, through Thomson, we might glimpse the core, the essence of nature, and, thus, of Canada itself.

In an article he wrote for *The Rebel*, J.E.H. MacDonald memorialized Thomson for Toronto’s intellectual and cultural elite. He underlined the poetic and romantic aspects of

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<sup>15</sup> Lismer, *A Short History*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 15.

Thomson's life and work. He spoke of Thomson's passionate quest to capture in paint the wilds of Canada. His paintings of the North were, 'in a simple and direct way, obviously inspired by the essential character of the subject.'<sup>17</sup> Unschooled, untrained, independent of critics and approbation, Thomson understood and represented the essence of the landscape. MacDonald then addressed his audience, revealing the purpose of the cairn raised to Thomson in the North.

One hopes that the long waters of Algonquin Park will bring many a discerning reader to this cairn, and that its wording and purpose will aid him in the interpretation of the Spirit of the Land.... One hopes to find it a beacon for Canadian Art, guiding artist and patron alike into the breezy ways where the breath of the Four Seasons blows purely, inspiring both of them to action enlightening the world.<sup>18</sup>

MacDonald's article focused upon Thomson's lived experience in this quintessentially Canadian environment. It did not depict Thomson as an artist, revealingly not mentioning the title of a single Thomson painting. The cairn he had raised marked the convergence of the nationalist landscape aesthetic and the wilderness-centred concept of national identity.

#### THOMSON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A NATIONAL IDENTITY

The North had long been a central aspect of Canadian identity. Such an association was reinforced by the cult of wilderness that grew out of the antimodernist's aspiration to the simple life. Both were supplemented by a pervasive romantic sensibility in Canadian culture extending beyond the Great War years. Each of these cultural trends influenced the creation of the Thomson legend.<sup>19</sup> Other societies had also expressed artistically the maturation of their national culture through national landscape art. The French Barbizon school, Constable and Turner in England, and the American Hudson River School were prominent examples. Canadian aspirations for a national landscape art were evident as early as the 1870s. Lynda Jessup, for example, documents

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<sup>17</sup> MacDonald, 'Landmark in Canadian Art,' 48.

<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, 'Landmark in Canadian Art,' 50.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the place of the North in Canadian nationalist thought, see Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 162-199.

the connections among artists, railway companies and government in creating an accessible national landscape, which helped to form the cultural basis for the Group of Seven's definition of a Canadian art.<sup>20</sup>

Writing in 1916, NGC Director Brown asserted that a distinctive style of landscape painting was developing in Canada free from the hindrance of European schools and influence. In the same collection, *Art of the British Empire Overseas*, published by *The Studio* magazine in 1917, representatives of other Dominions appear to have been equally obsessed with the issue of national identity. Each in turn focussed his comments on the question of whether a distinct national school of specifically landscape art was developing in New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa, respectively. Each also reflected a similar connection of national artistic culture with the physical environment.<sup>21</sup> Housser made a similar point, insisting that in the emerging national consciousness, knowledge of the national environment was more important than aesthetics: 'It is not ... so much the story of an art movement as of the dawn of a consciousness of a national environment which to-day, is taking a most definite form in the life of the nation.'<sup>22</sup> This new Canadian art represented and mirrored the character of the emerging nation.

Given the power and tenacity of Victorian romanticism in contemporary Canadian culture, the legendary Thomson was a suitably romantic, solitary, Whitmanesque woodsman. A 1920 reviewer wrote:

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<sup>20</sup> In her 1992 dissertation, Jessup argues the collected mythologies of the Group and of Thomson are the culmination of Canadian landscape nationalism, not something new in the 1920s. Lynda Jessup, 'Canadian Artists, Railways, the State,' 100-101, 246-247. J.E.H. MacDonald would reflect on the activities of groups such as the Toronto Art Students' League as precursors of the Group in a letter to Housser concerning Housser's book. MacDonald to Fred [Housser] 20 December 1926. NAC, MacDonald Papers. On this cultural and landscape antecedent, see also Dennis Reid, "*Our Own Country Canada*": *Being an Account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artist in Montreal and Toronto, 1860-1890* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Holme, ed., *Art of the British Empire Overseas*.

<sup>22</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 32.

Practically self-taught, and living almost a hermit's life for eight months of the year in Algonquin Park, he lived as truly with Nature as Walt Whitman, and sought to say through the medium of paint what Canadian poets have tried to express in verse, the infinite variety and beauty of the Canadian out-of-doors as seen at its best in Northern Ontario.<sup>23</sup>

MacCallum emphasized Thomson's romantic lifestyle, one that was always seemingly just out of the reach of the viewer. 'Living in the woods and even when in town avoiding the haunts of artists, he was to the public an object of mysterious interest. He lived his own life, did his work in his own way, and died in the land of his dearest visions.'<sup>24</sup> Independent, solitary, enigmatic, and above all living his life on his own terms and at one with Nature – here Thomson was presented as something of a romantic artist.<sup>25</sup> MacCallum maintained the inverted story that Thomson only painted in order to express his reaction to and knowledge of the North, and claimed that this intimate connection was at the root of Thomson's work. 'The north country gradually enthralled him, body and soul. He began to paint that he might express the emotions the county inspired in him; all the moods and passions, all the sombreness and all the glory of colour, were so felt that they demanded from him pictorial expression.'<sup>26</sup> Furthering the romantic intimacy, MacCallum's description seems almost to suggest that we should look at Thomson's depictions, not so much as paintings, but as diaries in which he bared his soul.

Thomson's death was a fitting conclusion to the romantic legend. The ambiguity and mystery of his death and burial seemed to allow writers an amount of liberty in describing it. In most narratives, and mirroring the high diction idea, so frequently mobilized in Great War

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<sup>23</sup> 'Beauty of North Shown in Color,' *The Mail and Empire*. From this comes David Silcox's 1977 comment: 'He embodied the romance rather than the gritty reality of the pioneers.' Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 209.

<sup>24</sup> MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson,' 375.

<sup>25</sup> E. Wyly Grier in *The Year Book of Canadian Art, 1913* emphasized the romantic elements of developing a unique Canadian art, finding a parallel in the chivalric ideal. The rewards this task would bring were not financial: 'There is something of the romantic interest of knight-errantry in our undertaking. ... We have forsworn the prizes of commerce; let us be satisfied with a fluttering scarf, a rose; perchance – who knows? – a wreath of laurel.' E. Wyly Grier, 'Canadian Art: A Resumé' in *The Year Book of Canadian Art 1913*, 246-247.

<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, 'Tom Thomson,' 378.

commemorations, of the “fallen” soldier, Thomson did not actually die in Canoe Lake in 1917. He seemed more to be simply absorbed into the wilderness. MacDonald’s cairn inscription began this trend in its final phrase – ‘and it took him to itself at last.’<sup>27</sup> By 1947, Richard Lambert described Thomson’s “loss” in the wilderness as the culmination of his life there, though he seemed to exaggerate the length of time Thomson spent in the North and to overlook that Thomson spent his winters in Toronto:

Tom had become a great painter of Canada’s Northland by making himself a part of it. He had become a dweller in the wilderness, a sharer of the life that went on in the wilderness.... The time had come for him to take the last step, and lose himself in the wilderness he so loved.<sup>28</sup>

His death came as the heroic culmination of his life and work – and that of Canadian art generally<sup>29</sup> – seemingly at the moment of victory, like that of the “fallen” of the Great War.

Thomson’s work was explicitly connected to the developing national culture through the later 1920s and into the 1930s. His fame was consolidated in Housser’s book in 1926. In a speech in 1926, George H. Locke of the Canadian Club of Toronto praised Thomson while announcing the donation of “The West Wind” to the new Art Gallery of Toronto. The ultimate value of Thomson’s work, as presented here, lay in his contribution to national culture. ‘Tom Thomson needs no tablet to commemorate his achievements. He has left us work which expresses our national life – the forces of the great natural surroundings of this young land.’<sup>30</sup> By 1930,

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Lambert, *The Adventure of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947), 146.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Robson in 1932 and 1937, William Colgate in 1943, and Richard Lambert in 1947 all reflect this accepted idea. Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters*; and *Tom Thomson*; Colgate, *Canadian Art*; Lambert, *The Adventure of Canadian Painting*. Though not completely certain that a Canadian school had indeed been established, Newton MacTavish viewed Thomson as the closest embodiment yet seen of such a development. Newton MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada*.

<sup>30</sup> George H. Locke, Speech: ‘On the Occasion of the Presentation to the Art Gallery of Toronto by the Canadian Club of Toronto, of a Picture (Known as The West Wind), by the Late Tom Thomson.’ Undated typescript, Art Gallery of Ontario, Registration Files, 784, *The West Wind*. Similarly, Arthur Lismer, in a speech to the Canadian Club of Toronto in 1926, emphasized how the encouragement of Canadian art would promote national independence: ‘We mistrust the courage and powers within us to achieve our

Blodwen Davies described Thomson as intrinsically connected to the post-World War I nationalist project: ‘Thomson was the product of his time, the blossoming of the Canadian genius.’<sup>31</sup> His paintings were ‘ikons of the new Canadian faith.’<sup>32</sup> This nationalist agenda was most clearly enunciated by Newton MacTavish:

Here and there, one is tempted to perceive, a national note is struck, a sounding of the buoyant, eager, defiant spirit of the nation.... Meantime we can only wonder whether they may yet resound, and still resound, until they can be recognized and accepted as veritable interpretations of national characteristics.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, MacTavish assumed – without evidence – that Thomson’s works were created within the same nationalist framework with which they would later be identified. MacTavish’s account leaves room for no sense of contingency at all in defining Thomson’s work as Canadian.

Contemporary reviewers of the 1920 memorial exhibition emphasized and re-emphasized Thomson’s spiritual connection with the North as capturing the national essence, accepting and adopting the phrasing of the catalogue directly.<sup>34</sup> The first such article spoke of Thomson depicting ‘the infinite variety and beauty of the Canadian out-of-doors as seen at its best in Northern Ontario.’ This argued that these images of a particular place somehow reflected the essence of Canada, well beyond the boundaries of Algonquin Park.<sup>35</sup> The second connected his lack of academic training to his ability to depict the Canadian environment so accurately: ‘That

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national independence in anything but politics and sport. We do not affirm with sufficient emphasis that we also possess an aesthetic independence if we would encourage and exercise it.’ Given the activity of the Associations of Canadian Clubs in fostering a nationalist identity in this era, Lismer would seem to be reinforcing an established aspiration for a national culture. Lismer, ‘Canadian Art,’ lecture given to Canadian Club, 13 December 1926, NAC, Lismer Papers, File 1-14. For a description of the role of the Association of Canadian Clubs in promoting the nationalist agenda, see Vipond, ‘National Consciousness.’

<sup>31</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada*, 159. See Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 135-136.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Fairbairn, ‘Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North,’ copy in NAC, Thomson Papers. Fairbairn quotes directly from the exhibition catalogue in her review.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Beauty of North,’ *The Mail and Empire*.

he was largely self-taught and remained entirely Canadian in sentiment adds to the force of his appeal.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Thomson's connection with the landscape took on its nationalist tone. Being truly Canadian in having no external influences – even his colleagues received but passing general references in articles about him – facilitated Thomson's ability to paint the essence of the Canadian environment.

#### EXPERIENCING THE PRIMAL CANADIAN ESSENCE

Thomson made a deep connection with the essence of that landscape. Barker Fairley wrote, 'Thomson stays in the mind as something stern, solid, horizontal, even static.... There is in his work on the one hand something granite-like that suggests that he would have ended by carving his dreams in wood or stone....'<sup>37</sup> In this construction, Thomson represented – without the external constraints of art theory or training – the fundamental and essential quality of the landscape and the unchanging, seemingly primeval Canadian character. There was something reassuringly unmodern and eternal about this 'something granite-like'.

Thomson's reputed ability to capture his own sincere and essential experience in paint was part of a general trend in western art. The preparation of a *plein air* oil sketch – to capture a moment of emotional intimacy between the artist and the landscape – was a well-established practice. And contemporary artists – yes, even the "effete", "decadent" Europeans: Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso were but three – also sought to connect with a primal human essence and pure organic culture through the primitivist movement. Antimodernists, as Lynda Jessup observes, equated the authenticity of the emotional response to the landscape with the strenuous physical activity of the encounter. The *plein air* sketch was considered to be a record of an artist's connection with the environment. For Thomson and his colleagues, their camping adventures

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<sup>36</sup> 'Thomson and the Algonquin School,' *The Mail and Empire*.

<sup>37</sup> Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 246. In 'Algonquin and Algoma,' a review of the 1919 OSA exhibition, Fairley contrasts artists exhibiting there with 'the curiously static imagination of Tom Thomson...'. B.F. (Barker Fairley), 'Algonquin and Algoma,' *The Rebel* 3:6 (April 1919), 281.

were reflected not only in the authenticity of the depictions they created, but also in the formal qualities of these works. These qualities were usually prominent in descriptions of their work.<sup>38</sup> These sketches recorded the moment of the artist in the landscape. Ann Bermingham captures this relationship of artist to landscape: ‘As the basic record of his immediate response to the landscape, the *plein air* oil sketch embodied both the appearance of the landscape and the emotions aroused by it. In this sense, the *plein air* oil sketch is implicitly retrospective and autobiographical...’<sup>39</sup>

The quest for authenticity implicit in *plein air* sketching was related to the early-twentieth-century fascination with the “primitive.” Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina and Gill Perry define primitivism as describing ‘Western interest in, and/or reconstruction of, societies designated “primitive” and their artifacts. Primitivism, then, was generally used to refer to the discourses on the “primitive”.’<sup>40</sup> European artists looked to peasant societies and to cultures in Africa and the South Pacific, borrowing styles, techniques and subjects in search of an essential humanity that would theoretically be more evident in what they considered primitive, less developed societies. The similar quest of American artists led them to the aboriginal American cultures of the southwestern United States. Thomson was often seen as a reflection of the experience of life on the land of an earlier and simpler day: the (past) days of “Indians” and *coureurs de bois* (necessarily defined as discrete groups). That Thomson’s paintings were pure unmediated responses to the environment was an essential element of the Thomson myth and a central element of the primitivist trope.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Jessup, ‘Bushwhackers in the Gallery’, 8-9; and ‘Canadian Artists, Railways, the State,’ 24.

<sup>39</sup> Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the primitivism of continental European artists, see Harrison, Frascina, and Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 5. The American example is developed in Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions*,



Lears describes a popular turn towards primitive and monumental art, emphasizing the therapeutic value of it to the uninformed viewer.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis on the individual viewer's emotional reaction expressed the romantic underpinning of this antimodern yearning. Thomson was intrinsically connected with the contemporary aesthetic and cultural trend towards primitivism. Part of the primitivist conceptualization asserted that the primitive, as the word suggests, was at the origins of the human experience:

Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the “lowest cultural levels”; we occupy the “highest,” in metaphors of stratification and hierarchy....<sup>43</sup>

The primitive satisfied two of the antimodernist's yearnings. First, he represented the unfettered masculinity, the primal virility that would counter the effeminizing effects of modern urban life.<sup>44</sup> Second, living in the wilderness, he was in touch with the primeval origins of human life. He could experience life as the natural unfettered man. Through the wilderness experience, the civilized western man could rediscover, by absorbing the experiences and attributes of the seemingly superceded Native American, his own primeval roots and recover the virility that he had lost in the city.<sup>45</sup> The pre-social liberty of such a primitive, a man living outside of society,

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*1789-1936* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 209-212. For a study of a similar Canadian expression, especially the connection between romantic tourism and tourism, see Jasen, *Wild Things*, 11-13.

<sup>42</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 189-190.

<sup>43</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>44</sup> Like the pioneer frontiersman, the primitive is usually male in these tropes. See, for example, Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Scott Watson picks up this tendency in the Group mythologies to define Native Canadians as belonging to a previous era: 'Indians in Housser's book were the dead Indians that Canadians love to lament. They inhabit the wilderness as ghosts. The wilderness itself exists in a permanent past tense, always at the origin of things.' Watson, 'Race, Wilderness, Territory,' 98. On this tendency generally and in the American experience, see Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive*. See also Jasen, *Wild Things*, 15.

formed the Lockean backdrop of American frontierism.<sup>46</sup>

Thomson was also often explicitly portrayed as something of a primitive. In turn-of-the-century Canada, this essentially meant the non-European. Defining their own cultures as the pinnacle of civilization and social development, many Europeans viewed other societies as primitive. They represented both an uncivilized barbarism and an essentialized purity and nobility. Primitive societies were constructed as reflecting a simplicity, a purity, a liberty, a harmony and a unity which antimodernists perceived as lacking in their own civilized society.<sup>47</sup>

Fairley, in his review of the 1920 Toronto memorial exhibition, developed the image of Thomson-the-primitive most forcefully:

Walking among the Thomson pictures one feels on every hand the presence in them of an essentially unsophisticated mind. There is the whole character of a man speaking and there is a whole landscape that speaks in the same accents. The one fits close upon the other.

And of Thomson himself: 'And always there is the child in the man; he was naive throughout.'<sup>48</sup>

Thomson, according to Fairley's construction, had nothing to learn from more sophisticated artists. Fairley carefully attempted to account for Thomson's technical ability and the seeming influence of contemporary styles on his work. 'Neither theory nor any acquired opinion can have had any permanent place in Thomson's mind. Whatever device he applied was either derived from or immediately corroborated by his apprehension of the landscape he knew so well.'

Thomson had learned all that the canons and theories of art knew, but had done so intuitively through his own direct and intimate experience.<sup>49</sup> The ultimate expression of the primitivization

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<sup>46</sup> See Cross, *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas*; Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis*.

<sup>47</sup> See Harrison, Frascina, Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 5-6. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 72. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 142-149. William Cronon connects primitivism to antimodernism in late nineteenth century American society describing '... the powerful romantic attraction of primitivism, dating back at least to Rousseau – the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living. In the United States, this was embodied most strikingly in the national myth of the frontier.' William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness,' 76.

<sup>48</sup> Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 245-246, 247.

<sup>49</sup> Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 245-246.

of Thomson came from Lambert. In discussing Thomson's death, Lambert attempted to make him as much a part of nature as the animals themselves. He wrote, 'But in wild nature, life and death are always close together.... And few animals meet their end in the open. Nature hides them, and their going is secret. So it was with Tom.'<sup>50</sup>

This primitivist/primitive motif in the Thomson mythology underlined the intimate connection of the untutored naïve painter and his essentialized knowledge of the landscape. In this image, Thomson's art depicted the pure essence of life in the Canadian wilderness. It did so naturally. The work of a "non-artist", Thomson's painting – its style, technique, colouring, and composition – grew organically from this lived experience.<sup>51</sup>

There was an imprecision in the constructed Thomson – sometimes primitive, sometimes primitivist – that reminds the reader that this discussion was occurring largely outside of the parameters of the art world. These writers sought to create an image of an artist depicting a region of the country considered to hold or to reflect the essence of national identity. The purpose of the mobilization of the primitivist/primitive trope was to emphasize Thomson's experiential and essential knowledge of a patch of earth that held meaning for the nationalist intelligentsia. The conflation of primitive and primitivist reinforced an aspect of the cult of wilderness. Part of the antimodern yearning for the wild was the desire to get in touch with a primitive vigour – the inner

<sup>50</sup> Lambert, *The Adventure of Canadian Painting*, 146.

<sup>51</sup> Lynda Jessup makes the case that the primitivism of the Group was not solely definable according to the discourse of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century art. She argues that such ideas were 'conflated with ideas about the primitivistic nature of the Canadian experience that were operating on a broad social basis in the early twentieth century.' Jessup, 'Canadian Artists, Railways, the State,' 24. See also George Altmeyer, 'Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 11:3 (August 1976 août), 21-36. Thomson does not display aspects of the primitive that one might expect. He did not borrow idioms, symbols, or even subjects from the region's aboriginal peoples. If Thomson was in fact recovering something of the primeval essence of the region, one might expect to see some parallels or similarities with the art of those culturally defined by his contemporaries as *part* of that primeval essence. The primitive Thomson, further, was using and developing modern techniques and equipment.

“wild man” in Patricia Jasen’s formulation<sup>52</sup> – lost in the process of civilization. The quest for the wilderness experience was of a piece with the antimodernist prescription for social and personal regeneration. By getting in touch with one’s inner wild man, by travelling back to a more primitive time when daily life was more real and authentic, the enervated city-dweller was able to rejuvenate himself before his return to the modern city. Thus, as the primitivist yearned to experience aspects of the primitive’s authentic habits and lifestyle, the lines between them become unclear. As something of a model for this practice, Thomson’s mythology indicated that this ability to get in touch with the inner wild man could be learned. This conflation of aesthetic expertise and authentic emotion was a necessary component both of the antimodernist wilderness vacation and of the *plein air* sketching engaged in by Thomson and his colleagues.

James MacCallum was the most insistent that Thomson’s paintings reflected his primitive-like emotional intimacy with his subject. In his memorial article, he denied Thomson any artistic sophistication: ‘He was not concerned with any special technique, any particular mode of application of colour, with this kind of brush stroke or that. If it were true to nature, the technique might be anything.’ He goes so far as to describe Thomson’s work as ‘the joy of a boy playing with paints...’<sup>53</sup> His presentation differed markedly from Jackson’s foreword, written about the same time. Jackson suggested that Thomson’s literalness was something he had needed to overcome. His early sketches, wrote Jackson, were ‘not remarkable’, but ‘sombre and dead in colour’ and ‘peculiar in composition’. They did show ‘a great knowledge of the country and [were] very faithful and painstaking.’ In the company of other artists, Thomson received valuable criticism and the benefits of their experience, as he learned colour, proportion, line, and pattern from his academically-trained colleagues and from his work. He learned, that is, how to paint.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jasen, *Wild Things*, 15, 105, 132. See also Jessup, ‘Bushwhackers in the Gallery,’ 7-8.

<sup>53</sup> MacCallum, ‘Tom Thomson,’ 385.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, foreword to *Exhibition Catalogue, 1919*.

## CREATING A READABLE ART

To debate the extent to which Thomson's paintings were photographically realistic is to miss the essence of contemporary descriptions of them. His sketches and paintings were expressive of his experience in the North. The blotchy colour, rough technique and crusty impasto reflected the rugged and primal qualities of the landscape, and the rugged, unrefined nature of the national character. More importantly, the insistence that Thomson painted simply what he saw made his work more accessible. The styles of modern art were becoming more difficult for the uninformed viewer to comprehend. The Thomson myth taught the uninformed viewer that he or she could access Thomson's art without fear of being confronted with something avant-garde. As Davies argued:

He was not the first to paint the North but he was the first to set its moods and message down on canvas in an unmistakable symbolism that even the *uninformed* could read. It was Thomson's faculty for simplifying an experience to its essential that made him an expressionist of his era.<sup>55</sup>

This was a necessary part of defining the paintings as reflections of the national essence and as organic expressions of the popular culture. At their core, these were depictions of a set of experiences that are supposedly part of every Canadian's background; thus, every Canadian should be able to appropriate them. Of course, these experiences and backgrounds were, largely, only those of a particular segment of Canadian society. This construct thus served to reinforce the understanding of the culture of specific middle-class Anglo-Canadians as encapsulating Canadian culture in general. MacCallum insisted that Thomson's paintings and sketches were valuable as reflections of the national experience: 'His sketches are a complete encyclopedia of all the

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<sup>55</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 11. Emphasis added. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel argue that a lack of knowledge of the styles and history of art can become an obstacle for the viewer to understand and appreciate a work of art. Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*, 47. The construction Davies offered insists that no special knowledge was required to understand Thomson's paintings. Of course, this assumed that the viewer accepted the larger notion that Thomson's paintings clearly and obviously captured the essence of the Canadian experience, a notion initially obvious only to a particular and localized segment of Canadian society.

phenomena of Algonquin Park, and aside from their artistic merits have a historical value entitling them to preservation in the National Gallery.<sup>56</sup> Notably, however, MacCallum, despite his apparent unease with a purely aesthetic valuing of Thomson's work, was still unwilling to abandon the image of these works as artistic creations. It was still in the National Gallery where they belong, though their value was described as historical.

In a similar vein, Davies maintained throughout her writings that the history of Canada was closely connected to knowledge of the land. Thomson captured the essence of this history and hence the national character:

That Thomson lived like one of the voyageurs who first knew and loved this land; that he served as a fire ranger, a sort of keeper of the forests; that he, as his memorial says, "lived humbly and passionately with the wild," was merely a summarization of Canadian life throughout its recorded history; that he was, in addition to all this, an interpretative artist, means that he was a crystallization of the Canadian consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

The Canadian consciousness she described was all-but-explicitly that of white Canadian explorers. In Davies's version, Thomson's story was the expression of the history of Canada – at least, the Dominion's "important" "recorded" history. Like MacTavish's designation of this particular space as the home of the Canadian "nation", any other presences on the land, being unrecorded, were designated as marginal.<sup>58</sup>

The characterization of Thomson as a primitive artist – as 'a natural painter', 'without

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<sup>56</sup> MacCallum, 'Tom Thomson,' 378. Thomson himself was also somewhat less insistent on his paintings' literalness. He wrote to MacCallum in October 1916 saying that his job fire-ranging was preventing him from doing much sketching: '... the natives can't see what we paint for. A photo would be great but the painted things are awful.' Thomson to MacCallum, 4 October (1916), NGCA, MacCallum Papers. Cited in Murray, *Art of Thomson*, 43. This comment underlines the fact that Thomson's paintings spoke not to northern Ontario lumbermen and trappers, but to his cultured circle of friends and supporters. It also suggests that, in Thomson's own mind, there was a distinction between his artistic strategy and one of a spontaneous natural "copying" of nature.

<sup>57</sup> Davies, 'Tom Thomson and the Canadian Mood,' 826.

<sup>58</sup> The idea of the erasure of the aboriginal presence from the landscape is taken up directly in Bordo, 'Jack Pine,' 98-128. On the erasure of the aboriginal presence in British Columbia see Elizabeth Furniss, 'Pioneers, Progress, and the Myth of the Frontier: The Landscape of Public History in Rural British Columbia,' *BC Studies* 115/116 (Autumn/Winter 1997/98), 7-44.

any direct academic training' in MacDonald's depiction<sup>59</sup> – connected to a specifically Canadian expression of antimodernism. Frequently Thomson and his colleagues were described as having had an unmediated experience with the Canadian landscape. In his article, MacDonald also argued that Thomson's paintings of the North were 'obviously inspired by the essential character of the subject.'<sup>60</sup> This description was very similar to the 1920 exhibition catalogue: 'To him the North was a spirit which, entering into him possessed him and permeated all his work.'<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the desire to push Thomson away from artistic paradigms also reveals this group's desire to bridge the space between increasingly remote avant-garde modern artists and society in general. As Ann Davis argues, the intention of the Group was to reach a broad audience: 'The Seven did not believe that painting would only reach the cultural elite.... Their art was more than mere embellishment suitable for gracing the walls of the idle rich; it would "admit the layman into the kitchen instead of seating him in the drawing-room."'<sup>62</sup> While this obscured the reality that these paintings initially spoke to a particular segment of Canadian society, it did capture the nationalists' drive to create an art for all Canadians. Thomson's paintings, in this construction, would repair the splits between high and popular culture, and between art and work.<sup>63</sup>

Thomson's use of the commercial style of art nouveau – the 'decorative' style of so many reviews<sup>64</sup> – also aided this accessibility. Rejecting the poetic mood and atmosphere of the so-called European techniques, Thomson's paintings emphasize line, colour, and immediacy of

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<sup>59</sup>MacDonald, 'Landmark in Canadian Art,' 47.

<sup>60</sup>MacDonald, 'Landmark in Canadian Art,' 48.

<sup>61</sup> AMT, *Catalogue of Memorial Exhibition 1920*.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, 'An Apprehended Vision,' 212. Quotation is from Fairley, 'Algonquin and Algoma,' 282.

<sup>63</sup> As Paul Litt defines it, popular culture is the organic expression of a people's social culture: its folklore, traditions, and way of life. Paul Litt, *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 83-87. See also J. Russell Harper, *A People's Art: Primitive, Naïve, Provincial, and Folk Painting in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 7-8.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, 'Art and Artists' *The Globe* (Toronto), 14 February 1920; Fairbairn, 'Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North,' *Toronto Daily Star*.

impact – the qualities of commercial poster art. This was the technique in which Thomson was trained and which he practised daily at work.<sup>65</sup> He captured the antimodern temper of his time and ironically expressed it through a modern commercial art form. Being stylistically familiar made the paintings accessible to a wider audience. The repeated emphasis on Thomson's work as representative of a common Canadian culture – that Thomson's lifestyle, characteristics and habits reflects the authentic Canadian experience – represented an effort to bridge the gap between high and popular culture.

Thus, not only was Thomson able to depict the essential North, but he was also uniquely able to communicate this essence to a wide audience. This argument was of course tautological: Thomson's symbolism was unmistakable for his viewer only on condition that the viewer accepted Thomson as Canada's symbolic interpreter. In this sense, responding to Thomson's works did not depend on any knowledge of art (for 'even the uninformed' were able to understand these paintings) but on a knowledge of the essence it represented. People who understood the elements of this particular reading (nationalist, wilderness, antimodern) would not have mistaken the symbolism of Thomson's paintings – a reading which Davies and the other Thomson biographers reinforced by laying out the assumption that one who understood the context would understand the work. Conversely, those who did not read these paintings in the same manner simply did not understand correctly the context in which they had been produced and the Nature (or the Canada) they depicted. This actually helps to identify the people to whom this message was directed: those who shared the nationalist network's sentiments and aspirations would most clearly have understood this message of identifying and specifying the national landscape. Just as experience in this "wilderness" region was central to Thomson's work, so it was to the viewer's ability to appropriate it "properly".

#### THE WILDERNESS IDENTITY AND THE ANTIMODERN PARADIGM

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<sup>65</sup> Ann Davis, 'An Apprehended Vision,' 7. See also Angela Davis, *Art and Work*, 84, 90-92.



Thomson's supposed wilderness lifestyle was congruent with antimodernism. Life on the land was meaningful in this construction. One struggled in the natural environment to survive. In the wilds, life is lived simply and directly. As Lears remarks, the need to accommodate both the aspiration to such a "simple life" and the realities of the urban workaday world was expressed in particular forms: 'The path of adjustment can be clearly seen in the craft reformers' redefinition of the simple life. Implicitly accepting the modern distinction between city work and country leisure, many reduced the simple life to a vacation cottage or a rustic exurban home.'<sup>66</sup>

Muskoka, Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park vacations represented the needed simple life experience that would ease the body and mind and spirit of an enervated urban resident. For through all of this period, it was primarily the middle-class professionals and bureaucrats to whom this aesthetic was directed, and for whom it held currency. The nationalist intelligentsia was largely made up of people who would know these regions as vacation sites and for whom struggling in the wild was not a life-sentence but an appealing escape from urban tedium.<sup>67</sup>

The conception, though, of the wilderness as romantic or even positive was a relatively new trend among English-Canadian elites. The pastoral image of the landscape – beautiful farms perfectly laid out among productive fields – had long been the dominant and preferred image, referring back to the struggle to tame the wild land.

The natural environment was being doggedly transformed into a cultural landscape and throughout much of Canada the first battle was with the forests. 'A Canadian settler hates a tree, regards it as his natural enemy, something to be destroyed, eradicated, annihilated by all and every means', noted one early nineteenth-century traveller through Ontario.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> As Patricia Jasen observes, the working classes generally did not enjoy the "summer vacation" as of yet, and so were generally restricted to day trips to places like Toronto Island. The wilderness vacation suited the lifestyles, the sensibilities and the opportunity of the urban bourgeoisie. See Jasen, *Wild Things*. 112, 124, 132.

<sup>68</sup> Osborne, 'The iconography of nationhood in Canadian art' in *The Iconography of Landscape*, 164-165. Quotation from Anna Jameson, *Winter studies and summer rambles in Canada* (Toronto, 1938 [1965]). Of course, this shift in the conceptualization of the forests which was a necessary precursor to the creation of the Thomson mythology was intrinsically connected to the changing lifestyles of the imaginers. Only an

The anxiety about the urban environment that underlay antimodernism caused a turn towards a new valuing of the natural environment and underwrote the high esteem for paintings of, for example, solitary trees exposed to the elements in the rocky northern Ontario landscape. The desire to secure the national identity in the wilderness setting was often contrasted (explicitly or implicitly) with the urban environment. Davies presented Thomson as the opposite of the disparaged urban world: 'To his receptive mind nothing in the natural world was meaningless, though very much in the man-made world was.'<sup>69</sup> Not only did this reinforce the negative definition of Thomson as external to the corrupt city, but it also confirmed a positive definition of Thomson as an interpreter of Nature's plan. At the same time, it appears ironic given Thomson's work life as a thoroughly urban commercial artist.<sup>70</sup> Intertwined with this antimodern antipathy to the perceived squalor, decadence and materialism of the modern city in the Canadian context was a determined national identification with the rural and wilderness environments.

#### SITES OF ANTIMODERN IDENTITY

The irony of this contrasting of city and wilderness underlines the complex relationship in the antimodern paradigm. Thomson, in his art and his mythology, represented the integration of this so-called wilderness into the metropolitan city. It was as the site of the wilderness vacation

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urban society could create such an idea of the wilderness. On the American context of the fixation with the clearing of land as the quintessential pioneer experience, see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xvi, 33. William Cronon describes the manner in which the ideas of the sublime and frontier culturally transformed wilderness from object of dread into one of romance. Cronon, 'Trouble with Wilderness,' 70-72. Also, critic Hector Charlesworth continued to assert that the pastoral landscapes of Constable and Turner represented the height of representation and the highest aspiration for the Canadian landscape. See Walton, 'Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 175; and 'Beauty My Mistress.'

<sup>69</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 46.

<sup>70</sup> MacDonald on a trip through Algoma and region reiterated the Canadian antimodernist's antipathy for the materialistic urban life. He bestowed Canadian primacy to the wilds: 'The general impression so far is that Canada will always be a wild country. She has it in her blood and the cities will never ordinance [sic] her true character.' MacDonald to Thoreau MacDonald, 23 August 1924, NAC, J. Russell Harper Papers, MG30 D352, Vol. 29, File 1.

that Algonquin Park was known. These vacations allowed the enervated mind-worker of places like Toronto to rest and to return regenerated and at peak efficiency to (usually) his urban occupation. This “wilderness” was being reconstructed to serve the needs of urban society.<sup>71</sup>

In her 1935 biography, Davies connected Thomson to the North as a resource region. She told the story of Thomson working on a log drive descending Grand Lake to the Ottawa River in 1916. She depicted him pushing his representations to include this other nationalist project – the economic development of the country fed by resource extraction:

Travelling day and night with the drive, Thomson, with his great sensitivity, absorbed something of the rhythm and significance of that powerful onward sweep of water that carried timbers and men downward from the virgin forests to markets and mills. So the work he did with the drive has another note, here the human factor enters, the white water that he painted then was not the secret, solitary, cataract of his earlier work, but was water power put to the service of man. That year Thomson painted the few things among his works in which man is related to the northern landscape.<sup>72</sup>

Davies gloried in the economic use of the region, which neatly paralleled its usefulness as a source of symbolic capital.

Thomson and his work came to represent the direct experience with life sought by many sufferers of antimodern ennui. Yet the created image of Tom Thomson was directed at a specific audience. For all of the ink spilled in describing Thomson and the Group as expressing in paint the authentic Canadian experience in an area of northern Ontario defined as the authentic Canadian environment, they shared this experience primarily with a small and specific group of Torontonians. It was the nationalist intelligentsia of middle-class Torontonians who had the associations with this region as a site for children’s summer camps and for family cottages. An article reviewing the 1920 AMT memorial exhibition referred to the subject of Thomson’s paintings as familiar ground for their intended audience: ‘...to the people of this city to whom the

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<sup>71</sup> See Allan Smith, ‘Farms, Forests and Cities.’

<sup>72</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 82.

north is so well known the exhibition just opened should make an especial appeal.’<sup>73</sup> Of course, only some people ‘of this city’ ‘knew’ the North in just this manner; their doing so was proof of a Canadian-ness to which others might aspire, as well as of a degree of middle-class comfort.

At the same time, this ‘pioneer mentality’ was far from being an outright invention. For the majority of the Anglo-Canadian elite of Toronto, distant though they were from the realities of a rural life, the countryside was not only a hinterland but also, in many cases, a place of family origin.<sup>74</sup> Two sorts of associations with pioneers were made in these texts about Thomson. The nationalists often saw and described themselves as pioneers of Canadian maturity and modernity.<sup>75</sup> These associations also privileged the pioneer heritage as authentically Canadian. The nationalists’ line was that, as people who were the direct inheritors of the pioneer legacy, they could access “true” and “primitive” things closed to immigrants and the urban working class.

Many of the writers explicitly associated the artists of this movement with pioneer heritages. Davies wrote of Thomson: ‘Tom Thomson’s family history was Scottish on both sides of the house; and through both channels he inherited the pioneer strain.’<sup>76</sup> She returned to this theme of a pioneer heritage:

Tom Thomson had talent that came to be called genius. This situation was one that could develop in pioneering family stock that had remained true to best principles from the day they first set to work in the Canadian bush, until, in the third generation, comfort and education produced men and women fit to pioneer in art, in science, in religion, in education and in many of the foremost fields of human endeavor. The pioneering spirit was thus diverted into intellectual and intuitional pursuits and set itself to fresh tasks for the evolution of humanity.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Beauty of North,’ *The Mail and Empire*.

<sup>74</sup> Cole Harris, ‘The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism’ in *Nationalism in Canada*, 28-29; see also Fletcher, ‘Industrial Algoma and the Myth of Wilderness,’ 7-12, 16.

<sup>75</sup> There was a current of seeing themselves as pioneers in the Group’s own outlook: ‘...next month the Algoma pioneers will disappear into the bush as usual and I trust emerge with a lot of strange things,’ Jackson to Eric Brown, n. d. 1920, NGCA, NGCF, 7.1-J Correspondence with/re Artists, Jackson, A.Y. The 1921 Group exhibition catalogue would concur: ‘these are pioneer days.’ Art Museum of Toronto, *Group of 7: Catalogue, Exhibition of Paintings, May 7th – May 27th, 1920* (Toronto: Art Museum of Toronto, 1920), n.p.

<sup>76</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 19. Throughout *A Canadian Art Movement*, Housser desperately insists upon the

While she was decidedly vague on what these ‘best principles’ might have been, they were akin to the eternal national characteristics purportedly reflected in Thomson’s art.

Algonquin Park and Georgian Bay were not necessarily remote from the middle-class Torontonians’ sense of place. Many had strong psychic connections with these locales. David Milne would wryly note that Thomson’s ability to speak to and to play upon these connections was the major cause of his popularity. ‘Tom Thomson isn’t popular for what aesthetic qualities he showed,’ Milne suggested, ‘... his subjects were ones that have pleasant associations for most of us, holidays, rest, recreation. Pleasant associations – beautiful subject; beautiful subject – good painting.... In Canada we like to have our heavens made to order and in our own image.’<sup>78</sup> Many in Thomson’s public would have had such associations with places like Algonquin Park.<sup>79</sup> Middle-class Torontonians had an understanding of the region in which ‘“the North” generally meant any of the areas of the Precambrian Shield, but in practical terms, for middle class city-dwellers, both phrases referred to something considerably more limited and something which was not necessarily outside of their experience.’<sup>80</sup>

These northern places existed for most middle-class Torontonians as vacation lands.

MacCallum’s description of his reaction to Thomson’s sketches from his 1912 trip through the

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pioneer heritage of Thomson and the members of the Group, associating even Varley and Lismer with this characteristic.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 155. Also in Thompson, *Decades of Discord*, 163.

<sup>79</sup> See Fletcher, ‘Industrial Algoma and the Myth of Wilderness,’ 3; also, Jasen, *Wild Things*, especially Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>80</sup> Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 197. See also Fletcher, ‘Industrial Algoma and the Myth of Wilderness,’ 3. In some texts, we find overcivilized Europeans contrasted with the Ontarians. In the 1912 *Owen Sound Sun* report of Thomson and Broadhead’s trip through the region, such Europeans are so described: ‘Mr. Broadhead said a party of English aristocrats started in from Bisco after they left, taking with them camp beds, chairs, carpet slippers, table napkins and other civilized luxuries but how they have since fared he does not know, but can easily imagine.’ ‘Local Man’s Experience in Northern Wilds,’ *Owen Sound Sun*. Despite the fact that this region was well-established by this time as a vacation area, Tom Thomson’s experiences were defined in contrast with those of these overcivilized Europeans. They are the wilderness dilettantes, he the wilderness expert.

Mississauga Forest is telling:

[A]s I looked them over I realized their truthfulness, their feeling and their sympathy with the grim, fascinating northland. Dark they were, muddy in colour, tight, and not wanting in technical defects, but they made me feel that the North had gripped Thomson, as it had me ever since, when a boy of eleven, I first sailed and paddled through its silent places.<sup>81</sup>

Attempting to include himself in this group of “Northern men”, MacCallum revealed his own status as a summer visitor. It was as the sojourner, despite his attempt to hide this, that MacCallum knew northern Ontario. Thomson himself returned to Toronto each winter, either to work or to paint, or, as MacCallum remarked, simply to avoid winter weather: ‘Jackson and he camped together and painted until the snow and cold weather drove them back to the city.’<sup>82</sup> The descriptions of Thomson from this era did not mention those people who spent the entire year in Algonquin or the North generally – those who, unlike Thomson, wintered in Algonquin Park.<sup>83</sup>

These sojourners, though, insisted upon their special knowledge of the region. Thomson could not be a mere tourist. The 1920 Memorial Exhibition Catalogue made a clear distinction. Thomson expressed in his paintings ‘the moods and passions, the sombreness and the glorious colour of early Spring and Autumn in the North – not the North of the Summer tourist, who sees but a waste of barren rock, bristly pine and ragged spruce.’ Thomson guided such tourists. His experiences and knowledge were defined as much more extensive and intimate than theirs were. The insistence on this distinction – between mere tourist and Algonquin School artist – obscured the differences between Thomson, MacCallum and their associates, and the trappers and forestry workers – the people who actually lived in northern Ontario – whose lifestyle they aped. This

<sup>81</sup> MacCallum, ‘Tom Thomson,’ 376.

<sup>82</sup> MacCallum, ‘Tom Thomson,’ 376.

<sup>83</sup> On his way to the Rockies early in 1914, Jackson went first to Algonquin Park. He wrote MacDonald that Thomson was well regarded among the local people he met there. Jackson to MacDonald, 14 February 1914, NAC, MacDonald Papers.

distinction in the 1920 catalogue underlined the extent of this circle's 'false hair on the chest.'<sup>84</sup>

Thomson was constructed as a liminal figure on a marginal site. He lived in and expressed the essence of the northern wilderness that defined the nation. He captured the imagined geography at the core of the imagined community. Yet his legend and art served to integrate this North further into the orbit of the urban metropolis. As Rob Shields argues, the North only makes sense as a concept in relation to another region, such as the south. This particular relation was further structured in this instance by such dichotomies as work/vacation, city/wilderness and Toronto/Algonquin Park. The idea of Thomson provided a commonsensical figure for these relationships. He brought a tangible North and northern experience into an understandable relation with the city.<sup>85</sup> Housser inadvertently captured an important truth when he described what Thomson had represented to MacCallum: 'He [MacCallum] had found the man whom he thought could paint his north country to suit him.'<sup>86</sup>

This sort of shared knowledge of Thomson's subjects made the images readable to their audience. Davies underlined the essentially non-aesthetic qualities of Thomson's appeal, suggesting the reasons these images spoke to this segment of society. She suggested a tautology: to the people who understood Thomson's subject as intimately as did Thomson, the truthfulness of the images was beyond dispute. 'His work has a rare emotional quality which strikes a deep note of response from all souls that are in tune with their Canadian environment.... [T]o those who know the country that he painted he is more than a great artist, he is the great interpreter.'<sup>87</sup> By extension, those who did not understand or appreciate the work simply did not understand the

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<sup>84</sup> AMT, *Catalogue of Memorial Exhibition, 1920*. In 1936, Frank Underhill remarked upon the contrast between the backwoodsman image of the Group of Seven and the reality that they spent most of their time in urban Toronto. Underhill, 'False Hair on the Chest.'

<sup>85</sup> On the spatial marginality of the northern wilderness in Canadian identity, see Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 162-199; on the relationship of the city and wilderness in contemporary Canada, see Allan Smith, 'Farms, Forests and Cities,' 71-94.

<sup>86</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 33.

region and thus the purpose behind his paintings. This observation worked not only to undercut those who would judge Thomson's paintings by standards other than his ability to reflect the essential Canadian experience in the wilderness, but also, it seems, to exclude significant portions of Canadian society. Some members of society could only be told what these images represented; and, as they did not properly understand the context and environment of the work, they did not have opinions about Thomson's work that were relevant to understanding them.

By the 1920s, the associations this social segment had with Algonquin Park and such wilderness vacation areas had firmly established the "North" within their intellectual framework. As Rob Shields writes, 'The North is less a real region signified by a name and more a name, a signifier, with a historically variable, socially defined content. An "official" social mythology appears to overlies the palimpsest of personal images and experiences....'<sup>88</sup> Given the dominance of Toronto-based elites in Ontario and Canadian culture, it is perhaps not surprising that Thomson's paintings of an area that only a small portion of Canadian society actually visited should come to be read as renderings of the quintessential national environment.

The long-standing confounding of Ontario with Canada was dramatized in the Thomson myth. It was, of course, part of a more general pattern Mary Vipond observed in 1974:

Ontario has, since before Confederation, tended to impose its standards on the other provinces (especially the English-speaking ones) to such an extent that to many it has become equivalent to the nation. Because Ontario has defined the nation, Ontario regionalism has become Canadian nationalism.<sup>89</sup>

Images related directly to the conceptual and material frameworks of the Toronto intellectual elite were transformed into icons of Canadian nationalism. They could be read as representations of an essentialized national identity by that elite because of their associations with the subject of those depictions. Toronto elites have typically regarded themselves as national elites and have presented their own nationalist ideas and aspirations as those of Canada as a whole. In this case,

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<sup>88</sup> Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 165.

<sup>89</sup> Vipond, 'National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada,' 16.



they developed their regional icons into national ones.

The process of creating Tom Thomson as a national icon also had to cross class lines. According to one theory, popular taste generally reduces the things of art to the things of life, giving primacy to the thing being represented over the mode of representation.<sup>90</sup> Thomson's paintings can be seen in this light – as quasi-realist “reflections”. Yet further connections, to the emergent myth-symbol complex, had to be *learned*. This connection was already made for the majority of Thomson's immediate public, the nationalist cultural elite. They could understand Thomson's work based upon their own associations with northern Ontario and their own ideas about Canada. To many members of the young cultural elite in Toronto, the images of Algonquin Park or Georgian Bay would have had powerful, definite and pleasing associations. In this way the “nationalism” of Tom Thomson's paintings became part of their ‘common sense’. Through the Thomson mythology, they were able to teach this reading to other Canadians. Thomson's paintings thus became indispensable visual aids for the nationalist project of the young middle-class, Toronto-based cultural elite.<sup>91</sup> In many ways, the national identity which this intellectual elite so avidly sought to express, and which they consciously or not actively created, was an expression of their personal identities in modern, early twentieth-century Toronto. Their specific ideas about the essence of Canada emerged from their limited set of personal experiences. And as the next chapter will suggest, this definition of essence normalized race and gender definitions particular to the time and place in which the myth of Thomson assumed a coherent shape.

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<sup>90</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5; Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*, 39-41.

<sup>91</sup> The manner in which this group of people come to understand Thomson's works underlines Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel's general idea that the system of perception of works of art are ‘historically constituted system founded in social reality....’ The are internalized as the standards of artistic appropriation for a given society at a given moment in time. Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*, 41.

## CHAPTER 3: A MAN FOR MOST SEASONS: THOMSON IN THE CANADIAN WILDERNESS

Thomson lived a simple life, it is true because it was the only life he could live and maintain his physical and spiritual independence. Freedom was essential.

Blodwen Davies<sup>1</sup>

The legend of Tom Thomson presents him as an archetype of and model for the modern Canadian man. Much as his mythology plays upon elements both “primitive” and “primitivist”, Thomson was a modern hero, who combined a rediscovered primal masculinity with a re-energized civilized manliness. He was thus something of an antimodernist’s dream. Depicted as a frontiersman, Thomson lived the simple life in the supposedly primeval wilderness; and this experience, in the True North, transformed him into a distinctly Canadian man.

The creation of Tom Thomson as an archetype of manhood blended a gendered identity with a national one. As George Mosse argues, national identities supported middle-class definitions of respectability as norms for social behaviour generally, not just for members of the middle class.<sup>2</sup> By describing Thomson as capturing, in his life and in his work, the essence of Canada and of the Canadian experience, the national identity was defined through essentially male activities. This imagined identity functioned equally powerfully for national as well as gender identity. Following Benedict Anderson’s seminal work on the topic, national identity can be seen as the consequence of modern choices and strategies, rather than as an eternal and “natural” part of the social world.<sup>3</sup> The habits and characteristics of an icon such as Tom Thomson became intertwined with national identity. At the same time, though, the way of life commemorated in the legend also privileged the experiences of a predominantly Anglo-Canadian segment of society, as normative for the entire society. Racial, gender, and national norms thus

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, *The Story of a Man*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

converged in this created icon.

The quest for primal vigour and essentialized experience lay at the roots of the cult of wilderness. Thomson's supposed rediscovery of an essential masculinity – an integral aspiration of the antimodern wilderness experience – most often manifested itself in terms of his “Aboriginalness”. As the “primitives” of the Canadian experience, “Indians” were regarded as the natural and masculine men (at least insofar as they were removed from white society). They were the exemplars in North America of the very masculinity that the over-civilized urban man lacked.<sup>4</sup> Through his experience living in the wilds, Thomson paralleled the experiences and knowledge of aboriginal man. He reconnected with a masculinity both “original” and “aboriginal” – though (importantly) he never fully “went native”.

The symbolic Thomson underwent his rite of wilderness passage in his 1912 trip through northern Ontario with William Broadhead. Importantly, Thomson was not guided in by some wise and spiritual aboriginal Canadian but by a man similar to himself. The 1912 *Owen Sound Sun* story identified him as Mark Ripley. Thomson met this man (who lived on the Mississauga River) and came face-to-face with the True Northern Man, whose ‘only companions’ were ‘the tame deer and the rabbits with which he has made friends.’<sup>5</sup> Having successfully canoed and portaged through northern Ontario, Thomson was metaphorically admitted to the woods by this encounter with an old hand of the Canadian wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive*, 8-9; Jasen, *Wild Things*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Local Man’s Experience in Northern Wilds,’ *Owen Sound Sun*.

<sup>6</sup> In his 1947 text, Richard Lambert modified the story somewhat to incorporate that other wild man, Grey Owl: ‘First, they met Grey Owl, the strange Englishman who had turned himself into an Indian, adopted their way of life, and later gave up hunting and trapping in order to devote all his time to preserving the beaver from extinction.’ Though Archie Belaney did not reinvent himself into Grey Owl until after Thomson’s death, Lambert’s decision to connect the two men was surely purposeful. Here were two men who appropriated key aspects of the aboriginal experience in the name of advancing the ‘higher’ Canadian society in part by reinvigorating Canadian manhood. Notably, in Lambert’s construction, Belaney had no problem “turning himself into an Indian”. Conceptualized as originary, the Indian was contained within him, and he needed only strip away his civilization and simply adopt the Natives’ way of life. Lambert, *The Adventure of Canadian Painting*, 141. A similar story appears in Robson, *Tom Thomson*, 6. David Silcox points out this stretching of time. Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 199. Addison indicates that this story may come from Belaney’s claim of having met Thomson. Addison, *The Algonquin Years*, 44.

In keeping with Thomson's "natural" affinity for the Canadian wilderness, Davies insisted that Thomson felt the intimate connection he was able to make with nature. Through his 1912 trip through northern Ontario and his 1913 summer spent in Algonquin and Metagami, Thomson had made a spiritual connection to the landscape. She presented an effervescent Thomson, describing his experiences to Jackson during the early winter months of 1914 when they shared a Toronto studio:

Month after month he [Jackson] listened to Thomson's tales of the primeval wilderness where man could get within sound of the heart-beats of Mother Earth, where the land is vibrant with a life that had not yet been subdued to the needs of mechanical age.<sup>7</sup>

Thomson, in this depiction, yearned for the vibrant life that could only be enjoyed in intimate contact with the primeval wilderness. Through its gendered language, this image further underlined Nature as the site of the original and the primal. Thomson, in his journeys to the northern wilderness, was able to return to the metaphoric maternal breast.<sup>8</sup>

Through this vibrant lifestyle in the primeval wilderness, Thomson began to take on the qualities, or at least, the supposed qualities, of aboriginal peoples. In his 1932 text, Albert Robson made a reference back to the ideal of the noble savage in describing the scene at Grip Ltd. when the news broke of Thomson's 1912 sale: 'the members of the department were jubilant, but Tom controlled his feelings with the stoicism of an Indian.'<sup>9</sup> Of Thomson's biographers, Blodwen Davies was the most pronounced in her attribution of aboriginal qualities to Thomson. She

<sup>7</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 22. Davies's description of these conversations going on 'month after month' stretches the amount of time -- about a month -- these two actually shared the studio. They moved into the Studio Building in January 1914, just after its completion. Jackson wrote to MacDonald from Mowat in Algonquin Park, on his way west, the morning after his arrival, on 14 February 1914. A.Y. Jackson to MacDonald, 14 February 1914. NAC, MacDonald Papers.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of the gendering, especially the feminization, of nature, see Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Karen Dubinsky, ' "The Pleasure is Exquisite but Violent": The Imaginary Geography of Niagara Falls in the Nineteenth Century,' *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 29:2 (Été 1994 Summer), 64-88.

<sup>9</sup> Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters*, 140.

described him as having something of the passion of the (imagined) Indian: ‘His eyes were a dark brown, at times deep and brilliant and in moments of enthusiasm or intensity they burned like the eyes of an Indian.’<sup>10</sup> Thomson’s “aboriginal” woodcraft skills were also highlighted: ‘Thomson was celebrated as a canoeman, although to be a merely competent canoeman is no distinction in Canada where a canoe constitutes the only means of transportation over such large areas. He developed the Indian kinship for his canoe.’<sup>11</sup> The hyperbole of her insistence on the underdeveloped nature of Canadian transportation systems at this time (Algonquin Park itself was serviced by two railroads by 1912) can be seen as the desire to “primitivize” Thomson’s environment and experiences. Yet, along with his other biographers, Davies stopped short of identifying Thomson as the complete child of the forest. She, for example, referred to Thomson as ‘...this voyageur with the spirit of an Indian...’ This passage made an important distinction between the two identities: while Thomson *had* the spirit of an Indian, he *was* a voyageur, the white fur trader. This dichotomy was further developed in her discussion of Thomson’s art: ‘There were two contrasting sides to Thomson. There was the man, quiet, reserved, gentle, unassuming, something of the Indian is spirit; the other was the artist, adventurous, emotional, dramatic, compelling, idol-smashing.’<sup>12</sup> Thomson seemed always to have had one foot in both worlds, his “wild man” ethic counterbalancing his pursuit of art. In this way, Thomson was depicted as able to subdue his inner wild man for the purpose of nation-building.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of Tom Thomson reflected a common pattern of white Canadians seeking to resolve their relative rootlessness in the Canadian environment. As Scott Watson remarks, ‘The answer ... [at least in part] was to take over First Nations history as one’s own and deny

<sup>10</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> See Jasen, *Wild Things*, 15, 105, 132. See also the discussion of primitivism and the quest for the inner “wild man” in Jasen, *Wild Things*, Chapter 1; Lynda Jessup, ‘Bushwackers in the Gallery,’ 7-8.

specificity to First Nations peoples' experiences.'<sup>14</sup> Thomson, in these depictions, had the woodsman's skills and the knowledge of the environment that any "Indian" had. 'He has that uncanny understanding of woods and lakes in common with the Indian....'<sup>15</sup> Yet as a "representative" white Canadian, he did not lose himself completely in the wilds as an "Indian" might. He simultaneously represented the evolution of the Canadian race, and served as a model of the reinvigorated modern man. Just as his paintings presented depictions of the Canadian essence, Thomson was an essentialized expression of the wilderness cult. The particular Canadians to whom the hagiographies were directed could participate in his lifestyle through the wilderness or cottage vacation. They were not required to "go native" or, for that matter, to know anything about the history or lifestyles of the First Nations.

The wilderness cult as a solution to the enervation of the urban lifestyle was particularly applicable to children. Boys would benefit by discovering the path to a virile manhood through their experiences in these "wilderness" camps and by re-enacting the lifestyle of the "noble savage". They reinforced, at the same time, manly virtues. Daniel Francis describes such camps as Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park, created in the 1920s by Toronto Y official Taylor Statten, which catered to the Toronto elites in just these terms: 'Camp Ahmek and other camps like it sought to develop character and to train future leaders. Campers learned self-reliance, responsibility and Christian fellowship. The Imaginary Indian created by Ernest Thompson Seton was perfectly suited to this project.'<sup>16</sup> This was illustrated in 1930 when Taylor Statten's campers participated in Tom Thomson Day. This celebration included the dedication to Thomson's memory of a totem pole (befitting a generic, or, if you will, "Imaginary" "Indianness" – totem

<sup>14</sup> Watson, 'Race, Wilderness, Territory,' 93.

<sup>15</sup> Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters*, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 156. Gail Bederman devotes a chapter to G. Stanley Hall's attempts to help boys become better men by rediscovering their savage roots. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 77-120.

poles were not part of Algonquin culture). The primitive's meaningful work and life experiences, and a national identity bound up in notions of a rugged, semi-civilized existence were brought together in such sacred moments. Much of the literature on Thomson discussed here can be read as an attempt to create an ideal sort of man. He possesses the virility and knowledge of a "primitive," yet contained this primitive savagery within the pure virtue and purpose of a member of the most advanced civilization.

In 1919 Jackson underlined Thomson's independent nature in describing his instinctive reluctance to take up painting full-time: 'He was sensitive and independent, and feared he might become an object of patronage.'<sup>17</sup> Writing in *The Rebel*, Barker Fairley, University of Toronto German professor and Algonquin School enthusiast, also promoted Thomson as the exemplification of this gender ideal of free-standing independence. While acknowledging the support that Thomson had received from a few official purchases and from MacCallum, Fairley's text worked to minimize and marginalize its significance: 'this rare and utterly Canadian artist had no practical backing worth speaking of.'<sup>18</sup> Thomson stood no less proudly apart from his fellow artists. Though influenced in his work by a group of working artists, 'It is equally clear that Thomson retained absolutely unimpaired his own character and his own way of looking at things.'<sup>19</sup> MacDonald concurred with Fairley's insistence on Thomson's essential independence and determination in his task: 'Unmarried, and having Thoreau's skill in wanting but little, he was practically independent of the mean recognition given by Canadians to the better efforts of their national artists.'<sup>20</sup> In these descriptions of the "manly" artist, both Fairley and MacDonald developed a silence, by now almost typical of articles about Thomson, about Thomson's art work as art.

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<sup>17</sup> Jackson, foreword to *Catalogue of Thomson Exhibition*.

<sup>18</sup> Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 244.

<sup>19</sup> Fairley, 'Tom Thomson and Others,' 246.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, 'A Landmark in Canadian Art,' 48.

For her part, Davies tried to construct a manly Thomson against other, more extravagant expressions of romanticism – the dandyism, carelessness, eccentricity – which were connected to Europeans. Despite supposedly living away from civilization, the Thomson Davies depicted maintained the social values of this age:

Thomson in real life was a most capable, level-headed and dependable individual. In whatever circumstances he might find himself, he was quite able to provide himself with food and shelter. He instinctively escaped the devitalizing effect of the industrial age and remained always a positive man. He was an excellent craftsman, woodsman and fisherman, a good cook, an attractive companion, and a musician. Though he was unconventional he was never incompetent or irresponsible.<sup>21</sup>

Davies presented Thomson as manly (fully independent of others, self-reliant, handsome, cultured) and as reinvigorated by his time in the wilds (rugged, vigorous, energetic). She also distanced the hero from his admirers: ‘Thomson became something of a curiosity in Toronto art circles. ... Rumour painted him a sort of wild man of the woods. However, Thomson eluded all those who would have exploited him, impatient of swank or vanity, insincerity or affectation.’<sup>22</sup> Rejecting the legend of Thomson as a wild man of the woods, Davies still insisted that he held in contempt the attributes of the decadent urban gossips.

In fact, she presented a fairly familiar image of Thomson’s life philosophy. Her Thomson upheld the morality of the fundamentally Christian late-Victorian middle class. ‘Thomson’s religion,’ she wrote, ‘like that of his philosophy, was of his own creating. One who knew him well summed it up as his determination to “do justly, love mercy, walk humbly, and say nothing about it.”’<sup>23</sup> Thomson intuitively, according to Davies, lived according to an ethic of the golden rule and middle-class gentility. He had recaptured his masculine strength in the wild, but not at the cost of abandoning the manly restraint of civilization. In fact, it was a desire to reinvigorate

<sup>21</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 26-27.

<sup>23</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 72.



his seemingly degenerating society and to lead the cause of social and national progress that motivated him to get in touch with his primal masculinity.

#### DEFINING THE NATIONAL RACE

Just as the Canadian wilderness was supposed to reinvigorate a man, many of Thomson's celebrants shared the popular belief that environment helped shape a people's character.<sup>24</sup> They had a primary role as interpreting the effects of Canadian geography. Housser explicitly connected this influence of the environment on a people's characteristics with the artist's activity of understanding and interpreting those influences:

Science recognizes that environment affects individuals and contributes toward the creation of racial characteristics. ... Nature and the universe are a mystery which Science seeks to understand. Art is on the same adventure as Science, with this difference, that Science tries to comprehend Nature's body while Art tries to apprehend her spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Thomson was interpreter of this environment. Albert Robson insisted 'His tragic and untimely death on Canoe Lake robbed our Dominion of a great interpreter of the Canadian wilderness....'<sup>26</sup>

Margaret Fairbairn made the same connection in her review of the 1920 Toronto memorial exhibition: 'But on bits of board or canvas ... he reproduced the glory of our Canadian wilderness, the sunshine of heaven, the Majesty of nature.'<sup>27</sup> In both of these comments, the wilderness was paradoxically defined as Canadian, the crucible of a Canadian people.

As the interpreter of this felt but unspoken national essence, the artist had a central role. Lismer argued that part of the purpose of art and literature was to bring an understanding of this land to the Canadian people through a distinctly Canadian landscape movement – to define an

<sup>24</sup> Carl Berger explicitly parallels H.A. Innis's call for Canadian explanations of Canadian development with the stated purpose and work of the Group. Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Robson, *Tom Thomson*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Fairbairn, 'Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North,' *Toronto Star*.

experience Canadians could feel but not describe. Through contact and knowledge of the region, the nation would take form:

The changes of season, topographical contours, native trees, and majestic forms of rock and mountain are mould for the form of a nation and if we cannot be moved by strange, primitive fears and religious impulses that stirred the earliest inhabitants of these vast areas, then the artist is entering into his true vocation when he depicts and presents them in the form of paintings and literature.<sup>28</sup>

The artist was here the interpreter of the essence and of the spirit of the landscape, which other members of society could not identify, but which – somehow – informed their identity as

Canadians. Housser too described the artist's role as central to the expression of a Canadian race:

For Canada to find a true racial expression of herself through art, a complete break with European traditions was necessary; a new type of artist was required; a type with sufficient creative equipment to initiate a technique of its own through handling new materials by new methods; and what was required more than technique was a deep-rooted love of the country's natural environment.<sup>29</sup>

Canada and Canadians, in this statement, had to let go of Europe and things European, and embrace the national landscape.

Through this embrace of a national landscape and thus of a national experience, one could understand the essence of the national being. Arthur Lismer put things basically if somewhat esoterically in his 1930 school textbook on art appreciation. In a note on "The West Wind," he wrote, 'We feel ... that it has the impress of truth. We recognize its great and eternal qualities.' These great and eternal qualities were the connection this painting made not only with the Canadian environment but also with 'our own sympathies with the lakes, trees and all the elements of beauty in the Canadian background.'<sup>30</sup> Thus, Thomson's painting was not just a depiction of a piece of the Canadian landscape, but also of the relationship of the Canadian people with that environment. It put in paint the lived relationship Canadians have with their

<sup>28</sup> Lismer, 'Canadian Art,' speech to The Canadian Club, Toronto, 13 December 1926. Typescript in NAC, Lismer Papers, v. 1, file 1-14.

<sup>29</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 17.

environment, but which they cannot describe themselves. This painting defined not something Canadians see or know, but something they 'feel'.

Yet this conceptualization severely limited the range of "truly Canadian" experience. It emphasized the experiences of settlers in the Canadas as definitive of a country which, by the time of Thomson, extended well beyond these areas. Neither Maritimers nor western settlers, it seems, had anything to contribute to the *essential* Canadian characteristics. This formula described one pioneer experience – that of the borderlands of agricultural Ontario and the mythic Shield of voyageur lore – as the essentially Canadian one. The pioneer heritage was projected back in time specifically to the pioneers of Ontario rather than across space to places where pioneering, in this sense, was still underway.

Housser's treatment of the northern Ontario Shield as the national landscape exposed his vision as being both region- and class-specific:

When a group of Canadian painters came, enthusiastic over the wonders and beauty of the Ontario northland, it was derogatively said by a Toronto critic, "This school of painting is not of the soil but of the rocks." But this land of rocks constitutes by far the greater portion of the total area of Canada. It is the race's inescapable environment. It is the playground of hundreds of thousands of Canadian people. The love of it is deep in our souls. To any one who has ever really been bitten by the North, the call to go back never leaves him and it is inevitable that its overpowering mood will find expression in the nation's art. ... The North, like the West, to be expressed in paint, demands the adapting of new materials to new methods.<sup>31</sup>

Though presenting a generalized picture of the Shield as a region, Housser displayed a particular conception of this environment. Unlike the unspecific and vaguely defined American West, the Canadian wilderness was confined to Ontario cottage and vacation country. Only Canadians of a specific region and social position used this region as a playground. Rare indeed would be the recreational visit of a Montréal garment worker or British Columbia logger. In fact, Housser's construction (the North can only lure one back from the not-North) implies that this was the

<sup>30</sup> Lismer, *Canadian Picture Study*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 14.

experience of the wilderness sojourner, rather than of the resident of this region. Again, he spoke to and for the middle-class nationalist intelligentsia – the Masseys, the Walkers, the Harrises, even the Browns.

This conceptualization also contributed to the privileging of pioneers of a particular ethnic background as truly Canadian. The antimodernist frequently considered recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, especially those flooding urban centres such as Toronto, to be social problems. They were certainly not yet a highly visible part of the Algonquin Park-Muskoka-Georgian Bay set, nor of the University of Toronto crowd.<sup>32</sup> Recent immigrants to the Prairie West, except Anglo-Celtics from elsewhere in Canada, were also excluded. The old Ontario pioneer of Anglo-Celtic stock and sensibility was the favoured Canadian type, along with an ill-defined *coureur de bois* figure. Housser was frequently at pains to connect each member of the Group and Thomson with such an old Ontario heritage throughout his book. In representing Thomson as a pioneer, this conceptualization of a Canadian type favoured people of similar backgrounds as those who were truly Canadian, who truly understood and experienced the Canadian lifestyle.<sup>33</sup>

And this was a male experience. Women, of the actual flesh-and-blood variety, were also routinely written out of Thomson's story. The tales of his relationships with Alice Lambert and Harriet Trainor have only been integrated into the story recently. The women (for example, Trainor and Shannon Fraser's wife) who lived in the area were rarely mentioned, if at all. The trips themselves were generally presented as all-male affairs.<sup>34</sup> Women were notably absent from

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<sup>32</sup> Though not the centre of his study, the backgrounds of university students into and through the 1930s are discussed in Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*.

<sup>33</sup> Lambert, in his 1947 textbook, reiterated the notion that the artist who could interpret the essence of the Canadian landscape had a heritage which predisposed him to develop these insights. Lambert, *Adventure of Canadian Painting*, v. Thomson is one such figure. Douglas Cole makes an interesting connection in describing Thomson as following the same pattern of farm to city migration which many of his patrons would have done a generation or two earlier. Cole, 'Artists, Patrons and Public,' 69-78.

<sup>34</sup> This depiction was not always the accurate. Jackson wrote to MacDonald from Canoe Lake in October

the early accounts of Thomson's life, which tend to focus on the painter's final five years. In her 1930 text, Blodwen Davies, the first to attempt an extensive exploration of Thomson's life, did not suggest that he had had any relationships with women. In her 1935 text, Davies mentions that Thomson was purported to have fallen in love in Seattle, but that no one knew the details. Her only comment was that this episode marked his emotional maturation: 'it opened the floodgates of his emotional life.'<sup>35</sup> Neither text mentioned Thomson's relationship with Winifred Trainor, though Davies would surely have heard of their rumoured engagement.<sup>36</sup> Ottelyn Addison reported, in a footnote in her 1969 text, the rumour of his engagement to Winnifred Trainor but suggested it to be little more than gossip.<sup>37</sup> It would have to wait until Silcox and Town's 1977 text for Alice Lambert to be named.<sup>38</sup>

This cleared the field for the female lead as played by Nature. Thomson became her faithful suitor. As already seen in another context, Mortimer-Lamb described Thomson's relationship with Nature in the language of a courtship: '...he went to Nature and communed with her in all her moods. He was the most constant of lovers, and with increasing intimacy came profound knowledge.'<sup>39</sup> Davies picked up this vocabulary, describing Thomson's activity as more of a devotional duty than an arduous job:

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1914 including Mrs. Beatrice Robertson in their party. Peter Mellen places Marjorie Lismer at Canoe Lake about the same time. Jackson to MacDonald, 5 October 1914, NAC, MacDonald Papers. Mellen, *The Group of Seven*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Davies, Thomson's Algonquin Park friend, Mark Robinson, mentions Trainor's insistence upon her engagement to Thomson, but was sceptical. His scepticism about the accuracy of Trainor's claim may account for Davies's omission. Mark Robinson to Blodwen Davies, 4 September 1930, NAC, Davies Collection. There seems, however, little doubt that writers such as Blodwen Davies, not to mention Thomson's closer friends, would have known about one or the other of these situations, if not both. They made conscious decisions to exclude these stories. Murray, for example, uses a letter in the Davies collection to reconstruct some of these stories. Murray, 'World of Tom Thomson.' See also Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*.

<sup>37</sup> Addison, *The Algonquin Years*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Mortimer-Lamb, 'Tom Thomson,' *The Studio*.

What he painted was the miracle of renewed life, the awakening of a mysterious something that never dies, but only withdraws after each cycle of experience to contemplate its achievement. He loved that yearly miracle and with the devotion of a mystic or a lover, he longed to trace, line by line, tone by tone, and note by note, every step in the ageless mystery.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the fact that Davies explicitly presented two alternative visions, mystic and lover, the construction of her final clause – Thomson’s longing, his fastidious attention to each facet of that which was being revealed (despite the lack of physical detail in his paintings) – harkens back more to a lover’s attentions than a mystic’s fervour. MacCallum most fully animated this courtship:

The northern spring radiant with hope bursting riotously forth from the grim embrace of winter always found him in the woods ready to chronicle its beauties. The awakening rivers and lakes, the earth peeping here and there through her coverlet of snow and the sunny skies afforded a wealth of ravishing colour which ever charmed his sensitive soul.<sup>41</sup>

Thomson was here presented as waiting for Miss Nature patiently at the appointed hour. She peeked out at him from beneath her blanket coyly, shyly. The sunlight, catching her colouring, highlighted her features as the enchantress encouraged and inspired his further attentions.

This imagery of Nature was highly sexualized. Nature was created as female in the romantic mould. She is “passively aggressive”, as Thomson’s cairn at Canoe Lake implies; she ‘drew him apart’, slowly revealing herself to her suitor, slowly receptive to his advances. Finally, having proven his fidelity and genuine affection even when away in Toronto, Thomson was accepted by her. Scott Watson’s observation that ‘the death of Thomson was tinged with Wagnerism; it consummated his affair with the wild and the untamed’,<sup>42</sup> is by no means an exaggeration of this mythical courtship relationship. Within both myth and reality – the obscure and unclear scenario of his death and burial – Thomson did not die in a boating accident, but

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<sup>40</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> MacCallum, ‘Tom Thomson,’ 380.

<sup>42</sup> Watson, ‘Disfigured Nature,’ 104.

disappeared into the wilds.

The depiction of his relationship with a feminized Nature helped to reintegrate Thomson into a structure of gender ideals from which he deviated somewhat. He did not marry and had no children in an era in which leisure time was increasingly structured around family, and in which having a wife and family was still something of a marker of maturity. It may appear somewhat paradoxical, then, that most of these authors omitted the details of Thomson's actual relationships with women. At the same time, such omissions helped to emphasize Thomson's faithfulness to Nature and to stress his intimacy with "her", from whence came his extensive knowledge. In his pursuit of Nature, Thomson exemplified a hierarchy, in which manly qualities control and use masculine elements in the interests of higher civilization. Paul Walton also notes this convergence in the case of Lawren Harris:

Influenced, like so many, by the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, Harris also recognized the importance of pioneering struggles in forming the Canadian character but he found its "crude, raucous, ill-formed energy" in need of "direction to lofty ideals within ourselves," and this, he thought, should be undertaken as "the task and the joy" of the artist.<sup>43</sup>

This complication of manly and masculine, the crude and the sophisticated, was also suggested by Jackson in the 1919 Montréal memorial exhibition catalogue:

Thomson was forty-two when he died. He gave one the impression of being under thirty. He was modest, oversensitive, almost naive in his outlook, a pal to everyman who came along – lumber jack, trapper or artist. Camping, he was not happy unless he doing three-quarters of the work. Careless of money, he left it lying about in the bottom of his canoe or tent, equally happy when he caught a big trout, when his bannock turned out well, or when he brought back a gorgeous sketch; a poet, a philosopher, and a good friend.<sup>44</sup>

Here Thomson had the traits one would expect in contrast to the modern city: modest, sensitive, naive, hard-working, careless of money, taking joy in life's simple pleasures. At the same time, he was separate from the wilderness that accentuated these qualities. He was only 'camping' in

<sup>43</sup> Walton, 'The Group of Seven and Northern Development,' 177.

<sup>44</sup> Jackson, foreword to *Catalogue of Thomson Paintings, 1919*.

the wilderness, not living or working there. He was *in* but not *of* the rough world of the North. He displayed the most evolved traits of civilization: 'a poet, a philosopher'. For Davies, Thomson's intellect, genius and discipline all moved for a higher purpose:

Genius, the capacity for universal thought and feeling, is not as rare as are characteristics which are necessary for its employment. Our civilization has taught self-indulgence, but the self-indulgent is never a creative individual. Genius, discipline and responsibility are eternally related in any constructive work of more than personal import.<sup>45</sup>

This construction by middle-class intellectuals obscured class as a factor in the designation and promotion of these chivalric values. This construction was also not innocent of a certain violence. As Gail Bederman argues, the frontiersman served the interests of his advanced society. His was the way of progress, superior use, and a violence that 'served the sacred interests of civilization.'<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Thomson took possession of his environment. He and his pioneer family had contended with the country and had won an existence in it, thus earning a right to it. 'And so,' Davies contended, 'Thomson came to epitomize this love of a land that was wooed in strength and conquered in love; his task was to paint it as it had never been painted before.'<sup>47</sup> For all of Thomson's described devotion to the primeval wilderness – his faithfulness, his sincerity to its essence, his courtship of Nature – he was nonetheless ultimately guided by a duty to the society from which he came. He was a suitor with an agenda. He did not depict or represent the truths of Nature in his life and work, but the essence of the Canadian experience as it could only be represented through the pioneer contact with the frontier. Here was Thomson, stoic, quiet, reserved, yet expressive of deeply-felt emotion and generous to a fault: 'On the one hand, silent and uncommunicative as a personality, but on the other hand, highly expressive as an artist; virile,

<sup>45</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 180-182.

<sup>47</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 19.



self-reliant, self-sufficient, yet thoughtful, helpful, considerate, even with strangers and chance wayfarers.’<sup>48</sup> Housser pictured Thomson as the very antithesis of the decadent modern: ‘This was Tom Thomson, impatient of swank, despising sophistication, and lacking the acquisitive instinct necessary to winning success in terms of the standard of his day....’<sup>49</sup> Thomson’s distaste for the materialism of contemporary society set him apart from that vulgar world. For Housser, ‘Thomson’s character was the antithesis of commercialism. He seems to have been a sort of modern *coureur-de-bois*.’<sup>50</sup>

It was through this sentiment – that Thomson was the antithesis of the modern man – that Thomson was created as the epitome of the antimodern man, as a man who did not seek the material. Davies’s Thomson was seen to reflect the national character. His masculine qualities were evident in the quest for the essential and the authentic of the Canadian experience:

Many pictures are merely a reproduction of nature – a copy of a scene; this one [“The West Wind”] is different. It is an interpretation of something we have experienced ourselves. We know our country through our interpreters, the poets, painters and musicians; they present aspects of life which we feel but cannot express for ourselves. This picture is an expression of what we feel about the beauty of Canada. It is a symbol of Canadian character – sturdy, vigorous, and direct.<sup>51</sup>

The highly evolved nature of Thomson’s activity (to ‘know our country’ as only ‘poets, painters and musicians’ could) did not efface his honest Canadian qualities: ‘sturdy, vigorous, and direct.’

Yet this advanced ability to know bestowed a position of privilege upon specific people. Nationalisms are, after all, as much about exclusion as inclusion. The emphasis placed by the myth of Thomson on his pioneer status was not without implications. At this time in Canada, certain groups of people were being ruled out as potential immigrants because they were judged

<sup>48</sup> Davies, *Story of a Man*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 28. Housser seemed oblivious to the materialistic motivations of the *coureurs de bois*.

<sup>51</sup> Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 2.

to be inappropriate settlers in Canada. Whether actively excluded or not, some ethnic groups were almost by definition not part of the national race being defined in these texts. Much of the antimodern anxiety about urban centres focused on immigrants flowing to the growing cities. Jewish, southern European, or Asian immigrants were often considered the epitome of the over-civilization, morally corruption, and rootlessness that haunted the antimodernist world.

As early as 1920, Thomson – already the embodiment of a true nationalism and a true manliness – signified also the nationality and solidity of an entire social order:

Tom Thomson built no railways and founded no banks, inspired no university convocation and swayed no electorate. But on bits of board or canvas measurable in inches, he reproduced the glory of our Canadian wilderness, the sunshine of Heaven, the Majesty of nature.<sup>52</sup>

The nationalist promoters of this image saw Thomson as capturing the essence of the Canadian experience. This image defined life on the land as central to his experience. Canadians were born as a people through their intensive contact with the primeval wilderness. Reacting against the effects of the urban environment and the perceived threats to the established social order, Thomson led the way to a restoration of those qualities of pioneering, independence and virile manliness essential to the national character. It is a vision that reaffirmed the social leadership of the Anglo-Canadian elite as those who best understood what it meant to be Canadian.

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<sup>52</sup> Fairbairn, 'Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North.'

## CHAPTER 4: A MAN FOR ALL CANADIANS:

## DIFFUSING THE THOMSON MYTHOLOGY: 1930-1947

Our play will tell how Tom Thomson gradually became absorbed in the spirit of the wilds, and made it his life work to depict it. His picture "Northern River" is typical of the scenes he best loved to paint – the northern Ontario backwoods, untouched by civilization.

'Adventures in Canadian Painting: Tom Thomson.'<sup>1</sup>

The legend of Tom Thomson was born in the writings of members of the nationalist intelligentsia after his death in 1917. As seen above, Thomson-as-icon carried the social values of its creators. Initially, Thomson was important to the urban, middle-class, and distinctly limited nationalist circles to which his creators belonged.<sup>2</sup> Starting in the 1930s, the idea of Tom Thomson set off for camp and for school, and there exemplified for children the values and norms of true Canadianism.

The promoters of the idea of Tom Thomson were many of the same people who had initially aided in the creation of mythology. Blodwen Davies, Arthur Lismer, and Harold McCurry occupied key strategic positions. Davies organized the Thomson celebration at Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park in 1930. Lismer featured Thomson prominently in his art appreciation texts and lesson plans. After succeeding Eric Brown as NGC Director, McCurry led the Gallery's reproduction programs in which Thomson's paintings figured more prominently than those of any other artist. The NGC's educational programs culminated in a series of CBC radio broadcasts through which children across English-speaking Canada learned of Thomson's life and legend. This was a process of cultural selection through which Thomson was generally presented as a

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<sup>1</sup> National Advisory Council on School Broadcasting [hereafter NACSB], *Young Canada Listens: School Broadcasts* [hereafter *YCL*] 1944-1945, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Vipond suggests that the Toronto nationalist intelligentsia might have included as few as 40 to 100 people. Vipond, 'Nationalist Consciousness,' 539. Robert McMichael states that Newton MacTavish's book, *The Fine Arts in Canada* had a small readership. Robert McMichael, introduction to *The Fine Arts in Canada*, iii. A.Y. Jackson states that Blodwen Davies was unable to find a publisher for her biography of Thomson in the early 1930s, finally publishing it privately and selling most of the copies to and through friends. Jackson, foreword to *The Story of a Man*, 1.

Canadian archetype.

#### TOM THOMSON DAY

Blodwen Davies was among the first to build Thomson into a national hero. She promoted this mythological figure to the children at Taylor Statten's Algonquin Park camps as a natural corollary to their wilderness experience. With the participation of the NGC (which lent 25 Thomson sketches for a small exhibition), Statten and Tom Thomson's old friend and Chief Park Ranger Mark Robinson, she organized a celebration of the legend of Thomson, Tom Thomson Day, in the Park. It was an event that can only be described as something between the extraordinary and the surreal.

The festivities were set for the weekend of 16 August 1930. With preparations for the celebration underway, word mysteriously reached the campers that Thomson's canoe had been left in a nearby lake. The boys from Camp Ahmek and girls from Little Wapomeo and Big Wapomeo set out to find it. Even more amazingly, a young boy found the canoe for which they were looking. *The Toronto Star Weekly* ran a story penned by Davies, who was already at the Camp, announcing the discovery with photos of the finder and the no-longer-lost canoe. Alas, they would have to wait for friends of Thomson's to arrive for definite identification. Unfortunately, the results of their identification did not receive the same press coverage.<sup>3</sup>

Soon, though, the festival weekend had arrived. On the Friday evening, four episodes in honour of Thomson were presented in the log theatre. Thomson's painting 'The West Wind' was used as a backdrop on the Saturday for the inter-camp regatta. The climactic celebration was held later that day at the Thomson cairn near Canoe Lake. Joined by the ex-chief of the local Algonquin tribe, Matt Bernard, 'representing his people in tribute to Thomson as a woodsman',

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<sup>3</sup> 'Canoe Discovered by Boy on Lake is Believed to be Tom Thomson's,' *The Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 9 August 1930; Blodwen Davies, 'Young Pirates Hunt Late Artist's Canoe.' *The Toronto Star Weekly*, 9 August 1930.

Robinson led the dedication of a totem pole beside the cairn. Created at Camp Ahmek, the totem was 'carved and printed with symbols of his character and achievements.' It represented, according to *The Mail and Empire*, the tribute of young Canadians 'to the Canadian artist [that] meant that his pioneer ideal of putting the north country's spirit in essential art would not be forgotten by later generations.'<sup>4</sup> The ceremony included a canoe filled with wild flowers being paddled to the cairn through a fleet of boats filled with the young campers. While the canoe was carried up to the foot of the cairn, the children threw the sprays of wildflowers and for they had made into the lake and the camp brass band played 'O Canada' from the deck of the camp pirate ship. Finally, at sunset, Statten presided over a 'great council' at which fires were lighted 'symbolic of the development of Canadian art.'<sup>5</sup>

This celebration displayed the full complexity of the Thomson mythology. Here was Thomson the backwoodsman, represented vicariously by the Park's Chief Ranger. Here was Thomson the (generic) Indian, represented vicariously by ex-chief Bernard. Thomson the artistic interpreter of the wilds was also here, represented by his sketches. Finally, Thomson the national symbol was made manifest by 'O Canada'.

Both the locale and the key figures of the celebrations suggest the deep influence of antimodern romanticism on Canadian nationalism. Taylor Statten's camps served the children of the growing middle class, drawn mostly from the Toronto area. Taylor Statten's camps were overtly connected to the woodland movement of Ernest Thompson Seton. The children were there for the summer for healthy recreation and to learn woodland skills and an appreciation for the wilderness. For them, it marked the beginning of a life pattern that would include summers at

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<sup>4</sup> 'Totem Pole Honors Tom Thomson's Ideal,' *The Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 18 August 1930.

<sup>5</sup> 'Bark Canoe Carries Memorial Flowers,' *The Globe*; 'Totem Pole,' *Mail and Empire*. None of the reports mentioned how out of place a totem pole – usually associated with West Coast aboriginal peoples, not Algonquin – was in a northern Ontario park. This is characteristic of a generic "Indianness": a conception of aboriginal peoples in which observers project desired and imagined values and characteristics onto them with little concern or regard for what those peoples were actually like. See Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*.

camp, then holidays at the cottage, as inoculations against the effects of modern urban living.<sup>6</sup> Blodwen Davies was at the centre of the celebrations. In her books, written just after this event, Davies depicted Thomson as an archetype of the rediscovered simple life. The artist connected spiritually with the wilderness, escaping the enervation, over-civilization and effeminization associated with the modern, urban lifestyle. In this elaborate ceremony, Davies added to the legend. Thomson was presented as a model for emulation, not as one who rejected the city and “went native”, but as a man of moral integrity who contributed to the development of his society in his own particular but important way. He understood the value of the Canadian wilderness and interpreted its meaning to Canadians who felt a similar if inexpressible connection. Like the poets before him, Thomson had found a language to express Nature’s meaning for the rest of the Canadian people.

#### PRINTS AND REPRODUCTION

The leading figures in developing and promoting art appreciation education in Canada helped spread the Thomson legend beyond the Toronto middle class to virtually all segments of English-speaking Canadian society by the 1930s. Eric Brown and H.O. McCurry, for example, were directors at the National Gallery of Canada (McCurry succeeded Brown upon Brown’s death in 1939) whose purchases established Thomson as a central figure in the “National” collection and whose reproduction of these images made them renowned from coast to coast. Arthur Lismer became Education Director at the Art Museum of Toronto in 1924 (it was renamed the Art Gallery of Toronto [AGT] in 1926) and placed Thomson at the centre of his books and programs. The NGC and AGT issued a series of print programs and educational texts in the late 1920s that established a set of images by Canadian artists as the canon of Canadian art. Thomson was especially prominent in these collections as the Canadian genius. Along with his paintings,

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<sup>6</sup> Bederman discusses the turn-of-the-century program of G. Stanley Hall who believed children should experience their innate primal brutality as part of their personal development. Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 77-120.

the idea of Tom Thomson was also reproduced in this series of programs, through the accompanying lesson plans and textbooks.

In 1922, the NGC reminded its public of its dedication to art education – ‘the encouragement and cultivation of correct artistic taste and Canadian public interest in the fine art, the promotion of interest generally of art in Canada...’ – as one of its primary objectives. In its *Annual Report 1921-1922*, the NGC defined its role as two-fold.

One is to build up a collection of the standards of all art, ancient and modern, by which modern standards may be judged and sound artistic education obtained. The second important function is to do everything possible for the art of its own country, by purchasing it, exhibiting it and bringing its importance as a national asset and an influence for good before the people generally, and by creating and cultivating in them correct artistic taste.<sup>7</sup>

The Gallery’s desire to build a national collection at the NGC and to promote it through public exhibition, lecture tours and reproduction was explicitly connected to the nationalist project. Throughout the inter-war period, the NGC’s *Annual Reports* argued for the connection between fostering a quality national art with the development of the Canadian nation.<sup>8</sup> These defined objectives provided the basis for the education programs of the NGC and of related AGT programs.

As Joyce Zemans has recently argued, the Gallery’s stated objectives and those of the programs for the distribution and study of the prints corresponded to a program of nationalist indoctrination:

The visual arts, and more specifically painting, like radio and, later, film, were believed to have the capacity to mold public taste, to create proper moral values and [to] identify the basic truths required to establish a sense of nationhood.

<sup>7</sup> NGC, *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada for the Fiscal Year [hereafter *Annual Report*] 1921-22*. Ottawa, 1923. Cited in Anne-Marie Émond, ‘Le Picture Study radiophonique: L’aventure de la Peinture canadienne,’ unpublished paper at NGC library, presented to Department of Art Instruction, Concordia University, 16 April 1997, 5.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, NGC, *Annual Report 1931 – 1932* (Ottawa, 1933), 6; NGC, *Annual Report 1941-1942* (Ottawa, 1943), 3.

Classrooms across Canada offered an ideal means of reaching the new generation of Canadians, including those in remote areas.<sup>9</sup>

As Zemans suggests, these initial art education programs corresponded in their objectives with later programs instigated by the NGC and the AGT (often working jointly or cooperatively). The NGC's and AGT's drive to expand art education through these texts, reproduction programs and later radio broadcasts corresponded to contemporary trends in art education. In the contemporary philosophy of art education, the artist's virtues and abilities informed the image, and these were transferred to the viewer through art education. Both Zemans and Anne-Marie Émond insist that Brown's work reflected the influence of this conception of art education, of which he had become aware through his involvement with United States museums through the American Association of Art Museum Directors.<sup>10</sup>

This philosophy was evident throughout the mythologizing literature and in the Gallery's programs. It was made more powerful by the self-appointed leaders at the NGC, who were quite aware of and explicit about their political and cultural role. When discussing sending the director to the West in 1927, the Board of Trustees expressed how they understood the NGC's position relative to regional galleries:

Mr [Norman] Mackenzie requested and the Board approved that the Director should visit the West during the summer for the purpose of meeting those interested in art in the various provinces and explaining to them the position of the National Gallery with regard to Canadian art and what could best be done by the local art societies toward the building up of collections and securing temporary exhibitions and, if advisable, to arrange a meeting of representatives of such societies in Ottawa at some convenient time.<sup>11</sup>

This formula – in which the NGC defined and collected Canadian art – confirmed the Gallery's

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<sup>9</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 11.

<sup>10</sup> Émond cites Mary Anne Stankiewicz's discussion of the philosophical underpinnings art education in the United States to support this conception of the objectives of art education. Stankiewicz describes this philosophy as 'an idealistic philosophy of art education [that] united formalist and romantic aesthetic theories, resulting in the belief that works of art transmitted the artist's virtues to the viewer.' Mary Ann Stankiewicz, 'A Picture age: Reproductions in picture study,' *Studies in Art Education* 26:2 (1985), 87. Cited in Émond, 'Le Picture Study radiophonique,' 4; Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 10.

<sup>11</sup> NGCA, NGCF, 9.21B Board of Trustees – Minutes of Meetings – January 17, 1923 – May 12, 1932, Minutes of the 51<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2 July 1927, 300.



place at the centre of Canadian art education.

The flood of reproductions from the NGC and the AGT satiated most of the demand for art education materials. The lack of requests for reproductions of Thomson's paintings before the Second World War suggests that no one made a concerted effort to reformulate the Thomson mythology, or saw such a project as needed. Eleven of the 21 requests for reproductions of Thomson's paintings came from Ontario. Two requests accompanied articles in educational magazines in Saskatchewan and one Manitoba educational journal article accounted for two more reproduction requests. Apart from exhibition catalogues in Nova Scotia (1918), Saint John (1920) and New Westminster (1922) where "Spring Ice" was exhibited, the only reproduction request from outside of central Canada came from Saskatchewan, for E.V.K. Grayson's book, *Picture Appreciation for the Elementary School: Grades I to VI*, in 1929.<sup>12</sup> At least initially, the Thomson phenomenon was clearly centred on Ontario.

As Education Director at the AGT, Lismer wrote three texts from 1926 to 1936 on art appreciation for use in public schools. This was supplemented by his summer courses for Ontario art teachers.<sup>13</sup> These texts had a wide reach, especially in Ontario, and provided the conceptual focus for these related programs. He suggested the creation of a national art was a process that had already begun in Thomson, whom Lismer featured prominently. Lismer maintained the position common to earlier texts and shared by many contemporaries, that through learning about Thomson and his paintings, students would learn about much more than simply art. Thomson's work, he argued, could teach Canadian children something the great European masters could not:

...[T]he art of our own country is no less important as a medium of study, if our children are to be made conscious of the beauty and character of Canada. It is

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<sup>12</sup> AGO, Registration Files, Thomson, *The West Wind*; NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, *Tom*, *Northern River*, #1055; *Spring Ice* (canvas), #1195; *The Jack Pine*.

<sup>13</sup> Brooker, ed., *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1928/1929*, 58.

through the work of the painters of Canada that such study is available and these little pictures attempt to aid the teachers to fulfil that purpose.<sup>14</sup>

Lismer omitted any notion that the primary (or even, it seems, the secondary) purpose of 'picture appreciation' would be to teach school children about art, art history, art technique, or art theory.

Instead, he emphasized the role of the artist as the spiritual leader of the nation:

In the schools of to-day, the appeal of the picture is a very important and valuable asset in the education of the young, and these prints of Canadian pictures, wisely used, will go far in establishing a knowledge and love for the work of our own artists and of our country.<sup>15</sup>

His term, 'Picture Study', marked the limits of this pedagogy. As Zemans writes,

While strategies for formal analysis represented a significant part of the text, the emphasis throughout was on the Canadian experience and Lismer regularly suggested the reproductions could be employed in teaching other subjects and the "discussion of things Canadian."<sup>16</sup>

The cultivation of artistic taste was secondary, if not simply a means to the larger goal of nation-building.

In the first of his three art history/art appreciation texts published before World War II, *A Short History of Painting: With a Note of Canadian Art*, Lismer included few specifics on Canadian art and artists. In his 'Note', Lismer described the process of development of a Canadian art from its beginnings (which he placed at first European settlement) through to its triumphant present day. He described those attributes that would mark a truly Canadian artist, some of which were surprisingly specific. 'A Canadian painter may be judged as being one who reflects in his work his impressions of the beauty, life, action, typical features of trees and atmosphere, seasons, energy and vitality of the country....'<sup>17</sup> Further, Lismer argued, '...[B]efore a country can be a real home for its people there must be art and the painters of Canada are in

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<sup>14</sup> Lismer, *Canadian Picture Study*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Lismer, *Canadian Picture Study*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 13.

<sup>17</sup> Lismer, *A Short History*, 30.

some measure pioneers.’<sup>18</sup> Lismer discussed Canadian artists specifically in his 1930 text *Canadian Picture Study*, but his teleology of a national art remained firmly in place. Created in conjunction with the AGT series of reproductions of the works of Canadian artists, *Canadian Picture Study* was expressly about bringing Canadian artists to people who might not be able to visit the Gallery: ‘It is important,’ Lismer wrote, ‘that we should know something of our own artists – their lives, their careers and works.’<sup>19</sup> It was important that “we” should know not only the paintings, but also the painters as personalities. When he came to describe Thomson, Lismer was able, therefore, to emphasize the importance of his lifestyle and character to his ability to depict the “truth” of the Canadian experience.<sup>20</sup>

Lismer’s 1936 text, *Education Through Art for Children and Adults at the Art Gallery of Toronto*, was essentially an account of the practices and experiments in art education at the AGT since the beginning of Lismer’s tenure. While it did not speak to Canadian art and artists directly, it reiterated Lismer’s ideas that a national art was a marker of national maturity and that Canadians’ sense of national maturity would be augmented if they learned more about their own art and artists.<sup>21</sup> These two themes informed Lismer’s teachings and writings about art and artists in Canada in which Thomson was featured prominently. Given the broad range of activities in which he had a hand, it is difficult to overestimate the influence that Lismer exerted over the form and content of art education in Ontario and across the country.

The NGC was the main source for reproductions. It began reproducing some of its holdings for general distribution in 1914. In its second phase, begun in 1927, this program focused on Canadian works. Prints were distributed to schools and galleries for educational use from 1927 onward. In 1934, the NGC donated prints to ‘important public libraries in the province

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<sup>18</sup> Lismer, *A Short History*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Lismer, *Canadian Picture Study*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Lismer, *Canadian Picture Study*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Lismer, *Education Through Art for Children and Adults*, 1, 6.

of Ontario.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1929, Arthur Lismer – himself a rather interested party – would comment on the excellent quality and tremendous distribution of these prints, noting especially the northern landscapes of Thomson.<sup>23</sup> He praised the Gallery for its creation of

...some excellent reproductions in colour of well-known Canadian paintings, especially the Tom Thompson [sic] northern landscapes, which are available at very low prices to the public. These prints are to be seen nowadays on the walls of a great many public schools in Canada. The national gallery, or any gallery, can be a source of educational enlightenment to thousands, old and young, who never get a chance to enter its doors.<sup>24</sup>

So spoke a man writing for the nationalist organ of the Arts and Letters Club. Zemans, perhaps with unintentional irony, describes the significance of Lismer's comments to this small self-appointed nationalist circle as 'the first official acknowledgement of the project on a national basis.'<sup>25</sup> She underlines the message that these programs of iconic distribution carried – that Thomson and the Group marked the culmination of Canadian art.

That the goal was to construct a coherent history and an autonomous identity through the aesthetic construct of the landscape is clear from the selection of work and Lismer's companion study guides. Thomson and the Group of Seven were presented as the culmination of that tradition and the texts are permeated by the notion of Thomson, "the first Canadian painter to capture the real spirit of the north country."<sup>26</sup>

This print program was part of a large effort to integrate a nationalist emphasis into art education in the 1920s and 1930s. Lismer also popularized the prints at speaking engagements. In 1932, Lismer went on a lecture tour to nine cities and towns from Fort William to Victoria speaking to nearly 10,000 people in 36 lectures. His talk at the B.C. College of Art sparked

<sup>22</sup> NGCA, NGCF, 9.21B Board of Trustees Minutes, 8 February 1934, 391.

<sup>23</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 9.

<sup>24</sup> Art Lismer, 'Art Appreciation' in *Yearbook of the Arts, 1928/1929*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 19.

<sup>26</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 17. She describes this quotation as appearing 'in all of the study guides which discuss Tom Thomson.' Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 31.

interest in the print program and orders of sets.<sup>27</sup> Lismer also created lesson plans for use in art appreciation classes in conjunction with the National Gallery reproductions. These plans, officially adopted by the NGC Board in May 1932,<sup>28</sup> and Lismer's books, especially *Canadian Picture Study*, brought Lismer's interpretation of Thomson's legacy to thousands of school children, especially in Ontario.

It does not seem to have taken much publicizing to generate orders of prints and study guides in Ontario. Private partners, who got the message out to teachers, administrators and government officials and members in Ontario, reported a brisk business. In 1934, McCurry sought and gained the support of the Alberta Ministry of Education in promoting the program to its teachers in newsletters and at the annual Teachers' Convention. Manitoba was creating its own art education program by 1938, but still relied upon the National Gallery for suitable prints. Significant sales were reported for the French-language market in Quebec. The NGC's presentation of copies to selected public libraries in Ontario increased the potential audience for the reproductions.<sup>29</sup>

Zemans argues that the inclusion of three works by Thomson in the initial ten-piece Canadian Artist Series from the National Gallery was calculated to capitalize on Thomson's already legendary status. "The Jack Pine" was a popular attraction at the NGC, as "The West Wind" was at the AGT. Thomson had been praised as central to the formation of the vision of the Group of Seven in Housser's book in 1925. The National Gallery had publicized the favourable reactions in London (at the 1924 Wembley exhibition) and in Paris (in 1927). Brown believed, Zemans argues, that Thomson deserved such an exalted position: 'For Brown, Thomson and the Group of Seven had ushered in Canada's epic period in which the heroism and vitality of its artist

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<sup>27</sup> NGCA, NGCF, 9.21B Board of Trustees Minutes, 12 May 1932, 362.

<sup>28</sup> NGCA, NGCF, 9.21 B Board of Trustees Minutes, 12 May 1932, 369.

<sup>29</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 18-21; NGCA, NGCF, 9.21B Board of Trustees Minutes, 8 February 1934, 391.

would contribute as much to the construction of a national spirit as the labours of its explorers, politicians and giants of industry.<sup>30</sup> The development of a national art for which Brown longed appeared well underway.<sup>31</sup>

For the most part, the educators receiving this body of work were content to accept the leadership of Brown and Lismer. They accepted the materials and took them into their classrooms. The propagation of these particular images by the NGC, and the mere existence and accessibility of plates for making reproductions, essentially determined the images that would feature in the era's art texts and in its classrooms. Because of the limited number of plates created by the AGT and NGC, only a select few images were widely distributed. These images, and their stories and associations, were dominant in classrooms and in other public and private spaces to the exclusion of other images.<sup>32</sup> Further, the active proselytizing of the national school of landscape painting by Brown and Lismer on tours to communities mostly west of Toronto in 1927 and 1932 respectively cemented the prominent position of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven in art education curricula.<sup>33</sup> The expanded print program and the radio broadcasts were simply extensions of these earlier lectures and the earlier produced texts. This cultural program was instituted with only marginal regional opposition.<sup>34</sup> It also determined the images available generally for educational and non-educational works and activities. Albert Robson's *Canadian*

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<sup>30</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> In *Art of the British Empire Overseas* of 1917, the section from each of the Dominions – Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa – comments on the prospects of the development of national schools of art (invariably landscape) as indicative of "national maturity". This would be a certain indication of national maturity. Holme, ed., *Art of the British Empire Overseas*.

<sup>32</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 22-23.

<sup>33</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 19. NGCA, NGCF, 9.1B Board of Trustees Minutes, 2 July 1927, 300; 12 May 1932, 362.

<sup>34</sup> Only in Saskatchewan did a challenge emerge to this national canon and story. In 1933, the Saskatchewan Deputy Minister of Education requested that a Saskatchewan scene by a Saskatchewan artist be made available, "The Ferry Trail" by Augustus Kenderdine. The request was refused for financial reasons. In 1941, the NGC acquiesced to a request from the Chair of Saskatchewan's Art Revision Committee for reproductions of James Henderson's "The End of Winter". Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 21.

*Landscape Painters* (1932) and Donald Buchanan's article in *Canadian Geographic*, 'The Story of Canadian Art' (December 1938), for example, included mostly images from the NGC and AGT print collections.<sup>35</sup> The central-Canadian elite fixed a specific and limited set of images Canadians had of Canada. Canadians from a young age were being taught to visualize their country in a specific way, and thus taught to imagine this range of experiences as their own.

In its 1944 *Annual Report*, the NGC again outlined its major objectives emphasizing its educational role and importance of cultural awareness in a modern nation. These ideas underwrote its renewed educational efforts. The NGC began to use modern technologies in pursuit of its goal of fostering a more aware and thinking citizenry and of communicating fundamental social values.<sup>36</sup> A film on A.Y. Jackson was to be the first of a National Film Board series on Canadian artists. In 1942, the NGC started a program of silk screen printing to make inexpensive reproductions for use in Canadian military installations but they were also made available for educational uses as well as for the public in general. In early 1945, the Gallery collaborated in a radio series on Canadian artists entitled 'Adventures in Canadian Painting' as part of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC] educational series, *Young Canada Listens*. In all of these activities, Thomson figured prominently.

Sponsored by Canadian businesses and businesspeople, the silkscreen program distributed 30 000 large reproductions to the Canadian forces at home and overseas, to schools, and to the public by 1944.

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<sup>35</sup> Zemans, 'Establishing the Canon,' 22-23; Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters*; Donald W. Buchanan, 'The Story of Canadian Art,' *Canadian Geographic Journal* (Ottawa) 17:6 (December 1938), 273-282. In 1931, for example, the *Farmer's Advocate and Home Magazine* sought reproductions for an article in their Christmas edition. They wrote requesting either "Breaking the Road" or "Oxen Drinking" by Horatio Walker, commenting 'If neither of these is available some other pictorial representations of early Canadian life might be suitable.' Though Zemans notes "Oxen Drinking" was available as part of the Canadian Artist Series (though perhaps no plate suitable for a magazine-size print existed), the NGC responded with "The Jack Pine". NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, The Jack Pine.

<sup>36</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1943-44*, 4.

The distribution of good colour reproductions of Canadian paintings, whereby the benefits of the National Gallery are carried to the remotest settlements, has now grown beyond the capacity of the present staff to cope with it satisfactorily. Extra space and assistance must be provided if this useful work is not to be handicapped. During the year 163,210 prints, including the well-known silk screen prints, were sent out: this is four times the number distributed last year, which was in turn double the total of the year before.<sup>37</sup>

This total includes approximately 120,000 prints distributed in the first year of the school broadcasts,<sup>38</sup> leaving approximately 40,000 prints distributed to barracks, to libraries and to private individuals. Immensely popular, this reproduction program brought this selected canon of art to an extensive audience. While perhaps not deserving the exclusive position in making Thomson's work widely known throughout the country accorded it by Dennis Reid in 1989,<sup>39</sup> the reach and impact of this reproduction program cannot be underestimated.

#### *YOUNG CANADA LISTENS TO THE THOMSON LEGEND*

The production and distribution of these silk screen prints fed into the CBC radio program, 'Adventures in Canadian Painting', through which the legend of Tom Thomson reached perhaps its largest audience. Created in 1944, 'Adventures in Canadian Painting' featured dramatic radio plays depicting the lives of Canadian artists. R.S. Lambert, the CBC's Supervisor of Educational Broadcasts, commented after the first of three sets of broadcasts (the series included six or seven dramatizations per year, aired in January and February of 1945, 1946 and 1947) that it was 'the most successful series yet put on the air by the CBC Education Department.'<sup>40</sup> It was part of a larger program called *Young Canada Listens*, a series of

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<sup>37</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1944-45*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1944-45*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> 'A whole generation of Canadians who grew up following the Second World War learned of the Group almost entirely from reproductive silkscreen prints that seemed to hang in every school library, bank, and doctor's waiting room in the country.' Dennis Reid, *The Group of Seven: Selected Watercolours, Drawings and Prints for the Art Gallery of Ontario* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Lambert, 'Radio and Art Appreciation in School and at Home,' included in Lambert to McCurry, 15 March, 1945, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 2.



educational broadcasts developed by the National Advisory Council on School Broadcasting [NACSB]<sup>41</sup> and the CBC. It was directed to students of grades 6 to 9. The CBC created the dramatizations and the NACSB provided a framework for the program and published the biographical and educational information prepared by the NGC in its programme guide.

According to this guide, *Young Canada Listens* had an overtly nationalist agenda. It sought 'to strengthen the sense of Canadian citizenship among our boys and girls at school.'<sup>42</sup> This objective directly paralleled the NGC objective contained in its 1921-22 *Annual Report* to develop national art 'as a national asset and an influence for good before the people generally....'<sup>43</sup>

While these radio broadcasts were developed by Lambert and the CBC, he left the content to McCurry and the NGC. In a provisional note to McCurry on the school broadcasts, he wrote:

We are leaving to you the selection of the artists, the plan of approach to each (with direction as to the important point to be brought out artistically with regard to each), the provision of research material and suggested line of treatment. We should also like you to indicate how you think the broadcast could be practically used by teachers in their classroom, i.e. how they should follow it up. We will be responsible for having the script written and of course for the production.

From this material, the CBC developed a syllabus to be circulated to the provincial Departments of Education and a script for the broadcasts. In a note to the NACSB, McCurry suggested that the program portray Paul Kane, Cornelius Krieghoff, Homer Watson, James W. Morrice, Clarence Gagnon, Tom Thomson, and A.Y. Jackson in its initial series.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The NACSB included representatives from each of the provincial Ministries of Education (both Protestant and Catholic Boards in Quebec), as well as from the Conference of Canadian Universities, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the Canadian Trustees Association, and the National Federation of Home and School.

<sup>42</sup> NACSB, *YCL 1944-45*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1921-22*.

<sup>44</sup> R.S. Lambert to Harry McCurry, 20 April 1944, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4-C CBC, File 1. On the back of the copy of this note in the National Gallery Archives is a handwritten message to consult 'Barbeau' of the National Museum about 'paddling songs [and] Indian music. Undated letter 'National School Broadcasts - 1944-45, Suggestions,' NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4-C CBC, File 1. Lambert's 1945 report on the first season states that Barbeau sang the 'Indian songs' used in the broadcasts. Lambert, 'Radio and Art Appreciation in School and at Home,'

For the Thomson episode, McCurry relied upon the books of Albert Robson and Blodwen Davies. McCurry's comments to Lambert reflected the key points of the Thomson mythology:

The essential point about Thomson's life and work is his love for the lakes, woods and hills of the north, and his personal understanding and knowledge of the north country in all its seasons and moods. This love and knowledge is, of course, exemplified in all his pictures.<sup>45</sup>

The YCL brochure turned this love of nature into an antimodern symbol:

Our play will tell how Tom Thomson gradually became absorbed in the spirit of the wilds, and made it his life work to depict it. His picture "Northern River" is typical of the scenes he best loved to paint – the northern Ontario backwoods, untouched by civilization. In an extremely vivid way he has caught the mood and quality of the scene, intensified by his own perception of its beauty. An almost delicate feeling for pattern characterizes this painting, but in no way diminishes its strength and vigour.<sup>46</sup>

All of the familiar themes were seamlessly integrated into the broadcast: Thomson being absorbed into nature, Thomson seeking simply to depict the nature he so loved, Thomson living outside of society and civilization, Thomson capturing the essence of the natural environment, and finally, but perhaps most importantly for these school broadcasts, Thomson a man of deep emotion and high virility.

In the radio play, Thomson was depicted as a romantic yet virile figure. No effete city-bred artist, Thomson's sketching sometimes seemed to be almost incidental to his life canoeing and fishing in the fabled North country. His character was presented as yearning to express some vague and ill-defined inner sentiment, emotion or idea. He could not himself identify it, yet it would fundamentally inform his painting. Thomson's character had lines such as 'I feel there's something inside of me that wants to burst out' in between scenes of him fishing, running rapids in a canoe, and feeding bacon to whiskey-jacks and chipmunks. This Thomson painted only as a

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included in Lambert to McCurry, 15 March, 1945, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/ Organizations, 7.4-C CBC, File 2.

<sup>45</sup> R.S. Lambert to Harry McCurry, 20 April 1944; McCurry to Lambert, 24 May 1944, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4-C CBC, File 1.

<sup>46</sup> NACSB, *YCL 1944-45*, 24.

way of connecting with the Canadian wilderness. He merely painted that which he saw, while others – MacCallum, Robinson, and his other colleagues – identified the greatness of his work.<sup>47</sup>

The play had explicit and familiar nationalist content. It presented the idea that Thomson had captured the essence of the Canadian experience as commonsensical. It opened with a short poem that included the description of Thomson as ‘A man who sought in colour to express/ The magic of an austere northern scene,/ And by his living art some hint to give/ Of what our Canada should mean to us.’ Later, the play included an invented dialogue of MacCallum’s reaction to Thomson’s sketches upon seeing them for the first time. MacCallum’s character said:

I don’t say your work hasn’t faults, Thomson. But the spirit of the north country is in every one of these sketches. And I know the north. You are expressing something. Besides, you’re painting in the new way – the Canadian way.

When the play did get around to discussing Thomson’s painting “Northern River”, reproduced to accompany the play, the discussion still focused on its supposed nationalist message. It suggested that once Thomson was given the freedom to paint, he was able to create images representative of Canada. The narrator described “Northern River” as capturing something essentially Canadian. ‘It is typical of our North country – indeed it might be found in any part of Canada from Nova Scotia to the Rocky Mountains.’ Thus, the North Country of Ontario’s near North was presented as the typical and essential Canadian landscape. Implicitly, his life in this region was typically Canadian.<sup>48</sup>

Zemans remarks in passing that the broadcasts had little to do with art education, in the sense of teaching listeners anything about art schools, styles or techniques. The plays were to be dramatic and this one did little more than mention that Thomson was painting while it dramatized his adventures. The Thomson broadcast proved the most popular with audiences, and was the

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<sup>47</sup> ‘The Adventures of Canadian Painting (5): Tom Thomson.’ NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 1.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Adventures of Canadian Painting: Thomson.’ NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 1, 1, 8, 9. There is no indication that this description was modified to include British Columbia or the Yukon Territory as parts of Canada.

only one re-broadcast (in the 1947 series). These experiences of broad public art education are fairly telling as to the motivations of those most centrally responsible for the dissemination of Thomson as a cultural icon. Presented as encapsulating the Canadian experience and essence, this image was never challenged nor refined. It was, in fact, repeated.

The program's reach exceeded the expectations of McCurry and Lambert. They demonstrated the first of these radio plays to Ontario teachers at the Ontario Educational Association meeting Toronto on 11 April 1944.<sup>49</sup> Lambert estimated in 1945 that 3500 schools and 125,000 students followed the broadcasts on over 40 stations of the network. Initially Lambert considered 25,000 sets of prints would be too many; that 10,000 to 15,000 would be enough with which to begin. In the inaugural season, 20,000 sets were distributed.<sup>50</sup> In the 1945-46 season, the NGC sold 124,782 reproductions in conjunction with "Further Adventures of Canadian Painting".<sup>51</sup> In 1946-47, a further 21,792 sets of reproductions (approximately 130,752 individual prints) were sold to schools.<sup>52</sup>

Table 1 shows the distribution by province for the year 1945-46 of purchases of sets of reproductions and the extensive national listenership of the programs. The heavy concentration of orders from Ontario (11,665 sets out of a total of 18,257, or approximately 63.9%) is not surprising given that both Lismer and the NGC actively promoted the program among educators in Ontario. However, the number of purchases and listener responses suggest that the program had a very broad listenership across English-speaking Canada. Praise for the program came in from all corners. The National Gallery received letters from education administrators in British

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<sup>49</sup> Lambert to McCurry, 21 March 1944; [Walter] Abel[I] [McCurry's assistant] to Lambert, 31 March 1944, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 1.

<sup>50</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1944-45*, 8; Lambert to McCurry, 15 March 1945, NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 1.

<sup>51</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1945-46*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1946-47*, 3.

Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec, as well as Detroit, Michigan.<sup>53</sup>

Table 1

<b>Summary: CBC Series 'Further Adventures in Canadian Painting'            For Series Ending 12 April 1946.</b> Total Number of Orders for Sets of Reproductions, and Total Number of Sets Ordered and Mailed, By Province.		
PROVINCE	NUMBER OF ORDERS	SETS ORDERED
British Columbia	71	1094
Alberta	103	902
Saskatchewan	77	803
Manitoba	29	647
Ontario	380	11 665
Quebec	28	746
New Brunswick	24	2001
Nova Scotia	69	393
Prince Edward Island	2	2
United States	2	4
<b>Total Sets Ordered</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>18 257</b>
Source: National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada Fonds, Outside Activities/Organizations, 7.4 Canadian Arts Council, File 7.4C Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, File 3.		

However, both Lambert and McCurry had reason to emphasize, perhaps to overemphasize, the program's national coverage. The overwhelming number of purchases were made by Ontario schools. Lambert's 1945 report commented that the broadcasts were heard 'in all parts of the Dominion....' This effort to underline the program's national reach focused on Western Canada. The disseminators went out of their way to emphasize the approving audience response from Western Canada with no mention of the response from within the Maritime provinces, even though sales in New Brunswick appear to have been as substantial as any other province after Ontario. The report noted a commendation for the program from the West

<sup>53</sup> NGCA, NGCF, Box Outside Activities/Organizations, File 7.4-C CBC, File 2. This file includes Alberta Supervisor of Schools to Lambert, 19 June 1945; Kathleen N. Lardie, Supervisor of Radio Education, Detroit Public Schools, 13 August 1945; and reference is made to letters from British Columbia and from the Director of Protestant Education in Quebec, W.P. Percival in Lambert to McCurry, 20 June 1945. McCurry to Lambert, 21 June 1945, mentions that the B.C. Department stated large numbers of rural schools had listened to the broadcasts.

Regional School Radio Committee and quoted letters from educators in British Columbia, Manitoba and Ontario, though none from major central Canadian centres. There is no doubt that these radio broadcasts had a wide national audience and took the canon of Canadian art to young people across the country. However, the extent of its reach is somewhat obscured by the need and desire of these two organizations to depict themselves as truly national institutions.

The NGC's success coincided with the renewal of Canadian nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s. New voices joined those of such veteran nationalists as Lismer and McCurry, most famously that of the Massey Commission,<sup>54</sup> but also including the less well-documented cultural emphasis of the Special Committee on Reconstruction and Re-Establishment, which attended to a wide variety of cultural organizations and groups advocating the improvement of facilities for the National Gallery.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout these texts and programs, the greatness of Thomson as a painter was a given, never justified or explained. Although there is no substantial evidence to link Thomson to the cause of Canadian nationalism, that he represented an essential Canadianness was also seemingly common sense. If the images were already popular before this surge in state promotion, and if Thomson as a figure was already a legend within a segment of the population, one can nonetheless say that state sponsorship made his fame seem a national commonsense.<sup>56</sup> The Thomson of legend was largely the construct of a generation of nationalist cultural producers that expressed the ideas of a select group of urban southern Ontarians. The print and educational

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<sup>54</sup> See Litt, *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission*.

<sup>55</sup> NGC, *Annual Report 1944-45*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> The extent of Thomson's fame by the 1930s is something of an open issue. Davies was unable to find a publisher for her biography, finally publishing it privately. Jackson, 'Foreword' to *Story of a Man*, 1. A letter from the Pelham Continuation School Principal, E.L. Crossley, in Fenwick, Ontario, in March 1940, regarding a request for images in their school newspaper suggests that as of that date, the construction of Thomson as a truly national figure was not yet complete. Crossley had received reproductions of "The Jack Pine" and of James Henderson's "The End of Winter". In April, he wrote back thanking the Gallery for their use, but, as they had mislaid the letter with the names of the paintings, he asked the Gallery to send the correct titles. 'One was by Thomson, a tree in the foreground,' he wrote. 'We remembered the title of the other one.' Perhaps, Thomson was more renowned than his paintings. E.L. Crossley to Secretary National Art Gallery, 12 March 1940 and 8 April 1940, NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, The Jack Pine.

programs carried the ideas of Thomson and of his place in Canadian culture throughout the Dominion. These programs grew out of the same nationalist intelligentsia from which the Thomson mythology initially emerged. They defined Thomson as a great Canadian artist and spread the gospel of the northland nationalism. Having dominant positions in the cultural institutions at a time when nationalist sentiment was growing generally, this nationalist group acted to popularize its own conception of national identity and of national icons.

## CONCLUSION

As Thomson's legend spread across the country, he appeared more frequently outside of the textbooks and lesson plans of art education. Thomson-as-icon became a much more widely used symbol of something particularly Canadian. As definitions of Canada adjusted to the new conditions of the post-war era, the mythological Thomson was a palimpsest of Canadian identity: while written anew, the earlier imagining was still evident.

Thomson's paintings were reproduced more frequently in the post-war era and more frequently outside the context of art education. In the 1940s, 'The Jack Pine', for example, was reproduced in Canadian history textbooks for use in high schools. It was also included in Canadian editions of international encyclopedias starting in the early 1950s. The use of his paintings for these sorts of books grew through the 1950s and exploded in the 1960s and 1970s. Paintings like "The Jack Pine", "The West Wind", and "A Northern River" were reproduced, and still are, in greater frequency in school textbooks for history, social studies, Canadian studies, and literature through these decades than before the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

The Thomson mythology has modified somewhat over these years. Contemporary concerns significantly influenced the manner in which Thomson has been approached. He has been frequently marshalled in the promotion of Canadian nationalism. This is hardly inappropriate as Thomson was created explicitly as a national icon in the moment of high nationalist fervour of the inter-war years. As a tide of Canadian nationalism rose in the mid-1960s, Thomson was a prominent figure in it. Part of this was due to an increasing desire to produce textbooks in and about Canada, but at the same time, the Thomson-of-legend fit the desire for truly Canadian images and for real Canadian heroes.<sup>2</sup> This nationalist vision of

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<sup>1</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario, Registration Files, Thomson, The West Wind; NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, Tom, Northern River, #1055; Spring Ice (canvas), #1195; The Jack Pine.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson was featured prominently in the nationalist literature put out in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See, for example, Berton, ed., *Great Canadians: A Century of Achievement*, 107-110. 'The Jack Pine' was reproduced for Canada Post's Centennial series as well. NGC, Curatorial File, Thomson, Jack Pine.



Thomson was also present in the literature of art history, including the books of J. Russell Harper and Barry Lord.<sup>3</sup>

This era's aesthetic concerns are also reflected in the interpretations of Thomson's work. Joan Murray in 1971 and David Silcox and Harold Town in 1977 focused upon Thomson's technique. They insisted that he was tending towards abstraction in his work. They may have been at least partially influenced by the desire to find a Canadian antecedent for the abstract art of their own day, as much as Barry Lord's socialist realist aesthetic may have influenced what he saw in Thomson.<sup>4</sup> Equally, the naturalist aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s likely contributed to the re-imagining of Thomson as a proto-environmentalist. This is most clearly marked in Joan Murray's 1991 and 1994 texts.<sup>5</sup>

The Thomson legend, however, is not a blank sheet upon which successive ideas are inscribed, then cast aside as new ideas become current. It is a palimpsest of Canadian identity. The existing aspects of his mythology linger noticeably. Joyce Wieland's 1991 work, 'Tom Thomson and the Goddess', provides an interesting example of the palimpsest effect. Thomson is here presented as making love to a goddess figure. This image is strikingly reminiscent of the chapter of the Thomson mythology in which he is depicted as courting a suitably feminized Nature. Wieland's work appears to recycle several of the themes present in the initial Thomson myth-making. Thomson is depicted as a suitably virile lover. The juxtaposition of him with a goddess suggests again his mythic spiritualism and the knowledge he thus gained of the essence of the human and of the Canadian experience.<sup>6</sup>

Tom Thomson was created in the years after his death as an icon of Canadian nationalism

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<sup>3</sup> Harper, *Painting in Canada*; Lord, *Painting in Canada*.

<sup>4</sup> Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*; Murray, *Art of Thomson*.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, 'The World of Tom Thomson;' *The Last Spring*.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Wieland (b. 1931), 'Tom Thomson and the Goddess,' 1991, mixed media on paper, 28.0 x 38.1 cm, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, reproduced in Murray, 'World of Thomson,' 47.

in two ways. First, he represented the development of Canadian art. More importantly, though, Thomson was created as a man who understood the essence of the Canadian experience and who communicated that knowledge to Canadians generally through his art. Through his personal qualities and his experiences in the wilds of Canada, Thomson grew to know the essence of the Canadian experience. Thomson had captured the landscape essential to the Canadian experience. He had therefore created depictions of Canada for all to see and through which we could all understand the nature of the Canadian experience.

In part this reflects that there is little new under the Canadian nationalist sun. Canada's identity as a northern wilderness and Canadians' identity as a northern people still convince, as they did long before Tom Thomson took up his brush. That Canada has escaped the ill effects of modernity is also an idea whose time has not expired. Many modern problems – slums, urban violence, environmental despoliation – are often still regarded as foreign to the essential Canadian experience.

The idea of Tom Thomson is also a carrier of particular values. This legend was the creation of a fairly small group of people, but it related closely to contemporary currents of thought within their social stratum. Much of the Thomson mythology plays down his work as an artist. His paintings were mere reflections of his life and character. Thomson was presented as the archetypal Canadian. He contained the virtues of the reinvigorated modern Canadian man. He provided a face and a set of images for the nationalist project of the Anglo-Canadian inter-war cultural elites.

Thomson himself became a vitally important icon of Canadian nationalism. An idea of Tom Thomson, created by his contemporaries in the years after his death and carrying ideas and values proper to their era and social standing, has been profoundly influential for Canadians in pursuit of a nation. Critical reflection on the Thomson legend, hardy and popular as it has been, is long overdue.

## APPENDIX 1

The Arts Club, Montreal. *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Tom Thomson, March 1 to March 21, 1919.*

## Foreword

The work of Tom Thomson may need some introduction in Montreal, since it is the first occasion on which a collection of his works have been exhibited here.

Since the artist's tragic death in the summer of 1917, he has been the subject of considerable discussion; and statements have been made which are more or less incorrect, producing a distorted shadow image of the artist and his development.

Thomson's development from 1913 to 1917 was extraordinary enough, attributable certainly to his innate genius; but this sudden flowering was the result of slow growth, helped by personal and circumstantial influences.

The writer trusts that a few impressions of the artist, gained through close association with him during the early stages of his latter period of development, may be fittingly presented in this foreword.

In 1913, after painting among the islands of the Georgian Bay until the snow drove me out, I went down to Toronto. There were a number of artists there who were keenly interested in the north country — among them Lauren [sic] Harris, Jas. MacDonald, and Arthur Lismar. Dr. Jas. MacCallum, though not a painter, had become, through his love of the north country, the constant friend and encourager of these men in their work. Meeting with such kindred spirits, it required little inducement for me to join them.

There was no conception or attempt to found a school or secede from the other art bodies; although we were dubbed the "hot mush" school, and later the Algonquin Park school, by newspaper critics.

There was nothing revolutionary about our ideas. We felt that there was a rich field of landscape motives throughout the north country if we frankly abandoned any attempt after literal painting and treated our subjects with the freedom of the decorative designer, just as the Swedes had done, living in a land where the topography and climate are similar to our own land.

We felt that the tendency of Canadian landscape painters was to work too much in those parts of Canada that had been long settled and when the landscapes had taken on a British mildness, out of keeping with the distinctive wild naturalness of our typical country.

Muskoka, of course, had been painted in the literal manner; but nothing more hopelessly common-place could be conceived, as the characteristic wildness and brilliant decorative qualities had been lost in attempts to impose a Corot atmosphere on a waste of bristly pine and ragged spruce.

We tried to emphasize color, line, and pattern, even if necessitating the sacrifice of atmospheric qualities. It seemed the only way to make a right use of the wealth of motives the country offered.

About the time I arrived in Toronto, Thomson came down from Canoe Lake, where he had been fishing, working as a guide, and sketching.

He had a few dozen sketches that were not remarkable, except that they showed a great knowledge of the country and were very faithful and painstaking. One felt he would not move a branch or change the contour of a hill, however much the composition demanded it. His sketches were also surprisingly sombre and dead in color, and were also peculiar in composition, in that many of them were of an upright panel shape, showing a low shore line and a big sky. The country in them seemed always to be viewed extensively. There were no gay little rapids or wood interiors, of patterned rocks, but only the opposite shores of lakes, far hills, or wide stretches of country.

Thomson was what is generally known as a commercial artist. He had refined taste, a fertile imagination, and in the more or less limited opportunities of designing title pages, catalogue covers, presentation addresses, etc., he acquired a knowledge and practice which were

of great service in his later work. For some years he had been working in the winter months at commercial art.

Some of his fellow-designers had studied art both in Canada and abroad, and still found time to sketch during week ends. To Thomson, who had received no regular art training, their experience and criticism were decidedly helpful. This engraving house where he worked possessed an art atmosphere; originality was not discouraged; color, line, proportion, pattern were problems which bear a close relation to his later work, wherein he was able to apply them with absolute freedom.

After the winter's work, Thomson would depart to his beloved north country – fishing, guiding when he needed money, and sketching to amuse himself.

When we proposed that they should take up painting seriously, he showed no enthusiasm. The chances of earning a livelihood by it did not appear to him promising. He was sensitive and independent, and feared he might become an object of patronage. Eventually it was arranged that he and I should rent a studio together, and he started to paint some canvases from his studies.

He was anxious that I should go to see his country, Canoe Lake, so in February, 1914, I landed there alone one moonlight night with the temperature round forty below zero. The post office is the only place alive in the winter months; the only roads are a few snowshoe tracks. Down the lake as straight as an arrow ran the track of Bud Callighan, park ranger. To be a friend of Thomson's was all the introduction one needed with the few natives about.

Round Canoe Lake is a ragged piece of Nature, hacked up many years ago by a lumber company that went broke. It is fire swept, dammed by both man and beaver, and overrun with wolves.

Most of Thomson's sketches were painted about Canoe Lake, which was his starting point and virtually his home.

Early spring and autumn seemed to inspire his finest efforts, and the intimate charm with which he endows his waste of rock and swamp, friezes of ragged spruce, the slim birch which clings to the meagre soil of the rocks, are but an expression of his love for the country.

In the autumn of the same year I joined him at Canoe Lake, and we worked together about six weeks. He was making great progress. No longer handicapped by literal representation, he was transposing, eliminating, designing, experimenting, finding happy color motives amid tangle and confusion, reveling in paint, and intensely interested. Full of restless energy, the amount of work he did was incredible. There were long canoe trips, and we were up and out fishing at dawn. He seemed to require no sleep.

Of schools of painting he knew little, nor had he seen much, apart from the local exhibitions in Toronto and a few Dutch paintings which he detested for their meanness of spirit.

Yearly the schools turn out scores of art students who, having learned a method of expression, then start on a vague hunt for subjects, and mostly prove they have acquired only the method, with no inner experience to express. Thomson was fortunate in that, finding a means of expression, he was able to interpret what had been to him the passion of his life.

Most of the sketches exhibited belong to the period after I left him. They appear to be painted simply as sketches, and not as studies for larger things; the difficulty of moving about – a canoe in a country of many portages – accounts for the great amount of his work in this form.

Thomson was forty-two when he died. He gave one the impression of being under thirty. He was modest, oversensitive, almost naive in his outlook, a pal to everyman who came along – lumber jack, trapper or artist. Camping, he was not happy unless he doing three-quarters of the work. Careless of money, he left it lying about in the bottom of his canoe or tent, equally happy when he caught a big trout, when his bannock turned out well, or when he brought back a gorgeous sketch; a poet, a philosopher, and a good friend.

It is to be regretted that a number of larger canvases in the possession of the Canadian National Gallery are on tour in the U.S., but the present exhibition gives a comprehensive idea of the artist's work.

A.Y. Jackson, November 1918.

## APPENDIX 2

Art Museum of Toronto. *Catalogue of a Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by Tom Thomson, and of a Collection of Japanese Colour Prints, Loaned by Sir Edmund Walker, February 13 to 29, 1920.*

Introduction [unattributed]

Tom Thomson, the most unique personality Canadian Art has yet produced, was born near Toronto, in August, 1877 – After boyhood [sic] spent on a farm near Owen Sound, and several experiments in choosing a career, he took up commercial [sic] art – His inherited tastes for fishing, camping and exploring led him into the wilds. Its lure grew ever stronger and determined him to devote his life to painting the beauties of that compelling, alluring, devouring North which took him to its bosom in July 1917.

Untrained in schools, ignorant of the theories and canons of Art, he has left behind him in his short and meteoric career pictures of such quality as to cause many to see in him the beginning of a Canadian School.

The object of many criticisms, too often arising from lack of observation of nature as it really is – he avoided controversy and discussion even with artists, content if he might but live with Nature and share her many moods. Alone by his camp fire, the moon a silvery green pathway on the waters, the stars peeping through the solemn pines he communed with the Spirit of the North, and straightway was freed from the shackles of the town, the petty meannesses which chafed him.

The North was not to him merely a place where he might find motifs, decorative or colourful. To him the North was a spirit which, entering into him possessed him and permeated all of his work. Modest, sensitive, shy and independent, he was a creature of the Wild and has revealed to us its wonders – the passion of his life. His message was to express the moods and passions, the sombreness and the glorious colour of early Spring and Autumn in the North – not the North of the Summer tourist, who sees but a waste of barren rock, bristly pine and ragged spruce.

In all his work there is a poetic emotion along with the foreboding, tragic feeling of the North, something of that eternal conflict which Nature wages against man, the vulgar intruder. Even in his pictures richest in colour and riotous in the Joy of light and life it is ever present.

His palette embrace the whole gamut of colour, black and gray, or glorious and golden – His work is characterised not by its subject, not by the preponderance of any colour, nor by the method of handling – to him a matter of no concern, – but by its purity of colour, and above all by its truthfulness, compelling sincerity and emotion.

That his work should be purchased by the National Gallery and the Ontario Government or valued by anyone was to him a matter of amused surprise and wonder. He wrought better than he wot of [sic]. He lived his own life, did his own work in his own way and died in the land of his dearest vision.

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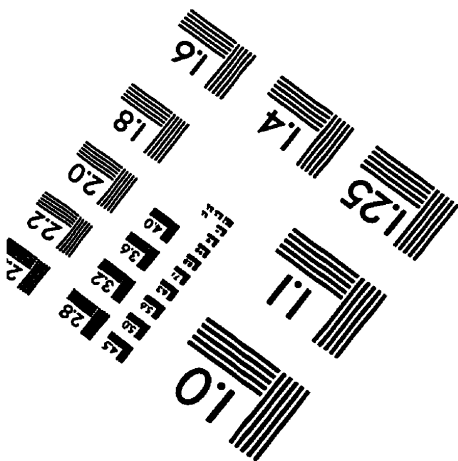
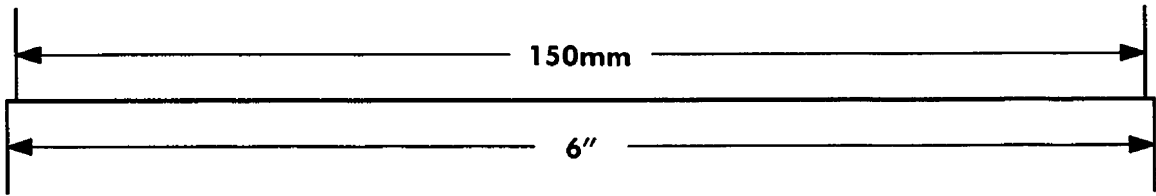
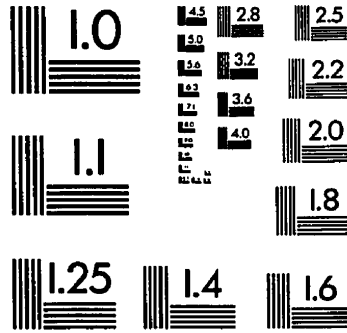
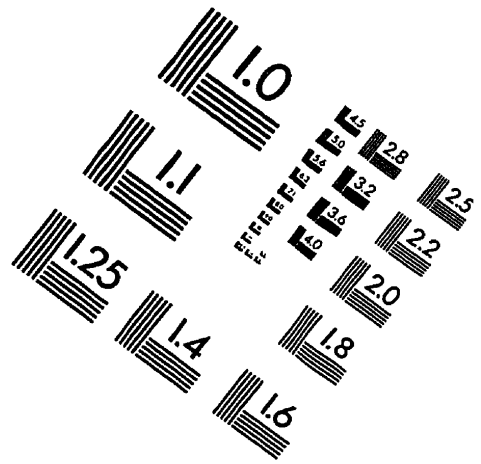
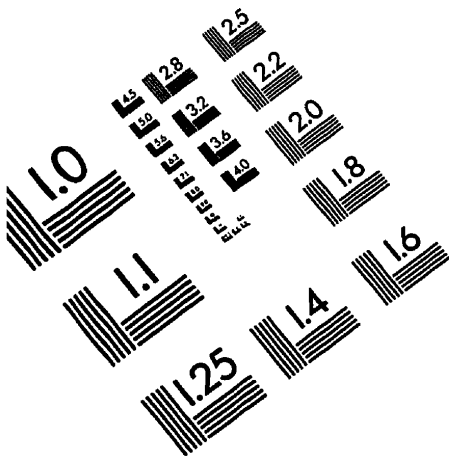
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