

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Tom Thomson, Antimodernism, and the Ideal of Manhood

Ross D. Cameron

Volume 10, Number 1, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030513ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030513ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

Tom Thomson is a legendary figure in Canadian culture. That legend was created after his death by a group of colleagues and admirers, many of whom had or later took up central positions in Canadian art circles and were important contributors to the nationalist movement of interwar Canada. Thomson's mythologisers created a symbol and a myth which combined their concerns about modernity - its threats to manhood and to Canadian society - and their desire to build a national cultural hero out of their own experiences. But their antimodern enthusiasm for the wilderness vacation also reinforced - though with a newly enthusiastic emphasis - an existing definition of Canada as an untamed country filled with rugged, virile men. In the face of the challenges of modernity, the Thomson of legend revitalized the independent and virile manhood his celebrants considered to be essential aspects of the national identity.

Cite this article

Cameron, R. D. (1999). Tom Thomson, Antimodernism, and the Ideal of Manhood. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 10(1), 185–208. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030513ar>

Tom Thomson, Antimodernism, and the Ideal of Manhood

ROSS D. CAMERON

Tom Thomson is perhaps the most legendary of Canadian artists. His paintings are frequently reproduced as symbols of the Canadian nation in such varied forms as postage stamps, coins, coasters, and posters. They are iconic in Canada: *The West Wind* has been a central piece of the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario since its donation in 1926, just as *A Northern River*, *Spring Ice*, and *The Jack Pine* are prominent in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Thomson is ever-present in the story of the development of Canadian art, alongside the Group of Seven, many of whom worked for the same graphic arts company, lived in the same building for a time, and most importantly sketched together in Algonquin Park from which they gained the designation from contemporary reviewers, The Algonquin School. Thomson is, for many, the important Canadian artist, a seemingly obvious reference point in Canadian art history, sometimes portrayed as the first to experiment with modern styles and techniques.¹

More importantly, Thomson is an iconic figure in Canadian culture. Thomson's is an image that has been lodged deep in the national consciousness.

The author would like to thank for their assistance in preparing this paper Melanie Cook, Michael Dawson, Karen Dubinsky, Todd McCallum, and Ian McKay, as well as the Department of History at Queen's University and my colleagues and friends for their support.

- 1 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." Hugh MacLennan, "The Ten Greatest Canadians," *New Liberty* 26, 9 (November 1949): 7-13. Pierre Berton included Thomson among the 25 Great Canadians in a volume of the Canadian Centenary Series. Pierre Berton, ed., *Great Canadians: A Century of Achievement*, Canadian Centenary Series (Toronto, 1965), 107-10. 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 Cumoe, 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. Joan Murray, *The Art of Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971); David P. Silcox and Harold Town, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm* (Toronto, 1977).

This fact has become fundamental to how his paintings are read. He is a consistent touchstone not only for the development of Canadian art, but for the Anglo-Canadian national identity that was developing in his day. Many accounts suggest that Thomson, wholly Canadian in training and experience, was the first truly *Canadian* painter for these precise reasons. Instead of simply painting a Canadian landscape so central to Canada's self-definition, Thomson reflected upon and reacted to it.

But this image of Thomson is a mythic construction. For all its general acceptance and enduring strength, this imaginary Thomson was the historically contingent expression of a particular time and place. The legendary Tom Thomson was created after his death by a group of colleagues and admirers, many of whom had or later took up central positions in Canadian art circles and were important contributors to the nationalist movement of interwar Canada.² Thomson was transformed from a Toronto-based graphic artist to a modern reincarnation of the *coureur-de-bois*, and the facts of his life and experiences were rewritten in the mythologising literature to emphasise Thomson's solitary and intimate contact with Nature. Thomson's mythologisers created a symbol and a myth that combined their concerns about modernity, its threats to manhood and to Canadian society, and their desire to build a national cultural hero out of their own experiences. In the wilderness, middle-class Torontonians sought to counteract the enervating effects of the modern, urban lifestyle. But this antimodern³ enthusiasm for the wilderness vacation also reinforced, though

2 For a discussion of the various forms of Canadian cultural nationalism of the early twentieth century, see Mary Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada in the 1920s: Seven Studies," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1974. Carl Berger effectively illustrates the various manifestations of Canadian nationalism in the early twentieth century. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore to which variant of Canadian nationalism the Thomson mythology properly belongs as it most likely has aspects of several different expressions, but the mythology does express some of the consistent themes of Canadian nationalist thought, primarily the burgeoning maturity of the Canadian nation. See Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867 – 1914* (Toronto, 1970).

3 T. J. Jackson Lears describes as "antimodernism" the reaction of American elites around the turn of the century, particularly those of the northeastern United States, against their secular modern society and what they perceived to be its enervating effects. 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. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920* (New York, 1981), xiii. Lynda Jessup has drawn on this concept 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. Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," in *Policing the*

with a newly enthusiastic emphasis, an existing definition of Canada as an untamed country filled with rugged, virile men. The Thomson of legend saw revitalised the independent and virile manhood that his celebrants considered essential aspects of the national character.

The persistence of the mythological Thomson pervades even the most skeptical of scholars. In his recent study of Canadian myths, Daniel Francis punctures several of the painters-in-the-wilderness tales of the Group of Seven. His debunking of the mythological Group is clear, well developed, thorough, and, ultimately, convincing.⁴ Yet revealingly, Tom Thomson escapes Francis's efforts to bring these legendary figures back to reality. A mythological idea of Thomson persists even in his account. Here is Francis on Thomson:

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.⁵

Comparing Francis's depiction with the description of Thomson by a Toronto reviewer of a 1920 Memorial Exhibition at the Art Museum of Toronto, reveals the continuity of the myth:

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

Boundaries of Modernity/Antimodernism and Artistic Experience (forthcoming). 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 that 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, 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 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): 119-39; and *The Mountie From Dime Novel to Disney* (Toronto: 1998).

4 Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver, 1997), chapter six, 129-51.

5 Francis, *National Dreams*, 137-38.

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.⁶

Testament to the power and tenacity of Victorian romanticism in contemporary Canadian culture, the legendary Thomson remains a suitably romantic, solitary, Whitmanesque woodsman.

This legend had been created 70 or 80 years earlier, shortly after Thomson's death in 1917. It is the story of a man who had an intimate knowledge of the Canadian wilderness. And it is the story of a Canadian backwoodsman – tall, handsome, virile, solitary, and stoic – who had partaken of the wilderness lifestyle since childhood, who had unparalleled outdoor skills and abilities even when compared with indigenous Canadians, and who supported himself as a ranger and guide while living in the wilderness of Algonquin Park. The Thomson legend is of a self-taught painter who was ignorant of any formal style, school, or technique, especially that of the European Salons. Unheralded and unsupported in his time, he simply painted, experimenting and creating techniques to suit his purpose. He led into the Canadian wilderness a collection of artists who would become the Group of Seven, only to lose his life there mysteriously.⁷ He was the backwoodsman who painted; a man who reflected the pure Canadian experience in the quintessential Canadian landscape incarnate in the alleged wilds of northern Ontario cottage country. His world was the world of pure and vigorous experience of the antimodernist's desire. Daniel Francis thus comes by this mythic Thomson honestly.

Tom Thomson was most active as a painter in the last five years of his life. It is during this period that he produced the paintings for which he is famous. He lived in Toronto during this time. He worked as a graphic artist and possibly was unable to find steady work during the downturn in that industry during the Great War. With the patronage of Dr. James MacCallum, he lived and worked in the Studio Building built by MacCallum and fellow painter Lawren Harris. After a year, he moved into a construction shack behind the Studio Building. For the five years before his July 1917 death at Canoe Lake – apparently in a boating accident though his mysterious death remains a particularly saucy aspect of the legend – he spent most of the year in Ontario cottage country, especially Algonquin Park, and wintered in Toronto. He supplemented the

6 "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), 14 February 1920. 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.

7 This legendary depiction is present in MacLennan, "The Ten Greatest Canadians"; Berton, ed., *Great Canadians*; and *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton, 1988): 2153-54.

money he made through sales with guiding and fire ranging in Algonquin, but the amount of this sort of work he found is unclear. Aside from the few canvases he painted during those winters, his activities in Toronto remain obscure.

One's ability to interrogate this Thomson mythology is limited. There are very few samples of Thomson's writing, and the letters that do exist are rarely introspective. Notwithstanding the actual numbers of letters, they contain 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."⁸ Most of what is known about him comes from the letters of his friends and colleagues. A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, and Lawren Harris, the men who would become famous as members of the Group of Seven, reported back the events of trips to artist-colleague J.E.H. Macdonald and to MacCallum. The rest comes from the books and articles written about him after his death in which his legend was born. This body of writing reveals much of Thomson's life history, especially concerning the final five or six years of his life. However, as the layers of this mythologising literature have built up, it has become difficult to separate fact from conjecture and invention.⁹

In biographical books and articles written during the 20 years after Thomson's death, a particular group of admirers purposefully sought to build him into a national icon for successive generations. MacCallum published an article in 1918 in *Canadian Magazine* in which he situates the Thomson legend within the cult of wilderness and in "cottage country," thus, reflecting the sensibilities of the University of Toronto's Madawaska Club with its Georgian Bay cottagers. Future Group member J.E.H. MacDonald's 1917 memorial, published in the University of Toronto magazine, *The Rebel*, spoke directly to the members of the metropolitan nationalist intelligentsia: to those who already shared their common natural/national sensibility. F.B. Housser, author of the widely read and influential *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, was a friend and spiritual fellow-traveller of Group member Lawren Harris. He placed Thomson at the origins of the movement he described as nationalist first and artistic second. Also a future Group member, Arthur Lismer

⁸ Joan Murray, *The Best of Tom Thomson* (Edmonton, 1986), 3.

⁹ 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 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," PhD thesis, York University, 1973, 149. Some others are in private hands, notably the Thomson and MacDonald families.

spread the Thomson legend through his work in and out of the Art Gallery of Toronto as the leading art and art appreciation educator in Canada in that time. A.Y. Jackson penned the foreword to the 1919 memorial exhibition to Thomson in Montreal. The books authored in the 1930s by Toronto writer and folklorist Blodwen Davies were widely cited in future descriptions of Thomson in art appreciation and art history texts. All of these writers were members of the central Canadian intelligentsia of the interwar era and were well connected to the nationalist network of that time.¹⁰ 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 uncivilised 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, in 1917, had died in a boating accident, and were positioned to spread this legend well beyond their own circles.¹¹

This legend explains little about the actual life and work of this particular artist, much less the lives and experiences of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. The idea of Thomson played upon and contributed to a variety of tropes of Canadian-ness which were current in the elite Toronto circles of the 1920s. The *coureur-de-bois* and frontiersman images, for example, often used in initial descriptions of Thomson, situated him in an existing Canadian mythology. It is a depiction that overlooks Thomson's artistic tutoring by his colleagues and friends.¹² It omits the fact that Thomson lived in Toronto and worked in

10 See Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada."

11 J.M. MacCallum, "Tom Thomson: Painter of the North," *The Canadian Magazine* 1, 5 (March 1918): 375-85; J.E.H. MacDonald, "A Landmark in Canadian Art," *The Rebel* 2, 2 (November 1917): 45-50; F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto, 1926); A.Y. Jackson, "Foreword," The Arts Club, Montreal, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Tom Thomson, March 1 to March 21, 1919*; Arthur Lismer, *A Short History of Painting: With a Note of Canadian Art* (Toronto, 1926); *Canadian Picture Study* (Toronto, 1930); Blodwen Davies, *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man who Looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness*, [1935] rev. ed. (Vancouver, 1967) and *Paddle and Palette: The Story of Tom Thomson* (Toronto, 1930); Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa, 1995), 92.

12 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." 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." Jackson to James MacCallum, 13 October 1914; Frederick Varley to MacCallum, n.d. October 1914, National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada Fonds, 1-71-M, MacCallum Papers. Emphasis in text. 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.

Toronto's graphic arts industry, illustrated for magazine and newspaper advertisements, and *travelled to* Algonquin Park to paint the landscape. It overlooks fundamental contradictions in presenting Thomson as a paragon of manliness. Thomson's wilderness lifestyle was an extreme exaggeration of the lifestyle of contemporary urban men. He neither married, raised a family, nor seemed to be able to hold a steady job. In conflating the tamed forests of Ontario cottage country with a primeval, untouched, unpeopled wilderness which defined Canada as a whole, and in confusing a commercial artist from Toronto for a frontiersman, this conception of Thomson also mythologised the particular values and habits of his community – the predominantly Anglo-Canadian, Toronto-based intellectual and cultural elite.¹³

The creation of this legend was structured by a variety of influences. The nationalism of the growing urban, central Canadian intelligentsia in the early twentieth century expressed a pride in Canada's contribution to the Great War and an enthusiasm about Canada's recent and future growth. Anglo-Canadian nationalists of various stripes saw Canada as maturing as a nation in these years. Thus, National Gallery Director Eric Brown could hold Thomson up to the world in 1917 as evidence of a national cultural maturation.¹⁴ Many members of the Anglo-Canadian elite also exhibited the antimodern anxiety about the effects of the urban growth, industrial development, cosmopolitan immigration, and corporate consolidation that were features of modernising Canada.

Thus, the northern wilderness – the concept from which the national definition had long been drawn – reflected closely the cult of wilderness which grew from the antimodernist mind. It is not surprising that a vague antipathy towards the increased size and centrality of cities fed a quest to rediscover the wilderness. But the cult of wilderness also featured an effort to rediscover a virile manhood seemingly lost or threatened in modern times. 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.¹⁵ 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

13 Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London and New York, 1991), 29; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 183.

14 Charles Holme, ed., *Art of the British Empire Overseas* (London, 1917).

15 The place of the north in Canadian identity has been much studied. On contemporary views, see Carl Berger, "The True North Strong and Free," in *Nationalism in Canada*, Peter Russell, ed. (Toronto, 1966), 4-27; Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto, 1995), 132; Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery," 7-8.

degeneration and overcivilisation. The effete, dandy, staid European was a frequent object of derision in the Thomson and Group literature; the American figures Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau were, conversely, praised.¹⁶ The Thomson mythology is, in part, an attempt to formulate a hegemonic definition of manhood.

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 Toronto 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 north is so well known the exhibition just opened should make an especial appeal."¹⁷ 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. David Milne in the 1930s 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."¹⁸

By the 1920s, the associations this social segment had with Algonquin Park and such wilderness vacation areas had firmly established the "North"

16 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 that 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*. John Weiss, ed. (Detroit, 1965), 44. MacDonald, Lismer, Harris, Housser, and MacCallum especially held a deep spiritual affinity with the wilderness movement of the era and with the wilderness spiritualism of Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. MacDonald, for example, named his son Thoreau. See Davis, "An Apprehended Vision."

17 "Beauty of North," *The Mail and Empire*.

18 Quoted in Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 155. Also John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto, 1985), 163. The middle-class cult of nature has been recently taken up by Michèle Lacombe in "Songs of the Open Road: Bon Echo, Urban Utopians and the Cult of Nature," *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 33, 2 (Été 1998 Summer): 152-67.

within their intellectual framework. Such personal connotations overlapped with nationalist ones in the case of Thomson and this region of Ontario. 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 overlie the palimpsest of personal images and experiences...."¹⁹ 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.

As such, the Thomson myth illustrates the long-standing confounding of Ontario with Canada. It was, of course, part of a more general pattern summarised succinctly by Mary Vipond:

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.²⁰

As members of the Toronto-centred intelligentsia positioned themselves as national cultural leaders, images related directly to their conceptual and material frameworks were transformed into icons of Canadian nationalism. These paintings could be read as representations of an essentialised national identity by that elite because of their associations with the subject of those depictions. This cultural elite was thus able to promote Thomson and his paintings as representative of the national experience generally.

The commercial artists of the Algonquin School were of a piece with the segment of Toronto society who partook of the then-fashionable wilderness vacations.²¹ There was little, besides paint and brushes, to differentiate the rush of these painters to the woods from that of thousands of other Canadians who joined in the great escape from the city by going back to a nature that was wild

¹⁹ Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 165.

²⁰ Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada," 16.

²¹ 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. 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," *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists*. Colin S. MacDonald, ed. 3rd ed., vol. 4 (Ottawa, 1975), 860-69.

and adventurous. Indeed it was the very commonality of the experience that made possible the profound effect which the Group's conversion had upon Canadian art. They began to paint the wilderness at just the right time to catch the enthusiasm of a generation of vacationing cottagers and wilderness buffs.²² Most of the members of the audience for Thomson's paintings "knew" this particular region of northern Ontario in this sense.²³ Canadian artists had been drawn to the landscape as the source of a national art from the earliest days of the country.²⁴ But in the years after the First World War, the combination of a growing nationalist intelligentsia and the antimodern enthusiasm for the wilderness accelerated this nationalist cultural expression and movement.

The Non-Artist Paradigm

The Thomson mythology emerged from the community of intellectuals, organisations, and institutions of the Toronto-centred nationalist elite that moved in the circles of the University of Toronto and Toronto's Arts and Letters Club. Their descriptions insisted on the centrality of Thomson's knowledge of the wilderness in contrast to that of a conventionally trained artist.²⁵ This emphasis on Thomson's life experience was forcefully reiterated in the catalogue of the 1919 memorial exhibition in Montreal, written by A. Y. Jackson:

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.²⁶

22 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): 74-75.

23 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. Douglas Cole, "Artists, Patrons and Public," 70.

24 The entries in *The Art of the British Empire Overseas* provide examples of this. 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. Holme, ed., *Art of the British Empire Overseas*.

25 Jackson later, in his "Père Raquette" incarnation, fully and enthusiastically embraced the paradigm of Thomson as the untutored wild-man artist. See A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country* (Toronto, 1958).

26 Jackson, foreword to *Exhibition Catalogue*, 1919.

James MacCallum, in his 1918 obituary of Thomson, 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.²⁷

In order to understand Thomson's work, in MacCallum's opinion, the viewer needed to call upon similar experiences. He thus ties the intelligentsia's wilderness vacations to a special knowledge of the national essence.

MacCallum did not seem to recognise 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. Fundamentally, MacCallum's description of Thomson emphasised 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 paralleled the values and experiences of his audience. Thomson thus became one with the wild and, seemingly by osmosis, was able to paint it as truthfully as only one deeply in touch with this territory could. 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.

The elements of the "myth of Thomson" that were to prove enduring – Thomson the primitive, the backwoodsman, the painter of a wilderness he knew with the intimacy of a lover – were much in evidence in the catalogue of the 1920 Toronto memorial exhibition. The most important elements in all of this were Thomson's personal characteristics. He was not merely experienced in the outdoors, and he was not merely an artist who painted in the wilderness. He was, the catalogue suggested, capable of communing directly with nature:

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.²⁸

²⁷ MacCallum, "Tom Thomson," 376.

²⁸ 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*.

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."²⁹ So much was Thomson one with nature that, in this description, he did not even die. The North simply "took him to its bosom"³⁰ like the much-anticipated embrace of a long-courted lover. This description of Thomson's death, like the Thomson myth in general, was steeped in a romantic conception of the wilderness.

The 1920 Toronto exhibition catalogue also 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. This lack of training in the "theories and canons of Art" meant that Thomson's representations of nature were pure, honest, and authentic expressions of the Canadian environment. He simply lived intimately and spiritually with Nature, learned "her" ways and reflected this experiential knowledge in his paintings. Anyone who shared even the smallest part of this knowledge of this wild region would recognise 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 were preconditions of a distinctly Canadian art.

Arthur Lismer, in a 1926 art appreciation textbook, argued that the Canadian artist was necessarily one who took in the multi-faceted life of "his" country and expressed it in his art. He contrasted the virile lifestyle of the true Canadian artist with the over-civilised, 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.³¹

Lismer's remark starkly juxtaposes the Canadian painter, whose work is rooted in lived experience in the country's environment, with the artist dominated by European styles, whose work displays knowledge of technique but none of the

²⁹ Art Museum of Toronto, *Catalogue of Memorial Exhibition*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lismer, *A Short History*, 30.

reality of Canadian life. In so doing, he echoed his cliques' antimodern critiques of modern society.

In 1925, 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.³²

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. For him, through Thomson we might glimpse the essence of nature, and, thus, of Canada itself.

In his 1917 memorial article, J.E.H. MacDonald underlined the poetic and romantic aspects of 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."³³ 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.³⁴

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.

³² Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 15.

³³ MacDonald, "Landmark in Canadian Art," 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

Thomson and the Struggle for a National Identity

Even before the 1920s, 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.³⁵ 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. This helped to form the cultural basis for the Group of Seven's definition of a Canadian art.³⁶

Writing in 1916, NGC Director Brown asserted that a distinctive style of landscape painting was developing in Canada free from the hindrance and influence of European schools. 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 focused 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.³⁷ 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."³⁸ This new Canadian art represented and mirrored the character of the emerging nation.

Thomson's work was explicitly connected to the developing national culture through the later 1920s and into the 1930s. His fame was consolidated in

35 For a discussion of the place of the north in Canadian nationalist thought, see Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 162-99.

36 In her 1992 dissertation, Lynda 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 and 'The Business of Becoming a Nation,'" PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1992, 100-101, 246-47. 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, 1979).

37 Holme, ed., *Art of the British Empire Overseas*.

38 Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 32.

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 its contribution to national culture. "Tom Thomson needs no tablet to commemorate his achievements," Locke proclaimed. "He has left us work which expresses our national life – the forces of the great natural surroundings of this young land."³⁹ By 1930, 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."⁴⁰ His paintings were "ikons [sic] of the new Canadian faith."⁴¹ This nationalist agenda was most clearly enunciated in 1925 by Newton MacTavish in one of the earliest survey texts of Canadian art history:

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.⁴²

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 questioning the nationalist purpose of Thomson's paintings.

Contemporary reviewers of the 1920 memorial exhibition had emphasised and re-emphasised Thomson's spiritual connection with the North as capturing the national essence, accepting and adopting the phrasing of the catalogue directly.⁴³ 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," and thus argued that these images of a particular place somehow reflected the essence of Canada, well beyond the boundaries of Algonquin Park.⁴⁴ A second connected his lack of academic training to his ability to depict the Canadian environment so accurately: "That he was largely self-taught and remained entirely Canadian in sentiment adds to the force of his appeal."⁴⁵ Thus, Thomson's con-

39 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*.

40 Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 34.

41 Ibid., 35.

42 Newton MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada*, [1925] (Toronto, 1973), iii. See Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 135-36.

43 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.

44 "Beauty of North," *The Mail and Empire*.

45 "Thomson and the Algonquin School," *The Mail and Empire*.

nection with the landscape took on its nationalist tone. Being truly Canadian meant having no external influences, facilitating his ability to paint the essence of the Canadian environment. In the articles written about Thomson, even his colleagues were referred to only in passing and in general terms.

Thomson, according to Barker Fairley, one-time President of the Arts and Letters Club and avid Group supporter, 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.⁴⁶

The mythologising literature also insists that Thomson's sketches and paintings themselves 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 Blodwen 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.⁴⁷

But such reviews, quite apart from simply reiterating the "obvious" qualities of Thomson's work, are part of an educative process wherein the recognised experts in the field – curators, fellow-artists and reviewer/critics – were instructing the reader and viewer as to what is to be seen in these paintings. They thereby established as obvious the nationalist content of Thomson's work.⁴⁸ This was a necessary part of defining the paintings as reflections of the

46 Barker Fairley, "Tom Thomson and Others," *The Rebel* 6, 6 (March 1920): 245-46.

47 Davies, *Story of a Man*, 11. Emphasis added.

48 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 localised segment of Canadian society. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel with Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public* [1969], Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, trans. (Cambridge, 1991), 47.

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 served to reinforce the understanding of the culture of middle-class, urban, Anglo Central Canadians as representations of 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 phenomena of Algonquin Park, and aside from their artistic merits have a historical value entitling them to preservation in the National Gallery."⁴⁹ 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. Though their value was described as historical, they still belonged in the National Gallery.

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.⁵⁰

The Canadian consciousness she described was all but explicitly that of Canadian settler society. In Davies' 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

49 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.

50 "Tom Thomson and the Canadian Mood," *The New Outlook*, (27 August 1930), 826.

the Canadian "nation," any other presences on the land, being officially unrecorded, were designated as marginal.⁵¹

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 they shared and with which the Toronto elite identified. Thomson's art was presented as literal depictions of the Canadian landscape and lifestyle.⁵² Thomson's style and technique was thus interpreted to reinforce the experiential qualities of his work; his life and experiences in the Canadian wilderness were to be seen in his paintings. The *plein air* oil sketch captured this. It 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.⁵³ This conception of the artist's work and of the artist at work was fundamental to the mythology of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. 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 supposed symbiosis of art, artist, and subject.⁵⁴ 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, concerns which fundamentally informed the antimodernist's yearning for virile masculine experience. Along with describing the urban middle-class lifestyle, with its wilderness vacations, as the Canadian norm, these writers created a normative description of Canadian manhood.⁵⁵ The basic alteration modern capitalism had effected in men's expectations for employment – the reduced prospects for economic independence –

51 The idea of the erasure of the aboriginal presence from the landscape is taken up directly in Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine – Wilderness sublime or the erasure of the aboriginal presence from the landscape," *Revue d'études canadiennes/Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, 4 (Hiver 1992-93 Winter): 98-128; and in Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. (Vancouver, 1992). 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.

52 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," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1991.

53 See Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley, 1986), 128.

54 Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery," 8-10; and "Canadian Artists," 24-30.

55 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

affected fundamentally men's self- and social-definition. Manhood was being redefined in the early twentieth century to encompass its changing social reality.⁵⁶ The desire and ability to rejuvenate it may provide the best evidence of the persistent faith in manhood as an organising principle for society.

And Thomson's story was a male experience. Women, of the actual flesh-and-blood variety, were routinely written out of Thomson's story. The tales of his relationships with Alice Lambert and Winnifred Trainor have only been integrated into the story recently. The women who lived in the area were rarely mentioned, if at all. The trips themselves were generally presented as all-male affairs.⁵⁷ Women were notably absent from 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."⁵⁸ Neither text mentioned Thomson's relationship with Winnifred Trainor, though Davies would surely have heard of their rumoured engagement.⁵⁹ Ottelyn Addison reported, in a footnote in her 1969 text, the rumour of

corporate economy meant a loss of personal economic independence for men. The self-employed businessman who had been the norm of the localised bourgeois world had become less common. The variety of ways for a young man to "get on in the world" was increasingly limited. See David G. Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment and Social Mobility in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal, 1994), 62, 102.

56 On the dynamics of definitions of manhood, see Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le travail* 23 (Spring 1989): 159-69; 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*. Mark C. Cairns and Clyde Griffen, eds. (Chicago, 1990): 183-204; George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, 1996); Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991).

57 This depiction was not always accurate. Jackson wrote to MacDonald from Canoe Lake in October 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. Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto, 1970), 100.

58 Davies, *Story of a Man*, 30.

59 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*.

his engagement to Winnifred Trainor but suggested it to be little more than gossip.⁶⁰ Alice Lambert was first named in Silcox and Town's book in 1977.⁶¹

This writing out of women from the mythology cleared the field for the female lead to be played by Nature. Thomson became her faithful suitor. Memorialising Thomson in 1917 for the international readership of the art and design magazine, *The Studio*, Harold Mortimer-Lamb described Thomson's relationship with Nature, tellingly feminised, 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."⁶² Davies picked up this vocabulary, describing Thomson's activity as more of a devotional duty than an arduous job:

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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵

60 Ottelyn Addison, *Tom Thomson: The Algonquin Years* (Toronto, 1969), 93.

61 Silcox and Town, *The Silence and the Storm*, 52.

62 Harold Mortimer-Lamb, "Tom Thomson," *The Studio* (August 1919). Copy in NAC, Davies Collection.

63 Davies, *Story of a Man*, 93.

64 MacCallum, "Tom Thomson," 380.

65 This sexualisation of the landscape of Algonquin Park is similar to that of Niagara Falls as Karen Dubinsky explores in her "'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; and *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (Toronto, 1999).

This imagery of Nature was highly sexualised. 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,”⁶⁶ is by no means an exaggeration of this mythical courtship. Thus, within both myth and reality – the obscure and unclear scenario of his death and burial – Thomson did not die in a boating accident, but disappeared into the wilds.

The depiction of his relationship with a feminised 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 manly 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 emphasise Thomson’s faithfulness to Nature and to stress his intimacy with “her,” 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 civilisation. 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 recognised 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.⁶⁷

This complication of manly and masculine, the crude and the sophisticated, was also suggested by Jackson in the 1919 Montreal 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 every man who came along – lumber jack, trapper or artist. Camping, he was not happy unless 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

66 Scott Watson, “Disfigured Nature: The Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape,” in *Eye of Nature*. Daina Augaitis and Helga Pakasaar, eds. (Banff, 1991), 104.

67 Paul H. Walton, “The Group of Seven and Northern Development,” *Revue des Arts canadiens/Canadian Art Review* 17, 2 (1990): 177.

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.⁶⁸

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 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 civilisation: "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.⁶⁹

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."⁷⁰

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 epitomise 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."⁷¹ 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, self-reliant, self-sufficient, yet thoughtful, helpful, considerate, even with strangers and chance wayfarers."⁷² Housser pictured Thomson as the

68 Jackson, foreword to *Catalogue of Thomson Paintings*, 1919.

69 Davies, *Story of a Man*, 100.

70 Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995), 180-82.

71 Davies, *Story of a Man*, 19.

72 Ibid., 90.

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...."⁷³ 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*."⁷⁴

It was through this sentiment – Thomson as 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' 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.⁷⁵

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 mirrors directly exclusionary immigration policies which judged some as inappropriate to the Canadian setting and community. 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 non-Anglo immigration flowing to the growing cities. Jewish, Asian, or southern European immigrants were often associated with the rootlessness, the over-civilisation, the moral corruption that haunted the Canadian antimodernist's world view.

As early as 1920, Thomson, already the embodiment of a true nationalism and a true manhood, was portrayed by a reviewer of his memorial exhibition as signifying 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 mea-

⁷³ Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 30.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28. Housser seemed oblivious to the materialistic motivations of the *coureurs de bois*.

⁷⁵ Davies, *Paddle and Palette*, 2.

surable in inches, he reproduced the glory of our Canadian wilderness, the sunshine of Heaven, the Majesty of nature.⁷⁶

The nationalist promoters of this image saw in Thomson 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. The legendary Thomson showed how the independent and virile manhood that his celebrants saw as essential aspects of the national character could be revitalised in the face of the urban environment and its perceived threats to social order. 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.

The Canadian Type: Thomas John Thomson

The characteristics attributed to Thomson also reinforced the notion of a particular "Canadian type." In his remembrance of the Great 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, he wrote, "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."⁷⁷ Tom Thomson epitomised this "new man" – the prototypical Canadian. Here was a man who lived most of the year in Algonquin Park. He supposedly handled a canoe with the same excellence and proficiency as a fishing rod. He was depicted as living in the Canadian landscape much as had the earliest trappers and initial settlers, and was frequently imbued with the imagined characteristics of indigenous Canadians. He was said to have lived by his own abilities, independent of other men, just as he painted in his own way unfettered by the influence of European styles.

Thomson's legend then was bound up with the idealisation of a virile and independent manhood as much as it was in the quest to define the national essence. His purported experiences, though, were ones with which this metropolitan Anglo-Canadian nationalist intelligentsia could identify, as an antithesis to the city, as a reflection of their cottage lifestyle and as the embodiment of their self-conscious desire to build a national mythology from which Canadians could draw their identity. The legendary Tom Thomson grew from this soil after the actual man drowned in Canoe Lake in 1917. It reinforced the actual habits of middle-class Torontonians as normative and proper, virile and "real" even if only vicariously through their summer trips to Algonquin or Muskoka or to the trackless wilds of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

76 Fairbairn, "Memorial Exhibition to Artist of North."

77 Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997), 159.