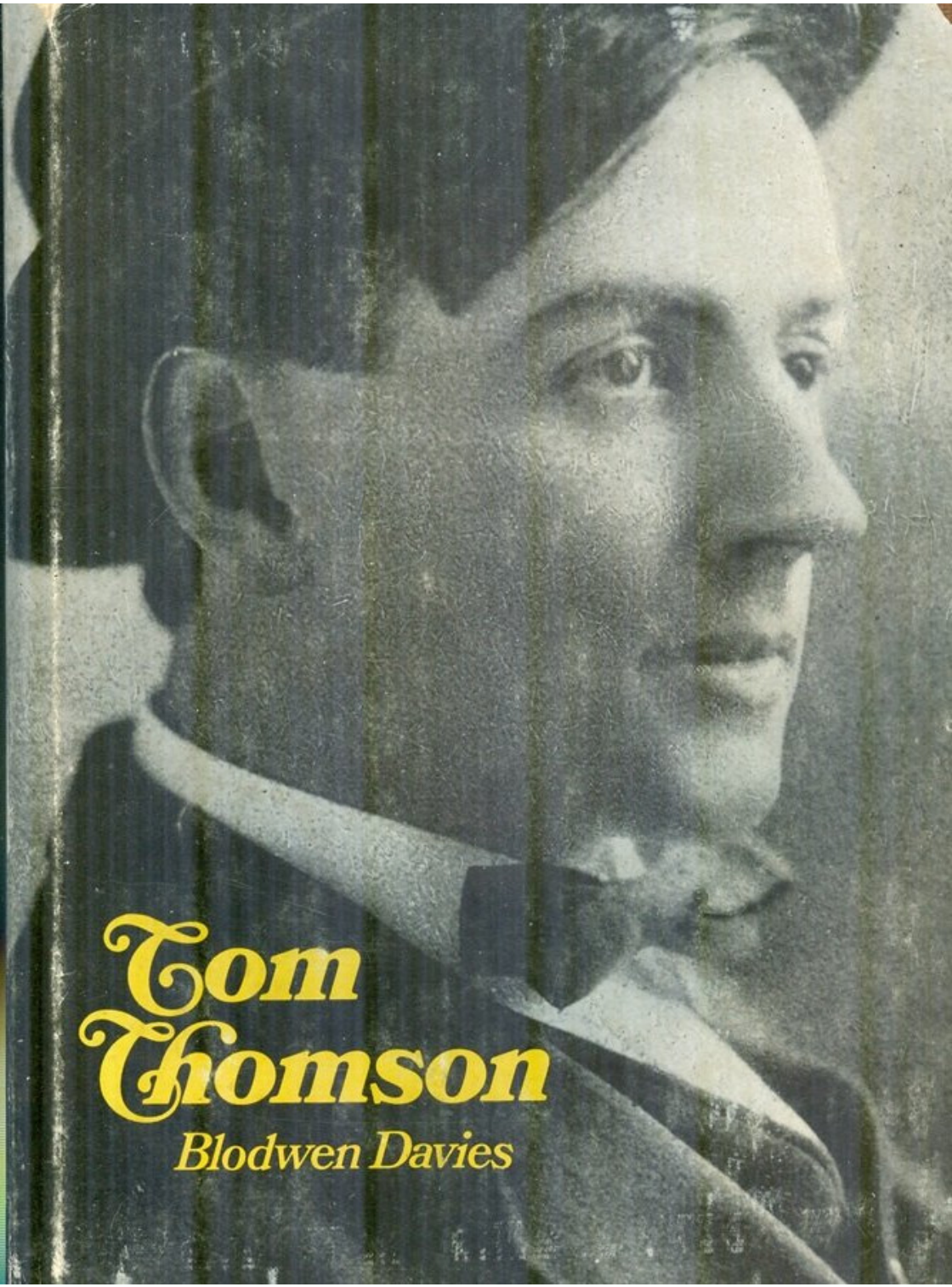
Tom Thomson
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Tom Thomson

THE STORY OF A MAN WHO LOOKED FOR BEAUTY AND FOR TRUTH IN THE WILDERNESS

By BLODWEN DAVIES

Foreword by A. Y. Jackson, R.C.A.

Sketches by Arthur Lismer, R.C.A.

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"*Work is love made visible.*
And if you cannot work with love
but only with distaste, it is better
that you leave your work
and sit at the gate of the temple
and take alms of those
who work with joy."

From *The Prophet*
by Kahlil Gibran

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Truth has its rights and its privileges, but it has to fight for them against the prevailing human weakness for embellishment and decorative effects. The simplicity of truth is something for which the artist and the philosopher alike must struggle, for man has a strange, overwhelming desire to complicate simplicity and elaborate truth into attenuated half-truth. So it is that since his death in 1917, the legend that has grown up around Tom Thomson, the artist, has been allowed to obscure the character of the man. Tom Thomson was not a genius who flashed, full-fashioned, into the sphere of Canadian thought. He acquired nothing easily and what he achieved was done by devotion and concentration, and in the spiritual struggle that marks any work of value to the race. His genius would never have flowered untended.

Thomson was not an untrained artist. For five or six years before he joined the sketching group at Grip Ltd., in Toronto, he supported himself as a commercial artist. Thomson was a very proficient draftsman. Before he abandoned commercial work he was considered the best letter man in the country and one of the best all-round men in the business.

When Thomson began seriously to turn his attention to painting, he was at the ripest period of his adult life. At thirty-five he was at the peak of his physical development and also mentally and spiritually mature. The mind he then applied to the technicalities of his art was keen and aware. He was highly sensitive and capable of great concentration. He was able, therefore, to absorb much more from his new associates than an adolescent student. His friends among the artists were men keenly interested in him as a personality. They were never casual. The professional teacher must, of necessity, divide his interest among the members of a class. Still unconscious of his true significance, Thomson's friends were all anxious to hasten his development as a craftsman.

Now we look back upon Thomson's career from the vantage point of historical position. Thomson's friends looked upon him from an entirely different point of view. To us he is the past. To them he was the intimate present. In 1914 when Thomson was for the first time installed in a studio of his own he was naively unaware of any significance in his work other than the personal. A. Y. Jackson said of him at this time that "he did not realize he possessed a large store of knowledge he was not using."

Beyond cavil now is the fact that some of the men who were associated with him, unknown and apparently unimportant at the time, were individuals of vast significance to the creative life of Canada. They were potential directors of creative thought. If, as some of Thomson's most reluctant admirers and his friends' most bitter critics again and again stated, Thomson was the chief figure in the movement that characterized his time, his was the motive power actuating the change in the art expression of his day,—if this was true, what would have happened when his influence was withdrawn? Surely the movement would have collapsed.

If Thomson alone had been imbued with the new mood then manifesting, his associates would have sunk comfortably into mediocrity, safe from the barrage of vilification which has been directed at their work during the last twenty years. But it was only after the death of Thomson that the modern movement in art in Canada actually took shape. Thomson never heard the phrase *The Group of Seven*. It was coined three years after his death.

Thomson's obscure friends were helping an obscure and eccentric individual to find an outlet for his spiritual fire, for it burned even in his earliest work, as a discerning eye could see. His chief need was a technique in painting. The leading artists would have scoffed at the thought that a thirty-five-year-old commercial artist could make a significant contribution to the fine arts. None of Thomson's friends had any lofty eminence from which to look down upon his amateur efforts. They liked Thomson as a man and they had faith in him as an artist. Nobody knew what Thomson was or might become. If his genius had been obvious, anyone would have been glad to discover him. However, only those on the same spiritual trails can travel together.

It would be equally unfair and untrue to imply that Thomson became a great artist because he encountered the companionship of the men who offered him an opportunity to paint. The group of young artists who were associated in the budding art movement twenty years ago included many whose very names are today almost forgotten, and others who journeyed a little way and wearied of the trail-breaking. External influences are important only insofar as they strike a response from the inner life. Thomson might have lived shoulder to shoulder with his new friends for decades without ever breaking through the crust of habit if he had not had striking power from within.

There was nothing accidental about the career of Tom Thomson. Inevitably he moved into the pattern which his contribution was to co-

ordinate. 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.

The Thomson of the familiar legend was a rough and simple woodsman, with a woodsman's trappings and ways. A new generation interpreted his life as crude and undirected. 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. He could sacrifice the material but never the spiritual necessities. Thomson's simple life was lived deliberately, under economic pressure. He knew that the few dollars he would ever earn would go so far and no further. It remained for him to decide how they would be spent. His was a cheerful and philosophical adaptation of circumstances. What the uninitiated did not realize was that there was in his work a profundity and significance that did not proceed from the soul of an unevolved individual fumbling his way through life. In Thomson's history there are all the evidences of a personality driven by a cosmic urge to fulfil that part of a plan with which he had been entrusted in this life. The man was never intellectually conscious of the plan nor of his part in it but he was intuitively loyal to the creative principle within him.

The Thomson of the legend created in the classrooms and the studios, where Thomson himself was unknown, was a romantic man of genius, moody and solitary, who dashed off an occasional masterpiece when inspiration roused him from his inertia. The legendary Thomson was careless, eccentric. The legend gave birth to an unfortunate point of view among young artists who preferred dreamy waiting for inspiration to the steady stoking of the creative fire and who wasted many precious years waiting for genius to burn.

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 the 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. Most people regard a man of genius as inconvenient because he does not accommodate himself to the second-hand standards of life that satisfy them. The genius makes his own standards of life and they are so different to the tattered acceptances of his contemporaries that they call him queer, eccentric, if not quite mad. A man of Thomson's type can regard the commonplace,

conforming life with pity and concern. Thomson could give things their proper values. For the most part he acted intuitively, trusting the inner promptings. Towards the end of his life he divested himself more and more of the paraphernalia of city life. He would not allow his days to be cluttered with inconsequential friends or occupations. The creative worker must be ruthless with himself and with others in order to be discriminating with his time. Time is limited but the urge and necessity to create is unlimited. Thomson was quite capable of making unwelcome visitors realize their intrusion. He was most truly unhappy when he was forced by circumstances into uncongenial company. It was only when Thomson let down his guard against those predatory influences that beset genius that he became involved in the circumstances that lead up to his death.

Thomson must sometimes have known the inertia that from time to time steals upon the artist but it was never a physical inertia. His long months alone in the North with his canoe proved him active and resourceful. In town, while others slept, Thomson was hiking, afoot in summer, on snow shoes in winter, through the outskirts of Toronto. He knew intimately every season of the year and every hour of the day and night in the natural world he loved so well. This was the stuff from which he shaped his work and he was no laggard in the gathering of it.

In the company of the immortals walks this lover of the wilderness and its mysteries. Unconscious of his own significance, he went up alone into the North and brought out the sword that cut the bonds of tradition in Canada. It was his Excalibur, the sword out of the stone, that proved his authority. 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 essentials that made him an expressionist of his era.

Tom Thomson was a manifestation which came at the appointed and crucial time in the development of the spiritual life of Canada. He was a portent to show a sceptical people that there could be an expression of Canadian aspirations in an untraditional form. There is no birth without pain, and it was out of suffering—acute spiritual suffering—that Tom Thomson produced his work. The urge for a native expression in the arts in Canada was an important part in the achieving of national self-consciousness and self-reliance. Canada became differentiated from her neighbors and her sister dominions and began to feel, like any newly self-conscious individual, "*I think, therefore I am.*" Once Canada is wholly aware of herself through her creative leaders in the arts and sciences, in

industry and economics, she will relate herself to the self-consciousness of humanity as a whole, which is striving for an expression of the spirit and aspiration of Man just as, in a lesser way, Canadians seek expression for the Canada of which they form a part.

Eight or nine months of every year in the cloister of the wilderness gave him time and opportunity to develop his genius, but it was difficult for the inarticulate Thomson to adjust himself and his ideals to a material-minded world. His only expression, his only protest, was in paint. That is why Thomson painted so passionately, so feelingly, in the brief years of his painting career. Only for the last three years of his life did Thomson have the technical skill to manifest the truth that burned within him, the power to paint his joy in elemental beauty and elemental conflict. At thirty-five he was unknown; at forty, acknowledged first of all Canadian painters; in death, a legend.

Tom Thomson was a man with a message. He might have been a musician, a poet or a dramatist. What he had to say had to be said. Circumstances of environment turned him towards form and color. Thomson was not a man with a medium seeking adequate objects for his brush. He was a man with the theme innate within him, groping about for seven-eighths of his life for a medium. And Canada, in her spiritual childhood, needed the graphic form of art above all others.

B.D.

1

CLAREMONT

Tom Thomson's family history was Scottish on both sides of the house; and through both channels he inherited the pioneer strain.

Thomas Thomson, the first of the name to settle in Canada, was born in St. Fergus, Aberdeenshire, in Scotland, in 1806. He was a man of no formal education, who boasted that he had "never filed six-penny worth of paper in any school." He was, however, a literate man, self-educated; he had good, strongly-marked characteristics and a natural force of personality. He was sufficiently eccentric to be a township character and he is still vividly recalled by men and women, now old in their turn, who knew him when they were young. "Tam", as he was called, came to Canada endowed with nothing but head and hands; he made himself a prosperous farmer and left his heirs a comfortable patrimony.

"Tam" Thomson came to Canada as an immigrant in the eighteen-thirties. It was a decade of rapid expansion in Ontario. There were many people then living who had come into Upper Canada, as it was called, when the colony was founded for refugee Loyalists. It was still very much the pioneer state when he arrived.

In "Tam" Thomson's day immigrants were arriving in the province at the rate of thirty to forty thousand a year, hailing chiefly from Scotland and northern Ireland. It was a journey of two or three months from the United Kingdom to Quebec. There the immigrants transferred to steamboats which took them to Montreal and again transported bundles and hide-bound trunks to Durham boats for the journey up the St. Lawrence to Kingston. There they had the choice of a steamboat to York or stagecoach by the Kingston Road to the capital. Inns and posthouses where stage horses were replaced and passengers refreshed were characteristic of Upper Canada highways of those times.

Thomson reached Canada in the era of plagues that swept the country like prairie fires. In 1833 the first plague-ridden ship reached Montreal. For two decades thereafter Canada wrestled with a problem big enough to overwhelm a small colonial state. Little ships reeking of cholera, typhus and ship's fever plied the seas with crowded human freights, consigning to the troubled waves the bodies of their victims and debarking the fatherless, the

widowed, the helpless and the penniless in scores of thousands every season at St. Lawrence ports. Poverty and despair filled the land with the low wailing of their victims.

In spite of all this "Tam" Thomson was hopeful and humorous. His son, at ninety years, was able to recall some lines of a witty poem his father wrote on his experiences in the quarantine sheds at Montreal.

Pickering township, to which "Tam" Thomson and his unknown bride each turned at about the same time, was still the backwoods. Claremont comprised a store and an inn in a clearing in the woods. It was fifteen years after his arrival that it was named Claremont and a postoffice opened.

Less than a mile from the crossroads was Thomson's homestead. For a year of service to an older settler he earned a yoke of steers. For supplies he could not get by local barter he walked to Whitby or to Toronto. His life was one of downright facts that demanded every resource of brawn and brain. He cut logs for a cabin he built close to the road and in the cleared spaces roundabout he sowed the first crops between the tree stumps and gathered the harvest by hand. As the roots rotted he hacked and dragged them from the good black loam. Every acre was consecrated by the faith of this brave young Scot.

In 1833 the Brodie family emigrated from Peterhead in Thomson's native Aberdeenshire. They were rather a remarkable family and among their descendants have been some distinguished men and women. One of the daughters was Elizabeth Brodie who was twenty-one when she arrived in Canada. Thomson must have known her during his earliest years of struggle with the bush. In 1839 they were married.

Elizabeth presided thriftily over the little log cabin but the first year of their married life was a series of disasters. The earnestly religious couple, steeped in a stern Presbyterianism, must have wondered why they were being so harshly dealt with. Their colt died. The cow wandered away into the bush and they found her fast in the tangled undergrowth, dead from hunger and exposure. Neighbors' dogs killed their sheep. Elizabeth helped with all the farm work as long as she could. When her child was born they called him John. Elizabeth was so ill that for months recovery was uncertain. She had a long, slow convalescence, a tragedy in pioneer life.

They had no other children. As time went by their fortunes improved; forest gave way to fields and their crops flourished. Thomson built a new house of the beautiful rock so plentiful on his land. It was a charming one

storey cottage of rose and grey granite, with a sloping roof and broad chimneys. There they lived contentedly.

Young John went to the log school up the road where a succession of drunken schoolmasters held sway. Both his parents were anxious that this son of theirs should have the advantage of a better education. The Thomsons were now prosperous and John a handsome youth. He went to school at Whitby but he was content to be a farmer.

At nineteen he was married. His bride was Margaret Mathewson who was born in Ross in Prince Edward Island, a spot not far from the capital. Her mother was a woman of fine character and gentle ways. Her grandfather was a doctor.

Margaret Mathewson and her family received most of their education from an old uncle who was a local celebrity. In the evenings he gathered together the men, women and children of the community and taught them as the old bards taught, by reading and reciting and discussing the poems and traditions of the race. Ancient history was one of his favorite subjects, but many a branch of learning came within the scope of this wise old man's teaching.

Her father moved up to Ontario at the close of the American Civil war, in which he had fought for the North. He was a builder, and constructed many fine stone houses that still stand in western Ontario towns.

When John married, his father built him a house, on the brink of the hill, close to the old cottage. Both houses still stand, the older one no longer occupied.

Presently the elder Thomson handed over the management of the farm to John and, still in the prime of life, retired to enjoy his leisure. Now he had time for his pet hobby; all about was rare good fishing and "Tam" loved it to the end of his days. The pioneers, living out a gracious old age in the granite cottage, were now nearing the end of their life span. They were not old people for neither reached the allotted three score years and ten. In August 1874 Elizabeth saw her last harvest and was carried up the road to the village graveyard where so many of their pioneering comrades already lay. For "Tam" the savor had gone out of life. He did not linger long behind her. At the end of March, in 1875, he, too, went up the road for the last time. It was a bright winter's day and all the neighbors were there to do honor to an old friend.

His namesake was not yet born.

2

NORTHWARD

To John and Margaret Thomson were born eleven children. Just before the arrival of the seventh child, Henrietta Mathewson threw in her lot with her sister's family and, like the traditional maiden aunt, gave unstintedly of her love and service to the offspring of the romance of others. On the fourth of August, 1877, the new child, who was to be called Thomas John Thomson, was put into her arms. That he became a great artist meant little to her compared to the fact that he was always kind to her as she grew old. She had a great love for this child that came to her on the day of his birth.

Only the fact that his parents were there had kept John Thomson in Claremont. He wanted to move north. His approach to the problem was simple and direct for he hitched a horse to a democrat and with his immediate necessities under the seat, he set out for weeks of roving in search of a new farm. On Georgian Bay he found fine country settled largely by Scottish families. At Leith Thomson discovered land to his liking. The farm had a good brick house on the brow of a hill not far from the shores of the Bay. As he had done so often before, he went over the fields with his spade, turning over the soil, fingering it knowingly. He was content with what he found—and there was good fishing in the Bay. He bought Rose Hill and went home to tell his family the news.

The migration from Claremont to Leith began when Tom Thomson was two months old. Along with five sisters and brothers, mother, father and aunt, he travelled northwestward towards his new home in that country of which he was to be both priest and prophet.

At Leith four more children were born. It was a big house but there was no room to spare while the big family were growing up in it. "My sister and I never ate the bread of idleness," said Aunt Henrietta.

John Thomson believed that the farm was a proper sphere for a man's labor but none of his sons followed his way of life. Some years before Tom Thomson's death his father gave up the farm and retired to a small house and a large garden in Owen Sound. John Thomson never lost his love of the outdoors. For many years in his old age he kept a horse and buggy just for his fishing expeditions with his old pal, Colonel Telford. The town, with

friendly interest, watched their comings and goings just as Claremont had watched old "Tam" a generation earlier.

Nearly seven decades after her marriage to John, Margaret Thomson died, in January, 1925. A year later, in February, 1926, John Thomson, hale and venerable was married to Henrietta Mathewson who had already been one of his household for nearly half a century. He was eighty-six; she was eighty. So, together, they settled down in the little house to spend the few remaining years of life together. It was a pleasant culmination of long, arduous and loyal lives, spent in common labor for the family group.

They spent the long days in familiar tasks, in labor that went slowly with the declining speed of human life. While he worked in his garden, she worked about the house, as she had done all her long life. They favored a faithful, old-fashioned stove. Before it they sat in long winter evenings, in easy speech or easy silences, just as their moods dictated.

John Thomson died, in his ninety-first year, in September of the year 1930.

Such was the past out of which our artist emerged. It was unsophisticated, gentle, honest and practical. There was a note of joy in his family story, a delight in elemental things, in physical strength and skill, in human relationships, in the outdoor world, in music; and finally, in an orthodox God who punished and rewarded, who protected and disciplined his faithful people. There was the pioneer strain directed to adventuring in a composed, orderly, affectionate family that was progressing by degrees to the place where it was ready to offer to the race the body, brain and emotions of a man fit to strike a new note, to add something to the stature of his kind.

The thing Thomson had to do emanated from the virgin land on which his family lived and worked for three generations. Spiritually they were in tune with its primitive strength and beauty; physically they were adjusted to its seasons and demands. There was no tragedy in the Thomson family life to distort his response to the land; there was no bitterness, no resentment to choke his utterances. His family had toiled and had been rewarded. They had contended with the country's ruggedness, its heat and its cold and had turned its qualities to their use and comfort. They could rejoice in their ingenuity, in their comfort, in their overcoming, because they had earned the right to the fruits of the earth and those fruits they knew how to enjoy, soberly and lovingly.

And so 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. Tom Thomson had talent that came to be called genius. The 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.

3

THE BOY

Tom Thomson's country, where he spent the impressionable years of childhood, is a beautiful country at any time of the year. Often in winter it has the quality of an etching, with everything reduced to the delicacy of tones in black and white. The lacey, naked elms, the delicate birches, the dark and friendly pines, fringing the skylines, outlining the contours of the hills, filling the hollows, give contrast to houses and barns in homely groups. Fields outlined by picturesque old rail fences give a natural design to this rolling country. There are days when the snow rests upon the shelf-like branches of the pines in strange, sculptural forms. New fields, where woodcutters had been at work, are like giant mushroom beds when every stump has a tam o' shanter of snow. Or again, under the blazing light of an afternoon sun all this may change and glow with color, as blue and purple shadows serve as foils for the unearthly beauty of the northern snows.

Spring has a tremulous beauty in this windswept land. Against the dark and ancient greens of balsam and cedar and all their kin, the delicacy of early greens is sharply accentuated. The northern spring is abundant and extravagant. It breaks its alabaster box with a recklessness that wipes out the memory of winter's bleakness at a stroke. Great stores of energy, dormant for months, suddenly are unloosed. The earth breathes the wonder of its own fertility. These months Thomson loved. Summer defies the palette, with its color and intensity. The lakes are jewel-like, the trees as pagan as when the Indians worshipped them as the haunts of beneficent spirits. The very rocks seem to have a curious quality of vitality. Autumn is the best-loved season of the year in Canada. In it the cycle of birth and death comes again to the gates of darkness and nature takes a gallant farewell in a blaze of light and color.

All this had its effect on the impressionable Thomson, nor were his parents unaware of natural beauty. His mother was a remarkable woman who possessed the happy faculty of putting first things first. She never allowed her duties or responsibilities to dull the bright edges of her personality. Her family cannot recall a time when she was too preoccupied with the affairs of the household to read her daily paper and to keep in touch with the events of the years in which she lived. Books were as much a part of her surroundings as curtains on her windows or carpet on her floors. The

works of classical poets and novelists were there, archaeological romances, books of science and tales of adventure. Her children, sharing the glamorous adventures of knights and ladies, learned the lilt of beautiful English from the pages of many an old bard.

"She managed that each member of the family," wrote one of her children, "shouldered a share of the responsibility and work, so that there was always leisure for the finer things of life, such as music, literature and hospitality."

Hospitality was one of Margaret Thomson's virtues. Of sympathy and joy she had equally large resources. Sudden needs, bereavements, illnesses, accidents, never found her too busy or too weary to lend a helping hand. Generous and impassive, she shared her rich personality with every one in need, and if the occasion was one of joy, she was ready to laugh with her friends. There was little of importance in the neighborhood of Leith in which the mother of the Thomson household did not share.

"They were all music-minded and liked to have music and musicians around them," writes an old friend. "Every one of them was a musician of one sort or another. They were the kind of people of whom one carried nothing but pleasant memories in after life. I never knew a family anywhere that was so utterly unselfish and that is a virtue which, like charity, covers a multitude of sins."

John Thomson, a magnificent figure of a man, even in his nineties, a fine patriarchal type, broad-shouldered, sinewy, bearded and burned, was the parent from whom Thomson inherited his physical characteristics. John Thomson was a man of impeccable principles. His word was as good as his bond and there were no subtleties in his philosophy. Right was right, wrong was wrong. He could be stern but he was just and kind and affectionate. He had a sense of humor his son inherited from him.

"John Thomson was always regarded as a rather unique character at Leith," contributes another old friend. "He was a gentleman in every sense, but one of the most eccentric men who ever drew the breath of life."

Any farmer who stood on a hilltop alone at night just to look at the stars, was, of course, decidedly "queer" to his matter-of-fact neighbors.

It was a happy household. In the evenings the father tutored the children in mathematics and grammar while the mother coached them in history and literature. Both parents read aloud to them a great deal. The love of beauty and consideration for one another bred something fine in all the children.

The impulse to give was fundamental with Tom Thomson, as man and as artist. He gave richly and generously of whatever he gave. The possessive and acquisitive instincts were in abeyance. Thomson was a man born to give and he fulfilled himself when he learned how to spend his own spiritual wealth. So long as he kept it locked up within his personality he was ill at ease, bewildered and unadjusted. As soon as he found an outlet he became increasingly conscious of his natural destiny. Tom Thomson was one of those rare manifestations in western civilization, a man who completely detached himself from the idea of profit.

As a child, Thomson was a wholesome lad with a zest for active fun and a capacity for getting a great deal more out of small experiences than the average youngster. When he was a small boy his father one day brought him a pair of top boots with red leather trimmings and copper toes. He put them on immediately and ran out into the melting snow of an early spring day to taste the joy of his new possessions. He trudged about till dusk but when he returned home, tired and happy, the red and the polish were all gone. Someone asked him what was wrong with his boots. The child looked down at the ruined decorations with contemplative eyes and then glanced up and said: “I guess they must be shoddy.” The child got down to principles early in life, for nothing ever roused deeper scorn in Tom Thomson than persons or things that masquerade under false colors, and failed him for want of true character.

Young Tom loved the trip back into the sugar bush in early spring. The sugaring-off was an event on the farm, for when the first warm, sunny days of spring came they were followed by frosty nights, and between them they made the sap of the maple trees flow freely into the troughs and pails so carefully set out in the custom of the Indians. The work of gathering and boiling sap was the first spring festival and to young Tom it was a time of wonder. With his mother he watched for returning birds, for pussy willows and swelling buds and the curious shapes of the banked snows shrinking away before the encroaching warmth.

Even as a very small boy Tom Thomson delighted in the fishing around Leith, but not only did he catch his own fish but he also cleaned and cooked them over an open fire to the huge delight of his playmates. Some of them can still recall those outdoor feasts.

From childhood, too, he had the urge to draw. He scratched his first sketches on frosty window panes and there is a cellar door in the old house at Leith still covered with his earliest efforts. A sister writes:

"Sometimes Tom would take a notion to draw such funny caricatures of people we knew. He would keep us all laughing and guessing who they were. Always while he drew he whistled and sang and I can still see the whimsical grin he wore when he got a particularly good caricature."

As he grew up Tom Thomson longed for a sailing boat and finally his father consented to having the old row boat equipped with sails. With the help of a chum, David Ross, he got the craft ready for "sea." When the last knot was tied and the last gadget in place, fortune sent them a nice stiff breeze and with the breeze came Joe Coture, a French Canadian fisherman with a reputation as an expert sailor. He had a two-masted sailing boat that had the name of being the fastest on the Bay. "Old Joe" was proud of his boat and his reputation. With the magnificent audacity of youth, the boys headed their little boat out towards the fisherman and flung him a challenge to race them. To their huge delight they skimmed past him in their cockle shell of a boat. The boys felt like young lords of creation and returned home to boast that they had "passed old Joe so fast, he looked as if he was backing up."

Such were some of the small incidents and adventures of Thomson's childhood, which bore within them the seeds of a future blossoming—his love of the natural world, his affinity with the elements, his skill and delight in the use of his hands as well as an innate sense of the quality of people and things.

As he stretched out into manhood, his physical strength was unequal to the forces then at work in him and demanding expression in some form then foreign to his environment. Fortunately he was a country boy, so when he showed the first physical signs of the strain he was under, wise parents took him out of school and turned him loose, with a dog and a shotgun, to wander the countryside around the Bay for a year or more. It was excellent treatment for a sensitive, imaginative but, nevertheless, wholesome and happy youth. He had an old felt hat that he soaked in water and shaped to a point over the handle of a broom. Then he decorated it with squirrels' tails and wildflowers. From under its worn brim his bright, inquiring eyes peered out upon the clean land from which he was one day to extract enough of truth and of beauty to stir the consciousness of a nation. He had the shores of the Bay, the streams that flowed into it, and all the lakes and pools within a day's journey, to explore. Wider and wider grew the radius of his wanderings in search of haunts of wild birds and animals, rare plants and curious trees. It was then he laid the foundations of his uncanny knowledge

of the natural world of the North but never till the day of his death did he end his tireless studies in the great school in which he was so apt a pupil.

The love of the gun was a boyish phase, for when he lived alone in the North in later years Thomson never carried a gun nor did he ever kill bird or animal for food or sport.

Those months of solitary rambling in the woods made him unique even in youth. “It seems to me that eighteen, Tom’s age at the time of which I write, is a particularly trying and awkward one for most young people,” writes a friend. “Some of us are filled with unwarranted conceit and enthusiasm; some utterly bewildered and confused in their outlook on life. And yet Tom was always quiet, sensible and manly; the tone of his voice was pleasant; he had an attractive laugh; he never seemed awkward and I cannot now recall a single flippant remark of his.”

Tom’s sense of humor and his quiet philosophy sometimes combined to get him into trouble. The minister of the little church that stood across the road from Tom’s home was a certain erudite and orthodox Scottish doctor of theology who resented Tom’s independent spirit and inquiring brand of intelligence. Tom had been working on a nearby farm with some other lads. They were making their way homeward on a quiet Wednesday, the traditional evening of prayer in the Presbyterian church. Some one of the boys, and it may have been Tom, suggested that they drop into the service. They were in their working clothes, just as they had left the fields. To those of other faiths in other lands there would have been nothing incongruous in turning into a place of prayer in clothing impregnated with the soil upon which they all worked and subsisted, but in Leith and in the eyes of the orthodox Dr. Fraser, as the boys well knew, it was an affront to Deity to worship in one’s working clothes. Moreover, it was an affront to Dr. Fraser. A wise and loving man would have turned the tables on the boys by assuming their sincerity and welcoming them to meditation and communion. Instead of that, he administered a scorching rebuke.

Tom could be grimly humorous in paying off such little debts. Once the minister stayed to supper at a farm on which Tom was working. Tom was told to serve butter to each plate. Impishly he recalled the minister’s weakness for butter, so he served him a very meagre portion. Then he spent the meal hour watching the minister’s plate and in replenishing it in small portions warranted not to last very long. Again and again Tom asked and again and again the minister admitted he needed butter, to the suppressed amusement of all at the table.

Tom's clashes with Dr. Fraser were of much more than passing interest. They had the effect of stiffening his resistance towards the orthodox mind. His rebellion began with this man who upheld the historic banners of Calvinism in a modern world. Dr. Fraser represented Tom Thomson's first conflict in the world of ideas. In the antagonism between the two were all the elements of the struggle between the established, the unalterable, and the expansive, progressive principle. It matters little how we approach that problem, where we begin, nor what the incidents of the controversy may be. The principles are constant; the conclusions are important.

It was about twenty years later that Thomson sold his first canvas. He telephoned the news home to his family in Leith. Even in the elation of that astounding event his mind flew back to the conflicts of his youth.

"And by the way," he concluded, "tell Dr. Fraser I painted it on Sunday."

Tom, in his turn, was always a challenge to the old minister's most cherished traditions, and in spite of increasing prestige and the deep sense of shock and regret that Tom Thomson's death stirred in the hearts of all who knew the man and his work, Dr. Fraser never admitted him to be anything more than "an amateur interpreter of the North."

That, however—in the truest and best sense of the word "amateur"—Thomson was throughout his painting career.

4

PRELIMINARIES

In his late 'teens Tom Thomson became very restless. The promptings of his spiritual necessities became more and more insistent, although the harassed lad did not know what was afoot. The wanderlust was in his blood. He was straining for change and adventure and a new way of life. The urge expressed itself first in a desire to go sailing on the Great Lakes. He heard adventurous tales from the men of Owen Sound who brought fantastic ice-encased ships home to port through high November seas and the elemental struggle evoked a response in him. However, his parents refused to consider the lakes as a means of livelihood, and Thomson had to look elsewhere for an outlet. He could not reconcile himself to the life of a farmer.

When Thomson came of age he came into possession of a legacy from his grandfather, "Tam" Thomson. That seemed the time for decision and action of some kind. He elected to apprentice himself to a firm of machinists in Owen Sound. This was in the winter of 1898. His experiment ended after eight or nine months, not because of any fault he had to find with the trade but because he could not get on with the foreman. At the age of twenty-two he was again at a loose end.

Years later Thomson still regretted his withdrawal from the machine shop and thought of going back to take up his apprenticeship again. It was a craft that gave him the chance to use his hands and he was always happy when he was doing skilled manual work.

It was harvest time when Thomson returned to the farm and as soon as the harvest work was done he was off on a new tangent. This time he went down to Chatham to enter a business school and prepare himself for office work. His brothers, George and Henry, had already graduated there and Tom decided to follow their example.

His stay in Chatham did him no good, for now he seemed to be drifting. He lacked enthusiasm. The work was uncongenial and Thomson had nothing, in or out of his school, on which to focus his attention.

There were times when Thomson bitterly resented the lack of direction in his life and of educational opportunities. He secretly regretted that he had not gone on through high school to university. He was definitely conscious of some unexpressed power, but he had no contact with what we identify as

the “creative life” nor with people who discussed self-expression as either the privilege or the duty of the individual seeking to adjust himself to civilized society. The current trend of orthodox faiths and philosophies made of the young men of the day careerists rather than artists. A young man was expected to “get on in the world” at whatever cost to the secret longings and aspirations which had to be repressed in living up to conventional standards. But while he had none of the pose or jargon of the studios, Thomson had an inner prompting that kept him on his way in search of experience, no matter how much of a laggard or a ne’er-do-well he might appear to be. When the business course was over, Thomson went home only to find himself as much at sea as ever. He was now a tall, vigorous and attractive man of twenty-four, still without a job or the prospect of one, but worse still, in the eyes of his provident family apparently no strong convictions on the subject. An old friend of those days discloses something of Thomson’s mood at the time.

“I discovered,” he writes, “how deeply sensitive he was and how he resented anything like public ridicule. I recall one night at Meaford in 1901 when he unburdened himself, lamenting his lack of success in life in terms that rather astonished me. I began to think that he then realized his power and had secret ambitions.”

His brothers, George and Henry, had gone to Seattle, one of the boom towns of that time. Thomson made up his mind to follow them. He went west in the same year, 1901. A few months later a fourth brother, Ralph, followed.

Thomson made the common error of seeking freedom and a solution for his problems from external circumstances. He hoped, that by some sort of magic, change of scene and associations would satisfy the hunger in his heart. What he truly sought was a change in his inner life, that world of which he knew so little, and he longed for a transformation that would bring order out of chaos and harmony out of discord. Thomson’s state of mind is common to most highly developed individuals at some stage in their unfolding, when the little triumphs and possessions of the average man seem so childish as compared with the elusive memories of struggles and aspirations in some shadowy past. The spirit brooks no turning back, no compromise with the affairs of those who had not travelled quite so far on the spiral path. It is indeed a crucial time for those in whom the creative fire smolders. Fortunately for Thomson, his heritage and his home training saved him from disaster in the testing years. The discipline of his youth, the inherent honesty and sincerity with which he was endowed, were the protective forces that surrounded that fine spiritual necessity for “the good,

the true and the beautiful." It would be impossible to describe what Tom Thomson suffered in those years of inner conflict, but the sensitivity displayed in his work is eloquent of intensity of feeling. To be true to himself and to adjust himself to society was his problem. Outwardly he showed few signs of the conflict, except that he had a gentleness and a consideration for others that was unusual for a man of his age.

Thomson seldom showed anger or excitement and his control may sometimes have been mistaken for indifference. One night in Seattle, Thomson was taking a short-cut home through a vacant lot and suddenly found himself looking into the barrel of a revolver. The young man behind the gun was awkward in his procedure, though he succeeded in getting his victim's watch and money. Thomson made the remark that he must be new to the business, as he trembled so violently.

"Yes," said the man, "you are the first."

In Seattle, Thomson entered the business college that his brother, George, had started, to put in time until he had a chance to settle down to office work. He was still restless and ill at ease. Then one day he came home to his brothers and announced that he had decided to go into photo-engraving. It was a more important decision than it might have seemed, for it was actually the turning point in his life. Photo-engraving was in its infancy and was linked up with the new age of advertising. Thomson had a gift for fine penmanship and a sense of design, and these he could apply to his work, for advertisers were beginning to realize the importance of design and imagination in their art work. Thomson found in the studio endless outlets for his skill and his imagination and he was happier than he had been since his school days. At last his feet were upon the trail. Even the mechanics of the craft interested him and he found scope for his ingenuity.

Thomson made amazing strides. His self-confidence was naive and boundless. He ignored instructions from his chief and gave his fancy rein. The chief's irritation soon gave way to discreet co-operation when he discovered that Thomson's designs were always acceptable to his customers.

Thomson's unconventionality demonstrated itself in his attitude towards his employer, with whom he lived. One day Thomson was sent on a message to a rival firm and while he waited he began to draw. Absorbed in his sketch, he did not hear the man approach. Thomson looked up some time later and the man asked him how much he was earning at his job. Thomson told him.

"I'll give you five dollars a week more to work for me."

Thomson accepted at once, quite casually and went back with the news. He changed studios but he went on living with his former employer.

It was in Seattle that Thomson also began sketching from nature in crayons and water colors. The results were quite simple and commonplace and gave no promise of the boldness of color and design that were to be expressed later.

One more event occurred that completed the cycle of experiences that Seattle had in store for him. He fell in love. Friends and relatives knew next to nothing of the significance of that brief and tragic romance. Thomson was endowed with a depth of feeling that would have been incomprehensible to the inexperienced young woman he would meet in a west coast town many years ago. Nobody knows exactly what happened. Some say that the lady laughed.

Whatever the incidents may have been, the purpose seems apparent. If Thomson had married and settled down in Seattle there would have been no lonely lover of the North, roaming the wilderness and spending the richness of a profoundly passionate love of nature on elemental beauty. His stay in Seattle did three things for Thomson: it adjusted him to society by giving him a craft; it gave him a clue to a method of expression; it opened the floodgates of his emotional life. Briefly, then, he became an adult human being, economically, spiritually and emotionally independent. The true results of the change slowly unfolded as the years went by.

For Thomson Seattle had done its best and its worst. He realized that the place had no real meaning for him. Returned home in 1905, he settled in Toronto.

It was not long after his return that he began to work with oils in a very experimental way that merely indicated his growing feeling for the art of painting. He became a great favorite with children and a sister recalls how he would sit in a big chair “painting ferocious looking lions, just ready to spring out of a tangle of jungle grass, while two children were perched on the arms of the chair and one peered over his shoulder, thrilled and spell-bound”. Children feel the quality of a man. Thomson’s increasing affinity for them and for the things of nature show how his character was broadening and his consciousness expanding to an awareness of others and of the means of contacting and enjoying the unspoiled wonder and faith and happiness of natural things. He was never happier than when amusing children or raptly studying the ways of birds or wild animals.

It is said Thomson took a few lessons about this time, anxious to learn more about his medium, but he never referred to them later among the artists who aroused his genius. When he came to know them he discovered a new world in the creative attitude to life. He realized how he had been fumbling in the dark and he never made mention to them of any early attempts to paint. It is a fact, that he did produce in those years little paintings which he gave away to members of his family.

Thomson passed the years 1905 to 1910 in obscurity at a desk in an engraving house in Toronto and most of his brief life had already been paid out in preparation for a few short years of achievement.

5

CHEERFUL REBELS

Developments in the world of the creative arts in Canada were now converging to a point where they were to focus the attention of the public upon certain painters as the expressionists of a new era. The events in the life of Tom Thomson could be paralleled in the lives of several of his contemporaries who were also cast to play parts in the drama of that turbulent decade. The career of Thomson was to be the briefest and most dramatic of them all. He was the keystone, perhaps, of the arch which others were so carefully building. Without them Thomson could not have achieved fulfilment and without him, his generation would have missed a rich note of dedication.

Thomson knew nothing of these other men with whom his fortunes were to be linked. Their ways of life had never touched his until the fateful year 1911. One day Tom Thomson walked into the studios of Grip Limited and asked Albert Robson for a place on his staff. Robson was one of the old Art Students League that had made valiant efforts in the Nineties to give art in Canada the true flavor of Canadian thought. There was not only promise but even genius in the group but the public was not ready for them and their work was not spirited and aggressive enough to worry the Royal Canadian Academy or rouse the temper of the public. The enterprise flowered early in the frosty spring of Canada's consciousness of the arts, but it made its own valuable contribution to a new awareness of environment. The League's influence became evident years after it had disbanded. The same fine fervor for the native note that later characterized Tom Thomson and his friends had stamped their work, an urge for an underivative expression, but they were largely concerned with subject matter. Thomson's group took that for granted and fought the issue on technique and interpretation. Robert Holmes was one of the League, and C. W. Jefferys another, a third was Dave Thomson, who later was lost to Canada.

Robson was the man who carried the principles of the League into business and revolutionized commercial art in Canada by raising it from the level of an imitative trade to that of a creative craft. He knew that to compete with the American houses that got all the big railway contracts he had to produce not only the equal of their work but something a little better, in order to overcome the handicap. To do that he built up a staff of

adventurous, intelligent young men, including J. E. H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Fred Varley, Tom MacLean, Frank Carmichael and many others who made names for themselves in the fine arts. When Thomson asked for the job, he got it.

A few days later his former employer called Albert Robson in an attempt to dislodge Thomson by accusing him of laziness, incompetence and quarrelsomeness. Robson took the advice for what it was worth. He discovered Thomson was a man in whom generosity of effort was a characteristic. He would often scrap a design and start over again rather than patch up a piece of work to make it do. Thomson's record gave the lie to every one of the false charges.

MacDonald was head designer in the studio when Tom Thomson joined them. He was a tall, red-headed man, with a slightly dour, slightly shy manner and a deep sense of humor. He was a designer of the very first rank. Later he was one of the original members of the Group of Seven and eventually he became the principal of the Ontario College of Art, the appointment coming shortly before his death. He first became known to the public through the controversy over his canvas, "The Tangled Garden", which created a storm when it was exhibited at the Ontario Society of Artists' show in 1916. Born in Durham in England, of Canadian parents, in 1873, he had come to Canada as a small child. All his training and experience were in this country.

At another desk sat Arthur Lismer, tall and lean and whimsical, lately from Yorkshire, and in search of opportunity and spiritual adventure. He had put up a fine effort in his early youth for an education in the arts and worked his way through the Sheffield School of Art and the Academie Royale des Beaux Arts in Brussels. He developed a passionate desire to bring the study of the arts within easy reach of all children. Even when Thomson first knew him Lismer had an excellent philosophy of art—he believed it to be less a profession than a way of life. The appreciation of art is not an esthetic privilege but a means of deepening and enriching the personality. The creation of any form of art sharpened the perceptions, expanded and stimulated the powers of every boy and girl, man and woman. Years after Thomson's death, Lismer had an opportunity to put his philosophy to work in art education for children and became internationally distinguished for it.

Another of Thomson's associates was Tom MacLean, who was one of the first to travel the north country seeking sketching material. He had been over the Lake Temiskaming and the Abitibi country. It was MacLean who roused Thomson's latent interest in the farther north. Thomson knew the

Georgian Bay country, but Algonquin, Temagami and the Mettagama country were unknown to him. At MacLean's suggestion Thomson and H. B. Jackson, still another fellow-worker, tried Canoe Lake for an early summer holiday in 1912. Later on in the same year Thomson and Broadhead went into the Missiassagua country at MacLean's urging.

With the Grip crowd Thomson found congenial company. There was many a jest to enliven the time for none of them paraded their ambitions or their underlying necessities. They were tradesmen with a fine feeling, a well-directed energy that not only made for good commercial work but which drove them all to making experiments with their own creative work as artists. From the time Thomson began to sketch with his new friends on their Saturday afternoons and holidays, life had quite a new and energizing interest for him. In the evenings he went back to his room at 66 Wellesley Street and sat at his window with his sketch box, painting a corner store, over and over again, struggling with composition and technique. In this room, too, he began to experiment on canvas after his sketching trips in 1912. Frank Carmichael recalls going there one day and finding Thomson at work.

"The room was thick with smoke and there was Tom with this huge canvas. It was a northern scene, a distant line of shore and a vast expanse of grey and soggy sky."

The sketching crowd searched for nearby sketching fields and found them at Weston, Lambton Mills and York Mills. One of Thomson's first experiences in sketching from nature was by Scarlett's Road near Lambton Golf Club. A friend sketching nearby had a fairly successful time and when Thomson strolled over to see what he had done, he was so disgusted with his own effort that he walked up and down the road a while, thinking intently, and then suddenly pitched his panel whirling into the bush.

As the group made progress with their sketching they roamed farther afield. They spent many happy weekends at Lake Scugog, unconsciously developing a group spirit and an attitude towards a solution of their common problems. Tom Thomson, his friends recall, seemed more "alive" and at ease there than they had ever seen him in town. Shyness and reserve fell from him and he was into all the fun, and his wholehearted and often silent laughter was proof to his friends of the unfolding of his personality. Thomson, with his mandolin, was one of the best loved figures in that adventuring little company.

6

PRELUDE TO ADVENTURE

The year 1912 was a highly significant one in the life of Tom Thomson. Either in the late autumn of 1911 or in the early spring of the new year, Thomson acquired his first real sketch box and began to take painting seriously. But he had not arrived at the point where he could conceive of art as total career. All that winter the group discussed the North as a future hunting ground. Thomson was once more restless and impatient and the lure of adventure was strong upon him. With H. B. Jackson he planned his first trip. His friends gave him a pack sack and a Dutch oven and in May sent him off, full of anticipation.

Thomson and his companion dropped off the train at Canoe Lake station and made the crossing of this lake that ever afterward was to be associated with his name. They did not camp on Canoe Lake but crossed it and paddled into Smoke Lake and then made their way on to Tea Lake Dam, where they camped. It was fine country, traced with old lumber trails through the woods, with countless lakes and streams, rapids and waterfalls. From camp there stretched on the one hand Smoke and Ragged Lakes, and on the other the picturesque length of Oxtongue River, and the vast chain of waterways and portages that lead all over the north country.

Algonquin Park appealed to Thomson from the first. He did little sketching, merely making notes and casual studies, for the passion for paint was not yet on him. It was the first time in years that he had been back to the wilderness and he was excited about fishing. The holiday was all relaxation and delight. Thomson displayed his old skill as a woodsman as he yielded to the lure of spring in the North.

The holiday over, Thomson returned to his desk only to be haunted by dreams of Algonquin. Jackson once recounted his amazing cunning out-of-doors. Twenty years ago jaunts of this kind were rare and considered very venturesome, for the north had not yet been turned into a vast complex of playgrounds for thousands of city dwellers. The trappers and lumberjacks were still lords of the wilderness.

The group at Grip's felt the trip had been quite an adventure. Thomson was afire with longing to get back to the old Indian travelways and his friends were infected with the wanderlust. One of them, Bill Broadhead,

decided to join Thomson on a much longer and more arduous trip that would take them much farther north than Algonquin. The district was New Ontario and their jumping off place was Biscotasing on the Canadian Pacific line. They stocked up with provision at the Hudson's Bay Company's store, the time-honored bacon, beans, rice, tea and so on. With tent, blankets, and sketching materials, they had about two hundred pounds of dunnage apiece.

The last week in July they set out in a light Peterborough canoe and paddled the length of Lake Bisco, on into Lake Ramsay and up Spanish River, camping in the sunsets, sketching whenever they found something to intrigue them. Wild life was abundant and the streams abounded with fish. Finally, by leisurely travel, they reached the height of land that divides the flow of waters that reach the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, from those that flow into the Arctic. On Green Lake they ran into the sterner side of the voyageur life in a torrential storm. Their canoe was swamped and capsized but both men were strong swimmers and were able to save their dunnage. For a while, weather conditions made travel difficult, all the streams being so swollen that landmarks were submerged or distorted. At one portage they discovered a washout and a tent buried under it. Fearful for the life of some fire ranger they stopped to dig but found no one. Finally they reached Mississagua Forest Reserve and found themselves once more on waters flowing south.

On Audinadong River, a branch of the Mississagua, they spent several days, spell-bound with the massive beauty of Aubrey Falls and the gorge through which its waters flow, with its rocky walls higher than those of Niagara River. In spite of bad weather, they sketched a great deal. It was a country of impressive qualities, a virgin world steeped in the spirit of the true North, that lofty, inspirational *ideation* that is so difficult to convey. Yet it was to this task that Tom Thomson, unskilled and inarticulate, was from this time forward entirely dedicated. In this country they had another accident. When they came to the celebrated rapids called the "forty miles of white water", they found its turbulence accelerated by long rains. In spite of the raging fury of the river, the two men set their course through the long series of rapids quite nonchalantly. Nearing the end of this swift and dangerous passage, they ran into trouble and capsized. This time they reached shore with difficulty and though they retrieved most of their dunnage, they lost a great many sketches and those they saved were damaged.

At last they reached Squaw Chutes and found Mark Ripley, a quaint, philosophical character, living in peace and solitude with animals he had

won as pets and companions. The two men had reached the end of their expedition. They were carried out by road to Bruce Mines and boarded a ship for Midland.

It was now the last week in September and they had been two months vagabonding in the wilderness. Their arrival in Toronto was awaited with a curious expectancy by Thomson's friends.

The adventurers reached town, lean, brown and exhilarated. Broadhead produced his sketches; they were clever and technically skilled. Thomson, in turn, brought out his work, a series of little panels, dark and tight and immature. However, to their friends there was no doubt about which of the two men had brought home the authentic spirit of the North. Broadhead had facility; Thomson had feeling. Thomson's work was scrutinized, analyzed and thoroughly discussed, and added fuel to the fires of aspiration and unrest among his friends.

7

THE DAYS BEFORE

Although Thomson was not concerned with the background of art yet he was inevitably influenced by the circumstances it produced. The creative world in Canada, small and circumscribed as it was twenty-odd years ago, was in the throes of a first class conflict when Thomson painted. It was the old quarrel between the academic, the established, and the pioneer and adventurer. It was a wholesome state of affairs, for it indicated that the newcomers had struck fire. The fire had smouldered in Canada since the seventeenth century when Quebec stood for the fine flavor of the Renaissance and Montreal for the baroque. But never until now had the quarrel hinged on a difference in point of view on a native expression and technique. The first artist to use the native scene as subject matter was Krieghoff, a Bavarian, never a great artist but a sympathetic one, who loved the St. Lawrence country and its people. Contemporary with him was Paul Kane, son of an Irish wine merchant of York. From copying old masters in Europe he had turned to painting Indians in the west. In the eighteen-forties he crossed the prairies and made his way through the Rockies to the coast. Kane was not a great artist either, but in him and in Krieghoff something stirred and responded to the spirit of the wild, new land.

Both these men were still living when the Ontario Society of Artists was formed in 1872. This was a significant event and for nearly a century the Society has served its original purpose of bringing Canadian artists together and introducing new painters to the public.

However, early conflict, when it arose, was between exponents of English or French schools of thought, for Canada was painted either with an English or a French brush. Horatio Walker was another Troyon, Paul Peel another Bouguereau, Homer Watson another Constable and so on. Though they were known abroad, they had little effect on the direction of art at home. Meantime, however, two men were breaking trail, for Suzor Coté and Maurice Cullen, working in Montreal, had devoted themselves to snow, about which Canadians had a curious complex. Painting snow was as bad as rattling the bones of the family skeleton. Both men were determined to paint things as they saw them. They were followed by the first of the moderns, J. W. Morrice, who loved the austere Canadian winter, but his work was too adventurous for his day and he was driven into exile in Paris. Thomson's

friends had a keen admiration for his work. Such, very briefly, was the situation in Canada. There was a considerable body of painters, many of them competent, and many of them sincerely searching for a new note, but the frost was not out of the ground yet—the frost of tradition.

Vital forces were, however, slowly converging; the Canadian genius was stirring and events among Thomson's friends were one phase only. Into the picture there now stepped another figure, Dr. James MacCallum. He was not an artist, but he was the first to demand from the artists the very note they were striving to sound. He was evidence of the need for an expression of an expansion of consciousness in a northern people. He had conceived the idea of finding an artist who could paint the North as he saw it. He discovered J. E. H. MacDonald and took him and his family to Georgian Bay in 1911.

It was in 1912 that a friend of Dr. MacCallum, Col. Mason, took two nephews on a canoe trip in the Mississagua country. Traversing the forty miles of white water, he made the boys walk a certain portage to investigate before running the rapids. At the end of the portage they found Thomson and Broadhead salvaging their sketches out of the river. On his return home, Col. Mason told the incident. The doctor knew the Mississagua country as a boy, so he decided to look up the artists. He learned the name of the street on which Thomson lived but not the number. One day he set out to find him, and rang the bells from door to door until he found the right place. Thomson was out but the doctor was shown into his room and found it strewn with sketches, which he proceeded to examine carefully. Thomson found him there and though pleased with his interest, he belittled his work and told the doctor to take home any of them he fancied.

After prolonged study of the sketches, Dr. MacCallum believed he had found the man to paint the North to suit him. He could do nothing to further Thomson's technical ability, but he could do something the artists could not do, and that was to provide financial support.

"A tall, slim, clean-cut young man," is how he speaks of Thomson as he was then, "quiet, reserved, chary of words. As I looked over his sketches, I realized their truthfulness, their feeling and sympathy with the grim, fascinating northland. Dark they were, muddy in color, tight and not wanting in technical defects, but they made me feel that the North had gripped Thomson, as it had gripped me ever since, as a boy of eleven, I first sailed through its silent places."

He saw no more of Thomson that winter, but in March he was among those who greeted Thomson's canvas at the O.S.A. show with sympathetic

interest.

As the winter went by, Thomson's friends had prepared for this annual O.S.A. show, while Albert Robson quietly prodded Thomson into attempting a canvas. He was reluctant, and had plenty of excuses—he did not know enough about canvases, he did not have a place to work, and so on. But Robson was relentless. Thomson could use the workshop on Sundays and paint there.

Finally, Thomson got to work and painted a canvas he called "Northern Lake." Quiet and unadventurous as it seems now, it was outstandingly bold and vigorous for 1913, and it serves to mark the changes that have taken place in the attitude to interpretation of environment in Canada since then. (For many years it hung in Teacher's College in Ottawa then it was removed to an office in Queen's Park.)

Off the canvas went to the hanging committee and to Thomson's surprise, it was accepted. At that time the Ontario government offered an annual prize of two hundred dollars for a picture of outstanding distinction at the O.S.A., the picture winning the prize becoming the property of the government. Sir Edmund Walker was one of the selection committee. On the night of the pre-view he rose to heights of enthusiasm over "Northern Lake" and walked about the room drawing attention to it. Romantic as it may seem, the prize went to Thomson's canvas.

When news of the award reached Albert Robson, he went into the workshop and bent over Thomson at his desk.

"Tom, your picture has been bought", he said.

Thomson did not stir, nor as much as look up from his work, but Robson saw the blood rising under his skin until the back of his neck was scarlet.

"What damn fool did that?" he asked gruffly.

The show was notable for other things, also. Lawren Harris exhibited four canvases, forerunners of a new mood. One was "The Corner Store". Jackson had four, all from sketches done on his Italian tour. Lismer had "The Clearing", one of the first in which he brought through the essence of the Canada he knew. MacDonald had six Georgian Bay studies.

If there was a change in the quality of painting in the opening years of the decade, there were also greatly increased numbers of exhibitors and entries. Also, there was change of subject matter. Fergus Kyle, writing in

“The Year Book of 1913”, remarked with surprise that “of the ninety-one paintings exhibited, at least ten were subjects distinctly of this country.”

Thomson was a product of this age of gestation. He would never have become an artist if the times had not been ready for him. There was a quickening, of which his experience was a part. The writers of the day all record the new pulsations in the creative life of Canada as so many men and women became increasingly aware of the subjective and real qualities of their own times and own environment.

Meantime, during these significant years, two other young Canadians, unknown to each other and to the Grip crowd, were making their way to the same objective. Lawren Harris was a young man who did not allow his financial independence to stand in the way of his striving for creative achievement. The other man was A. Y. Jackson, who was making his way on savings accumulated by exacting labor at uncongenial tasks.

Both these men had been studying in Europe and both reached home in 1909. They returned with a common hope of finding, somewhere in Canada, the material out of which to create a native expression in painting.

Behind Lawren Harris was Ontario pioneer tradition. He had an untrammelled intellectual zest that promoted experimental thought. He was, even then, interested in the study of occult literature and believed much was possible in the conscious spiritual and esthetic development of man. He was stimulated by A. E. Russell’s work and the Irish Renaissance movement. He was in search of other young Canadians on the same trails.

A. Y. Jackson was a Montrealer. As a boy he hiked about the Quebec countryside and he is still a devotee at the altar of that real Quebec for which he has to search now in more and more remote spots, as the age of standardization creeps over the Laurentian hills. There is little of the north shore from Quebec to the Saguenay that he has not known intimately and on foot. He began work as an office boy in a lithographing plant but when he was discovered putting all his spare time on drawing, he was shifted into the art department. At his next job he worked three days a week and kept the rest of his time for painting. One summer he got to Europe on a cattleboat from Montreal. There was no lack of direction in Jackson. He came home knowing what he wanted and he worked like a galley slave to get it. When he had saved enough, he went across again and at twenty-five he registered at the Julien Academy, an art student for the first time in his life. On his return in 1909, he was determined to make painting his profession.

That winter he went sketching in the Eastern Townships and one of the results was “The Edge of the Maple Wood.” This hung at the O.S.A. in 1911, attracting the attention of the younger group, particularly of Lawren Harris and J. E. H. MacDonald. Who A .Y. Jackson might be, nobody knew.

Jackson was forced back into commercial work so he took two jobs, one a day job, the other evenings, and so saved another thousand dollars and went back to Europe.

On his return from this trip, Jackson and Randolph Hewton, another Montrealer, held an exhibition of their work which was greeted with an all-pervading silence. The critics did not even go to look at it. Bankrupt with the effort, the two men retreated to a small village near Farnham, Quebec, where living was cheap and the sketching was good. Jackson’s faith and hope were strained to the breaking point.

When they left Montreal, the spring show of the Montreal Art Association was on and a visit to it had filled them with dismay. There was no vitality there, nor any modern feeling. But while the young artists slogged away in the country the critics expressed themselves as seriously disturbed over the daring modernism that had invaded the spring show.

During that season of retreat Harris got into touch with Jackson to ask if “The Edge of the Maple Wood” was still for sale. It was, since no one had ever tempted the artist to part with any of his Canadian canvases. Harris bought it, but the appreciation and enthusiasm of the buyer were worth more to Jackson than the cheque, badly as he needed the money.

“The Edge of the Maple Wood” is still a noteworthy painting in addition to being an historical piece, a very fine expression of a typically Canadian subject and mood. If it had not hung at the O.S.A.,—if Harris and MacDonald had missed the show—if Harris had not bought it and so made it possible for Jackson to go to Toronto and Georgian Bay that fateful year, what would have been the difference in the story of Tom Thomson and of Canadian painting? The movement needed Jackson’s energy and inspirational qualities. He was to supply a certain pugnacity and a fine old cavalier propensity for laying about him with brush and pen as if each was a good, bright blade.

That summer Jackson went to Toronto, where he met MacDonald and Lismer, but missed Harris. The latter followed him to Kitchener, however, and urged him to throw in his lot with the Toronto crowd. Jackson went north to think over the idea. The group, almost unconsciously motivated, was drawing together.

8

THOMSON THE WOODSMAN

One spring day in 1913, Mark Robinson, a ranger in Algonquin Park, paddled down Potter's Creek to Canoe Lake. He saw a stranger sitting among the alders, sketching. Robinson speculated—sketching was a new dodge. The Park authorities were contending with beaver poachers who used many ingenious methods, but none of them had ever thought of posing as an artist. He approached the newcomer, glanced at his sketch and greeted him.

Thomson liked the look of the ranger. He was sketching an old tree stump around which the marsh grass grew tall and rank. They discussed the character of tree stumps and Thomson told Robinson they were the hardest things in the world to paint. Then he asked suddenly:

"Do you suppose I could get any guiding to do?"

"You might," said Robinson, cautiously, "but I don't know anything about you. Park guides have to be licensed by the government."

Thomson proceeded to explain his business in the Park.

"Well, if you get a chance to take a party out, come over to the shack and I'll talk it over with you," he replied.

The incident was the beginning of a very fine friendship, for they had much in common. Robinson was a true nature worshipper, who also walked "humbly and passionately with the wild." His pioneer background paralleled that of Thomson. It was Thomson's power of interpretation that the ranger welcomed. Thomson spent a lot of time at Robinson's cabin, often working for hours at a time experimenting with color and struggling with the problems the palette presented to him. Robinson knew his moods and never intruded. He knew Thomson's mind was never idle, and no matter where he was, there was some experience to be turned to account.

Algonquin Park is a provincial reserve of 2721 square miles and includes within its boundaries some fifteen hundred lakes. It was once the haunt of the Indian and the coureur de bois. The waters of the Park are divided by a height of land which the Indians regarded as a tribal boundary. The land on one side, where the waters flowed to the Ottawa, was the country of the Algonquins, while the other side, where they flowed to Georgian Bay, was the hunting ground of the Ojibways. When the spring

fret came over Thomson, this was the land that offered him the solace and the inspiration of its splendid calm. Like the gulls, he arrived as soon as the ice began to break up. The pines that artists considered unpaintable were to him beautiful in the infinite variety of their forms and compositions. There is something courageous about these trees that have adapted themselves to the furious elemental heat and cold, winds and frosts, of the North, and preserved their beauty and their usefulness. That fragrant, evergreen foliage, pyramided up to a delicate, aspiring tip, seems to symbolize man's deathless spiritual yearning to reach to that which is not yet attained, in spite of all the buffetings of experience and initiation. Thomson realized character and significance in such things, and gave us these symbols in a form that passed on the insistent message of the new world to those not yet so sensitive to the subjective world about them. To his receptive mind nothing in the natural world was meaningless, though very much in the man-made world was. The bird symphonies at dawn and dusk, the tender and translucent greens of spring, the silver and gold of the birches in autumn, the dramatic skies and their mirroring lakes, all these had form and purpose. Thomson intuitively sensed the universal harmony and organization of the natural world, expressed in limitless diversity.

On Canoe Lake, Thomson usually pitched his tent on Heyhurst Point, and there his red blankets, hung in the sun, made a bright splotch of color against the landscape. Round the tent in this more or less permanent camping place he built some rustic seats and a table. He was up and off early in the morning, on the lakes "still remembering night", and there other early risers would discover him, busy with his fishing rod or sketch box. He camped and paddled, cooked and fished, sketched and explored, nearly always alone. Only in midsummer did he lay his brushes aside, when the greens were too intense and too undifferentiated to interest him as an artist. The spring, with all its delicate nuances, the white and austere winters, the passionate autumns, these were the seasons in which he worked and created. For years after his death, bright spots of color on rocks and logs and tree stumps all around Canoe Lake recalled to neighbors that these were places where Tom Thomson had cleaned his brushes after sketching.

From the day that he stepped from the train at Canoe Lake station in 1912, Algonquin Park was his real home. He called it "my country."

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. And just as his grandfather was the most

celebrated fisherman in Pickering and his father in Sydenham, so Thomson's name was a by-word in the north among the fishermen. Men still boast of owning fishing tackle that Thomson made for them. One of the first signs of spring in Toronto was remarked as Thomson took down his rods and reels from the walls of his studio and got out his savings of bright oddments to be made into lures. He made all his own lines, and feathers and coins were put to work in many an ingenious way to match wits with the wily big fellows of the North. Thomson enjoyed doing the same thing for his friends and he would often offer to overhaul gear even for a chance acquaintance. He considered himself an authority on that subject.

"Tom was never very proud of his painting, but he was very cocky about his fishing," J. E. H. MacDonald once remarked.

He made a study of the habits of fishes and of the nature of lake bottoms and so was often able to make quite spectacular catches where others failed, and he thoroughly enjoyed the distinction that this skill conferred on him. He sometimes earned a little cash by teaching fishing to visitors in the Park.

He made use of the natural foods about him, the wild fruits, and the fish. He was famous for his camp cooking, too, and was sometimes coaxed over to Mowatt Lodge to prepare his special dish of baked fish or his baked beans, and not least of his accomplishments was the way he cooked crisp and curly bacon.

A typical story of Thomson's attitude to life is told by Mark Robinson. Late one evening Thomson paddled up to the ranger's cabin and landed. He was in a state of great exhaustion, and Robinson hastily prepared a meal for him. When he had finished eating, Thomson said he had been fighting a forest fire, single handed, for three days. A few days later, Thomson again called at the cabin and put a can of jam on the table.

"What is that for, Tom?" asked Robinson in surprise.

"Well, I had a big meal here the other night," was Thomson's reply.

It was in Robinson's cabin that he planned a long trip to the French River. This was the historic Frenchman's route and the tales of events associated with it had intrigued him. He planned to sketch along the way. He made his passage by lake, stream and portage, to Lake Nipissing. He crossed the lake to French River, down which so many great Frenchmen had paddled, beginning with Champlain and Brule and Brebeuf, and so proceeded down to Mer Douce, as it was called by the Frenchmen—Georgian Bay, as we know it. He did not linger long on that journey but

turned and made his way back to Canoe Lake, for he was disappointed with the country along the route.

"Flat," he pronounced it, "the rapids are just rapids, same as anywhere else."

Thomson was keenly aware of the romantic past of the north country and often some legend of the Indians, or some tale of the fur traders or timber men, would send him off for days at a time in search of landmarks.

Thomson's affinity with the natural world was almost uncanny. He had a casual way of introducing his friends to incidents in wild life that they still remember. At one time when he was camping with Thomson, Arthur Lismer remarked that he had never seen a porcupine. Thomson disappeared and then returned presently for Lismer and led him quietly to a place where a family of them could be observed.

"There's your porcupines," said Thomson.

At another time, they were paddling back to camp at dusk when Thomson suggested that they pause a while.

"If we wait for about half an hour, we'll see some deer here," he said. Lismer was willing but skeptical.

Very soon four deer came down to the water's edge to drink and they had an excellent view of them.

Another night Thomson drew his attention to a strange bird song. Lismer had never heard it and asked its name.

"A bittern," said Thomson.

The bird was extinct in England and rare in Canada. There was nothing in bird music that he missed.

On another occasion Thomson and a companion were paddling in the dusk when the friend was startled by a very curious sucking sound.

"That's just moose," said Thomson and moved his canoe noiselessly towards the unseen animal. Suddenly he brought the blade of his paddle loudly down on the water. There was a great crashing of hoofs, the crunching of broken timber, as the big animals sped away in fright. Beavers and bears and even wolves were alike of interest and amusement to him. A relative once asked him if he was not afraid to be alone in the bush with so many wild animals about.

"Why, no, of course not," was his reply, "for the wild animals are our friends. I have picked raspberries on one side of a log while a big black bear picked them on the other side." Then he went on to tell of an experience when he had heard some big creature coming towards him through the underbrush. A huge timber wolf emerged, the largest he had ever seen. Its head, neck and breast were black and the rest of the body was grey. He said it was the most beautiful animal he had ever seen. Thomson had no fear for his first reaction was one of admiration for the magnificent beast. It came so close to him that he could have reached out a hand to stroke it. The wolf sniffed Thomson up and down.

"Apparently he decided I was alright," is the way that Thomson told the story, "so he turned and went his way and I went mine. But, you see, I don't tell that story, except to those who know me very well. I told it once to some folks in Toronto and I could tell from their looks what those people thought of me."

During July and August he usually worked as a guide and he was a popular one for he was efficient, courteous and given to long silences, and when he broke them he was both interesting and intelligent. George Rowe was one of the oldtimers with whom Thomson often worked. Early one spring, Rowe took Thomson with him on a long, quick trip. The artist was soft from the winter in the city but eager for the journey, and at the end of three weeks when they got back to Canoe Lake, he had lost twenty-two pounds. His life in the North was by no means a lazy one.

Rowe was one of the pioneers of the Park. In the summer of 1930, too old to brave the trails any more, he put in his time patching and painting canoes for other people. One wet afternoon he sat with his gnarled old hands cupped about his pipe and recalled how he had come into the Park with the timber cutters before the railway was built. He loved the country so that he could not leave it again. But now, he admitted, he had guided his last party and made his last camp. Anyway, times were different, he went on, and the same sort of people didn't come to the Park any more.

"I've made up my mind to go away. This time it's sure."

It was George Rowe who pulled the body of Tom Thomson out of the waters of Canoe Lake in 1917, so that very day he set out with the writer to retrace the tragedy of Thomson's death. In spite of his eighty-odd years and his rheumatism, he insisted on taking his place in the stern of the canoe, and he paddled gallantly that last Sunday morning of his life in Algonquin Park. He paddled along the shores and between the islands where untimely death

had lurked upon another wet, grey, Sunday such as this one, just seventeen years before. As he paddled he pointed out the spots that were associated with the discovery and burial of the body. It was the old guide's last paddle.

When frost and snow drove Thomson southward to the city his friends would find him back in his studio with his fishing tackle on the walls and score on score of sketches piled carelessly around.

"Here's some of my junk," he would say, when his callers asked to see some of his work.

His sojourns in the city became shorter and shorter and his dress more and more like that of a backwoodsman. He endured three months in town because he worked steadily at his canvases. Then he would say one day:

"If I don't get up there soon, the snow will all be gone."

And in a day or two his studio would be empty.

9

INDIAN DRUMS

Not long after the incident of the O.S.A. show in 1913, Thomson went north, to try his wings as a fledgling artist, learning the delights of flight even while sadly conscious of his limitations. It was his first experience in giving all his time and attention to painting.

Arthur Lismer strained at the leash for the summer but the autumn found him with his family at the MacCallum cottage at Go Home Bay. It was Lismer's first experience in that region and its amazing motifs filled him with joy. The clean, wind-polished granite of the countless islands, the wind-warped trees, the twisting channels, these were all part of the pattern of this new country which he sensed so keenly.

Jackson, too, was painting in another part of the Bay, abandoning himself to its increasing fascination. It offered all sorts of problems worthy of solution, endless compositions and curious rhythms and patterns to be worked out. Under all its physical interest was something else, a quality that demanded comprehension and expression.

They were all working at a new tempo. It was as though Indian drums were beating a strange, new, insistent rhythmic cadence, driving them on irresistibly to their goal.

Jackson decided to stay in the Bay as long as possible and live with some of its sterner moods. He was preparing for wintry weather by making camp in an abandoned boathouse on Portage Island to the southward of the MacCallum cottage but along the route to it.

While Dr. MacCallum was up on his last trip to close camp for the season, he had a letter from Lawren Harris, asking him to look up Jackson who would be found painting somewhere in the vicinity. On his return journey he made inquiries for the stranger and finally found him at work filling the chinks in his shack with moss to make the place habitable.

The two men had a talk about painting and some of its problems. MacCallum presently plunged into seconding the efforts of Harris to induce Jackson to move to Toronto. But Jackson had to remind him that he had the problem of earning his way as he went and he admitted he was thinking of

spending part of each year in the United States to earn enough to make it possible to devote the rest of the time to painting in his own country.

"How do you think," demanded Dr. MacCallum, gruffly, "that we'll ever have a Canadian art if you fellows dash off to the States to work?"

Time was limited so Jackson agreed to go part way in the launch to Penetang and paddle back. So they went on with their eager discussion as they zigzagged their way between islands. Suddenly, off Minnicoganashene, his new friend made Jackson a practical offer—if Jackson and others took a studio in the new building planned for Toronto, he would guarantee their expenses. This was the offer that was made to Thomson, as well.

Jackson, usually so deliberate, hesitated no longer. He accepted on the spot. He would throw in his lot with the Toronto crowd for the time being, at least.

So Jackson paddled back to his cabin with much to think about. He did not go on chinking the cracks, for he was to have the use of the MacCallum cottage. A few days later the launch that went up for the Lismers took Jackson to Go Home Bay. The two men had met only once, at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. Now they had only time to exchange greetings before Jackson was left in possession. He stayed and painted until the cold weather drove him back to the city.

The years from 1910 to the end of 1913 were formative ones, not only for Thomson, but for these friends of his. Thomson had as yet no idea of becoming an artist by profession. MacDonald, Lismer, Jackson and Harris were all groping and experimenting. All but Harris regarded commercial art as something to fall back upon if necessary. None was ever to return to commercial studios again. The year was drawing to a fruitful close. The stage was set, the players in the wings, a new act about to begin.

To Thomson, back in Toronto in the late fall of 1913, Jackson was an anticipation of absorbing interest. Jackson, too, was curious to meet and estimate Thomson. One day Thomson went up to Lawren Harris' studio, found Jackson at work and saw the daring expanse of a canvas dubbed by the jubilant comrades, "Mount Ararat", in anticipation of the critics. "Mount Ararat" was the largest canvas Jackson had ever attempted. Thomson studied the canvas carefully. This bold experiment in northern landscape was not the fumbling attempt of an amateur like himself, but the work of a trained and competent painter and Thomson was far enough advanced to recognize it as such.

In the spring of that year, when Jackson exhibited in Montreal, Morgan Powell had this to say about him in the Montreal Star, the result of a belated interest in his work:

"A. Y. Jackson's work was, in many ways, quite as interesting as that of anyone who exhibited this year. He is an impressionist. He knows the line where sanity ends and the kingdom of freaks begins. He pushes the impressionist technique to the limit but he does not overstep it. Such work as 'The Fountain' and 'Assisi From The Plains' stamp him as an earnest student, a skilled draughtsman, a colorist who is likely to make a name for himself and an artist of acute perceptions."

In the interim between that show and Jackson's advent into Thomson's life there had been the long retreat in the Bay and a new experience, of a more elemental side of his environment, had entered his consciousness. "Mount Ararat" was the expression of that experience and so this was what confronted Thomson as he entered the studio where Harris and Jackson awaited him.

Thomson and Jackson felt an immediate liking for each other and found much in common in their interests. Also, the tide of enthusiasm was rising and the new mood was actually taking form. Harris had a scheme for a studio building where they could all work together and it was to be ready by the first of the year. It was soon arranged that Thomson and Jackson would share one of the new studios. Jackson went down to Montreal to arrange for his migration while Thomson waited impatiently in his old quarters for the time to make the change.

With the beginning of the year 1914, Thomson entered an entirely new phase of life in a fresh environment. He was a professional artist, committed to an adventurous attempt at earning his way with his brush. From that time until his death he was frequently prey to doubts of his right to the role of artist, but he loved the life, which was stripped to a very minimum of essentials. It relieved him of the necessity of dividing his attention between the inner and outer necessities.

Never before had Thomson regarded his painting as important from the point of view of creative achievement. Up to the time he went to the Grip studio he had heard nothing of art as a creative instinct. There, and later, at Rous and Mann, he learned the meaning of creative design and discovered the value of experiment and initiative. The deeper he went into relationship with the painters, the more he heard of the principles of creative expression.

Thomson's character and personality were expanding. His new ideas were making inroads in every direction upon his inherited and acquired conceptions of life. Although he was at heart a rebel all through life, yet it had not been an open rebellion, for he was not aggressive. But now his mentality was ripe for change. It was enlightening to him to discover that these friends were men who did not conform but their rebellion was spiritual, rather than social. None of them was in any sense a rebel of the bohemian type. Life to them was much too real and inviting to spend any of it in a conventional effort to be unconventional. They were conspicuous among the artists for their sanity in their personal relationships and for their balance in the practical affairs of life. When it came to vocations and the really vital things of the spirit, they bowed to no established tradition, no orthodoxy of custom.

Lawren Harris has expressed himself as believing that "it is blasphemy to wilt under the weight of ages; to succumb to second-hand living; to mumble old, dead, catch-phrases; to praise far-off things and sneer at your neighbor's clumsiness."

"There are two ways of interesting oneself in art," he went on to say. "The first is a mere matter of satisfying the possessive instinct; of inflating the personality; of looking always to other people, other times, for all created work and ignoring or denying or decrying all native endeavor . . . In brief, it is the way of the plutocrat to self-glorification. Of these we have many.

"The second way is a way of life. This way demands an interest in what is being done today in our midst; the furthering of all original expression in one's community. It requires a perspective that relates near and distant happenings and brings all findings to bear fruit here and now and a vision that sees that never was anything created anywhere, at any time, save it was in defiance of all catch cries. It sees that life is creative and that people only live when they create and that all other activities should be a means to creation."

Although their philosophy was not so definitely formulated at that time, this was the spirit underlying the ideals and motives of each and all of them. There was no effort to found a new movement in art, for none of them had gone far enough to think in terms of group influence; each one was chiefly concerned with the problem of personal emancipation and analysis. Thomson's friends were all too busy to reduce their ideas to epigrams, but the raw materials of their philosophy were assembled. Working with them, Tom Thomson developed quickly that "way of life . . . here and now" which

was the goal of all their efforts. It was not just a matter of a technique in art, it was a philosophy.

To Thomson, much of it was strong, strange food. In his mind nebulous ideas, secret longings, unconscious urgings had been rising, mist-like, for years. Thomson was not an intellectual, but rather “a vast intelligence”, as one of his friends put it, and he required the spark from other minds to set his own genius ablaze.

Thomson was now subjected to the influence of his studio mate. Jackson knew as much as any man in Canada about the principles of painting. To the problem of technique he brought all the shrewd and inquiring qualities of an active mind. He was as indifferent to the material ambitions of the day as was Thomson, but he had what Thomson lacked, a greater initiative, an unconquerable will. He had not drifted into painting, he had hacked his way through all sorts of obstacles to get his start. He had a keen sense of humor, grim at times; a great tenacity allied with a lively vision; a deep and abiding sense of beauty. He was an ideal companion for Thomson. Both were fundamentally men’s men; their approach to life was simple and direct, their material wants very few.

Jackson had two qualities of special value to Thomson. He was a great colorist and he had a natural habit of subtlety so that he knew how to draw out of Thomson, rather than drive into him, the conscious knowledge that he lacked. The best of teachers could not have forced a system of technique or color upon Thomson, any more than he could have forced a social contact or a point of view upon him. Thomson was shy and cautious as a deer. The ultimate success of his work could have been endangered by the effects of uncongenial personalities upon him in those extremely impressionable months of initiation into the new life.

The two settled down together in the big new studio, with its north windows overlooking Rosedale Ravine. They had little to put into it but their books and painting gear. There was only one thing Thomson regretted —there was no place to do their own cooking.

Jackson recalls how they tried to keep down their expenses. There was a bar nearby on Yonge Street and in order to comply with the law it had to serve meals if they were asked for. There was a little dining room in the rear, so there the artists would go for the excellent meals the bar keeper provided for twenty-five cents. Then there was the Busy Bee, where a motherly woman cooked and her daughters waited at table. It was a very simple, almost humble life they lived, exalted by their high hopes and endeavors.

Jackson saw both the possibilities and the limitations of Thomson. His work was interesting but tight and photographic. He was still trying to paint every twig, the common fault of all who first attempt to paint the North. Painted objectively and meticulously, the north country can appear commonplace and undistinguished, a tangled mass of vegetation and a wilderness of stone and water. Behind externals is the brooding, splendid spirit that is not to be expressed in terms of twigs. Thomson knew the spirit and Jackson was fast becoming cognizant of it. They pooled their resources and set to work.

Black Spruce and Maple

Northern River

In January and February of 1914 Tom Thomson was initiated into the mysteries of painting on canvas. His preliminary attempts the previous year had served to show how real his problem was. Now, painting beside Jackson, he had an opportunity to observe the practices of a trained painter. Thomson, longing for the capacity to translate ideas into form, let nothing pass unnoticed. Jackson's quiet way of criticizing and commending at the same time was stimulating to Thomson. He still had little faith in himself, and in spite of the urge to create, he sometimes felt himself a fraud for setting up as an artist. Jackson's steady, friendly pressure was essential. The more sensitive Thomson grew with the expansion of consciousness, the more liable he was to give way to fits of bleak despondency. The pendulum was swinging in ever-widening arcs. The keener his perception and the more ambitious his aspirations, the deeper was his misgiving as to his ability to

carry out his promptings. His friends stood by with encouraging words, but there was no use trying to make Thomson believe he had achieved anything more than he could see for himself.

Thomson was equipped with four important qualities to work with at this time, and they were fundamentals: his earnestness, his knowledge of the North, an instinct for design and a natural feeling for color. What he had to acquire was a means to co-ordinate all these.

All that winter Thomson was in intimate daily contact with Jackson, a training which, if not based on curriculum, was nevertheless based on Jackson's rich store of knowledge, accumulated with much effort and discrimination. All that he had Jackson shared unstintingly with Thomson. It was a magic hoard which, divided, mysteriously multiplied itself.

The two men exchanged experiences. Jackson had a graphic way of describing his native Quebec and its habitants or life in the studios of Europe. Thomson talked of the life in the North, of his country, Algonquin. Between his tales of the North and the sketches he brought out of it, he stirred Jackson into impatient longing to be off. He could not wait for Thomson, but set out for Algonquin by himself while the Park was still in the grip of winter. He arrived at Canoe Lake with the temperature at forty-five below zero and found the country full of the beauty Thomson had predicted. He stayed until the snow went.

Meantime, much as Thomson would like to have been north, too, he would not leave the studio where he worked with dogged earnestness at his canvases. His new knowledge required fostering. Though he had grasped the principles involved, the execution of them would come only by practice and application. Thomson knew how to work alone, a most essential quality for an artist, and for the next two months he plugged away, feeling his skill blossoming from day to day as he experimented.

From that winter onward Thomson's four friends, Harris, Lismer, MacDonald and Jackson, were targets for the fiercest abuse of the critics. They were not the only ones painting in the new mood but they were admittedly the spearhead of the revolutionary movement against the old, crippling conventions in the arts in Canada, a group claiming the privilege of creating in their own way, in their own time. Jackson's exhibition of his Georgian Bay sketches was the signal for the onslaught. All that the reporters from the Toronto Star could see in Jackson's work was a chance to clown through a couple of columns at the expense of the stranger. The press would have dared no such injustice and abuse as appeared in such articles as

“The Hot Mush School” in the case of men in any of the other professions such as law or medicine, nor would it have occurred to writers to make their readers laugh by holding up to ridicule the work of some earnest young scientific researcher. But as the artists dug themselves in, the antagonism increased, so today to read through the old newspaper files is to sense the shock and uneasiness the new philosophy produced. It requires no little effort now to imagine what the fuss was all about. However, the thing these men stood for could not be obliterated either by ridicule or by the Jovian frowns of self-elected art juries. The thing was as spontaneous as the seasons. The less the sympathy the artists received from the public and the critics, the less obligation they felt toward the lay world. They had no purchasers of canvases to influence them, no markets to lose, nothing to tempt them from their own course. It was an excellent time and circumstance for true research.

So Thomson found himself in the thick of a first class fight. He was not subject to the same amount of virulence as some of the others because the academics could not regard this amateur as a serious menace to the entrenched position of the traditionalists. He was accused of painting “diseased trees” by a man who never painted outside his own studio, but such little pleasantries soon became the jests of the busy studios. Once Thomson put on his door a card decorated with some dancing imps and with the words “The Devil’s Den.” He watched his friends under the stress and strain of the situation and saw them as firmly rooted in their own plans as any storm-resisting northern trees. He must have chuckled to himself over the way the *Mail and Empire* disposed of him with the words:

“Among those who have made the most daring departure from representing nature as it appears to ordinary mortals are A. Y. Jackson and Tom Thomson.”

But then it is not from among ordinary mortals that we get the guides and emancipators of the race.

When the O.S.A. show came along in the early spring of 1914, after Jackson had gone north, Thomson had two canvases hung. One was “Morning Cloud” and the other “Moonlight”. Jackson had four, two of them from his Assisi sketches and two from Georgian Bay. Harris had been to the Laurentians and his work was divided between that country and old Toronto houses. Lismer had three canvases from the Bay, and MacDonald, who had been with Harris to Quebec, had compositions from the old, hilly land.

The critics complained of a lack of “poetic appeal”, for the Scottish mists of Lucius O’Brien and the Prussian sunsets of Jacobi still had a grip on popular fancy. These “carmine effects” bespoke a country then unknown to the armchair critics. But none who knew the North ever condemned these men for attempting to tell the truth about it as they saw it.

However, Thomson and his friends had moved through the galleries with their palettes dripping pure color. The situation in Canadian art would never be the same again.

The show of the Royal Canadian Academy was held in Toronto in the autumn of that year. Thomson again appeared, this time with “A Lake, Early Spring”. Hector Charlesworth of *Saturday Night* admitted his “real promise” and conceded that it was doubtful “if a better collection of Canadian pictures has ever been gathered together.”

And so, in the five years since Harris and Jackson had returned as students from Europe, very much had happened and even those who ridiculed the aspirations of a handful of unknown men had to acknowledge the evidence of a new spirit abroad among the painters of the country.

10

NINETEEN FOURTEEN

Before Thomson reached Algonquin Park in the spring of 1914, Jackson had left to spend the summer in the Rocky Mountains. Thomson settled down for a season's work with his new command of technique. With an encouraging sureness of touch he painted all through the delicate, enchanting spring months. Lismer accompanied him for two weeks and his free and lively sketching was of much interest to Thomson.

When July had settled down into the heavy greens of summer, Thomson set out with his canoe and sketching materials for Georgian Bay to make a promised visit to the home of Dr. MacCallum. He made a leisurely trip of it.

Perhaps the Bay did not mean as much to Thomson, perhaps the summer campers gave it an air of sophistication he did not like, or it may have been the numbers of small craft on the channels between the islands, but whatever it was, he didn't want to stay there. Neither did he want to explain to his host and hostess how he felt about it. So one morning, silently and enigmatically as an Indian, he slipped away. When the household bestirred itself, he had gone.

He set out northward toward Parry Sound and on his solitary way reached the vicinity of Sans Souci. Another paddler shot out from behind an island and Thomson hailed him to ask him the way to Rose Point. The stranger answered and passed on his way.

Presently, after he had been to Sans Souci and was on his way home again, the stranger saw Thomson sitting upon a rocky ledge, eating supper. It was growing dark and channels between the countless rocks and islands are dangerous travel even for those who know them well. The paddler headed towards Thomson and introduced himself as Ernest Fruere. He suggested that Thomson should postpone his departure until the morning. Then he invited Thomson to join him at his camp on a nearby island.

Thomson was too careful a "man of the North" to take liberties with that "vast, unsentimental" land which makes no compromise with man's ignorance or stupidity. He never took foolish chances on land or water, so he accepted the offer. Moreover, he liked the stranger.

In the dusky, summer twilight the men became acquainted over camp fire and pipes. When they were ready for sleep, Thomson insisted on pitching his own tent. Next morning Fruere heard him astir early. When he asked him later why he got up at daybreak, Thomson said, “I never miss a sunrise.” By the time Fruere was ready for breakfast, Thomson had completed a sketch.

Thomson was enjoying the episode, so he prolonged his stay for five days. Fruere was a musician and of music they talked a great deal, but most of their time was spent fishing. Thomson taught his friend many a fisherman’s secret and much of nature lore and woodcraft. Before he left he gave Fruere the sunrise sketch he made that first morning in camp. It was a permanent friendship and Fruere’s studio in Toronto came to be one of the places where Thomson spent many a happy winter evening.

After leaving his new friend, Thomson paddled up to Parry Sound and then, camping and portaging, made his way at last back to Canoe Lake. Presently the color began to change and Thomson prepared to keep his rendezvous. Jackson at last arrived from the Rockies and set up his camp with Thomson on Heyhurst Point.

Very diffidently Thomson produced his summer’s work. To Jackson’s genuine delight he discovered that Thomson had made real progress since they had parted in February. His old conception of “his country” was there but expressed in a new way, and there was a freshness, a breadth in his handling of brushes and pigment he had never had before.

Jackson discovered that Thomson had happy moods, sometimes, when something he did “came through” as he wanted it to do. However, his self-confidence was intermittent. In spite of his obvious development, he was still sometimes prey to those old haunting moods of mistrust of himself and his powers.

Jackson tells of an incident that shows how the artist’s mind worked at such times. Things had gone badly with him one day and he returned to camp very much depressed. Jackson knew that the even-tempered Thomson must be deeply perturbed. By the time their support was over, Thomson’s revulsion against himself surged up in a kind of fury. He seized upon his sketch box and flung it into the bush as far as his arm could throw it. Jackson wisely said nothing, but let the matter slide, for Thomson’s mood was intense. By morning he was in quite a different frame of mind. Jackson was able to persuade him that he had not really discarded the art of painting entirely. After a hearty breakfast they set out to look for the sketch box.

They found it with all its contents scattered far and wide. After a long search the only thing they failed to recover was the clasp of the box. All was serene once more. They paddled over to see Bud Callaghan, a fire ranger, about that missing clasp. Like a good woodsman, he was equal to the occasion and made a new one from a piece of galvanized iron. Presently the sketch box was as good as new again and Thomson went off to make a fresh start at sketching.

Still another significant little incident that occurred on this trip showed how deeply Thomson resented any form of interference. Arthur Lismer went north late that autumn to join them at Canoe Lake. Just before leaving Toronto he had a talk with Dr. MacCallum who said to him: "You tell Thomson not to let that fellow Jackson influence him."

When Lismer and Thomson were alone Lismer said:

"Tom, I have a message from Dr. MacCallum."

"Yes, and I know what it is," growled Thomson. "He said, 'Tell Thomson not to let that fellow Jackson influence him.' "

Lismer, very much amused, admitted he was right. Thomson cursed bitterly and dropped what he was doing to work off his blaze of temper in gathering firewood. Any such attempt at authority over him aroused his deepest resentment.

In spite of all there was to rejoice over in that autumn of 1914, in spite of all the bright promises of the year and the strides each of the friends had made toward their objectives, yet the year came to a close in clouding darkness. The world was at war. Canada found herself involved in the blood-lust of Europe, in obscure hereditary greeds and passions until, even in the clean and solitary North, Jackson and Thomson were disturbed in their fishing and painting by this new clashing world relationship. The return to town, that should have been jubilant, was sobered by the menacing, unfamiliar spectre of war.

The two returned to their studio. Jackson was restless and ill at ease. His year of grace was up. If there was so little support for the arts in times of peace, there was none at all while the country was in the throes of war-madness. The national mind was bent on the destructive, not the creative, arts. Jackson packed up and went down to Montreal to think things over.

Thomson and Jackson took leave of each other very reluctantly. Their friendship had been very fruitful for both of them. There was affection and respect between them. Neither had an inkling that this was the end—that

they would never meet again. Jackson spent the next few years at the war, and when peace came returned safely to his interrupted work. Thomson was to go down to a mysterious death, on a quiet Sunday, in the peace of the north country.

In 1914 Jackson's "Red Maple" and Lismer's "Guide's Home" were exhibited in the RCA show and Jackson's was purchased by the National Gallery. Lismer's was purchased shortly after.

11

THE WAR WITHIN

By the year 1915 the little group with which Thomson was associated was recognized as a specific coterie. In spite of the fact that there were many others also striving for a new expression by this time and using various methods of their own to solve their problem this little group became, to the public, something apart.

In March the show of the Ontario Society of Artists summed up the year's work. Frank Carmichael, who had succeeded Jackson in the studio with Thomson, exhibited his first canvas, called "Winter Evening"; Harris had a snow study called "Winter Twilight" and Jackson had a study of the same subject, "A Winter Afternoon". MacDonald also had a snow picture called "Snowbound". Lismer contributed a canvas, "Sunlight and Shadow", forecasting his brilliant light effects. One among the canvases exhibited was to become celebrated. It was Thomson's "Northern River", which for sheer beauty, delicacy and tenderness of mood was not surpassed by anything else he ever did. It was acquired by the National Gallery. The shrine-like quality of the scene evokes a ready response and makes it one of the best-loved of all his pictures. He had two other canvases hung, "Split Rock" and "Georgian Bay Pines."

Saturday Night thought they saw things in exaggeration, but admitted that their influence was, on the whole, good. "They have wakened up their elders and some of the veterans show a greater vitality, more pigmentary enthusiasm so to speak."

It is remarkable that the effect of this unorganized half-realized movement among the younger men should have had so immediate an action on the older men who were not friendly towards the expressed philosophy of the group. As yet there were no plans for any attack on the old guard in Canada. Jackson, reviewing the situation years later, put it like this:

"There was no attempt or intention to found a school or to secede from the art bodies . . . There was, moreover, nothing revolutionary about our ideas. We felt there was a rich field for landscape motifs in the north country if we frankly abandoned our attempt at literal painting and treated our subjects with the freedom of the decorative designer . . . We tried to emphasize color, line, pattern, even, if need be, at the sacrifice of

atmospheric qualities. It seemed to be the only way to make use of the wealth of motifs the country had to offer us."

There is a distinct demarcation point here in the quality of Thomson's work. The work of 1912 and 1913 is that of a gifted and untrained amateur. The work from 1914 until his death reveals Thomson as an artist of technical skill as well as a man of rich spiritual development. His sketches before 1914 only hinted at the latent genius that was to blaze forth with such explosive force. Jackson said Thomson himself did not realize that he possessed a big store of knowledge that he was not using, "for he had a distinguished sense of color and was an excellent designer, but before nature he took no liberties."

In winter of 1914-1915 conditions in the arts in Canada were extremely discouraging. Even commercial studios that were the last line of defence for the artists were cutting down their staffs because of the war's effect on their business. Nobody wanted pictures. The public mind was turned to destroying, not creating. Nevertheless, in the midst of all this, a new recruit joined the group. Frank Carmichael, like Tom Thomson, came from the fringes of the North. He moved into the studio with Thomson when Jackson left.

Frank Carmichael had been an apprentice at the Grip studio. He started painting on sketching trips round about Toronto with Thomson and his friends. By dint of some magic of economy he managed a year's study in European studios and galleries. He returned to Canada with a better technique and an intense appreciation of the possibilities of his native environment. He went back to his home in Orillia and went to work on familiar landscape. There a new element came into his work and confirmed him in a resolution to join the group in Toronto and launch out on a career as an artist.

Back of all their work and plans that winter the war drums throbbed. Thomson and his friends were thoughtful men to whom war appeared in a light in which it did not appear to less sensitive and intuitive men and women, as a barbarous and meaningless relic of the savage ages of the race, when man had neither the intelligence nor the language to settle his disputes in any other way than by brute force. They were concerned with esthetics, the subjective side of life and with the intangible things of the spirit. By nature and by circumstances they were individuals of independent judgment. That independence operated as surely in regard to the subject of war as to the subject of painting. Consequently, the war added an entire new set of conflicts to their struggle for integration. The whole trend of their

experience had taught them to suspect and to resist mob judgment. Now the mob approved of war. Why should they think the mob was right this time?

As Jung says in his "Modern Man In Search of a Soul", the spiritual problem of modern man is an intimate problem of the immediate present.

"The modern man," he says, "is a newly formed human being; a modern problem is a question which has just arisen and whose answer lies in the future . . . the question . . . has to do with something so universal that it exceeds the grasp of any single human being . . . The man we call modern, the man who is aware of the immediate present, is by no means the average man . . . He is, rather, the man who stands upon a peak or at the very edge of the world, the abyss of the future before him . . . Every step forward means an act of tearing himself loose from that all embracing, pristine unconsciousness which claims the bulk of mankind almost entirely. The values and strivings of past worlds no longer interest him . . . Indeed, he is completely modern only when he has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow."

In this sense, Thomson and his friends were modern. They did not solve all the problems that life presented to them, but they did recognize them, and they sensed the need for constructive thinking on the basic relationships of man to his environment, to his fellows and to his own subjective life. Now these are the almost universal concerns of the generations of thoughtful young Canadians succeeding them and no young artist will go through the same torment today over the problem of enlistment, for example, that Thomson went through in that period.

As they worked and cheerfully contrived their very economical way through the winter, Thomson and Carmichael had this problem of enlistment to face. They were instinctively opposed to war with all its prostitution of youth and health and intelligence to the ugliest of humanity's conventions. But very few Canadians thought in those terms then.

They were the most difficult times in Thomson's life. With spiritual freedom there had inevitably come proportionate responsibility. There is no further unconscious evolution for man once he has learned to think. Once he has won his spark of Promethean fire he must learn to create and direct the activities of his life. Of this too few are aware when they attempt to live the creative life and look to it as an escape from the pressure of reality. There is nothing so real as the problem of living the creative life, when every

relationship between the individual and his work, his associates, his environment, becomes an issue to be settled in the light of the goal he has set for himself. It is here that men and women too often fail, in not recognizing the responsibilities of creative living and the necessity of making things function harmoniously, so as to pay due tribute to that divine faculty which endows humanity with the right to think and to create.

These were the principles which made life increasingly difficult for Thomson. The number of spectators around his ring of life increased. As soon as he was earmarked for success, more and more people were eager to have a hand in his career and a share in any subsequent credit. The nearer he got to the happiness of self-expression the more he became aware of the lively curiosity his progress excited.

Thomson produced his work for his own satisfaction and not with an eye to its effect upon the crowd. Too many artists paint canvases for exhibitions. Thomson painted the things he yearned over, whether or not they were ever to be seen by any eye but his own. Every true artist knows the need to guard against overstepping the faint demarcation line that lies between self-expression and self-glorification. Expression is a spiritual necessity, but self-glorification is an indication of a lack of something to express. So to discover that his work and his personal life were matters of curiosity now to so many was disturbing. Moreover, when the question as to whether or not he should enlist for war service became a matter of contention among his friends, the tension became acute in Thomson's mind.

In "Whitman to America: The Study of an Attitude", F. B. Housser defines the creative life as "the search for one's deific identity or integrity."

"Life itself is a creative force," he says, "but our manner of living it is not always creative. The creative life is natural. The imitative life is unnatural . . . Life, being creative, is constantly changing. Circumstances, relationships, beliefs and opinions are forever altering in accordance with the law of life. The majority of people will not trust life. They fear change and desire stability. In their effort to prevent change they struggle to defeat the law of their own being, which is life . . . There are four stages to the finding and living of the creative life. The first is the taking of the creative attitude, or a ceasing to fear life, whether it hurts or not. The second includes a faith or trust in the beneficent purpose of life. The third is a gaining of an understanding of the purpose of life. The fourth is the allying of oneself with that purpose."

Thomson had no fear of life; he believed that his life had meaning and purpose and the course of his future was now consciously directed towards allying himself with that purpose. But the process of doing that was the war that Thomson fought on the battle front of his own soul. The race was facing the issue of a mechanized god of war versus the right of man to live as a human individual recognizing his own—and his neighbor's—right freely to seek his own integration. Thomson faced the whole incredible situation in personal terms. His real purpose, dimly sensed, was to develop in his countrymen that integrity that the times threatened to destroy. Would his, or any other country, survive even a victory without the strength that integrity bestowed? And where lay his immediate duty, in the trenches, killing or being killed in the name of love of country or as a priest before the altar of that inner shrine at which he served the spirit of his native land?

Thomson did not live long enough to solve consciously this problem. He was not a philosopher, nor a mystic, but just an inspired man struggling bravely against heavy odds, alone and handicapped by human frailty and besetting doubt.

Early in the spring Thomson left the busy military city of Toronto behind him. While the snow still lay on the ground he packed his bags and rolled up his blankets and boarded a train for Algonquin.

12

THOMSON THE MAN

While Tom Thomson was not a typical Canadian of his times, he was, however, the product of typical Canadian circumstances. He went through the same mill as most of the Canadians of his generation, went to the same schools, read the same books, listened to the same sermons, yet out of the woof and warp of that youth he emerged with a new pattern of life. We are all compounded of the same basic qualities and energies, just as all music is evolved from the same notes, and all painting from the same colors.

No man had a more honest contempt for subterfuge, for sham or for snobbery than had Tom Thomson. He was not aggressive in his resentments, nor did he go down into battle with those whose ways ran counter to his own. He just eliminated them as thoroughly as possible from his way of living. He succeeded in stripping his life pretty well to what he regarded as essentials.

He was free of that "bondage of friendship and the fear of loneliness" that so often weakens an otherwise powerful individual. He enjoyed friends and had a great affection for his intimates but there were times when he craved solitude more than anything else. No personal relationship could stand between him and his work but he had not reached the stage of development where he could adjust his personal relationships and his work to the great advantage of both. He was at the place where he sensed the significance of his creative powers and he could be ruthless where they became involved. At the same time, he was sensitive to ridicule and he knew how to concede enough in inessentials—and no more than enough—to make himself inconspicuous. He was deaf to what Ludovici calls "the unsound, external promptings of the modern world."

Thomson was a man of great personal charm and magnetism. He was six foot two in height, well-proportioned and physically fit. One of his intimates, attempting to describe Thomson, said, "It is a curious way to express what I mean, but Thomson was a lovely man."

One of Thomson's boyhood friends, writing after the lapse of so many years, says:

"Tom was handsome, as a youth. Apart from my own opinion, I remember my mother commenting on this. I can remember particularly a

well-shaped nose and fairly long, black hair. He had a habit of throwing his hair back from his face with a motion of his head and it was done with an air of great freedom and grace."

Lismer recalls a trick of Thomson's that demonstrated the control and co-ordination of his body that he had achieved. In the shack that became his studio there was an electric light in the ceiling from which there hung a cord with a press button on the end of it. When Thomson came in with his hands full of parcels he would casually kick the light on.

He has been described as light and graceful as a deer, and was very fond of dancing. 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. His mouth was generous, sensitive and expressive, his chin firm and well defined, his hands the large, deft hands of a good craftsman.

Thomson was a great walker. As a youth he would tramp ten miles through a blizzard to go to a party, or quite nonchalantly cover the twenty miles to Meaford and back on an errand. Often when he was alone he sang or whistled. A brother says that "he would sing for hours but he did not talk very much." His mandolin was his boon companion and he liked to sit on the floor with his back to the wall while he played.

As a companion he was charming. "He had an odd, silent little laugh," says one of his friends, "and as his sense of humor was pretty active, one often heard, or rather saw it." When once he had given his friendship he was very easy to get along with. "He was always plain and easy-going as an old shoe."

Thomson never interfered with his friends' affairs and he expected them never to interfere with his. Naturally, he did attract some friends who were anxious, for a variety of reasons, to put pressure upon him, social or professional or intellectual. With the first evidence of this Thomson became restless. Sometimes it was a quite honest and affectionate effort on the part of some obtuse friend. Presently he would find that he was seeing less and less of Thomson, that he had stopped coming to his home, and finally that he seldom had a chance to talk to Thomson. If pushed to a point Thomson would refuse to see him. In such an emergency Thomson was at bay. He could not argue over such intangible things as human relationships. He grew silent, resentful, antagonistic.

"Thomson had strong antipathies," one of his friends says of him, "and the few people he did dislike, he disliked intensely."

Thomson's reactions were not subject to any code. We want geniuses, someone has said, but we want them to be just like other people. They never are. Upon Thomson, the effect of beauty was to rouse pure joy and exhilaration, and whatever touched his sense of humor induced honest laughter. Social injustices stirred him to forthright anger. All of his reactions were intense, wheresoever they were directed. Only a few realized that underneath his quiet, unassuming exterior there was a vibrant inner life in which he really lived, moved and had his being. It was to this life that his painting gave its first expression.

Thomson's religion, like the rest 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."

Once when Thomson was at work in one of the commercial studios in Toronto, a room next door was rented to a religious group for prayer meetings. Thomson could hear all that went on beyond the partition and judging from what he heard he decided there was more dramatization than there was devotion in the proceedings. One day the fervor rose to fever height and some of the leaders shouted to Deity detailed advice upon how to deal with their fellow men. Thomson bore it as long as he could but his sense of the fitness of things was outraged. He walked to the door, opened it and glanced in at the meeting.

"Say, folks," he said, "it isn't necessary to shout like that at the Almighty. He is not that far away."

Then he closed the door quietly and went back to work.

On the other hand, there is the story of the old lady at Mowatt Lodge. She had charge of the kitchen and so as a consequence her own meals were irregular. When Thomson was at the Lodge he joined the staff at meals.

Whenever the old lady found time to sit down to table, she bowed her head to give thanks for her food. Thomson was the only one who laid aside his knife and fork and bowed his head while the old lady was in prayer.

One spring Thomson asked Mrs. Shannon Fraser for the use of her washing machine to wash out his red blankets. She consented, remarking that she was soon going to start on the Lodge blankets herself. When Thomson was through, he said he might as well go on with a few of her blankets. He realized the task it was for a woman, and so he went straight on with the job for two entire days.

At another time, when Thomson was travelling in the vicinity of Ogama, the people roundabout arranged to have a party at the home of one of the settlers. Thomson was invited and thoroughly enjoyed himself. When the party was over, Thomson lingered until all the other guests had left. Then he surprised his tired hostess by insisting on washing over the floors before he went off to his camp.

A Frenchman who lived alone in the northern end of the Park came to Mowatt Lodge one day after Thomson's death. Mrs. Fraser asked him if he remembered Thomson. He shook his head.

"A painter," said Mrs. Fraser, making motions with her hands.

The Frenchman's face suddenly lightened and he broke into his story. One day he was expecting four men to dinner and had prepared everything. He went to watch for them but seeing no sign returned to his shack to find that his dog had helped himself to all the bacon. Thomson paddled up to the dock while the man was still cursing his luck. While he probably chuckled to himself over the scene, he dug down into his packsack for his own piece of bacon and handed it to the Frenchman.

"An' he tak' no money," concluded Mrs. Fraser's visitor emphatically.

Taylor Statten tells a story that illustrates another side of his character. He was building a cabin on Little Wapomeo Island and had engaged masons to erect a chimney. He had to have a supply of sand on the island by the time they arrived. Thomson had often earned a little cash when he needed it by clearing underbrush on the island. But now when Taylor Statten appealed to him he certainly did not want work, for it was in the middle of a fine sketching season. Thomson tried to find someone to do the work, but there was no one available. He could not refuse to help where he had received help, so at a considerable sacrifice he set to work with team and scow,

hauling sand from the pit to the island. No one turned up to relieve him, so he saw the job through to the finish.

Unromantic tales are these, and yet they serve to show Thomson was no idle dreamer, trading on his capacity to produce beauty or truth as an excuse for evading the homely tasks and responsibilities of every day associations. It never occurred to him that the hand that produced "Northern River" should keep its cunning for paint and canvas. Thomson did these homely tasks so congenially and simply that they are one with the spirit in which he reduced some great northern mood, that had escaped all who had tried before him, to the proportions of a sketch board. Thomson brought art to earth in Canada and proved that the creative life is a quality of character, that cannot be laid aside, nor lent nor borrowed, or least of all, assumed as a mask to disguise a weakness. Only a soul, tempered by aeons of experience, comes to us as a creative individual, richly endowed with the power to discriminate and to synthesize. These are those who know the real values of life and of effort.

Money had no significance for Thomson and he resented the ritual with which money was hedged about. There is the famous story about Thomson going into a bank to have a cheque cashed. The teller demanded identification, whereupon Thomson tore up the cheque. The story is quite true, but the point is not that Thomson was ignorant of banking rules but that the presumptuous clerk knew Thomson quite well and was parading the power bank rules lent him.

Thomson had his own way of dealing with self-inflated individuals. Some friends of his tell of a visit to Toronto not long before his death, when he arranged to take them to a play that had appeared at an opportune time. He got good seats, so Thomson's grey sweater coat found itself rubbing shoulders with indignant black broadcloth. Thomson's neighbor made his disapproval obvious and Thomson ignored him for quite a while and then turned to him and said quietly:

"They are all paid for."

Thomson used his money as it came to him. Often would he take a child in off the street to buy it shoes or mitts and there was an old hermit at Canoe Lake that he supplied with winter underwear. There was only one time when he could be niggardly with himself or anyone else and that was when he needed paint. And Thomson, if need be, would do without almost anything, to replenish his store of paints. But when there was no immediate use for money his attitude to it was quite naive. While on a trip with Thomson in the

North, Lawren Harris one day noticed that he had become suddenly moody. He would disappear for an hour or two at a time. Eventually the truth came out—he had lost all his money. He carried it in his hip pocket along with some of his brushes and somewhere he had pulled it out and dropped it.

His carelessness with money was proverbial. On long trips he might tie a roll of bills to a thwart of his canoe. Lismer tells of seeing him drag a bill out of his hip pocket and drop it over board as they were paddling along.

"Look, Tom," he called, "you've dropped some money overboard."

Thomson glanced back at the floating bill they were so rapidly leaving behind them. He shrugged his shoulders. It wasn't worth going back to get.

He was held up and robbed on at least three occasions.

However careless he might be with his own money, he was scrupulous where his obligations were concerned. Once he had a boil on his arm which required medical attention. He went to a doctor and explained with some embarrassment that he could not pay in cash, but offered some sketches in payment. The physician waved aside the explanation and proceeded to treat him. Thomson sent him a bundle of four or five sketches, but the doctor didn't think much of them and stowed them away in the cellar.

Thomson's careless generosity made him the victim, at times, of those who chose to trade upon it. If anyone admired a sketch very much, Thomson was almost sure to say, "Take it, if you like it." A sketch or two was payment for any little kindness. He once offered "The West Wind" to one of his friends in the Park.

13

THE SHACK

When Thomson returned to town in the autumn of 1915, Carmichael had married and also, their old studio had been rented to some one else, somewhat to his secret satisfaction. Behind the studio building was a shack formerly used by a cabinet maker and later as a tool shed while the studio was being erected. It was here that he elected to live. Here he could live just as he would live in a shack in the North, cook his own meals, go his own gait, sleep and paint and tramp the ravines, as he pleased. It was an excellent arrangement for preserving in town something of the freedom of the North while he had the advantage of associating with his friends among the painters.

The shack needed changes and repairs and Lawren Harris put a big window in the east wall. Then Thomson moved in, hung his fishing tackle on the walls, stacked his sketches, set up his easel and settled down to his winter's work. This was to be his home, his headquarters, for all that remained to him of this life. (The rent was a dollar a month.) Here it was that he painted most of his great canvases, including the two most celebrated, "The Jackpine" and "The West Wind." The shack still stands and although it has since had several other occupants and has seen other experiments, it is still "Thomson's shack." (In 1962 it was moved to Kleinberg, Ont. as part of the McMichael Conservation Collection.)

That autumn Lismer was also free-lancing and looking for a place to paint. He had his own home and only needed space and light to work. The logical thing to do was to paint with Thomson. They made excellent studio mates for there was in the whimsical Lismer something of that same delight in the wonders and humors of nature—human, animal and elemental—that constituted so large a part of Thomson's life. That winter the shack was the focus of a good deal of interest and attention. Lismer, Harris, MacDonald, Varley (another one of the old Grip crowd), Carmichael and several others who had been swept into a recognition of the philosophy of the new movement were seeing each other almost constantly, frequently dropping into the shack to share beans or mulligan and over a pipe, discuss the news.

So far, the new movement had been the concern of the men painters. The women painters had to work under all the handicaps that hampered men painters plus the handicap of being a woman in a conservative society in

pre-war days. During the war there was one very gifted, attractive young woman who made a valiant effort to break down the walls of tradition that cramped her sex in Canada. Her chief weapon was the assumption of an extreme sophistication which was allied to a fundamental naïveté. Because she was endowed with real ability and a puckish sense of humor, she was very popular. Her studio was the haunt of army officers and of women enthralled by the smartness of this studio life. Here Thomson and his work and ways of life were sometimes discussed and lost nothing in the telling. The artist and the woman in her were intrigued. Thomson's group was exactly the antithesis of all she was apparently striving to create. He would never be found thumbing his nose at the conventions in her studio. Well, when the mountain wouldn't go to Mahomet, Mahomet could, of course, go to the mountain.

She met Arthur Lismer one day and suggested that she would lunch at the shack and named the day. When Thomson was told, he made no comment. On the appointed day Lismer mentioned the approaching visit, expecting to see Thomson decamp. He did nothing of the sort.

"I thought, perhaps, you'd be going out," he said.

"I've a lot to do today," Thomson replied with a smile of amusement. He had not missed the news of the other studio.

Thomson had the mulligan simmering on the stove when she arrived, prepared to be as provocatively feminine as possible. Thomson was profoundly amused. He knew she expected a roughneck and he decided to play up to her best expectations, so he was apparently blind to all her wiles and treated her like a man. He pushed her plate over to her as though she was a ranger dropping in to camp.

She was puzzled and intrigued. None of the old tricks worked with Thomson. Then her sense of humor took charge and she warmed up to the game. Realizing that he was exaggerating his part, she did the same. She took a little black patch from her chin and tried it on her cheek. Behind her back Thomson mimicked her gleefully. She pressed her campaign, determined to break down his detachment, despite the fact that she could see that the old weapons of war were obsolete where this new kind of man was concerned. Again she raised her little black flag, this time to her eyebrow, but Thomson talked on as if she were a lumberjack. At last she gave up and dropped the patch on the floor. Some time later, when they parted, all were the best of friends. Lismer went to the door with her and when he turned back he found Thomson searching the floor.

“What are you looking for, Tom?” he asked.

“That patch,” said Thomson. “She may need it when she comes again.”

Presently it was time for the O.S.A., that yearly accounting to the public for the year’s work. The 1916 show curdled the ink for one critic who thought the new canvases were “samples of that rough, splashy, meaningless, blatant, plastering and massing of unpleasant colors . . . all conveying the same impression, that the artist was out to make a sensation, didn’t know how to do it and wasted considerable good pigment in a disastrous attempt.”

Considering that this was in the midst of the turmoil of war and under conditions apparently strange for the birth of creative endeavor, the effect of the year’s work was truly significant. A handful of painters forced the press and the public into a heated controversy over the symbols of form and color which stood for an expression of that land for which hundreds of thousands of men were being asked to fight and to die. It made the thoughtful realize that they did not know a great deal about this land of theirs, after all, not even such simple, observable things as light and color. Some began to wonder if there were qualities of light and color and form in this northern country that they had failed to recognize and enjoy, or whether it was possible for men such as these rebel painters to develop faculties for the enjoyment of more subtle pleasures. Certainly, they must be doing their work for pleasure, for they were getting neither profit nor praise. So, very subtly, a spirit of enquiry worked its way into the minds of Canadians. If the old school of painters had misinterpreted the spirit of the land, what of the poets and the politicians? Thoughts are insidious, elusive things. A regiment of critics may condemn a picture but they can do nothing about the vague longings and aspirations that the picture sets up in the heart of the individual —each man according to his own measure. This longing for truth spread from soul to soul, unconsciously, imperceptibly, and emerged in many places, to influence the sister arts, education and the youthful philosophers who are only now beginning to find speech.

However, in Thomson’s time, it was bad enough for an artist to go off into the wilderness to paint, and then to tell his critics they were not competent to judge the spirit of the work because they did not know the country, but MacDonald had the audacity to tell them they did not even know their own back yards. He had painted a composition from his garden at Thornhill in late autumn, which he called “The Tangled Garden.” This was bringing the whole thing home, with a vengeance. MacDonald felt and saw in the gorgeous outpouring of nature the same decorative patterns, the

same rich intensity of color, the same natural rhythms, as were to be found in the more elemental wilderness. Thomson might paint in Algonquin, Jackson in the Laurentians, Harris in the back streets of Toronto and MacDonald in his garden, but they were all sensing and expressing the same thing—the quickening pulse of a new life in Canada.

Technically, "The Tangled Garden" was a daring piece of work. MacDonald was a fine craftsman as the disturbed critics knew, and that he, and not merely the amateur, Tom Thomson, should rise to such a pitch of enthusiasm, was very provoking. The storm broke over his head. Thomson's new canvases, "The Hardwoods" and "Birches", had only hurried notice as the papers swept on to the attack. But they overreached themselves and, in a now celebrated article in his own defence, MacDonald showed them that he could meet them with their own weapons—words—and teach them how to use them. Instead of the bluster of abuse there was a measured reasoning and a spice of learning and humor. Charlesworth had charged the whole group with insincerity and an attempt to "hit 'em in the eye."

"If they planned a hit anywhere," wrote MacDonald in the *Globe*, "it was in the heart of understanding. They expect Canadian critics to know the distinctive character of their own country and to approve, at least, any effort by an artist to communicate his own knowledge . . . One can also assure the critics that it can be demonstrated that every one of the pictures is sound in composition. Their color is good, in some cases superlatively good; not one of them is too large. Their nationality is unmistakable." He made a plea for courageous experiment and pointed out that the exhibited canvases were "but items in a big idea, the spirit of our native land."

From that show until after the war MacDonald was regarded as the most radical member of the group.

Thomson had worked hard that winter and had four canvases hung at the O.S.A. "Hardwoods"[1] he showed again in the autumn at the Royal Canadian Academy in Montreal when Jackson's "Mount Ararat" (re-named "North Country" for the occasion) was hung for the first time. This canvas of Thomson's has disappeared. It is said that he was never satisfied with it and after an effort to improve it he destroyed it.

The year 1916 found Canada more deeply involved in war than ever. Except for those engaged in the work of the War Memorials Commission, there was nothing for the artist in the holocaust of war. Pictures and painters were apparently superfluous and Thomson's funds had dwindled very low. Fortunately, some friends got him a post as ranger with the Park

administration and he was assigned a district on the northeastern outskirts of Algonquin.

Early in June, Thomson arrived on Lake Achray to join Edward Godin, with whom he was to work. Godin had a cabin which he called Outside Inn. One of Thomson's first contributions to their common life was a beautifully lettered sign to hang over the door. Thomson delighted in devising little gadgets for use around camp or studio.

It was fine country and Thomson found himself well situated with congenial companions, good fishing and plenty of fine sketching. Godin, too, found Thomson very much to his liking.

"Tom Thomson was a fine fellow," he writes, "easy to get along with and always in a good humor."

Slightly northwestward from Lake Achray is Grand Lake, which forms part of the waterway leading down to the Ottawa River. It was an old timber route. When Thomson was out on one of his first fire ranging expeditions, he came upon one of the Booth company drives, descending Grand Lake in early June. A timber drive is a dramatic affair and Thomson was interested. Moreover, as ranger, it was part of his duty to keep an eye on the camp, to see to it that no fires originated with it. The drive moves slowly, not more than a few miles a day, so Thomson travelled with them for three or four weeks. As he followed or kept abreast of them he sketched a good deal, somewhat to the amusement of the lumberjacks, who were accustomed to thinking of painting as a rather lady-like accomplishment. However, this painter was a big, husky woodsman like themselves and his sketches were not pretty.

Like an army, a timber drive travels on its stomach and the camp cook is an important individual, for on his ability and trustworthiness may depend the success of the long journey from the timber limits to the mills. On this drive the cook was Pete Sauve, who was another of those men who fell under the charm of Thomson's individuality. They became good friends.

One day Thomson settled down a few feet from the cookhouse door and sketched the logs as they came tumbling through the waters at Grand Lake Dam. The following winter he painted it into a canvas to which he gave the title of "The Drive"[2]. It was an exceedingly vigorous composition painted in his best manner. He shows the drive at the point where the loggers have opened the sluice and the logs are tumbling through into the stream below. "The hill in the background," writes Arthur Lismer of this picture, "is blue and purple, with a knife-like gleam of water at its base. The water of the

river is painted a cream-yellow and deep, brackish browns. The logs, rich in deep purple browns, have the reflection of the sky on their surfaces. The time is spring, although there is little hint of green. The sweep of the curve of logs leads to the center where the figures are working and the birch tree to the left acts as a frame and its sprawling limbs point to the figures straining at the pike poles at the top of the dam. Thomson had a powerful grasp of the composition values in this picture and nothing is accidently placed—all lead to the convincing truth of his interpretation. The aspect of depth, which means going into a picture, is presented here with true character and ability. It is one of the strongest of Thomson's pictures, that is, in its contrasts and colors."

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 waters 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.

That sketch, painted at his cookhouse door, lingered in Pete Sauve's memory. He was another of the "men of the North" who felt the pull of her spirit. He recognized a kinship with Thomson. When he went home, when the season's work was over, he took the fishing tackle Thomson had made for him, regarding it as a souvenir of a brief friendship that was, somehow or other, remarkable, and he has kept it ever since. But his interest in that sketch grew into a longing to possess it. If ever he could find Thomson, he would try to buy it from him. But Thomson and Pete Sauve were not to meet again. A few years later Sauve went to Canoe Lake to take charge of the kitchens at Camp Ahmek. When he asked about the cairn on top of Heyhurst Point, he learned that it was in memory of Thomson, of whom he had heard nothing since 1916. Now he wanted that sketch more than ever. It was ten years later that he learned the story of the study of the timber drive, and how it had been painted into one of the greatest of Thomson's canvases.

The year passed on to autumn with Tom Thomson steadily accumulating materials for his last winter of studio work. On a trip to Pembroke he is said to have made the sketch for his last—and unfinished—canvas, "The West Wind." A companion of Thomson's of that summer recalls how impressed Thomson was with the upper Ottawa. He said nothing had ever gripped him

quite so much as this piece of country and its mood. But the seasons are inexorable, and winter found Thomson back in the shack, ready for work on his last canvases.

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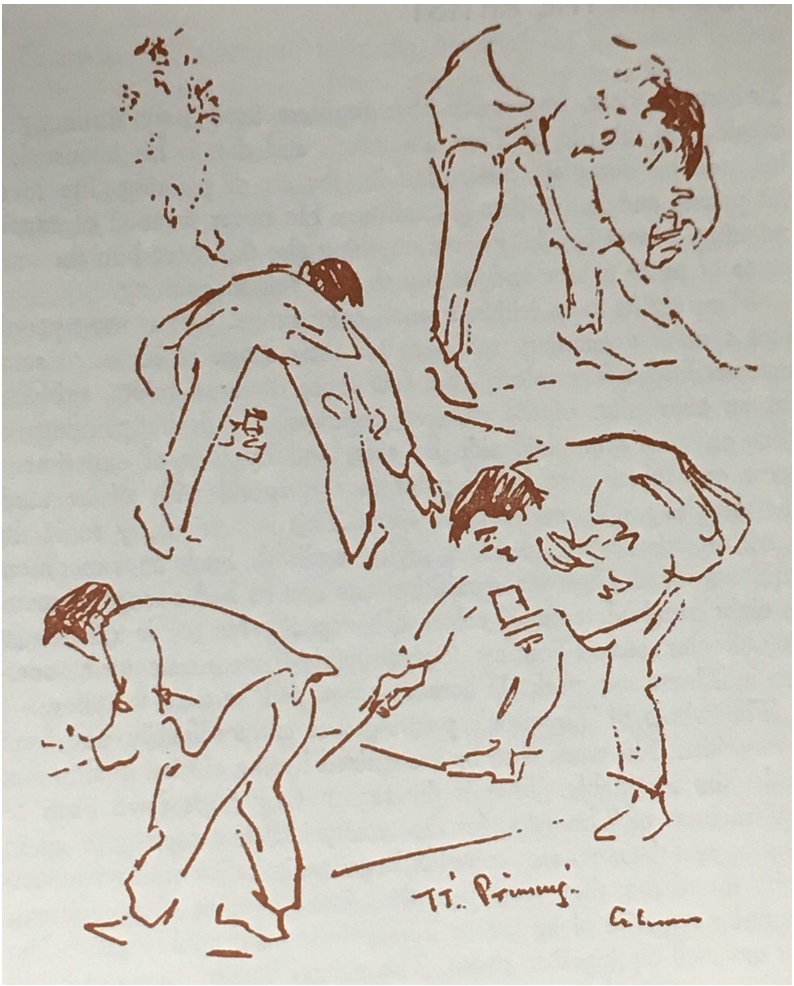
[1] Now in England, owned by Dr. Fred MacCallum.

[2] Now in Guelph, Ontario.



14

THOMSON THE ARTIST

There is one impression that registers itself very distinctly in considering the life of Tom Thomson, and that is his intense love for, and his complete absorption in, the art of painting. He loved his palette and its limitless possibilities. He never wearied of experimenting. Never had he known anything else that gave him the same sense of inner power and beauty that he felt in painting.

Many artists keep within a small color range. Just as most people find a small vocabulary sufficient for their range of ideas, so some painters find a few colors, or a few tones of those colors, sufficient for an expression of the creative impulses. If all the paintings of such an artist were laid side by side, and by way of experiment, some one mixed samples of paint to correspond with all he used, the samples might total fifty or sixty. This is particularly so in the work of artists whose work is highly stylized. Such an experiment on the work of Thomson would indicate that he had a range of seven to eight hundred tones of color. His capacity for subtle differentiation of color seemed limitless. Consequently there is no color mannerism in Thomson's work. Wherever nature led he tried to follow.

The whole of Thomson's painting was extraordinarily free from mannerisms. His work is to be recognized by the elusive quality that made him inimitable. That is the reason why there have been so few imitators of Thomson, for the tamely imitative soon gave up in despair, and those whose aspiration began as imitative endeavor eventually found that they were provoked into his spirit of experiment, the polar opposite of imitation. The painter who could imitate him was too well equipped to do so. The painter content to do so could not be recognized as an imitator.

This holds equally true in the other arts which Tom Thomson's philosophy influenced. Sculpture seems to have responded most notably to the spirit of adventure; drama has felt the stirring of that "wild bird in the breast"; literature, too, but with least results. Those who have been imbued with his spirit, no matter where they work, begin with his scorn of second-hand emotion, his deep, almost religious faith, in an inner truth that he could some day capture, which is the only aspect of truth which an individual has the right to offer as his own.

Thomson had a way of maturing his work in his mind before attempting to set it down. There are numerous anecdotes which illustrate the point. His friends tell how he would sit a long time in silence, staring at apparently nothing at all, occasionally asking some seemingly irrelevant question. It was this power of intensive visualization which made his painting seem so effortless to those who watched him work. His mind seemed to be a laboratory in which he conducted his experiments, assembling his materials of perception, discrimination, emotion and synthesis, and there worked out the compositions that would express the essence of the whole experience. Although Thomson was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, an intellectual, there were intense mental processes at work in his painting. His work was never naive and it was too profound to be sophisticated. He matured his observations and impressions in the recesses of his mind and produced them at will. When he knew that certain patterns or effects were essentially true, he would set out to reproduce them.

Mark Robinson tells a story of him which bears out this idea. One day the ranger from his cabin saw Thomson coming almost at a run, with his canoe over his head, up the portage from Canoe Lake. He dropped the canoe into the water above the dam and jumped in, obviously in a great sense of urgency. He landed and hurried up to the cabin.

"Say, Mark," he said, "do you remember any place near here where I can get three spruce trees—black spruce, cold, rough looking trees—do you know what I mean? And I want them against a green-grey north sky. Where can I find them?"

Robinson, who knew the Park as he knew the palm of his hand, told him where the black spruce would be found.

"Against a northern sky?" Thomson insisted.

Robinson nodded. There was a northern background.

Without another word of explanation, Thomson turned and was gone. For three days no one saw or heard anything of him. Then he turned up again at the ranger's cabin, a broad smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Well, Tom," was Robinson's greeting, "did you get your black spruce?"

"Yes, I did. They were just what I wanted. And I stayed till the light was right."

At another time he might want an old rampike, and would tramp the woods for days in search of just the right one. He might turn up a week later and announce briefly, "I got just what I wanted."

Certain effects of light and color constantly intrigued and exasperated him. The browns of dying ferns was a case in point. “Today I think I’ve got it and tomorrow it’s all richer color.” Light and depth were things he strove after, for he wanted his pictures flooded with light. He wanted the country to stand out in its most telling characteristics. “I must lift it out,” he would say, with a gesture of his hands.

Thomson knew how to use pure color and his paints, once he had acquired command of technique, were never muddied. His work was swift but unhurried. “Tom’s canvases never hung around very long,” his friends say. He had a deft hand with his brush and often achieved with one stroke what would require half a dozen strokes of a hesitant painter. He had a trick which still puzzles his friends, for he could lay one luscious color on top of another without smudging either one. A young maple in late autumn is an excellent example of this. With a few bold strokes he has built in the form and color of the tree. Then, apparently with a very full brush, lightly manipulated, he has superimposed other tones of red which give the tree a fine sense of light and planes and character.

Though Thomson loved clear color and often sketched with colors of great brilliancy, he loved grey and brooding days and felt in them a mysterious charm. A sister tells of driving with him on a day when the clouds were heavy and threatening and all the landscape was crouched and silent.

“I do wish the sun would come out,” she said.

Thomson pulled himself out of his absorption.

“Oh, no,” he protested, “this is so beautiful and there is so much to see.”

One of his best known canvases, “Chill November”, is a study in the beauty that pervades the stern and sombre moods of nature.

These many moods of the natural world he knew from childhood. The power to set down those moods authentically was the expression of his genius. He was able to simplify and summarize out of an immense store of observation and experience, from which, as an artist, he could select and emphasize the vital characteristics of the subject on which he worked. The mind is full of the intimate details of the landscape as we look at one of his canvases, not because he put them there, but because he suggests so much and recalls so much and all so subtly. It comes as a little shock, later on, to discover just how little detail he did set down. It is possible to set down

every twig and say nothing. It is genius which reaches past the eye and touches and stirs the depths in the spectator.

Particularly does this thought apply to “The Jack Pine”, notable for its dynamic forcefulness. This canvas seems to be a culmination of his skill and emotional life. To every highly charged creative worker in the arts and sciences, there is a joy beyond words in using to the very utmost his skill with his medium, to feel his control over material substances in manifesting or proving the ideas of the intuitional mind. Each new attempt at creation is an adventure fraught with the possibilities of emotional excitement. That it is excitement of a very high order is true, in which emotion and intellect are blended and then transcended, becoming something akin to ecstasy. This joy in creation is the remote ancestor of the “thrill” which each and every one seeks, in one form or another. To every canvas there is the experimental side, for the artist is not sure how it will turn out. He knows precisely what he is striving for—his joy comes as he sees that idea emerge in form. This is apparent in “The Jack Pine.” The spirit of the canvas leaps out to meet the spectator in a way no reproduction can fully convey. There is no fumbling, no hesitancy here. His brush was sure. Heavily laden with paint it swept over the canvas in broad, exultant strokes in which the very spirit of Tom Thomson still speaks aloud. Standing before a canvas such as this we can actually “tune in” upon the acute sense of consciousness with which the artist worked, if our own state of awareness has become sufficiently sensitive. Hence we can share his joy in achievement.

Thomson was always sensitive to criticism. Early in his painting career he made a visit to his family. His brother, George, a professional artist then working in New England, was also at home. Some criticism of his work by his brother disturbed Thomson and he went to bed thinking about it. At two o’clock he got up and dressed and slipped out of the house. By breakfast time he was back with a sketch that answered his brother’s criticism.

His critics of later years will never know how deeply bruised he often was over their sneers and witticisms. One of them had condemned the younger men for their wide brush work. Thomson threatened to paint a whole canvas with inch wide brushes, just to show what could be done. One day in the winter of 1916-17, Dr. MacCallum dropped into the shack to see him. Thomson was painting.

“My God, Tom, what are you doing?” he demanded.

“I’m painting this for Charlesworth,” said Thomson, and laid on another stroke of red paint. The canvas was “The Pointers”, from a sketch done with

the timber drive.

Criticism of his methods hurt him but criticism of his subject matter or doubt cast upon the veracity of his work enraged him. Some of Thomson's friends, mistaking his attitude towards criticism, decided to compensate for it by fulsome flattery. One of them went so far as to resent anything that savored of criticism from anybody. Everything that Thomson did, he insisted, was excellent. Tom Thomson knew how to deal with that. He had a phonograph in his shack, so he doctored a record by making an oval hole in the centre. Whenever his over-zealous friend came in, mouthing his praises, Thomson put on his record and raised an ungodly din, putting an effective end to conversation. To protests he always replied that he liked it.

There was little of the critical disposition in Thomson. A discriminating sense applied to his own work, but he disliked risking hurting anyone's feelings by pointing out their failings. He expected people to be self-critical. One day he was asked for his opinion of a canvas on which an acquaintance was working. He passed some non-committal remarks. After they left the studio a companion said to him:

"Tom, didn't you see there was a hollow in the lake?"

"Sure," said Thomson, "but he can see that himself."

Thomson is quoted as telling this story:

"Once when I was out on a sketching trip in the Park I suddenly made up my mind to go on in another two days' journey. There were portages ahead so I decided to lighten my load by leaving my sketches to dry, planning to pick them up on my way back. On my return journey, I found that a lynx had come along and after a critical inspection, he clawed them and still not satisfied, he chewed them."

He enjoyed telling the story and said even the animals knew what a rotten artist he was. As he dug down into his dunnage for the sketches to illustrate his tale, someone said:

"That would make a great picture, Tom. Paint it and call it 'The Art Critic.' "

In spite of the fact that Thomson painted for only five years and that only the work of the last three years is important, two of Thomson's canvases were acquired by the National Gallery, before his death. Thomson's friends agree in saying that he was indifferent to recognition. He painted for the sake of creating and attached no value to his work once it was completed. Nevertheless, the fact that his work was regarded as

significant must have brought a sense of some measure of success in manifesting the spirit of "his country." When Thomson's work eventually was sent abroad with Canadian exhibitions, he was quickly recognized as a new element in Canadian art. In France he was more definitely acclaimed as an individual. The French seized upon Thomson himself as the forerunner of a new force in painting. The British were more interested in the emergence of the new group of landscape painters and the group significance.

There were two contrasting sides to Thomson. There was the man, quiet, reserved, gentle, unassuming, something of the Indian in spirit; the other was the artist, adventurous, emotional, dramatic, compelling, idol-smashing. And therein arose the conflict in his life in the effort to bring the unaggressive personality into alignment with the urgent soul that owed allegiance to no master, no school, no tradition, and which would condone no compromise with its demands. In his effort to ally himself with the creative life of his subjective self, Thomson developed many contrasting characteristics. 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. In his work he ranged from the most delicate penmanship to the boldest summarizations in heavy pigment. There was the simplicity and moneylessness of his life and the richness of his work and the spiritual largesse he bestowed.

What is genius? How shall we recognize it? Was Thomson a genius? Was he, rather, another of those highly evolved individuals who are more common to the human family than we realize, but who fail of utterance through lack of faith and a sense of values?

What we now call genius is a faculty which will some day be the common property of the race. Genius is the fruit of creative living. At this stage of our development, those magnificent flashes of cosmic insight on the part of some individual, which result in the bringing down into use of some universal law or truth or harmony, we regard with awe and reward with tribute—even though the recognition comes long after the individual has left us. On the whole, the race does eventually recognize scientific truths, great works of art and engineering, great contributions in philosophy and religious thought. The real value in the stress laid upon genius is that it indicates a faculty which is becoming increasingly available to man with use. The fact that genius works progressively, and that each generation adds its little quota of knowledge to the common fund is significant. The fact that an individual can make use of accumulated cosmic knowledge and work on from there to

new knowledge, proves the common source of all intuitional and inspirational work, and the law and order underlying the gradual disclosure of man's relationships to the natural and spiritual worlds.

This being so, the responsibility actually lies with the individuals of the race to prepare themselves to be receivers of universal knowledge in many forms. Consequently, the genius does not conform to the customs of the uninspired. He is really a priest of whichever of the arts or sciences he chooses to serve. Consecration and discipline are the keynotes of his life, although the outer world may not realize that the simplicity of his life, his apparent exclusiveness, his nonconformity, are parts of a self-imposed discipline.

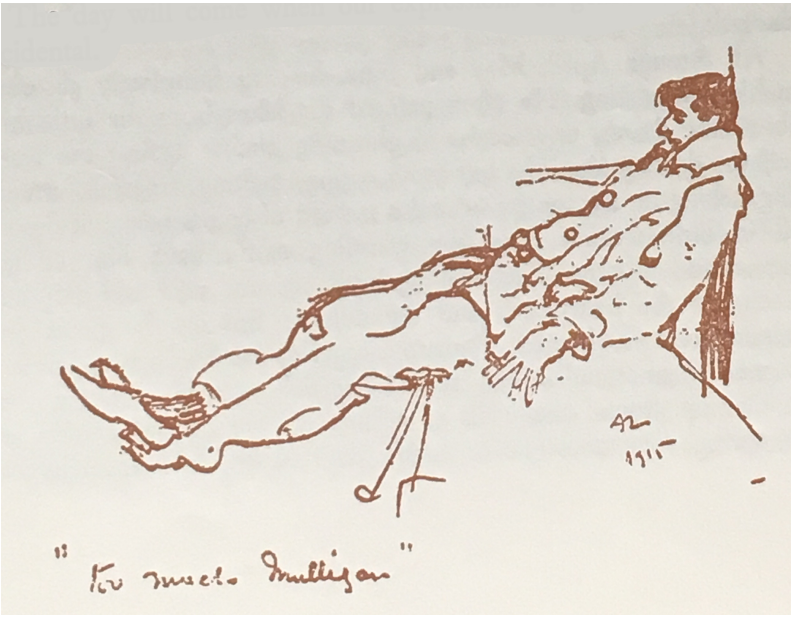
Genius, as the capacity for universal thought and feeling, is not as rare as the talents and characteristics necessary to make genius serve, and which must be voluntarily acquired. Fate does not thrust an expression of genius, unearned, on anyone. Our civilization teaches self-indulgence, but that is death to intuitional knowledge, so genius keeps his eye trained on the goal for the race, not on the prizes of the day.

Education has recognized the problem of degrees and types of intelligence by providing special opportunities for subnormal children. They are the privileged class in our public school system. Out of this experience is slowly emerging the demand for special privileges for the specially endowed. The super-normal child eventually will be taught to control his mind, to co-ordinate his personality and to make conscious use of his intuitional faculty. He will have his field of perception and experience very greatly enlarged in comparison with the youth of today. The care of the healthy mind will be advanced through the study of crippled minds, just as the health of the body is protected by the state through the study of disease.

The well-endowed youth of the future will know something of cyclic law and will avoid the tragic despair that floods the minds of creative workers now in unproductive periods.

In short, individuals of the type of Thomson will be discovered in childhood and will be given an education that trains the intellect without impairing the intuition. It is not so long since education became free and compulsory. There are many things just ahead of us.

The day will come when our expressions of genius will not be accidental.



"*Too much Mulligan*"

15

NINETEEN SEVENTEEN

When winter and the studio season had passed away once more, Tom Thomson began to finger his fishing tackle thoughtfully and the end of March saw his easel pushed to the wall and his canvases stacked away.

When Thomson went up to Algonquin it was to his sixth sketching season in the North—and his last. Spring had a deep fascination for him, with its strange stirrings and pulsations, its almost palpable breath of life. He had set for himself a remarkable task for the spring months of 1917. He had planned to paint a record of the unfolding year, with a sketch a day to set down each subtle gradation of mood and color, from the days when the North first seemed to struggle from the relaxing grip of a dying winter, until midsummer blanketed everything with a lush, prevailing green that bid the artist lay aside his palette. Thomson lived just long enough to complete the task.

All through April, May and June, he was completely absorbed in his undertaking. He often painted the lakes from the little hills above the shores, or traceries of gleaming birches against the water and the drifting ice. The last snow, aging, melting, freezing, crumbling, taking on strange forms and a myriad of colors before it flowed off in little rivulets from the warming earth, gave him endless themes and patterns. The swelling buds, red and gold and grey and green, on the hardwoods and the delicate tips on the pines and balsams were all eloquent. Patiently, eagerly, day by day, he painted, in good weather and in bad, setting one rich, wet sketch board after another up around the walls of a little cottage he had rented for the spring, sometimes two or three a day. All the vibrant tenderness of the birth of spring in this stern north country held him enthralled and happy. 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. No one knows what experiences the reserved and single-minded Thomson met with during those long days of contemplation, nor what intuitional insight he won into the laws and resources of the natural world. Little escaped him in light or form or color but it was the spirit of every experience that he tried to capture and record.

All of this carried Thomson far beyond the realm of the ordinary dualities into a world of amazingly subtle differentiations. In pursuit of these hairbreadth discriminations he had need of all his skill and knowledge. That sense of using himself to the uttermost gave Thomson a profound sense of pleasure—not satisfaction, for the creative individual never knows that, but perhaps a knowledge of effort worthily directed and rewarded by results. For Thomson was one of those to whom the whole purpose of intelligent living was union with his spiritual counterpart, the inner man who was "inseparable and unsatisfied."

Mark Robinson recalls how happy and elated he was.

"Mark, it has never been done before," he said, eager as a boy over this experiment that would carry back to the listless public not just a flash of a northern mood, but a sustained and graphic proof of its beauty and its meaning.

Towards the end of June Thomson asked Robinson to let him hang the group, selected from the mass of his season's work, in the ranger's cottage. Robinson tried to put him off the idea, feeling reluctant to assume responsibility for the ninety-odd sketches of this "one man show". Thomson was insistent. He wanted them "weathered a bit" he said. At last Robinson consented and Thomson was to do as he liked.

The sketches were not hung. Thomson had only a week to live after his work was done. The series of which he was so proud was broken up and scattered. Even yet, some day, it may be possible to assemble the spring sketches in one of the galleries and catch something of what he intended to say. It would be an epic of spring, in which Thomson would seem to be poet and musician, as well as painter, so well did he unite his rhythms and harmonies in color.

With the first days of July Thomson relaxed and amused himself with fishing. When he was fishing with Mark Robinson one day, they discovered a big trout in the river below Joe Lake Dam. He was a wily fish and soon had both the fishermen on their mettle. He had not grown to patriarchical age without many an adventure and the wise old fellow enjoyed the battle of wits as much as did Tom Thomson and Mark Robinson. Thomson's zest in the competition rose day by day. He contrived new lures and tried them out, only to chuckle over the old trout's craftiness when he flicked his tail and swam away.

"That old fellow's an artist," he said, "he knows the real from the unreal. You can't fool him."

Who could have suspected, during those pleasant July days, as the two men waged their friendly feud, that the fish was to send Thomson to his death?

The week passed and the fateful eighth of July arrived. It was Sunday. Thomson shaved and dressed in an unusually leisurely way and went over to Mowatt Lodge for a late breakfast. A group sat around the table talking, and when Thomson finished eating, he stayed with them, smoking a cigarette with his last cup of coffee. Inevitably the old trout made his way into the conversation. Presently Tom Thomson turned to Shannon Fraser and suggested that they walk around to Joe Lake Dam by the road, so that he could try again to catch the big fellow off his guard. They picked up their rods and set off. It was a cloudy morning, with a light wind out of the east.

They spent an hour or two at the dam with no better results than on the previous days.

"I know what I'm going to do now," said Thomson, folding up his rod. "I'm going down to West or Gill Lake, and get a big fellow—there's lots of them there—and after dark tonight I'll put it on his doorstep with a note. I'll make Robinson think I got the old fellow here."

He was very much amused over his idea, and anxious to be off to put his jest into execution. Thomson and Fraser started back around the end of the lake and arrived at Mowatt Lodge somewhere between twelve and one o'clock.

Thomson got his canoe ready for the trip and stowed away food and utensils for a meal or two. He had no bread at the cabin, so he drew up at Mowatt Lodge dock, while Fraser went up to the store for a loaf. Thomson tucked it away under the bow.

The morning had turned grey. There was a light east wind blowing, with a drizzle of rain. Thomson bid the crowd that had gathered on the dock a gay farewell and in a very engaging mood set out on his mission to carry out a practical joke on a fellow fisherman.

Mowatt Lodge stood on the shoreside of Canoe Lake. A short distance down the lake and separated from the mainland by only a narrow channel is Little Wapomeo Island, the property of Taylor Statten, who had a cottage on it. At the time the cottage was empty. The channel between the island and the mainland was choked with drowned timber, so Thomson paddled around to the east of Little Wap, then passed out of sight of Mowatt Lodge and the cottages round about it. He swung in across the channel between Little Wap

and its sister island, Big Wapomeo, apparently with the intention of hugging the main shore until he came to the portaging place by which he would cross over into one of the little lakes where the big trout were to be found.

When Thomson did not return that night, there was no alarm on the part of any of his friends. If they discussed it at all, they must have concluded that the fish were not biting and that he was challenged to continue. He had food with him and a groundsheet.

The Coulsons of Algonquin Hotel, at Joe Lake, had reported a canoe missing from the foot of the portage at Joe Lake Dam. On Monday morning, Martin Blecher, Jr., one of the campers who lived near Mowatt Lodge, reported that on Sunday afternoon he had seen an upturned canoe drifting between Little Wap and Big Wap, which might be the lost Coulson canoe. Charlie Scrim, of Ottawa, another camper, and a friend of Thomson, paddled down to have a look at it. There was consternation when he returned and reported that the canoe was Thomson's.

Thomson's friends were puzzled. That some mishap had befallen him was evident, but the idea of drowning they did not entertain at all. He was too expert a swimmer to come to grief there. The only possible explanation was that he had landed somewhere, gone inland and had an accident—broken a leg, perhaps—and his canoe had in the meantime drifted free. A search was organized to cover the adjacent woods and the news was sent out that Thomson was missing.

Mark Robinson, who had recruited the Simcoe Foresters for war service, got to the front at Vimy in October, 1916. He was issued an officer's whistle before he went to the front line where he was injured before he could fire a shot. Now, limping from his wounds and blowing his Vimy whistle, he set out on his anxious search for a stricken friend. For seven days he blew its shrill note through the summer woods and listened for an answering call. None came.

There were others, too, who tramped the woods and daily grew more hopeless and more puzzled.

Meantime, what had happened? *Did Thomson's body take eight days to rise in a shallow lake in the middle of July?*

The cottage on Little Wap had been rented and just after Thomson's disappearance, Dr. Goldwin Howland took his family there from Toronto for the holidays. The weather continued to be wet and grey and the newcomers had to keep to the island. The morning of Monday, July 16th, was a little

brighter and Dr. Howland took his small daughter out trolling on the lake. It was about nine o'clock when the child felt something heavy on the end of her line.

"I've got something on my line," the child said.

"Let me see what it is," her father replied and took the troll out of her hands.

As Dr. Howland hauled up the heavy burden on the line he saw, slowly emerging from the shadowy depths, the figure of a man.

"I think we'll just let it go," he said quietly, and let the line slip back over the edge of the boat.

As soon as they were informed of the discovery, George Rowe and Larry Dixon paddled to the spot and secured the body. After taking it to Big Wap they reported the fact by telegraph to the coroner at North Bay.

When the night train arrived the coroner was not with it. Rowe and Dixon paddled back through the night to the island and prepared to keep vigil. They built a fire and sat till morning by the water's edge.

On Tuesday, though there was no word from the coroner, it was decided to proceed with the burial. It was fortunate that a physician was available and so Dr. Howland was asked to make an examination of the body when it was taken from the water.

A coffin had been sent in, and in it the body of Tom Thomson was laid by his friends. Later in the day a little procession followed the coffin up the path from Mowatt Lodge to the brim of a sandy slope overlooking Canoe Lake. Mark Robinson had a prayer book and from it Martin Blecher, Sr., read the service for the burial of the dead.

When the night train arrived at about half past nine or ten o'clock that night, the coroner, Dr. A. E. Ranney, was aboard. He proceeded to the little colony at Mowatt Lodge and called the inquest immediately. The meeting was held at the Blecher cottage.

The chief piece of evidence was Dr. Howland's signed statement on the condition of the body, now on file at the office of the crown attorney at North Bay. In it Dr. Howland stated that there was "a bruise on right temple size of 4″ long, no other sign of external marks visible on body, air issuing from mouth, some bleeding from right ear."

Rowe and Dixon had not been summoned so Mark Robinson paddled across Canoe Lake to tell them that their testimony was required before a

verdict could be reached. Seven witnesses testified to what they knew of the case and death was declared to be due to "accidental drowning."

No one remarked that only a living body could be bruised or could bleed, or that Thomson's lungs were filled with air, not with water.

In May of 1931, an enquiry into the circumstances of the inquest brought the following reply:

> *Received your letter asking for information from standpoint of Coroner. This occurred in 1917, 14 years ago and naturally you must admit the circumstances are not fresh in my memory but, upon looking up my notes, I am able to give you the information you require.*
>
> *The body was in such a state of decomposition when found that it had to be buried as quickly as possible. The body was thoroughly examined by Dr. G. W. Howland, qualified Medical Practitioner of Toronto, before inquest, who gave me full description of the condition of the body; there was only one bruise on the right side of head, temple region, about 4 inches long, this no doubt, was caused by striking some obstacle, like a stone when the body was drowned. Dr. Howland swore that death was caused from drowning, also the evidence from the other six witnesses points that the cause of death was drowning. Those who were present at the inquest were as follows: Dr. G. W. Howland, Miss Bessie Blecher, Mr. J. E. Colson, Prop. Algonquin Hotel, Mr. J. S. Fraser, Prop. Mowat Lodge, Canoe Lake, Mr. Mark Robinson, Park Ranger, Mr. Martyn Blecher, Tourist and Mr. G. Rowe, Resident Guide.*
>
> *Hoping this information will help you, I am*
>
> *Yours very truly,*
> *A. E. Ranney.*

And so mystery laid its imprint upon the seal of Thomson's death—and the seal has not yet been broken. All that was earthly of Tom Thomson was lowered into a sandy grave in the country that he loved and the broken turf was covered with wild flowers. No one who knew Tom Thomson ever looked upon his face again.

Legend in the north says that he still lies on the brink of the hill overlooking Canoe Lake.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE—We have been informed that following the burial at Canoe Lake, Tom Thomson's body was disinterred, through family arrangements, and re-buried in a small churchyard at Leith, Ontario.

The mystery surrounding Thomson's death will never be cleared up. Was he drowned in the quiet waters of a small lake? A man who had paddled all over the Park, generally alone, in all kinds of weather, run rapids, and carried his canoe over rough portages and made his camp in the bush in wolf-ridden country?

There were theories—suicide, heart attack, foul play, but the verdict was "Accidental drowning"—not very convincing; but with no evidence of anything to the contrary, it stands, and must be accepted.

A. Y. J.

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IN CONCLUSION

This study is not intended to be merely a history of a man. The only importance of history is its significance. The past is a series of experiments conducted by other people, from the results of whose work we extract a residue of truth. The significance of Tom Thomson was what he achieved by single-pointed devotion to his search for beauty and for truth, and that was the liberation of a great store of intuitive knowledge and inherent skill. His modesty, his sensitivity, his courage and his faith in his own inner promptings serve to prove the value of those characteristics and the need to cultivate them in ourselves and in others.

In some respects Thomson has been given credit for more than he deserves. Thomson was part of a whole, a segment without which the circle would not have been complete. He gave much to the life of his group, and he took much from it, but the modern movement for spiritual freedom neither began nor ended with Tom Thomson. Interest in him lies not in a strange and solitary genius but in an outcropping that revealed a rich vein of genius running through his age and his people, waiting to be worked. Without predecessors and without successors, his life would have had little significance for others, but Thomson was slowly evolved by the intelligent forces that direct the progress of the race.

Thomson was not the goal; he was a milestone.

Some day this liberation of the creative spirit will be recognized as one of the chief functions of the educational system; not mass education based on the capacity of the average, but a plan that recognizes the highly developed individual who establishes the normal of the future. We stand in awe of those great souls whose cosmic insight has brought to use some facet of universal law of scientific knowledge, a work of art or engineering, some philosophic truth applied to human welfare, scarce realizing that these are the pioneers who open up new worlds that those coming after them will inherit. The real value of genius lies in the fact that it points to the goal for the human mind and indicates a faculty that grows with intelligent use. The fact that genius works progressively, that each generation adds its quota to a common fund and that the next generation makes use of the accumulated knowledge and proceeds a little further, proves the common source of all

wisdom and a purpose in the plan of revealing it to the aspiring human mind.

This being so, the responsibility rests with the individuals of the race to prepare themselves to be the channels for the bringing in of this available knowledge. So, the genius is never one who lives like the common man, without a sense of any such responsibility. The expressive genius is a priest of that which he chooses to serve. Discipline, discrimination and consecration are always characteristics of his unconforming way of life.

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. When this principle becomes established in the public mind, we will then realize the grave need to inculcate in the above-normal child a consciousness of his or her responsibility because each is a specially endowed pioneer of the race. A genius who regards his power as a means of personal aggrandizement becomes a menace to society. We have reached a stage in the evolution of the human mind at which the race must achieve a higher code of ethics or perish from the effects of its inventions, for now science prolongs life, fights child mortality, nurtures the mentally unfit and at the same time produces methods and machines that make life a torment of insecurity to all but a handful of visionaries. The experiences of such as Thomson, of those who battle single-handed against the inertia, the timidity and the compromises of contemporary life, are rich in promise and in possibility, whether they be painters or poets, scientists or sociologists. The important thing is that in each of them under all the human error and frailty lies passionate aspiration towards the good, the true and the beautiful.

The next step for us will be the spirit of Thomson, plus an intellectual note, the blending of mind and emotion on a high plane of endeavor. The creative life is already the subject of scientific study and the most advanced of the modern psychologists find in the subject of genius a fruitful field for investigation. The psychologist and the endocrinologist alike find the creative individual is an advanced type of human being with the masculine and feminine elements in each one well balanced and blended, so that the individual becomes emotionally and mentally androgynous. In such cases, the incentive to create has become a function of the intellect and the intuition. With a growing awareness of all this, we shall be more apt to

recognize, protect and encourage those who do not fall readily into our classified ranks.

The value of the creative life to society is that it co-ordinates the subjective and the objective in life. The purely objective life is one devoted to externals and unprompted by spirit. The subjective life is one given over to things of the spirit without, necessarily, the effort to give to that life a form. The creative individual recognizes the beauty and value of the subjective life but he cannot rest until he has objectified some part of it for the benefit of his group.

"Some day they will know what I mean," Tom Thomson would say when his work was ridiculed.

And some day these pioneers of the race will be relieved of the grim economic struggle that now besets them. Perhaps social history will force the issue. If the machine age decrees that there is not enough manual work to go around and that a part of the population shall live at the expense of the state, surely it should at least include those who are able to make a contribution to the advancement of the state.

Now, in our fantastic civilization, only the man who is wholly unproductive, ill, mentally subnormal, hopeless and dismally unfortunate, can expect the aid of the state. He is provided for, and rightly so. If a man of exceptional possibilities wants state support to give him time for any purely speculative effort in creative work before his imagination has grown thin at some daily grind, he must become an outcast, idle, ill or incompetent. For genius in its experimental stage the state has no provision.

When Einstein protested that his mentality was not extraordinary and spoke of his small contributions to human progress, he was speaking quite sincerely. He believed that his mind was not different from the highly evolved minds of his kind and he knew that even his amazing contributions to the common fund of knowledge were but morsels of the greater truths almost within the grasp of man. But if every self-conscious individual made the same effort to use his intellectual and intuitional equipment that an Einstein made, what an age this would be! It is not lack of ability inherent in the human mind that has kept the race at the pace we travel, but lack of the urge to put it to work. The Promethean spark needs aspiration to make it glow into a flame.

The value of genius is relative. It is the coin which may be used for the ultimate satisfaction of the creative impulse. It has no virtue in itself and creates value only in use. There is a technique of single-pointed attention, of

concentration of mental energy in lieu of its diffusion. This is the discipline of genius, the conscious transfer of thought from the personal to the impersonal. This is something that can be taught when the functions of the intuitional faculty are more generally understood.

Here, then, lies the significance of the life experience of Tom Thomson. Those who come after us will look back upon our times in amazement at our wanton waste of the two purely human functions with which man is equipped to advance his own evolution, the capacity to think and the capacity to feel. They will marvel at our tardiness in reaching a philosophic synthesis, based on scientific knowledge and experience, with which to deal with the problems of our daily life. But they will also see us following the trail blazed for us by the pioneer souls of the race, who travelled ahead in splendid solitude.

“Some day they will know what I mean.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Because of copyright considerations, the Foreword by A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974) has been omitted from this etext.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man Who Looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness* by Blodwen Davies]