

And The Earth Took Him Back To Itself

The life and art of Tom Thomson

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20, 196 Words

Prologue: Canoe Lake, Ontario, August 1917

A plaid overcoat, caps, a worn out suit, red Hudson Bay blankets, 4 pairs of socks, 2 plates and cups, handkerchiefs, an aluminum pail, an ink bottle, a brown canvas bag, drawers, this is about all. Yes, I think this is everything.

Dark brown waxy paper envelops Tom's belongings within the beach-brown pine crate. The lid is nailed into place, iron biting easily into obliging wood. Red-haired and sweating freely in his black wool suit, Shannon Fraser slides his hammer along the porch, tiddlywinking scales of paint from chapped boards. He harvests the sweat from his forehead with a shiny sleeve and dons his misshapen black felt hat. "Ho man! Chubby, gimme a hand here!"

Fraser's assistant, George Chubb, rangy and unshaven, lopes in from the beach to help shift the crate. The midday heat flattens the trees, cottages, the immobilized lake. Treetops are tousled weakly by the shrilling of cicadas. The horses clip-clop dully along a tree-shaded lane—dirt roadway to Canoe Lake Station. Their smooth backs dappled by transient islands of light.

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200 miles to the south, in the Gallery of Art at Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition, nested amongst pastoral landscapes and portraits of dogs: a twisted pine bent like a lyre, a robin's egg blue sky contending with piebald clouds, a whitecapped lake, distant hillocks loitering grey, and green. The smell of sun on fallen pine needles. The sound of wind in the trees.

Chapter One: The Pointers

The first Thomson to come to Canada is called Tom also. In 1832 he leaves Scotland, the lairds and tenanted fields of St. Fergus, and descends 'tween deck into the steerage stink and daylight darkness of a trans-ocean voyage. After six harrowing weeks, he emerges into the purgatory of a quarantine shack in Grosse Île below Quebec while all around cholera consumes Lower Canada. Finally, he takes a ferry to the river's head, a thousand islands, and a lake as large as a sea.

[Map of the Canadas circa 1830 to show (that the lake is Lake Ontario. Needs to include East Coast so we can see Thomson's route. Should not include Western Canada or USA.)]

York

Behold York, the capital of Upper Canada, seat of his majesty's

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representative with its five thousand inhabitants, an excellent assortment of shops and auction rooms, hotels, taverns and supernumeraries: oyster shops, sham shops and dram shops, the latter consecrated to love and debauchery.

In thirty-seven, rebellion swirls through the Canadas. Lieutenant Governor Francis Bond Head maintains the status quo through violence and fraud. Rebel leader William Lyon Mackenzie convinces many that revolution is the only way to wrest power from the elite. What results is an historical fizzle, the only mutual retreat in Canadian history.

While Bond Head rages and Mackenzie runs, Tom settles in Pickering township on Wixon's land near Nobel's corner store. His Betty joins him from St. Fergus, with her family—the Brodies—in tow: Aunt Jean, Uncle George, and their five children including William, destined dentist, amateur botanist, future mentor to Betty's unborn grandson.

Tom and Betty marry in thirty-nine, and together they work the land. Their first year is a difficult one, a cow lost to the woods, dogs gone feral kill their sheep, and Betty ill, but still she helps log and clear, and many a day binds grain behind the cradlers. With luck and labour they persevere, and though he never filled a six-penny's worth of paper in school, Tom writes himself onto the land, furrows

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grammar, lexis sews. Together they raise a son, see him schooled. Tom takes him hunting, fishing. John learns how to trace his name over his father's fields, a palimpsest.

Margaret Matheson's people trade red earth for brown. Her father Kenneth, a builder of homes, cannot keep his household whole. After his wife dies he sends his daughter off to be a servant in the Thomson home. There, John and Margaret meet and fall in love. John chooses the land over neckties and ledgers, and when he and Margaret marry, Tom and Betty retire to the stone cottage they had built nearby.

In eighteen sixty-seven Canada is confederated among promises of railways, and the first of the next generation of Thomsons is born starting with George. He is followed by Elizabeth, Henry, Louise, Mary, their names reiterate the British royals. In the summer of seventy-four Betty dies, followed by Tom the subsequent spring. No longer immigrants, they become a part of the land on which they toiled.

In eighteen seventy-seven, two years after the first Tom Thomson dies, his namesake is born, written into his forefather's names. It is a circular name: Tom's son John's son, Tom John Thomson. Tom, from the Greek, ultimately Aramaic,

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te'oma "twin" originally an epithet for Yehuda, the second Jude, Doubting Thomas.

Tom is a baby when the family moves to Rosehill, an elegant farmhouse a few fields from Georgian Bay in the Hamlet of Leith, a stone's throw from Owen Sound. It is flat, tree-covered hunching inland into hills. John is so excited to make the purchase after such a long search, he leaves six thousand dollars, unattended, in his democrat wagon while he is in the lawyer's office making final arrangements.

Leith

Here lieth Leith, incomplete, unfinished. Village of dreams, county seat of ghosts. The town square exists in blueprint only. The mill abandoned. At the intersection of city and country. Too far to be integral, too close to be distinct.

Chapter Two: Early Spring

[Tom Thomson sketch: Kemp's Mill Pond, Leith *National Gallery of Canada* (no. 42138)]

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At Rosehill John begins afresh, filling fields with flowers and herbs instead of cash crops. Here he has a larger home for his growing brood that now includes his wife Margaret's sister Henrietta, her niece Charlotte "Lottie" Tripp. The girls are called diminutively: Minnie, Lizzie. Here also are born Margaret (Peggie), Ralph, James and Fraser, the last named after the pastor of nearby Leith Presbyterian.

[Photo: *1887 family photo*, Library and Archives Canada, MG30 D38 'Blodwen Davies fonds, Vol. 11]

When Tom is five, his brother James dies, a baby, merely nine months old. He is interred a short walk from home. The sharp stab of grief, then a passing frisson wondering, why the earth took him back to itself. He shares a plot with his maternal grandfather, Kenneth Matheson. This same plot will hold Tom, or at least, the stone will also bear his name.

About this same time, in Toronto, William Brodie—dentist, amateur botanist, cousin to Tom's grandmother—mourns the loss of his only son, "Sweet William" who drowns when his canoe overturns on the Assiniboine River. Brodie will find a surrogate in Tom, when he settles in Toronto in the next century.

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On the farm, each member of Tom's family shoulders his or her share of the work, but there is time for leisure also. All of the Thomson children are fond of drawing, draw at home and at school. Tom loves to draw the ships he sees on the bay, sails set to breeze. He also draws pictures of the people in his life. When he draws a good one, the appreciative laughter, a whimsical grin. John will later be at a loss to account, by any law of heredity, how artists should be among his offspring.

At night the family sings around the piano, reads. Tom listens to Byron, Dickens, Burns, Scott through his mother's warm chest as his Auntie Henrietta strokes his straight brown hair. Tom's father reads to them also. He chokes up, has to abandon the passage of Little Paul's death in *Dombey and Son*, the entire family in tears, "Oh I can't read it, you'll just have to read it for yourselves."

One night, he laughs so loudly at Dickens' description of an American eating horse meat for breakfast, he wakes the entire household. He tries repeatedly to read the passage aloud, but is overcome by laughter each time.

In eighteen eighty-five the country's focus turns west. While the last spike is struck, connecting railways east and west, and Riel is hanged, ending the North-West Rebellion, Tom attends school with his siblings. He is an indifferent student,

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Henry being the best, admired for his focus. Tom's mother helps the children with their history, literature, his father with mathematics, grammar.

Tom plays with the village boys, the Rosses, the McKeens: rounders, bull in the ring, duck on the rock, arbour down. He explores the fields, Telfer's Creek, trolls with his father for salmon-trout and whitefish until dark, "Fish where the fishing's good. Watch what they are biting: minnows, flies, frogs, bugs. The right bait. The right time."

[Photo: *Photo of Tom Thomson and Friends*, Archives of Ontario S 1927]

Tom's father has an adage for every occasion, an answer to every question, right is right, there is no compromise. From his father Tom learns to prize sincerity, contempt for snobbery and hypocrisy.

At first, Tom shares a room with George, eight years his elder, George the scholar, George the musician, George with his dashing moustache. When Tom is twelve, George leaves home for business school, chooses neckties and ledgers over the land. Tom takes his place in the village band. Mr. Boddy teaches them how to play *British Grenadiers*, *Red, White And Blue*. Tom tries the tenor trombone, the coronet, not the musician his brother had been. In time he comes

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to master the humble mandolin, practicing for hours, the tips of his fingers scalloped and red.

John helps Tom and his best friend, Dave Ross add sails to their rowboat. They race Old Joe Couture on The Sound. Play at being Captain Cook fighting at doomed Wolfe's side. Tom might have played at being Étienne Brûlé leading Indian raids on the shores of La Mer Douce, but his father wouldn't let him canoe.

Tom and Dave's brother, Alan, are trolling in the sailrowboat when a sudden storm rolls in. They pull about four miles through the worst blow they'd ever seen. Off Vail's Point, the boat swings into the trough, overturns, everything: lines, oars, lunch basket, fish and tackle, roll up to the beach on the big combers. The boys tumble, swim, and wade ashore, once they're waist deep. They are received as if returned from the dead. The fishermen ashore tell the boys they never expected to see them again, alive. Years later Alan will recall that Tom never spoke once during the ordeal, nor ever spoke of it afterwards.

Tom and the band play local dances, *Green Grow The Rashes, Banks and Braes of Bonnie Doon*. With a fine maple floor in the hall, a good time is a foregone conclusion. Although Tom is uncomfortable being the center of attention, the stage creates a space, a distance that allows him to perform unselfconsciously. Face turned to the ground when the crowd applauds.

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Tom grows quite fond of a girl from school. A girl who sings in the choir. After she reads out a letter from Tom to her friends, he finds out, says, "that's the end of it." On another occasion he works up his courage to ask a girl to the dance. They meet, dance, part, all without more than a few words from Tom. Although he is a fine singer, dancer and enjoys both, he is never very popular with the ladies. Who find him distant, strange.

Tom's "weak lungs" sometimes keep him out of school. At seventeen Tom is restless, anxious. He wants to sail the Great Lakes, beyond, but there is no question of that. Nothing could stop John's sons from working the farm until they are twenty-one, "I feed and clothe and keep you, this is the debt you owe to me."

[Pencil sketch: Tom Thomson, *Harbour scene with ship with 3 masts*, Tom Thomson's sketchbook, National Gallery of Canada (no. 35621.1-20)]

Dr. Fraser, stern presbyter, frowns his congregation into grace during Wednesday evening admonitions. Tom's downturned face turns red as he and his friends are dressed down for wearing their work clothes to church.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there

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a man which had not on a wedding garment. And he was speechless.

*Then said the king unto the servants, bind him hand and foot,
and take him away, and cast him into the outer darkness; there shall be
weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.¹*

Owen Sound

*Owen Sound notches Georgian Bay in the south at the base
of the Bruce Peninsula—tailbone of that rocky ridge scarping
south to Niagara Falls.*

*Ships of all descriptions set off from Owen Sound, the shortest,
most direct route from all points in Ontario, Quebec, New England
and seaboard ports to Manitoba and the great northwest.*

*Bicycles race beside horse and buggies on gravel streets. Dust rubs
calves like incorporeal cats. Dock workers and sailors clomp
on wooden sidewalks as police constables eye Indians
from the Saugeen Reserve.*

Chapter Three: Morning Cloud

¹ King James Bible, Mathew 22; 11-14

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At twenty-one Tom inherits a legacy from his grandfather, two thousand dollars. Its expenditure evidenced by its absence later on. Some of it went to membership fees for the Ancient Order of Foresters—Dr. Oronhyatekha, the Supreme Chief Ranger and CEO—an organization dedicated to helping those who “fell into need walking through the forests of life,” sick pay and funeral grants.

Some of it went towards an apprenticeship at William Kennedy and Sons Foundry in Owen Sound where his friend, Allan Ross is already employed as a machinist. Tom likes working with his hands, but Munro the foreman, he cannot abide. He leaves after half a year. Later he will confess, quitting his apprenticeship was the most regrettable incident of his life.

Tom visits the taverns of Owen Sound, occasionally buys a bottle. Some nights there is no sense to the manner in which he sets about drinking. Staggering, sloppy, sick, he pours out his heart to Alan Ross, lamenting his lack of success, “Missed too much school for university, have no marketable skills, and I'll be damned if I wait around to inherit the farm. I don't know what I thought I'd do, but I thought I'd be on my way, instead of nowhere.”

In pursuit of neckties and ledgers, Tom enrolls in the Canadian Business College in Chatham, Ontario where Henry had gone and George had been on the honour

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roll. There he learns bookkeeping, banking, penmanship, "Property has an exchangeable value. Capital is property invested in business. Assets are available property." The letters and numbers drift lazily across the page.

While riding their bikes from Chatham to Leith, Tom and Will Gracey, a friend from Leith, come upon a party. On a lark, Tom pulls out his mandolin and Will begins to sing. As they leave, they are surprised when the revelers press money on them.

In the fall of ninety-nine the South African Republic and Orange Free State declare war on Britain. In Canada, Lieutenant-Colonel William Dillon Otter calls on all able men to fight the Boer in the Transvaal, "Where's the coward that dare not fight for such a queen?"

Tom signs up, but is rejected, flat feet. Tough to take for a man that can hike twenty miles from Meaford to Leith.

Early in 1901 Queen Victoria dies. Few alive had ever lived under another monarch's reign. Almost every building was embossed "Victoria Regina." More so than the usurped century, this is the end of an era, *Vale desideratissime*.

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That summer, Tom turns twenty-four. He joins brothers George and Henry who have settled in Seattle, Washington. There he continues his education, studying penmanship at Acme Business College which George owns and runs with his father-in-law.

George is now a single father, his wife having passed six years back. Not satisfied simply running the business school, George also works on a law degree at the University of Washington.

Tom stays first with George, his son, and in-laws, studies, and works nights as a liftboy at Diller's Hotel. One night, on his way to the trolley, a boy approaches, trembling gun in hand. "Are you new at this?" Tom asks, handing over cash, his watch. "Yes," the boy admits, "you are the first."

Tom finds work, room and board with Charlie Maring who had taught at the Canadian Business College, Tom's business school, back in Canada. At Charlie's company, Maring and Ladd—the only complete engraving house north of San Francisco—Tom works as a commercial artist, an occupation he will pursue until leaving to paint full-time a decade later.

Seattle

Squeezed between Lake Washington and Elliott Bay, the city of seven hills: Jesus Christ Made Seattle Under Protest. Eighty thousand souls, the Klondike's dross, and the most bordellos per capita in the USA.

That fall, the trial of Big John Considine, owner of half the box houses on Skid Row, the man who brought hoochie coochie and Little Egypt to town in ninety-nine. He shot Police Chief Meredith three times. The final shot so close his coat caught fire. The verdict returned: Not guilty.

Chapter Four: Rocky Shore

The buzz of pen on paper. The anticipatory murk of the darkroom. The smell of nitric acid etching zinc. Tom takes photos, develops negatives, prepares plates. He learns how tiny dots create an image, how three colours merge to make all others, how to wield shade, shadow, texture. Tom learns as he goes, executing Charlie's designs, sometimes substituting his own, much to Charlie's dismay.

While President McKinley is slain and Theodore Roosevelt succeeds, the Thomson children continue to make art. On their leisure time, Henry paints the mountains, George and Tom, the coast, Ralph, who joins his brothers in Seattle that winter, sticks with drawing. Many years later, Fraser and Margaret will join

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George in painting Ontario's Muskoka region, adjoining the land their brother Tom will make legendary.

Tom borrows George's watercolours for a day trip, returns with *After A Day in Tacoma, self portrait*—head bowed, eyes closed, a wisp of smoke dancing on the bowl of his corncob pipe. He also works in pen and ink, black and white wash, copying ads from magazines, improving their design, consigning failed attempts to a mass grave.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *After A Day in Tacoma, self portrait*, Tom Thomson Art Gallery]

When Tom's younger brother Ralph joins his brothers in Seattle, Tom finds them accommodations. Standing in front of Shaw's boarding house, watching the family on the porch, Tom decides, "This is the place," refusing even to see the room, until their baggage is moved in.

One day, Tom is sent to Maring and Blake's chief competitor, Seattle Engraving Co. He makes a pencil sketch while he waits. The proprietor, Mr. Adams, sees the sketch, "How much are you making at Maring and Blake? I'll give you five dollars a week more." Tom accepts, resigning on his return, but continuing to take his meals at Charlie Maring's.

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Ralph watches Tom work all night sketching up designs, reworking them again, again, oppressed by the overhead lights. He smears drafts with ashes, sets them aflame.

The Shaw's is an echo of Tom's busy house back home, buzz of voices, footfalls, evenings around the piano, Tom's mandolin. Some evenings they go to the theatre: The Seattle, Third, or Grand, on hand early to rush the gallery for the front row. Weekends they fish Elliott Bay, The Sound, Green Lake. Along with his rod and reel Tom packs his sketchpad, pencils. Ralph knows, if the sketch pad comes out, that's it as far as fishing goes.

Alice Lambert, daughter of a Congregationalist minister, boards weekends at Shaw's, rooming with Ralph's sweetheart Ruth Shaw. Tom takes her out to Alki Point, dancing, her little hand warm in his, the way her fingers graze his neck. They pore over the Old Masters at the public library, sing together back at Shaw's.

*"Harp and carp, Thomas," she said, "Harp and carp, along wi' me,
and if ye dare to kiss my lips, Sure of your bodie I will be!"²*

² Sir Walter Scott, Thomas The Rhymer, from <http://allpoetry.com/poem/8479525-Thomas-the-Rhymer-by-Sir-Walter-Scott>

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In Seattle, Tom has everything a man needs: family, friends, a career, and a woman to share it with, but things do not go as he had hoped. Alice is independent, impulsive, at eighteen not yet ready to settle down. "Have I been strung along, played for a fool?" Tom thinks, "Does she really fancy Horace Rutherford instead of me?"

When Tom realizes where things stand, he packs up immediately, flees. But you can't flee failure, heartbreak.

"Now, ye maun go wi me," she said, "True Thomas, ye maun go wi me, and ye maun serve me seven years, Thro weal or woe as may chance to be."³

Tom returns to Canada in the fall of 1904. He licks his wounds in Toronto a discreet distance from his childhood home. He works at Legg Brothers photo engravers for a meagre eleven dollars a week, boards at Joseph Walton's on Elm Street near the Good Luck Athletic Club and The Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Tom drinks with his colleagues, his fellow boarders, sometimes alone. Sideways walking. Dawn vomit heave. At work, head in a vice. Dry eyes. Temples screaming. A wan silence. Mutters, "No patience for that nonsense today."

³ Ibid

Toronto

Formerly York, a city sandwiched between rivers. Humber.

*Don. A harbour bordered by a brace of islands. A flat land
fenced in by the shoreline of an ancient lake.*

*Slums circle the more affluent neighbourhoods. Conditions are
wretched, the sewers poor. Street boys hawk papers;
old women, pencils.*

my old man is parailays no

Chiidlen we leve

in Toronto for

five year god blas you.

*In 1904 a fire in the E&S neckwear plant razed one hundred
and twenty-four acres of warehouses from the railway up past
Wellington Street. Millions in damages, thousands out of work,
but only a single fatality. From guttered buildings
sprang arcades, broad banks of brick and stone, warehouses,
factories, commerce, community.*

Chapter Five: New Life After The Fire

In the evenings Tom takes drawing and painting lessons at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design near King and Simcoe—the Nation's Four Corners: Legislation, Education, Salvation and Damnation, these being: Government House, Upper Canada College, St. Andrew's Presbyterian, and the British Hotel and Tavern.

His teacher, William Cruikshank, a cantankerous old snorter, is rumoured to have taught Dana Gibson, creator of the ubiquitous Gibson Girl. Tom is working on *Young Man with Team*, dawn, a rural scene. A pair of horses confer quietly while a farmer contemplates the sunflower sky. "Did you paint that?" asks Cruikshank. A nod. "Well you'd better carry on then."

Some weekends he visits his parents, siblings in Owen Sound, and Minnie at finishing school in St. Catherines. There he makes a sketch of St. Thomas', the church where they attend services.

*Thy precious time misspent, redeem, each present day thy last
esteem, Improve thy talent with due care; for the great day*

*thysself prepare.*⁴

When Tom's brother Fraser visits Toronto they watch the Toronto Maple Leafs play baseball at Hanlan's Point, stroll along the boardwalk, do King Street on a Saturday night, catch the Mendelssohn Choir at Massey Hall.

In Toronto, thousands throng to Union Station to see Tom Longboat, Canadian Winner of the Boston Marathon, fastest man on earth: twenty-five miles in two hours, twenty-four seconds. The crowd carries him to City Hall. Mayor Coatsworth pins a medal to his chest. Years later, not so fast, he sweeps the streets he was carried through. Fame more fleet than the fastest foot-runner.

Sundays Tom walks with his grandmother's favourite cousin, William Brodie, director of the Biology Department of the Provincial Museum: by his house along the Don where prisoners from the Central Jail milk his four cows, or out to the Scarborough Bluffs, or through the Black Oak forest in High Park. "They burned out all the trailing arbutus, damn them!" he fumes.

Brodie holds forth, "It is the aim and function of philosophy to construct intelligence out of nature—to construct nature out of intelligence—to express one

⁴ Thomas Ken, *Morning Hymn, Manual of Prayers for the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College*, 1674.

in terms of the other and to demonstrate the harmony and unity of the two.⁵ You see Tommy, it's our job to make sense of the natural world, the world we are an integral part of. We do that by reconstructing it, using science, the arts. And because we are a part of nature, not apart from it, we are also making sense of ourselves."

With no formal training as a biologist, Brodie collects tens of thousands of specimens: plants, insects, animals; donates the lot in exchange for his appointment at the museum, release from his day job as a dentist.

Not apart, but a part of the land that surrounds them, they find specimens for Brodie's collection. Tom snaps shots with his Brownie, sketches on the imitation Steinbach pages of his Watercolour Sketcher's Pocket Book. Brodie says, "The beginning of wisdom is the knowing of names: Staghorn Sumac, Paper Birch, Red Maple, White Pine."

[Photo: Tom Thomson, *Scarborough Bluffs I*, Tom Thomson Fonds, Library and Archives Canada]

One Sunday, Brodie tells Tom about his recent expedition to Algonquin Park—the establishment of which, was partly to his credit, "The bare gneiss glacier-worn rock, high, irregular. Precipitous hillsides. Broken rocky ridges. Lumbered already

⁵ William Brodie, unpublished manuscript, Royal Ontario Museum Archive.

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of profitable pine, and the slashings much burned-over. There is a fine overgrowth of young Maple, Beech, Red Oak and White Pine.”⁶

In 1906, Tom's brother George sees a fine, modern, colourful picture, “a seascape of the California coast: rocks, cliffs and rolling sea”⁷ displayed in a Seattle shop window. This picture is a thunderclap, a shooting star, a starving saint. It awakens in George the ambition to paint professionally. George becomes the first Thomson to declare himself a painter. At thirty-eight he sells his business, takes his young son to New York, joins the Art Students League.

Within the year, George's work is shown at the National Academy of Design, the Art Institute of Chicago. Success, satisfaction, comes early.

At twenty-nine, Tom, turned out nattily—silk shirt, peg-top pants, horned shoes—dances at the Centre Island pavilion with Elizabeth "Arty" McCarnen, at the ballroom of the Gladstone Hotel. Together they visit the Art Museum, also the Canadian National Exhibition. They visit the Fine Art Building, and also a sideshow exhibit, an “African Village.”

See the savage Kaffirs, Zulus, Matabeles, Swazies and representatives of other

⁶ William Brodie Fonds, Royal Ontario Museum Archives

⁷ Excerpt from article by Frank Barkey, The Owen Sound Sun-Times 1964 quoted by Angela Littlefield in George Thomson bio
<<http://angielittlefield.com/TomThomson/GeorgeThomson.html>>

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South African tribes clad in their native costumes!

This exhibit captivates Tom. He revisits it again and again. To him the natives are truly a part of their environment, integral, not merely inhabitants, boarding house tenants. Ironically, some, if not all, of the villagers were likely African-Americans, recruited from the vaudeville circuit.

1908, September second, crowds line the Scarborough Beach boardwalk as Charles F. Willard and his Golden Flyer biplane take off over the lake. After a few minutes flying at an altitude of several feet they splash into the water. Three more attempts, three more crashes. Willard returns to the states.

Back at Legg, Tom tires of the get by attitude, of the hacks, the clock-watchers. Although he shows his sister the office, introduces his co-workers, he stops caring about the work. One day he overhears two designers complaining they're underpaid, that many shops pay five dollars a week more. Tom puts together his portfolio, does the rounds.

That winter, Tom shows his bundle of work to Albert Robson, director of The Grip. Mostly lettering, decorative designs applied to booklet covers, and some labels. It is proficient and promising enough to win him a position under the kindly supervision of J.E.H. MacDonald. Although MacDonald is only a few years older,

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Tom calls him Mr. MacDonald and will do so the rest of his life.

Shortly after Tom is hired, Robson receives a gratuitous and unsolicited phone call from his previous employer. He calls Tom erratic, difficult. Robson says, “I’ve seen nothing of the sort!”

The Art Room has a schoolhouse scheme of desks laid out in rows, rows of celluloid collars, neckties, waistcoats. Suspended in a blue haze of tobacco, the thrum of male voices, scratching pens. MacDonald's desk is a tangle of sketches, pens, brushes and books with a corner clear for work.

[Photo of Tom Thomson at The Grip LAC, MG30 D284 Tom Thomson Collection, NO, TY485, R82, Leonard Rossell]

At first Tom is an inconspicuous presence: quiet, diligent; at 31, older than everyone in the department, save MacDonald and Robson. He watches, but does not join the horseplay: wrestling, stamping, kicking, hanging from the steam pipes. He smokes his pipe—feculent smoke issuing from his Hudson Bay tobacco—lays Ben Day tints on metal plates, does some lettering.

Tom's silence is matched by the silence of MacDonald. Silence seems to grow around MacDonald. It is not willful, nor forced or assumed priestly. Tom finds it

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impossible to knock heads with MacDonald or Robson. Both are encouraging, patient, kind. His co-workers in the Art Room are a motley bunch: Frank Johnston, an irreverent joker, his brother Bob, Ben Jackson, an avid angler who'd fished much of the East Coast, Stanley "Kempus" Kemp, an intellectual who had studied for the ministry, and Tom McLean, who'd worked as a prospector and fire ranger up north.

Tom moves to Esther Plewes's boarding house at 99 Gerrard Street East to be closer to the office and there he befriends Med student John "Doc" MacRuer, and Edgar Burke, an engineer at the CNR. So close is their friendship, that Tom is best man at both their weddings the following year. As he stands in the nave, at the chancel's edge, watching Doc watch his bride walk up the aisle, Tom's heart is full, "If I can be so filled with joy on behalf of others, surely that joy resides in me, the possibility of joy, the potential."

While Commander Peary doggedly seeks The North Pole and the University of Toronto Varsity Blues win the inaugural Stanley Cup, Tom's beloved uncle, William Brodie dies one day after Tom's 32nd birthday, August 6th, 1909. Nature takes him back to itself. Tom's girlfriend Arty exits Tom's life also, returning to Phelpston, Ontario to care for her brother Bernard's children. He having passed away.

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In March 1910, Tom and his brother Fraser go to the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition at Toronto's central library. Tom's co-workers MacDonald and Frank Johnston both have paintings there. Tom criticizes a canvas Fraser admires, "How far away would these trees be? You see the veins on the leaves? Could you make out that detail from that distance? No."⁸

Monday, back at The Grip, MacDonald raves about a Montrealer, A.Y. Jackson, but Tom was most impressed by the work of a Toronto artist, J.W. Beatty's *The Evening Cloud of the Northland*. The image of a distant shore atop an expansive lake, massive clouds in a widesome sky, burned into his inner eye, a template for the works Tom will shortly paint.

[Painting: J.W. Beatty, *The Evening Cloud of the Northland*. National Gallery of Canada (no. 41)]

In May, Tom and his co-worker Ben Jackson leave typhoid-ridden Toronto behind, head up to Huntsville to fish and visit Tom's old housemate, Doc McRuer. Tom watches the terrain blur by, blasted bedrock, cross-sectioned, for the railway, looking like nothing so much as raw meat.

On May 6, Queen Victoria's son Edward dies, and his son George succeeds,

⁸ This story appears in Littlefield, Angie, *Tom Thomson's Toronto Neighborhoods*, www.angelittlefield.com

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another era's end. William Broadhead joins The Grip from Sheffield, England,—all confidence, bravado, pride—followed shortly by his friend Arthur Lismer, figure men with European art school educations. Blithe Lismer, is nicknamed "The Bronc," an immigrant unbroken to Canadian culture.

An apprentice also is hired that year, a thin, bespectacled, twenty-one year old carriage painter from Orillia, Franklin Carmichael. MacDonald and Tom take him under their wings, send him off to Tom's old teacher, Cruikshank, for evening lessons.

Back in his boarding house, in his room, Tom sketches the corner store across the street again, again. Damnation. Immolation. Wastebasketing failures.

In 1911, Spring brings the OSA exhibition once again. Tom's workmates Johnson, McLean, MacDonald, Lismer all have work in the show. This year both MacDonald and Tom agree: A.Y. Jackson's *Edge Of The Maple Wood* is the standout piece. The shadow of an unseen tree falls through the foreground pulling the viewer into the scene. A part of the scene, not apart from it.

[Painting: A.Y. Jackson, *Edge of the Maple Wood*, National Gallery of Canada (no. 4298)]

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*When seven years were come and gane,
The sun blink'd fair on pool and stream;
And Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
Like one awaken'd from a dream.*⁹

With both his uncle and Arty gone, Tom begins to go sketching with the gang from The Grip. Weston, Lambton Mills, York Mills. He heeds, finally, MacDonald's fiat: *nulla dies sine linea*. Not a day without drawing a line.

That summer Tom gets his first sketch box, designed to sit on one's knees, a combination easel/palette, that holds paint tubes, brushes, slots to keep the boards apart, allowing air to circulate around them. Tom uses only three or four colours. A few squeezes from each tube. He Paints quickly, remembering MacDonald's mantra: Tone. Rhythm. Balance. Harmony.

Progress is slow, glacial. After seeing the work of his companions, Tom paces in frustration, unable to translate from mind to brush and board. "Dammit!" He pitches his whirling panel into the bush.

Back at The Grip, MacDonald reviews all proffered boards, parceling out praise and advice. He himself does not join the sketchpeditions, preferring his own

⁹ Sir Walter Scott, *Thomas The Rhymer*, from <http://allpoetry.com/poem/8479525-Thomas-the-Rhymer-by-Sir-Walter-Scott>

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company, and that of his wife and young son, Thoreau.

[*Photo of Tom Thomson at Lake Scugog*, T.H Marten, Tom Thomson Art Gallery
Permanent Collection]

Tom sketches through the summer, going farther afield to Lindsay, Lake Scugog
with Ben Jackson, 'lunge fishing, with his mandolin as distraction, entertainment,
medication. He sings,

I dwelt alone

In a world of moan,

And my soul was a stagnant tide,

*Till the fair and gentle Eulalie became my blushing bride.*¹⁰

On visits to Leith Tom entertains his nephews and nieces, painting ferocious
lions as they sit rapt on the arms of his chair. George and his son visit too.
George, living now in Old Lyme artists' colony in New Haven, criticizes Tom's
sketch, by the next morning, Tom has repainted it.

In the OSA of 1912, MacDonald shows with Lauren Harris, with whom he'd been
painting over the winter, sombre cityscapes of Toronto's Ward neighborhood,

¹⁰ Poe, Edgar Allan, Eulalie, from <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/eulalie/>

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squalid and contemptible, a place of filth and disorder. Lismer and Broadhead are also represented, Carmichael shows for the first time.

Tom takes lunch with his Gripmates at the Arts and Letters Club, that most impressive inaccessible room in Toronto. The entrance through a dark, foul-smelling alley behind police headquarters. Scylla and Charybdis, a manure pile and a pile of firewood. Members are expected to haul in a snow-covered stick from off the pile on their way in. There they dine at the Art Table, across from “Knockers” Table where critics Gadsby and Charlesworth sit. Relations are civil, bad reviews being better than no reviews at all.

[Pencil sketch: Arthur Lismer, *Knocker’s Table*, McMichael Canadian Collection]

After years of graft and scandal, Premier Whitney finally brings Niagara power to the people of Toronto. With an audience of forty thousand, he pushes the button that lights the city. At City Hall a replica of the falls is activated. Malfunctioning it soaks the unsuspecting onlookers.

While the doomed *Titanic* founders and Alaska attains statehood, MacDonald, Tom's mentor, his silent supporter, leaves The Grip to paint full-time at the urging of Harris. MacDonald has a patron in Dr. MacCallum, a wealthy oculist who had treated Tom's Uncle, William Brodie.

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After listening all winter to his co-worker Tom McLean spin stories of “up north,” Tom takes a leave from The Grip to take two trips, the first, a few months in Algonquin Park camping and fishing with Ben Jackson. In May of 1912, they leave the spring sewage stink and smoky skies of Toronto behind and board the Grand Trunk at Union Station. After six hours Tom emerges into the pleasant purgatory of Scotia Junction, picnicking with Doc MacRuer and friends before transferring to the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound line to Canoe Lake Station.

"There's your man." Tom is misidentified as a poacher to Park Ranger Mark Robinson, though he can clearly see it isn't true. Tom asks him where he can get “good eats”. Robinson points out Shannon Fraser, proprietor of nearby Mowat Lodge.

Fraser was hired by Gilmour Lumber Company to dismantle the mill after the logging operations went bust. He stayed on, converting bunkhouse to inn. Seasonal home to nature lovers, sportsmen, American tourists.

Says Fraser, “Well, I think we can make room for you, we’re pretty well filled but we’ll try and provide some room for you some place.”¹¹

¹¹ Quoted by Mark Robinson in taped recollections of Mark Robinson in conversation with J. Alex Edmison in Tom Thomson Collection, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives

In fact, they only had two other guests.

Mowat

*Back in 1896 the village of Mowat sat
on the northwest shore of Canoe Lake. Gilmore Lumber Company
owned the mill that employed most of
the six hundred inhabitants. Three years later—
bypassed by the Ottawa-Parry Sound line, park headquarters set up
on Cache Lake, the mill closed—the people left. Mowat became
a name without a village. A collection of abandoned buildings
and a ruined mill. A small graveyard back in the bush with two tenants:
an infant and a young lumberjack, his marker carved by a friend:*

*Remember comrade as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you will be
Prepare thyself to follow me.*

*Hardly a northern enclave, Algonquin Park shares latitude
with Venice, Milan, Bordeaux. But here north
is an idea, like wild, free.*

[Photo: Unknown, *Canoe Lake seen from Mowat cemetery*, Algonquin Park Archives, APMA, 6932]

Chapter Six: In The Northland

Tom and Jackson spend the night at the lodge before setting out from Canoe to Bonita to South Tea Lake. They camp at the dam, fishing and sketching. At night Tom cooks—lake trout, boiled and baked, biscuits baked from scratch. Every thing cooked just so. When it rains they stay in camp, Tom plays his mandolin, cleans his pipe, reads, “And upon all that are lovers of virtue; and dare trust in his providence; and be quiet; and go a-angling.”¹²

[Painting: H.B. Jackson, *Tom Thomson, Rainy Day in Camp*, 1912, National Gallery of Canada]

Tom agrees to take some tourists, Leonard Mack, Harry Bracken, trout fishing out to Crown Lake. The evening he prepares to depart a storm is brewing. Shannon Fraser, recognizing his inexperience advises him to wait until tomorrow. “For God's sake, don't say anything to them.” Tom begs, “I'm their guide!”¹³

¹² Walton, Izaak, *The Compleat Angler*, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/683

¹³ Quoted by Mark Robinson in taped recollections of Mark Robinson in conversation with J. Alex Edmison in Tom Thomson Collection, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives

At Molly Lake, Park Ranger Bud Callighen sees Tom sketching. He stands waiting to be acknowledged. Waits, waits. After about ten minutes, without turning, "Howdy," Tom says. "Howdy," says Callighen.

In the end fewer than a dozen sketches are made including *Northern Lake*, *Thunderhead*, *Old Lumber Dam*, and *Smoke Lake*, painted at Nominigan Point—Tom's sombre palette plus a rich blue swath of sun on lake—that Ranger Bud Callighen so admires, Tom makes him a gift of it.

They stop at Huntsville on the way back, visit Doc McRuer and his brother James who is recovering from a bout of tuberculosis. Tom's room, in the Dominion Hotel, the air heady with the scent of oil paints. He opens his pack and excitedly spreads out on the bed, four feet of splendid sketches. Each brother picks two.

Back in Toronto, Tom moves in temporarily with Broadhead and Lismer at their Summerhill digs, Lismer about to head back to Sheffield to marry. There Tom meets Fred Varley, another figure man from Sheffield (what is it with that city?). Varley, a mop of fiery red hair in corduroy, an intemperate drinker, and though married, a womanizer. Animus and angst all aimed outwards. Varley lives his tempers, temptations, whereas Tom's passions are largely self-contained. They become fast friends.

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In August, Tom and Broadhead catch the Canadian Pacific main line to Biscotasting, north of Elliot Lake. There they meet Archie Belaney, ranger, Englishman, liar. His face burned black as the arse of a tea kettle. He poses as part Cherokee, part Scots. Quotes Shakespeare, especially when drunk. He is impressed with Tom's donuts, fried in fat, over an open fire. Belaney will be run out of Bisco later that year, after taking shots at the church bell, on a Sunday, during services.

Tom and Broadhead buy their supplies from Hudson's Bay: flour sugar, pork, beans, rice, prunes, baking powder, desiccated potatoes, onions, milk. As they depart, a group of British "aristocrats" pack up their gear: camp beds, carpet slippers, chairs, table napkins, and other niceties.

Tom and Broadhead canoe three hundred miles under heavy skies: Spanish River to the Mississagi, Aubrey Falls. At Green Lake they are held up for several days by a rainstorm. A sudden cloud burst swamps their canoe, throwing them into the water, wetting their blankets and provisions.

[Photo: Tom Thomson, *Canoeing through drowned land I*, National Gallery of Canada]

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Wood smoke bites at the back of their throats. They pick bones from plentiful pike, sleep in soggy tents. At Clear Lake they come across a washout, a tent, but no people. They search for fire rangers finding only sand beneath sand.

They are dumped again on the Forty Mile Rapids, the rush of white water, sunken rocks, dozens of rolls of film, several sketches snatched by the river. Just as the biggest fish get away so the best sketches always drown.

Tom and Broadhead paddle on to Squaw Chute, come down by way of the Soo to Owen Sound.

Back in Leith, Jim Henry, Tom's brother-in-law asks, "are you not afraid to be so much alone with so many wild animals roaming about?"¹⁴ "Why, the animals are our friends. I've picked raspberries on one side of a log while a big black bear picked berries on the other."¹⁵

Tom also tells him that when he was tramping through the woods he heard an animal coming through the undergrowth towards him. To his surprise, it was a large timber wolf, one of the largest, the most beautiful, he'd ever seen. Its head, neck, breast jet black and the body the usual grey. "He came so close, I almost could have touched him. He sniffed me up and down and apparently decided I

¹⁴ Quoted in a letter from Louise Thomson to Blodwen Davies, 1931

¹⁵ Ibid

was alright, so he turned and went his way, and I went mine. Do you know Jim, I only tell that story to those who know me well. I told it to some folk in Toronto, and the look they gave me was enough.”¹⁶

Tom returns to Toronto and discovers that his boss, Albert Robson, has left The Grip for Rous & Mann Press, taking most of the department with him. Lismer, like MacDonald, has left to paint full-time.

Still in his mackinaw trousers and flannel shirt, Tom visits Rous & Mann unannounced, a bundle of sketches in hand. In MacDonald's absence, Robson comments on the improvement of his technique, the purity of colour.

Shortly after his return to Toronto, MacDonald invites Tom to his Adelaide Street studio. "Bring some boards. There's someone I want you to meet."

Dr. James MacCallum, oculist, Arts and Letters Club member, art enthusiast, benefactor, asks Tom about his trip, scrutinizes his dark, muddy sketches. They are not wanting in technical defects, but he sees truthfulness about them, a sympathy with MacCallum's own vision of The North. He buys *Old Lumber Dam*, *Algonquin Park*, a few others. Of his first sale, his initiation as a professional painter, Tom says, "thanks, that will pay for some paint."

¹⁶ Ibid

*Some hae meat and canna eat.*¹⁷

That October, Tom follows Robson and the others to Rous & Mann.

After hearing many stories about Tom's trips, seeing some of the sketches, Robson pesters Tom to paint up a proper canvas. "Nowhere to paint? Work here, on Sundays."

In the winter of 1912, at the age of 35, Tom begins work on his first full-size canvas, *Northern Lake*. Little sketches, dashed off in a moment, are easily excused. Easily erased, tossed aside. But a canvas is a statement, a declaration, displayed for friends and critics alike. Many a mind was lost for want of a canvas to paint, but it is also a larger manifestation of Tom's ability, or lack thereof.

Tom's mind squirms, "Still, I've agreed to work at the shop. They're all expecting to see something, even young Carmichael has exhibited. George has many paintings, shown, sold."

Tom paints and repaints. Transposing board to canvas requires more than copying. MacDonald visits, advises Tom to add a foreground, something to get the viewer to look into the picture. He adds boulders, brush. But the boulders aren't right. Varley suggests whorls, vortices, shows Tom how to mix a thin wash

¹⁷ Burns, Robert, *The Selkirk Grace*, <http://www.poetryofscotland.co.uk/Burns/grace.php>

of oil paint and turpentine. To paint and then paint over using the palette knife.

This winter, both Tom's travel companions, Ben Jackson and Bill Broadhead will decamp for more profitable pastures in the USA. MacDonald and Harris, inspired by an exhibition of Scandinavian art at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo—the bold and forceful handling of the snow!—begin to speak of a national school of painting. They organize an exhibition of little pictures by Canadian painters of Canadian subjects. Invited are the usual suspects from The Grip, Arts and Letters, plus A.Y. Jackson and Cullen from Montreal. Tom does not participate.

At the OSA of 1913 however, Tom shows his canvas, *Northern Lake*. He is joined by Harris, MacDonald, the rest of The Grip group, A.Y. Jackson, Arts & Letters alumni Art Heming, C.W. Jeffrys, and J.W. "Bill" Beatty, whose *Evening Cloud of Northland* Tom had so admired. Tom's brother George also sends a canvas up from Connecticut.

*The Year Book of Canadian Art, 1913*¹⁸

*Tom Thomson's "Northern Lake" is remarkable for its fidelity
to the northern shore; boulders and undergrowth in the foreground,
the brown water turned to the deep blue of the sky under*

¹⁸ Kyle, Fergus, *The Ontario Society of Artists* in *The Year Book of Canadian Art 1913*
https://archive.org/stream/1912bookofcanadi00artsuoft/1912bookofcanadi00artsuoft_djvu.txt

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the fresh gale that is putting white caps on the little lake.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *A Northern Lake*, Art Gallery of Ontario (72/75)]

To Harris, Tom's canvas is the work of a natural. One born to paint, having vision, lacking only technique, craft. Harris feels antithetical, a European art school education, theories, creeds in abundance lacking only the vision, the how, lacking the what, not knowing the why.

*Some wad eat that want it.*¹⁹

Tom lives now at Mrs. McKenzie's boarding house at 61 Breadalbane Street. Shares lunch counter meals with Varley—dinner of Chop Suey, Souvlaki sandwiches—until his wife Maud and the children arrive in April.

One day in May, Tom at his desk, Albert Robson walks over. "Tom, your painting has been bought!" Continuing to work, Tom's neck reddens, "What damn fool did that?"²⁰

Tom calls home to tell his family about the sale. "The Ontario Government has bought my painting for two hundred and fifty dollars! Be sure to tell Dr. Fraser

¹⁹ Burns, Robert, *The Selkirk Grace*, <http://www.poetryofscotland.co.uk/Burns/grace.php>

²⁰ Quoted in Davies, Blodwen, *Tom Thomson*, Mitchell Press Limited, 1967

that I painted it on a Sunday."

Tom and Lismer, whose *The Clearing* has also been bought, cash their cheques for one-dollar bills. Back at Lismer's digs on Wellesley Street, they toss them in the air, dance a fandango. Later Tom pins his money to the wainscoting of his room, just to see it all together at once.

All that spring, Tom plots his return to the north, to the scent of balsam fur, to the breaking buds, the blossoms, marshy bogs, the plentiful trout and bass, the straightforward folks, and the scenery. "There's money to be made guiding and fire ranging, and living is cheap with a tent and a rod," Tom explains to his co-workers at Rous & Mann.

Tom buys a new paddle, tests it out in a photo-engraving tank full of water. J-stroke, straight back, twist, forward, repeat.

When the spring comes, Tom heads up not to Algonquin, but north of Bisco, where he'd canoed the year before, to Mattagami to do some fire ranging. It is only late in the summer that Tom returns to Canoe Lake. The smell of the water, the sound of the wind in the trees, greet him like an old friend. He sets up camp at Hayhurst Point, across the lake from Mowat Lodge: Hudson Bay blankets, pots, pans, a sack of flour.

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[Photo: *Tom Thomson in a canoe*, 1912, Arthur Lismer Papers, Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario (file 19).]

Tom lives on bacon, flapjacks, fish and potatoes. Shannon Fraser, proprietor of Mowat Lodge, calls on Tom to guide when George Rowe and Lawrie Dickson are drunk or otherwise on the outs. This year Tom meets the Trainors who own The Manse, a cottage next to Mowat Lodge on the shore of Canoe Lake: Hugh and Margaret and their adult daughters Winnie and Marie.

Tom digs out his city duds to dance with them both at Mowat Lodge and Algonquin Hotel on Joe Lake, breaks them out again for dinner at The Manse. Tom McCormack, Marie's future husband, thinks Tom a rounder, a drunk, a bum.

In August Tom explores the park's north: Manitou Lake, North Tea. He sketches sunsets, storms, silhouettes. A spectrum of greys: *Lake, Shore, and Sky*, *Northland Sunset*, *Canoe Lake*, *Moonlight*, *Morning Cloud* and ironically, *Red Forest*. There is some colour: the baby blue, pink and lilac of *Evening*, the yellow, orange and pinks of *Sky (The Light That Never Was)*, and the orange, reds and greens of *Autumn, Algonquin Park*.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Red Forest*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection]

Tom shows his sketches to Ranger Mark Robinson and the sixteen-year-old sister of Canoe Lake Section man Charlie Ruttan. "Oh!" she says, "just like the alders were a week ago."²¹ A whimsical grin. Afterwards Tom turns to Robinson and says, "Why, that's the finest compliment I've ever gotten!"²²

On his way back to Toronto, Tom stops in at Huntsville, says so long to the Trainors, thanks them for their hospitality through the summer. He also says goodbye to his friend Doc McRuer, ill with the TB that had afflicted his brother. McRuer tells Tom he's moving to Colorado to take the cure of fresh air, the very cure Algonquin is thought to offer. McRuer will succumb to the disease in a scant four years, only days before Tom himself will pass away.

In Toronto, Tom meets A.Y. "Alex" Jackson. Jackson came from Montreal the previous spring to meet J.E.H MacDonald and Lawren Harris, who purchased Jackson's *The Edge of the Maple Wood* in 1911. Both men had written Jackson, inviting him to join their fledgling school. Feeling "the sacred fires about to burst into flame,"²³ Jackson agrees to stay in Toronto. He summers with family at their

²¹ Quoted by Mark Robinson in taped recollections of Mark Robinson in conversation with J. Alex Edmison in Tom Thomson Collection, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives

²² Ibid

²³ Quoted from a letter by A.Y. Jackson to Lawren Harris, March 26, 1913

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Georgian Bay cottage, then at the modest millionaire's cottage in nearby Go Home Bay. Dr. MacCallum makes him the same offer he made to MacDonald— to pay his expenses for the year so he could paint.

Jackson studies Thomson's sketches: "Sombre, dead in colour. No gay little rapids or wood interiors. No patterned rocks. Only opposite shores, lakes, far hills. Big country."²⁴

Tom gifts him *Lake, Shore and Sky*, which Jackson thinks the best of the bunch. Though Jackson thinks Tom's paintings are no great shakes, he finds him a friendly chap, likes him well enough to share a studio that winter in the building MacCallum and Harris are having built in Rosedale Valley. Tom finds a room in Frank Gavin's boarding house on Wellesley Street.

[Painting, *Lake, Shore and Sky*, National Gallery of Canada (4565)]

After buying a few of Tom's sketches: *View Over a Lake: Shore with Houses, Thunderhead, Autumn, Algonquin Park*, MacCallum makes Tom the same offer he made the others. Tom refuses, only to be convinced by Jackson, shortly thereafter. Tom decides to give it a shot, to be a full-time painter, like Jackson,

²⁴ A.Y. Jackson quoted in Foreword of Catalog of an Exhibition by the Late Tom Thomson, The Montreal Arts Club, March 1-21, 1919

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Tom's friends Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald. Albert Robson, Tom's boss at Rous and Mann, is understanding when Tom resigns.

At Lawren Harris's studio above the Bank of Commerce at Bloor and Yonge, Tom shadows Jackson as he paints up his canvas. A snowy hilltop, ragged pines intersect a cloudy sky, brilliant autumn leaves, the beginnings of a rainbow. Harris and MacDonald call it Mount Ararat, site of the earth's rebirth after the great flood in the Book of Genesis.

Tom's former co-worker and would-be protégé Franklin Carmichael visits Tom in his room, the air thick with smoke, finds him painting *Grey Day in the North*: sunlight on water, a distant line of shore swathed in pure green, a vast expanse of grey and soggy sky. Carmichael is leaving shortly to study at Lismer and Varley's Alma Mater, The Academie Royale des Beaux-Arts, the trip to Belgium made worthwhile by the free tuition.

J.E.H. MacDonald calls Tom, asks him to come up to his Thornhill farmhouse to help him finish illustrations and a cover for a booklet commemorating the soon to be opened Toronto General Hospital. It's late, and Tom's former co-worker Stanley "Kempus" Kemp is keen to get back to his wife and children. He has to work the next morning at his day job as well. MacDonald and Kempus meet Tom at the streetcar stop. Three hands are wrung like pump handles and Kempus

takes the last car back to Toronto. Tom and MacDonald work through the night as MacDonald's son, Thoreau looks on, hoping to hear Tom's stories of the north.

Back in Toronto, Jackson introduces Tom to his family friend, Christina Bertram who feeds them and mends their clothes in exchange for sketches.

In December, Jackson's sketches adorn the walls of the Arts and Letters Club alongside MacDonald's and Harris's. The most vehement response to the show is a satirical letter in *The Toronto Daily Star* penned by "Peter and I," the nom de plume of parliamentary reporter and Arts and Letter Club member H.R. Gadsby. "What's this one?", he asks, "a hob-nailed liver, a Plesiosaur in a fit?"²⁵ The painters are dubbed "The Hot Mush School".

MacDonald replies immediately with a letter to the editor, "You have got my goat, my horse, my ass, and everything else which is mine. Let us support our distinctly native art, if only for the sake of experiment."²⁶

By January the Studio Building is nearly done. Tom and Jackson move into Studio One on the ground floor. They join MacDonald, Lismer, Harris, as well as Art Heming, Curtis Williamson and Bill Beatty, three painters united only in their

²⁵ Gadsby, Henry "Peter and I" *Toronto Daily Star* December 1913

²⁶ MacDonald, J.E.H *Toronto Daily Star*, date TBD

mutual dislike. Beatty, that glorious truculent bigot, belabours the workmen at their task.

The Studio Building

Cupped in Rosedale Valley, north of city limits. A Canadian echo of its eponymous twin in New York. Next to the village of Yorkville, half a century away from its own bohemian occupation.

Eden Smith, designed the three-story block. Utilitarian in comparison with his usual fare—tony mansions for Toronto's moneyed—but with dormers, hipped roofs, multi-paned windows to catch the light.

Six double-height studios. Each with a fireplace, cottagey living-room, wrought-iron stairs leading to a modest loft. At twenty-two dollars a month, steep for a struggling artist.

Chapter Seven: Sky: The Light That Never Was

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Tom and Jackson paint together in Studio One. Jackson's sparkling, vibrant, colour opens Tom's eyes. True doesn't mean photographic. It's personal, conveys more than just appearance—emotion, meaning, truth. Not so different from design really. Lift it up. Pull it out. Jackson introduces Tom to his heroes, van Gogh, Matisse. “See how Monet loves the air.”

Though at first Tom refuses to move a branch or change the contour of a hill, he appoints the skies with broken strokes, brightens both *Moonlight* and *Morning Cloud*.

*Three easels stand at the far end of the room. A waste paper basket topped by a palette in front of one. Alongside another, a sketching stool and a drawing board. The table too is covered with half-used tubes of paint, brushes, a bottle of oil, turpentine, bottles, sketches, and colour boxes. Behind the easels, in great array, canvases and frames, not without disorder.*²⁷

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Morning Cloud*, Art Gallery of Ontario (PC-1051)]

Through the winter Jackson teaches Tom paint mixing, brushwork, colour. Alizarin Crimson, Vermillion Hue, Cadmium Yellow, Cobalt Yellow, Viridian,

²⁷ Quoted from a letter by Franklin Carmichael to his fiancé, Ada Went, date TBD, McMichael Art Gallery Archives

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Ultramarine Blue, Freeman's White. There are lively interchanges of opinion, frank discussions on aims and ideals, on technical problems that result in various experiments.

In one of Lawren Harris's efforts to get vibrant colours: he drags his brush quickly through three or four colours and slaps it on the canvas. Among the Hot Musers it's known as Tomato Soup.

Tom also proves a willing pupil for Studio Building tenants Heming, Williamson, and Beatty, who will later claim to have taught him all he knew. Tom builds a new sketch box to accommodate the larger sketch boards favoured by Jackson. They order the boards from the same Kitchener plant. For dinner they walk to Yonge and Bloor, The Busy Bee, Lennox Hotel. Some Saturdays they raise the fifteen cents to see a moving picture at The Yorkville: The Last Days of Pompeii, Bangville Police.

Tom is included with his Hot Mush colleagues in the Second Exhibition of Little Pictures in the Public Reference Library. *Cumulus Clouds, Evening, Grey Day, Northern Lake, Winter*. None of Tom's sketches sell. But to be invited! To have work worth showing! To be a part.

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At the 1914 Ontario Society of Artists exhibition in March, Tom shows *Morning Cloud, Moonlight, Early Evening*. The latter purchased by Eric Brown, new director of the National Gallery. For the first time, Tom is listed as a member of the OSA. Jackson, is not so fortunate, his masterpiece, which will come to be called *Terre Sauvage*, goes unsold

While Charlie Chaplin waddles and The Toronto Blue Shirts win the Stanley Cup, Jackson journeys to Algonquin Park. He tells MacDonald and Beatty, who will join him there shortly, "supply yourself with plenty of madder, blue, and white!" Although all three painters had painted in the north, they consider Algonquin "a revelation," finding objectionable only the collection of comic gramophone records at the lodge. Jackson returns to the studio, paints up *Frozen Lake, Early Spring, Algonquin Park* with subtle blues. Violets and mauves shadow snow. Sunlit snow reflects pale yellows, creamy whites.

Journal of Bud Callighen, Friday May 1 1914

Froze hard last night, lake iced over, this morning. I went across portage to Canoe L. only to find the ice had not started out yet. Came back, & went up river in aft. & up along shore to P.O. got a lot of mail & posted some. Lower end of Lake full of ice. Saw Tom Thompson (sic) (artist)²⁸

²⁸ From Algonquin Park ranger Bud Callighen's journal, Archives of Ontario

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Arthur Lismer joins Tom at the park this spring. Like Beatty, MacDonald and Jackson, he finds the park a revelation. They canoe and camp: Canoe Lake, Smoke, Ragged, Crown. He is amazed at Tom's facility in the bush. "He sees a thousand things that others missed."²⁹

Tom is not happy camping, unless he does three-quarters of the work. Paddling, setting up camp, cooking, cleaning up, breaking camp, paddling. He enjoys playing host, guide to The Bronx, revealing a world heretofore unseen, unimagined. Lismer sketches like an impressionist, captures changing effects of the light, careless of detail. Tom's sketches become freer, broader.

With *Hoar Frost*, Tom makes a negative of the scene: white sky, white trees, snow-covered bushes against white hills, opposed by dark green turf, dark pines that bite into the sky. Red soil peeks out from the turf: elbows through a worn jersey.

After Lismer leaves, Tom paints his way to Dr. MacCallum's cottage: *Parry Sound Harbour, Spring, French River, Byng Inlet, Georgian Bay, Evening, Pine Island*.

He gives the doctor's daughter painting lessons, gifts her a sketch: *Boathouse*,

²⁹ Quoted from a letter by Arthur Lismer to TBD, date TBD

Go Home Bay. By July Tom is ready to leave, finding Go Home Bay too much like Thornhill, all birthday cakes and water ice, too tamed by tourists with money.

On his way back to Algonquin Park Tom meets musician Ernest Freure. For five days they canoe and camp together. Tom thinks, "just as imperfect notes destroy the soul of music, so does imperfect colour destroy the soul of the canvas."³⁰

Back at the park, guide George Rowe, says, "Tom you are a painter, my cabin could sure use a coat." Tom paints Rowe's cabin. Tom also does some guiding. A group of Americans ignore Tom completely as he sets up camp, cooks dinner, cleans up afterwards. In the morning, deep in the bush, they wake up alone.

While the plague-ridden Panama Canal opens and Archduke Franz Ferdinand is shot, the benighted twentieth century has its bloody birth and Tom turns thirty-seven.

Bad news travels with the trains. Thousands of British soldiers die in suicide trenches, deadly gas attacks, death from above. Tom has a lean summer for boards, goes almost two months without a single one.

³⁰ Quoted by Mark Robinson in taped recollections of Mark Robinson in conversation with J. Alex Edmison in Tom Thomson Collection, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives

Bud Callighen Personal Diary Monday September 21

Caught 5 small trout this morning, 'pearl wobbler' & came back to Smoke L. T. Thompson & A.Y. Jackson here tonight, camped on Windy Point. Very hot today and strong S.W. wind Met large party on Porcupine going to Rock Lake. 5 people with 13 guides.³¹

Jackson, returns from an excursion with Bill Beatty—painting the Rockies on the railway's nickel—and rejoins Tom at the park having found mountains are not his line. The two set up base below Tea Lake Dam, travel through the southwest corner of the park, Tom canoeing, Jackson hunting for motifs from the prow. They eat good husky meals: bannock, flapjacks, fish, endless kettles of tea. They paint the war news away, the fools who “damn the Germs and thereby think they do some good.”

Tom struggles to produce, hand inarticulate as a hunk of wood. Not only is he unable to capture the scene, what he does create isn't any good. Shades of Don Valley years before. He hurls his sketch box into the bush, retrieved by Jackson, repaired by Bud Callighen the next day.

Although Tom complains, Jackson marvels at his growth: “Tom is doing some exciting stuff. He keeps one up to time. Very often I have to figure out if I am

³¹ From Algonquin Park ranger Bud Callighen's journal, Archives of Ontario

leading or following. You need a man who tries to do the impossible. To do what you know is easily within your powers never has given rise to a great school of art or anything else. I can finish up the autumn sketching and still be in plenty of time to fight the Germs. There are sure to be some of them left.”

Tom paints in thick strokes left undisturbed. Frozen motion. Sunlight glistens on the drying paint, reflections like restless water. Jackson takes Tom to task for giving away his boards so freely. “Alex, it's painting, not the painting that's important.” The doing, not the having.

Fred Varley, Arthur Lismer and their families arrive in October, amazed by the drama of fall. An exercise in relativity—the passengers having aged only eight hours during their train trip from Toronto, while the fall colours are two weeks ahead. Here also, the painter Beatrice Robertson née Hagerty. Capturing the fall colours in Algonquin is not only a boy's game.

Tom, Jackson, Lismer and Varley surround Larry Dickson's shack. Laptop sketching in broken colour, channelling light, four windows onto the same scene. Lismer scatters pure yellow and orange leaves over a brilliant blue sky. Tom raises his thumb in closed fist, jerks it at him in approval. Varley, unrepentant portraitist, paints his wife Maud in the midst of the birch grove. Tom makes a less successful sketch than his spring version—brilliant blue skies, sunny green

branches glimmering over dark green conifers, snow laden branches laid over top. Jackson's sketch will be lost or thrown away.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Larry Dickson's Shack*, National Gallery of Canada (4656)]

Discharged from duty, the old Gilmour Mill hospital building houses dozens of drying sketches, propped against abandoned walls.

Lisner pulls Tom aside, dutifully tries to convey Dr. MacCallum's concerns. Tom's angrily retorts, "Yes, I know what it is. 'You tell Thomson not to let that fellow Jackson influence him.'"³² Tom writes his benefactor:

Dear Dr. MacCallum—

*Jackson has written Harris (who has my Bank Book) to find out my bank balance—I have probably used most of it up by this time and it is just to find out if I should ride or walk back to Toronto. Could you phone the bank and find out?*³³

³² Quoted in *Tom Thomson* by Blodwen Davies, Mitchell Press, 1967

³³ Quoted from letter by Tom Thomson to Dr. MacCallum Oct. 6, 1914

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Despite Tom's money worries, he abandons the idea of becoming a park ranger because of all the red tape involved.

Back in Toronto bachelors Tom and Jackson feel the wartime mood acutely.

Recruiting sergeants call from every corner, "Sign up now or you'll miss it."

Bitterly, Tom mutters, "Six months hell. Three or four years. It must be."³⁴

Jackson is in no desperate hurry to enlist either, "There are lots of institutions and big fat heads in this country not worth laying down one's life to preserve.

They should send the politicians to the front."

MacCallum visits the two painters in their studio, strolls over from his Bloor Street office, teasing, "you fellows must have something wrong with your eyesight. You can't tell me you ever saw anything like that." He digs into his pocket for dollar bills.

Jackson paints up *Red Maple*, dashes crimson leaves against a dark blue brook to create depth, whisks white to set the water in motion. He explains as he goes.

Rather than working from a sketch, Tom paints up a study for *Northern River* in the studio, uses gouache instead of oils, stretches pure blue, red, green across a forest bed of black. Lattices the foreground with silhouette trees. Dead trees reflected from the far shore reiterate river. Sky palely loitering. He paints up a

³⁴ Quoted from Tippet, Maria, *Stormy Weather*, McClelland & Stewart, 2000

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canvas for *Petawawa Gorges (Early Spring)*, warmsit up with pinks and baby blues, sets the horizontal strokes of lake, sky, against the vertical stroke of the far shore, introduces umber to the canvas for *In Algonquin Park*, adding drama to the clouds. Like Jackson's *Maple Wood*, he drags shadows across the canvas from behind the viewer, spectral fingers pointing to the twisted trees. At Jackson's urging, he adds his own shadow among the trees, becomes a part of the painting, not apart from it.

[Painting, Tom Thomson, *Study for "Northern River"*, Art Gallery of Ontario]

In November, Tom shows for the first time at the Royal Canadian Academy show held at the Public Library on Church Street: *A Lake, Early Spring, Frost After Rain*. *In Algonquin Park* is sold at a special sale for The Patriotic Fund war effort, \$50 to Marion Long, new tenant at the Studio Building and founder of The Heliconian Club (where Tom will have a solo show).

That winter Tom gets a commission to design tourism posters for Owen Sound—*Industrial Center/Summer Resort!* Despite the work, Tom's circumstances are straightened. He tightens his belt even further.

A changing of the guard; Tom's former co-worker Franklin Carmichael returns from art school Europe just as Jackson returns to Montreal—his year of

patronage from Dr. MacCallum having ended. Carmichael and Tom agree to share a studio for the winter. Christmas comes. The war does not end, shows no sign of slowing down: pan-oceanic best wishes, absent fathers, lovers, sons.

Tom visits the MacDonalds in their Thornhill home, a member of the family. One Sunday dinner at the Lismers' on Delaware Avenue, Fred Varley acts up, "freezes" the others with callous words. Carmichael has never seen Tom so angry.

The Hot Mushers live, work in the Studio Building. The artists share canvases, paint, trade advice about each other's work. Tom and Carmichael's studio becomes a centre of gravity, a congregating place. Carmichael writes his girlfriend, Ada Went, "You said you would like to be a concealed onlooker when Tom and I were preparing our meals. I too wish you could, as no doubt you would see some queer sights, and when a finger is burnt or some stuff boiled over, overhear remarks not heard everyday in a kitchen. The rest of the fellows are all glad to come in and have a snack. That speaks well for our cooking doesn't it? We really have an enjoyable time as we visit, gabbing away like so many geese."³⁵

³⁵ Quoted from a letter by Franklin Carmichael to his fiancé Ada Went date TBD, McMichael Archives

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[Pencil sketch: Arthur Lismer, Shack at No. 25 Severn Street Toronto, 1915,
National Gallery of Canada (no. 16783)]

Everyone contributes his particular talent: Irish stew, Mulligan. Bill Beatty fries potatoes, makes oyster stew.

Dr. MacCallum, patron saint of the Studio Building, keen enthusiast, comes in, flops down in a chair, throws matches on the floor, and discusses the work. He hooks the painters up with freelance work when he can, tasks Carmichael with anatomical diagrams of the eye.

Dr. MacCallum takes Tom, Carmichael and fellow Studio Building tenant, Arthur Heming to a boxing match at Broadview and King.

*Champion Tommy Tootel of Riversides beats the hard-hitting
Red Gallagher to the punch every time. Finally in the second round,
knocks him through the ropes with a heavy right swing. Gallagher gamely
climbs back in and rushes Tootel, who coolly drops him again. Referee Hewitt
gives him a minute to come to and he weathers the round, but two punches
finish the job in the third round. Gallagher's head hits the floor
with a bump that could be heard all over the arena.³⁶*

³⁶ Quoted from *Toronto Star Sat Nov 26 1914 on The Fighter Blog*
<http://redgallagher.wordpress.com/>

At the Ontario Society of Arts show in March 1915, Tom's *Split Rock*, *Georgian Bay*, *Pines*, and *A Northern River* are lauded in an article that lists George Thomson as Mr. Tom Thomson's brother. The latter canvas will be purchased by the National Gallery of Canada for \$500.

Mail and Empire March 13, 1915

There are 187 pictures in the gallery, representing the work of about 70 artists and the paintings cover a very wide range, both in subject and method of treatment. There are some canvases of the old school, which dominated all our exhibitions a few years ago, tranquil little landscapes painted in a pleasant manner. Then, in marked contrast, stands out the work of the younger men, whose radical ideas have undoubtedly put a new vitality into Canadian art.

A large and arresting canvas by Mr. Tom Thomson is Northern River. One of the most striking pictures of its kind and bears close examination. Its striking colour holds the attention first, but beyond that tangled foreground is a destination of very real beauty.³⁷

³⁷ Mail and Empire March 13, 1915

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Tom leaves Toronto earlier than ever, travelling first to Owen Sound, then Huntsville to stock up. There he paints Winnie Trainor into *Snow in the Village*, one of several paintings to feature people this year. Tom will never be a figure man like Lismer, a portraitist like Varley, instead Tom paints trees bent by wind, bowed by snow, but standing still, surviving. Tom's friend Lawren Harris understands what Tom sees in the trees. In his poem, *Old Pine*, Harris writes, "Moan over and over again/ I am beautiful because I struggle."³⁸

Back in Algonquin, Tom goes up the track behind the section house to the old dam on Potter Creek. Paints the ice breaking up—blustery blues and greens, rotten ice screened by branches grey and brown—hikes back to the station, stamps feet to thaw out as he waits for postmaster and proprietor of Mowat Lodge, Shannon Fraser to come for the mail.

By the end of April, Tom has already made dozens of sketches: *Burnt Land*, *Fraser's Lodge*, *Northern Spring*, *Wild Cherries*, *Spring* and *In the Sugar Bush*, featuring Shannon Fraser. Once it is warm enough to camp, Tom leaves the lodge and sets up camp on Hayhurst Point.

[Painting: *Wild Cherries*, *Spring*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, (1966.16.72)]

³⁸ From Lawren Harris's unpublished poem, *Old Pine* in journal, Library and Archives Canada

Bud Callighen Diary April 28 1915

*Paddled up to Mink L. & picked up my box-traps. Met
Vanclief (guide) on Tea L. Had come up river from
L. of Bay's. Also met Rowe & Thompson with two
Johnston boys, (tourists). Very strong west wind,
thunder no rain.³⁹*

Tom finds the war has effectively killed tourism this summer. Owing in part to the lack of work—there are sometimes more guides than tourists—Rowe and Tom pair up, half a wage being better than none.

Tom battles the blues after a letter from Carmichael announcing his betrothal. “I should be unreservedly happy for Frank and Ada, but instead I write a moralistic letter decrying the state of celibacy which some claim is ideal for artists. Ha! Most every man needs love, needs the support only a good wife can provide. It's not that I don't want a wife, it's that I'm not fit for one. Too wild, too moody, too irresponsible. Sure Arthur and Mr. MacDonald can manage a family, though they suffer greatly for it. But I am too much like Fred, although I hate too admit it. But unlike him I will not impose myself and my life on a woman and children as well.”

³⁹ From ranger Bud Callighen's journal, April 28, 1915, Archives of Ontario

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Tom is restless, considers canoeing the French River back to Georgian Bay, working the wheat out west. Instead Tom paints the park, capturing enormous summer skies, clouds like zeppelins, dreadnoughts, floating passively overhead, beautiful bloody sunsets—due to the eruption of Lassen Peak in California this past May.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Sunset*, National Gallery of Canada, (4701) and/or *Summer Day*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection (1966.15.18)]

After the disastrous second battle of Ypres in June, it is clear to all that this war will not be over by this Christmas, nor perhaps the next. In Montreal, Tom's friend and future Group of Seven member A.Y. Jackson enlists, refusing offers of a commission. "I am new to this soldiering business. I must learn from the bottom up."⁴⁰

When he hears about Jackson, Tom writes MacDonald, deeply dismayed, "as with yourself, I can't get used to the idea of Jackson being in the machine, and it is rotten that in this so called civilized age that such things can exist, but since this war has started it will have to go on until our side wins out, and of course there is no doubt which side it will be, and we will see Jackson back on the job once more."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Quoted from a letter by A.Y. Jackson to TBD, date TBD, Library and Archives Canada

⁴¹ Quoted from a letter by Tom Thomson to J.E.H. MacDonald, July 22, 1915

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On July 27, a local boy, Alex Hayhurst is laid to rest in the makeshift cemetery that will one day hold Tom's remains. Diphtheria. Park Ranger Bud Callighen takes Mr. Munger out to read the service:

*As a father is tender toward his children, so is the Lord tender to those who fear him. For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust, our days are like grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone and its place will know it no more.*⁴²

*We brought nothing into this world, and we take nothing away. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*⁴³

August 1915: more than 100,000 people gather in Toronto's Riverdale Park to watch fireworks and hear marching bands drum up enthusiasm for the fight. Two spirited young ladies make their way through the crowd, joyously bestowing white chicken feathers on the astonished and outraged young men standing around.

Up at the park, Tom canoes up to the Magnetawan River, sketches the running of the logs, swirling a frothy pink sky over a pyramid of abandoned logs,

⁴² From the Anglican funeral service <https://churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/pastoral/funeral/funeral.aspx>

⁴³ 1 Timothy 6.7; Job 1.21b

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shattered on a choppy lake. Up by South River Tom hikes 14 miles, bagging seven partridge and a sketch of Sand Hill. He picks up his mail, stocks up on supplies, boards from the veneer mill. At Ard's store Tom treats himself to a boloney sandwich, biscuits and a pop.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Abandoned Logs*, McMichael Canadian Art, 1974.3]

For the first time, Tom's paintings are shown at the Canadian National Exhibition in The Gallery of Fine Arts. *In Georgian Bay, Pines, Georgian Bay* sit beside the work of established Canadian artists such as Horatio Walker and Homer Watson who Oscar Wilde has dubbed, "the Canadian Constable."

The Ex has a distinctly patriotic flavour this year: a model military camp with trenches, all kinds of engines and implements of destruction, a "Remarkable Exhibit of War Trophies including a captured Krupp gun and a blood-stained cap of a Teuton," and of course a recruiting booth.

Back at Canoe Lake, ranger Mark Robinson grows used to seeing Tom idly tossing stones in the Joe Creek rapids, tearing around looking for a scene. Tom runs up to Robinson's cabin, "Say Mark you know. I know you know."

"Tom just tell me what you want and possibly I can help you."

"Three trees. Spruce trees, black spruce rough old looking trees. You know what I mean. Where can I get them, at once?"

"Go to the little wharf below Sim's Pit you will find those trees you want in a grove." He was away like a shot. Robinson's wife asks, "is he slightly... demented?"⁴⁴

Three days later Tom is back, a smile on his face, and *Black Spruce In Autumn* in hand. "Say Mark, those trees were just what I required, and the sky was just right. How do you always know what I want?"⁴⁵

Tom tries to enlist but is rejected as he was in ninety-nine, for fallen arches. Robinson himself is called up that fall.

Tom invites Carmichael up to Algonquin, but he is otherwise occupied with his wedding. As a gift, Tom invites Carmichael to wander around the shack behind the Studio Building where his sketches are currently stored. "Select anything in the way of 'wall decorations.'" Not wanting to be hoggish he chooses two from the many he deeply admires, promises to value them always.

⁴⁴ Quoted by Mark Robinson in taped recollections of Mark Robinson in conversation with J. Alex Edmison in Tom Thomson Collection, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives

⁴⁵ Ibid

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After the wedding, Carmichael leaves The Studio Building, Toronto, and full-time painting behind, moves to the nearby community of Bolton with his bride.

Although he is sometimes accused of profligance, Tom worries often about his lack of money. When *Northern River* is finally purchased by the National Gallery, Tom writes to MacCallum to enquire about the money, "I sent a check down to the Bank at Bloor and Yonge which would arrive there Sat. morning and so far have not heard from it (and) so conclude that my account has gone broke. It was for \$25.00 for stocking up, could you see Harris and get the amount from him and have it sent to me here as I am stranded. I may possibly hear from the Bank today but have almost given up hope."⁴⁶

Tom is lonely. He writes his friends in Toronto, invites them up to the park, "I should like awfully well to have some company." There are no takers.

Public funds are redirected into the war effort. The National Gallery cuts its budget by 75 percent, the Royal Canadian Academy by half. The Ontario government stops buying art entirely, stops funding the OSA.

⁴⁶ Quoted from a letter by Tom Thomson to Dr. MacCallum, September 9, 1915

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Tom's solitary productivity continues into the fall. *Golden Autumn*: staccato jabs of orange, mustard yellow, counterpoints of deep blue, violet, aqua. Sunset broiling pink clouds. Skies an impossible colour between yellow, blue and green.

In November, Tom is in Round Lake. He stays with park ranger Tom Wattie and his family, square dances at South River. Before heading back to Canoe Lake he lightens his load by firing some of his less successful sketches. The multi-coloured flames delight Wattie's young children.

From the park. Tom travels to Owen Sound, arriving after midnight to be met by his aunt Henrietta and Tom's sister Minnie visiting from her home in Saskatchewan for the first time in eight years. She finds him quieter, more serious.

Distance makes the heart more perceptive, the increments of personal growth too subtle to be seen day-to-day. Strength, confidence, clarity of vision can look like remoteness, reticence. Tom shares his worries about his paintings selling, his fallen arches, his desire to enlist.

When Tom returns to Toronto, it is to the shack behind the Studio Building, the twenty-two dollar a month rent on a studio become unaffordable. He pays a token one dollar a month for the shack, shares it during the day with Arthur

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Lismer. Lismer and his family, in likewise precarious circumstances, have moved in with the MacDonalds, trying to make a go of their Thornhill farm.

Harris, Lismer and MacDonald all praise Tom's sketches, but not overly as it only seems to embarrass him. Harris in particular is dazzled by Tom's use of colour.

Black Spruce and Maple goes through him like a spear. "I'll buy this one Tom, also the rapid sketch and you must paint up *Burnt Land*. Magnificent."

[Pencil sketch: Arthur Lismer, Brilliant sketches, TBD]

MacDonald is taken with Tom's flower studies, *Marguerites*, *Wood Lilies* and *Vetch*, and *Water Flowers*—delicate yet vital, vibrantly set against an inky black background.

The Shack

*In its previous life a chicken coop, a tool shack,
a cabinetmaker's workshop. The shambling shack behind
the Studio Building. Harris and MacCallum resurrect, reroof,
restore, insulate with beaverboard, furnish
with bunk and box stove.*

*It is a financial expediency, but it also creates a continuity
with Algonquin lodges, ranger's cabins, guide's shacks.*

Chapter Eight: Sunset

Lures and trolling spoons, axe handles, paddles, and snowshoes line the shack's unpainted walls. A naked bulb hangs from the ceiling, stowed behind a fog of tobacco, wood smoke, steam from the kettle, and breath when the temperature dips. Tom leaps into the air, clasps the chain between his stocking feet, pulls down snapping the light on, and somehow, lands on his feet, a silent laugh. The bulb's chain swings like a cautionary tail.

In the winter of 1915, the patron saint of the Studio Building strikes again, Tom works with MacDonald and Lismer to paint up panels for MacCallum's cottage. Lismer and MacDonald paint Tom into the mural: a fisherman seated, leg outstretched, a pipe clamped in his teeth, a lumberjack standing, eyes downcast, an insubordinate fist at his hip.

Tom traces the day, the year, through four square panels. He begins with a spring nocturne, clumping leaves coolly in gradients of blue and green overtop spectral skies. On the second, he oscillates brilliant orange leaves against

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nascent skies of robin's egg blue. The following two: piebald birches with mellow fall foliage in evening, and midday.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Decorative Panel I*, National Gallery of Canada (4717-20)]

Tom's former Gripmate Frank Johnston returns to Toronto after having studied and worked in the United States for several years. Johnston is a frequent visitor to the shack, a larger than life presence, never shy with opinion or advice. Tom has supper with the Johnstons in their York Mills home.

[Pencil sketch: Arthur Lismer, *Frank Johnston in TT's shack*, TBD]

The Hot Mushers tease Tom about the scarcity of summer pictures. "Too hot to paint was it? Distracted by the fishes I'll wager. Did you run out of greens?" Tom agrees readily to all suggestions, but the truth is more complicated. It is true that he is busier guiding, that the browns and greens are less appealing than the colours of fall, but there's something about the change from winter to spring, from fall to winter, the pivot point between seasons, the becoming.

Ensnared in the shack, behind his canvas, Lismer bobs his gangly head in time to the victrola,

Stretch your lovin' arms straight out in space
Then do the Eagle Rock with style and grace
Swing your foot way 'round then bring it back,
*Now that's what I call Ballin' the Jack.*⁴⁷

This year Tom's canvases are delicate, nuanced, compared to the staccato energy of his sketches, the colours less contrasting, the shapes softer. Tom loops gracile trunks over curlicues of birch, ghostly against an azure lake face, a robin's egg blue sky, the premonitory dark of the forest deeps. *Autumn's Garland* and *Opulent October* form a decorative dyad, an idyll, a Canadian Arcadia. Tom is mystified when people find his pictures violent, frightening, inhuman. Inhuman? "As if we are not every bit as much a part of the natural world as the lakes, hills, flowers, trees," he thinks. He says nothing, but remembers his uncle's mantra, "man, not apart, but a part of nature."

Harris goads Tom into painting even more canvases, sneaking into the shack, placing blank canvases on Tom's easel. For *In the Northland*, Tom uses a square canvas like Harris, draws a fallen tree through the birch grove, to the wine-dark, rippled lake. Behind the grate of trees, beyond the cold lake: a sun-drenched beach, brilliant leaves, and green, an invitation to enter

⁴⁷ Buris, Jim: Lyrics, Smith, Chris: Music *Ballin' the Jack*, Jos. W. Stern & Co. 1913
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballin'_the_Jack

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[Painting: Tom Thomson, *In The Northland*, TBD or Pencil sketch: Arthur Lismer, TT priming a canvas, TBD]

One Friday in December, M.O. Hammond, journalist and photographer, drops by the Studio Building to visit the artists and claim a sketch from Beatty, long-owed, in return for photographs he had taken.

M.O. Hammond journal - Friday, December 10, 1915

Walked then over to Studio Building, Severn St., called on Williamson. He was genial and talkative. His place was untidy, cluttered a good deal. He had pictures of MacIntosh and T. Eaton under way. Both are good as far as done.

Then he took me out to a shack at the back where Tom Thomson has his studio. T, whom I now first met, is a (tall, crossed out) medium-sized, well-built chap, with a clean face, and the hard hands of the woodsman. But the place was awfully bare. He (and) Lismer work together and both are almost bankrupt. There was no fire in the stove. He explained it did not draw well for lack

*of enough pipe. But I perceive the real reason is no money for fuel. He showed me bunches of sketches by Jackson (and) Lismer, praised them highly but said nothing of himself save in answer to questions.*⁴⁸

Afterwards Hammond calls on Heming, then Beatty, the latter in a typically foul mood. He starts in at once fulminating against Heming who he says is being grub-staked by D.A. Dunlop, part owner of La Rose mine. It grieves him that Heming was comfortable while Thomson, so much a better painter, "hasn't \$50 between him and starvation." "I'd give \$50 if I could smash his head."⁴⁹

At the turn of the year, at thirty-eight years of age, Tom has his first one-man show at the Arts and Letters Club, another shortly thereafter at the Heliconian Club—a club for female artists made necessary by their exclusion from organizations like the Arts and Letters Club. Women will not be considered “persons” under Canadian law for another thirteen years.

Artist and critic Estelle Kerr writes a glowing review for Tom in The Courier,

Landscapes of Northern Ontario by Tom Thomson form a striking

⁴⁸ Quoted from the journal of M.O. Hammond, MO Hammond Fonds, Archives of Ontario

⁴⁹ Ibid

*exhibition which may be seen at the Heliconian Club. Mr. Thomson is considered one of the most promising painters who follows (the) Impressionist Movement, and his work reveals him to be a fine colourist, a clever technician, and a truthful interpreter of the north land in its various aspects.*⁵⁰

By the start of 1916, three hundred thousand Canadians have enlisted. Prime Minister Robert Borden has promised two hundred thousand more. Britain has enacted conscription, Canada, as yet, has not. In the papers and on the streets, shirkers and slackers are called out, abused.

*Don't you hear the bugle calling; calling for good men and true
to take up their stand for freedom? That call is meant for you.
Some boyhood chum has fallen and as he stricken lies
he appeals to you to take his place in the glorious enterprise.*

*Don't you mind my lads how promptly you joined in their games of yore?
Don't let them call you slacker in the sterner game of war.
And if in nobly striving the brave sacrifice you pay,
your chums will proudly tell the world that you died the British way.*⁵¹

⁵⁰ Estelle M. Kerr, The Courier, March 25, 1916

⁵¹ Pritchard, T. Lyrics; Brazil, Jules Music, *The Call*, in "Boys of Canada": Songs from the First World War, Independent Publishing Co. Goderich, 1914-1918

[Photo: *Recruiting Billboard at the South African Monument on University Avenue in Toronto, 1914, City of Toronto Archives* or Photo: *Recruiting tent at Toronto City Hall, c. 1914, City of Toronto Archives*]

Tom leaves for the park in March, just as the furor erupts over this year's

Ontario Society of Artists show:

M.L.A.F. (Margaret Fairbairn) "Some Pictures at the Art Gallery" Toronto Daily Star, Mar. 11, 1916

*The forty-fourth yearly exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists opens today in the Art Museum gallery, on the corner of College and St. George streets. On the whole, the work of the younger men dominates the galleries, not so much as to numbers, but as to forcefulness, as to their use of strong, even violent, colour— colour that makes the quieter toned canvases look weak by comparison.*⁵²

Hector Charlesworth "Pictures That Can Be Heard" Saturday Night Magazine, Mar. 18, 1916

Applied or quasi-futurism has gotten hold of the hanging committee of

⁵² Quoted from "Some Pictures at the Art Gallery" Toronto Daily Star, Mar. 11, 1916

the Ontario Society of Artists this year with a strange clinch, and those who believe that pictures should be seen and not heard are likely to have their sensibilities shocked....It is perhaps, one of the duties of the artist to surprise us and take us out of mental ruts, but it is hardly necessary to tear one's eyes out in the performance of that duty.⁵³

The chief grudge that one has against these experimental pictures is that they almost destroy the effect of very meritorious and sincere pictures, which are hung on the same walls.

Fairbairn:

Of these, Mr. (J.E.H) MacDonald's "A Tangled Garden" is a good example. It is what one might call "an incoherent mass of colour," for at first glance it seems a purposeless medley of crude colours which gradually explain themselves as standing for the blooms in a garden bed in full sunlight.⁵⁴

Charlesworth:

⁵³ Quoted from "Pictures That Can be Heard" Saturday Night Magazine, Mar. 18, 1916

⁵⁴ Ibid

The chief offender seems to be J.E.H. MacDonald....his "Tangled Garden," which a discriminating spectator attempted to praise by saying it was not half as bad as it looked.⁵⁵

Fairbairn:

Mr. Tom Thomson('s) "The Birches" and "Hard Woods" show a fondness for intense yellows and orange and strong blue, altogether a fearless use of violent colour which can scarcely be called pleasing, yet which scoops an exaggeration of truthful feeling that time will temper.⁵⁶

Charlesworth:

MacDonald has also infected a number of other talented young artists, who seem to think that crudity of colour and brushwork signify the vaunted qualities of "strength" and "self-expression."⁵⁷

Charlesworth excoriates several of MacDonald's pictures, retitles them:

"Hungarian Goulash," "Drunkard's Stomach." He reiterates old accusations, recycled paint pots, as if the Armoury Show had never happened. Those who forget the past are condemned to repaint it.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

Once again, MacDonald dashes off an angry rejoinder,

The Globe, March 15, 1916

*We have a new country and a country practically unexplored artistically and it would seem therefore that courageous and thorough experiment is not only legitimate but vital to the development of a living Canadian art.*⁵⁸

Although many artists are supportive of the fledgling school, many established artists, already jealous of the attention MacDonald and his friends have garnered, are galled by the implication that their artistic explorations of Canada do not count.

Painter and critic Carl Ahearns launches a far more personal attack:

*The so-called new art has no excuse, it bespeaks of a hermaphroditic condition of the mind. These young people who are indulging in these pastimes would gain a much higher standing before men if they gave up their now misspent efforts to the destruction of the Hun.*⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Quoted from letter by J.E.H. MacDonald in *The Globe*, March 15, 1916

⁵⁹ Painter and Art Critic Carl Ahearns interviewed in *The Toronto Daily Star*, Date TBD

Hermaphroditic here meaning homosexual.

Tom is embittered by the artists' in-fighting, the apathetic public, the vicious critics, although he not only avoids the worst of the criticism, but the National Gallery actually buys *Spring Ice* for \$300, no mean feat in the throes of wartime cutbacks.

In April, Tom is joined by Lawren Harris, Harris's cousin Chester, and Dr. MacCallum. The men canoe, camp together. Tom takes them to the north end of Algonquin Park: Little Cauchon Lake, Aura Lee. One afternoon, in the midst of a vicious rainstorm, painting gear in hand, Tom barrels out of the abandoned lumber shack he and Harris are sheltering in. Harris watches as Tom squats behind a dead tree, paints furiously, his hair plastered to his head, his green mackinaw jacket soaking up water like a sponge. A sudden burst of wind and the tree topples on Tom: a massive wooden hand smacking a mosquito.

Harris calls out in alarm, "Tom! Tom!" For a moment there is no sign of life, then Tom hops up, waving, continues to paint: a twisted pine, bent like a lyre, a robin's egg blue sky contending with piebald clouds, a whitecapped lake, distant hillocks loitering grey, and green. But the damned clouds move too fast to capture, and the trunk cuts between shorelines, bars the way in.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *The West Wind (sketch)*, Art Gallery of Ontario, TBD]

*Make me thy lyre, ev'n as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! be thou me, impetuous one!
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?⁶⁰*

After fishing one morning, Tom returns to camp to find a young lynx clawing and chewing on one of his sketches. Later he shows the board to Dr. MacCallum, "I am only a bum artist anyway. Even the animals know that."

⁶⁰ Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Ode To The West Wind*, Francis T. Palgrave, ed. (1824–1897). *The Golden Treasury*. 1875. <http://www.bartleby.com/106/275.html>

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When Tom spots a weathered pine on the shore of Little Cauchon lake, it transports him to a summer, years before, as he walked in Toronto's High Park with his uncle, William Brodie, dead these 6 years. "Fires are a natural part of forest life, necessary even for its continuance", says Brodie raising his bushy eyebrows emphatically. "Take the Jack Pine, for instance, *Pinus banksiana*, it requires intense heat for the cones to open, only then do the seeds scatter, germinate. Like the phoenix eh? Born in flames. You don't want to eradicate fires, merely to contain them, survive them." Tom sits, quickly sketches the upright trunk, the scraggly limbs, bits of pines to left and right, a lake like glass reflecting the murky sky above.

In May Tom heads out to Achray Station on Grand Lake, at the south branch of the Petawawa River in the park's east end, fire ranging with Ed Godin. The two men canoe the rapid rivers, cataracts pinioned between massive walls of rock. On steep hills they set up lookouts, ladder steps against the tallest white pines, keep the portages clear so people can get around in case of fire. They meet with railway men whose locomotives start many of the fires.

In August Tom and Godin canoe down the south branch of the Petawawa where Tom sketches The Capes as he did in 1914, but this time without the guidance, the companionship of A.Y. Jackson—massive clay-coloured bluffs royal blue

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in the shade. A pine-covered outcropping slopes into the grey/blue water, beckoning, “canoe around the bend.”

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Petawawa Gorges*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection (1981.9.2)]

They follow the Booth Company timber drive, lakes jammed with bobbing logs, frothy water spewing from the chute. They speak to the men about fire safety, watch how they handle the log booms. Tom sketches *Bateaux*, *Sandbank with Logs*, *The Alligator*, *Algonquin Park*, and *Log Jam*.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Log Jam: Sketch for “The Drive”*, The Thomson Collection, Art Gallery of Ontario (PC-162)]

Back in Huntsville, Canoe Lake cottager and Tom’s would-be girlfriend, Winnie Trainor, and her mother knit socks for soldiers, raise money for the troops with Women’s Temperance Union, All Saints’ Anglican. She wonders why Tom couldn’t fire range closer to her family’s cottage, especially after a Grand Trunk engine ignites a pile of wood chips at nearby Canoe Lake train station.

Early June, in Montreal, Alex Jackson’s mother receives a terse telegram:

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Government cable June 4th, 1916

Sincerely regret to inform you

457396 Private Alexander Jackson infantry

officially reported admitted No. 1 Canadian General Hospital

Etaples

gunshot wound hip.⁶¹

[Photo: *Private A.Y. Jackson c.1915*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives]

Jackson is shipped first to the French coast, and then back to England. He soon recovers, digging latrines, and peeling potatoes until he is drafted into a division of Canadian war artists, later joined by Varley. Tom might have been chosen to become a war artist, but it is only in the summer of 1917 that Canadian artists were commissioned by Lord Beaverbrook to paint the Canadian war effort, and by then, Tom will be dead.

Back in Toronto, the Canadian National Exhibition once again features a model military camp. The 169th Battalion from Camp Borden is set up just west of the Transportation Building. In addition to demonstrations of trench warfare there are special details of grenade throwers, bombers and bayonet squads. On the

⁶¹ Telegram from TBD to Mrs. TBD Jackson, June 4, 1916, TBD

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nearby lake, miniature battleships dodge submarine mines and airplane bombs while firing torpedoes at each other. Tom's *Moonlight* is featured in the catalog, as well as in the gallery, at this year's Ex.

Tom writes Dr. MacCallum,

*Have done very little sketching this summer as I find that the two jobs don't fit in. When we are traveling two go together—one for the canoe and the other, the pack, and there's no place for a sketch outfit when you're fire ranging. It would be great for two artists or whatever you call us but the natives can't see what we paint for. We are not fired yet but I am hoping to be put off right away.*⁶²

In October, the fire ranging ends. Tom stays near Achray, begins to paint in earnest. Time stands still when Tom paints, he loses any sense of himself, immersed entirely in the painting. He doesn't think about what he is doing, if he does, he'll second guess, analyze, and the sketch is lost. Instead, he finds the scene, then goes on instinct, tells himself, "don't think, paint." It's addictive, this loss of self. No self means, no doubts, no frustration, no worries about money, no loneliness. Tom makes sketch after sketch, paints on both sides, when he runs out of boards he uses orange crates.

⁶² Quoted from a letter from Tom Thomson to Dr. MacCallum October 4, 1916

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Back at Canoe Lake, Tom makes some extra cash hauling stones from Sim's Pit to Little Wap Island to make a fireplace for cottager Taylor Statten; an eerie foreshadowing of Bill Beatty's labours the following autumn, hauling stones like an ill-tempered Sisyphus to the top of Hayhurst Point for Tom's cairn.

Tom visits Winnie Trainor at her cabin and again in Huntsville before he leaves for Toronto. "You know I can't stay Winnie. My studio is in Toronto, my colleagues, all the shows are there, and the buyers too."

At the RCA show in November, J.E.H. MacDonald's garden sketch continues to infuriate critics. The Severn School, A.K.A. The Algonquin School, née Hot Mushers, are accused of making "freak art".

Tom returns to Toronto to find his few remaining friends have scattered. Lawren Harris had enlisted in the spring and is now a musketry instructor at Camp Borden near Barrie, Ontario. Conditions there are so dismal that the troops call it "Camp Horror", riot at its official opening. Tom's daytime shackmate Arthur Lismer is now the principal of the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax—a posting Bill Beatty had refused, but will later come to covet, writing letters suggesting Lismer should be let go in favour of him.

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Tom's former studiomate, Franklin Carmichael, has gone back to full-time commercial work at Rous and Mann Press and moved his family to the suburb of Thornhill, like Tom's mentor, J.E.H. MacDonald who is surviving on freelance work including decorating the windows of Simpson's department store for Christmas.

Tom's canvases this year are larger and more numerous than ever. Even without Harris' good-natured goading, Tom paints up canvas after canvas in Harris' square dimensions, winter matching the productivity of fall.

Tom struggles with the sky in *West Wind*. He couldn't capture it in the sketch and fails with the canvas as well, scrapes and repaints but can't get it right. Tom abandons that canvas and begins work on *The Jack Pine*, starting with an undercoat of burnt sienna—a sanguine aura for the trees, the distant shore. Tom roughs in the central tree. How human it is, like Christ at Calvary, leafy thieves on either side. But it's more a pieta than a crucifixion scene by the attitude of the tree's limbs. The longest bough, lolls to the left, or is it gesturing towards the facing shore? A signpost? Tom adds an ingress to the shore, a space between the dark green hills, a passage through to the distant blue shore, an invitation to enter. In fact it's more than an invitation, it's a truth told, "man is a part of nature, not apart from it." Tom transposes the sky and the reflective lake face, from his

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sketch *A Lake in Autumn* to *The Jack Pine*—horizontal lines in a spectrum of greens and yellows.

As Tom stares at his masterpiece, the chemical wedding of his lithe art deco and staccato sketching styles, he floats past the outstretched limb, over the still, sky-streaked lake, through the narrows to that far distant purple shore.

Although Tom is dissatisfied with his canvas for *West Wind*, the image of a lone pine twisting in the wind in front of a whitecapped lake, burns into Tom's former co-worker Franklin Carmichael's inner eye, Fred Varley's as well, and Lismer's too, once he sees it. It becomes a template for their future works, just as J.W. Beatty's *The Evening Cloud of the Northland* did for Tom many years before. This image will become eidetic, a blueprint for generations of Canadian artists, burning into the inner eye of a nation. It will become a touchstone for a people, an icon undying.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*, National Gallery of Canada (1519)]

Tom spends the Christmas of 1916 with his family in Owen Sound, attends a dance at Leith Hall with his sister Lizzie and her family. His parents and sister Peggi are home, sick with the flu.

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Back in Toronto, J.E.H. MacDonald's teenage son, Thoreau, visits Tom at his shack. Tom feeds him bacon, mashed potatoes that he makes with a pound of butter, using an empty bottle. Though he drums his fingers impatiently, Tom listens politely to the boy's prattle, thinks "How much like his father he looks,". Idly Tom wonders what his son might look like, if he had one. If he and Alice Lambert had married, he could have a twelve-year old by now. If he'd married Elizabeth McCarnen he could have a ten-year old.

Florence McGillivray also visits Tom's shack this winter. Newly returned from Europe, Tom knows her through her art. She'd shown her paintings at the OSA and RCA shows: modern, bold, colourful in the French post-impressionist tradition.

McGillivray took art lessons from Cruikshank, like Tom, was born in Whitby, near Tom's birthplace of Claremount. More than a decade Tom's senior, McGillivray had taught art at a girl's school in Whitby, but at 49 years of age left to study art in Paris with Lucien Simon and Emile Rene Manard. When she returned to Canada, she sought out members of the arts community and was directed to Tom—a promising new artist, working in a post-impressionist style.

Inspecting Tom's sketches around the shack, his canvases, she comments on

the vitality, the strength, but unlike many others, she doesn't find them foreign, foreboding, instead she finds them, invigorating, compelling, a destination worth visiting. Tom will later tell his friend, ranger Mark Robinson, "She is the first of the artists I know to recognize instantly what I am trying to do."⁶³

Doctor MacCallum is another familiar face to visit Tom this winter. He finds Tom hard at work on a large canvas filled with brilliant daubs of paint, red boats on a lake, part of the timber drive. "The critics are bound to have a problem with this one, Tom," he says. "Damn them," says Tom. "I'll show them!"⁶⁴

In March 1917, Tom attends Florence McGillivray's one-woman show, at painter Harry Britton's house at 67 Wellesley Street. He is there not as a follower of MacDonald's nor a protégé of Jackson, but as a peer, a fellow painter, a friend of the artist. Rather than chucking the invite, Tom keeps it in his sketch box, a memento, a reminder.

It is not a lack of confidence that keeps Tom from submitting a canvas to the OSA in 1917. He is done with the critics, the bickering artists, done with the cash-strapped public galleries, the apathetic public. Although he's sold paintings at every OSA since 1912, he decides it's not worth the stress. "The government has

⁶³ Quoted from interview with Mark Robinson by Alex Edmison, Date 1952, TBD

⁶⁴ Quoted from TBD by Dr. James MacCallum

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cut its budgets and a sale is no sure thing. It's the painting, not the sales that matter, and that is where I'll focus my energies," he decides.

While the USA joins the war effort at last and flying Ace Billy Bishop marks his first kill, Tom returns to Algonquin Park. There he is reunited with ranger Mark Robinson who has returned from the war, invalidated by a minor injury. Tom gets his guide's license, though there are precious few tourists again this year, and digs a garden for the Frasers and the Trainors in whose cabin his sketches will be stored.

The Crombies are staying at Mowat Lodge when Tom arrives; Robin, a young soldier taking the cure in Algonquin Park for the tuberculosis that sent him home from the war, Daphne, his newlywed wife celebrating their honeymoon by nursing her ailing spouse. While Robin rests outside, wrapped in his officer's quilt, Daphne wanders the lodge, the surrounding countryside. When she returns with a bouquet of pussy willows, Tom offers to make her a vase, paints up a mason jar with his precious oil paint.

Daphne watches Tom make sketch after sketch. Sometimes he acknowledges her presence, tells her, "I'm trying to get the light just right. It's different over here. You'll see." He waits for her to come. Daphne finds Tom quiet, moody,

“a very lonely man.”⁶⁵

Tom’s brother-in-law, Tom Harkness, sends him an article from the local paper in the mail:

*"Pictures by Sydenham Boy Worth Seeing", The Owen Sound Sun,
Apr. 10, 1917*

In every report concerning pictures exhibited by Ontario’s artists in Toronto for the past few years there has been a paragraph or sentence which, without exception, was one of praise for the pictures shown by Mr. Tom Thomson. He has been spoken of by the highest art critics as a young artist who is on the threshold of an exceptionally brilliant career, and any work he shows always receives marked praise.

*A member of The Sun staff had the pleasure, while in Toronto recently of paying a visit to Mr. Thomson’s winter studio in Rosedale, and the visit was all that was needed to convince one that Mr. Thomson is indeed an artist whose name will be much before the public in coming years.*⁶⁶

After Tom reads the article in the Sun, he fires off a letter to his brother-in-law,

⁶⁵ Quoted from *Northern Light* by Roy MacGregor, Vintage Canada, 2010 p. 90

⁶⁶ Quoted from an article in The Owen Sound Sun, April 10, 1917

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Tom Harkness, "I got a copy of the O.S. Sun and it seemed to be well filled with bunk, however the foolishness of newspaper matter is well known and I knew nothing about it in time to have it stopped."⁶⁷

One night, after sunset, Tom sees the fairy green shimmer of the Northern Lights, can almost hear its sizzling song. He calls on Robinson at his cabin, a short distance from Mowat Lodge. "Did you see the lights?" "Yes Tom," says Robinson, "they're brilliant tonight." Tom warms his hands over the fire, leaves to watch the lights, returns to thaw out again. Finally, about eleven-thirty Tom announces, "I believe I can paint that up." "Alright," says Robinson, "I'll keep the fire on for you." Tom smiles wistfully, "oh, there's no background here."⁶⁸

Tom trudges down to the point where Larry Dickson and George Rowe's cottage stands. He sets a fire, steps outside to paint at midnight, massive green flames undulating across the night sky, the stillness, the eerie quiet of the earth in stark contrast to the living sky.

[Painting: Tom Thomson, *Northern Lights*, National Gallery of Canada 4677r]

Before the Crombies leave, Daphne and Annie Fraser—the cook, and Mowat Lodge proprietor Shannon Fraser's wife—walk by Larry Dickson's cabin. Tom

⁶⁷ Quoted from a letter by Tom Thomson to Tom Harkness, April 23, 1917

⁶⁸ Quoted from interview with Mark Robinson by Alex Edmison, Date 1952, TBD

shouts, "Stop. Stay where you are."⁶⁹ The women wait while Tom paints them in to the sketch.

Doctor MacCallum and his young son Arthur take the train up to Canoe Lake Station for a rainy and cold fishing trip one weekend in May. The doctor throws Tom a bone, admits that Algonquin Park is a better place to paint than his cottage: "in the Georgian Bay there is in the spring practically none of the brilliant colour from the vegetation of the park—there were really only two soft maples in bud...—the birches have not even begun to change."⁷⁰

It is a cold and wet spring. When the ice goes out, the black flies and mosquitoes come in worse than ever, even bug dope doesn't dissuade them. Despite this, Tom remains as prolific as he had been last winter and fall, painting at least one sketch a day. He tells Robinson, "I have a record of the weather for sixty-two days, rain or shine, snow, dark or bright. I have a record of the day in a sketch."⁷¹

In terms of sheer output, this rivals A.Y. Jackson's hero, Vincent van Gogh, who produced seventy paintings, in the last seventy days of his life.

The wet and cold spring gives way to a damp and cool summer, the bugs are bad even after the black flies go. The fishing, however, is good, and Tom and

⁶⁹ Quoted from interview with Daphne Crombie by TBD, date TBD

⁷⁰ Quoted from a letter by Doctor James MacCallum to Tom. Thomson, May 28, 1917

⁷¹ Quoted from an interview with Mark Robinson, date TBD

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Robinson share a good-natured rivalry over a monstrous trout said to lurk near Joe Lake Dam. Tom, as usual, makes his own lures, Robinson uses any contrivance he can. Both men claim to have hooked it, but neither manages to reel it in.

It was raining hard on the morning of July eighth 1917. After failing to land the big trout again, Tom stocks up for a trip, provisions, kit bag, a fishing rod, an extra paddle. He asks Mowat Lodge proprietor Shannon Fraser to help him lift his boat over Joe Lake Dam. Both men are soaked through. At the dock Tom says, "I am going to West Lake and get some of those big trout and I will be back either tonight or tomorrow morning."⁷² Tom sets off in his canoe, and is never seen alive again.

Ninety-five years before to the day, July eighth 1822, Percy Shelly the poet, author of *The West Wind*, drowns in the blood-warm Mediterranean Sea at the tender age of thirty.

Although it is midday, Canoe Lake has a morning calm, mirror-smooth, Sky reflects lake reflects sky ad infinitum. Past Little Wap Island an unexpected mist lifts off the lake. Though they are difficult to make out, Tom sees what looks like two deer, a buck and doe, white as snow, on the shore, likely trees, bowed

⁷² Quoted from a letter by Shannon Fraser to Dr. MacCallum, July 24, 1917, Library and Archives Canada (MG30 D284 Tom Thomson Collection, Vol. 1)

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survivors of countless conflagrations, winter storms. Tom canoes towards them. Through the haze, he sees a narrows between two pine-covered hills, a passage through to a distant blue shore, an ingress, an invitation.

*Some said to hill, and some to glen,
Their wonderous course had been;
But ne'er in the haunts of living men
Again was Thomas seen.*⁷³

At three P.M. Tom's canoe will be found overturned, three-quarters of a mile from where he set out. Eight days later his body will be found. He will be buried at the little cemetery at Canoe Lake, cottager Martin Blecher Sr. reading the service. At the request of his family, he will be disinterred and reburied at Leith—or was supposed to be—sharing a grave with his infant brother James, his maternal grandfather Kenneth Matheson.

When he hears the news, A.Y. Jackson writes J.E.H. MacDonald, posts his condolences:

I have heard nothing further about Tom, but conclude it is only too true. I know how keenly you will feel his loss. You had very much in common. Tom, though he was a man of few words, often expressed his confidence in you and in the future

⁷³ *Thomas the Rhymer*, Sir Walter Scott, <http://allpoetry.com/Thomas-the-Rhymer>

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*of your work, and without you he never would have associated himself with our little school. Well, it is a blessing that the last years of his life were devoted as they were. He has blazed a trail where others may follow, and we will never go back to the old days again.*⁷⁴

Back in Toronto, in Thornhill, in England, in Halifax, Tom's friends will mourn. They will promote his work, show it along with their own, ensure any profits go to his parents, siblings. Tom's family mourns as well, wonder whether Tom was lonely on his own, wish they wrote him more despite his disinclination to reply.

Although Lawren Harris and J.E.H. MacDonald are broken for a time—a nervous breakdown, a stroke—and A.Y. Jackson and Fred Varley are overseas, the Hot Mushers will persevere, become the legendary Group of Seven, the preeminent school of painters in Canada for the twentieth century.

A decade after Tom's death, their foothold in Canada established, The Group of Seven exhibit in England, the motherland, to great acclaim.

The Observer, London, "The palace of arts at Wembley" by P.G. Konody

May 24, 1925

⁷⁴ Quotes from a letter by A.Y. Jackson to J.E.H. MacDonald, August 26. 1917, Library and Archives Canada.

Canada has not only gained artistic independence, but can boast of a real national school that owes little of nothing to European influence, is racy of the soil, and expresses Canadian Landscape and Canadian life in an idiom of its own. Canadian art has progressed with rapid strides.

Not more than seven years ago, when I visited Toronto and Montreal, the pioneers of this movement, the “Group of Seven” who had just lost their leader, Tom Thomson, the artistic “discoverer” of Canadian landscape, were still an isolated clique fighting bravely against the prejudice of the ignorant public. Now at Wembley, they have it all their own way. They practically fill the two rooms with their daring, decorative, and intensely stimulating landscapes.

The movement seems to have attracted many new recruits in Toronto, and to have spread to Montreal. I know of no European school that shows such unity of effort, on a similar combination of nature-worship and respect for the laws that rule pictorial design, or a similar balance of representational element and abstract aesthetic principles, as are found in the work of these Canadians.⁷⁵

Despite many books about Thomson and his art, he remains as enigmatic and inaccessible as many found him in life: a solitary genius, remote, reticent: an

⁷⁵ The Observer, London, May 24, 1925 “The palace of arts at Wembley” by P.G. Konody, Library and Archives Canada

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unschooled prodigy, harsh, brittle, brilliant, uncouth. Questions around his death buzz about his life, his art, distract from his accomplishments: hundreds of sketches, dozens of canvases in less than four years, a vibrant, startlingly original style that continues to influence artists, capture the imagination of a nation, a century after his death. Now Thomson's paintings adorn the walls major Canadian galleries, tour the world to acclaim, adorn calendars, coffee mugs, T-shirts. The remaining private paintings are auctioned for millions, more than enough to "pay for some paint."

Tom has been simplified in death, details erased, attributes, incidents harmonized to suit his biographer's designs. The paintings though remain unchanged. Waves slap at the rocky shoreline, the scent of the sun on the fallen pine needles, wind takes form in the trees.