

WHO IS TOM THOMSON?

Tom Thomson (1877–1917) was a Canadian artist primarily known for his iconic paintings of the Canadian wilderness, but perhaps best remembered for the curious circumstances attached to his premature death on July 8, 1917 at Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park. Thomson directly influenced a small group of Canadian painters that included the likes of A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley and Arthur Lismer, all of whom would come to be members of the storied Group of Seven, sometimes known as the ‘Algonquin School’.

Tom Thomson is often, incorrectly, credited as being a member himself, or even a founding member, of the Group of Seven, but this is not the case—Thomson had died two years before the Group formally established itself in 1919.

Thomson was born in Claremont, a bit east of Toronto and grew up in Leith, a small village near Owen Sound. He enjoyed a privileged childhood with many opportunities to indulge in music, poetry and drawing. He also embraced a deep and abiding love of nature, cultivated as a result of his connection with renowned naturalist Dr William Brodie, a distant relative, who often accompanied Thomson on hikes through Toronto’s ravines (MacGregor 17). In 1899 Thomson apprenticed at a foundry owned by a family friend in Owen Sound where he was soon fired for what was described as habitual tardiness, but may have been a personality conflict between Thomson and the firm’s foreman (Klages 20). In the



Grip was the name of a commercial design firm where Thomson worked in Toronto early in his career and where he met many of the artists who would form the Group of Seven after his death. J.E.H. MacDonald was senior artist at the firm at that time.

same year, Thomson volunteered to fight in Africa in the Second Boer War, but was refused on medical grounds. (Thomson was later refused entry into the Canadian Expeditionary Force for service in the First World War for similar reasons.)

In 1900, Thomson enrolled in a business college in Chatham, but dropped out just months later to join his older brother, George, who managed a similar school in Seattle. There, Thomson met and enjoyed a brief romance with Alice Lambert, a much younger girl who, by some (unsubstantiated) reports, is said to have rejected his proposal of marriage (Klages 21).

In 1904, Tom returned to Canada, possibly heartbroken, settled in Toronto and joined Legg Brothers, a photoengraving firm, as an illustrator (Klages 21). He began to take art classes in the evenings at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design, where he studied drawing (MacGregor 22). He also took free lessons from William Cruikshank, a member of the Royal Academy of Arts, and under Cruikshank's tutelage produced his first oil painting in 1907 (Klages 21, MacGregor 22).

In late 1908/early 1909, Thomson left Legg Bros. and moved to Grip Ltd, an artistic design firm where several future members of the Group of Seven were similarly employed. It was on the recommendation of a co-worker, Tom McLean, that Thompson first visited Algonquin Park in the spring of 1912. Captivated by the uniquely Canadian landscape, he returned to the Park in the summer to take photographs and to attempt oil painting *en plein air* (Klages 23). These early trips inspired him to follow the lead of fellow artists in producing oil sketches of natural scenes on small, rectangular panels that were suitably sized for portability while travelling.



Northern Lake, 1912.

By the fall of that same year, Thomson had left Grip with a number of his colleagues to work at a storied Toronto printing firm, Rous & Mann. Surrounded by supportive friends and colleagues, his artistic skill—and public recognition of his unique talent—grew. He exhibited his first piece, *Northern Lake*, with the Ontario Society of Artists in 1913, and later sold the painting to the Ontario government (Klages 24).

Tom spent much of the next five years travelling back and forth from Toronto to Algonquin Park, where he busied himself drawing, painting, fishing and meeting the locals, including Algonquin Park Ranger Mark Robinson, Canoe Lake cottagers Martin Bletcher and his sister Louisa and Mowat Lodge proprietors Shannon and Annie Fraser. It was during this time that Tom met Winnifred Trainor, a woman who frequently summered in the Park with her family (McConnell, *Canadian Mysteries*). Thomson was later rumoured to have been engaged to Ms Trainor, though these accounts were never conclusively proven (*Canadian Mysteries*).

In 1914 the National Gallery of Canada began to notice, and to collect Thomson's paintings, which signaled a turning point in his career. Many of Thomson's major works, including *Northern River*, *The Jack Pine* and *The West Wind* began as rough sketches before being rendered as large oil paintings at Thomson's 'studio'—an old utility shack with a wood-burning stove on the grounds of the Studio Building, an artist's enclave in Rosedale, Toronto.

Thomson's painting bears some stylistic similarities with the work of European post-impressionists such as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, whose work he may have known from books or visits to art galleries. Other key influences were the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, styles he would most certainly have known from his work in the commercial graphic arts at Grip and Rous & Mann.

Thomson peaked creatively between 1914 and 1917 with the financial assistance of Toronto physician James MacCallum, whose patronage enabled Thomson's transition from graphic designer to full-time professional painter. Described as having an 'idiosyncratic palette', Thomson's control of colour was remarkable. He often mixed available pigments to create unusual colours, which made his distinctive palette along with his brushwork instantly recognizable regardless of the subject of his work.

Thomson disappeared during a canoeing trip on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park on July 8, 1917. His body was discovered in the water eight days later and recovered by Park Rangers George Rowe and Mark Dickson. Dr Goldwin Howland of Toronto (Davies) later examined the body at the request of

Ranger Mark Robinson, noting a bruise on Thomson's right temple, 'evidently caused by falling on a rock', but ultimately cited drowning as the official cause of death (Robinson). The coroner, Dr Arthur E. Ranney of North Bay, confirmed Howland's conclusion that the drowning had been accidental. Thomson's body was first interred in Mowat Cemetery near Canoe Lake, but under the apparent direction of his older brother, George, the body was allegedly exhumed two days later, to be re-interred in the family plot beside the Presbyterian Church in Leith on July 21.

To this day, rumours persist that Thomson's death was no accident. The tell-tale bruising on his temple, the fishing line wrapped around his leg, and reports of altercations between Thomson and Martin Bletcher, led to several of Thomson's friends and some of the Canoe Lake locals to question the official cause of death. Others, including Mark Robinson and Shannon Fraser, took issue with the circumstances of the burial. They were convinced that the Thomson family buried an empty casket in Leith, and that Thomson's body remained in its original grave in Algonquin Park. Requests to exhume Thomson's grave were denied by the family, perpetuating the mystery and providing biographers with ample fodder for speculation (Archives).

For artist and Thomson biographer Harold Town, the brevity of Thomson's career hinted at an artistic evolution never fully realized. Town cites the painting *Unfinished Sketch* as 'the first completely abstract work in Canadian art,' a painting that, whether or not intended as a purely non-objective work, presages the innovations of Abstract expressionism.

In September 1917, the artists J.E.H. MacDonald and John

W. Beatty, assisted by area residents, erected a memorial cairn at Hayhurst Point on Canoe Lake, where Thomson had died. The cost was covered by MacCallum. In the summer of 2004 another historical marker honouring Thomson was moved from its previous location in the centre of Leith to the graveyard in which Thomson is reported to have been buried.

Tom Thomson's mysterious death has, ever since, captured the imagination of creative artists, who have used their own art forms as well as existing letters, interviews and newspaper reports, to put forth their own interpretations of events. During the 1970s, Canadian experimental filmmaker Joyce Wieland based a movie (*The Far Shore*, 1976) on the life and death of Tom Thomson. His death is also referenced in The Tragically Hip's recording of the song 'Three Pistols'.

Since his death, Thomson's work has grown exponentially in value and popularity. In 2002, the National Gallery of Canada staged a major retrospective of his work, according Thomson the same level of recognition that had been lavished on Picasso, Renoir and the Group of Seven in previous years. On 3 May 1990 Canada Post issued 'The West Wind, Tom Thomson, 1917' in the Masterpieces of Canadian art series. The 50 cent stamps are perforated 13 x 13.5 and were printed by Ashton-Potter Limited in Toronto.

Sources:

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