

**The True North:**

**Canadian Landscape Painting 1896-1939**

Michael TOOBY

with essays by:

Robert STACEY, Charles C. HILL,

Maria TIPPETT and Esther TRÉPANIÉ

Barbican Art Gallery, 1991

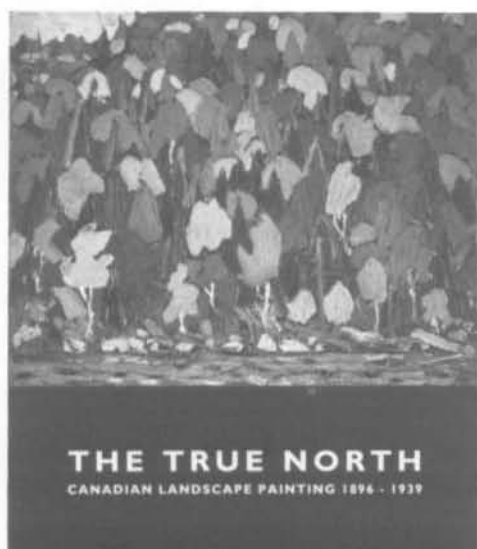
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Our initial reaction to an exhibition of Group of Seven *et al.* landscape painting shipped over to Britain this year might be to roll our eyes and swat our collective forehead. But, the companion catalogue to this show is a serious, scholarly effort by writers intent on taking (yet another) look at this period and its over-riding subject: the unpopulated, Pre-Cambrian Shield region, mainly in Ontario. Michael Tooby, a British scholar, has taken an interest in Canadian art, sparked by his exploration of the Sheffield-Canada connection with artists such as Arthur Lismer, F.H. Varley and Elizabeth Nutt.<sup>1</sup> He organized and selected the exhibition, edited the catalogue and wrote its introduction. In this introduction he reveals a familiarity with the period and its artists that is as deep and detailed as that of the best Canadian art historians. His fascination with and enthusiasm for the works are clearly conveyed. Tooby does not express any defensiveness about the project, feeling the selection to be obvious, and he hopes that the exhibition will lead to further debate, enquiry and recognition for Canadian art in Britain.

The closest we get to any philosophical discussion of the "true north" of the show and catalogue's title is in the first essay, "The Myth — and Truth — of the True North" by Robert Stacey. He begins by leading his reader on an engaging romp through various thorny questions surrounding myth, history, identity, and how these turn back on them-

selves and intertwine with one another. *Afficionados* of art history might find his description of art history as "a kind of scar-tissue of conflicting evidence" slightly unappealing. But certainly Stacey's examination of the accepted and often erroneous 'evidence' we have concerning this period goes a long way to set the record straight on the Group of Seven's "discovering the north country." He also points out, quoting Margaret Atwood, that "north is relative;" Lismer and Varley, emigrating from Sheffield to Toronto, actually moved southward. His essay also looks at the development of Ontario's near-north, as well as the relationship between the fine art work of the Group (and their precursors and contemporaries) and their commercial art. He then investigates the question of the north forming a cornerstone of the Canadian psyche, with particular reference to the Group's particular construction.

Stacey seems to align himself with the Group and others with compasses oriented northward.<sup>2</sup> He quotes Canadian artist Ron Bloore in conversation last year, denigrating the Group's nationalist program, and then more or less dismisses Bloore as a modernist whose work "has never really captured the soul of Canada." (p. 59) Stacey quotes Bloore speaking in the 1990's and he is a little older and crankier than the Ron Bloore I listened to as an undergraduate at York University in 1974, when he could hold a room of students enthralled as he ranted about the unfair domination of the Group and their outlook in Canadian art. He could speak for at least an hour in front of a slide of Tom Thomson's *The West Wind* (catalogue no. 113 in this show), without a pause except to inhale on a cigarette. Undoubtedly, this experience influenced my thinking. Therefore, Robert Stacey's position reads *to me* as an exhortation to lie down and give up, letting the machinery of the myth of the north roll over us, unchecked, forever.



Charles Hill's essay on the National Gallery and its role in this period, is a well-written, straightforward account of the efforts of NGC directors Edmund Walker and Eric Brown on behalf of the artists in discussion, at the time of their respective tenures. The gallery's purchases of the Group's paintings and Brown's support of their work in his lectures and writing annoyed the academic members of the Royal Canadian Academy. The issue came to a head when Brown included a large proportion of Group of Seven work in the now infamous 1924 Wembley exhibition in England. It is a pleasure to listen to Hill's "voice" again in print, especially since his knowledge of the topic is so detailed and his expression so lucid.

Skipping over the three prairie provinces, the catalogue then moves to the west coast for a discussion of Emily Carr by Maria Tippett. Choosing to focus on Carr's 1935, *A Rushing Sea of Undergrowth*, Tippett seeks to account for this work, in terms of the "causes and conditions" that brought it about, since she considers it to be an "historical event." (p.87) Tippett's point that no previous painter chose the rain forest interior as their subject, but

used the landscape only as a backdrop or as incidental details while focussing on other concerns is well taken. Even in Carr's own work, the forest landscape does not begin as a subject *per se* until late in her career. Although Tippett obviously feels a great enthusiasm for Carr's work, and even, I think, some empathy for her personality, her language in this essay is vague, her logic jumpy, and the general tone almost argumentative. Claiming that Carr viewed nature in two ways, first as the Indians did and secondly as a Victorian (p.87), she doesn't explain how the Indians viewed nature, something with which a British audience certainly might not be familiar. With reference to the Victorian point of view, Tippett says it "regarded the forest wilderness with fear and related that fear to God" (p.88); but I can't help wondering in what sense that fear was related to God. Writing of Carr's c.1931 *Blunden Harbour* (not in the exhibition), and attempting to explain how she feels Carr was trying to convey her understanding of the Indians' relationship to a guardian spirit and to the land, she says that Carr "was able to imbue the scene with a surreal awesomeness." (p.88) Something more incisive and analytical is required to make Tippett's point; and this is, unfortunately, typical of her writing in this essay. We end up with a distorted version of Emily Carr, as someone who drops and picks up religions as coolly as changing a perfume, without doubt or anguish.

The last essay in the catalogue is "The Expression of a Difference: the Milieu of Quebec Art and the Group of Seven," by Esther Trépanier. In this piece, Trépanier makes the point that, historically, Québec painters were never as interested in the empty landscape as were Ontarians, and instead genre painting predominated. In an essay of this length, she is able to only scratch the surface of how Québec was, and is, a different culture and how it related to the landscape in a different

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way. Trépanier's main weakness in her essay (apart from a very poor translation from her original French, which translates many idioms literally and makes for difficult reading) is an over-reliance on quoting others' writing, and not enough of her own pictorial analysis of the paintings. Her piece contains a wealth of quotations from period critics, which is valuable nonetheless to have in published form since many are difficult to find in the original outside Québec.

One sub-topic touched on only briefly and superficially in Trépanier's essay but which merits more emphasis is the 1930's reaction against subjects for art which were not politically relevant. Artists were involved in the left outside Québec and Paraskeva Clark's article "Come Out from Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield," referred to in passing by Trépanier, was, of course, written from Toronto.<sup>3</sup> The conflict over art that was politically *engagé* or aligned, and art that was simply about itself was very intense during the thirties, and shifted emphasis in the 1940's when the possibility of no recognizable subject at all arose in the work of the *Automatistes*. This is not brought out clearly to me in Trépanier's writing.

No Maritime artists are represented in the show and L. L. FitzGerald is the only Prairie painter included. However, none of the essayists mentions his work or his views on landscape. As well, there is very little discussion of David Milne, although twenty-six of his works are in the exhibition. I am not advocating a regional quota system nor an equal time policy for all artists. But perhaps this is where the great white north mystique falls down the most severely for me: it just doesn't explain the experience and expression of artists living in other geological regions of the country. I know of no reference by FitzGerald to living in a northern place, but he loved the prairie landscape (as did C.W. Jefferys, who has three prairie scenes in this exhibition), and he

strove to express his own brand of spirituality in his depictions of it.

Despite my various criticisms, the catalogue is an enjoyable read. It is large and handsome, with many excellent, large-sized colour reproductions. The only flaw in its design is the wide, single column used for all the text. Since it is very difficult for the eye to return such a long distance to the beginning of the next line, it makes reading a little frustrating. The catalogue listings are included under short, descriptive biographies of each artist. No general bibliography has been included since, as Tooby explains, most material would not be available in the U.K. but a reader could search out sources referred to in footnotes.

At the very least, a reader receives an update on some people's thinking on this period. But *The True North* is not — nor does it claim to be — a de-bunking, a re-examination, re-orientation, a deconstruction in any sense, of the works and politics of this period. Since it was conceived to be seen and read abroad, we could lament that people are being exposed, once again, to the empty, Shield landscapes of the 1920's. However, an accompanying, concurrent exhibition at the Barbican focussed on contemporary Canadian art, so *The True North* was not all that Britons saw of our art this year.<sup>4</sup> Although a looser, more comprehensive topic might have provided a broader look at the history of Canadian art, the exhibition would not have been as neat and as focussed. But the artists themselves are not necessarily best served by an exhibition which looks only at one aspect of their views and work.

Do we, as Canadians, really have to deal with an ideology of northeriness? Ultimately, I am not convinced that the *north* is necessarily *true* for everyone in Canada, despite Robert Stacey's formidable arguments and Margaret Atwood's ubiquitousness. I would still tend to pitch my tent in Ron Bloore's camp and

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seek a more pluralistic, regionally-rooted expression, if we're talking about the formation/communication of an identity for Canada.

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#### Notes

1 Tooby has curated an exhibition concentrating on this topic entitled *Our Home and Native Land: Sheffield's Canadian Artists*. It opened at Tooby's home institution, the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield in March 1991 and travelled to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in July, 1991 and to the Art Gallery of Windsor (Ontario) in October 1991.

2 He states on p. 26, for example, "As long as the magnetism of the Shield country retains its hold on our collective imagination, the Group of Seven will be its popular embodiment."

3 The reference is Paraskeva Clark, "Come Out from Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield," *New Frontier*, 1:12 (April, 1937): 16-17. The *New Frontier* was a left-wing Paper, published under the direction of the Communist Party of Canada. It contained writings from Spain by Norman Bethune and published drawings by artists such as Laurence Hyde, Fritz Brandtner and Louis Muhlstock. Due to the strong rise of Fascism in Québec in the 1930's, artists in Québec tended toward Communism more so than those in the other provinces at this time.

4 This exhibition was entitled *Un-Natural Traces: Contemporary Art from Canada*, and was curated by Bruce Ferguson and Carol Brown. The artists included were: Kim Adams, Vicky Alexander, Mowry Baden, Claude-Philippe Benoit, Eleanor Bond, David Buchan, Lynne Cohen, Robin Collyer, Daniel Dion, Angela Grauerholz, Micah Lexier, Ross Muirhead, Claire and Suzanne Paquet, Charles H. Scott, Jana Sterbak, and Jeff Wall.