



TOM THOMSON

Dennis REID (ed.)

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Although it might seem to some that Canadian artist Tom Thomson (1877-1917) has been done to death, an in-depth, scholarly gathering and examination of his work was in fact long overdue. The last major monograph on Thomson was David Silcox and Harold Town's celebratory if somewhat irreverent work, *The Silence and the Storm*, published in 1977. The collaborative 2002 exhibition and its accompanying multi-authored book on our national artist-hero was masterminded by the National Gallery's Curator of Canadian Art, Charles Hill and Art Gallery of Ontario Chief Curator, Dennis Reid. From the outset they must have been determined to avoid the pitfalls that have long plagued the path of those en route to "mapping Tom," (the title of one of the essays in *Tom Thomson*). There is almost no mention in this book, for example, about the murky circumstances of Thomson's tragic, early death – officially by drowning in Canoe

Lake in July of 1917, a few weeks shy of his fortieth birthday. No pop-psych personality analyses, speculations on the artist's love life, personal habits and interests or new possible causes of his demise are put forward, as has been the case in so many other publications on Thomson. Instead we have a serious, straightforward, scholarly look at the context – political, social, economic, aesthetic – and at the paintings. The more mundane facts of his life are kept to a point-form chronology, compiled by Joan Murray.

The approach of individually authored essays was the right one and is laudable. But I think the fear of falling into fulsomeness and the commitment to adhere to a critical focus makes the book just ever so slightly tame and dry in tone, which is lamentable. Nevertheless, this is a hugely important work and achievement. It immediately becomes the authoritative text on the artist, and is a good read. Its design has been carefully considered and the book is physically beautiful and pleasing, while remaining elegant and understated. Every decision and care seems to have been taken to serve and showcase the work of Thomson. The colour in the plates is excellent, which is an achievement in itself. The book is a coffee table tome, but only in the good sense of that term – it is a distinct pleasure to hold and look through. A reader can dip in for only a few moments, or choose to read just one essay at a time, as each provides a separate lens on his production. One could also sit down and read the whole book in one go, then spend time digesting the feast. Amazingly, a full exhibition history for each of the one hundred and forty works has been compiled, which is rare these days when it is so difficult for galleries and museums to muster and allocate resources to the more scholarly, less marketing-oriented aspects of a project.

All the myth-making that has gone on around Thomson aside, there truly is something in his work itself that compels and moves us to edge closer to him and his thinking – if only we could. How often have I, canoeing along the shore of an Algonquin Park lake, felt embarrassed by my irresistible but maudlin yearnings to paddle where Tom paddled, to see what he saw, hoping to penetrate more deeply the feeling and conviction of his paintings. There is a passion and intensity about his work, the sensuous pushing about of the gorgeously coloured, stiff but malleable paint – which Thomson used so effectively as a carrier for feeling, ambition, ideals, even for a sense of place. He seemed able to create a powerfully concentrated elixir of what David Milne termed “aesthetic kick” (riffing on Clive Bell's invented phrase “aesthetic emotion”), but using stylistic means very different from those of Milne. In reading the five main essays of this book, I felt the underlying commitment and excitement of each author's response to Thomson's work, but I also had the sense of this being constantly held in check by intellectual rigor. None of the writers could afford to let down his guard for fear of falling victim, as have others in the past, to the overwhelming fumes from the spell of the Thomson myth.

It is a powerfully bewitching myth that can lead people to do things even more foolish than composing purple prose. I myself, I confess, have not been immune: I recall one summer several years ago on a canoe trip in Algonquin Park when I suddenly felt utterly compelled to change my planned route and head into an area denoted on the map as “under-maintained,” which turned out to be a dangerously brutal euphemism indeed. But I was convinced in a crazily “bushed” manner that I would find the site for Thomson’s *Northern River*, that I would spot that famous black scrim of twisted jackpines with the swampy little waterway opening up behind among the thick, punishing, unchecked growth and almost unpassable “portages.” Surely Tom would have explored this part of the park, and perhaps no art historian had been here before. After several days of exhausting bushwhacking, I emerged in crushed disappointment, concluding, as Dennis Reid tells us coolly on page 79, that *Northern River* is actually an amalgam, a studio concoction that is a summation or paradigm for any and every swampy lake outlet that Thomson paddled. It existed only in the artist’s imagination and despite the purity of our desire and motivation, no effort of ours can take us there in reality; we can only journey towards it by looking at the painting.

Not to be swayed then by the heady, visceral delight of Thomson’s paintings, the delicious colour and paint handling, the sheer radicalness of his project (the sketches particularly are still alive and pack their almost violent aesthetic kick), the writers remain cool-headed during their own journey. How *did* the five male authors of this book fare on their quest to re-examine the work of Thomson, giving the reader all the context they could muster, and keeping their focus scholarly as they penetrated more and more deeply into the dangerous mire of Thomson-land, armed only with their antidote of intellectual rigour and critical focus as their defense?

The first of the party is Andrew Hunter, who is an artist, a curator and a writer, known for projects that obliterate and delightfully confuse old boundaries between/among traditional art and artifacts, the curated exhibition, and installation. Hunter does not tell the reader at the outset of his essay “Mapping Tom,” what it will encompass or try to achieve. A reader must just forge ahead and move on from one of his three subheadings – *Going North*, *Gone Fishing*, *Industrial Park* – to the next. While many of Hunter’s points are fascinating, his essay would have benefited from some basic infrastructure elements, such as an introduction and a conclusion. Unless, however, it was purposely meant to just unravel like a “ripping yarn of derring-do” recounted in one of the fireside lumberjack songs Hunter speculates that Thomson knew. Hunter does raise questions and make statements that are new and interesting; for example, that much of the underpinning of Thomson’s approach to nature can be

found in Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (of 1653), which Thomson owned and read thoroughly. Hunter postulates that many of Thomson's paintings could have been executed at good fishing spots. In fact, he tells us that Thomson took his fishing as seriously as he took his painting, which I found a shock to contemplate, although apparently Thomson was an outstanding fisherman.

Charles Hill notes in his essay that when A.Y. Jackson first visited Mowat Lodge in Algonquin Park in 1914 he wrote to J.E.H. MacDonald that: "It appears that Tom Thomson is some fisherman, quite noted around here." The importance of Thomson's fishing and his overall ability to thrive as a woodsman is also touched on by Dennis Reid, and he quotes the Canadian art historian Donald Buchanan, writing in 1950: "Thomson's originality as a landscape artist and his skill as a woodsman developed hand in hand, one as it were deriving sustenance from the other." So the importance of fishing and life in the woods to Thomson is not an entirely new idea, but is one that is brought to the fore in this book especially as the integration of all aspects of life was an Arts and Crafts ideal. It contributes to the feeling that the authors of this book are attempting to give us a properly reconstituted Thomson, one without overlays and distortions. The texts prompt the reader to re-think the role of Thomson's art in his life as one distinct element, but not the central or only meaningful activity. It could also be said that the same needs to be done for J.E.H. MacDonald, who integrated design, writing, painting and other activities in his life in accordance with the Arts and Crafts paradigm, yet he is remembered today in the general culture solely as a painter.

Independent curator and writer Robert Stacey follows Hunter with an essay that focusses on Thomson's work as an applied artist. It is a beautifully written text, dense with detail about the artist's early life in commercial art, especially when he came to Toronto in late 1908 or early 1909, working first at Grip and then at Rous and Mann. Stacey has carefully reconstructed Thomson's milieu and activities in a highly informative manner. Things have changed so much in the last century that the old intertwined nature of art and applied art needs to be explained as these are now completely separate fields of study and practice. Thomson was not, after all, trained as an artist and it was only through the rather technical activity of commercial art that he met artists in Toronto, including those who would form the Group of Seven. It was these fellow artists who encouraged him to paint. In fact A.Y. Jackson and J.E.H. MacDonald almost had to twist Thomson's arm to get him to devote time and concentrated effort to his painting. His serious production as a fine artist dates pretty much from only the last five years of his life, beginning in 1912 when he was thirty-five. Charles Hill writes in his essay: "There was no precedent [pre-1912] in his life to predict the passion with which he would now pursue his art." Everyone was surprised, maybe even Thomson himself.

The middle essay is by Dennis Reid, who took charge of the overall conception and editing of the book (while Charles Hill managed the curating of the exhibition). Reid sets out to explore the Arts and Crafts movement as it manifested itself in Toronto when Thomson lived there from late 1908 until his death in 1917. In a nutshell, the movement was centred on a rather utopian vision of an artistic/craft community that was non-hierarchical and led to lives that were aestheticized and in accord with nature. Reid holds that its ideals and underlying notions were if not wholly, at least partially absorbed by Thomson. He believes that this helps to explain the integrated power and passionate resonance he feels in Thomson's work, where design, art, the artist's beliefs and lived experience come together so wonderfully.

Historian John Wadland then takes the stage with his essay called "Tom Thomson's Places," that attempts to reconstruct how Thomson would have seen Algonquin Park in the years he painted (and fished) there, from 1912 to 1917. Providing great detail and adopting a "curious eye" (a term he borrows from cultural theorist Irit Rogoff), Wadland seeks to identify the artist's cultural baggage, and speculates that Thomson was acutely aware of the scale and brutality of the logging industry in Algonquin Park. He also suggests that it is highly unlikely that Thomson experienced the area as wilderness at all. This is certainly a major debunking of the myth of Thomson travelling through the untrammelled wilds and goes a long way to redress the sad state of affairs whereby, in Wadland's words, Thomson (and his art) has been reduced to a logo for the "north."

The fifth of the main essays is Charles Hill's on Tom Thomson's paintings. Hill painstakingly constructed the most accurate chronology of Thomson's paintings that he could establish and used this timeline to structure his essay. As a result of his intense observation and analysis, one develops a distinct, almost palpable sense of the paintings themselves, ranged round a room for our contemplation, season by season, with the winter studio paintings following on the small sketches done in the earlier part of the year. The colour reproductions follow the same sequence, and it is very easy to hold one's finger in the plates section and flip back and forth while reading Hill's essay, to follow in his footsteps, or rather eye-steps (if that were a word). Hill's analyses and ruminations on each work always ring true, and a reader can imagine him speaking to us spontaneously in front of each painting, speculating on what it was that interested Thomson in the scene and how he set up his composition and laid on his colours.

As well as maps, a bibliography, a list of exhibitions and an index, the book publishes all of Thomson's known letters, which are illustrated with reproductions of related photographs and drawings. There is a most informative chapter on the artist's materials by the two conservators who worked on the exhibition for

the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery, Sandra Webster-Cook and Anne Ruggles. Virtually no stone, it would seem, was left unturned, except those that would have exposed the writhing snakes of populist conjecture and myth-making. No effort was spared, and we are the beneficiaries.

Was nothing missed? Thomson's reputed love of reading, especially poetry, and of music (and how these related to his painting), do come to mind. Other books on the artist mention these but perhaps it is too difficult to substantiate any connections. One other aspect not touched on by any author here but dealt with previously for example by Silcox and Town, is the notion of Thomson's composition and pictorial space being derived from the "canoe-eye view." The term was previously used by Robert Stacey in writing on Frances Anne Hopkins. Perhaps this topic was not considered important or germane by these authors.

In conclusion, the book has accomplished even more than its principals likely set out to achieve, which can happen with truly well-conceived projects. It is a model, an exemplar, an inspiration in methodology, design and production, writing, scope, and scholarship.

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