



Homer Watson and *The Pioneer Mill*¹

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A Story

The narrative's details are specific to a time and place, but its structure is old and clichéd: a variation on a biographical conceit common since at least the time of Vasari. A young man in a backwater village longs to be an artist but the circumstances are unfavourable. His father dies of typhus when he is only six years old, leaving a widow with five young children and a failing business. His formal education is rudimentary. The village schoolmaster reprimands him for drawing caricatures in his school notebook. He abandons the classroom at the age of eleven to take on a series of manual labour jobs.

His greatest desire is to draw and paint, but his village is too small to attract an art teacher and has never produced an artist. His family owns no works of art and so until his late teens he must teach himself by studying illustrations in books and magazines. At the age of eleven he receives a watercolour kit. Four years later a sympathetic aunt gives him his first set of oil paints. During his teenage years he risks the opprobrium of neighbours by forsaking regular paid employment to devote himself to sketching in and around his village. In this, his mother and his devoted sister support him financially. At sixteen, having largely abandoned a juvenile flirtation with portraying polar bears and other exotic subject matter, he sells a painting to a doting aunt and uncle. The subject is a boy playing with a homemade waterwheel.

Our budding artist shows his work at local fairs, where he wins occasional and modest prizes. His ambitions are fuelled, however, by a trip he makes to Toronto, the nearest large city, when he is seventeen years old. Later, at nineteen, a trustee of his father's estate arranges an advance on his inheritance. With this small but providential windfall he moves back to Toronto for several months. There he meets professional artists and views copies of Old Master paintings and casts of well-known sculptures at the

Detail, Homer Watson, *A Coming Storm in the Adirondacks*, 1879, oil on canvas, 85.7 × 118.3 cm, Coll. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of George Hague. (Photo: Denis Farley)

Museum of Natural History and Fine Arts, established in the Normal School in 1857 by Egerton Ryerson. Possibly encouraged by John Fraser and Lucius O'Brien, two of Canada's most prominent artists, the young man visits New York state from 1875 (possibly 1876) until late in 1877. His travels there are known in only the vaguest detail, but he probably sees canvases by members of the popular Hudson River School. In any case he goes sketching in the Adirondack Mountains and along the Susquehanna, Mohawk, and Hudson rivers: terrain that was central to the Hudson River aesthetic. Five decades later he will recall that during this trip a New York painter "kindly offered to teach me how to use a maul stick [sic] and spread paint on a palette."² This is minimal compensation for his lack of previous training.

And then, just over two years later, near the beginning of 1880, at the age of twenty-five, our youthful artist submits a painting to a national exhibition intended to showcase the best of his country's art. He almost immediately regrets his temerity, but too late; the painting is on its way from his village to the exhibition. There, he is certain, it will compare disastrously to the work of the other participants, most of whom have established reputations. "Of course I knew nothing about painting," he would later assert, "and how I got through the job of making a picture ... I do not know ... Any means to an end, and there was nothing of line, pattern, or design in those days; merely the feeling of sentiment."³

The young man is Homer Ransford Watson (1855–1936). The painting is *The Pioneer Mill* (1880; Fig. 1). The village is Doon, founded in 1834 on the Grand River in Waterloo County, near the town of Preston and today a suburb of Kitchener. The 1880 exhibition, held at the Clarendon Hotel in Ottawa, is the inaugural showing by the Canadian (soon to be the Royal Canadian) Academy of Arts, which had been founded that same year. Decades later, Watson recalled that when his unnamed American acquaintance had been teaching him how to use a mahlstick, "I got so impatient to rush back home and use all this knowledge that I could not stay in the city any longer. So home I went and commenced to paint with faith, ignorance and delight. A subject that popped into my mind was 'The Pioneer Mill'."⁴ And so, after a history of disadvantages, setbacks and isolation, the culmination of the narrative – now fully recognizable as a standard parable of untutored artistic genius – can be given in Watson's own words:

While I was working away at this picture a friend of our family wise and old in years and quite a cultivated gentleman who was a qualified lawyer engaged in manufacturing twine almost daily advised me to quit the nonsense of going in for art in a country like Canada. "Quit it and come into the office and become a business man." On



1 | Homer Watson, *The Pioneer Mill*, 1880, oil on canvas, 86 × 127 cm, Royal Collection Trust. (Photo: © HM Queen Elizabeth II)

nearing home [some weeks after he had submitted the painting to the Canadian Academy exhibition] I saw this gentleman on the road in front of his establishment reading the *Toronto Globe*. Seeing me he advanced waving the paper and putting out his hand he exclaimed, “I take it all back. Go ahead and paint. Look here,” and there it was in flaming headlines in the *Globe*, “Country boy paints picture bought by Princess Louise.” So that was that ... ⁵

The painting did find a purchaser, although that supporter was Canada’s governor-general, the Marquis of Lorne, rather than his wife, Princess Louise, as Watson incorrectly recalled. It was a gift for Lorne’s mother-in-law, Queen Victoria, who hung it in Windsor Castle. There it remains to this day.⁶ The purchase money was equal to Watson’s previous two years of earnings. He used some of it to marry his long-time fiancée, Roxanna (Roxa) Bechtel (1855–1918) on 1 January 1881, thereby symbolically launching himself into adulthood. He was two weeks short of his twenty-sixth birthday.

Lorne was not alone in his admiration of *The Pioneer Mill*; newspaper reviewers who singled it out for comment unreservedly approved of it. For example, three days after the exhibition opened, the *Globe* described the painting as “an admirable landscape, wonderfully truthful in design, with rich but quiet colouring; rocks, water, sky and foliage are all strong and realistic.” Ottawa’s *Daily Free Press* considered it “a pleasant picture for the eye to dwell upon.”⁷ But Watson’s recitation of the *Globe*’s headline, “Country Boy Paints Picture Bought by Princess Louise,” sounds almost too good to be true – and in fact that’s exactly what it was. The announcement of the painting’s purchase in the 8 March 1880 issue occupied only part of a single paragraph in what was otherwise a long, multi-column report.⁸ Contrary to Watson’s romantically embroidered memory, the article’s title made no reference whatsoever to him. Nor did the headlines of any other reviews, whether in the *Globe* or the *Mail* (both, Toronto) or in the newspapers of the towns near Doon. Watson may perhaps have been thinking of an image of *The Pioneer Mill* that was printed in the 1 May 1880 issue of the *Canadian Illustrated News*, almost five weeks after the Canadian Academy exhibition ended.⁹ The full-page illustration was, after all, an impressive tribute to the painting’s power, and its date of publication accorded with Watson’s false memory of the *Globe* headline.

Also contrary to Watson’s memories, none of the reviews referred to him as a “country boy.” The *Canadian Spectator* did ask how it was possible that the art of painting should flourish “among men who are of humble parentage – men who have not received a classical or liberal education?” – but the reviewer was referring to Canadian artists in general. “Genius,” he wrote, “fills a void which education cannot do. Among the founders of the great European schools of painting were men of humble origin, yet men upon whose heads it pleased Heaven to accumulate gifts and graces not generally bestowed upon mortals.”¹⁰ Thus, although the phrase “country boy” was not used, at least the gist of Watson’s memory was accurate. That same year (1880), reviewing his comparably large oil entitled *A Coming Storm in the Adirondacks* at the Art Association of Montreal, two newspapers described him as a “genius comparatively unaided by culture” and a “back woods” figure who had enjoyed “no advantages for the study of art but those furnished by dame nature.”¹¹ Refrains like these would become a central facet of Watson’s reputation, repeated in published appraisals throughout his long life as well as after his death.¹²

However, notwithstanding having almost no formal training, and despite what his autobiographical obscurity-to-sudden-fame story claimed, Watson was certainly not an unknown upstart at the time of the opening of the first Canadian Academy exhibition. He had been elected to the Ontario Society of Artists as a draughtsman and designer two years earlier (in April 1878), first



2 | Homer Watson, *A Coming Storm in the Adirondacks*, 1879, oil on canvas, 85.7 × 118.3 cm, Coll. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of George Hague. (Photo: Denis Farley)

exhibited there the following month (three paintings that most of the Toronto newspapers considered interesting¹³), and in June changed his membership status from draughtsman and designer to painter. He exhibited with the OSA again in December, and yet again (four paintings) in May 1879. On that occasion the *Globe*, while conceding that he was “a comparatively new member of the Society and a young painter,” devoted more than 500 words to him and encouragingly remarked that he was “very rapidly coming to the front in the estimation both of the public and his fellow-artists.”¹⁴ The next year – only two months after Lorne’s purchase of *The Pioneer Mill* – Watson’s *On the Susquehanna*, one of four paintings he would exhibit at the OSA in 1881, was bought for the Ontario art collection.

Nor did the dimensions of Watson’s paintings from these early years suggest someone who was feeling his way with hesitation. He had begun producing impressively large canvases in about 1877. The modesty of *The Pioneer Mill*’s subject is thus not reflected in its size (86 × 128 cm). Its dimensions are in fact almost identical to those of two earlier canvases: *The Castellated Cliff* (1879; 88 × 126 cm; National Gallery of Canada) and *A Coming Storm in the Adirondacks* (1879; 86 × 118 cm; The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Fig. 2). In short, it seems unlikely that when Watson submitted



3 | Homer Watson, *The Stone Road*, 1881, oil on canvas, 91.5 × 129.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

The Pioneer Mill to the Canadian Academy exhibition he would have been as trepidatious as he later claimed. It was, though, an enthralling story, and one that cemented his enduring reputation as a *wunderkind* of Canadian art.

Watson's importance as an artist was reinforced when, twelve months after buying *The Pioneer Mill*, Lorne purchased two more of his paintings – *An April Day* and *The Last of the Drouth* [Drought] – from the five that he showed with the Royal Canadian Academy's second annual exhibition.¹⁵ A year later, in April 1882, he was elected to membership in the Academy, submitting *Down in the Laurentides* (1882; NGC) as his diploma picture. With the \$400 from his 1881 sales to Lorne, Watson bought a two-story house originally built for Adam Ferrie, a key figure in the founding of Watson's hometown of Doon.¹⁶ As *The Arion* newspaper (Toronto) noted in April 1881, "Mr. Homer Watson seems to have plucked up courage and taken heart from the approval his 'Old Mill' [sic] met with last year," and observed that a recent large oil was "a very honest and truthful rendering ... [that] will go far to convince the sceptical mind of the average Canadian visitor to the exhibition, that it is possible for a Canadian pastoral landscape to possess beauty, and the



4 | Homer Watson, *The Old Mill and Stream*, 1879, oil on canvas, 60 × 88 cm, Collection Castle Kilbride, Baden, Ontario. (Photo: Homer Watson House & Gallery)

power to move the soul.”¹⁷ In the four years following the 1880 exhibition Watson would paint some of his most compelling, accomplished, deeply felt and magisterially individual compositions, including *The Stone Road* (1881; NGC; Fig. 3), *Down in the Laurentides*, *A Cornfield* (1883; NGC), and *Near the Close of a Stormy Day* (1884; Winnipeg Art Gallery). These were the impressive opening steps in a career that would lead to the presidency of the Canadian Art Club (1907–11) and of the RCA itself (1918–22). Cinderella stories don’t get much better than this.

Yet, if Watson and others presented the success of *The Pioneer Mill* as an exemplification of the cliché of inexplicable, untrained genius, the painting derived from a rich confluence of factors. These included: broad aesthetic and cultural trends; the economic development of southern Ontario; relationships between rural and urban realities, expectations and attitudes; and the personal histories of Watson and his forebears. The remainder of this essay explores these interrelated issues.

The Omnipresent Image: Water-Wheel Mills in North American Culture

Abandoned mills driven by water wheels – especially mills powered by vertically-mounted breastshot and undershot wheels (the most stereotypically familiar types)¹⁸ – were favourite motifs for Watson throughout the last



5 | Homer Watson, *Landscape with Mill and Cows by Moonlight*, ca. 1875–87, pen and black ink, dry brush and wash on cardboard, 11.5 × 9.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

quarter century of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. Along with other types of mills, they feature in large and small canvases dated to or around 1879, the year after his return from New York (Fig. 4); there are numerous paintings from the following three decades, and several undated drawings (Fig. 5).¹⁹ After famously showing *The Pioneer Mill* in 1880 Watson contributed similar subjects to a number of exhibitions. These included the important annual displays mounted by the Royal Canadian Academy (1884, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1890, 1897, 1898, and 1903), the 1886 London Colonial and



6 | Homer Watson, *The Pioneer Mill*, 1890, etching in dark brown on wove paper, 33.4 × 44.5 cm, plate 30.2 × 41.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

Indian Exhibition (*The Saw Mill*), and the Toronto Industrial Exhibition in 1890 (*The Saw Mill*). Earlier, at the 1879 Toronto Industrial Exhibition, he had showed *The Haunted Mill*: “an old brown mill rapidly going to decay,” according to a reviewer.²⁰ *The Flood Gate* (1900; NGC), arguably his best known and most frequently reproduced painting, is one of many that depict mill subjects but without actually showing buildings. In *The Flood Gate* the focus is on the pond that serviced a mill owned by Watson’s grandfather.²¹

Nor did Watson limit himself to drawing and painting. In 1889–90 he experimented with printmaking, producing not only five small landscapes, but also a large etching of *The Pioneer Mill* (Fig. 6) that he made in the aftermath of seeing the painting in its home at Windsor Castle. (Once again, Lorne was instrumental in promoting Watson’s career. It was he who helped the artist gain access to the room in which the painting was on display.) As the Toronto art dealer John Payne wrote to Watson in 1890, the etchings of *The Pioneer Mill* were “away ahead of the small etchings ... The ‘Pioneer Mill’ is one of your very best subjects.”²² Unfortunately, however, the print sold badly due to a constellation of factors: John Payne’s inexperience in marketing etchings, the high customs duties imposed on imported prints (Watson

had done the work in England), and a serious lack of Canadian support for the Etching Revival.²³ The poor sales had little to do with Payne's accurate evaluation of the subject's attractiveness to members of European and North American society, including the large numbers of visual artists, authors, composers, and lyricists for whom mills were a favourite theme. Although John Ruskin distrusted representations of decaying mills and other workaday architecture because of what he described as their sentimentalization of human poverty and decay,²⁴ many laypeople and critics saw that very sentimentalization as being integral to the appeal of the imagery. Placid wind and water mills were interpreted with striking frequency as symbols of abstract concepts: the passing of time; irreversible change; death. It was an ethos that partook of the same taste for Victorian romanticism that manifested itself in the rushing rivers, precipitous cliffs, and dramatic skies that were endemic to much of Watson's work during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the field of romantic literature, for example, *Scribner's Monthly* did nothing unusual when in 1874, it published a lengthy poem that recalled the glory days of an antiquated grist mill, and linked the building's emotional and psychological resonance to its now deceased owner's home in heaven: "The mill's old murmuring monotone / May now steal up to his ear alone, / Bringing a breath of the Savior's Prayer – / Droning the base to the angels' air – / Hum of the Mill in the golden choir!"²⁵ Outdoing this cloying sentiment was not easy, but Mary Dwinell Chellis managed it in extravagant style in her novel *The Old Mill*, published in Boston in 1884. Chellis's book luxuriates in the travails of a man who, out of despair after the loss of his wife and children, closes down the family's mill, consigning it to a process of evocative decay. 'Neath the Maple by the Mill, a song published in Toronto in about 1881, associates the titular building with the singer's wooing of his sweetheart, revealing only in the final verse that their courtship took place long ago and that the beloved is now dead and buried "neath the maple by the mill." Such unabashedly antimodernist texts and songs continued into the twentieth century, nourished by the collapse of traditional ways beneath the onslaught of the modern world. Adeline Teskey's *Where the Sugar Maple Grows* (1901) was one of many examples; its bucolically telling subtitle was "Idylls of a Canadian Village." Modern ways were also the villains in the immensely popular 1910 song *Down by the Old Mill Stream* (in which "The old mill wheel is silent and has fallen down"), in M. Forsyth Grant's 1912 essay "The Old-time Ontario Farm" (published in the widely circulated *Canadian Magazine*), and Ontario native Wilson Pugsley MacDonald's undated poem "The Old Mill," the concluding stanzas of which describe "phantom millers [who] move in rhyme / Even as when in life, and on clear nights / You

end of human life are unambiguously conflated: “A wreck, beyond repair, the old mill seems, / A type alike of manhood and the time – / Decay o’ercreeeping all his busy schemes: / Himself low buried ’neath the winter rime” (Fig. 7).²⁹ Other views of water-powered mills from yesteryear, prepared by American printmakers such as the prolific John Douglas Woodward, were used less to evoke death than to suggest a bygone rural simplicity that was out of step with the hurly-burly of the modern world. Woodward’s engravings were included in, among other publications, the hugely popular *Picturesque America; or, The Land We Live In*. This was produced as a series of subscription ‘parts’ in 1872–74, and used nostalgic water-wheel imagery to counterpoint views of modern factories. “Labor mars the landscape it enters,” wrote O.B. Bunce, one of *Picturesque America*’s many essayists, “but the mill seems to partake in the spirit of its surroundings, to gain a charm from woods and waters, and to give one.”³⁰ The phenomenally popular Currier & Ives, too, revelled in subjects that presented antiquated, almost pre-industrial structures in pastoral settings. Among these are *Winter in the Country: The Old Grist Mill*, *The Old Windmill*, *The Old Mill – In Summer* and, with a title that left no doubt about the equation of water-wheel mills and drowsy bucolic wistfulness, *The Mill-dam at “Sleepy Hollow”*.

Homer Watson had ample opportunity to observe other oil painters’ interest in the nostalgic possibilities of mills, and especially those mills that used water wheels to power small family businesses. Jasper Cropsey’s *The Old Mill*, reproduced in *The Art Journal* in 1879,³¹ was one of many examples. George Inness, described by Watson as the outstanding figure in American landscape painting, also depicted this subject. Watson may well have met the American when the two of them were in New York, Inness having relocated there from Europe in 1876. Certainly Inness’s predilection for dramatic skies and his elimination of irrelevant details seem to be mirrored in the Canadian artist’s imagery.³² It may be significant that Inness produced no fewer than 25 *Approaching Storm*, *Coming Storm*, and related canvases before Watson painted his own *A Coming Storm in the Adirondacks* in 1879, and that he showed two of them in the 1878 and 1879 exhibitions of the Society of American Artists in New York.³³ At the very least, Watson could have encountered Inness’s paintings during his New York sojourn of the late 1870s, perhaps at the National Academy of Design, where old mills were frequent subjects in post-1860 annual shows and where Inness enjoyed a well-publicized critical exhibition triumph in 1877. Of Inness’s various mill-themed paintings from these years, *The Old Mill* (1849; Art Institute of Chicago) bears striking compositional similarities to Watson’s *Pioneer Mill*, with their shared use of flowing water to divide the canvases diagonally, their placement of a mill in the centre of each picture, and the presence of human figures beneath

the trees and across the water courses from the mill buildings. Although it is unlikely that Watson would have seen the Inness painting while he was in New York, as it had been acquired by a private collector in 1849 and did not reappear in public until 1902,³⁴ Inness's interest in mill themes would have been known to anyone who, like Watson, was familiar with his work.

A Society in Flux

The fascination with the remnants and symbols of a disappearing past was abetted in Ontario by sea changes in the economic and social infrastructures. The province's industry at mid-century consisted for the most part of relatively small businesses, although there was already significant evidence of steam-based technology and, consequently, industrial expansion and specialization of labour.³⁵ Until the 1860s, however, most mills were powered by water wheels. Only about 41 of Ontario's grist mills were steam-driven in 1854 (the year before Watson was born), compared to 569 that used wheels.³⁶ Waterloo County alone was home to some 112 water-powered mills over the course of the century.³⁷ Even in 1861, when Watson was five years old, more than two dozen were operating in Waterloo Township (one of five townships comprising Waterloo County), most of them powered by the Grand River and its tributaries the Conestoga, the Nith, and the Speed.³⁸ Doon itself, founded in 1834 under the appropriate name of Doon Mills, had early on established its importance as a milling town thanks to the energetic Ferrie brothers, who constructed water-powered grist, barley, and other mills there.³⁹

During the 1870s and 1880s, however, many wheel-driven mills had fallen or were falling into picturesque decay, among them Doon's first grist mill.⁴⁰ Those that were powered solely by water wheels accounted for about 12 per cent of all industrial establishments in Ontario in 1871.⁴¹ Employees thrown out of work by the closure of traditional mills often found ready and more lucrative employment in the proliferating factories that increasingly consigned the small-scale mills of the mid-nineteenth century to the unrecoverable past. For example, in 1863, a grist business in the village of German Mills, midway between Doon and Berlin (the latter renamed Kitchener in 1916), became the first in Canada to employ the new gradual reduction (multi-stage grinding) technique. Patented in Canada that same year, this technique challenged the single chop, fast reduction method, which required two traditional grindstones mounted close together. Twelve years later and only a few miles further afield, at his mill at St Jacobs, also in Waterloo County, E.W.B. Snider established Ontario's first gradual reduction *rolling* mill. Rolling mills used corrugated iron cylinders (or, from the early 1880s, porcelain cylinders) instead of the grindstones that had been the defining technology



8 | Winslow Homer, *The Old Mill (The Morning Bell)*, 1871, oil on canvas, 61 × 96.8 × 2.5 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, BA 1903. (Photo: Yale University Art Gallery)

throughout the preceding decades and centuries. Rolling mills quickly proved their value: they produced whiter flour, required less supervision, were more easily maintained, did 37 per cent more work than traditional grist mills, and needed 47 per cent less power.⁴² Of the six establishments named in an 1884–85 summary of flour mills in Waterloo County, only two featured millstones; the others were all large-scale commercial rolling mills.⁴³ Inexorably, the small wheel-driven mills lovingly chronicled by Homer Watson – buildings that had been centres of community life (marriage banns had often been posted on them, for example⁴⁴) – were replaced by businesses that were less concerned with building relationships with local farmers than they were with acting as hubs for large geographical areas. The development of railways and the ensuing concentration in urban centres of large mills of all types additionally meant that, as Watson noted with regard to the bygone subject of his 1900 masterpiece *The Flood Gate*, “the country ponds [used to store the water that drove mill wheels] are drying up and the mills rot.”⁴⁵

The shift was usually drastic and always noteworthy. American artist Winslow Homer, for example, tracked changes in textile manufacture in his *Old Mill* of 1871 (Fig. 8). In this painting, female factory workers begin to traverse an inclined walkway that leads past an abandoned textile mill (the empty-windowed building on the left of the canvas) to arrive at a new facility just beyond the forsaken structure. The only part of the more recent

building, visible just above the roof of the abandoned one, is a bright, shiny bell, the ringing of which embodied the new tyranny of timed labour: “the most distinctive fixture and defining attribute of the new mills.”⁴⁶ As an 1898 description of an idyllic picnic on the banks of Waterloo County’s Grand River explained,

It seems to me I’d like to go
Where bells don’t ring, nor whistles blow,
Nor clocks don’t strike, nor gongs don’t sound,
And I’d have stillness all around.⁴⁷

Tellingly, although Winslow Homer’s canvas is widely known as *The Morning Bell*, its original title, *The Old Mill* (under which it was first exhibited, at the Century Association in New York in 1871), gave primacy to a fast-disappearing model of community economic organisation.

The changes in technology and scale that characterized mills of all types were symptomatic of a larger phenomenon: the increasing urbanisation of the province, and concern that southern Ontario’s self-identification as a society premised upon rural and small-town life was under threat in a world beset by dizzying change. During the 1850s railroad incursions by the Grand Trunk and the Great Western led to the expansion of manufacturing in Berlin, Galt, Preston, Doon, and other Waterloo County towns. An 1860s gazetteer described Berlin as lacking water power and other resources necessary for industry, but even as that judgment was being published, the foundations were being laid for a dramatic economic and population boom that led to Berlin being incorporated as a town in 1871. By then, Waterloo County had an industrial workforce of some 4,000; this was the ninth largest such population in Ontario’s thirty-seven counties.⁴⁸ An 1872 observer compared the concentration of industry in Hespeler (near Doon) to that in the British industrial centre of Bradford.⁴⁹ Doon itself had a population of only 150 in 1871, but this rose to about 300 in the 1880s (when a resident could justly describe it as “a busy and prosperous village”), and to 600 by the end of the century.⁵⁰ During the 1890s the population of the federal electoral district of Waterloo North was 55 per cent rural and 45 per cent urban, while the figures for Waterloo South were 47 and 53 per cent, respectively.⁵¹ By that time, the once bustling but now outdated Grand River canal system had been largely displaced by the urban concentration of large-scale, technology-driven industry that relied on the railways to transport raw materials and finished products alike. “The artist,” according to an 1893 magazine article, “now delights to haunt its banks and transfer some of its numberless bits of enchanting scenery to his canvas or his paper.”⁵²

The social fabric of southern Ontario was thus in flux. But, although the confederation era placed much faith in steady progress and in the related rise of cities, that assurance was tempered by an increasing association of urban life with noise, dirt, a hectic pace, materialism, and artificiality. All of these were blamed for what were claimed to be escalating levels of stress, poor mental and physical health, and the loss of the self-reliance that rural life – trumpeted as an organic social order founded on simplicity and natural virtue – supposedly fostered and symbolised. Chronologically coincident with the fame of *The Pioneer Mill*, an 1881 book entitled *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* argued that “Americanitis” was creating neurasthenic conditions amongst urbanites in the United States, and that “a restful time away from modern civilization in a park, at a cottage, or in Canada should return the sufferer, at least temporarily, to health.”⁵³ Despite this country’s presumably bucolic nature, concerns similar to those highlighted by *American Nervousness* informed the Canada First Movement’s fears for Ontario’s future. Beginning in the 1870s, the movement’s members championed the already fragile idea of Canada as a principally agrarian nation, and in the early twentieth century, Conservative politician George Foster was to insist (with a singular lack of prescience) that “Canada’s rural population must always be preponderant” because its “robustness of morals and simplicity of life ... are essential elements in any people.”⁵⁴ In a related vein, nascent urban moral reform and social welfare movements were being promoted in newspapers as early as the 1880s, as the presumed dangers of urban life were in their initial days of formulation. Twenty years later they were complemented by the growth of presumably restful suburbs, the popularity of the village community ideal, and a drive toward town planning. The latter manifested itself as early as 1890 in the town of Waterloo, near to Doon, when the municipality adopted Ontario’s Public Parks Act and was thus positioned to acquire land for the preservation of salutary parkland.⁵⁵

It was under these circumstances that city dwellers became key proponents of nostalgia for an idealised rural past. The 1880s were marked by North American journalists reaching largely urban readerships (including many Canadians) through such periodicals as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. These were magazines that often espoused “a philosophy which seems in retrospect appropriate only to *Outing* and *Forest and Stream*.”⁵⁶ Rural Ontario was no stranger to these developments. Previously understood and championed primarily by those who actually lived there, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century the countryside became increasingly understood in terms of its therapeutic relationship to Toronto and other burgeoning cities.⁵⁷ In this regard, railways supported the most striking travel trend to blossom during

the last three decades of the century: a fashion for rural spas and waterside resorts that catered to urbanites. Preston, next door to Doon and much noted for its mineral baths, was one such locale. But city dwellers were also cycling, hiking, and boating through non-resort areas, as well as spending time as guests on farms.⁵⁸ The Grand River was popular with large groups and single day-trippers alike, including artists both amateur and professional.⁵⁹ *Cycling* magazine in 1893 specified the attraction of the area around Doon: “A number of Toronto waifs ... [who were] sent out to breathe the pure air and give a sight of green fields and woods” had “pale pinched faces” before their arrival; but when they “first caught sight of the flowers near the track at the [train] depot they ran and plucked them in the wildest glee.”⁶⁰ Picnics, too, were a popular pastime along the Grand River. In the words of American art historian Angela Miller, picnics epitomised “the contradictory experience of men and women benefiting directly from economic expansion and reluctant to slow the juggernaut of progress yet concerned with maintaining a sense of continuity with the past.”⁶¹

This reciprocal relationship between the rural and the urban also played itself out in Watson’s career. The cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa were where his work was most frequently exhibited. Although many of his paintings were initially subsumed into the private collections of his friends and admirers in the towns and small cities around Doon, his most visible and acquisitive collectors tended to be urban dwellers associated with industry and high finance: figures such as R.B. Angus, George Drummond, Charles Porteous, James Ross, William Cornelius Van Horne, and, in Regina, Norman MacKenzie. Important for many such collectors was the fact that Watson’s work was imbued with a Barbizon sensibility that recorded his intense visual study of rustic landscapes that he knew and loved. Most famously, Oscar Wilde, at the time of his May 1882 stop in Toronto during his tour of the United States and Canada, admired Watson’s *Flying Shadows* in that year’s OSA exhibition and described the artist as “Barbizon without ever having seen Barbizon” and as being “the Canadian Constable.” (Significantly, the two working mills owned by Constable’s father figure frequently in the work of the by then iconic British artist.⁶²) “I had never heard of the Barbizon men,” Watson repeatedly insisted throughout the remainder of his career. “I had never seen a picture by Constable.”⁶³ Like those artists, however, he dedicated himself to lovingly recording a local landscape with which he was intimately familiar and then selling those paintings to powerful figures whose lives and activities were thoroughly urban, much as cosmopolitan Parisian collectors had been the driving force behind the popularity of the decidedly anti-urban Barbizon artists.⁶⁴ The same rural/urban relationship characterised the art and audience of the English artist George Clausen (1852–1944), whose

paintings Watson first saw at Goupil & Cie. in London and with whom he established a warm friendship after meeting him in 1887. Described by Watson as a devotee of truth,⁶⁵ Clausen – like his contemporaries Henry Herbert La Thangue in England and Jules Bastien-Lepage in France – espoused a rural nostalgia painted in a painstakingly realist aesthetic that was rooted in a close connection with his immediate milieu and that supplanted Jean-François Millet’s imagery with a more uncritical, and therefore more palatable and “timeless,” depiction of old-world country lives, infrastructures and economies.

Like the Barbizon artists, like Constable, like Clausen, and like Horatio Walker (Watson’s contemporary on Île d’Orléans in Quebec), Watson’s view was almost entirely of a society innocent of the heavy industry and urbanisation that were expanding throughout southern Ontario during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, he actively encouraged a meshing between his own identity and the pre-technological landscapes that he painted in such large numbers (Fig. 3). “Great landscape artists,” he proclaimed in a 1900 lecture at the University of Toronto, “are no more cosmopolitan than are great patriots, and no immortal landscape has been painted which has not had as at least one of the promptings for its creation, a feeling its creator had of having roots in his native land and being a product of its soil.”⁶⁶ At the same time, commentators referenced the sentimental identification of Watson’s art as embodying a relationship of both negation and desire between his bucolic world and his patrons’ modern urban lives. To the anonymous critic who reviewed the Royal Canadian Academy’s 1892 annual exhibition for *The Week*, Watson’s “romantic pastorals” exemplified why “landscapes [are] the most lastingly soothing of all pictures; they bring the tired and harassed drudge of city life back to the playgrounds of his youthful truant days, and woo the memory away from present care.”⁶⁷ This rural/urban relationship reached what was perhaps its apogee of verbal expression in 1929. In that year, R.C. Reade, writing in the *Toronto Star Weekly*, adopted an aggressively anti-modern vocabulary for bringing Watson once again to the attention of Toronto readers. Reade described making a “pilgrimage” to visit “the hermit of Doon,” who “lives hidden in the woods ... because he has no passion for painting rubber plants and artificial palms.” Appropriately enough, Watson’s “sylvan retreat” (Doon: “a shrinking violet as modest as its most illustrious citizen”) proved difficult for the adoring journalist to find, “even with the most detailed road directions.”⁶⁸ Just five months before the cataclysmic stock market crash that would eviscerate the financial security that Watson had accumulated over the course of a career that had stretched far beyond Doon and Waterloo County, his image remained that of a recluse inhabiting an anachronistic idyll: an exemplar

for the urban populations who could not get enough of the type of imagery summarised five decades earlier in *The Pioneer Mill*.

Family and Pioneer Legacies

However, the emphasis that Watson laid on deserted and crumbling mills went beyond Victorian romanticism, beyond the psychological impact of the changes that were transforming southern Ontario's industrial infrastructure during the first two decades of his career, and beyond the relationship between rural subject matter and urban needs and expectations. Equally important was Watson's family history. The two previous generations of Watsons had been bound up with small-scale milling in Waterloo County. Their involvement appears to have led the artist to roughly base the eponymous building in *The Pioneer Mill* on a sawmill built by his grandfather James following the latter's emigration to Canada from New York state.⁶⁹ "The fondest recollections I had of the place [Doon] dwelt there [in the mill]," he wrote in an undated and fictionalised autobiographical manuscript. "A history was connected with it and the place was now a ruin."⁷⁰ Ransford Watson (James's son and Homer's father) was listed in the 1861 Canadian census as a clothier whose mill produced woollen cloth and yarn. According to the artist's most reliable biographer, the business operated by Ransford Watson was actually a combination saw and woollen mill that failed three years after his death in 1864 and was sold.⁷¹ An uncle leased the property in 1872 and opened a sawmill and pail factory, at which the seventeen-year-old Homer worked. Sixteen years later, in 1888, the mill was sold a second time. That event, which Roxa Watson described as having made her husband "blue for three days," furnished an indication of Watson's psychological investment in the building.⁷²

Small wonder, then, that many of Watson's images of mills are permeated by a sense of personal longing and loss that goes beyond generalised Victorian sentiment about the past. The titles of his paintings and drawings frequently incorporate words such as "old," "deserted," and "haunted." ("Haunted" is particularly resonant in view of Watson having witnessed the death of his older brother Jude in a milling accident when Watson himself was only twelve years old.) "Life and thought hath fled away" is the regretful inscription below another drawing of a crumbling mill (Fig. 9). Indeed, Watson's progress from the two surviving preparatory drawings for *The Pioneer Mill* to the painting itself evinces an increasing emphasis on age and disuse, as if the artist's steps toward the final painting recapitulated the decline in the family's fortunes from one generation to the next. What is surely the first of the two drawings includes two buildings, only one of which survived into the painting. The



9 | Homer Watson, *Life and Thought Hath Fled Away*, ca. 1875–87, graphite, black ink and wash on wove paper, 17.8 × 23.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

second drawing (Fig. 10), more detailed, more highly finished, and omitting one of the two buildings, adds a male figure carrying an unidentified object (quite possibly a fishing pole) and walking along a curving path that is scarcely hinted at in the other drawing.⁷³ (The apparently misleading inscription on this sheet – “First drawing for Pioneer Mill” – is in the hand of Watson’s sister, Phoebe, and must post-date the drawing itself by a span of years.) It is now evident, as it was not in the first drawing, that the stream is escaping a mill pond by pouring through a sluice gate and down a millrace.

The finished painting contains even more changes. The lively male figure of the second drawing has been transmogrified into an elderly man with a long white beard. Rather than carrying a pole over his shoulder, he leans upon a stick or cane for support. The tall, flourishing tree that anchors the left side of the drawing has become the corpse of a tree: a dead trunk, exposed roots, and a few remaining but lifeless branches. The roof and walls of the mill itself show the damage wrought by time, and the foliage that merely surrounds the building in the drawing now overwhelms it. The effects



10 | Homer Watson, First [sic] drawing for *The Pioneer Mill*, ca. 1878–80, graphite on wove paper, 23.6 × 30.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

thus produced are further accentuated in Watson's subsequent etching of 1890 (Fig. 6). Here the dramatic contrasts between shades of black and white throughout the landscape and in the sky are attributable to the nature of the etching medium itself, but they also add a greater sense of oppression than is present in the painted version of a decade earlier.

A significant source of such evidence of decline, as well as of *The Pioneer Mill*'s emotional punch, can be found in the painting's title. Just as the putative model for the mill in the painting underscores Watson's subjective investment in the financial and personal losses that punctuated his family's history, so the title draws attention to his absorption in the legacy of the nineteenth-century Waterloo County pioneers in general. With a population of only about 300 in the 1880s, Doon had factories, brickyards, and other industries, but was still small enough for material evidence of its pioneers to be ubiquitous. This was accentuated by the fact that a large portion of

the population bore surnames – among them Watson and Bechtel (the family of Watson’s wife) – that connected them directly with the area’s early nineteenth-century history.⁷⁴ For Watson, the differences between the pioneer past and the growing modernism of the present were filled with closely felt emotional resonance.

For historian W.L. Morton, “the [nineteenth-century] Canadian fixation on the Pioneer,” and the resulting centrality of such ideals as enterprise, persistence, resourcefulness, and bravery, were based on the belief that the “supreme act of history” was the taming of an unpopulated geography. In English Canada this “supreme act of history” was usually seen as a progressive one that had led to the spread of a civilisation based on pioneer values.⁷⁵ This was a frequent theme in visual art, poetry, novels, memoirs, and magazine articles and, as noted above, was ardently promoted by the Canada First Movement.⁷⁶ Over the course of the half-century beginning in 1850, hundreds of Ontario pioneer-related fiction and non-fiction publications of every type appeared on the market. They ranged in purpose, structure, and authorship from Elizabeth Hely Walshe’s *Cedar Creek: From the Shanty to the Settlement; A Tale of Canadian Life* (1860), to *A Pioneer History of Elgin County: Prize-winning School Essays Published by James S. Brierley in the Southern Counties Journal* (1896). Nor was there any shortage of books with titles in the vein of *Early Pioneer Days*, or *Pioneer Sketches*, or *Pioneer Reminiscences*, and so on.⁷⁷ Poems – Alexander McLachlan’s “The Emigrant” (1861) and Isabella Valancy Crawford’s “Malcolm’s Katie: A Love Story” (1884) are typical – epitomise a genre in which pioneers are seen as noble warriors felling trees that are described as worthy opponents: as “Caesars” (McLachlan) and “kings” (Crawford).⁷⁸ The same approach characterises a number of novels of the day, including Robert Sellar’s *Gleaner Tales* (1886) and Coll McLean Sinclair’s *The Dear Old Farm* (1897), as well as a range of settlers’ handbooks and autobiographies, most famously those penned by Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill.⁷⁹

In the visual arts, too, pioneer-related themes were popular. The issue of the *Canadian Illustrated News* that reproduced *The Pioneer Mill* following the painting’s inclusion in the 1880 Canadian Academy exhibition, also featured a double-page illustration of a James Weston painting, *Logging Bee in Muskoka*.⁸⁰ George Agnew Reid’s sizeable (107.4 × 194 cm) 1888 painting *Logging* (NGC; Fig. 11), though based on activity the artist had seen near his studio in Paris, was described by him as representing “a phase of the development of Canada which in its main aspects ended about seventy-five years ago in old Ontario, where the farms were cleared by the heaping together of the large and small logs and brush, and then burned.”⁸¹ Nine years later Reid, faced with the City of Toronto’s refusal to endorse a proposal by



11 | George Agnew Reid, *Logging*, 1888, oil on canvas, 107.4 × 194 × 2.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: © NGC)

the recently founded Society of Mural Decorators to provide an extensive decorative programme in the Toronto Municipal Buildings (today the Old City Hall), contributed new mural work at no cost in an attempt to reverse that decision. Reid's donation most prominently included two large panels entitled *The Arrival of the Pioneers* and *Staking a Pioneer Farm*. He envisioned these as part of a larger mural project, *Hail to the Pioneers, Their Names and Deeds Remembered and Forgotten, We Honour Here*. Although the two panels were installed, they failed to attract the municipal support needed for more such work, and the project came to a premature conclusion. Meanwhile a number of other Ontario and Quebec artists had painted and exhibited smaller oils and watercolours on pioneer themes in numbers that are a gauge of the breadth of social interest in the subject; works such as Robert Harris's *A Meeting of the School Trustees* (1885; NGC) exploited the related, general nostalgia for nineteenth-century rural life. Outside museum settings, the Toronto Industrial Exhibition included a walk-in "pioneers" display. In 1879, the year before Watson exhibited *The Pioneer Mill*, the Industrial Exhibition included among its attractions a reconstructed log cabin, built to order on the site. The pioneer cabin would be a recurring feature of the Exhibition for years to come. In 1879, exploiting the familiar truism that pioneer values and skills were all too lacking in modern society, the *Mail* newspaper remarked that the cabin had been built by "old men ... who are still capable of



12 | Homer Watson, *Pioneers Crossing a River at Sunset*, 1896, oil on canvas, 86 × 122 cm, Collection of The York Club, Toronto. (Photo: © The York Club, Toronto)

performing work which, if imposed on young men, would make them wish they never were born.”⁸²

Throughout his life Watson identified himself, in correspondence, speeches, and interviews, as a grandson of Waterloo County pioneers.⁸³ In his youth he began a novel about his grandfather James (named “Landseer” in the manuscript). In his visual art *The Pioneer Mill* was thematically linked to other similarly themed projects, including his plans for a series of paintings recording the immigration of the first Pennsylvania settlers into Waterloo County. Drawings of diverse settler themes exist in the collection of the National Gallery, and Russell Harper refers to no fewer than six canvases that he states were painted between the 1880s and the early 1900s. However, only three large oils, each at least 86 × 97 cm, are traceable in other sources: *A Land of Thrift* (private collection), *Clearing the Land* (location unknown), and *Pioneers Crossing the Grand River* (Fig. 12). The latter was the most widely seen of the series. It was exhibited in 1909 with the Royal Canadian Academy in Ottawa, and in 1910 at the Art Association of Montreal, the Canadian

National Exhibition, and the large showing of Canadian art organised by the RCA and shown in Liverpool.⁸⁴

In keeping with his proud self-identification as a scion of a pioneering family, Watson's approach to such subjects was not one of artificial nostalgia for a distant past. Indeed, he adopted that attitude only at the very start of his career and in only one major painting: *The Death of Elaine* (1877; Art Gallery of Ontario), which shows an episode from Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century epic *La Morte d'Arthur*. Having fallen in love with Launcelot, Elaine helps him back to life after his near death in a tournament, only to have him decline her love. She wastes away with despair, and Watson's painting shows her funeral barge being steered down the Thames to Camelot, King Arthur's castle, represented by the painting's fantastical background architecture. But this type of subject never reappeared in Watson's work. Instead, he avoided mythologizing earlier times with which he had no connection, and concentrated on faithful representations of subjects that fell within relatively recent memory: a trait that historian Ann C. Colley has identified as a frequent one in the work of many Victorian artists and writers.⁸⁵ Just as Watson replaced the antiquity of *The Death of Elaine* with the recent and much more personal history embedded in *The Pioneer Mill*, so he also abandoned the contrived emotionalism of the 1877 canvas in favour of an exploration of the moral tensions he felt between linked binaries: nature and progress, creation and destruction, civilisation and excess.

As Watson wrote late in his life, "My love has always been where cultivation went on to furnish a living to men who came out of the pioneer stage to a more refined rural life, where people were growing into what Canada will be more and more."⁸⁶ However, the development that followed the arrival of pioneers in southern Ontario also had a dark side: one that Ralph Connor probed in his 1901 novel *The Man from Glengarry*. In Wellington County, where European settlement had begun in about 1820, it was estimated in 1881 that the length of time between initial settlement in relentlessly treed bush, and the occupation of all the available land and the consequent need to import firewood, was a mere twenty-five years.⁸⁷ There is no reason to believe that the situation in neighbouring Waterloo County was any different. In paintings such as *Log-cutting in the Woods* (1894; Fig. 13) Watson envisioned human economic activity taking place within a natural setting of which it makes use but which it does not push beyond the bounds of sustainability. It was in 1880 – the year *The Pioneer Mill* was completed, exhibited, and sold – that the first warning was raised that the felling of woodlands along the Grand River was resulting in flooding: a new phenomenon in the area.⁸⁸ Only about a decade later, Watson's unpublished essays "A Landscape Painter's Day" and "The Village" were unequivocal



13 | Homer Watson, *Log-cutting in the Woods*, 1894, oil on canvas, 45.7 × 61 cm, Coll. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of Lord Strathcona and family. (Photo: Brian Merrett)

about how the sawmill built by James Watson had eventually undercut its own viability by destroying the trees upon which it depended. “A Landscape Painter’s Day” describes its author’s thoughts when, during a thunderstorm, he took shelter in the by-then abandoned mill:

I thought of those earlier years when the mill in its vigorous life tore into sections with the giant force of its devouring saw the bodies of all the neighbouring trees. Year after year the forest was spoiled in order to furnish food for the saw. Into its depths rolled resinous timber, and gorged with such richness, a ruinous waste came about. No forests rose anew in place of those shreds. The pulse of the life of the mill became less and when the last of those cloud-cleaving pines were laid low to supply man with his needs, then the mill wrought its own death.

The floods of water that the forests once held in their mould bore down every year with might, until at last they wreaked vengeance upon the old mill for being the agent that had loosed them to turbulent life.⁸⁹

Although Watson took great pride in his pioneer stock, and believed firmly in the desirability of the human improvement of nature, he was also acutely aware both of the delicate need to balance progress with sustainability and of the consequences of not maintaining that balance. Nor was it a coincidence that he gave visual expression to those concerns in paintings such as *The Pioneer Mill*.

Postscript

Two decades after writing “A Landscape Painter’s Day,” Watson would take very public action to strike a balance between the advantages of development, and the loss of the qualities that made rural life so desirable. In 1913 he became instrumental in a successful campaign to preserve a wooded area near his home and studio: a tract threatened by population growth and the corresponding demand for more land development. As a key organiser and the president of Waterloo County Grand River Park Limited he helped raise funds to buy and preserve the forty-acre stand of trees named Cressman’s Woods (rechristened Homer Watson Memorial Park in 1944), located between Doon and German Mills. The site was about to be auctioned and was expected to be purchased by the owner of a “portable sawmill.”⁹⁰ These ‘sawmills’ consisted of large circular blades and were mass-marketed by such major retailers as Sears; they were the early twentieth century’s rapacious successors to the outdated, expensive, and site-specific buildings recorded in *The Pioneer Mill*. Fittingly, the warning that Watson had tried to convey in that painting about an ultimately self-defeating relationship between civilisation and nature was marshalled by him again in 1913: this time to thwart a twentieth-century version of that same menace. The next year, however, marked the beginning of a war that would employ technology of unprecedented voraciousness to inflict devastation upon the natural and built environments of Europe. *The Pioneer Mill* became, more than ever before, a symbol of the unrecoverable past.

The years following the successful preservation of Cressman’s Woods were not kind to Homer Watson. His wife Roxa died in January 1918, only ten months before the end of World War I. Deeply distressed, he began to take solace in spiritualist séances and in doctored photographs that showed him surrounded by the translucent bodies of deceased relatives and friends



14 | “Spirit” photograph of Homer Watson, 1935, silver gelatin print, 14.5 × 10 cm, Homer Watson House & Gallery, Doon. (Photo: Homer Watson House & Gallery)

(Fig. 14), much as his paintings and drawings of settler life captured a fondly recalled but increasingly ghostly pioneer history. His eclipse as a key figure in contemporary Canadian art was implicit in the rise of the Group of Seven, whose work he occasionally admired but which he criticised for proposing too narrow a definition of ‘Canadian’ and focusing too much on uninhabited landscapes; Watson believed that the artist should “paint where he can dominate the scene, and not be dominated by the scene.” He also criticised them for applying “bill-board symbols ... [and] sign writing technique” to landscape in a way “that gives quite a thrill or shall I say shock.”⁹¹ As if to emphasise his outmoded status, the Depression blighted his final years by plunging him into financial chaos from which he never recovered.

Watson’s twentieth-century marginalisation had been foreshadowed at the start of the new century when, in 1902, Katherine Hale, the author

of an admiring article about a visit to his home in Doon, simultaneously gave voice to the view of Watson as a creature of the past. Hale described coming upon “a charming old stone house in the last stages of decay, enwoven in vines and orchard-set. Convinced that it is our Mecca we turn for confirmation to a respectable citizen on the sidewalk. ‘Last house to the right, stranger,’ he says decisively, and disappointed we drive on.” Taking a different and less reverential approach, Wyly Grier had noted his friend Watson’s growing alienation as an artist as early as 1895. “Ten years ago,” wrote Grier, “he was frankly a realist ... and now, with an increased knowledge of the vast field that has already been covered by the men of his craft, has come a hesitation, an eclecticism, a tendency to a preoccupation in questions of style, arrangement and technique, rather than that objective absorption in subject which results in a naive translation of it to the canvas.” The *Montreal Daily Witness* in 1909 was more caustic: “We have seen him receding gradually through Troyon to Constable and now back of that to a hopelessly artificial style. Mr. Watson is not alone in whacking on plenty of pigment and varnish to give a sense of strength,” but “there is something unreal, and on the grotesque side of unreality in Mr. Watson’s pictures.” The *Ottawa Journal’s* art critic was equally unfriendly in 1912: “Watson has an endeavour and style peculiarly his own, and while it is uncompromising to suggestions of pettiness or prettiness, it is one which has become mannered in its methods and somewhat harsh and unnatural in its treatment of textures.”⁹² Interestingly enough, Watson’s escalating interest in what he took to be modern ‘style’ for its own sake – a development that initially coincided with his first visit to Europe (1887–90) – overlapped a move away from mills as themes in his art. He rarely exhibited such subjects after the beginning of the twentieth century, although they did not disappear entirely from his repertoire. His memorial exhibition in 1936 (he had died at the end of May that year), consisting of ninety paintings drawn entirely from his estate, included only two that took mills as their subjects.

This change in Watson’s themes of choice also corresponded to the faltering popularity of pioneer themes during the twentieth century. In 1957 the Doon Pioneer Village was opened to the public. Its goal was to celebrate the settlers of Ontario and especially those of the Grand River area, commemorating a period in which (according to one proponent of the project) “men and women had purpose, perseverance, thrift and sincerity, qualities not as prevalent in our own age.”⁹³ Ironically, the location proposed for the Village in 1954 was Cressman’s Woods: a plan that was mercifully scuttled. Over the next two decades the historic site acquired large numbers of buildings and artefacts, many with little or no connection to the district around Doon or even to the pioneer era. The driving force was instead a fuzzy, generalised nostalgia for ‘old things’ of every description: an approach

very different from the intensely personal presentation of local scenery and architecture by which Watson had established his credibility and reputation. This historical tactic was not abandoned until the implementation of a master plan in 1979, but at the cost of redefining the Village's focus away from the pioneer era altogether. The site was renamed Doon Heritage Crossroads and from now on, would present "a typical, rural Waterloo County crossroads of 1914."⁹⁴ Nineteen-fourteen was, ironically enough, the year that definitively marked the arrival of twentieth-century modernity: a development opposed to everything for which Watson's depictions of Doon and its landmarks both stood and were valued.

What does survive (and thrive), though not as part of Doon Heritage Crossroads, is the Homer Watson House & Gallery. This, the artist's long-time home, fittingly located on Old Mill Road, functioned as the Doon School of Fine Arts from 1948 to 1966 and today serves as a museum, art school, and community centre. The gallery's 2012 summer exhibition, featuring both *The Pioneer Mill* and *The Last of the Drouth*, the Watson paintings purchased by the Marquis of Lorne in 1880 and 1881, offers a welcome opportunity to contemplate the rich aesthetic and social history that can be extrapolated from Watson's personal and professional identification with local history.

NOTES

- 1 This essay grows out of research that was generously supported by a Canadian Centre for the Visual Arts Fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada.
- 2 Homer Watson to John M. Lyle, 15 Feb. 1933. Homer Watson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives (hereafter Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA).
- 3 Quoted in Jane VANEVRY, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight: Homer Watson* ([Doon]: Homer Watson Trust, 1967), 47.
- 4 Watson to Lyle, 15 Feb. 1933. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA. Muriel Miller states that the painting was conceived in 1878 (Murial MILLER, *Homer Watson: The Man of Doon*, revised edition [Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1988], 34). According to Watson's sister, Phoebe, *The Pioneer Mill* was painted "in the attic of our house and on the verandah" (Phoebe Watson to M. Elizabeth Becker, Toronto, 2 Jan. 1932. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA).
- 5 Watson to Lyle, 15 Feb. 1933. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
- 6 Oliver MILLAR, *The Victorian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280.
- 7 "Academy of the Arts," *Globe*, 9 Mar. 1880; "Canadian Art," *Daily Free Press* (Ottawa), 8 Mar. 1880.
- 8 This has been pointed out in Gerald NOONAN, *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: MLR Editions Canada, 1997), 17–18; but Noonan is incorrect in stating that the lengthy article made no reference to the purchase of the painting.

- 9 *Canadian Illustrated News* 21, no. 18 (1 May 1880): 285.
- 10 Thomas D. KING, "Fine Arts at the Capital," *Canadian Spectator* 3, no. 12 (20 Mar. 1880): 137.
- 11 "comparatively unaided by culture": "Art Association of Montreal: Exhibition of Works by Canadian Artists," *Montreal Gazette*, 14 Apr. 1880; "back woods": "Something To Be Proud Of," *Montreal Daily Witness*, 14 Apr. 1880.
- 12 For example: G.W. BINGHAM, "A Canadian Landscapist," *The Home Magazine* 7, no. 3 (September 1896): 252.
- 13 "Art in Toronto," *Evening Telegram*, 20 May 1878; "Ontario Society of Artists: Sixth Annual Exhibition; The Oil Paintings," *Mail* (Toronto), 20 May 1878; "Ontario Society of Artists: Sixth Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings," *Globe* (Toronto), 24 May 1878. The exception was "Art in Toronto: The Ontario Artists' Exhibition," *Daily Leader* (Toronto), 23 May 1878.
- 14 "Ontario Society of Artists: Seventh Annual Exhibition – Second Day," *Globe*, 17 May 1879.
- 15 *An April Day* was purchased for his own collection, while *The Last of the Drouth* (1881) was another gift for Queen Victoria, as were four other paintings by Aaron Allan Edson, Thomas Mower Martin and Lucius O'Brien. MILLAR, *The Victorian Pictures*, 66, 184, 192–93, 280–81.
- 16 VANEVERY, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 17.
- 17 "Studio Notes," *The Arion* 1, no. 7 (April 1881): 54.
- 18 The breastshot wheel – the most common North American type – rotated when falling water struck it near the centre of the wheel's circumference. The undershot wheel – the oldest type, commonly used in conjunction with shallow running water – rotated when water struck the bottom of the wheel.
- 19 Among the paintings dated 1879 are at least three large ones: *The Grist Mill* (71 × 56 cm; private collection), *The Old Mill and Stream* (60 × 88 cm; Castle Kilbride, Baden, Ontario), and *The Old Mill* (34.0 × 60.5 cm; Homer Watson House & Gallery). Smaller oils dating from in or around 1879 include *The Grist Mill* (private collection); illustrated in "Nature Seen through a Temperament: Homer Watson, 1855–1936," *The Doon Recorder*, 5 June 1975. Mill drawings in Watson's sketchbooks (NGC Library and Archives) include 7874.1r, 7874.1v, 7874.9v, 7875.29, 7875.72, 7875.76, 7878.6, 7879.1, 7879.5, 7880.12, 7880.15, 7888.21, 7895.2, 7897.45, 7898.18, and 7898.84.
- 20 "The Industrial Exhibition," *Mail*, 2 Sept. 1879.
- 21 Watson to Arthur Lismer, 30 Sept. [1930]. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
- 22 John Payne to Homer Watson, 2 Mar. 1890. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
- 23 Rosemarie L. TOVELL, "Homer Watson's *The Pioneer Mill*: The Making and Marketing of a Print in the Canadian Etching Revival," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 31:2 (2011): 12–36. John Payne to Homer Watson, 2 Mar. 1890. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
- 24 John MACARTHUR, "The Heartlessness of the Picturesque: Sympathy and Disgust in Ruskin's Aesthetics," *Assemblage* 32 (April 1997): 126–41.
- 25 "The Brook and the Mill: How the Brook Went to Mill," *Scribner's Monthly* 8, no. 2 (June 1874): 199–201.
- 26 See, *inter alia*: Susan Joan WOOD, *The Land in Canadian Prose, 1880–1945* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1988), 169; George ALTMAYER, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893–1914," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 11 (August 1976): 21–36; and Allan SMITH, "Farms, Forests and Cities: The Image of the Land and the Rise of the

- Metropolis in Ontario, 1860–1914,” in *Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of J.M.S. Careless*, ed. David Keane and Colin Read (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990): 71–91.
- 27 Kenneth W. MADDOX, *In Search of the Picturesque: Nineteenth-century Images of Industry along the Hudson River Valley* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Milton and Sally Avery Center for the Arts, 1983), 19.
 - 28 J. Russell HARPER, *Homer Watson, R.C.A., 1855–1936: Paintings and Drawings* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1963), n.p.
 - 29 *The Aldine: The Art Journal of America* 7, no. 12 (December 1874): back cover. See also: “The Old Mill,” *The Aldine: A Typographic Art Journal* 6, no. 6 (June 1873): 126; and “The Old Mill,” *The Aldine: The Art Journal of America* 9, no. 9 (September 1879): 278.
 - 30 O.B. BUNCE, “Scenes on the Brandywine,” in *Picturesque America: or, The Land We Live In*, Part 1, ed. William Cullen Bryant (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 222. Woodward’s antebellum mill imagery is discussed in Sue RAINEY and Roger B. STEIN, *Shaping the Landscape Image, 1865–1910: John Douglas Woodward* (Charlottesville, VA: Bayly Art Museum, University of Virginia, 1997), 28–29.
 - 31 “American Painters: Jasper F. Cropsey, Horace W. Robbins, and Wyatt Eaton,” *The Art Journal*, new series, vol. 5 (1879): 77.
 - 32 Watson is quoted in Muriel MILLER MINER, *Homer Watson: The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938), 68. Harper (HARPER, *Homer Watson*, n.p.) states that Watson made “several trips to the studio of George Inness.” No documents supporting this statement are known, but a comparable view appears in “G. Horne Russell, President of RCA,” *Montreal Gazette*, 18 Nov. 1922, where Russell remarks that Watson had for “a short time” been associated with Inness in the United States. Watson himself does not appear to have said or written anything to support this claim.
 - 33 Inness’s *The Coming Storm* (1878) was shown in the 1878 Society of American Artists exhibition and was discussed in mostly enthusiastic reviews published in March in the *New York Herald*, the *New York Mail*, the *New-York Daily Tribune*, *The Sun* (NY), the *New York Times* and *The Daily Graphic*. *A Passing Thunder Storm* (ca. 1878–79) was exhibited in the Society’s 1879 exhibition and was praised by *The Aldine* and *The Daily Graphic*. If Watson did not see *Passing Thunder Storm* at the exhibition he may have had the opportunity to view it in Inness’s studio, as it was part of Inness’s collection until 1879. See Michael QUICK, *George Inness: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 548–49, 572–73.
 - 34 *Ibid.*, 68.
 - 35 Darrell A. NORRIS, “Migration, Pioneer Settlement, and the Life Course: The First Families of an Ontario Township,” in *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, Vol. 4, ed. Donald H. Akenson (Gananoque: Langdale Press, 1984): 130–52.
 - 36 Felicity LEUNG, *Grist and Flour Mills in Ontario: From Millstones to Rollers, 1780s to 1880s* (*History and Archaeology* series, no. 53) (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, Environment Canada, 1981), 89.
 - 37 W.H. BREITHAUPT, “Waterloo County History,” *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records*, vol. 17 (1919): 43.
 - 38 *Waterloo Township 1861* map (Waterloo Historical Society website. Accessed 23 Sept. 2011, <http://www.whs.ca/watmap61.html>). In 1967, Watson’s niece Jane VanEvery described Doon as it existed at the time of Watson’s birth as having “a sawmill, a flax mill, ... a woollen mill, a gristmill” (*With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, op.cit., 8).

For more statistics on mills in Waterloo County, see: *Illustrated Atlas of the County of Waterloo* (Toronto: H. Parsell & Co., 1881); *County of Waterloo Directory 1877–1878* (Toronto: Armstrong & Co.), reprint edition (Port Elgin, ON: Ross Cumming, 1977); D.N. PANABAKER, “President’s Address,” *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Waterloo Historical Society* (1929): especially 104–105; and LEUNG, *Grist and Flour Mills in Ontario*.

- 39 J.G. NELSON and Pauline C. O’NEILL, eds., *The Grand as a Canadian Heritage River* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1989), 89; “Historical Sketch of the County of Waterloo,” *Historical Atlas of Waterloo and Wellington Counties, Ontario* (1881[?]), v–vi.
- 40 Geoffrey HAYES, *Waterloo County: An Illustrated History* (Kitchener: Waterloo Historical Society, 1997), 15.
- 41 G.T. BLOOMFIELD and Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD, “Water Wheels and Steam Engines: Powered Establishments of Ontario,” in *Canadian Industry in 1871* (Research Report no. 2), ed. Elizabeth Bloomfield (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1989), 8. As the Bloomfields note, however, “Census data do not distinguish between the various types of water wheel [traditional overshot and undershot wheels as well as more modern breastshot wheels and turbines]” (7).
- 42 On the shift from traditional grindstone to gradual reduction roller milling see LEUNG, *Grist and Flour Mills in Ontario*, and LEUNG, “Grist and Flour Mills in Ontario: Their Technological Development, 1780–1880,” in *Fourth Annual Agricultural History of Ontario Seminar: Proceedings*, ed. Alan A. Brookes (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1979), 6–39.
- 43 *Gazetteer and Directory of Waterloo County*, cited in LEUNG, *Grist and Flour Mills in Ontario*, 205–206.
- 44 LEUNG, *ibid.*, 72.
- 45 Watson to Newton MacTavish, 30 April [1915–18] (Newton MacTavish Collection, North York Public Library Canadiana Collection, Toronto).
- 46 Nicolai CIKOVSKY, Jr, “Winslow Homer’s (So-called) *Morning Bell*,” *American Art Journal* 29, no. 12 (1998): 6.
- 47 ESSIE, “A Day with Nature,” *News-Record* (Berlin), 19 Aug. 1898.
- 48 HAYES, *Waterloo County*, 62.
- 49 Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD, “Building the City on a Foundation of Factories: The Industrial Policy in Berlin, Ontario, 1870–1914,” *Ontario History* 75, no. 3 (1983): 207–208; HAYES, *Waterloo County*, 62. On the parallel change in rural land use, see Owen SCOTT, “The Changing Rural Landscape in Southern Ontario,” in *Third Annual Agricultural History of Ontario Seminar: Proceedings*, ed. T.A. Crowley (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1978), 30–49.
- 50 “a busy and prosperous village”: A.O. KUMMER, “Reminiscences of A.O. Kummer, Early Settler, Doon,” *Waterloo Historical Society* 52 (1965): 63–64. Period and later sources cite different population statistics, but see especially: *Illustrated Atlas of the County of Waterloo*; *County of Waterloo Directory 1877–1878*; Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD, *Waterloo Township through Two Centuries* (Kitchener: Waterloo Historical Society, 1995); and Floreen Ellen CARTER, *Place Names of Ontario* (London, ON: Phelps Publishing Company, 1984), 316. A useful map of the architectural layout of Doon as it existed in Watson’s youth and early manhood is given in Marguerite Bechtel EBY, “Doon 1867 – Before and After,” *Waterloo Historical Society* annual volume 54 (1966): 36–58.

- 51 HAYES, *Waterloo County*, 82.
- 52 Thomas L.M. TIPTON, "At the Mouth of the Grand," *The Canadian Magazine* 1 (1893): 350. More generally, see NELSON and O'NEILL, eds., *The Grand as a Canadian Heritage River*, 87–88.
- 53 George Miller BEARD, quoted in D.M.R. BENTLEY, "Charles G.D. Roberts and William Wilfred Campbell as Canadian Tour Guides," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 86.
- 54 Canada First and imperialist thought on rural versus urban life is examined in Carl BERGER, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 177–83 (Foster is quoted on 191). As in the United States, much of this thought focused on agrarianism, but the sensibility can be broadly located within a more general philosophy of rural life.
- 55 Paul RUTHERFORD, "Tomorrow's Metropolis: The Urban Reform Movement in Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Papers* (1971): 203–24. See also Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD, "City-Building Processes in Berlin/Kitchener and Waterloo 1870–1930" (PhD diss., University of Guelph, 1981), 397.
- 56 Peter J. SCHMITT, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), xviii.
- 57 SMITH, "Farms, Forests and Cities," 79.
- 58 HAYES, *Waterloo County*, 99–100; Roy I. WOLFE, "The Summer Resorts of Ontario in the Nineteenth Century," *Ontario History* 54 (September 1962): 159.
- 59 On the popularity of the area with artists of all kinds, see several articles in the *Berlin Daily Record*, including: "Town Topics" (24 July 1893), and "Art School" (27 Sept. 1893).
- 60 "Fresh Air Youngsters," *News-Record* (Berlin), 10 July 1893.
- 61 Angela L. MILLER, "Nature's Transformations: The Meaning of the Picnic Theme in Nineteenth-century American Art," *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 2/3 (Summer–Autumn 1989): 124. Doon area picnic getaways attended by 500 and 600 people are mentioned in "Doon," *Daily Record*, 1 Nov. 1894.
- 62 I am grateful to Douglas Schoenherr for his comments to me about the Constable family mills. For an analysis of the significance of Wilde's comments, see: Mark A. CHEETHAM, "Struck by Likening: Homer Watson, Jack Chambers, Gerhard Richter and the Force of Art World Analogies," in *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada*, ed. Lynda Jessup, Kirsty Robertson, and Erin Morton (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012); and CHEETHAM, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The "Englishness" of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
 Primary sources for Wilde's reaction to Watson's art include: "Oscar at the Gallery," *Telegram* (Toronto), 25 May 1882; "Art Decoration," *Toronto Daily Mail*, 26 May 1882; and "Oscar Wilde," *Globe*, 26 May 1882. The entirety of Oscar Wilde's Canadian tour is the subject of Kevin O'Brien, *Oscar Wilde in Canada: An Apostle for the Arts* (Toronto: Personal Library, 1982), while his views on art in Canada are discussed in detail in O'BRIEN, "Oscar Wilde and Canadian Artists," *Antigonish Review* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1971): 11–28.
- 63 Homer Watson to Harold Mortimer Lamb, 29 Mar. 1909 (undated handwritten version in Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; dated typescript in Queen's University Archives).

- 64 Nicholas GREEN, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape Painting and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-century France* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).
- 65 Quoted in Wyly GRIER, "Art Notes," *The Week* 12, no. 11 (8 Feb. 1895): 258.
- 66 Homer WATSON, "The Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters" (1900), in NOONAN, *Refining the Real Canada*, 267–68.
- 67 "Art Notes," *The Week* 9, no. 10 (8 Apr. 1892): 298.
- 68 R.C. READE, "Hermits of Art," *Toronto Star Weekly* (4 May 1929): 3.
- 69 The building in *The Pioneer Mill* differs somewhat from the one depicted in Watson's drawing titled *My Grandfather's Sawmill* (Sketchbook Z, 7898.18; NGC). The artist later insisted that, "When I want to paint a picture I make a number of studies of things I want to put in the composition and when I have these done I sit down in my studio and paint as suits my fancy using the sketches where I feel they suit." (Quoted in, R.M. FLEMING, "Homer Watson, Painter of Canadian Pictures," *Ottawa Journal*, 15 Nov. 1913). Watson's principal biographer suggests that the building in *The Pioneer Mill* "may have been an invention in the mind of the artist" (Muriel MILLER, *Homer Watson* [1988], 34). Miller also cites a painting titled *The Watson Mill* (1886; location unknown; 146): Watson's only painting to be thus identified.
- 70 Homer WATSON, "A Return to the Village," in NOONAN, *Refining the Real Canada*, 310–11.
- 71 MILLER, *Homer Watson* (1988), 22–23; Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD and Linda FOSTER, *Families and Communities of Waterloo Township in 1861* (Guelph: Caribou Imprints, 1995), 18.
- 72 Roxa Watson to Susan Mohr Watson (mother) and Phoebe Watson, 5 May 1888. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
- 73 Homer Watson, Sketchbook B, 7874.IV and 7874.IR (NGC).
- 74 Pioneer Waterloo County families are detailed in several sources, but see especially Elizabeth BLOOMFIELD, *Founding Families of Waterloo Township, 1800–1830* (Guelph: Caribou Imprints, 1995).
- 75 W.L. MORTON, ed., "Victorian Canada," *The Shield of Achilles: Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 312.
- 76 Michael BUNCE, in *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), argues that whereas the British rural landscape was valued primarily in aesthetic (often picturesque) terms, the North American ideal "has tended to value the settled rural landscape more as a symbol of agricultural progress and of bygone lifestyles" (36). Useful surveys and discussions of the pioneer motif in nineteenth-century Anglo-Ontario writing and thought include: SMITH, "Farms, Forests and Cities," 71–94; WOOD, *The Land in Canadian Prose*; Susan GLICKMAN, *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Carole GERSON, *A Purer Taste: The Writing and Reading of Fiction in English in Nineteenth-century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); and Royce MACGILLIVRAY, "Novelists and the Glengarry Pioneer," *Ontario History* 65, no. 2 (June 1973): 61–68.
- 77 For example: Samuel THOMPSON, *Reminiscences of a Canadian Pioneer for the Last Fifty Years (1833–1883)* (1884); E.M. MORPHY, *A York Pioneer Looking Back, 1834–1884* (1890); James Robert GOWAN, *Incidents Connected with Pioneer Life in a New Country*

- (1894); Alexander SINCLAIR, *Pioneer Reminiscences* (1898); and David KENNEDY, *Incidents of Pioneer Days at Guelph and the County of Bruce* (1903).
- 78 GLICKMAN, *The Picturesque and the Sublime*, 47. The valorisation of pioneer themes in Victorian Canadian literature is also addressed in WOOD, *The Land in Canadian Prose*, and Carole GERSON, *A Purer Taste*.
 - 79 GERSON, *A Purer Taste*, 98, 135. Susanna MOODIE: *Roughing It in the Bush, or, Life in Canada* (1852); *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853); *Life in the Backwoods: A Sequel to Roughing It In the Bush* (1887). Catherine PARR TRAILL: *The Canadian Crusoes: A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains* (1853); *Pearls and Pebbles: or, Notes of an Old Naturalist* (1894).
 - 80 *Canadian Illustrated News* 21, no. 18 (1 May 1880): 280–81.
 - 81 George Agnew Reid, typed note dated 7 October 1941, in Reid Scrapbook 1, 132 (Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario). As Reid remarked in that same note, “finding a log yard near my studio in which were great logs resembling those found in Canada, I seized the opportunity to paint a Canadian picture.”
 - 82 “The Industrial Exhibition,” *Mail*, 25 Sept. 1879.
 - 83 For example: Watson to Lamb, 29 Mar. 1909, and Watson to Mrs F.J. Martin (Thamesville, Ontario), 28 Feb. 1922. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA.
 - 84 Watson discussed plans for the series in letters to Newton MacTavish, 21 July and 30 Oct. 1908[?] (Newton MacTavish papers, North York Public Library, Toronto). Harper’s statement that various paintings were completed beginning in the 1890s (HARPER, *Homer Watson*, n.p.) contradicts the Watson/MacTavish correspondence. *A Land of Thrift*, 81.3 × 114.3 cm was exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal and at the Normal School (Toronto) in 1883 (see MILLER, *Homer Watson* [1988], 145), and was described in the *Hamilton Spectator* on 5 October 1963.
 - 85 Ann C. COLLEY, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 1998), 5.
 - 86 Watson to Lismer, 30 Sept. [1930]. Homer Watson fonds, NGCLA. This aspect of Watson’s thought is considered throughout NOONAN, *Refining the Real Canada*.
 - 87 Elizabeth WATERSTON and Douglas HOFFMAN, eds., *On Middle Ground: Landscape and Life in Wellington County 1841–1891* (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1974), 31.
 - 88 HAYES, *Waterloo County*, 189.
 - 89 Homer WATSON, “A Landscape Painter’s Day,” quoted in VANEVRY, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 61–62.
 - 90 See especially David BROWNSTEIN, “Early Conservation Efforts in Waterloo County,” *Waterloo Historical Society* annual volume 86 (1998): 17–31.
 - 91 “Let him paint”: quoted in NOONAN, *Refining the Real Canada*, 27; “or shall I say shock”: Watson to Lyle, 15 Feb. 1933.
 - 92 Katherine HALE, “The Art of Homer Watson: A Leading Canadian Landscape Artist,” *The Canadian Magazine* 20, no. 2 (December 1902): 140; GRIER, “Art Notes,” 259; “Art Exhibition,” *Montreal Daily Witness* (26 Mar. 1904); “Annual of R.C.A. Open,” *Ottawa Journal*, 28 Nov. 1912.
 - 93 Mary TIVY, “Dreams and Nightmares: Changing Visions of the Past at Doon Pioneer Village,” *Ontario History* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 84.
 - 94 *Ibid.*, 93–94.

Homer Watson et *The Pioneer Mill*

BRIAN FOSS

L'exposition inaugurale de la Canadian Academy of Arts, tenue à Toronto en 1880, comprenait un tableau intitulé *The Pioneer Mill*, par Homer Ransford Watson, alors âgé de 25 ans. Watson était presque entièrement autodidacte en tant qu'artiste et, jusque là, il avait toujours vécu dans la petite ville ontarienne de Doon (aujourd'hui dans la banlieue de Kitchener), sauf pour un court séjour à Toronto et un voyage de quelques mois à travers l'État de New York. *The Pioneer Mill*, grand tableau représentant un petit moulin à scie abandonné, actionné par une roue hydraulique, a été acheté, lors de l'exposition, par le marquis de Lorne, gouverneur-général du Canada, pour en faire cadeau à sa belle-mère, la reine Victoria. Bien que Watson ait connu du succès lors d'expositions et une couverture de presse favorable dès la fin des années 1870 (réussite dont il a plus tard diminué l'ampleur afin d'établir la date d'achat de 1880 comme événement fondateur dans le développement de sa carrière), cette vente a été un événement décisif pour l'établissement de sa réputation à long terme. L'image d'un Watson non formé et isolé, profondément attaché à ses racines rurales, puisant son inspiration artistique directement et uniquement dans la nature et modèle de toutes les vertus associées à la vie à la campagne, allait, jusqu'à aujourd'hui, définir essentiellement l'artiste et son œuvre. Le présent article explore cette image en considérant les facteurs qui ont influencé Watson dans le choix de représenter un ancien moulin. Il est question de la représentation des premiers moulins dans l'art et la littérature contemporains ; du développement économique du sud de l'Ontario ; des rapports entre les réalités rurales et urbaines, des attentes et des attitudes ; et de l'histoire personnelle de Watson et de ses ancêtres.

Les vieux moulins étaient un sujet favori durant la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle, non seulement de Watson, mais aussi de plusieurs artistes, illustrateurs, romanciers, poètes et mémorialistes nord-américains, qui associaient sentimentalement l'abandon et la destruction physique de ces structures au déclin d'une société antérieure fondée sur des entreprises familiales et une conception généralement sans complication de l'organisation sociale et économique. Les moulins en ruine furent donc associés à la déchéance, à

la mort, au passage du temps. En fait, la vie sociale et économique dans le sud de l'Ontario, en particulier, connaissait une évolution radicale pendant la jeunesse de Watson et les premières années de sa vie d'adulte, les années mêmes où il a peint *The Pioneer Mill*. Après avoir été le soutien des économies locales, les moulins familiales étaient remplacées à un rythme étonnant par des entreprises grandioses et plus impersonnelles, où les anciennes technologies étaient écrasées par des procédés industriels à grande échelle. Cela n'était nulle part aussi évident que dans le comté de Waterloo, où Watson vivait et travaillait. Ce boom industriel a éventuellement transformé des villages endormis en centres industriels qui employaient un grand nombre de gens, reliés les uns aux autres par une infrastructure de transport de plus en plus étendue. La croissance s'accompagnait de soucis grandissants concernant le stress, les menaces à la santé mentale et physique et la perte de l'autosuffisance, qui était largement vue comme une caractéristique de la vie rurale, et, en même temps, d'une nostalgie pour les anciennes formes de vie rurale et d'organisation économique. En opposition à ces développements, Watson et les auteurs d'articles de journaux et de revues cultivaient sa réputation d'humble fils de la terre et la renforçaient en soulignant ses origines comme petit-fils de pionniers locaux et héritier des valeurs pionnières d'autosuffisance, de simplicité et de droiture. De fait, le bâtiment représenté dans *The Pioneer Mill* s'inspire d'un moulin construit par le grand-père de Watson, et ce qu'on pourrait appeler un culte largement répandu du pionnier était lié au courant de nostalgie sociale dont le dernier quart du XIX^e siècle était imprégné.

L'auto-identification de Watson en tant que paysan était à double tranchant. Alors que *The Pioneer Mill* épouse une approche nostalgique au déclin et à la perte d'un mode de vie passé, ses écrits inédits révèlent qu'il était conscient que c'était l'exploitation du bois qui était en partie responsable de la ruine de sa famille, parce que la demande de bois pour le moulin familial avait eu pour conséquence d'épuiser la ressource même dont dépendait l'avenir du moulin à scie. Bien qu'il se soit fait le champion des pionniers du comté de Waterloo comme hérauts de la civilisation dans ce qui avait été un désert, et que, dans plusieurs de ses tableaux, il ait présenté une relation idyllique de dépendance mutuelle entre l'humanité et les sites qu'elle occupait, Watson reconnaissait aussi les dangers associés à la croissance d'activités civilisatrices. Ces réalités étaient pour lui d'importants aspects de *The Pioneer Mill*, qui sont devenus encore plus évidents alors que le XIX^e siècle a fait place au XX^e. Les menaces à la survie de la forêt locale, suivies de la Première Guerre mondiale avec son utilisation sans précédent d'une technologie moderne létale, ont marqué *The Pioneer Mill* et Watson lui-même comme symboles d'une manière de vivre devenue irrécupérable et non viable. La

redéfinition, en 1979, de Doon Pioneer Village (inauguré en 1957) en Doon Heritage Crossroads et l'actualisation des objets exposés pour les éloigner de l'époque des pionniers et les rapprocher de 1914, ont donné le coup de grâce à la viabilité des structures sociales et économiques simples que Watson avait évoquées avec nostalgie dans *The Pioneer Mill* et dont il avait donné l'exemple dans sa propre vie.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette