

## The Group of Seven and Northern Development

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### Article abstract

La découverte, par les peintres du Groupe des Sept, d'un nouveau thème d'inspiration, celui des vastes étendues sauvages, coïncide avec un sursaut d'industrialisation, appelé par les historiens « La Grande Transformation » du Canada. En Ontario, elle commença avec l'acquisition, auprès du gouvernement fédéral, de vastes étendues de territoires riches en ressources, situées sur le bouclier précambrien. En tant que centre manufacturier et financier, Toronto bénéficia d'une croissance industrielle que stimulait le développement du « Nouvel Ontario », et cette ville attira les artistes commerciaux, excités à l'idée de nouvelles frontières et attirés par des excursions de peinture sur le motif, devant ces paysages du nord. Les toiles qu'ils ont exposées employaient des techniques modernistes qu'on pourrait interpréter comme l'expression d'une nouvelle alliance entre l'art et l'industrie. Et quoique ces artistes n'aient été que des touristes du nord, ils se présentèrent comme de robustes aventuriers, émules des trappeurs, bûcherons, prospecteurs, figures mythiques associées à la conquête du nord. Ils ont aussi manifesté leur souci d'aider directement le commerce, en cherchant à améliorer la qualité du design industriel au Canada.

La confiance et l'optimisme que dégagent les oeuvres du Groupe des Sept s'harmonisent avec une attitude de propriétaire face à la nature, qui est propre aux Canadiens, et qui s'explique par les dispositions prévues par la constitution, réservant une partie des ressources des Terres de la Couronne à la jouissance publique. Ceci a contribué à encourager une sorte de foi optimiste dans le caractère inépuisable de la nature que l'imagerie de ces peintres laisse transparaître. De plus, certaines tensions se sont développées entre les critiques qui envisageaient le progrès en Amérique du Nord en terme de poursuite de la tradition agraire et ces « modernistes radicaux » qu'il est possible d'associer avec un nouveau concept de grande accélération, de progrès scientifique inspiré par l'utilisation des derniers développements de la technologie pour arracher de force, et de manière destructive, les ressources naturelles à ces étendues sauvages.

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# *The Group of Seven and Northern Development\**

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## RÉSUMÉ

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La découverte, par les peintres du Groupe des Sept, d'un nouveau thème d'inspiration, celui des vastes étendues sauvages, coïncide avec un sursaut d'industrialisation, appelé par les historiens «La Grande Transformation» du Canada. En Ontario, elle commença avec l'acquisition, auprès du gouvernement fédéral, de vastes étendues de territoires riches en ressources, situées sur le bouclier précambrien. En tant que centre manufacturier et financier, Toronto bénéficia d'une croissance industrielle que stimulait le développement du «Nouvel Ontario», et cette ville attira les artistes commerciaux, excités à l'idée de nouvelles frontières et attirés par des excursions de peinture sur le motif, devant ces paysages du nord. Les toiles qu'ils ont exposées employaient des techniques modernistes qu'on pourrait interpréter comme l'expression d'une nouvelle alliance entre l'art et l'industrie. Et quoique ces artistes n'aient été que des touristes du nord, ils se présentèrent comme de robustes aventuriers, émules des trappeurs, bûcherons, prospecteurs, figures mythiques associées à la conquête du

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The decade of the 1920s was a period of unprecedented activity in all the arts in Canada<sup>1</sup> and the Group of Seven sensed the growing momentum as they prepared for their third exhibition in 1922. Encouraged by increased patronage and public approval, their brief preface for the catalogue sounded a new note of boldness and self-confidence, ending with the words, "In the midst of discovery and progress, of vast horizons and a beckoning future, Art must take to the road and risk all for the glory of a great adventure."<sup>2</sup> But this sentence was also a reflection of the current public mood about the economic prospects for Ontario and the nation, which could be characterized as one of defiant optimism that the opportunities offered by "the vast and wonderful

physical assets of the country" would soon end the post-war recession and allow continuation of "two and a half decades of phenomenal progress."<sup>3</sup> Their buoyant frame of mind was soon justified by an acceleration of economic and cultural growth that reached a climax in 1929 and was celebrated with the publication of the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1928-1929*, which included a contribution by Lawren Harris rejoicing in the continuing success of the Group of Seven and predicting its continental, if not global, influence with the triumphant statement, "We live on the fringe of the great North across the whole continent and its spiritual flow, its clarity, its replenishing power passes through us to the teeming people south of us."<sup>4</sup>

A few years later the historian Frank Underhill, writing in the depths of the Depression, remembered the enthusiasm of Harris and other contributors to this volume and commented;

[As] we look back, we can see that it was not so much Canadian art, actual or potential, which excited [these writers] in that intoxicating year of 1929, it was the boom. They were mainly giving expression to what more vulgar fellow-Canadians were expressing in skyscrapers and railway extensions and International Nickel at 73.<sup>5</sup>

However, as we have seen, the excitement he noted was not simply the accompaniment of a single, frantic year of economic growth but the outcome of a prosperous decade that was itself the climax of years of prosperity beginning in the late 1890s. That was when Canada began to accelerate its changeover from an agricultural to an industrial nation as it embarked on what economic historians refer to as "The Great Transformation."<sup>6</sup>

This radical and profitable remodelling of economic life was expedited in Ontario by the acquisition in 1889 and 1912 of very large tracts of territory in the North that had formerly been claimed by the federal government, thereby creating a "New Ontario" extending far into the Precambrian Shield. Prized for its timber and promise of mineral wealth, the newly acquired territory was vigorously promoted by Ontario politicians and the financial community, but northern development also benefited from the "Laurier boom" affecting the whole country as settlement of the western plains began in earnest in the late 1890s and the long economic depression of the previous two decades came to an end. Also, tariffs had been put in place to protect Canadian industry so that soon after 1900 Ontario experienced a surge of economic growth and dramatic developments followed one after the other in rapid succession. Iron ore, copper, nickel, gold, and silver began to be mined on the Precambrian Shield in spectacular quantities and large industrial complexes were built at Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, Cobalt, Timmins, and elsewhere. A new source of energy, hydro-electricity, made possible the explosive growth of the pulp and paper industry, which introduced an innovative use for the forest wealth of the North and, in addition, tourism began to develop into a significant Northern enterprise.

These developments depended on new metallurgical processes for the extraction of gold and nickel from the hard rock of the Shield; the invention of methods for the large scale manufacture of paper from wood; the perfection of the hydro-electric turbine and the improvement of

transportation systems, all of which became available after 1880 as part of a world-wide, second industrial revolution based on modern science and technology. The excitement of this enterprise gripped the imagination of Ontarians to the extent that for decades they were caught up in a feverish mood of optimism about what seemed the prospect of almost unlimited growth and prosperity based on the natural resources of their province.

Toronto was the major beneficiary of renewed industrial progress that was further stimulated by World War I. It soon became the smoke-stack city we see in J. E. H. MacDonald's *Tracks and Traffic* from 1912 (Art Gallery of Ontario), the manufacturing hub of a railway network built to transport raw materials down from the North and carry manufactures up from the south and out west along routes like those depicted in 1913 by MacDonald in an illustration entitled *A Night Train in the Northland* (Fig. 95). Thus energized, Toronto became a community consumed by commercial ambition to such an extent that in 1910 Sir Edmund Walker, President of the Bank of Commerce and patron of the arts, felt impelled to sound a warning in the *Toronto Globe* with an article entitled "Shall Canada Go Money-Mad?," which also enquired, "What . . . must be the fate of a nation which does not give due place to the intellectual and the artistic in life?"<sup>7</sup>

At this moment a community of commercial artists in Toronto was excited by a concern similar to Walker's. In their spare-time sketching activities, they had begun to work toward the formation of a distinctive school of Canadian painting featuring the Northland as subject matter, but their sense of a need to explore the aesthetic potential of the wilderness must have been linked, one feels, with an awareness they shared with so many others of its availability for pioneer endeavours of all kinds linked to the business life of Toronto.<sup>8</sup>

Ontarians had by then learned to see the North as a cornucopia overflowing with natural resources, no matter how forbidding its aspect might have been in the past. Suddenly, "technology gave value to the landscape,"<sup>9</sup> as one notes in the *Owen Sound Sun's* description of Toronto artist Tom Thomson's visit in 1912 to the Mississauga Forest Reserve in "the wilds of New Ontario." The report commented on the scenic beauty of the land, but even more emphasis was placed on its rich resources of minerals, forests, water-power, and fish and game.<sup>10</sup>

Thomson's accidental death in 1917 conferred mythic stature on his memory as the guide and inspiration of the artists who formed the Group

of Seven three years later. A number of them had explored the north in his company from 1914 to 1916 when their enthusiasm for its possibilities as an artistic resource was inevitably coloured by what may be called the "Grey Owl syndrome" as they revelled in "going native" for a few days or weeks so as to absorb the spirit of what they believed to be a pristine wilderness. This was particularly true of those with strong, "old-country" ties, Varley, MacDonald, and especially Lismer, who wrote eloquently about his first visit to Algonquin Park in 1914 when the North left an impression of "an atmosphere and a glamour all its own," and where spring is "one of the wonders of God's creation."<sup>11</sup> But their new sketching territory was also remembered as "ruthless and savage," or "vast, drab and lonely,"<sup>12</sup> responses that can be verified with reference to the harsh reality depicted in Thomson's photographs,<sup>13</sup> where one often sees the Northland as the devastated site of the second great industry to be established, after the fur trade, in the North. The lumbermen, whose log-drives had been depicted in early paintings by J. E. H. MacDonald and Lauren Harris,<sup>14</sup> left behind them a land characterized by A. Y. Jackson as "slashed up, burnt over and flooded."<sup>15</sup> But it was this kind of country that Thomson made his own in Algonquin Park, which, as Jackson noted rather wonderingly, "Many people would consider monotonous, but to Thomson it was a treasure house of motifs, rivers, lakes, beaver swamps and abandoned lumber camps."<sup>16</sup>

In his sketches and finished paintings Thomson made some references to the fact that Algonquin Park had become a site for two industries, lumbering and tourism,<sup>17</sup> but in his most characteristic works he explored the new kind of landscape created by the clearing of white pine from the region.<sup>18</sup> He did not entirely ignore the damaging effect of logging on the environment ("drowned land," "burnt land," and shoreline debris are frequently depicted) but for the most part he concentrated on newly opened vistas of sky and water (Fig. 96) or on finding decorative patterns of colour, form, and texture in the tangle of underbrush, smaller trees, and bared rock, the "bush" that was often the remnant of the original forest (Fig. 97).<sup>19</sup> In his best known show pieces like *The Jack Pine* (Fig. 98) he usually combined both "vista" and "bush."

Georgian Bay had been even more radically transformed by the lumber industry, which had cut down most of its high quality white pine by the beginning of this century. Lumbering continued, but after that the area became what was, in effect, a large, well-appointed holiday resort

created by private enterprise.<sup>20</sup> As early as 1900 there were complaints that accommodation was overcrowded and the water-ways were encumbered with log-booms,<sup>21</sup> so it was hardly a wilderness area when Dr. MacCallum's cottage provided a comfortable base from which his artist friends could explore the region's picturesque possibilities. In fact, some of the best-known icons of the wilderness cult in Ontario could almost have been painted from its verandas—Jackson's *Terre Sauvage* (Fig. 99), Lismer's *A September Gale, Georgian Bay* (1921, National Gallery of Canada), and Varley's *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* (1920, National Gallery of Canada).<sup>22</sup>

The growth of tourism in the North was rapid and by 1907 Toronto regarded itself as "the gateway of the summer paradise of North America" in Muskoka, Georgian Bay, and Algonquin Park.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning the industry had to offer its customers a product that included not only fresh air, exercise, and scenery but as much as possible of the structure and predictability of urban life with regard to transportation, accommodation, planned social events, and so forth. Eventually, of course, the scenery came to be viewed with reference to an orderly set of expectations as visitors learned what to look for with the aid of the Group of Seven and their followers. Their works evoked romantic communion with the "wilderness" by means of a set of traditional conventions, sublime panoramas (Fig. 100), beautiful valleys (Fig. 101), and picturesque details (Fig. 102), but they were cast in a modernist, "poster-esque" style that had evolved within the cultural processes of industrialized urban life. The combination and imposition of these patterns of form and feeling on the North Country had, therefore, the important function of creating a consoling myth about co-operative interdependence between cities and the health-preserving influence of nature,<sup>24</sup> but at the same time it augmented the process by which the tourist industry became a powerful mechanism for the absorption of the North into the metropolitan system.<sup>25</sup>

When members of the Group entered New Ontario for the first time in 1918 to explore the Algoma District and the north shore of Lake Superior they encountered wilder country, but it was far from being uninhabited. There were railways, shipping routes, mines, lumber mills, and a working population in the industrial centres of Sault Ste. Marie, Fort William, and Port Arthur, as well as so-called "resource communities" peculiar to development on the Shield like Michipicoten, Marathon, Schreiber, and Nipigon.<sup>26</sup> But these modern working sites were widely sepa-

rated and for the most part could not, like the picturesque activity of lumbering, be incorporated within a romantic concept of nature, so the Group's efforts were concentrated on fashioning heroic or transcendental images from this vast territory, in large part logged over and desolated by forest fires<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 103).

Nevertheless, the exclusion of human activity from the Group's wilderness paintings does not preclude the suggestion of at least a parallel between their activity as artists and that of industrial developers in the North. This was spelled out in an article published by Arthur Lismer in 1925 where he referred to the development of natural resources as the primary means by which a material foundation for nationhood was being created, an activity he regarded as a model for that of the artist, who could draw on "a powerful reserve of national beauty" in the same regions of the North exploited by industry and utilize his discoveries to "sustain the spiritual and aesthetic life of the inhabitants of this country."<sup>28</sup>

Vincent Massey, an important patron of the Group of Seven, enlarged on this theme in an address to the Royal Society of Canada in 1930 when he held the post of the first Canadian Minister to the United States. He deplored a tendency in Canada and elsewhere to create a divorce between beauty and utility, emphasizing that

[In] Canada . . . the human imagination can express itself just as well in engineering and in business as in poetry. . . . Our Northern wilderness is, in an especial sense, the scene of the poetry of action with its great treasure hunt conducted from the sky, its railways nosing their way through the forest to northern oceans, the harness which is being thrown on rapid and waterfall. . . . This treasure-laden wilderness . . . will inform our literature and art with a spirit of its own. . . . Commerce and art are becoming allies.<sup>29</sup>

A more concrete link was established between art and business by the Group when they began to speak and act in the interest of strengthening the progress of industry in Ontario. In 1919 Arthur Lismer set out the terms of this concern in some detail when he wrote in the *Canadian Courier* that the average man was beginning to realize that art could be useful. It was a lesson that had been driven home, he thought, by an unusual wartime exhibition in Montreal and Toronto of German manufactures organized in 1916 to show how Canadian industry might profit by supplying what was no longer available from an enemy country. There Lismer had found "every conceivable object of human use . . . touched by an element that we do not possess in this country" – art in the service of industry. This demonstrated, he concluded, that for

Canada to compete it must mobilize art museums, technical schools, and universities to train industrial designers in the production of "goods more pleasing to public taste and of more industrial value."<sup>30</sup>

Jackson showed the relevance of their northern sketching trips to this undertaking when, after returning from a sketching trip to Algoma in 1920 (where he had travelled on a railroad built to serve the industries of Sault Ste. Marie) he commented on how the artist could bring another kind of richness from that source to manufacturers in the south: "Probably no country has greater wealth on intimate detail than has the north in autumn, and no nation has made less use of its own natural forms in decorative design than Canada has in textiles, wall-papers, jewelry, and other branches of applied art."<sup>31</sup>

Of course, the involvement of most of the Group of Seven in commercial and applied art is well known, including their training as commercial artists; their early work for Grip Ltd. and Rous and Mann in Toronto; the influential teaching of commercial design by Lismer, MacDonald, and Carmichael at the Ontario College of Art; the organization by MacDonald of decorative schemes for Toronto buildings, and so forth.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, they must have felt at home in the predominantly industrial and commercial British Empire Exhibition staged at Wembley in 1924-25, where, in the outlying Fine Arts Building, they competed for public attention with the central, rather grand Canadian Pavilion containing exhibits of Canada's natural resources, including a two-ton lump of silver ore from Cobalt and an imposing display of moose heads.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, critical acclaim in the British press confirmed their status in Canada as originators of a national movement in art.

The Group's sense of kinship with the business community was reciprocated in a practical way when a significant number of industrialists, financiers, and corporations began to purchase their works, as they continue to do,<sup>34</sup> and one senses a recognition on their part that the artists they patronized employed, like modern industry, what were regarded then as the most advanced methods of extracting artistic treasure, emphatic design, colour, and expressive effects, from the same hills, forests, rivers, and waterfalls that were the basis of so much material wealth in Ontario and Canada.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the relationship between art and industry exemplified by the Group did not conform with assumptions made by many inhabitants of Southern Ontario about the true mission of landscape art. It is not simply

that so many then, as now, felt that the landscape artist should distance himself from technology and development in order to provide an imaginary retreat for the jaded city worker into the refreshing peace and purity of Northern scenery. There was also a deeper and more disturbing question about how one could understand the relationship between wilderness, industry, and art without reference to the agrarian myth.

For example, Hector Charlesworth, the Group's most severe critic, objected strongly to their depiction of "areas of primeval rock and Jack Pine," regions that constituted, he believed, "Canada's gravest problem in an economic sense and the most serious barrier to her social and political unity," a curiously outdated view at the time. He also attacked their "futurist" style with its "mechanical outlines and crude colour" as an expression of merely "jazzy and momentary sensation."<sup>35</sup> These failings were due primarily, he believed, to their abandonment of the methods and aims of his favourite painters, Homer Watson, McGillivray Knowles, Carl Ahrens, Archibald Browne, and other traditionalists who utilized "subtle colour and atmospheric treatment," to "etherialize" their subjects while conforming to "eternal standards of poetry and beauty," and who did "not paint the wilds, but the hills and valleys that the pioneers of Upper Canada made opulent and fruitful"<sup>36</sup> (Fig. 104).

Charlesworth's strictures show that his preferences, like those of so many others in the province, had been influenced in large measure by the agrarian myth. Sanctioned by centuries of praise in poetry and prose for agriculture as the foundation of society, agrarianism also provided a basis for understanding material and cultural progress, especially in the New World. It placed pioneer farmers in the vanguard of civilization, advancing into the wilderness to clear, cultivate, and improve the land in a process of natural interaction with the earth that would result over a period of time in the establishment of rural communities. Towns would grow into cities and develop industries to supply manufactured goods and tools for agriculturists who would, in exchange, provide the fruits of nature to urban centres. Populations would increase, wealth would accumulate, and the arts would flourish to express ideals of beauty and virtue stemming directly from the divine influence of nature. The special impact of this vision of agrarianism on the culture and history of the United States from earliest times to the present is well documented. Its pictorial expression in American painting includes Asher B. Durand's work from 1853 entitled *Progress* (Fig. 105) where, within a Claudian

framework of form, space, and light one can follow a sequence from foreground to distance of wilderness, farm, town, and industrial city.<sup>37</sup>

Different political values and an environment dominated by the proximity of the Precambrian Shield prevented the agrarian myth from having a comparable impact in Ontario,<sup>38</sup> but it was nevertheless influential in shaping a conception of life, history, and art shared by Charlesworth with many others.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, they had difficulty coming to terms with a modern myth of progress, so far unnamed, but which might be called the "extractionist myth." In contrast to agrarianism it celebrated the wilderness areas of North America as a limitless treasure house of raw materials that had formerly been inaccessible. Now they could be discovered and violently extracted from the land by means of modern science and technology without significant damage to a vast and supposedly desolate environment. Huge sums of private and public money were required for the purpose but the gratifying result was the sudden appearance of railways, resource towns, mines, mills, factories geared to foreign markets, booming cities, and dozens of new millionaires.<sup>40</sup> Franklin Carmichael's *A Northern Silvermine* from 1930 (Fig. 106) provides a partial illustration of this new myth of progress. It was based on studies made at Cobalt and the style he employed to render the dominant mine buildings and surrounding wilderness approaches the machine-inspired "precisionism" of Charles Sheeler and other illustrators of twentieth-century cities and industries.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, many were appalled by this scheme of things and its climax in the development of a materialistic, "money-mad" urban society in which there was little concern about preserving "eternal standards of beauty" rooted in a pastoral landscape. They were unable to accept the view that a new aesthetic could emerge from an industrialized community rooted in technology, or that F. B. Housser, the first historian of the Group of Seven, could be correct in his assertion that "Canadian art budded from a civilization of iron and steel in Toronto."<sup>42</sup> Charlesworth spoke for them when he rejected works depicting what he regarded as an empty wasteland inexplicably garbed in "jazzy" colours and forms expressing the momentary sensations of urban life.

Charlesworth accurately expressed a widely felt anxiety evoked by the extractionist myth about the possibility of true art in the modern world but his *bête-noire*, the Group of Seven, actually shared this concern, and sought to humanize the new myth rather than reject it. They represented the wilderness as rugged enough to defy conver-

sion to pastoral ground, to be sure, but their modernist style was meant to make it emotionally accessible in decorative terms, and they also sought to imbue it with grandeur, harmony, and a degree of poetry by means of traditional, if more or less concealed, compositional devices. This strategy made the North seem less threatening and its resources more capable of being processed to provide aesthetic satisfaction as art expressing the national and spiritual aspirations of a culture based on resource extraction.

In addition, the North could be viewed through the works of the Group with a special pride of ownership that was specifically Canadian. Then, as now, over 80 percent of the province was Crown Land, with reserved timber, water, and mineral rights.<sup>43</sup> The leasing of these rights by the provincial government provided a considerable amount of revenue earlier in the century, especially from timber lands, and provincial elections featured controversies about issues connected with government management of its property.<sup>44</sup> The Hydro Electric Power Commission of Ontario was made possible by Crown control of water rights and literature promoting its establishment as a Crown Corporation in 1906 made frequent use of the phrase, "the people's power."<sup>45</sup> Consequently, awareness of the significance of Crown Lands was more widespread in the first two decades of the century than now, so the freedom, confidence, and optimism with which the Group of Seven painted the North harmonized with and expressed the population's proprietary view of nature and helped to make Northern development more comprehensible in terms of public benefit.

However, this situation induced a certain smugness when Americans brought their concerns about the conservation of natural resources and the preservation of the wilderness to Canada around 1900. Ontarians believed that public ownership of so much land created circumstances much superior to those prevailing in the United States, where conservationists had to fight hard to reclaim nature from private owners and protect it from unlimited exploitation. In reality, of course, government and industry in Canada had long co-operated to devastate forests and waterways, and the false sense of security created by public ownership tended to prevent Canadians from seeing the danger.<sup>46</sup> As a result Canada has always found it difficult to separate the conservation and exploitation of resources from the preservation of wilderness, hence the application of a "multiple use" policy to national and provincial parks.<sup>47</sup> This problem is also embedded in the Group's paintings, which can be seen both as cel-

ebrations of the beauty and spiritual energy of the North and as symbols of resources that, deep down, many believe to be inexhaustible. As a result, the Group of Seven had a powerful role to play in creating what has been called the "myth of a solemn, empty, resource-rich northern land" in Canada.<sup>48</sup>

Although the development of the North was accomplished primarily by means of science, technology, and the mobilization of huge financial resources, an effort was made to give the operation a human face, and the Group of Seven was important in this regard. Their own forays into the wilderness were represented by themselves and others as artistic campaigns undertaken by "a new type of artist," a muscular pioneer and adventurer comparable with the workmen involved with commercial enterprises in New Ontario.<sup>49</sup> It was a role that had been adopted before them by at least one industrial trailblazer, Francis H. Clergue of Sault Ste. Marie, who liked to introduce himself as "a backwoodsman from the wilds of Algoma."<sup>50</sup> Ultimately there evolved the idea of a kinship between industrialists and artists as outdoorsmen, which was expressed amusingly enough in 1937 by the sculptress Elizabeth Wyn Wood. She defended the Group of Seven and their followers from the charge of being outmoded in their view of the relation of the artist to society by describing them as "trailblazers" comparable with those "fine fellows, our millionaires, who mush through the North as we do, eating hard tack and bully beef."<sup>51</sup>

This persona is an aspect of a myth that the development of the North was carried forward primarily by heroic lumbermen, prospectors, engineers, and other enterprising individuals. The seriousness with which it could be taken in the realm of art is illustrated by the words of Ray Atherton, the first American ambassador to Canada, who on one public occasion in 1947 spoke of Tom Thomson as "the man in the canoe . . . a symbol of the western march of our civilization who alone was able to express . . . the deep faith in nature . . . of all the strong men in canoes" and in "whose wake the economy and culture of Canada appeared."<sup>52</sup> This is an eloquent version of the kind of statement that had served financiers, corporations, and politicians very well for many years as a means of distracting attention from the real beneficiaries of public money spent in support of Northern development.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the myth also served to humanize the process of development by suggesting that the new industrialism was rooted in everyday labour. It removed some of what the public might perceive as the mystery, impersonality, and gigan-

tism of the overriding extractionist myth and it suggested how art could emerge from the wilderness without reference to European artistic traditions and conventional views about the priority of agriculture as the basis of human culture.

Acceptance of "extractionism" was also promoted in a general way by the Victorian cult of progress, imported from Britain. It combined the Romantic assumption that the natural environment shapes spirit and mind with the Darwinian conviction that any improvement brought about by technological innovation would result in the enhancement of cultural and intellectual life within the community.<sup>54</sup> On the whole, the Group of Seven and their associates tended to accept this view of the potentially beneficial effect of technological progress on the arts, an outlook to be expected among artists trained to work in an industrial setting. However, the unusual speed of development in Ontario, coupled with what seemed to be an almost exclusive attention to commercial affairs in a newly formed "money-mad" society, offered a special challenge to Victorian optimism about the inevitability of cultural improvement in an industrial community. Concern was expressed not only by Sir Edmund Walker, as we have seen, but by the painter Wylie Grier, later to become President of the Royal Canadian Academy. He noted in 1913 that even in England painters were subject to "the deadly, suffocating effect of the weight of surrounding utilities . . . in a country of commerce." In Canada, he said, the situation was made worse by the fact that "[we] have no leisured class, no idle sons to potter with dilettante pursuits and who almost unconsciously drift into art" so that "the artist is even more singular [here] than in Britain."<sup>55</sup>

Even so, it was just such a privileged, if not idle, son of a wealthy Canadian family who stood out among his colleagues in the Group of Seven for his ability to withstand "the weight of surrounding utilities." Unlike Lismer, who spoke for the majority when he wrote that the Canadian artist should work in tandem with industry to draw beauty and power from the "ruthless" wilderness, Lawren Harris believed that "the determining factor for a man is *not* adaptation to his environment." He was enthusiastic, of course, about "the clear, replenishing, virgin north," but primarily as an influence that could "melt the artist's personal barriers" and enable his intensified vision to "penetrate through appearances to the underlying hidden realities." Influenced, like so many, by the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, Harris also recognized the importance of pioneering struggles in forming the Canadian character but he found its "crude, rau-

cous, ill-formed energy" in need of "direction to lofty ideals within ourselves," and this, he thought, should be undertaken as "the task and the joy" of the artist. By this means Canadians would be enabled to make contact with "the spirit that informs all forms" and come to understand that "the principles, the laws, the informing spirit, is [*sic*] eternally the same." His Theosophical convictions had led him to the conclusion that art, as well as life itself, was to be understood as a spiritual unfolding "from within outwards."<sup>56</sup>

This vision of individual and collective spiritual development seems to have little to do with the material circumstances of a newly industrialized country, but not only did Harris acknowledge the importance of engagement with the facts of his immediate environment as a necessary, initial stage in artistic and spiritual development,<sup>57</sup> he also recognized the inevitability of material progress as "the world moves into new relationships in space . . . which evoke a new attitude and are giving rise to what we call the modern world." "Our art," he wrote, "[conveys] a strange, brooding sense of Mother Nature fostering a new race and a new age."<sup>58</sup>

Harris's reference to the advent of a new race and a new age forms a link with an essay from 1930 by his friend and fellow Theosophist, F. B. Housser, in which he welcomed the approach of a new stage in human evolution on the North American continent, as predicted by Madam Blavatsky. Its outstanding characteristic was to be a "willingness to submerge the individual for the sake of the ideal" and he found confirmation for this judgment in the views of the Irish poet and mystic, George Russell, who believed that new communications technology, railway, steamship, cable, wireless, air transport, etc., would be instrumental, together with art, in creating what he called a new cosmic, or "planetary consciousness."<sup>59</sup> As financial editor of the *Toronto Daily Star* Housser was well placed to observe these latest features of the "Great Transformation" and perhaps he discussed them with his friend Harris in terms of their bearing on art and the Theosophical concept of the ascent of the spirit. The sense of crisis they shared about the relationship between technology and human development was resolved for them by an optimistic view that industrialism might yet lead to a new phase of religious enlightenment, but their initial anxiety was widely prevalent and the discussion it provoked in Canada extended well beyond the bounds of a religious cult. As it continued over the years gloomier conclusions were often reached. The historian Harold Innis worried about the power of technology to advance new forms of tyrannous imperialism,



Communism, and Fascism. The philosopher George Grant deplored the tendency of technology to compel treatment of the environment as an object, resulting in the destruction of values derived from the reverential contemplation of nature. Only Marshall McLuhan developed a hopeful position corresponding in some respects to that of Housser and the Theosophists when, for fundamentally religious reasons, he desperately placed his trust in a restoration of agrarian values within a global village created by modern communications techniques.<sup>60</sup>

For better or for worse the work of the Group of Seven, like that of McLuhan has been regarded, for very different reasons, as an antidote to fear of technology because of its success in endowing the "extractionist myth" and our "treasure-laden" Northland with aesthetic interest, nationalism, mysticism, faith in progress, and confidence in the inexhaustible wealth of the wilderness, a modern value system regarded by many as equivalent in merit to traditional ideals identified with the agrarian myth and the cultivated land of the south. Today both systems may seem irrelevant as the extractionist myth itself comes under attack from the new mystique of global competitiveness, but how Canadian artists have been involved in the new form of development that engendered it is another story.

#### NOTES

- \* A version of this paper was read on 9 November 1991, during the annual conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.
- 1 Census figures show that from 1921 to 1931 the number of artists rose by 86 percent compared with the previous decade, whereas the population increased by only 18 percent during the same period (Mary Jean Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada in the 1920s," diss., University of Toronto, 1974, 33).
- 2 Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto and Montreal, 1970), 217.
- 3 "Future Is One of Bright Promise," *Half Century Anniversary Number of the Daily Mail and Empire, 1872-1922. The Story of Fifty Years of a Great Newspaper with a Review of Canadian History and Progress* (Toronto), 30 March 1922, 97-98.
- 4 Lawren Harris, "Creative Art and Canada," in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1928-1929*, ed. Bertram Brooker (Toronto, 1929), 182.
- 5 Frank Underhill, review of *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1936*, ed. Bertram Brooker, *The Canadian Forum* (December 1936), 27.
- 6 Donald Kerr and Deryck W. Holdsworth, eds., *Historical Atlas of Canada* (Toronto, 1990), III, 13-15, 29-30.
- 7 Sir Edmund Walker, "Shall Canada Go Money-Mad? . . . (From the Toronto Globe)," *Busy Man's Magazine* (August 1910), [22-23]. For Walker's relationship with the Group of Seven and the National Gallery of Canada see Charles C. Hill, "The National Gallery, a National Art, Critical Judgement and the State," in *The True North: Canadian Landscape Painting 1896-1939*, ed. Michael

- Tooby, exhibition catalogue, Barbican Art Gallery (London, 1991), 65-83.
- 8 For a description of the commercial art scene in Toronto before World War I as experienced by immigrants like Lismer, see Michael Tooby, *Our Home and Native Land: Sheffield's Canadian Artists*, exhibition catalogue, Mappin Art Gallery (Sheffield, 1991), although the author is reticent about the history and nature of the industrial development that sustained "artist workers" in both Sheffield and Toronto.
- 9 H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto, 1974), 51.
- 10 Joan Murray, *The Art of Tom Thomson*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, 1971), 23.
- 11 Marjorie Bridges Lismer, *Arthur Lismer's Pen and Pencil: A Border of Beauty* (Toronto, 1977), 16.
- 12 Arthur Lismer, "Canadian Art," *The Canadian Theosophist* (February 1925), 177, and Lawren Harris, "Winning a Canadian Background," *The Canadian Bookman* (February 1923), 37.
- 13 Dennis Reid, "Photographs by Tom Thomson," *The Bulletin of the National Gallery of Canada*, XVI (1970).
- 14 E.g., J. E. H. MacDonald, *By the River (Early Spring)*, 1911, Government of Ontario Art Collection, Queen's Park, Toronto, and Lawren Harris, *The Drive*, 1912, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- 15 A. Y. Jackson, "The Birth of the Group of Seven," in *Our Sense of Identity*, ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto, 1954), 226.
- 16 A. Y. Jackson, "Foreword," in Blodwen Davies, *Tom Thomson: The Story of a Man Who Looked for Beauty and for Truth in the Wilderness*, rev. ed. (Vancouver, 1967), 5.
- 17 Ottelyn Addison, *Early Days in Algonquin Park* (Toronto, 1974), 9-28, 71-99. See Thomson's *Tea Lake Dam*, 1916 (National Gallery of Canada) for logging and *Little Cauchon Lake*, 1916 (National Gallery of Canada) for tourism, among others.
- 18 For an early description from 1908 of how Algonquin Park was transformed by logging see G. D. Garland, ed., *Glimpses of Algonquin: Thirty Personal Impressions from Earliest Times to the Present* (Whitney, Ont., 1989), 73.
- 19 A. Y. Jackson was the first to make a distinction between Thomson's works "showing a low shore line and a big sky" and those "finding happy color motives amid [the] tangle and confusion" of "his waste of rock and swamp" (A. Y. Jackson, "Foreword," in *The Arts Club Montreal: Exhibition of Works by the Late Tom Thomson* [Montreal, 1919], [2]).
- 20 James Barry, *Georgian Bay: The Sixth Great Lake* (Toronto and Vancouver, 1968), and G. Wall, "Recreational Land Use in Muskoka," in *Recreational Land Use: Perspectives on its Evolution in Canada*, ed. Geoffrey Wall and John S. Marsh (Ottawa, 1982), 143-44.
- 21 "Canada and the Tourist," Editorial, and W. R. Bradshaw, "The Georgian Bay Archipelago," *The Canadian Magazine*, Special "Tourist Number" (May 1900), 3, 23.
- 22 Charles Comfort, "Georgian Bay Legacy," *Canadian Art*, VIII (1951), 106-109; Dennis Reid, *The Group of Seven*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1970), 46-47, 153; and Pierre B. Landry, *The MacCallum-Jackman Cottage Mural Paintings*, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1990).
- 23 C. Price-Green, "Toronto's Progress—The Advent of the Canadian Northern," *Canadian Magazine* (January 1907), 31.
- 24 Douglas Cole, "Artists, Patrons and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, XIII (1978), 69-78.
- 25 For a useful discussion of the origins of the Group of Seven's "poster-esque" style, their connections with commercial art, and the background of tourism, see Robert Stacey, "The Myth—and Truth—of the True North," in *The True North*, 52-58. A somewhat different treatment of metropoli-

- tanism and the Group of Seven has been given by 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 Reade (Toronto, 1990), 71-94.
- 26 Roy T. Bowles, "Introduction," in *Little Communities, Big Industries: Studies in the Social Impact of Canadian Resource Extraction*, ed. Roy T. Bowles (Toronto, 1982), 1-5, and T. S. H. Baxter, *Quiet Coves and Rocky Highlands: Exploring Lake Superior* (Wawa, Ont., 1983).
  - 27 For a useful sketch of the limited extent to which the Group of Seven and others reacted directly to the spectacle of industrial enterprises on the Shield, see Rosemary Donegan, *Industrial Images*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of Hamilton (Hamilton, 1987), 70-78.
  - 28 Arthur Lismer, "Canadian Art," 179.
  - 29 Vincent Massey, "Art and Nationality in Canada," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd ser., xxiv (1930), lxi-lxii.
  - 30 A. J. Lismer, "Art and the Average Canadian," *Canadian Courier*, 1 February 1919, 13. As vice-principal of the Ontario College of Art Lismer re-stated his views on art and industry before an influential gathering in 1926 (Arthur Lismer, "Canadian Art," *Addresses Delivered Before the Canadian Club of Toronto, Season of 1926-27* [Toronto, 1927], 174-76). This theme was not new in discussions of art education in Canada. When the Royal Canadian Academy was founded in 1880 an important goal, as stated in its Constitution, was "the encouragement of Design as applied to Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Engraving and the Industrial Arts, and the promotion and support of education leading to the production of beautiful and excellent work in manufactures . . ." (quoted by Hill, "The National Gallery," 66). Also see Marie L. Fleming and John R. Taylor, *100 Years: Evolution of the Ontario College of Art*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, 1976), 11-19.
  - 31 A. Y. Jackson, "Sketching in Algoma," *The Canadian Forum* (March 1921), 174-75. The major work resulting from this trip was Jackson's *First Snow, Algoma*, c. 1921 (McMichael Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario) and in detail it illustrates the decorative qualities to which he refers (Mellen, *The Group of Seven*, illus. 105 and 106).
  - 32 The Group's influence, especially that of Lismer, in promoting better industrial design may be said to have attained its goals, somewhat belatedly, with the establishment of the National Design Council in 1961 under the direction of Donald Buchanan, who had begun investigating the subject in 1947. His publications from the 1940s onward had provided some finishing touches to their canonization (especially his Phaidon volume of 1945, *Canadian Painters from Paul Kane to the Group of Seven* [Oxford, 1945]) and it is not surprising that important features of the Council closely paralleled those of the Group—close ties with the National Gallery; emphasis on Canadian materials and techniques; strong nationalist motivation and even the adoption of Scandinavia as a source of design inspiration (Gloria Lesser, "Biography and Bibliography of the Writings of Donald William Buchanan [1908-1966]," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, v [1981], 129-37).
  - 33 *Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1924, 932-71.
  - 34 Georges Loranger, *An Essay on Private and Public Art Collecting in Canada (The Tip of the Canadian Iceberg)* (Toronto, 1985).
  - 35 Hector Charlesworth, *Saturday Night*, 17 May 1924, 1; 18 March 1916, 5; 24 January 1925, 3; and 26 November 1921, 5.
  - 36 Hector Charlesworth, *Saturday Night*, 21 March 1914, 5; 20 March 1915, 4; 23 December 1922, 2; and 13 November 1920, 12.
  - 37 The classic account of the myth's influence in the United States is Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950). See also Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964), and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven and London, 1982).
  - 38 Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 42-44.
  - 39 Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto, 1971), 175-83.
  - 40 Altmeyer's discussion of the Canadian idea of Nature as a "limited storehouse" probably overemphasizes conservationism as an ameliorating influence on traditional attitudes that have determined Canada's exploitative practices in dealing with its natural resources (George Altmeyer, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 11 [1976], 27-31). Roderick Nash, on visiting Canada in 1967, found considerable indifference to the American concept of wilderness as a resource deserving preservation (Roderick Nash, "Wilderness and Man in North America," in *The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow. Proceedings of a Conference Organized by the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada and the University of Calgary*, ed. J. G. Nelson and R. C. Scace [Calgary, 1968], 1, 80-81).
  - 41 Jean Clair, ed., *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, exhibition catalogue, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Montreal, 1991), 450-71.
  - 42 F. B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto, 1936), 33.
  - 43 Gerard V. La Forest, *Natural Resources and Public Property Under the Canadian Constitution* (Toronto, 1969), and S. L. Macenko and V. P. Neimanis, *An Overview of Crown Land Management in Canada* (Ottawa, 1983).
  - 44 Richard S. Lambert and Paul Pross, *Renewing Nature's Wealth* (Toronto, 1967), 263-69, 317.
  - 45 Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 248-55.
  - 46 Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 199-200.
  - 47 For Canada's "multiple use policy" in its parks see R. Y. Edwards, "Canada's Neglected Parks," and R. C. Passmore, "Provincial Parks in Canada," *Canadian Audubon Magazine* (May-June 1963), 65-70; (November-December 1966), 150-56.
  - 48 Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 45; see also Cole Harris, "The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism," in *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russell (Toronto, 1966), 27-43.
  - 49 Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement*, 15. The type was recognized and satirized at an early date by the journalist Peter Donovan ("Arting with the Artists," *Saturday Night*, 8 April 1916, 5).
  - 50 Verbatim report of a speech to the Toronto Board of Trade regarding his enterprises in Northern Ontario in the *Toronto Globe*, 3 April 1900, 9.
  - 51 Elizabeth Wyn Wood, "Art and the Precambrian Shield," *The Canadian Forum* (February 1937), 14.
  - 52 Ray Atherton, "The Man in the Canoe," *Canadian Art*, v (1947), 57-58.
  - 53 Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 108-10.
  - 54 Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 109-15.
  - 55 Wylie Grier, "Canadian Art: A Resumé," *The Year Book of Canadian Art, 1913*, [ed. Alan Sullivan] (Toronto, 1914), 243.
  - 56 Lawren Harris, "Revelation of Art in Canada," *The Canadian Theosophist* (July 1926), 85-88.
  - 57 For the duality characteristic of Harris's transcendentalism see Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940*, exhibition catalogue, London Regional Art and Historical Museums (London, 1990), 37.
  - 58 Harris, "Creative Art and Canada," 180-81, 185.
  - 59 F. B. Housser, "Walt Whitman and North American Idealism," *The Canadian Theosophist* (March 1930), 104-105.
  - 60 R. D. Mathews, "Nationalism, Technology and Canadian Survival," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, v (1970), 44-49; Jonathan Miller, *McLuhan* (London, 1971), 15-37; and George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto, 1969), 15-40.



FIGURE 95. J. E. H. MacDonald, *A Night Train in the Northland*. Illustration for *The Canadian Magazine* (October, 1913) (Photo: McMaster University).

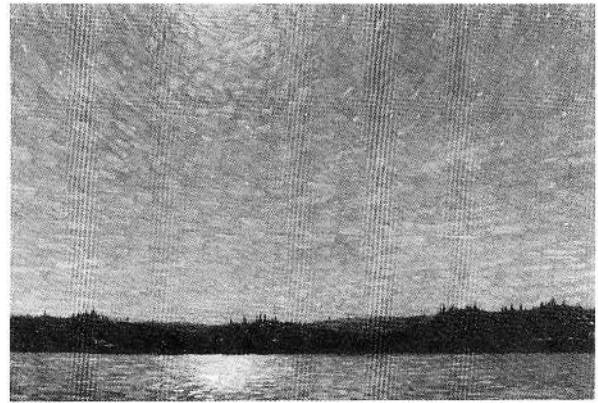


FIGURE 96. Tom Thomson, *Moonlight, Early Evening*, c. 1914. Oil on canvas, 52.9 × 77.1 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



FIGURE 97. Tom Thomson, *The Birch Grove, Autumn*, 1916-17. Oil on canvas, 101.6 × 116.8 cm. The Art Gallery of Hamilton (Photo: Art Gallery of Hamilton).



FIGURE 98. Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*, 1916-17. Oil on canvas, 127.9 × 139.8 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

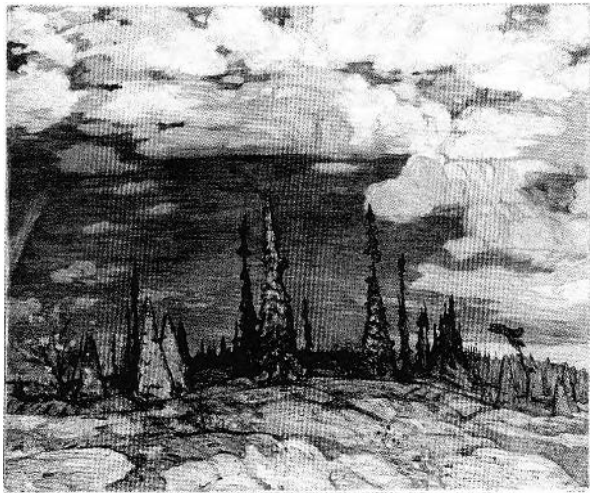


FIGURE 99. A. Y. Jackson, *Terre Sauvage*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 128.8 × 154.4 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



FIGURE 100. F. H. Varley, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, c. 1920. Oil on canvas, 132.6 × 162.8 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



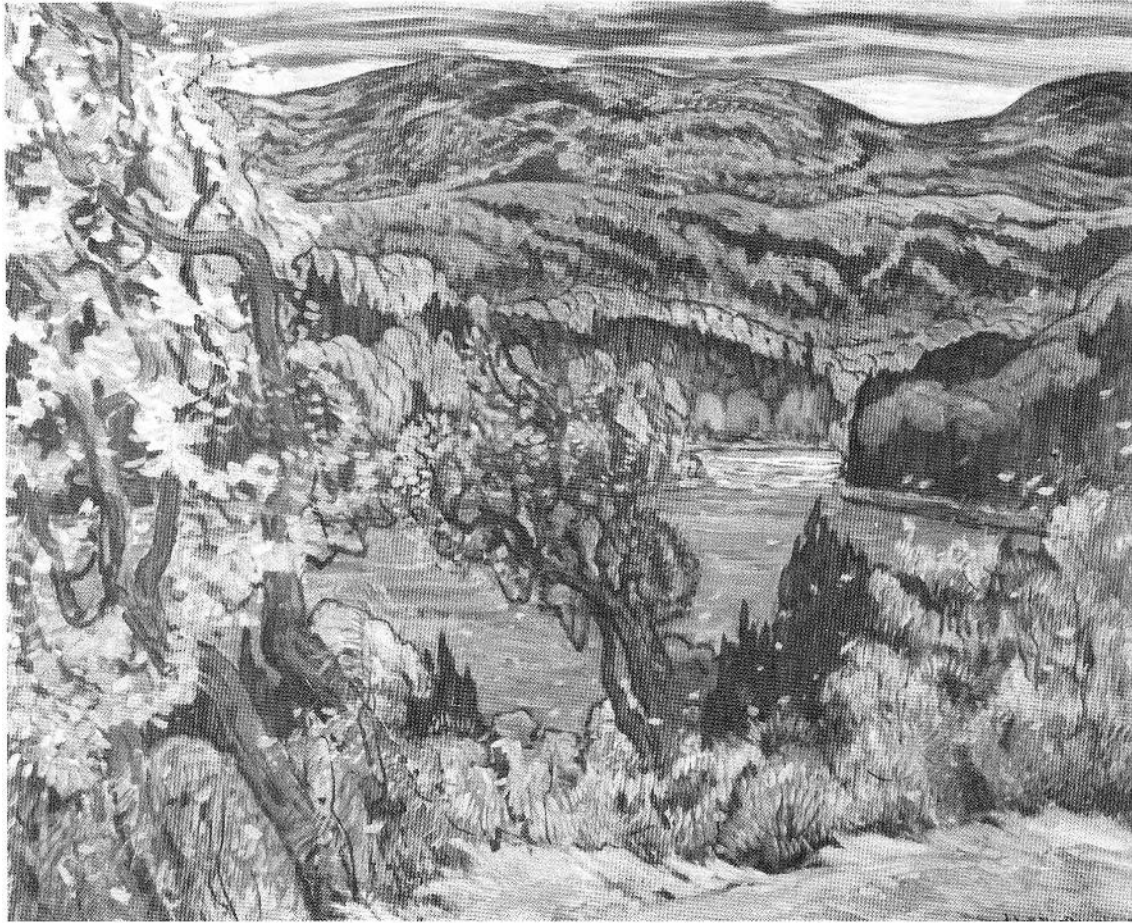


FIGURE 101. J. E. H. MacDonald, *Autumn in Algoma*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 122.8 × 152.4 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



FIGURE 102. Arthur Lismer, *The Guide's Home, Algonquin*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 102.6 × 114.4 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

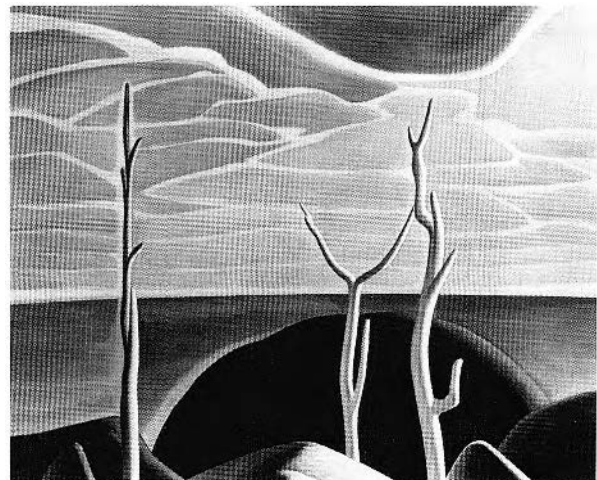


FIGURE 103. Lawren Harris, *Lake Superior*, c. 1924. Oil on canvas, 102.0 × 127.3 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



FIGURE 104. F. McGillivray Knowles, *Landscape with a Farmhouse*, 1901. Oil on canvas, 116.8 × 152.4 cm. Agnes Etherington Art Gallery, Queen's University, Kingston (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Gallery).



FIGURE 105. Asher B. Durand, *Progress*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 121.9 × 182.7 cm. The Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation, Tuscaloosa, Alabama (Photo: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., New York).



FIGURE 106. Franklin Carmichael, *A Northern Silver Mine*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 101.5 × 121.2 cm. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg (Photo: McMichael Canadian Art Collection).