

THOMAS JOHN (TOM) THOMSON

Early years:

Born in Claremont, Ontario (Pickering Township) in 1877, Thomson was a descendent of Scottish pioneers. Just two months after his birth, Tom's parents decided to move their large family (Tom was the sixth child in the family of ten) to Rose Hill Farm in Leith, Ontario (close to Owen Sound) where Thomson spent his childhood and early adolescence.

Tom had a childhood typical of rural Ontario at the end of the 19th century. He loved fishing and hiking in the area around Georgian Bay. His family was very musical: each child played an instrument. One of Tom's friends, Tom McKeen remembered Tom playing violin in the school orchestra, as well as mandolin. Apparently, Tom was quite accomplished mandolin player.

The neighbors considered Tom's father, John somehow eccentric. It seems that he didn't take farming too seriously. If the fishing was good, he would occasionally forget the harvest and stay rather at the stream than in the field. He was also an avid reader, and he planted the love of literature in his third son. The poetry of Byron and Burns were Thomson's family favorites. John Thomson liked to sketch and encourage his children to do so. Several of Tom's siblings like Frazer or Margaret, were quite skilled in visual arts and his older brother Gerorge was recognized as a skilled landscape painter. However, at this time Tom hasn't yet exhibited an extreme interest in arts painting.

When he reached adolescence, Tom Thomson developed a lung ailment and a touch of inflammatory rheumatism that forced him to temporary leave the school. During this time he helped his parents at the farm, but also had a lot of free time to enjoy outdoors. Telfer Creek, which runs through Leith, is famous for its trout. It was Tom's favorite fishing stream, however often he would venture in his family rowing boat on the Georegian. His hometown Leith is situated on the Nipissing Bluff, a pre-glacial shoreline and its beauty was well known to the tourists from Toronto. From his farm Tom could see the Georgian Bay.

Commercial Art Studies:

Around 1898, Tom received a legacy of about \$2000 from his grandfather's (Tam Thomson's) estate. It was the time for him to make some decisions about his future. One year later he apprenticed himself to a firm Wm. Kennedy and Sons, a foundry, machine and pattern shop in Owen Sound. He was training to become a machinist. However, Tom soon realized that this type of work doesn't suit him well. The sense of duty and the adventurous spirit made him to try to enlist in army for Boer War. He was rejected, due to his earlier illness.

In 1899, Thomson decided to follow his older brothers and to attend a business school in Chatham, Ontario. After receiving the diplomas, he continued his education in Seattle, Washington (1901), at the ACME commercial art school co-founded by his older brother

George. Eventually Tom found his first employment in Seattle at Maring and Ladd, Engravers - a photo-engraving firm as pen artist and engraver.

Toronto 1905-1908:

In 1905 Thomson arrived to Toronto and found photo-engraver employment at the Legg Brothers as senior artist. He was noted there as a good professional, with some artistic ambitions and an unpredictable temper.

Around the same time (in 1906), Tom's older brother George decided to abandon his teaching career in Seattle, dissolve the partnership at the ACME and enroll at the Art Student Leagues in New York. Later George became involved in the artist colony at Old Lyme, Connecticut, and achieved a certain level of recognition in the States. It was at the advice of one of his teachers, Frank V. Dumont that he decided to become a landscape painter rather than a commercial artist, which initially was his intention.

In Toronto, Tom who regularly corresponded with his older brother, also decided to engage more seriously into art. Apparently, he enrolled in night classes at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design probably with William Cruickshank, a noted Toronto academic painter influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement.

During this time Thomson visited regularly his maternal relative, Dr. William Brodie, a dental surgeon by profession, but famous in Toronto for his academic career as naturalist. Dr. Brodie was the director of the Biological Department at the Provincial Museum from 1903 until his death in 1909. He was a renowned entomologist, ornithologist and botanist, with a special interest in vertebrate and mollusks. His naturalist collection was famous: 20.000 of his specimens were eventually purchased by the Smithsonian Institute, while other 80.0000 ended up as a donation to the Provincial Museum in Toronto (later the ROM).

Brodie lived with his family on Parliament Street from where, every Sunday morning, a group of young people known as the Brodie Club had been setting to explore the Don Valley's ravine. Brodie was particularly fond of Tom who reminded him of his lost son William, also a naturalist, who had drowned a decade before in a canoe accident on Assiniboine River in Manitoba. Dr. Brodie was instrumental in fostering Tom's love of nature that was earlier installed in him by his parents. Inspired by his uncle's scientific attitude, Thomson hiked extensively throughout Toronto's ravines and along the Scarborough Bluffs and even in his natal Durham observing plants, land formations and wildlife. Several of his friends admired later his amazing knowledge of natural environment and a keen sense of observation.

Grip Ltd. 1908-1912

In 1907, Thomson moved to Grip Ltd., hired there by a visionary art director Albert Robson. He worked as engraver under supervision of J.E.H. MacDonald (senior artist). Colleagues at Grip Ltd. included Carmichael, Lismer and Johnston. Together, they attended the Arts and Letters Club on Adelaide Street in Toronto and organized some sketching trips around town. In 1910 Thomson sketches at Lake Scugog, in York Mills,

and in outlying Toronto districts. In 1912, together with his friends Carmichael and Lismer, Thomson followed Albert Robson to Rous and Mann Press. Soon another immigrant from Sheffield, Fred Varley, joined them there.

Algonquin Park 1912-1917

It was in 1910, when Tom Thomson arrived for the first time to Huntsville to visit his close friend Dr. McRuer. Just a year before Thomson was the best man at his wedding in Brampton, Ontario. A colleague from Grip, Ben Jackson was accompanying him on this trip. They did some sketching at the Fairy Lake, but failed to visit the Algonquin Park at this time.

In May **1912**, once more time with Ben Jackson, Thomson traveled to Huntsville and this time they arrived to Canoe Lake station and set their camp at the Tea Lake Dam. Later this summer with another friend from Grip Ltd., William Broadhead, Thomson went even further north to Mississagi River Reserve. There they had an opportunity to meet Archie Belaney, who later became known as Grey Owl. At this time he was simply a park ranger. Thomson enjoyed this trip tremendously, however he was not so impressed with this area as much as with the Algonquin Park. Due to a canoe accident, Tom lost the extensive photographic material from this trip as well as some sketches that he executed along the way. He also complained about the abundance of fish – pike in particular, which made the fishing not challenging enough.

Starting from 1912, Tom Thomson keep returning regularly to the park, arriving usually in the early spring, intensively painting until summer when he would become more occupied by fishing and occasional seasonal jobs (as fire ranger or guide). His prime painting season was the fall, when mosquitoes had been more tolerable and the woods had exploded in his favourite vivid colours.

In the park Thomson usually stayed at the Mowat Lodge, unless he was travelling or camping in his favourite spot near Hayhurst Point. The Mowat Lodge was recommended to Tom by Mark Robinson, the park ranger who usually met all the trains at the Canoe Lake stations checking for potential poachers, remember well meeting Thomson for the first time at the station in 1912.

The Mowat Lodge, former Gilmour Company building, was run by Shannon and Annie Fraser. The Lodge became Tom Thomson's headquarters during his stays at the Park.

The very first Thomson's Algonquin sketches from 1912 trip came to the attention of Lawren Harris' friend, an ophthalmologist, Dr. James MacCallum who Thomson met at J.E. H. Macdonald studio. MacCallum was a passionate Canadian art collector and well-known art patron. At this time, he was co-financing the construction of the Studio Building on Severn Street at Rosedale conceived as an affordable studio space for young artists. Dr. MacCallum particularly admired Tom's ability to capture the spirit of the North, however noticing at the same time the lack of technical finesse of the artist. In order to help him to focus on painting Dr. MacCallum offered Thomson the coverage of his expenses for one year, which allowed Tom to leave his commercial art job and basically move to Algonquin for the season.

In the meantime some level of financial security seemed to come from the first art sales. In **1913**, one of the Thomson's northern paintings *Northern Lake* was purchased at the exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists by the government of Ontario for \$250. According to Fred Housser's accounts, negated later by MacDonald, Thomson cashed his check in \$1 bills, which he and threw it in air in the celebration of the success. In November 1913 Tom Thomson met A.Y. Jackson, freshly arrived from Montreal. Jackson was charmed by Thomson's enthusiasm about the Algonquin wilderness that he visited again over the summer after taking a two-month leave of absence from the Rous and Mann. The artists become friends and sketching companions. They were also first tenants, sharing the same studio in the newly open studio building.

In the early spring **1914**, empowered by Dr. MacCullum sponsorship, Thomson returned to spend spring at Algonquin, and later two summer months at MacCallum's cottage at Georgian Bay. However, it seems that he was a little overwhelmed by civilized amenities of the cottage and with a pleasure returned back paddling along the French River to the Algonquin for the fall season.

This time he invited there his Toronto friends: Lismer, Jackson and Varley. At this point Thomson appeared to them as an accomplished bushman. His canoeing and camping skills obviously developed well, enough to impress his friends. Jackson noted Thomson's fame in the park as a fisherman, that allowed him to act occasionally as a guide (job usually reserved for more experienced with outdoors trappers and natives). At the same time Thomson enjoyed the opportunity to have his paintings commented on by more experienced painters. In particular, he appreciate the advice of Jackson, who unlike Varley and Lismer who arrived to the Park with their families, was unattached and could stay in the Park for several weeks. It was during this time, when Jackson completed the famous sketch for *The Red Maple*.

Back in Toronto. Thanks in great measure to patronage of Dr. MacCullum and soon Eric Brown from the National, Thomson's works from the Park were more and more popular. In 1914, the artist sold several works, among them *Moonlight*, *Early Evening* (\$150) and *Northern River* (\$500) to the National Gallery and the McMichael's *In Algonquin Park* (\$50) to a fellow artist, Marion Long. In 1915 he had a one-man show at the Arts and Letters Club.

Thomson established a pattern of working in the Park during warmer months and coming to the city to do some commercial work during the wintertime. After Jackson had moved to Europe and Franklin Carmichael - with whom Tom shared shortly the studio space - had married, Thomson decided to move away from the studio building into the construction shack, probably in order to save some money for the summer trip up North.

He returned to Algonquin in mid-March **1915**, travelling now with his new Chestnut canoe (from a famous New Brunswick company) and silk tent. He was staying occasionally with friends (Winifred Trainor at Huntsville) or at Mowat Lodge, but mostly camping. Again Tom found couple of guiding opportunities, but truly he spent the summer exploring by canoe the northern part of the Park probably as far as Mattawa. In

October, Thomson travelled to Go Home Bay, in order to take the measurements for decorative panels commissioned by MacCallum to his Georgian Bay's cottage. However, after couple of weeks he returned again to the Park where he remained until the first snow in late November.

Thomson spent the winter working on MacCallum's panels and larger canvases. He had an opportunity to exhibit some of his sketches at the Arts and Letters Club. Again the OSA exhibition resulted in a sale of a canvas, the *Spring Ice* to the National Gallery for a nice some of \$300.

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n Mid-March **1916** Tom was already back at the Algonquin (with the usual stopover at the Trainors in Huntsville). This year Lawren Harris and Dr. MacCallum visited him in the park for couple of weeks in May. Due to the war situation work in the commercial art industry became more problematic. Therefore, Thomson took this summer a job as a fire ranger and was posted in Achray, a park station at Grand Lake where the sketch to the West Wind was created. He is sharing this post with Edward Godin with whom he eventually along the Petawawa river later in the summer. This year he returned to Toronto already early in November.

Mysterious death:

In the early April 1917, Thomson returned for the last time to Algonquin. This year he promptly got a guiding license. The sales over the winter were not great and obviously Thomson was financially strained. However, in his letters he seemed confident to have enough money for art and camping supplies and even mentioned some plans for a trip to the Rockies. Dr. MacCallum and his son visited the park again in May for a short fishing trip.

According to Mark Robinson, the park ranger, who had just returned from overseas (he served in the army from 1915 to 1917, and where he was wounded in action), during this period Thomson painted one work a day in order to produce a record of the progression of the spring. However, in his letter to Dr. MacCallum, Tom complained that he could hardly do any sketching due to the abundance of flies and mosquitoes, that were particularly annoying this year.

On July 8, 1917 Tom Thomson was last seen for the last time alive at Canoe Lake. Mark Robinson, Mrs. Thomas (the wife of the local railway section head) and Mrs. Colson (the wife of the owner of the Hotel Algonquin) claimed to see Tom walking with Shannon Fraser down to the Joe Lake Dam. According to Fraser, Tom was after a large trout that he planned finally to catch this afternoon. It was not unusual for Tom to not return in the evening, considering that he packed for the trip his camping gear. However his friends became concerned when Martin Bletcher – an German - American tourist occupying one of the cottages on the Canoe Lake reported sighting the previous day, Tom's famous Chestnut canoe drifting and upturned. Immediately, an extensive search was undertaken and Tom's brother George, visiting in Owen Sound with his new wife, came north to help with search. A note appeared in Toronto's newspaper about the artist's disappearance.

Unfortunately, Thomson's body wasn't discovered until July 16. At this point the remains were badly decomposed. Hot weather and delay in the arrival of the coroner aggravated their state. Except for a fast check up performed by Dr. Howland, present while the body was found, Thomson's remains were never properly examined. When coroner finally arrived, a fast inquest based mostly on Dr. Howland's report and Shannon Fraser's account, concluded with a verdict of an accidental drowning. It happened well after Thomson's family removed Tom's body from a temporary grave situated close to the Mowat village. Currently, Thomson is buried in the graveyard of a small Anglican Church in Leith. The later claims that his body is still in the small Mowat's graveyard were never properly supported.

A couple of months after the artist's tragic death, his two friends, J.E.H. MacDonald and J.W. Beatty, erected a commemorative cairn near Lake Canoe. Several commemorative exhibitions followed in fast succession: 1917 - Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, 1919 - Arts and Letters Club in Montreal and 1920 – Art Gallery of Toronto. The uniqueness of Thomson's oeuvre and the mystery surrounding his disappearance fuelled a development of the romantic narrative around his persona. This story soon came to live in a chapter of F.B.Housser's *Canadian Art Movement*, permanently linking Thomson to the Group of Seven, even though the artist didn't live long enough to become the part of this formation.