

## The West Wants In: The Inadequate Representation of Western Canada in the Group of Seven

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When searching for the roots of Canadian nationalism, historians, politicians and Canadians at large at some point mention the Group of Seven. This group of pioneering Canadians, consisting of founders Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley, with Tom Thomson considered a posthumous member of the Group, are considered the foundation of Canadian art. Some may even say that the Group's development in the early twentieth century was the only 'movement' in the history of Canadian Art. To Dennis Reid, the public's perception of the Group had steadily ascended to the point that they occupied a "position in the Canadian cultural pantheon shared only with a few hockey stars and a handful of beloved politicians."<sup>1</sup>

One cannot discredit the Group's talent or impact, but the myth surrounding the Group, which sets them on a pedestal as the creators of a Canadian school of art, as well as their creation of a Canadian nationalism through art needs to be revisited. In association with a pan-national image, which the Group sought to create, the very nature of the Group makes it inadequate in properly portraying Canada. This paper, by focusing on the portrayal and art scenes of Western Canada, will discuss how framing the 'Canadian spirit' through the focused lens of the regionally developed Group of Seven is a misrepresentation of several key regions of Canada. There is an argument suggesting that the West, seen through the Group's idea of nationalism, is not the 'true' West,

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<sup>1</sup> Barker Fairley, "The Group of Seven," *The Canadian Forum* 5 (1925), 146.

and that it may be better represented when a western painter holds the brush. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the fact that Canada and its school of art were not framed through a conglomeration of artists from all regions of the nation, and that historic events moved the spotlight onto the Group in Ontario instead of scanning the nation.

The Group of Seven came into existence officially in May 1920 under the edict "that an Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people."<sup>2</sup> Background into the members of the Group is vital in understanding the mentality of the seven men. Their first exhibition together was not their first interaction as a group. Dating back to November 1911, Lawren Harris and J.E.H. MacDonald were meeting at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto.<sup>3</sup> The Group was founded with no native Westerner in attendance; also, three out of the seven members were born overseas. MacDonald was born in Dunham, England and moved to Hamilton, Ontario at the age of fourteen,<sup>4</sup> while Arthur Lismer and Fred Varely both hail from Sheffield, England.<sup>5</sup> Harris was born in Brantford, Ontario and was one of the main economic contributors for the Group; his family owned part of the Massey-Harris Company. Along with Harris, Frank Carmichael and Frank Johnson were Ontarians and A.Y. Jackson hailed from Montreal, Quebec.<sup>6</sup> The lack of a western presence in the Group was of no concern to the founding members. They had met, become colleagues and friends in central Canada, and from the outset this was not an issue. It was not until they and the media started to put forth the idea of a distinct Canadian nationalism and 'spirit,' seen through the Group's landscapes, that the mem-

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 146.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>6</sup> Catharine M. Mastin, *The Group of Seven in Western Canada* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2002), 15-17.

ber's heritage raised a few eyebrows. By 1931, criticism of the Group's exclusiveness of both its membership and its vision of Canadian art had arisen in the media, which forced the Group to consider changing its dynamic in 1933. Along with these well-defined Anglo-Central Canadian roots, the Group's education was derived from places abroad.

For a group claiming to be "drawn by an irresistible urge to replace [the European] 'foreign-begotten technique' by a way of painting dictated by Canada itself, to concentrate all their energy on making a Canadian statement in art in Canadian terms,"<sup>7</sup> they had studied a great deal in Europe. It was not uncommon for young, budding artists at the turn of the twentieth century to venture to develop their skills overseas. Jackson went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian; Harris trained in Germany; Varley studied in Antwerp; and MacDonald viewed exhibits in London.<sup>8</sup> The only colleague that had little to no contact with the European masters and techniques was Tom Thomson. Even though he did not receive formal training abroad, he must have obtained tutoring and crash courses from the Group. Thomson was the Canadian boy who felt most at home in the landscapes that he and the Group painted. Growing up in Leith, Ontario, near Owen Sound, on the Georgian Bay, Thomson was a guiding light for the Group, showing them nature in a fresh, hands-on manner. Harris reflects, "Thomson knew the north country as none of us did and it was he who made us partners in his devotion to it."<sup>9</sup> This contagious mentality drove the artists into northern Ontario and their 'wilderness'.

Riding on the coattails of their guide Thomson, the Group developed in the 'north,' painting Georgian Bay, Algonquin Park,

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<sup>7</sup> Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Society, Report of the Annual Meeting Held at Victoria and Vancouver June 16-19, 1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ryan Edwardson, "A Canadian Modernism: Pre-Group of Seven 'Algonquin School,' 1912-1917," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 117 (2004), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, "The Group of Seven", 32.

Alogma, Lake Superior and many lakes, hills, rivers and trees in northern Ontario. According to the Group, they were fun loving, “young rebels”, and serious painters fighting to establish a “modern Canadian” outlook, by presenting a Canadian view of Canada.<sup>10</sup> One gets the image of life at summer camp when reading the accounts of the summers the Group spent in northern Ontario, but it was here that defining moments occurred and influential works were created. Harris recalls that while they were painting the Georgian Bay they “were at times very serious and concerned, at other times hilarious and carefree. Above all, we love this country, and loved exploring and painting it.”<sup>11</sup>

The Group, with the help of Thomson, quickly fell in love with the Canadian Shield region, which would come to define them. The early influence of the Shield on their artistic lives would carry through into the foundation of the Group of Seven, and thus into the foundation of what is today considered the Canadian school of art. Their scenes of northern Ontario soon become indistinguishable from what Canadian culture saw as the Canadian landscape. This was reinforced at the Groups first official exhibition in 1920. The beautiful pictures of the Shield region became the landscapes that represented the ‘spirit’ of Canada.<sup>12</sup> It is this mentality and Shield-centric perception of the Group and of what they defined as the Canadian landscape that hinders the claim of the Group’s nationalism. The West is blatantly absent from paintings of northern Ontario at the Groups inception. Along with the lack of western members, the lack of any pan-Canadian feel early on is obvious.

Examining the Group members who made the trek west and saw the vast prairies, the spectacular Rockies and the picturesque West Coast, some observations can be made concerning

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Sowaik, *A Passion for Identity: Canadian Studies for the 21st Century* (Canada: Nelson Thomson Learning, 2001), 258.

their attempts to portray the Canadian west. Each of the artists' styles and techniques certainly evolved after 1911 and the formation of the Group; looking at a painting by Harris from 1915, for example, and comparing it another from 1931, one can see a drastic difference. However, what is more striking are the similarities in the works of the four who made the trip west: Harris, Varley, MacDonald and Jackson. For each, similarities between their early (or Eastern) and later work in the west is blatantly noticeable. In particular, A.Y. Jackson's early work in the Laurentians and northern Ontario bears striking similarities with his works of southern Alberta. This would suggest that Jackson did not paint the west any differently than the east, or to put it another way, he did not see the west as a new entity unlike the Canada he saw in central Canada. Dennis Reid has observed this same phenomenon in Jackson's work in the late 1930s. Reid concludes that "technically and conceptually, [the Alberta paintings] are the same work as Jackson did at St. Tite des Caps the previous spring, and essentially the same work he had been producing since 1914, or even since France."<sup>13</sup> Compare *Winter, Quebec* (1926) with *Blood Indian Reserve, Alberta* (1937) and *Country Road, Alberta* (1954), or *Saint-Jean, Île d'Orléans* (1925) with *Lundbreck, Alberta* (1937). The similarities of composition and subject jump off the canvas. Once the connection is made, Jackson's great works of the west seem a little less spectacular than they did before. Without minimizing the value of *Alberta Rhythm* (1948) or *Waterton Lakes* (1948), the repetition or application of his earlier style needs to be acknowledged, if only for the fact that Jackson did not give western Canada the same intensity and attention he gave the east.

Another point of contention about the Group from the Western Canadian perspective is the spectacular promotion of the Group from Central Canada at the expense of artists from other regions of the nation. There are a number of factors that caused the pro-

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<sup>13</sup> Dennis Reid, *Alberta Rhythm: The Later Work of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), 15.

motion of the Group of Seven, namely the National Art Gallery under the leadership of Eric Brown and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The National Art Gallery was the main advocate of the Group. Along with the Gallery's almost exclusive internal promotion of the Group, it also led a calculated and relentless marketing campaign which inundated Canadian homes and schools with Group works such as *The West Wind* (1917) or *The Solemn Land* (1921) along with a narrative reinforcing the mythology of the Group embodying a rugged style and expressing a national 'spirit'.<sup>14</sup> Taking up the mandate of nation building and establishing a common heritage, the Gallery focused on the Group of Seven as the definitive school of art in Canada. By simply placing their works inside the walls of the Gallery it legitimized the Group's work as Canada's art. In the Group's works, the Gallery and Brown found an art that was free from both traditionalism and extreme modernism;<sup>15</sup> it was something Canadians could embrace. The Group's paintings were also affordable and easily attainable, in contrast with European works.

By focusing almost directly on the Group of Seven, the National Gallery created a sense of alienation of western artists. The painting of Canada by members of a Toronto-based group rang fowl in the west, and brought back bitter memories of the Central exploitation in the National Policy.<sup>16</sup> There was even a calculated campaign focusing on Tom Thomson as a folk hero, drawing on his legendary status as the outdoorsman painter.<sup>17</sup> A.Y. Jackson knew to be thankful of his elevated position, writing in the early 1930s: "We artists go on existing thanks to a few enthusiasts and

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<sup>14</sup> Claire Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 147.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 84.

<sup>16</sup> Lynda Jessup, "The Group of Seven and the Tourist Landscape in Western Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37 (2002), 144-179.

<sup>17</sup> Joyce Zeymen, "Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery's First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 16 (1995), 14-15.

Eric Brown.”<sup>18</sup> It is clear that he is referring not to artists in general but ‘we artists’, meaning the ones in Jackson’s circle. The mention of Brown is also appropriate, because it was he who filled the Canadian art spotlight with the seven members.

Eric Brown believed whole-heartedly that he had found a national school of painting in these few artists, and he did everything in his power to make the Group known. There was no limit to his promotion of the Group. He exhibited the works at home and abroad, made silkscreen prints and reproduction postcards for sale, travelled across the country speaking in lectures and on radio, as well as arranging the Gallery to purchase a number of canvases.<sup>19</sup> Concerning reproduction of the Group’s works to Canadian libraries, school and homes, Brown believed the art would create a strong sense of Canadian nationalism in the populace. In a speech in 1936 he stated:

Quite a large business is...growing up in the sale of both large and small coloured reproductions of National Gallery pictures, both to the public schools and commercially. They are made available to the schools and sent out complete with lesson plans which can be used in class and I am glad to say that the use of them is spreading rapidly and cannot fail to bring to the children a better knowledge of the work of Canadian artists and the program of the arts in Canada...The greatest need in Canada for the growth of the arts is active public awareness...[which] the National Gallery is the radiating centre for art knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

The Group members supported Brown in his commercial ventures of its art. Lismer believed that “prints of Canadian pictures, wisely used, will go far in establishing a knowledge and

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<sup>18</sup> Tippet, *Making Culture*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Zeymens, “Establishing the Canon”, 22.

love for the work of our own artists and our own country.”<sup>21</sup> A somewhat shameless plug, seeing that Lismer and the Group were ‘the Canadian artists’ used, and it was their interpretation of the country that was being seen. Taking the role of championing the Group, Brown never faltered, and while increasing the popularity of the Group, he reinforced the feelings of alienation of the west in an Ontario-based central Canadian school of art.

The National Gallery also teamed up with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to extend the art world through the media. The duo broadcasted three annual series between 1945-1947, highlighting Canadian artists and basing the shows on the reproductions from the Gallery. The Gallery was then responsible for the core material on each artist and suggested lines of discussion for each.<sup>22</sup> It is not difficult to guess which artists were featured the most. Of the eighteen broadcasts, six were concerned with artists associated with the Group of Seven.<sup>23</sup> The CBC provided a means to promote the Group, this time on an instantaneous and national scale, and once again, the emphasis was on youth. Schools were the prime audience of the programs on the CBC, with an estimated 3,500 schools tuning in, which equates to roughly 125,000 students.<sup>24</sup> The National Gallery had its objectives, and Canada was going to receive the Group whether it liked it or not. Although the National Gallery was the main advocate of the Group, other institutions helped promote the Canadian nationalism that it created.

The Group of Seven often appeared between the pages of Canadian periodicals throughout the 1920s and onward. As a result, a relationship was forged between certain periodicals and the Group members. Graham Spry’s *Canadian Nation* often published works by the Group, but it was the University of Toronto’s journal, *The Rebel*, and its successor, the *Canadian Forum* that created

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25.



the greatest support for the Group. This symbiotic relationship between the *Forum* and the Group is convincingly described by Margaret Davidson: "the periodical found the painters the perfect example of the new postwar Canadian cultural spirit for which it was searching; in turn the artists were encouraged by the attention and publicity the Forum gave them."<sup>25</sup> The *Forum*, in the 1920s and after, was easily one of the most important journals regarding the arts and academia in Canada, thus allowing for debate and criticism of the Group's art. This also supplied a means for the Seven to have their literary works published and to effectively present their ideal version of nationalism to the country.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the promotion of the Group of Seven's nationalism in all its forms, the view presented was built out of central Canada, with little westerner input, and was based on perceptions taken from a specific section of Ontario landscape. Therefore, the so-called Canadian nationalism represented little more than central Canada, and can hardly be referred to as nationalism.

In contrast with the events associated with the Group of Seven and its regional orientation, there were artists in western Canada who were born in western Canada and worked in western Canada. By examining L.L. FitzGerald and Emily Carr and their work as contemporaries to the Group, one can see that a central Canadian regional bias on the school of art in Canada was not necessary. FitzGerald and Carr were both western-born artists who painted what was in their bones and struggled all the while to get a toe into the spotlight Toronto placed on the Group of Seven. FitzGerald, born and raised in Manitoba, was officially welcomed into the Group of Seven in 1932, shortly before it disbanded. Technically speaking then, there was a western born member of the Group, but FitzGerald still stands outside the Group in both style and perception.

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Vipond, "The National Network: English Canada's Intellectuals and Artists in the 1920s," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 7 (1980), 42.

<sup>26</sup> Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1995), 123.

The late addition of FitzGerald into the Group gives the impression that adding a western flavour was an afterthought. In 1921, Jackson is quoted as proposing that the Group expand. He claimed: "I would like to see it increased to ten or twelve members, but we do not see any original genius among the young elements here [in Toronto]."<sup>27</sup> Early on there was mention of expansion to encompass regional differences, east or west, just to increase in size, not to address deficiencies in the Group's perspectives. Later it had been revealed that the Group intended to disband in the early 1930s, only to form a larger group, one they believed would represent the nation better, so FitzGerald's inclusion could be thought of as a honorary membership, celebrating his achievements thus far.<sup>28</sup>

Similarities between FitzGerald and Tom Thomson, as men at home in their regional nature, are striking. In a Thomson-esque recollection, FitzGerald recalls: "Summers spent at my grandmother's farm in southern Manitoba were wonderful times for roaming through the woods and over the fields, and the vivid impressions of those holidays inspired many drawings and paints of a later date."<sup>29</sup> One gets the sense that FitzGerald understood and felt the nature of that region, something he developed as a boy and developed into authentic art of the region. FitzGerald was a regional artist from a completely different area of Canada. Well beyond Lake Superior and the Algonquin Park resides FitzGerald's Winnipeg, with its open sky and the beginnings of vast prairie. "The prairie has many aspects," he would explain, "but intense light and the feeling of great space are dominating characteristics and are the major problems of the prairie artists."<sup>30</sup> It would take a regional representative to understand this about the prairie

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<sup>27</sup> Reid, *A Concise History*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1970), 182.

<sup>29</sup> Liz Wylie, "The Prairie Art of L.L. Fitzgerald," in *The Group of Seven in Western Canada* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2002), 136.

<sup>30</sup> Reid, *A Concise History*, 160.

landscape, and, for the most part, FitzGerald dealt with it in his Impressionistic paintings of the prairies. This is evident in FitzGerald's *Summer Afternoon* (1921). Even in one of his most famous works, *Doc Snider's House* (1932), he differs from the Group, as this painting portrays and focuses on human interaction in the landscape – something that the Group tended to avoid.

The other major character coming out of western Canada during the time of the Group of Seven was Emily Carr. Born in Victoria and painting the West Coast, Carr is somewhat of an anomaly in the history of the Canadian school of art. Being a westerner she fought through trials, tribulations, and seemingly endless training.<sup>31</sup> At one point Carr actually walked away from painting, but came back once she received a piece of the spotlight and became associated with the scene surrounding the Group and the National Art Gallery. Carr began painting something from which the Group of Seven shied – the Natives of the West Coast.<sup>32</sup> Reid explains that Carr was “resolved – much like Paul Kane had done sixty years before – to paint a programmatic series that would record [Native] villages, and particularly the awesome totem poles, for posterity.”<sup>33</sup>

Early in her career, Carr painted what she thought was important and part of the culture of her region, but gained little success. An interesting part of Carr's journey is that she was brought into the fold of the Group's Canadian consciousness. In 1927, Carr's work was shown in the National Art Gallery and she travelled to Ontario, meeting members of the Group. The impact was immediate. She was strongly affected by the style of Lawren Harris, and her style changed noticeably with her images of Native villages and carvings now being devoid of human figures.<sup>34</sup> From

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>32</sup> The expeditions to the B.C. Skeena Valley by members of the Group of Seven once again come across as an afterthought of how they could rectify their lack of pan-Canadian representation in their notion of Canada.

<sup>33</sup> Reid, *A Concise History*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Gerta Moray, “Wilderness, Modernity and Aboriginality in the Paints of Emily Carr,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33 (1998), 53.

that point on, Emily Carr had an audience and contributed to Canadian nationalism through her work. She added a western Canadian dimension, but it needs to be noted that she did not remain a slave to the Group's style. Her Harris-like paintings, such as *Sky* (1935-1936) have been said to rival even the best of Harris, and she became successful in her home region as well. In a 1938 exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery she sold eleven paintings, but she received the most joy from the fact that she "had been able to make their own western places speak to them."<sup>35</sup>

It is evident that the Group of Seven has been found lacking in pan-Canadian composition, continuity, style, and perspective. The fact that the Group was embraced so strongly as 'the school of art' for Canada, even though they did not wholly represent the vast nation, can be blamed on a few factors. Early on in the Group's existence, quasi-propaganda literature was being written about the painters and what nationalistic ideals they were creating. Writers like F.B. Housser were proselytizing the message of the Group as the foundation for Canadian art, and his message seemed to have caught on. It is a shame that the Group became the measuring stick for national art instead of its successor, the Canadian Group of Painters, which included L.L. FitzGerald and Emily Carr. This new, larger group consisted of artists from across Canada and would have been a far better icon for a foundation for the Canadian school of art, with the Group of Seven seen as a foundation piece to the new Canadian Group. The lack of western representation in the Group of Seven is an unfortunate circumstance, and the same argument could be made for the Maritimes or the Arctic. Barker Fairley points out that the Group of Seven's error in representation in his critique of their 1925 exhibition: "The defects of this landscape school have frequently been defects of outer knowledge; the artists were not sufficiently familiar with the country they were painting. For, whether an artist is going to paint nature literally or not, he must know her before he can use her."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>36</sup> Fairley, "The Group of Seven", 146.