

## **Painted Land: In Search of the Group of Seven**

by Joanie and Gary McGuffin and Michael Burtch.

Canada's northern landscape is rugged, solitary and daunting. It is alluring, moody and majestic. It has drawn Canada's most well known artists, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven to the drama of its unfolding seasons; to Algonquin, Algoma and the vast shores of Lake Superior. But where were they, *exactly*, when they created Canada's most iconic paintings?

Eight years ago, the three of us set out to find the places that inspired these famous artists. We've told our story in a film of the same title. And now we want to tell our story in a photographic book chronicling our site discovery research and adventures. We envision an art book featuring 100 paintings juxtaposed with our photographs taken from the exact painting sites revealing the landscapes as they appear today. Stories of the cultural history will be revealed through the artist's own poetic writings in the form of excerpts from their letters and published works. Matching hundreds of paintings to landscapes has required many weeks of exploratory hiking and paddling. Matching the photographs to the paintings requires a particular attention to the details of the lighting and the seasons. The Group painted in the spring but more often they captured the rich colours of autumn. Layering historical research and our contemporary painting site discoveries is providing the world with a fascinating new insight into The Group of Seven.

### **September 12, 1918 Agawa Canyon, Ontario**

Three young, largely unknown artists, J.E.H. MacDonald, Frank Johnston, Lawren Harris and their patron, Dr. James MacCallum, stand on a siding at Mile 113 of the Algoma Central Railway, east of Lake Superior. The train pulls away, leaving behind a red boxcar outfitted with a canoe, a wood stove, bunk beds, provisions and art supplies. This boxcar will be their shelter and studio for the next three weeks. Little could these men imagine that the sketches they would paint during their time in the Agawa Canyon would become some of the Canada's most iconic paintings - works of art that, a century later, have come to define Canada's identity and conjure up our nation's soul.

## **September 12, 2013 Sault Ste Marie, Ontario**

Ninety-five years later, Michael, Gary and I climb aboard the same Algoma Railway. Armed with cameras, maps, the artists' letters and scans of field sketches and drawings, we are following in the footsteps of Harris, MacDonald, Lismer, Jackson and Johnston, searching for the locations and expansive vistas that inspired these painters almost a century ago.

What drew the artists to this lonely land so far from their comfortable homes in Toronto? What were they seeking, really? What remains of the spiritual and inspirational pines, spruce, granite hills, lakes and rivers? What can we learn about the land and the painters who were drawn here? How and why did these remote vistas come to define our nation?

### **Art and Identity**

In the early part of the 20th century, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven set out to create a new national artistic style independent of European traditions. Canada was a young country. As artist Arthur Lismer wrote "Canada was as yet unwritten, unpainted, unsung... there was a job to be done." The First World War had galvanized a new national consciousness, and Canada, now a member of The League of Nations, was emerging onto the international stage. A.Y. Jackson remarked after returning from service in France "We've made armies, we can also make artists."

These artists turned to Canada's northern wilderness with all its moods and colours to define this new art. They believed that our nation's identity was inseparable from its geography. To be Canadian is to know this landscape, to be in it, to paint it. One hundred years later, these extraordinary paintings continue to retain a powerful hold on our collective imagination. Though Canada has changed dramatically - through urbanization, industrialization and the rich diversity of immigration - Canadians still feel a strong attachment to the work of Tom Thomson and The Group of Seven. Their paintings are ingrained in our national psyche and grace the walls of Canadian embassies around the world and classrooms across the country. They define our nationhood.

When the project started, the task of finding the exact places from which the Group of Seven artists painted, and finding the landscape scenes in their paintings was, in the beginning, like searching for “*needles in a haystack.*” Canoeing rivers and lakes, hiking through forests and hills, searching for particular beaver dams and waterfalls, we have uncovered the paintings one after another as we piece together this intriguing puzzle of where the artists were, and when. The eloquent writings of Group members often only provide vague details of locations, while field sketches reveal important details eliminated in studio paintings.

Paintings and matching photographs will be augmented by archival photographs, maps and drawings.

**In the Artists’ Own Words.** (*words to accompany the paintings*)

*“We carried a one-man hand car inside for use up and down the tracks - two of us could manage to ride on it - and bring canoes for use on lakes and rivers. We worked from early morning until dark, in sun, in grey weather or rain.”*

Lawren Harris

*It is a land after Dante’s heart, with all the attributes of an imagined paradise... I have not assimilated this experience yet. It is something to be quiet and think over.”*

J.E.H. MacDonald

*“The most impressive sight on this trip was a view of Lake Superior... There was a sharpness in the air which merged the horizon with the sky, and that smooth shimmering infinity of waters was a like a glimpse of God himself.”*

J.E.H. MacDonald

*“I’m trying to get to the summit of my soul and work from there -- there where the universe sings.”*

Lawren Harris

**Words from Gary, Joanie and Michael (to accompany the matching photographs)**

### **Adventures in Algonquin.**

Six of us in three canoes, two tandems and a solo, were paddling the Petawawa River in Algonquin Park to find where Tom Thomson painted “Petawawa Gorges”. We were scanning the shoreline for the familiar scene as we entered a long stretch of rapids. The three canoes were taking different routes. About half way down, I saw Gary, ahead of us, suddenly swing his canoe into a small eddy on river right. He quickly held up his paddle horizontally which is the ‘*do not proceed*’ signal. At that moment I noticed spray rising where the river appeared to vanish before us. Joanie called out to me in the bow to paddle hard as she spun the canoe upstream angling it toward Gary so we could ferry across the river to him without drifting further downstream. Being a relative novice, I paddled with all the energy I could muster until we reached the safety of the small eddy where Gary grabbed our bow pulling us into shore. We camped there for the night and went to look at the falls below. At the bottom was a memorial cairn for Blair Fraser, the famous Canadian journalist who drowned in the rapids several decades before.”

*Michael Burtch*

### **Site Discoveries at Mongoose Lake**

It was just the size of a postage stamp but its name bore an important clue - *On Mongoose Lake*. This thumbnail-size reference to a J.E.H. MacDonald painting launched us into a new area of Algoma. Also, there was talk among the locals that A.Y. Jackson’s *October Morning* was inspired by the dramatic panorama on another lake to the east. From MacDonald’s hint and the musings of the locals, we struck a plan for our next adventure north on the Algoma Central. This time the trip would include Michael, Gary and I as well as, Sila and our Alaskan Malamute puppy, Luna. Before setting out that August of 2010, Gary had attended his high school reunion in London, Ontario where he reconnected with an old school chum who had been following our adventures over the years. She was also a devout admirer of the Group of Seven. One of her most treasured possessions, a graduation gift from her parents, was Paul Duval’s book of MacDonald paintings entitled *The Tangled Garden*. The Group’s work so inspired her that three years before, she was compelled to acquire a cabin, sight unseen, in the Algoma District. She remembered it as ‘*being on a lake with the funny name of Mongoose.*’ The serendipitous meeting turned into an offer of a place to stay on the very lake we wanted to explore.

We caught the ACR train north one August morning and disembarked with our canoe on the siding at Mongoose. We canoed the crooked shoreline following her instructions. The cabin was as she described somewhat dilapidated but complete with a woodstove, bunks and a screened porch with a view to the lake. It was a great little spot from which to explore the area. The first two days of paddling and bushwhacking turned into more questions: how, for instance, had A.Y. managed to get to Wartz Lake from Mongoose? One evening, as if in answer, a bare rock ridge to the east was set aglow by theatrical sweeping light. It suddenly occurred to us that this exposed elevation would surely have caught the eye of Jackson and Harris, ever the explorers seeking new vantage points. The next morning we set off early in our red canoe in pursuit of this new location. Michael in the bow, Gary in the stern, and Sila and I in the centre with Luna and the backpacks. Being the puppy she was, Luna began chasing her tail beneath Michael's seat. The unexpected rocking produced a short burst of terror from Michael and hearty laughter from the rest of us. While en route to the cliff, a cluster of half submerged rocks captured Gary's attention. The familiarity of the scene was soon made clear once we circled in to get the right perspective. What could be a better omen? We had unmistakably, and quite by chance, found the place where MacDonald rendered *On Mongoose Lake*. Our spirits bolstered, we pressed onward. At the opening to a small creek overhung with a jungle of alders and spruce, we pulled the canoe onto the bank. The next moment, Luna had stepped into a bog and was momentarily swallowed whole by the black muck. Undaunted she regained solid ground racing around us while we enjoyed the second good laugh of the day. We continued on bushwhacking through dense conifers then climbed steadily through sugar maple forest.

Although eager to get to the top of the ridge, I stopped often with Sila and Luna to climb boulders, feel bark, examine bugs, eat snacks, listen to birds; these things being of greater interest to a ten-year-old and her dog. At last we reached a clearing with our first glimpse of the distant horizon.

From lookout to lookout along the ridge, we studied contours seeking clues in the foreground, mid-ground and distant hills. On the widest bald rock, we stopped for lunch. It was clearly not the place of *October Morning*, but Michael and Gary determined the distinct cut of the horizon to be the Batchawana massif. As Michael was pulling the research materials from the pack, Gary suddenly hurried to a lower

viewpoint gesturing for us to join him. We scrambled down, Michael clutching the paintings in hand. The shape of the two beaver meadows below was immediately recognizable from the Harris painting *Silent Land*. We knew with thrilling certainty that we'd made a special discovery. Positioning his tripod, Gary captured the virtually unchanged scene with a click of the shutter.

Now it was almost as though the painters were guiding us as we continued eastwards along the ridge for another half mile. We investigated several clearings overlooking Wartz Lake until things lined up to reveal Jackson's *October Morning*. New life had long ago taken root among the charred trees depicted in the painting but there was no mistaking the lake shape that Jackson captured on that autumn day in 1920. Whether he followed this ridge as we had done, or hiked up from Wartz Lake somehow, was a question that lingered inspiring many more exploratory trips in the years to come.

The day was getting on to dusk as we turned back. With Luna in the lead, her reliable nose to the ground, following our scent, we retraced our steps with relative ease right back to the canoe hidden amongst the thick alders near shore.

Back at the cabin that evening, we rifled through our books searching for any other paintings that resembled the scene from our day's discovery. And there on page 129 of *The Tangled Garden* was MacDonald's Autumn Colour- the distinctive slice of blue surrounded by brilliant fall foliage being Mongoose Lake. Scrolling through the digital images on his camera, he found one that closely matched this painting. It had been one of the most remarkable days ever. We had found a fourth place without even realizing it. That autumn when Michael and Gary returned to the ridge, the cabin's owner accompanied them. Just one hundred yards above Silent Land, Gary set up his tripod on the rock where MacDonald must have sat 90 years ago. He framed up the image matching as closely as possible to Autumn Colour. To Tamara's surprised delight, there was her place tucked discreetly into the upper right corner. The cabin, acquired on a whim, was now in the present day scene of a MacDonald painting.

Joanie McGuffin