

Tom Thomson, the Silence and the Storm

By Harold Town, David P. Silcox

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Tom Thomson did it better than anyone else. He stands as the most important artist in Canadian history. A forerunner of The Group of Seven, Thomson created paintings that shaped the way Canadians view their land.

The mystery of his death continues to stir speculation and spin off theories, but the emotional response to his paintings is stronger than ever.

Although he died before he was forty, Thomson's compelling works ignited a powerful national art movement and create lasting icons for a young country.

Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm contains the most extensive collection of his work ever published, 177 paintings in vivid color and many more in black and white. Nearly 80 of his brilliant sketches are reproduced to their actual size, giving them an immediacy almost equal to the originals. This is the only book that reproduces over 140 paintings that had never been reproduced in color before.

The accompanying texts, by artist Harold Town (1924-1990) and art historian David P. Silcox, provide an aesthetic commentary and full biographical chronicle.

This special 25th Anniversary edition of **Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm** marks the 125th Anniversary of the birth of Canada's most popular and beloved artist and the 85th anniversary of his death.

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Tom Thomson, the Silence and the Storm By Harold Town, David P. Silcox Bibliography

- Rank: #1654364 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Mcclelland Stewart Ltd
- Published on: 1977-11
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Number of items: 1
- Binding: Hardcover
- 240 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
A real concerto of a book. Harold Town, the late Toronto artist, writes some fabulously imaginative solo riffs on Thomson's working methods. These in turn are framed -- in proper concerto fashion -- by some sober, information-packed background pieces provided by David Silcox, the art historian and current head of Sotheby's Canada. (Peter Goddard *Toronto Star* 2002-06-09)

Super-comprehensive ... 177 full-color prints. (Gilbert A. Bouchard *Edmonton Journal* 2002-08-11)

The most extensive collection of [Thomson's] work ever published and a fitting tribute to a great Canadian artist. (*Kitchener-Waterloo Record* 2001-10-20)

Explodes with the artist's boldly colored works. (*Maclean's* 2001-12-10)

Everything a Canadian could want in an art book ... This is an excellent read and a feast to look at. (Robert Amos *Victoria Times-Colonist* 2001-12-02)

[The book] is a moving, and even beautiful, in its tribute to Canada's most beloved lost talent. (Michelle Porter *New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal* 2001-11-03)

About the Author

Harold Town's art hangs in the world's leading galleries and museums from New York and Ottawa to London and Amsterdam. He was awarded many prestigious prizes, an honorary degree and the Order of Canada. He wrote extensively on art and is the author of *Albert Franck: Keeper of the Lanes* and two books of his own drawings.

David P. Silcox is a Senior Fellow at Massey College, Chairman of the Canadian Artists Tribunal, Director, University of Toronto Art Center and a former arts administrator at all levels of government. He has written extensively on Canadian art and art history including the definitive biography and the award winning catalogue raisonne of David Milne as well as on Christopher Pratt, Jack Bush and others.

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

This book began in 1967, when A.Y. Jackson, who had admired Harold Town's essay "The Pathfinder" in *Great Canadians* (Canadian Centennial Library, 1965) told him he should do a book on Tom Thomson -- one that concentrated on Thomson's paintings.

Jack McClelland, that intrepid publisher, overheard the conversation, and got Town to agree. Iris Nowell did the research, I tracked down the paintings, Michael Neill photographed them, Harold and I laid out the book, page by page, and Jack published it. We were determined that *The Silence and the Storm*, a title we came up with after more than a hundred rejections and two bottles of champagne, would celebrate Thomson's paintings, as A.Y. Jackson had wished. Harold Town, who died in 1990, would be pleased to see that *The*

Silence and the Storm is still thriving.

Eighty,five years after his death, Tom Thomson stands higher than ever in our country's image of itself. Since this book first appeared in 1977 to mark the centenary of his birth and the sixtieth anniversary of his death, his life and work have been lionized in films, documentaries, a novel, plays, and a musical. While these are nearly always romantic and adulatory, they are heart-felt tributes to a legend.

Thomson's early death in 1917, before he turned forty, has given him the special respect we reserve for artists like Mozart or Keats or Raphael, except that this man was ours. What made his early death more poignant was that he emerged so late. He was not a child prodigy -- he got a very late start and only in his few last years, less than five really, did he blaze like the comet he was. No one before or since in Canadian art had such an impact on so much that followed.

Moreover, the bitter irony is that Thomson's solitary death in Algonquin Park occurred while a whole generation of other young men of promise were being slaughtered in Europe. The battle of the Somme, in which Canadian losses were enormous, had taken place early in 1917; the five-day battle at Vimy Ridge in April, in which over 3500 Canadian soldiers died and twice that number had been wounded, was still a vividly fresh and stark horror to absorb. Yet Thomson's death is the one that reverberates through the years. Far removed from the theatre of war, a great talent-that-might-have-been came to have a resonance that, instead of fading, amplified with time.

Thomson didn't live long enough for his painting to slip into a predictable formula, like the later paintings of his friend A.Y. Jackson. He might have turned out, as only Lawren Harris among the Group of Seven did, to maintain his originality and creative power throughout his life. But few artists enjoy a long career while sustaining their power -- only Harris and David Milne, of their generation, were able to do so.

What if Thomson had lived and then declined as a painter, losing power and energy and favour? What would we have thought of his work then? Would later work of lesser importance have diminished his overall achievement as well? No one knows. But what is certain is that his brief and brilliant achievement, and its inherent promise, created a belief, a palpable ache, that he would have done even greater work if he had lived.

One oddly disturbing thing about Thomson's art and that of the Group of Seven, which followed in 1920 shortly after his death, is how distant it was from the strongest art movements of the day. In France and Germany and Italy and Russia, a sea-change in art occurred just before, during and after the First World War. The European 'Rite of Spring,' as one might call it -- Les Fauves, Der Blaue Reiter, Suprematism, Cubism, Dada and Futurism -- had all set aesthetic practice on a new track. This excitement travelled almost instantly to the United States (the Armory Show of 1913) and was eagerly picked up by artists there. There was no such ferment in Toronto. Here in Canada, despite the later outcries by the Group of Seven of being attacked and vilified, we sipped tea compared to the heady brew of Europe or America. It was as if Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Henri Matisse and Kasimir Malevich had not existed. The spirit of the age did not visit Canada until much later. Little of modernism's power and excitement leavened the art scene here.

Another characteristic of Thomson and the Group is that their work does not 'travel' well: they are regional, but in the best sense of that term. Their work is not sufficiently admired to be collected elsewhere in the world. Like the 'Mountie' image of Canada, this work we so much love is seen abroad as an exotic reminder of our northernness, our frontier self. Other countries experience this national limitation too, and it is not a disparaging fact. The 'international' market excludes many English, French, American and Scandinavian artists, who are cherished (and garner high prices) in their home market, just as Thomson and the Group of Seven are here.

And yet the pictures of Thomson and the Group of Seven, rooted as they were in the impressionism of the 19th century, with a nod to Art Nouveau, gave us a vision of Canada that was fresh and brash and emotionally charged. They spoke in a regional dialect, perhaps, but it immediately felt like, and was, and is, our own voice. And their appeal was not simply their subject matter, the northern, rural and western vistas, but also the way in which the painters adopted colour ranges and painting techniques that expressed their subjects in strong and true means. Not being in touch with the zeitgeist seemed not to matter: their powerful paintings stir our emotions, whether we want them to or not, as if they are touching some genetically present nerve. We love Tom Thomson because he owns a piece of each of us: we find ourselves in his paintings.

David P Silcox
Massey College
2001

Users Review

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