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Shattered Landscape: The Great War and the Art of the Group of Seven

Laura Brandon

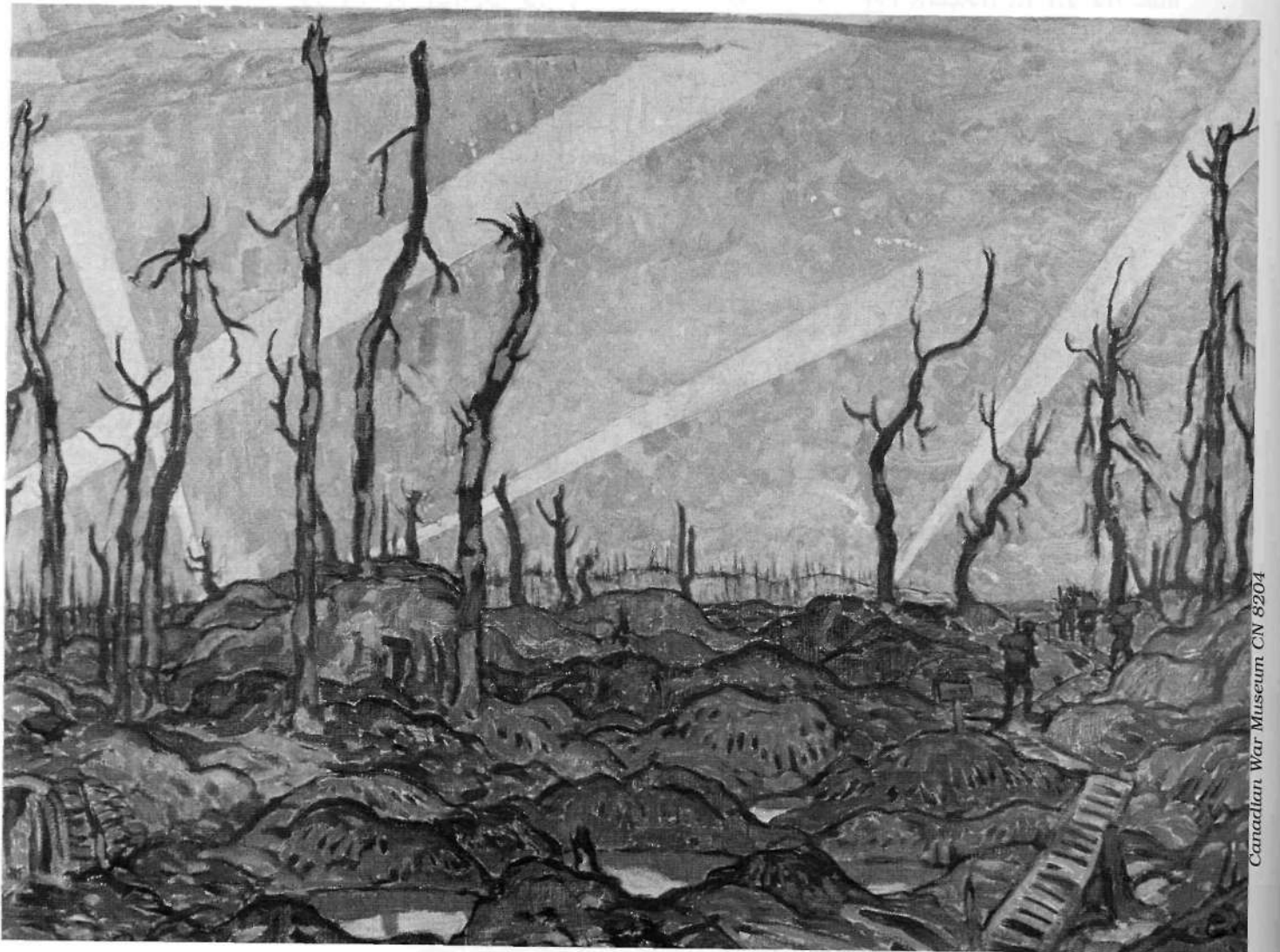
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A.Y. Jackson, A Copse, Evening.

Shattered Landscape

The Great War and the Art of the Group of Seven

Laura Brandon

The Group of Seven is the best-known and most influential group of Canadian artists to have worked in Canada in the twentieth century. Original members F.H. Varley, A.Y. Jackson, Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, and Frank H. (Franz) Johnston first exhibited as a Group in 1920. LeMoine FitzGerald, Edwin Holgate, and A.J. Casson later augmented the Group's membership. The Group ceased exhibiting in 1931.



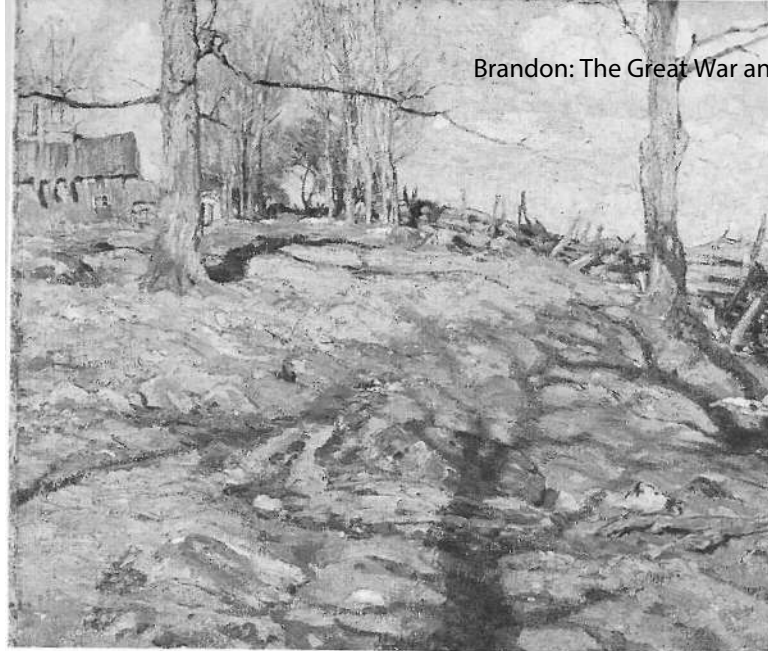
them Canadians. In 1921, it gave nearly 1,000 of its paintings to Canada in the expectation of permanent exhibit.¹

In September 1917, Jackson worked for three weeks in the area around Vimy Ridge. He sketched quickly outdoors in pencil and coloured pencil on paper. Then, if possible, he made rapid, on-the-spot oil sketches on wooden boards. After returning to his London studio in October he painted full-size canvasses. Jackson had trouble coming to grips with his subject and the somewhat decorative landscape style he had adopted just before the war dominated his early war work. In the spring of 1918, he returned to France for another three weeks. By this time he had familiarized himself with the dramatic and experimental war art of British artist Paul Nash.² Nash's work was to have an enormous influence on Jackson's and, through him, the other members of the Group of Seven. Two months after the armistice, in January 1919, Jackson received a brief assignment to paint troopships returning to Halifax, Nova Scotia. He demobilized three months later.

Six members of Canada's original Group of Seven painted war subjects during the First World War, and their work influenced the seventh. Moreover, the Group's successful assimilation of elements of war iconography into their post-war landscape art contributed to the creation of a nationally significant art style, something which is not widely acknowledged.

A.Y. Jackson, in many ways the group's natural leader, was the first to go overseas. He enlisted as a private in the 60th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in June 1915, went overseas in November and, in June 1916, after being wounded in the hip at Maple Cope near Ypres, was invalided back to England. Although he had not painted for nearly two years, in August 1917 the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF) appointed him to record Canada's participation in the war. The first Canadian to be so employed, Jackson produced 45 works for the CWMF. Before the end of the war, the CWMF would employ 116 artists, more than a third of

The significant change in Jackson's painting as a result of his First World War experience can be discerned from a brief examination of eight paintings dating from 1910-1923. In its overall impressionistic effects, *The Edge of the Maple Wood* (1910) shows the impact of his studies in France from 1907-1909.³ The artist plays with shadows undulating across the pitted ground to enliven an ordinary scene. *Terre Sauvage* (1913)



A.Y. Jackson, *The Edge of the Maple Wood*, 1910.

depicts a more visceral response to the northern Ontario wilderness, evidence that Jackson was looking for a less derivative style to express the nature of his own country.⁴ (Tom Thompson, an important artist for the Group who tragically died in a drowning accident in July 1917, joined him in this search.) In *Terre Sauvage*, Jackson stresses the rugged grandeur of the wilderness, one critic describing the work as "untamed nature, savage and wild."⁵ The same unrestrained quality appears in a 1918 war work, *The Pimple, Evening*.⁶ In this vividly coloured painting, Vimy Ridge stretches behind a trench-riddled landscape across which trudge two small groups of soldiers. Nonetheless, the struggle to find a painterly language to depict the conflict did not end for Jackson until he incorporated the full influence of Nash into his work.

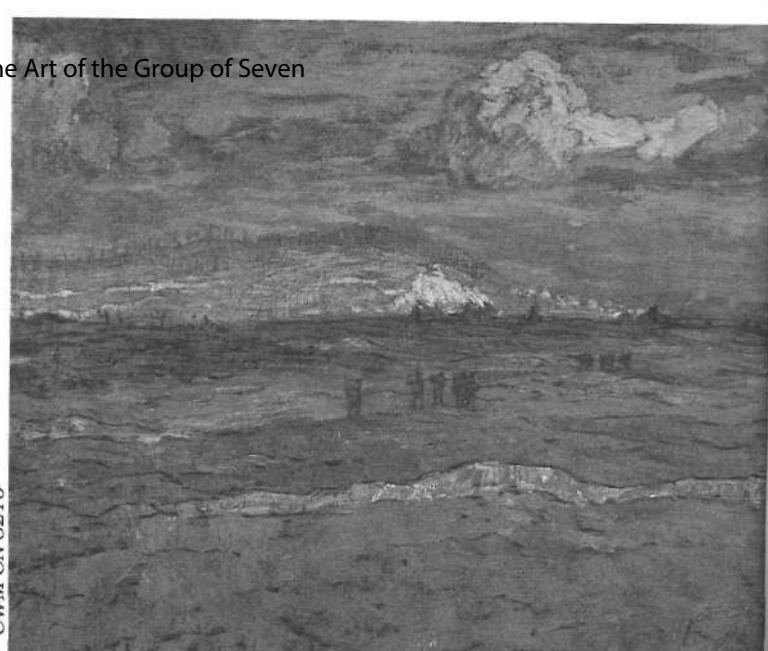
Jackson knew *Void*, a CWMF painting by Nash, as early as March 1918.⁷ As the Canadian described it:

Void is great painting; line mass and color combined with fierce intensity to express an emotion. The literary prop is superfluous; there is here an intelligible use of means by which many artists are striving to lift art above mere representation.⁸

Its influence can be seen in Jackson's *A Copse, Evening*, where searchlights silhouette denuded tree trunks in a shell-torn, muddy landscape.⁹ The composition prompted one critic movingly to describe it:

Do the mothers and wives think it hard to know that their men are dead? Let them look at this picture... and know that it is lucky for them, but unfortunate for the living world, that they do

Paul Nash, *Void*



A.Y. Jackson, *The Pimple, Evening*

not know how and with what thoughts their men *lived* for some time before they escaped from a *Copse, Evening*. It was not death they dreaded. Sometimes that was welcomed. It was the mutilation of the mind.¹⁰

Shortly after his return to Canada, Jackson began *First Snow, Algoma*.¹¹ In this work snow flurries drift across a barren landscape of stunted tree trunks, much like clouds of gas across the fields of the Western Front. *October Morning, Algoma (Wartz Lake, Algoma)* [1920] is an even starker rendition of the Ontario backwoods, the mutilated tree trunks unequivocally reminiscent of those he painted in *A Copse, Evening*.¹² As late as 1923, the Western Front was still a prime influence on Jackson's landscape painting style. The desolate *Algoma Rocks, Autumn* resembles several of his wartime views of the Souchez valley near Vimy Ridge.¹³ As one commentator put it, Jackson returned from the war not satisfied to "paint anything that was serene" but rather "storms and...things that had been smashed up."¹⁴



National Gallery of Canada, Acc. # 8650

Frederick Varley was the other Group of Seven member who painted in Europe during the First World War. In fact, war work launched his career. An English immigrant to Canada, he had been working as a commercial illustrator in Toronto before the war. The War Artists Advisory Committee of the CWMF likely recommended him for commission as an official war artist in 1918, in part on the strength of recruiting illustrations he had drawn for the Royal Flying Corps.¹⁵ In early 1918, he painted at Seaford Camp on the south coast of England and in August he travelled to France, following the Canadian Corps into Flanders in the final advance known as "The Hundred Days." What he saw affected him tremendously. He wrote home:

You in Canada...cannot realize at all what war is like. You must see it and live it. You must see the barren deserts war has made of once fertile country...see the turned-up graves, see the dead on the field, freshly mutilated - headless, legless, stomachless, a perfect body and a passive face and a broken empty skull - see your own countrymen unidentified, thrown into a cart, their coats over them, boys digging a grave in a land of yellow slimy mud and green pools of water under a weeping sky. You must have heard the screeching shells and have the shrapnel fall around you, whistling by you - Seen the results of it, seen scores of horses, bits of horses lying around, in the open - in the street and soldiers marching by these scenes as if they never knew

of their presence - until you've lived this...you cannot know.¹⁶

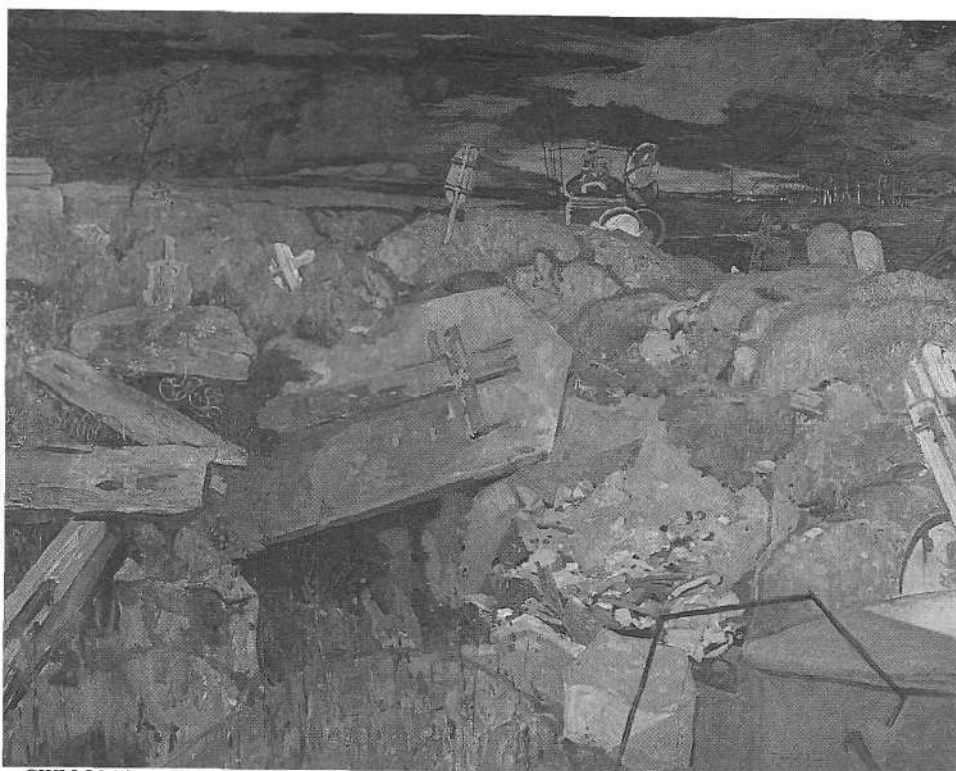
Like Jackson, Varley recorded the war in sketchbooks, painting larger canvasses in his studios in London and later in Canada. Some surviving oil sketches on wooden boards indicate that, like Jackson, he also utilized an on-the-spot method of recording a scene.¹⁷ In April and May 1919, he returned to France to paint but by August he was back in Canada. A short survey of seven works completed between 1910 and 1920 demonstrates how his art changed as a result of his exposure to the grim subject matter of France and Flanders.

The Hillside, a 1910 watercolour study on paper, is a decorative and tranquil landscape enlivened by a subtle use of light and dark contrasts.¹⁸ *Some Day the People Will Return*, however, moves Varley into the forefront of Canadian art.¹⁹ In this war work, based on a tiny sketch, a destroyed village cemetery contains a single symbol of hope in the flower tendril that survived the bombardment.²⁰ *For What?* is a devastating portrayal of burial in the field.²¹ Canadian critic Barker Fairley, who saw it at the 1919 exhibition of CWMF paintings in Toronto, wrote:

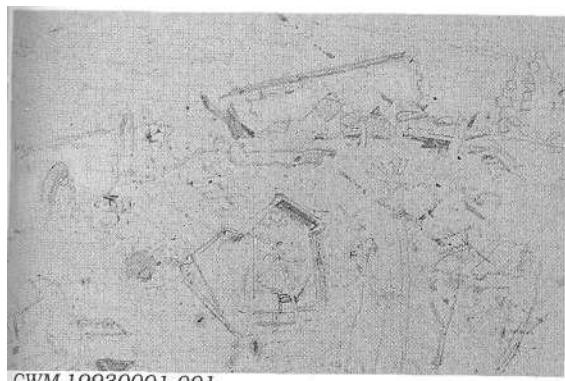
There is but one painter in the whole group who has succeeded in conveying an intense human

Right: Frederick Varley,
*Some Day the People
Will Return.*

Below: Frederick Varley,
Shelled Graveyard, 1918.



CWM8910



CWM 19930001-001



Frederick Varley, *For What?*

emotion concerning warfare in an outright manner that does not break outright with traditional forms of expression. That man is F.H. Varley...*For What?* and *Some Day the People Will Return* are a thing apart in the collection... They are executed in an impersonal way, neither laboured nor mannered; they are not the product of a passing fashion. They will never become widely popular, but neither will they ever be appropriated by a clique. As time

goes by they will simply be found standing where they now stand - in the forefront of Canadian paintings.²²

In *German Prisoners*, the artist introduces the motif of the destroyed tree trunk already familiar to Jackson and closely associated with the war paintings, drawings and prints of Paul Nash.²³ This image was the one that, ironically

Frederick Varley, *German Prisoners*



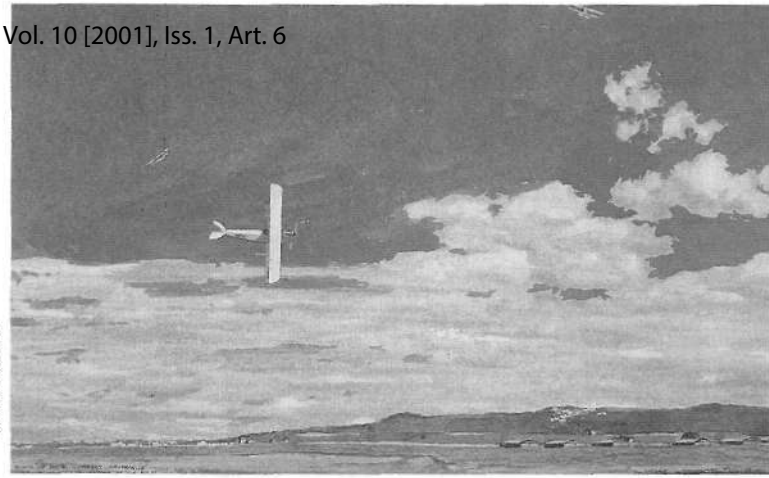
Franz Johnston, School of Aerial Gunnery

perhaps, was to become, for many Canadians, emblematic of their weather-scarred and natural-disaster prone landscape. Certainly, on Varley's return to Canada, he sought in the Ontario wilderness the bleak qualities of the landscape, epitomized by tree stumps similar to those he had seen on the Western Front. *Georgian Bay Sketch No.5* (1920) is no decorative scene, but a rough-hewn composition reflective of the daunting countryside that is its subject.²⁴ Similarly, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* centres on a lone pine tree struggling for survival against the odds.²⁵

Two members of the Group of Seven painted on the home front, Franz Johnston and Arthur Lismer. Franz Johnston was working as a commercial artist when the CWMF commissioned him to depict the Royal Flying Corps training program in Ontario. In the late summer and fall of 1918, he flew with training officers in Curtiss JN4 aircraft and painted at a number of bases, including Camp Borden and Beamsville, Ontario. Nearly 80 watercolours and drawings, and two canvases, resulted. These show that his approach changed through personal experience and his exposure to the war art of Jackson and Varley.

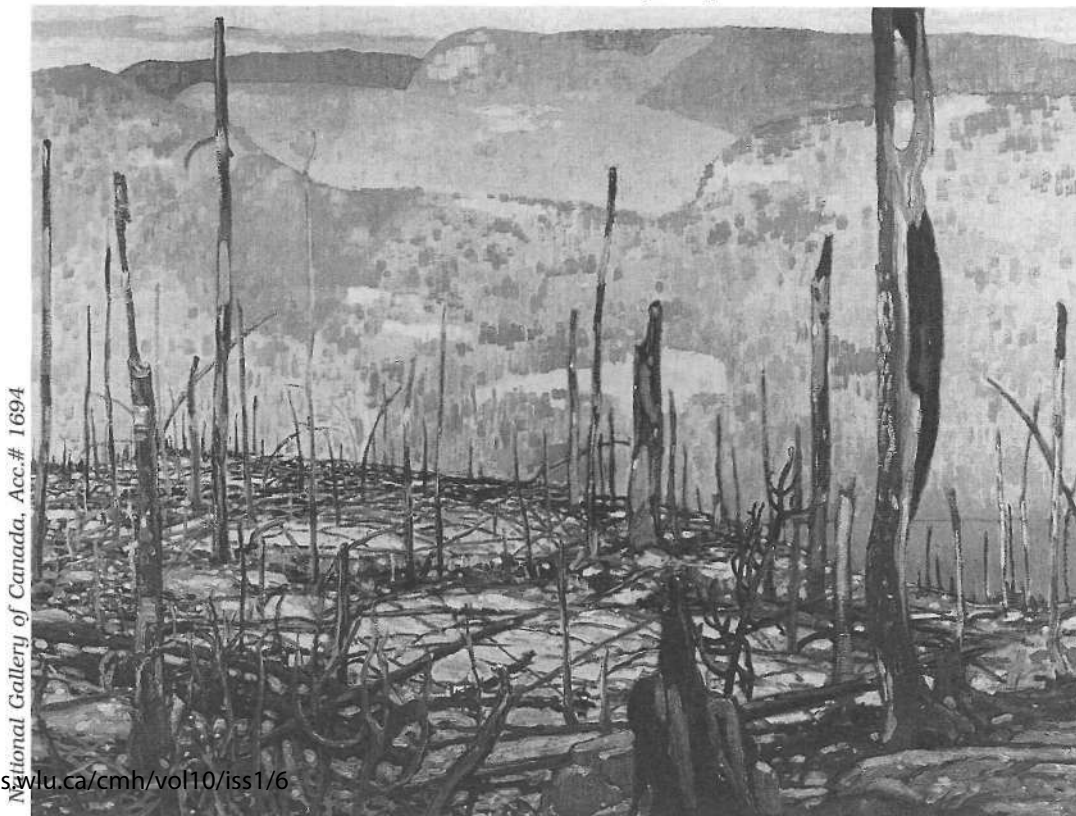
Johnston's *The Magic Pool* (1917) is a decorative and sentimental composition featuring

CWM 8270



a dancing wood nymph.²⁶ In contrast, his *School of Aerial Gunnery*, while stylistically related in terms of its use of colour and detail, is an unsentimental rendition of an aircraft in flight.²⁷ In 1920, Johnston used almost the same approach in a painting of the Ontario landscape. *The Fire Ranger* portrays a non-military aircraft flying low over forested hills against a cloud-filled sky.²⁸ *Serenity, Lake of the Woods* (1922) uses the same format with the sky dominating the upper four-fifths of the composition, but lacks an aircraft.²⁹ In *Fire-Swept, Algoma* (1920), the impact of the Western Front is fully incorporated into Johnston's composition although he personally was never there. The influence of Jackson is evident in the desolate foreground countryside, covered in a forest of charred and denuded trees, that owes much to his colleague's *A Copse, Evening*.³⁰

Franz Johnston, *Fire-swept, Algoma*



National Gallery of Canada, Acc.# 1694



Arthur Lismer, *Convoy in Bedford Basin*

CWM 8364

The CWMF commissioned Arthur Lismer to portray naval activity in the port of Halifax in 1918. He had earlier been employed as a commercial artist alongside MacDonald, Varley, and Johnston in Toronto, but in 1916 had become principal of the Victoria College of Art in Halifax. Lismer was well aware that the war experiences of Canadian artists "will have a great deal to do with the development of our art in Canada."³¹ He made hundreds of sketches, completed a number of oil studies on board, and finished several major canvasses during 1918 and 1919. The CWMF also commissioned and sold sixteen lithographs. Like Johnston, Lismer tried to experience some of the subjects he painted and, in October 1918, sailed in Halifax harbour on a minesweeper. He learned of the war overseas from both Varley and Jackson when they returned to Canada in 1919 and he painted alongside Jackson in Halifax while the latter was completing his own CWMF commission. The influence of his two colleagues profoundly altered Lismer's own artistic approach in the immediate post-war period.

The Guide's Home, Algonquin (1914) is a quasi-impressionistic and decorative work in which the landscape appears benevolent and non-threatening.³² *Convoy in Bedford Basin* retains something of the same cheerful style, despite its wartime subject matter, in that the sun shines, the waves lap, and the dazzle-painted ships look as though they are participating in a regatta.³³ However, *A September Gale, Georgian Bay* (1921) is Varley's *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* reincarnated: the same tree, the same storm-tossed water, and the same wildness of nature.³⁴

Gone from Lismer's work is the impressionistic palette that characterized his painting before his exposure to the legacy of the Great War in his friends' art.

J.E.H. MacDonald was one of three Group of Seven artists who did not receive a war commission. The early years of the war had seen MacDonald in straitened circumstances eking out an existence on \$12.00 a week as commercial contracts dried up. During this time he produced a war painting, *Spirits of Christmas - No Man's Land*, and a poster entitled *Canada and the Call*.³⁵ The possibility of his obtaining one was certainly discussed towards the end of the war with Eric Brown, the Director of the National Gallery of Canada and a member of the Canadian committee of the CWMF. MacDonald seriously considered submitting a work based on the groups of veterans who hung around at two Toronto street intersections known as Shrapnel and WhizzBang Corners.³⁶ The artist also expressed enthusiasm for painting one of the oversize decorative panels for the memorial war art gallery intended to house the CWMF paintings that ultimately was never built.³⁷

Early paintings, such as *The Sleighing Party, Winter Moonlight* (1911) could be atmospheric and moody.³⁸ The same quality infuses *Spirits of Christmas - No Man's Land*. His growing concerns about the war and his poverty find reflection in a wildly atmospheric 1916 painting entitled *The Elements*.³⁹ This work, like Jackson's *Terre Sauvage*, suggests that even before the war members of the nascent Group, including Tom Thompson, sought less



J.E.H. MacDonald
Spirits of Christmas – No Man's Land



J.E.H. MacDonald
Canada and the Call 1914

picturesque means of depicting their country. In *Leaves in the Brook* (1919) the artist's approach has become looser, demonstrating a stylistic indebtedness to the post-war art of Varley and Jackson.⁴⁰

Lawren Harris enlisted in July 1916 as an instructor in musketry at Camp Borden and Toronto. Although he never went overseas, he lost a brother in France. Like the other members of the Group, his work changed markedly in response to the war. *Hurdy-Gurdy* (1913) is an impressionistic treatment in the vein of Lismer's *The Guide's House, Algonquin*.⁴¹ *Spruce and Snow, Northern Ontario* (1916) shows in its use of thick paint and its almost sculptural quality a style owing much to the Scandinavian paintings he had seen in 1913 at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo.⁴² However, *Above Lake Superior* (1922) evidences the debt owed to the landscape styles that emerged out of the First World War.⁴³ In a stark winter setting bare tree trunks rise from the ground, like the trees in Jackson's *A Copse, Evening*.

To understand the ongoing influence of the Group of Seven on Canadian art one has only to look at the work of their myriad followers, who continued to paint landscapes from the point of view of a dramatic face-to-face confrontation with untamed nature. Artists like Carl Schaefer, Pegi Nicol MacLeod, and Charles Comfort were all

indebted to the Group. A later work by the seventh original member, Franklin Carmichael, demonstrates the enduring quality of their post-war collective iconography. Carmichael, who was studying in Antwerp when war broke out, fled back to Canada. A.Y. Jackson was an important influence on him as was Tom Thompson. The iconography of Jackson's war art, however, did not emerge in Carmichael's landscape art until much later. The evidence is best seen in a 1929-30 watercolour entitled *Wabajisik: Drowned Land*.⁴⁴ Here, the dead tree trunks that for so many war artists became the icons of the Western Front, also speak of a dead Ontario landscape.

The original Group of Seven's First World War experiences had an important impact upon the development of their painting styles. But, while the Group's post-war landscape art is very well known, their war art, as a result of limited exposure, is not. The extent to which much of their subjects after 1920, in particular their references to dead trees and devastated ground, is indebted to the landscape of the Great War is not widely understood. In the immediate post-war period the Canadian government pursued an increasingly independent and nationalist agenda *vis d vis* Great Britain. The Group achieved lasting fame by espousing this agenda and supporting a vision of a Canadian school of art inspired by the countryside itself. The significant roots of their art in a landscape art

born on the battlefields of the Western Front that was partially British-inspired became largely forgotten.

Notes

1. For a full account of the program see Maria Tippet, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
2. For a full survey of Jackson's war career and the influence of Nash see Jacqueline Adell, *British First World War Art and the Group of Seven*, M.A. Research essay, Carleton University, 1984.
3. A.Y. Jackson, *The Edge of the Maple Wood*, 1910, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 65.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
4. A.Y. Jackson, *Terre Sauvage*, 1913, oil on canvas, 128.8 x 154.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
5. Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1995), p.309.
6. A.Y. Jackson, *The Pimple, Evening*, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.0 cm, Canadian War Museum (8216).
7. Paul Nash, *Void*, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 91.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada (8650). Adell, p.29.
8. Adell, p.21.
9. A.Y. Jackson, *A Copse, Evening*, oil on canvas, 86.8 x 111.8 cm, Canadian War Museum (8204).
10. Hill, p.65.
11. A.Y. Jackson, *First Snow, Algoma*, c 1919-20, oil on canvas, 107.1 x 127.7 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, gift in memory of Gertrude Wells Hilborn, 1966.
12. A.Y. Jackson, *October Morning, Algoma (Wartz Lake, Algoma)*, 1920, oil on canvas, 52.0 x 60.0 cm, Hart House Collection, University of Toronto, purchased by the House Committee, 1931-32.
13. A.Y. Jackson, *Algoma Rocks, Autumn*, c 1923, oil on canvas, 81.7 x 100.8 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, bequest of Charles S. Band, 1970.
14. Susan Butlin, "Landscape as Memorial: A.Y. Jackson and the Landscape of the Western Front, 1917-1918," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 5, Number 2, Autumn 1996, p.68.
15. Catalogue numbers 8914-8924.
16. Hill, p.65.
17. See for example, *In Arras*, 1918-19, oil on wood panel, 29.8 x 40.6 cm, The Faculty Club, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
18. Frederick Varley, *The Hillside*, c 1910, watercolour on paper, 44.3 x 32.0 cm, Rosa and Spencer Clark Collection, Toronto.
19. Frederick Varley, *Some Day the People Will Return*, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 228.6 cm, Canadian War Museum (8910).
20. *Shelled Graveyard*, 1918, carbon pencil and chalk on paper, 17.8 x 24.9 cm, Canadian War Museum (19930001-001).
21. Frederick Varley, *For What?*, oil on canvas, 147.2 x 182.8 cm, Canadian War Museum (8911).
22. Hill, p.71.
23. Frederick Varley, *German Prisoners*, oil on canvas, 127.2x183.8 cm, Canadian War Museum (8961).
24. Frederick Varley, *Georgian Bay Sketch, No. 5, 1920*, oil on wood panel, 29.2 x 39.7 cm, private collection, London, Ontario.
25. Frederick Varley, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, c 1920, oil on canvas, 132.6 x 162.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
26. Franz Johnston, *The Magic Pool*, 1917, tempera on board, 30.6 x 50.7 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
27. Franz Johnston, *School of Aerial Gunnery*, watercolour on paper, 34.3 x 56.2 cm, Canadian War Museum (8270).
28. Franz Johnston, *The Fire Ranger*, 1920, oil on canvas, 123.0 x 153.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
29. Franz Johnston, *Serenity, Lake of the Woods*, 1922, oil on canvas, 102.3 x 128.4 cm, Winnipeg Art Gallery.
30. Franz Johnston, *Fire-Swept, Algoma*, 1920, oil on canvas, 127.5 x 167.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
31. Hill, p.67.
32. Arthur Lismer, *The Guide's Home, Algonquin*, 1914, oil on canvas, 102.6 x 114.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
33. Arthur Lismer, *Convoy in Bedford Basin*, oil on canvas, 91.0 x 260.0 cm, Canadian War Museum (8364).
34. Arthur Lismer, *A September Gale, Georgian Bay*, 1921, oil on canvas, 122.4 x 163.0 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
35. *Spirits of Christmas -No Man's Land*, c 1916, oil on laminated paper board, 75.6 x 53.0 cm, Canadian War Museum (19930115-001) and *Canada and the Call 1914; Exhibition of pictures given by Canadian artists in aid of the patriotic fund, under the auspices of the Royal Canadian Academy*, ink on paper, 107.3 x 74.1 cm, Canadian War Museum (19940018-001).
36. J.E.H. MacDonald to Eric Brown, 4 December 1918, National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, Canadian War Art - Canadian War Memorials.
37. For an account of the building see, Laura Brandon, "The Canadian War Museum that never was," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 7, Number 4, Autumn 1998, pp.45-54.
38. J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Sleighing Party, Winter Moonlight*, c 1911, oil on canvas, 41.3 x 51.0 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of Claude Laberge, 1984.
39. J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Elements*, 1916, oil on board, 71.1x91.8 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Dr. Lome Pierce, Toronto, 1958, in memory of Edith Chown Pierce (1890-1954).
40. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Leaves in the Brook*, c 1919, oil on canvas, 52.7 x 65.0 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.
41. Lawren Harris, *Hurdy-Gurdy*, 1913, oil on canvas, 75.8 x 86.6 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton, gift of Roy Cole, 1992.
42. Lawren Harris, *Spruce and Snow, Northern Ontario*, 1916, oil on canvas, 102.3 x 114.3 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Roy G. Cole, Rosseau, Ontario.
43. Lawren Harris, *Above Lake Superior*, c 1922, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift from the Reuben and Kate Leonard Canadian Fund, 1929.
44. Franklin Carmichael, *Wabajisik: Drowned Land*, 1929/30, watercolour and gouache over charcoal on wove paper, 51.8 x 69.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

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