

Douglas Hunter. *Jackson's Wars: A. Y. Jackson, the Birth of the Group of Seven, and the Great War*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. 544.

“What to paint was a problem,” wrote A. Y. Jackson, the famed artist who would become a member of the Group of Seven. “There was nothing to serve as a guide. War had gone underground. There was little to see. The old heroics, the death and glory stuff, were obsolete” (p. 282). So railed Jackson during the Great War in which he served in uniform as an official war artist. Indeed, how was the artist to document the Canadian war effort when the earth-shattering firepower of artillery drove soldiers into their trenches along the Western Front? Jackson found a way, as did over a hundred other British, Canadian and Belgian artists who created original works of art for the Canadian War Memorials Fund, established by Lord Beaverbrook to document the war.

Jackson's Wars is the story of the artist and his fellow members of the Group of Seven as they strove to create a new artistic movement to portray the Canadian landscape in bright, bold and, for some critics, dangerous colours. Historian Douglas Hunter, author of several fine books including *Beardmore: The Viking Hoax That Rewrote History* (2018), draws heavily on the Jackson family archives. The first half of the book, set before the war, makes for insightful reading into the prewar Canadian art scene and the ongoing effort of artists to survive in a country ill-disposed to support culture, but for this journal I will focus on the war years. Hunter draws out Jackson's service, but also that of many other artists who joined the colours in the defining event of their generation. Despite his established reputation as an artist, Jackson enlisted as a private in June 1915 at the age of thirty-one, later regretting that he did not hold out for a commission because of the drudgery of discipline and difficult work for the lower ranks.

Jackson was both a cynic and an idealist. He understood and wrote about the importance of serving in the war against the militaristic Germans, especially the need to liberate Western Europe from enemy occupation. And yet he found service in the 60th Battalion mind-numbing and dangerous and he had no compunction in labelling many of his comrades in the ranks as illiterates or villains. “All the high sounding nonsense about fame and glory have vanished,” he wrote. “We are just going to do our bit” (p. 209). But

he respected his comrades far more than anyone who stayed safely at home and he came to hate the slackers and anti-conscriptionists who refused to fight.

Private Jackson served many months at the front, surviving shellfire and snipers, but his number came up during the Battle of Mount Sorrel in June 1916. As part of a counterattacking force to drive the Germans back from a position they had snatched from the Canadians, he was wounded with shrapnel in the right hip and shoulder. He was one of eleven officers and 334 other ranks from the 60th Battalion killed or wounded in the battle. The assault, he was later to write from the hospital, “was a cruel business...I can’t believe there was much brains behind it all” (p. 246).

While the author offers new insight into Jackson’s war experience, as well as exploring the high casualty rate to his comrades, the strong narrative of the battle situates Jackson’s fear of returning to the line as a private. He felt he had done his bit for the war effort, at least in the trenches. But Jackson was lucky to have several patrons and when word circulated of Beaverbrook’s official art program, the artist was one of the first to be appointed. Hunter offers new insight into the artists in the program and some of the administrative inner workings, especially the influence of the Hungarian-born art critic Paul Konody’s role in advising Beaverbrook. However, Hunter does himself no favours by failing to draw upon some of the established literature on the subject by Brandon, Wellington, Keshen and Cook.¹

Commissioned as a lieutenant, Jackson painted officially for Canada from late 1917. It was a good post, and he knew it, although he wrestled with the subject matter. The overwhelming destruction of the landscape, eviscerated from countless shells and poisoned by chemical agents, fascinated him, just as Canada’s wilderness had stirred in him a desire to capture its raw beauty before the war. Hunter has a good eye for a quote and in deconstructing art, especially in describing the colour and composition of works like *Gas Attack*, *Liéven* and *The Green Crassier*. While Jackson laboured

¹ Hunter fails to draw upon Laura Brandon’s *Art or Memorial?: The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006); Jennifer Wellington’s *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jeff Keshen’s *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada’s Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996); and Tim Cook’s *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

to represent soldiers, his masterwork, *A Copse, Evening*, hauntingly depicts infantrymen overwhelmed in a devastated landscape. Readers can compare Hunter's analysis with the many colour plates and black and white illustrations in the book and *Jackson's Wars* is another fine offering from McGill-Queen's University Press's Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History.

Jackson emerged from the war as a fierce Canadian nationalist, writing "we are no longer humble colonials, we've made armies, we can also make artist, historians, and poets" (p. 354). He was also further emboldened to paint the Canadian landscapes that would be made famous through the Group of Seven, with its inaugural exhibition in 1920. Hunter argues for the importance of Jackson's war experience in propelling him forward and compelling him to think of what could be depicted on the canvas and this is a worthy read for both art and military historians.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*