MORE TO THAT TREE THAN MEETS THE EYE:
THE GROUP OF SEVEN, CANADIAN NATIONALISM, AND ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

The Group of Seven are regarded as the forerunners of a national Canadian artistic identity. Focus of the Canadian landscape and their style of painting drew both national and international attention and is often regarded as an integral part of the emerging nationality Canada developed in the twentieth century. The question remains, however: is this veneration justified? What relationship exists between the construction of Canada and the landscapes depicted, and does the work of the Group of Seven really remonstrate the people who call that landscape home?

The Group of Seven painted Canada: at least, they claimed to. This collective of artists specialized in paintings of the Canadian wilderness, and have been widely thought of as the epitome of Canadian art. In one sense, this is certainly true: the majority of the paintings they produced were of landscapes within Canadian borders. On the other hand, even a minute amount of critical thought calls this claim to national sainthood into question. How can the soul of Canadians be found in an area with no people in it? What about the people who did live there? Are there any views of Canada other than that of rugged wilderness? The problem gets fuzzier when we consider the preconceived ideas of wilderness, colonialist possession of landscape, and the nationalistic agenda the Group of Seven advocated. The Group of Seven's work had highly constructed precedents and contained problematic attitudes about what constituted Canada, but their narrative can be used to expand analysis of the Canadian search for identity.

The Group of Seven began as eight: Franklin Carmichael, Lawren S. Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Franz Johnston, Arther Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, Frederick Varley, and Tom Thomson. Some were British and some had grown up in Ontario; all of them lived in Toronto, all except Harris and Jackson worked for the same design firm, and all, except Thomson, were members of Toronto's Arts and Letters Club. These connections were enough that by 1913 they began to be recognized as a collective for a specific style of landscape painting. Their boldly composed, richly colored paintings of the Canadian Shield were sourced from sketches gathered during expeditions to the Laurentians and Algonquin Provincial Park. These trips were made at the encouragement of Thomson, who had a veritable mania for the outdoors. The upheavals of

the First World War postponed the official formation of the group, and they were dealt a subsequent blow when Thomson drowned during a trip to Algonquin Park in 1917.

However, in 1920 the remaining colleagues gathered to make an exhibition in Toronto, calling themselves the Group of Seven. Thomson's influence on their art qualifies him, in this paper, to be analyzed as a member of the Group. Participation in the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 and 1925 increased their international recognition. Reactions to their work throughout the 1920s were mixed, some criticizing their fixation on landscape while others saw them as creating a vigorous and distinctly Canadian tradition.[1] Few reviews were vehemently negative, with the notable 1913 exception of a Toronto *Star* critic who described their paintings as "a Dutch head-cheese having a quarrel with a chunk of French nougat."[2] In the long run, as Dennis Reid remarks, the Group "steadily ascended until now they occupy a position in the Canadian cultural pantheon shared only with a few hockey stars and a handful of beloved politicians."[3]

The Group's depiction of the Canadian environment was informed by contemporary ideas concerning the environment and nationalism. According to George Altmeyer, environmental thought at the time had ceased to view nature as a fearsome enemy. Instead, anxieties over exponential urbanization produced a 'back to nature' movement which championed the value of outdoor activities. At the same time, the environment became a vessel

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[1] Marylin J. McKay, *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2011), 169-183; Douglas Cole, "Artists, Patrons, and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 131.

[2] Ann Davis, "The Wembley Controversy in Canadian Art," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 125.

[3] Dennis Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 101-107.

for religious thought, thinkers finding evidence of God in nature's splendor. They espoused a vague transcendentalism which viewed nature as a method of communicating with a hazily defined Deity, or used Darwinian theory to consider humanity as part of nature rather than separate from it.[4] William Cronon supplements Altemeyer's position, arguing that the transformation of views of nature in the nineteenth century was due to two concepts, the sublime and the frontier. The ethos of the sublime described the wilderness as a place where people could come closer to God, while the frontier hypothesis stated that living conditions on the American frontier produced the independence and vigor of the American people; this hypothesis could be applied to Canadian lifestyles, as we will see.[5] Altmeyer and Cronon's arguments waver if applied outside of the middle class, but the middle class was the main support of the Group's art.[6] Therefore, placing values of outdoorsiness and spirituality on the environment played an immense role in the Group's approach to Canada's landscape.

Exterior pressures intensified these nineteenth century longings. The 1920s saw a more frantic rate of social change than ever before. Three decades of urbanization had created noisy cities with a low quality of life.[7] Meanwhile, the advent of technology had shifted views of northern Canada from a frozen wasteland to "a cornucopia overflowing with natural resources", descriptions of Ontario focusing on the minerals, timber, hydroelectric potential, and wildlife of

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[4] George Altmeyer, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 11, no. 3 (August 1976): 21-33.

[5] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 10, 13.

[6] Barry Lord, "The Group of Seven: A National Landscape Art," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 116.

[7] Cole, "Artists, Patrons, and Public," 129.

the region.[8] These resources offered a power base for Canadians to stand on in their intensifying search for a national identity. The First World War saw immense loss of Canadian life, the industrialization of the economy, and votes for women; it was also believed, as a commanding general at Vimy Ridge commented, that the war brought "the birth of a nation."[9] Abruptly ejected into modernity, Canada wanted a modern life and identity.[10]

This hunt for nationalism is another integral force in the Group of Seven's work. During the 1920s, the appearance of the League of Nations created the expectation that all League members would have a specific nation to represent.[11] Also, Canadians had for some time viewed themselves as distinctly North American rather than British subjects.[12] Wanting to avoid Americanization and recognizing no history before European contact, Canadians turned to the landscape as the source of Canadian nationalism. [13] According to John O'Brian, there is possibly no other country in the world which focused as closely on landscape in the twentieth century as Canada.[14] The Group of Seven played an immense role in developing this obsession and the nationalism attached to it, and further applied spiritual and racial ideas to the Canadian environment.

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[8] Paul H. Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 142.
[9]Benedict Anderson, "Staging Antimodernism in the Age of High Capitalist Nationalism," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 245.
[10] Rosemary Donegan, "Modernism and the Industrial Imagination: Copper Cliff and the Sudbury Basin," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 145.
[11] Anderson, "Staging Antimodernism," 245.
[12] Ramsay Cook, "Landscape Painting and National Sentiment in Canada," *Historical Reflection* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1974), 268.
[13] Cook, "Landscape Painting and National Sentiment," 274.
[14] John O'Brian, "Wild Art History," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 21.

The landscape fixation of early twentieth century Canada was adopted by the Group in a fashion John O'Brian describes as "predatory."[15] While they produced occasional illustrations of industrial landscapes, the most famous Group works are of empty, imposing wilderness. For instance, A.Y. Jackson's *Terre Sauvage*, a 1913 example of the Group's early work, depicts coniferous trees clinging to Precambrian bedrock whilst fat clouds float overhead.[16] Most of the Group's canvases continue this subject matter. Lawren Harris's paintings after the 1920s were abstract, depicting mountains and shores as "simplified, almost sculptural masses in deep space."[17] While most of their images of tree, rock, water, sky, and storm depicted northern Ontario, the Group travelled far west and north in order capture all of what they saw as Canada's soul.[18]

For it an essential Canadian nation they were looking for, and the Group perpetually claimed to have found it.[19] Reid argues that "the phenomenon which is known as the Group of Seven has very little to do with the nature of the artists' paintings, and a great deal to do with their stance and their struggle to gain acceptance of that stance."[20] J.E.H. MacDonald wrote in 1919:

> The Canadian Spirit in art prefers the raw youthful homeliness of Canada to the overblown beauty of the recognized art countries. It aims to fill its landscape with the clear Canadian sunshine and the open air, following faithfully all seasons and aspects and it would make its treatment of them broad and rich attempting to convey the sense of rough dignity and generosity which the nature of the country suggests. Let the reader go if he will [to the exhibition] and feel in the pictures the Canadian spirit in art, striving

[15] O'Brian, "Wild Art History," 22.
[16] O'Brian, "Wild Art History," 25, 26.
[17] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 106.
[18]Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 105.
[19] O'Brian, "Wild Art History," 24.
[20] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 102.

> through sincere expression for a self-determination which will enable our people to make their necessary and fitting contribution to the common art treasures of the world.[21]

Harris felt that Canadian art was founded completely on close knowledge of and love for the North.[22] Arthur Lismer was involved with the Ontario Department of Education, writing a concise history of Canadian art in which the Group of Seven figured largely.[23] Indeed, the introduction to the Group's first exhibition stated that "No country can ever hope to rise beyond a vulgar mediocrity where there is not unbounded confidence in what its humanity can do…the greatness of a country depends on three things: its Words, its Deeds, and its Art."[24] They therefore sought to bring Canada onto the world stage through their own particular style.

The essential Canadian nature the Group found in their landscapes was strongly informed by their preconceptions of spirituality and racial identity, recalling nineteenth century ideas of getting back to nature to regain spiritual energy and frontier vigor. Firstly, the Group saw landscape as a vehicle for personal connection to the spiritual world. For instance, Jackson and MacDonald described and painted the Ontario wilderness as primeval, a glimpse of a new Creation, while Frederick Varley sought to paint the Rockies in a way which could aid people in a personal spiritual journey. On another vein, Harris was heavily involved in Theosophy. This "study of the divine" was established in 1875 and produced writings which told of a northern, Aryan race which had dwelt in perfect harmony and spirituality until materialism separated the physical and spiritual worlds.[25] However, spiritual energy from the north would heal this divide. Harris extrapolated from this that it was the Canadian north which would "bring forth a perfect

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[21] Anne Whitelaw, "'Whiffs of Balsam, Pine, and Spruce': Art Museums and the Production of a Canadian Aesthetic," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 176.
[22] Cook, "Landscape Painting and National Sentiment," 266.
[23] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 101.
[24] McKay, *Picturing the Land*, 177.
[25] McKay, *Picturing the Land*, 189-191.

world in which people would be in touch with the spiritual."[26] He thereafter implied that Canadians were a special race: "We live on the fringe of the great North across the whole continent and its spiritual flow, its clarity, its replenishing power passes through us to the teeming people south of us."[27]

This statement has clear racial implications, suggesting that the white, energetic North would create a superior Canadian race.[28] The personae of the artists themselves combine this idea of a vigorous northern people with a healthy dose of frontier ethos. The American frontier was seen as a place of rugged, masculine individualism, and the turn of the century saw a fear that Canadian manhood was being undermined by urban living.[29] Armed with the argument that Canada had a frontier as well, only in the north rather than the west, the Group of Seven painted the Canadian north as a frontier within which the Canadian race could flourish.[30] In his 1926 book *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, Fred Housser, a personal friend of the Group, explicitly labeled the Canadian Shield as "The race's inescapable environment."[31] The Group took it upon themselves to personify this role: contrasting effete stereotypes of artists, they canoed, portaged, camped, and climbed their way to creating their paintings.[32] They were portrayed as wilderness warriors worthy of Canada's esteem; Thomson

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[26] McKay, *Picturing the Land*, 192-193.
[27] Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," 141.
[28] Scott Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory, and the Origins of Modern Canadian Landscape Painting," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 278.
[29] Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness," 13, 14; Altmeyer, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," 26, 101.
[30] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 107.
[31] Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory," 278.
[32] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 101, 102.

was particularly revered.[33] Thomson fell in love with Algonquin Provincial Park in 1912 and thereafter spent as much time as possible in the wild, becoming an expert canoeist and living in a trapper's shack even while in Toronto.[34] This, then, was the ideal for the Canadian race which the Group believed to be emerging.

The legacy of this nationalistic agenda is impossible to summarize, but a few pertinent examples demonstrate that the ideas promoted by the Group are long-lived. W.L. Morton produced the second edition of his book *The Canadian Identity* in 1972; it describes Canadian identity as hinging on interactions with the environment. For instance, Morton claims that the alternation between wilderness and civilization which characterized the fur trade continues on in the typical Canadian wilderness holiday of the late twentieth century. Further, he argues that a northern environment produces Canada's economy, a dependency on metropolitan culture, and a penchant for monarchy. "[The] Canadian frontier", Morton feels, "is perpetual", and all this leads to northern qualities in Canadian art and literature.[35] In a later essay on the role of the 'North' in Canadian historiography, Morton defines the North as "all that territory beyond the line of minimal growth of the known cereal grains", yet it "is an integral part of Canadian history."[36] Historical analysis of Canadian identity, then, has depended heavily on the perceived impact of the environment.

Art criticism also contains these ideas. Joan Murray, when introducing a book which emphasizes the role of rock in the Group of Seven's art, refers to bedrock as "the fundamental

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[33] Leslie Dawn, "The Britishness of Canadian Art," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 195.
[34] Cole, "Artists, Patrons, and Public," 131; Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory," 278.
[35] W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 5, 72, 83, 89, 93, 94, 99, 109.
[36] W.L. Morton, "The 'North' in Canadian Historiography," in *Contexts of Canada's Past: selected essays of W.L. Morton*, ed. A.B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980), 230, 231.

basis of Canada".[37] Throughout the twentieth century Canada has been explained "in terms of land and location," and this shows no sign of stopping.[38] A 1995 National Gallery exhibition titled "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," carried the assumption of "an essential Canadian identity" grounded on the principles the Group of Seven espoused.[39] The idea that Canadian art stems from wilderness elements particular to Canada, then, has immense staying power.[40]

The Group presented a tidy image of Canada as a unique force, drawing its power from the environment; it is almost pitiful how easily this narrative is dismantled. To begin with, although the Group promoted their work as springing directly from contact with the Canadian environment, it was in fact laden with European precedents. Five out of the Seven—Harris, Jackson, Lismer, Varley, and Carmichael—had learned their artistic trade in Europe.[41] Next, they drew inspiration from Scandinavian art. In 1913, MacDonald and Harris visited an exhibition of contemporary Scandinavian landscape art which sparked their interest in depicting specifically northern subject matter in a bold, modern style.[42] British landscape painting also held precedents for the Group. Since the eighteenth century, the idea had been simmering in England that landscape equaled national identity.[43] This British penchant for landscape art is highlighted in the contrast between the 1924 British Empire Exhibition and a 1927 Paris

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[37]Joan Murray, *Rocks: Franklin Carmichael, Arthur Lismer, and the Group of Seven* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2006), 25.

[38]Cole Harris, "The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism," ," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 239.

[39] Lynda Jessup, "Art for a Nation?" in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 189.

[40] Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America 1890-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 159.

[41] Reid, "Introduction to *The Group of Seven*," 106.

[42] Nasgaard, *The Mystic North*, 159, 160.

[43] Dawn, "The Britishness of Canadian Art," 197.

exhibit.[44] British critics approved the Group's art and nationalistic agenda: "[T]hese Canadians are standing on their own feet, revealing their own country with gay virility."[45] Meanwhile, French reviews found the fixation on landscape tiresome and plaintively wondered if there were any beautiful women in Canada.[46] Finally, the Group's view of the wilderness as a source of strength was far from new. The first Europeans in North America saw it as a paradox of wealth and savagery, while nineteenth century Northwest Passage expeditions "did much to popularize the vision of the Canadian North as a rich but dangerous place requiring great heroism and perspicacity to conquer."[47] Furthermore, late nineteenth-century art commentary described ideal patriotic art as being created by an artist who would explore the wilderness for material.[48] It is apparent, then, that the Group of Seven's depiction of the Canadian wild had ample precedents.

Next, the success of the Group's work was not due to some essential feeling in the hearts of the Canadian people, but rather to ample aid from the National Gallery. From 1913 onwards, the Gallery regularly bought Group paintings.[49] The Gallery's influence obtained forty-four spots for the Group in the British Empire Exhibition in London in 1924, gaining them international recognition.[50] Patronage, then, furthered the Group's image of Canadian nationalism: as Anne Whitelaw puts it, "the museum is one such mechanism which makes the nation visible."[51]

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[44]Charles C. Hill, "The National Gallery, A National Art, Critical Judgment and the State," in *The True North: Canadian Landscape Painting 1896-1939*, ed. Michael Tooby (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1991), 78.
[45] Dawn, "The Britishness of Canadian Art," 194.
[46] McKay, *Picturing the Land*, 179.
[47] Jody Berland, "Space at the Margins: Colonial Spatiality and Critical Theory after Innis," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 90.
[48] Cook, "Landscape Painting and National Sentiment," 271.
[49] Davis, "The Wembley Controversy," 123, 124.
[50] Dawn, "The Britishness of Canadian Art," 194.
[51] Whitelaw, "'Whiffs of Balsam, Pine, and Spruce,'" 177.

Another hole in the Group's claim to paint Canada's true reality was their near complete exclusion of humanity, both indigenous and Euro-Canadian. In this respect they broke with European precedents, as European landscape painting usually held traces of human activity.[52] However, "an inhabited land is not what the Group of Seven…were looking for, and it is therefore not what they saw."[53] While the Group did depict villages and industrial development, they are best known for images of empty wilderness, such as *Terre Sauvage* and *The Jack Pine*. In Housser's 1926 analysis, indigenous people were ghosts, replaced by the likes of Thomson, exemplar of the new Canadian race. This picture of Canada, though, was patently untrue. The Algonquin speaking peoples of Northern Ontario were alive and kicking, having "been in court every few years since the end of the eighteenth century protesting and petitioning the loss of their territory and infringements on their rights."[54]

The exclusion of humanity extends to Euro-Canadian involvement with the land as well. Although *Terre Sauvage* depicted a region peppered with cottagers, Jackson chose to paint it uninhabited.[55] The Group did produce pictures of railways, mining, and smelters, but chose to focus on their wilderness cult despite the reality of human involvement with the Ontario landscape.[56] No mention is made of the conflict between farmers, indigenous people, and industry in Northern Ontario, or of the corruption of resource management at the time.[57] Algonquin Park was being reshaped by logging, but rather than showing the land as altered,

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[52]Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine—Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études canadiennes* 27, no. 4 (Hiver/Winter 1992): 98-128, ProQuest Literature Online.

[53] John O'Brian and Peter White, "Introduction," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 4.

[54] Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory," 278, 279.

[55] O'Brian, "Wild Art History," 24, 26.

[56] Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," 141, 142; Donegan, "Modernism and the Industrial Imagination," 147.

[57] Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory," 280.

Thomson painted the small bush and open vistas logging produced as untouched spaces.[58] Although all of the trips the Group took outside of Ontario in the 1920s were taken on free passes from the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian National Railway, the companies hoping art would boost tourist traffic, tourism did not play a role in the scene they created.[59]

In one analysis, then, the Group of Seven are colonizers, and for this they have come under heavy criticism. In postcolonial nations, landscape has often "functioned as a powerful political unifier. It has helped to consolidate the drive toward national sovereignty," but it does so at the cost of "aboriginal claims to the land."[60] By portraying the land as the source of a very specific Euro-Canadian identity, the Group became imperialists within imperialism: even as Euro-Canadians attempted to break free from the British yoke, they exerted their own colonialism over the land and the minorities living on it. By exerting their particular view of landscape on Canadian society, the Group made landscape a vehicle for power dynamics.[61] As has been mentioned, this continues to the present day. Even though the text accompanying the "Art for a Nation" exhibition admitted the Group mainly catered to English Canadians, it failed to deal with the implications of this. Indeed, the title of the exhibition implies that the Group of Seven canon is still viewed as a true expression of Canada.[62]

However, can another conclusion be reached besides consigning the Group to history's growing collection of dead white males? Certainly, any redemptive work on the Group must recognize their problematic legacy: for instance, they would likely have agreed with Morton's

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[58] Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," 143.
[59] Jessup, "Art for a Nation?" 191; Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," 143.
[60] O'Brian and White, "Introduction," 4.
[61] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 18.
[62]Jessup, "Art for a Nation?" 189.

assertion that Canadian history commenced with European contact.[63] Their attitudes about an energizing North and a pure Canadian nation are at best far-fetched and at worst racist. However, dispatching their work to the dustbin of history deprives us of the opportunity to examine their paintings as historical documents which contain truthful elements of Canadian life. As history, the paintings, although idealized, summarize the state of the Canadian environment in the early twentieth century. For instance, Thomson's uses of logging devastation to enhance his paintings of Algonquin demonstrate what the park looked like at the time. The ideological baggage connected to the canon also has historical value. The paintings serve as illustrations in the history of Euro-Canadian beliefs concerning race, nationalism, and spirituality. Since these dilemmas remain to the present day, this art can be used in the quest for a more equal and accurately described Canada.

In fact, the untruths told by early twentieth century wilderness propaganda have become reality: "In their haste to become old, young nations tell lies to themselves that turn into necessary truths."[64] Canada finds itself with wilderness on one side and the United States on the other. Whether if wilderness is a good foundation for Canadian identity or not, it is what has been chosen as an alternative to cultural and political annexation.[65] While much of Morton's analysis of Canadian identity is problematic, he does make the excellent point that Canadians are often "Canadians by choice", since throughout most of Canada's history moving south has been an option.[66] Furthermore, by believing that the northern landscape creates northern art, we create

[63] Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, 4.
[64] Robert Stacey, "The Myth—And Truth—of the True North," in *The True North: Canadian Landscape Painting 1896-1939*, ed. Michael Tooby (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1991), 37.
[65] Stacey, "The Myth—And Truth—of the True North," 58.
[66] Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, 110.

a self-fulfilling loop: if the landscape produces the art, our belief in the uniqueness of the landscape grows stronger.

Shoring up this reality of ideology is the fact of environment. Much of Canada really is as wild and northern as the Group portrayed it. European landscape painting may consciously choose to include human content, but in much of Europe, it is nearly impossible to avoid traces of human habitation. Meanwhile, the presence of millennia of human involvement with the Canadian environment is erased from the Group's paintings with relative ease: before modern technology, Canada did not allow for lifestyles which left a significant mark on the land. Furthermore, all societies living in Canada up until the present day have depended on either subsistence or a capitalist economy based on natural resources.[67] The ideology might be false but the land is real; since indigenous history leaves few physical landmarks, Euro-Canadians have created their historical basis in the Shield and the Rockies. Taking the constructed nature of the Group's work into account, can it not be used to discuss Euro-Canadian longings for history?

The Group of Seven's art represents an outmoded set of values, but still is still useful to illustrate both the history and present concerns of Canada's continual identity crisis. The Group's paintings codify early twentieth century views of wilderness, nationalism, spirituality, race, and landscape. Although European precedents and the calculated erasure of human presence from the environment destroys their claim to paint Canada as she was, the idea that Canada's identity was buried in the landscape has proved to be a durable one. The Group need not entirely be discarded. Their art is an integral part of the creation of Euro-Canadian identity, and holds enough reality to be useful both as historical documents and illustrations for the current struggle to find Canada. The "North" may no longer be in vogue, but the Group's work can be subverted,

[67] Altmeyer, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," 21.

used in ways that even they could not have imagined in order to broaden our understanding of the blurry relationship between Canadian nationalism and environment.

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