

Tom Thomson: painter and le

Two years before he died mysteriously, the legendary artist Tom Thomson painted the scene of his own death on Algonquin Park's Canoe Lake. The painting, which hangs in the McMichael Canadian Collection, is a poignant reminder of one of Canada's great art geniuses.

Thomson died 58 years ago and, as one commentator put it, "his life was the pure stuff of legends. Most of his later years were lived alone in the forest. His early death in mysterious circumstances, plus the meteor-like briefness of his dazzling career, combined to turn him into a national icon of art."

The painting is a small oil on wooden panel measuring 8½ by 10½ inches and is one of a series made around Canoe Lake—a favorite haunt of the artist. It was sketched from a point of land at the north end of the lake where Thomson often camped and where there stands an historic cairn, erected by friends after his death.

The view to the south shows the sear autumn hills of spruce and balsam, birch and pine which still grow to the shoreline. It is painted in a distinctive style which characterized some of his most famous works. The panel shows the islands which figured in the final chapters of the Thomson story, and the vivid, sparkling water where his body was found on July 16, 1917, eight days after he was last seen alive.

Thomson was born in 1877 at Claremont, Ontario and spent his boyhood at Leith, near Owen Sound. The years of his young manhood have been described as indifferent, lacking in a solid direction. He wandered briefly to Seattle, Washington then settled in Toronto as a commercial artist. Well into his thirties Thomson was doing "dull, imitative and not very accomplished figures and landscapes . . . at an age when most artists had already achieved a personal authority of style."

But in Toronto Thomson met and worked with other artists who were later to form the famous Group of Seven, Canada's most powerful art movement—men whose bold elemental portraits of the country were to give new meaning to the idea of being a Canadian. Among them were J. E. H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Fred Varley, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnson, Franklin Carmichael and others.

Thomson made his first trip into Algonquin Park in 1912 when the Park was still remote northern country. By 1914 he began to find the freedom and power, the brilliant color and forceful brushwork which characterized his art and began to attract some prominence.

In the winter he worked in a weatherbeaten shack in Toronto's Rosedale Ravine which once served as a machine shop, preferring it to a spacious and comfortable studio nearby. Today the shack, preserved much as he used it, stands at the McMichael Canadian Collection, a modest building, but one of the most important in Canadian art.

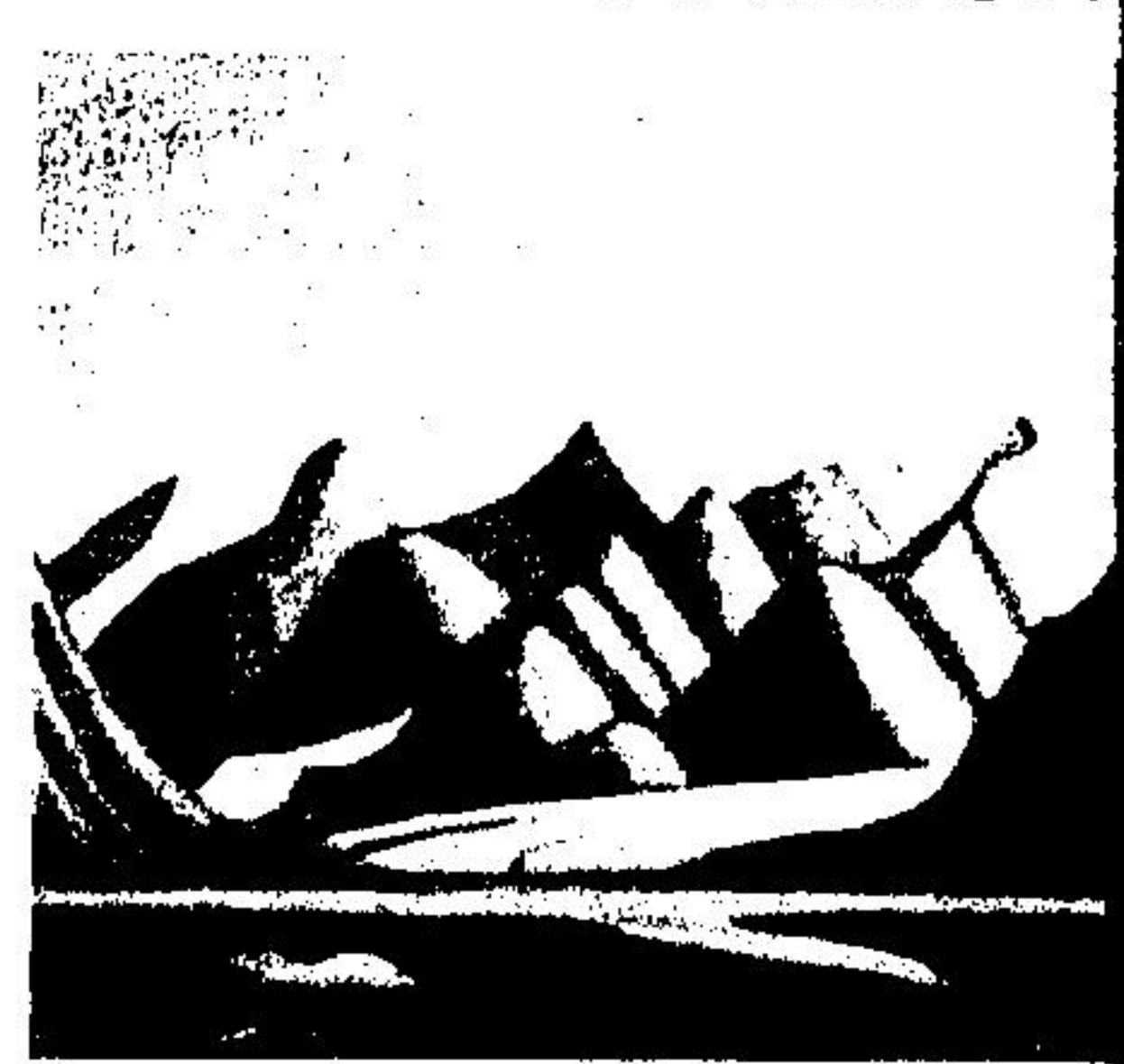
At the shack he entertained his friends; a quiet man to the point of shyness; tall, athletic, his woods-



THE M'MICHAEL



CANADIAN COLLECTI



man's stride somewhat out of place in the city environment. He was an easy-going man but capable of intense feelings toward his art, feelings which sometimes left him nearly inarticulate until he achieved an artistic goal—capturing an exact color, an exact mood or scene. Some of the most endearing insights into Thomson were provided by the quick pen of Arthur Lismer, the wit of the Group of Seven, who captured Thomson in simple ink sketches.

Thomson was last seen alive on the afternoon of July 8, 1917, a dull wet day with a brisk northeasterly breeze. He was paddling south on Canoe Lake to fish, he had said, either at Gill Lake or Tea Lake dam. As his life and work captured the imaginations of Canadians, his mysterious death was to raise questions for generations.

Exact details vary from witness to witness but in the main there is no dispute with the following facts:

July 8: an upturned canoe was sighted by an American cottager, Martin Bletcher, and his sister.

July 9: the upturned canoe was reported by Bletcher.

July 10: the canoe, Thomson's, was recovered.

July 11: a search for Thomson was started by friends.

July 16: Thomson's body was found near the islands which he had earlier painted and was towed to a small cove and, still lying in the water, was tethered to a tree to await the coroner.

July 17: the coroner, located more

than 100 miles away, had not arrived, and Thomson's body was examined by a doctor vacationing in Canoe Lake. Sixteen or 17 turns of fishing line were found around the left ankle. There was a wound on the left temple. Thomson was buried later that day in a small graveyard near the west shore of the lake which contained other graves.

July 18: an undertaker arrived with orders from Thomson's family to exhume the body and ship it home. Unassisted, he completed his grisly task between 8.00 p.m. and midnight.

July 19: a casket said to contain the artist's body was shipped to Owen Sound for a family service.

July 21: the casket was buried in the family plot at Leith, Ontario. The church record notes: "Talented and with many friends and no enemies—a mystery."

Few of Thomson's friends could accept that the skilled canoeist, woodsman and swimmer could have fallen from his canoe and drowned on a reasonably calm day and within a few 100 yards of shore. No one could explain the wound nor the fishing cord around his ankle.

The night before his death, Thomson had argued with Martin Bletcher about the progress of World War I. Bletcher, who apparently spent long periods in Canada to evade serving in the U.S. forces, may also have had an interest in Winnie Traynor, a Canoe Lake resident to whom

Thomson may have been engaged.

Theories about his death, for these and other reasons, have been many. Nor have the years lessened interest in the mystery. One theory, widely held, is that Thomson was murdered. Another, that he was struck by lightning—not so uncommon an accident as might be supposed. Other theories include the views of a mystic that

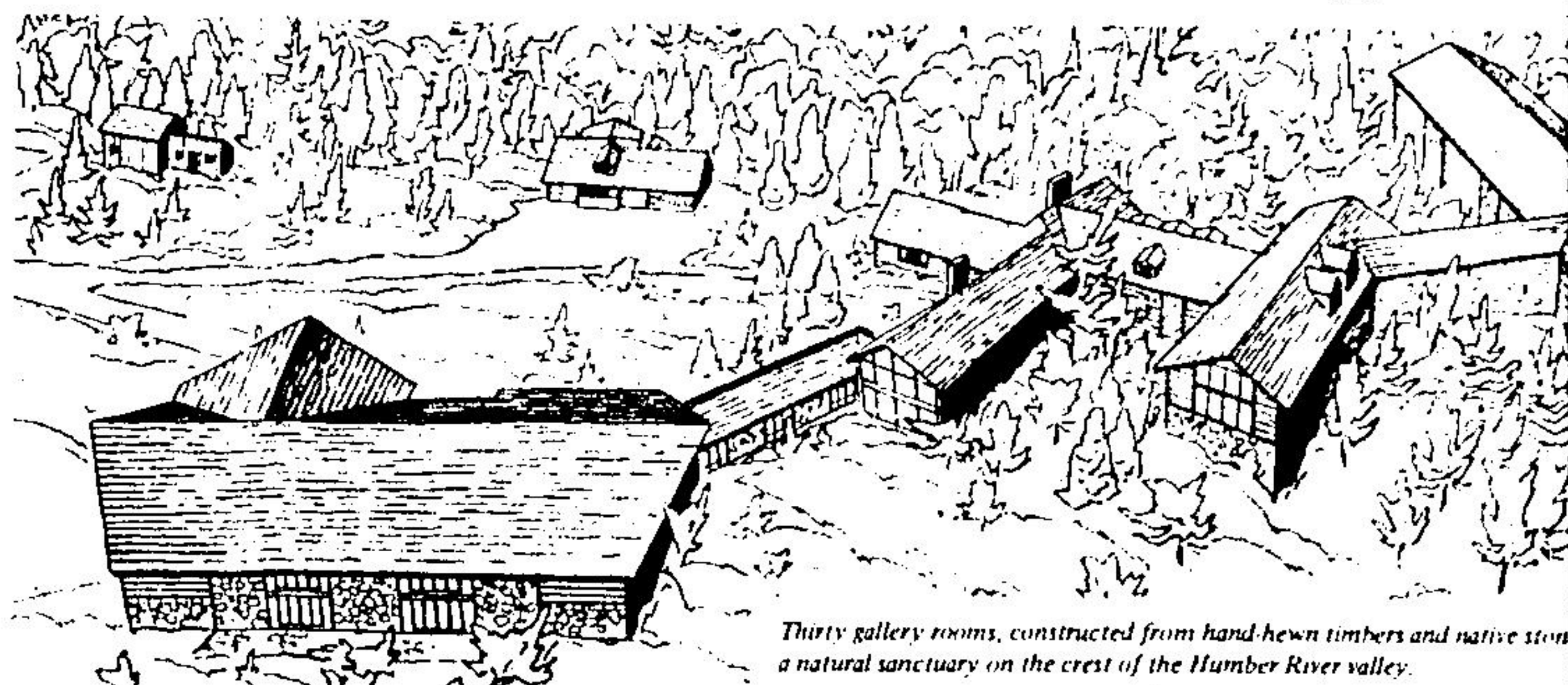
he faked his own death and travelled to the U.S. to join the armed forces after being unable to join in Canada.

Over the years there was also a belief that Thomson's body had never been removed from the Park and the doubts were strong. In 1956 a small group led by Toronto judge William T. Little—one of the best known of Thomson's biographers

and investigators—located a gravesite in a pine grove on the west shore of Canoe Lake. In 1956 a skeleton. The skull was a wound.

Forensic scientists, however, said the body was that of an adult or a half-breed, but many questions were left unanswered and about the final resting place of the artist remain to this day.

McMichael Canadian Collection village of Kleinburg



Thirty gallery rooms, constructed from hand-hewn timbers and native stone, a natural sanctuary on the crest of the Humber River valley.