

National Visions, National Blindness





National Visions, National Blindness

Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s



Leslie Dawn

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National Visions, National Blindness

Introduction

In British dominions such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand from the 1890s ... artists ... presumed that the nation lacked an identity, and that it was their task to invent one ... The deep association between indigenous people and the land provided strong and condensed reference points for a colonial culture that sought both to define itself as native and to create national emblems. Settlers also ... wanted to emphasize their modernity and their connections with Britain and Europe.

— Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions*, 12

The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?

— Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation*, 12

THE TWO PRECEDING PASSAGES provide a useful framework for mapping out the formation of independent national identities within the British dominions after colonization. Thomas describes three co-ordinates for positioning such inquiries: namely, the relationship of these identities with the imperial centre, with the nation's indigenous peoples and their lands, and with modernism. However, the paradoxes Goldie articulates imply that the emergence of national differences was complex and difficult to realize. More specifically, they suggest that the construction of a modern Canadian identity in the early twentieth century, such as that associated with the landscapes of the Group of Seven, may not have been as straightforward as sometimes presented. By offering alternatives to conventional narrations of the nation, I propose that the historical conditions

unique to Canada, especially those that influenced its representations of its Native peoples and their lands, rendered its new visual identity open to challenge. I suggest that the construction of this identity – although often posed as a historicist inevitability based on stable binary oppositions (mediated through landscape) both between the nation and its colonial parent and between the nation and its indigenous peoples – was fragile and involved a multiplicity of ambiguities, which were (and remain) disguised and kept from sight. I conclude that along the fault lines created by these ambivalences initial attempts to foster an essentialized national identity faltered, fractured, and in the end failed – but also pointed the way to new, more pluralistic possibilities.

One of the primary factors underlying this instability was that the presence of indigenous peoples in colonial territories made it evident that the nascent nations lacked an element thought necessary to validate claims to nationhood. Most pressingly, the primarily English-speaking inhabitants did not have an ancient *volk* whom they could cite as ancestors, thereby legitimizing their entitlement to these territories by continuous occupation. In Canada in the 1920s this problem was obscured partly because the diverse indigenous peoples were seen as a single race with a common history and (non)future – that is, they were collectively identified as “Indian” and continuously portrayed as bordering on inevitable and imminent extinction or assimilation.¹ Their identities, cultures, and arts – and consequently their persisting claims to their lands – were represented as belonging only to the past. This belief had been extended into a truth that appeared everywhere. In this context, the “discourse of disappearance,” as I refer to it, served several important functions. Put somewhat simplistically, essentializing the Indian as a single race ensured that the dualism of indigenous and colonialist remained stable, while at the same time privileging the second term by erasing the first. This erasure allowed for an unimpeded construction of the subsequent dualism through which the colony could be transformed into a singular nation; a modern Canadian national presence, set in opposition to a colonial past, could now be predicated on and negotiated around the assumed absence of the “primitive.” Native populations had no viable place within the new “native” Canadian culture, except as emblems of their own disappearance. It was no accident, then, that the emerging Canadian visual identity took up and occupied the spaces vacated by this presumed absence to proclaim an essential national character different from that of its colonial parents because of its profound attachment to the (representation of the) emptied landscape, which became, in many ways, a substitute for the lacking *volk*.

But in the years following the First World War, the seemingly stable notion of Native disappearance confronted a combination of mounting internal contradictions and external opposition, not the least of which came from Native peoples themselves, who asserted their visibility, cultural continuities, and claims to their lands, especially in the western provinces. The clamour threatened to destabilize what had long been held as foundational truths for the discipline of ethnography, for the principles of museum collecting, for enacting government policies and legislation, and for acquiring territories – as well as for practising art in Canada. However, at this point, the ruptures that would eventually lead to a complete fragmentation of the discourse of disappearance were just forming. The conflicts and threats that they initially produced resulted in a countercampaign to stabilize the nation's foundational structures; managing, policing, and disciplining the imaginary representation of the Indian, both at the imperial centre and at home, became as much a matter of concern as managing and policing the peoples themselves. However, continually maintaining the principle of Native disappearance in the face of a growing body of evidence to the contrary produced a phantasm that corresponded less and less to its intended subject. As this division became increasingly apparent in the following decades, the principle of disappearance would have to be abandoned and accommodations made to allow for a continuing Native presence. This ultimately resulted in an entire reformulation of the position of the “Indian” within Canada.

Concurrently, the image of Canada as represented by the Group of Seven in their empty wilderness landscapes faced equal challenges, despite the support of the National Gallery of Canada. These became evident when their work was taken abroad for ratification of their national difference at the imperial centres of London and Paris. In England their project was certified but at a risk. The positive critical reception came dangerously close to revealing that the principles and claims underlying their works were primarily based on English landscape precedents. Although this intimate, but concealed, relationship assisted in the ratification process, it undermined the Group of Seven's basic premise that, free of outside colonial influences, their work grew from a direct experience of a primeval nature specific to the nation. Shortly thereafter, in Paris, the French critics, who lacked the same sympathies, did not find expressions of nationalism, modernism, and mastery in the Canadian landscapes. This invalidating reception was experienced as a traumatic failure best kept from sight. It has been largely overlooked ever since. Further, it was also in Paris that both Canada's native and its Native arts were shown

together for the first time. The two mutually supporting discourses that surrounded them – a distinct Canadian presence and a disappearing Native one – could be kept intact as long as they remained separate. When they intersected in France, and when they subsequently confronted each other directly on several other occasions, their conjunction exposed the fragility of each. This resulted from the difficulties involved in using Native material, which could be interpreted as establishing a Native presence, to demonstrate the absence of the Native and placing it next to (and, indeed, in overlap with) the new painting of the national landscape, which was initially dedicated to excluding images of the Indian. In retrospect, it appears that the moment of greatest triumph for both interlocking discourses was also the threshold of their fragmentation.

The series of case studies that I present in which this fragmentation played out occurred more or less simultaneously within a few brief years. Some began somewhat earlier, some ended a little later, but they were all intertwined, concurrent, and part of a small, tightly knit community whose policies overlapped but were not always harmonious. I have separated these detailed studies into eleven chapters, each dedicated to one of a series of closely related projects. These extend geographically from the national capital of Ottawa and the metropolitan centres of London and Paris to the regional and rural areas of Banff, Alberta, as well as to the more remote, at least from a non-Native perspective, Gitksan territories in the Upper Skeena River Valley in British Columbia. The specific projects include a sequence of national and international exhibitions organized by Eric Brown of the National Gallery of Canada between 1924 and 1927 that attempted to solidify a new national image but, in the end, disrupted it. I also look at initiatives and alternatives for depicting the Native in art, in ethnography, and in a new genre of literature that combined the two. Intimately linked to both art and ethnography are a number of museum and tourist projects. These are further joined to the work of several artists who were engaged in representing western Canada's Native peoples, including the American Wilfred Langdon Kihn, who worked with the ethnologist Marius Barbeau; A.Y. Jackson and his associates; and finally Emily Carr. Such textual divisions may tend to create the perception that the events can be considered in isolation. This is not the case; rather, they overlap. Thus each chapter is predicated on the previous one but also related to those further in the study. Equally, because they occur in both a parallel and a sequential manner, strict chronological order must sometimes be violated both to initiate and to complete the

discussion of each aspect of this set of imbricated events. I hope that I have taken sufficient care to preserve historical specificity and to establish a precise chronology, even if this sometimes means moving back and forth in time as well as between the various subjects and locations under discussion.

This brief but complex and conflicted period was a crucial time of transition and disruption when the nation was both formulating its own identity and renegotiating who would be granted visibility and a voice on the basis of this identity. In showing how the ruptures that forced these reappraisals were formed and either dealt with or disguised and ignored, I have attempted to examine the mechanisms that directed their progress. This process was neither static nor singular but continuously disturbed in complex ways by a variety of factors arising from both within the nation and outside its borders, factors that have, until now, been largely overlooked. Expanding the area of study has also meant moving away from any essentialized and dualistic concepts of either Canada or the Indian. It has meant recognizing the instability and even volatility of the first, viewing the latter in terms of the specific histories that each Native group underwent in the period following colonization, and positioning both within the international context in which they were situated.

But questioning conventional narrations of Canada's nationhood has also meant departing from one of the norms of discourse theory and practice: the tendency to privilege the suprapersonal while occluding individual agency. To this end, I have attempted to demonstrate that discourses have a human element by paying attention to how individuals and their personal relationships, institutional allegiances, disciplinary affiliations, and so on – as well as the classic triad of race, gender, and class – modified outcomes within the larger frameworks. In so doing, I have tried to show how human agency plays an integral part in determining the specific operations of discourse within day-to-day activities. But I am also interested in how individuals who are embedded in discourse react both to fragmentation from within and to challenges and threats from without – that is, how confrontations with larger conflicts and ruptures play out on the personal level. Although this may diverge from prevailing directions within current methodologies, which see the construction of history solely as a textual matter to be deconstructed, I think that the risk is worth taking and that the area is worth exploring.

Chapter 1: Canadian Art in England

We should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so “natural” as to require no definition other than self-assertion.

– Eric Hobsbawm, “The Nation as Invented Tradition,” 76

THE 1920S WERE A heady decade for Canada. As the general histories tell us, the young Dominion, although not yet an independent country separate from England, was “coming of age” and “cutting the apron strings” that bound it to the imperial centre. However, this was not an easy maturation. Less metaphorically, it can be said that in the years before and after the First World War, the emerging nation underwent a complex and contested transformation. Various agencies, cultural institutions, and individuals were attempting along many fronts to imagine and establish a singular, modern national identity that would clearly signal the independent status to which the nation aspired politically and for which it sought international recognition.¹ The process was not without problems. Until 1900 the Dominion had closely identified itself with its dominant colonial parent. Further, in attempting to define itself as different from the imperial centre in the twentieth century, Canada was already following the lead of England, which had been engaged in a project to establish its own unified national culture since before the turn of the century.² A similar attempt had been under way in France since the 1890s.³ Somewhat ironically, then, attempts in Canada to proclaim independence through recourse to a homogeneous national identity also reaffirmed its allegiance to and dependence on Britain and France, which served as models for its enterprise. This paradoxical situation corresponded to the Canadian

foreign policy that was developed throughout the war, which served to maintain imperial solidarity while asserting independence from England. Here we can see the first signs that declarations and constructions of colonial dependence and independence as well as of national difference and similarity were entwined in contradictory and even paradoxical ways.

Many factors within Canada militated against this nationalist project. Even though the war is usually cited as consolidating the drive to independence, it did not assist in unifying the nation. English- and French-speaking groups – the latter bitterly opposed to the introduction of conscription and each already distinguished by its own identity, history, and cultural agenda – now further separated politically, particularly after the 1917 elections, when voting split along linguistic lines. The war also led to the repression of many ethnic and immigrant groups whose members were not British, especially those from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as to a clampdown on organized labour.⁴ Consequently, those who wished to foster and articulate a homogenous nationality faced both a coercive element within and resistance from without. There appears to have been little unanimity on the question of what shape the unity would take. However, the necessity of an identity that, at least ostensibly, cut across the borders of the two official languages was evident.

But other problems were also present. Canada did not possess many of the core qualities deemed essential to nationhood. As a recently colonized area, the Dominion had neither a deep history nor an ancient *volk* with distinctive lore, ceremonies, costumes, architecture, language, and so on who had inhabited the land since time immemorial and to whom the present occupants could trace their ancestry, thereby justifying their claims to the unified territory and underwriting their claims as a nation. In addition, Canada spanned a vast and diverse geography, contained differing colonizing and immigrant groups, many of whom had only recently arrived, and had a broad spectrum of resident indigenous populations predating colonization. The latter, which were seen as a single essentialized race of “Indians,” posed special problems. Since it was repeatedly stated in many forms that these diverse peoples were collectively on the edge of either extinction or complete assimilation and since they were seen as racially distinct from the colonizers and as having a different, and potentially competing, history that went back for millennia, they could not be claimed as an ancestral *volk*. This was doubly the case because, despite the prevalence of a “discourse of disappearance,” Native peoples were

still asserting their presence and still agitating for the resolution of land claims and other outstanding problems, especially in western Canada. In addition, the state was pursuing a policy of actively repressing Native cultures, identities, and ceremonies. This program reached its peak in the 1920s. Recognizing the "Indians" as the nation's *volk* at this time would have validated their rights to their disputed territories and obviated the need to destroy their traditions. The alternative, then, was either to exclude them from the emerging emblems of the nation or to place their cultures irretrievably in the past.

These complex problems were widely recognized at the time. Bertram Brooker, an artist and cultural broker of the period, addressed this condition succinctly in 1929 in his summation of the arts of Canada: "Geographically we are not unified ... Racially we are split 'forty ways' ... Historically we have no past as a people." He concluded: "We are *not yet* a people!"⁵ He solved the problem of the longstanding claims of the indigenous peoples by asserting sameness with the colonizers. All were typed as recent occupants, or as he put it, "foreigners." Casting everyone as immigrants levelled any claims to the nation's lands but also dispensed with any possibility of an ancient national *volk* with a deep past. Instead, according to Brooker, the nation could give up being a "colony" and become "*our* homeland" only when we "forget the old countries."⁶ For Brooker and those who thought like him, the foundation of nationhood was amnesia rather than remembrance. Yet, even given these shortcomings and paradoxes, nothing less than a new, singular, seamless, and some would even say racial identity was projected and occupied a place in popular and political circles as well as in Brooker's own cultural publication, which was dedicated to the national uniqueness of the Dominion's various arts.⁷ Insofar as this cultural construction can be construed as a discourse, it had to be disseminated, reproduced, and circulated as a new "truth" according to which Canada and its differences could be legitimately discussed, defined, and known.⁸ Decisions had to be made about who would belong to or be excluded from this constructed identity, who would be "Canadian" and who would be "other," what the qualities of this identity would consist of, what forms it would be represented in, who had the authority to speak of and for it, and how to deal with the lack of some essential items. In addition, the tricky question of what it would be based on also had to be broached. Consensus on these issues was not easy to achieve even within the institutions that promoted them. Overlapping, but also conflicting, views existed simultaneously. Given the problems confronting the pro-

ject, it was perhaps doomed to failure from the start and thus could never have been anything but a convenient, if difficult to maintain, fiction based on a sequence of shifting and ambiguous boundaries and definitions that had to be continuously renegotiated.⁹ But the stakes were high; with some exaggeration, it was argued that the future of the country rested on the success of the venture, so the project proceeded apace.

On the artistic side, programs were going well. The paintings of the Group of Seven, formed in 1920, were presented as embodying an autonomous, modern, visual culture rooted in the soil, severed from colonial ties, and ostensibly inclusive and independent of language. In fact, Canada seemed to have been at the forefront in using primarily the visual arts, but especially landscape painting, as part of what Hobsbawm would call an “invented tradition” to assert a unified national identity.¹⁰ However, this was not a straightforward or simple enterprise. Bhabha’s theories on what he terms “the narration of nations” provide access to the ambiguities and uncertainties that underscore the broadly accepted concept of the unified nation as well as the hierarchies and binaries on which this concept is based.¹¹ I hope to demonstrate not only how such simplified relationships were put into play during this period, but equally how unstable they were and incommensurable with the problems confronting the representation of Canada as a nation. But first I would like to argue that the work of the Group of Seven was necessary for this new Canadian identity not so much because it reaffirmed an essential Canadianness already existing and awaiting form, one different from the identities of its colonial parents, but because it filled an imposing lacuna in the text of the nation that threatened its very construction.¹² National necessity, not nature, was the mother of this “invention.”¹³ I would also like to claim that, rather than effecting a separation from England, the works of the Group were in fact meant to establish a closer tie and solidarity with the imperial centre. It is also my contention that one of the major achievements of the Group was its negotiation of the difficult and complex terrain that joined the drive for a uniquely Canadian art with formats and forms that were also linked directly to England and, further, that this paradoxical problem was clearly understood from the start. The Group’s role in filling the first lack, solidifying the second connection, and establishing a series of clear dualities around colony and nation accounts for the broad institutional support that its members received from the moment that they first emerged.

Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, was at the forefront of the institutional and state-sponsored drive for a singular

national visual identity from before the war.¹⁴ Brown, who, after several failed careers, emigrated from England to Canada in 1909 without firm prospects for employment, was not a professional in the field of art. His wife later attested to his somewhat thin credentials for the elevated positions that he was given shortly after his arrival by citing his direct experience with the principles and practices of British landscape painting. He learned these from “his elder brother Arnesby ... [who] had acquired a reputation as a landscape painter ... In the summer months Arnesby and [his wife] Mia joined the artist’s colony of St Ives, known as the Newlyn School of open-air painters, and here again when Eric was with them he learnt much of the artist’s outlook.”¹⁵ These experiences and connections, although limited, would have served Brown well and could even have recommended him in the forthcoming task that he faced in Canada.¹⁶ Both the Newlyn School and the later St. Ives art colony played a role in appropriating what were seen as Cornwall’s Celtic territory and history, as well as its folk costumes and practices, into a larger English national identity in a relationship of centre and periphery expressed through landscape painting in the late 1800s.¹⁷ Both groups also advocated the principles of picturesque plein-air painting, especially in rural surroundings at some remove from urban centres, a setting deemed so much the better if it required painters to rough it in inclement weather.¹⁸ Arnesby Brown contributed to this drive in the early twentieth century to foster a distinct, native British landscape, separated from urban areas and representing the unindustrialized south, that could become emblematic of an English national identity.¹⁹ Through close contact with his brother, then, Eric Brown would have obtained a rudimentary education both in the history and principles of British landscape painting and in how a modern national identity could be figured within a nation’s contemporary artistic production.

Eric Brown’s competence in and knowledge of a British nationalist tradition expressed through a native English landscape, although second-hand, provided him with a life-long career in Canada, where he was soon introduced to Byron Edmund Walker, the president of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, who had become chairman of the Advisory Arts Council to the National Gallery in 1909.²⁰ Walker, the consummate Canadian capitalist, thoroughly understood the relationships between political power and cultural formations, and he positioned himself accordingly. He was, above all, a staunch supporter of maintaining close ties with the empire. He was even prepared to abandon his own political party to ensure this

end. In 1911 he “led the way” in bringing down Wilfrid Laurier’s Liberal government, of which he was a member, for its proposed policy of reciprocity with the United States, which it was felt “put continentalism ahead of the British connection” and “would weaken the ties which bind Canada to the Empire.”²¹ During this crisis, Walker hired Brown as curator in 1910 and appointed him director in 1912. The following year, under Robert Borden’s new Conservative government, which Walker helped to form, the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) was given official status as an autonomous entity. It would, unlike many of its counterparts, intervene directly in the formation and direction of a national art. The major problem seemed to be fostering and displaying an image of national difference and independence that at the same time remained loyal to the empire, which was an imperative for Walker. This paradoxical problem complicated the otherwise simple binary between colony and imperial centre.

A mandate to underwrite a unique national art founded in landscape and paralleling that developed in England appeared as soon as Brown took office at the NGC. By 1912 he was publicly calling for such.²² From this moment, he took a concentrated interest in the painters who would later officially form the Group of Seven in 1920. Despite claims in the conventional narrations of the Group’s history that its members faced opposition and neglect before being vindicated, they were, since their first appearance, the handmaidens of the NGC, and consequently of the state, in the birth of this identity invested in the visual arts.²³ The rewards for these relative unknowns were substantial and immediate. Within a year, Brown, despite a limited acquisitions budget, was buying significant quantities of their work as well as works by Tom Thomson, with whom the Group was associated but who would die before its actual formation.²⁴ By 1914 Brown was communicating with and receiving advice from the Group’s two principal members: A.Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris.²⁵ Brown’s rapidly acquired predisposition toward the nascent group is remarkable given his newness to the country, the newness of the painters, and the newness of the style and subject that they had suddenly adopted and in which they were all now working. Nonetheless, from this date forward they received the continued favourable attention of the most prestigious and powerful art institution in the country.

This did not mean that Brown neglected his brother, who was favoured by Walker. One of the NGC’s first acts under its new status in 1913 was to acquire a large oil painting by Arnesby Brown, *In Suffolk* (157.5 x 183 cm),

which had been illustrated that year in the leading English art magazine, *The Studio*.²⁶ This journal, which in many ways defined art for a broad English-speaking public both at home and in the dominions and colonies, was an important site for the construction of the rural landscape as essentially British.²⁷ It also became the primary vehicle for soliciting recognition of Canada's emerging independent national imagery at the imperial centre. Arnesby Brown's work shows, as does almost all of his production, a placid herd of cattle in a tonal, peaceful, cultivated landscape set in the south of England, which stood in opposition to the industrialized north.²⁸ Untroubled by implications of nepotism, Eric Brown justified the purchase, also in *The Studio*, as "worthy of the very finest traditions of the British school of landscape painting. Bold in design, innovative and generous in its handling, it has an incomparable richness of beauty, and is at once peace giving and heart-satisfying to its observers."²⁹ But its importance lay beyond its purely aesthetic and pacifying qualities. As Brown's assessment indicated, it was an emblematic representation of England and English identity invested in a contained, ordered, and civilized bucolic plenitude, which despite claims that it was innovative, followed formulae developed over the previous century. It is no coincidence, then, that the new emerging imagery of the Group of Seven was to be defined as the opposite – that is, as open, empty, wild, and geographically situated in the North – although both represented nonindustrialized landscapes. This dualistic relationship (mediated through nature) between civilized centre and wild periphery was a trope already familiar in England in depictions of other areas on the margins of the empire, namely Ireland.³⁰ It was also to become essential to the formation of the image of Canada. In fact, Brown's painting represented precisely the conventions against which the Group would later rail as representing an outmoded European vision of Canada, although this oppositional definition of difference, in deference to both Eric Brown's filial relationship and English allegiances, was almost always associated with the Hague School – that is, with Continental rather than British precedents.

By 1915 Brown was able to announce to the imperial centre his first thoughts on the formation of a Canadian movement in the pages of *The Studio*. Although it was embryonic and its existence overstated by Brown, the early signs of this movement contained the germ of what was to follow: "Canadian art is undergoing a great change, a renaissance almost. The earlier Canadian painters . . . [who] at best paint[ed] Canada according to European tradition, are passing. A younger generation is coming to the



FIGURE 1: A.Y. Jackson, *The Red Maple*, November 1914, oil on canvas, 82 x 99.5 cm.

fore, trained partly in Canada, believing in and understanding Canada ... They are painting their own country ... The hopeful are convinced that they are looking into the dawn of an art era in Canada which will realise some of the true glory of the country."³¹

That Brown solicited recognition of this movement abroad before it was even fully formed at home indicates that the intended audiences were as much international as local. He accompanied his birth announcement with illustrations of A.Y. Jackson's *The Red Maple* and Lawren Harris's *Winter Morning*, both recently acquired by the NGC (see Figure 1). Although Brown's article also reported the acquisition of two Impressionist works by Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley, he drew no genealogical links between them and the fledgling Canadian school. This separation

of Canadian and French modernisms echoed concerns in England, where “involvement with Continental traditions in modern art was deeply ambivalent, at once fascinated and fearful.”³² Such involvement would remain a major problem in Canada as well.

The programmatic campaign to have the new Canadian image ratified in England would extend over the following decade. The second instalment, appearing in 1916 when Brown was given the opportunity to expand on the concept of a distinctly national art that could be seen as part of the British Empire while remaining separate from Europe, figured largely as France and centred in Paris. Midway through the war, *The Studio* published a special edition entitled “Art of the British Empire Overseas.”³³ Its appearance corresponded to the need for convincing displays of solidarity and unity within the empire at a time when some dominions were calling for national autonomy. Despite its inclusive title, which figured the empire as possessing a homogeneous art that transcended borders, continents, and hemispheres yet allowed for national variations, the issue was devoted only to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.³⁴ All of the dominions at the edges of the empire were presented as fostering national schools of painting derived from the specifics of their respective topographies. Lavishly illustrated both in black and white and in colour, the publication was further limited in that it contained only landscapes outside of the urban sphere.³⁵

Although Brown’s ideas were still not fully developed at this point, in the section on art in the Dominion that he contributed to this publication, he began to construct a summary of Canadian painting and national identity based on the history of representations of the land and English precedents.³⁶ Admittedly sketchy, it still had significant exclusions and inclusions that would come to characterize his later expansion on these concepts. In keeping with *The Studio*’s prejudices, he made no mention of current French modernist influences while also omitting Canada’s unique French colonial histories. Nor were Native arts discussed. Rather, Brown began with representations of Canada’s Native peoples by Paul Kane and progressed through Cornelius Krieghoff and the British “pioneer” painters down to the beginning of the war. Although at this early stage his narrative lacked great detail, he was already certain of its impetus and conclusion. His opening remarks indicated that “Canada as a country possesses such a striking individuality that it was inevitable that sooner or later a generation of landscape painters would arise who would see her without let or hindrance from European traditions, conventions, or teaching” – that is,

those learned in Paris. His naturalized historicist progression, in which European influences were gradually expunged, culminated in a “group of younger landscape painters” who, although not yet named nor numbered, were located in “a certain studio building in Toronto.” Even though these painters had been engaged in their project for fewer than four years and would hardly have been known in Canada, works by Harris and Jackson as well as by Tom Thomson and future Group members Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald were illustrated in the publication and said to represent the emerging nation.³⁷ Discussion of these painters was also given a significant portion of his text, with Thomson and Jackson taking up the lion’s share. Thomson was already figured as the woodsman/guide on the home front, and Jackson was the loyal soldier wounded while fighting in the trenches for the empire. Many of the other claims that later came to surround the Group of Seven were also present. Although their work was framed as part of the overseas empire, Brown again spoke of it as “the dawn” and “hope of a distinctly national school” that drew upon a direct experience of “primeval nature.”³⁸ Although he cited their “decorative arrangement and brilliant colour,” he mentioned no French sources in late Impressionism or post-Impressionism. Rather, the French influence on Canadian art was either deplored or downplayed. James Wilson Morrice, who was undoubtedly Canada’s most internationally recognized artist at the time but who was loyal to French modernist traditions and resided primarily in Paris, received scant attention. Indeed, his work was not featured in any of the twenty-two illustrations, although he did many luminous and richly coloured landscapes both abroad and on his regular return trips to Canada.³⁹ Instead, Brown universalized the trend toward colour and light as “world-wide” or naturalized it as being based on Canada’s distinctive seasons. However, he did suggest modern Scandinavian parallels. He concluded with the prediction that “the next few [years] will see definitely established a Canadian school of landscape painting which will be one of the greatest impulses in the national progress, and compel the attention of public and dealer alike.”⁴⁰

The paradox here was that Brown and his three coauthors all declared the uniqueness of their emerging national images in the same manner and with the same rhetoric. Australia also claimed “a distinct school [of landscape artists] with a national character . . . uninfluenced by the older schools of painting,” while the contention found in this section that settler societies did not produce art in their early stages would reappear in Brown’s later writings.⁴¹ Even New Zealand projected that “there is no

need to go to Paris to learn how to paint the New Zealand landscape ... Nature will provide all that is necessary ... There is not the slightest doubt but that shortly there will come an era of first-rate landscape art in New Zealand, conceding pride of place to none and owing allegiance to no other school."⁴² These similarities in declarations of difference were seen not as problematic but as forming a unity within a diverse empire in which the divergent terrains of the dominions were brought together under the banner of an English non-Parisian tradition. Thus the project undertaken by the future Group of Seven was neither unique to the Group's members nor unique to Canada but part of a larger, coordinated movement that spanned and unified the empire during a time of crisis.

Yet another ratification of Canada's national project by England was orchestrated in the postwar period immediately after the Group's official formation in 1920. Two critics from London were brought to Canada to view and write about the work: Lewis C. Hind and P.G. Konody. These were excellent choices. Hind was well known, having been one of the founders of *The Studio*, although his role in its actual production was limited because of other assignments. He wrote extensively on British landscape painting, including works by J.M.W. Turner, and subsequently published a two-volume survey, *Landscape Painting from Giotto to the Present Day*, which was reviewed with great irony in the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁴³ Taking time out from what amounted to heavy-handed sarcasm, the reviewer did note as a redeeming feature that Hind had turned his attention to the landscapes of the dominions, which were almost unknown.⁴⁴

Konody already had some experience with Canadian art and its claims to nationhood. During the war, he had worked closely with Canada's agent in London, the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, who, like his friend Walker, also possessed both financial and political clout.⁴⁵ Beaverbrook's political assignment was to pursue a policy of maintaining solidarity with England and the empire while at the same time promoting Canadian independence. As part of this effort, he headed the Canadian War Memorials Project, which documented Canada's unique contribution to the war, when it was in danger of being absorbed into English initiatives. Konody was his right-hand man in this undertaking. As well as directing the Canadian War Memorials Fund, Beaverbrook was rewarded with a peerage and a Cabinet post in the British government as minister of information. He became "responsible for propaganda in Allied countries and in the British Dominions." This new position led him to abandon the Canadian War Memorials Fund and to become head of the British

Pictorial Propaganda Committee. He took Konody with him. The Canadian project was more or less handed over to Walker. Konody, then, was well connected to political power and also to imperial propaganda and national positions. Linked as he was to two of the major press barons in England – Lord Beaverbrook and Beaverbrook’s friend and business partner, Lord Rothermere, for whom Konody also served as art advisor – the critic occupied a prominent position within British art circles, although there were those who questioned his credentials and his taste.⁴⁶ He had written several books, including an essay for a deluxe edition on the Canadian War Memorials Project, and much criticism. His voice carried authority and power. While in Canada, he and Hind “visited the Canadian National Exhibition, and their laudatory opinions of the new landscape painting were published in the papers,” providing proof of “foreign recognition” and additional validation from the centre, which would have confirmed the correctness of Brown’s claims of 1916.⁴⁷ Their voices would be heard again on the matter.

Nonetheless, despite these carefully controlled criticisms, ratification from England was not a foregone conclusion. While the project was recognized in principle, it was not fully accepted in practice by *The Studio*’s critics writing from Canada. Dangerous internal rifts were exposed at the local level within what was supposed to be a seamless structure. These disruptive voices, by also appearing in issues of *The Studio*, gained both a larger audience and authority. In a review of the Royal Canadian Academy (RCA) exhibition in 1921, Ramsay Traquair acknowledged that the “most interesting exhibits were in landscape. A number of painters are taking their inspiration from the wild scenery of the Canadian woods.” However, he qualified this appreciation of the nascent national painters by stating, in opposition to Brown, that “the Canadian landscape painters can hardly at present be called a ‘school,’ and would possibly resent any such appellation, but on their foundation a real school seems to be being built up.”⁴⁸ In 1923 Traquair again reviewed the RCA exhibition and claimed that Cullen, who was not part of the Group and who clearly showed French Impressionist traits, was “the best all-round painter in Canada.” He did recognize, however, that the “Toronto school is alive and sincere. By dint of hammering away, its members have broken down the old prejudices, and their art is now almost accepted.” He went on to further qualify this somewhat patronizing observation by withholding mastery of their medium. “Their weakness is technique. They do not put their paint on well enough. Their pictures show joy of colour, joy of

pattern, joy of nature, but very little joy of paint.”⁴⁹ This ambivalence, which recognized the possibility of a Canadian national landscape yet did not unreservedly accept its current manifestations, continued in an article devoted only to the Group of Seven that appeared in 1923. “B.F.” called them “vital to Canadian painting.” He pointed out the English connection through MacDonald, F.H. Varley, and Lismer, on whom he focused. Although he noted that they were “three North-country Englishmen” who had emigrated to Canada before they joined the Group, he indicated that the latter had become “a thoroughly native interpreter of landscape.” Nonetheless, he also discerned a conflict between their Britishness and their adopted national subject. MacDonald was characterized as

a distinctly progressive landscape artist. His sketches are full of interest, although unequal. They show an elaborate sense of design spontaneously at work side by side with a Wordsworthian submissiveness to Nature. The two often conflict as they do in his recent canvases. The same conflict shows itself right through the younger landscape movement in Ontario. To be quite up-to-date, one might call it the clash between expression and impression. It is not peculiar to Canada, but it takes on a distinctive character here because it grows out of the nature of the country-side.⁵⁰

This equivocation problematized Canada’s uniqueness and its painters’ debt to England as well as the essential qualities of the Canadian landscape and the means of rendering it. This effect was only compounded in 1924 when the British critic William Gaunt cited Harold Beament and G.N. Norwell, again non-Group members, as the leaders of the new, unpeopled, and uniquely Canadian landscape. Gaunt also stated that any such “school” was only developing.⁵¹ Obviously, a corrective confirming both the Group’s preeminent position and their success in having already established an image of national difference separate from any outside influences was in order if ratification in England was to be assured.

However, things were also progressing in a different direction. By the time the Group of Seven was actually in place in 1920, Brown, together with others sympathetic to the cause and with the aid of the Group itself, had constructed, reproduced, and put into circulation a critical jargon and historical narrative that articulated how their works sprang from the land itself; were not subject to outside, or at least to colonial and conti-

mental, influences; were modern and new; showed a mastery of primeval nature situated in the Northland; and represented a unique national identity that went beyond the divisions of language and geographic barriers.⁵² Throughout the early 1920s, a critical literature, resulting from a series of important exhibitions in Canada and the United States, rapidly arose announcing support of this assertion to a growing and receptive public. By the mid-1920s the project, with the active support and even subsidization of various institutions beyond the NGC, had undergone several trials and, despite the occasional oppositional voice at home and abroad, appeared secure. The time had come to test these claims to a new, national, native visual identity in the international arena and to silence any dissenting voices. The final stage in the ratification process presented itself in the two shows of Canadian art held as part of the *British Empire Exhibitions* at Wembley in 1924 and 1925. These shows were of great importance for a variety of reasons. The location itself was significant. England was the colonial parent, the so-called “mother country,” from whom the maturing nation was, at the time, gaining its own autonomous cultural and political identity. The link between Canadian art and political policies was identified by Ramsay Cook. He equated the two Wembley exhibitions with the Balfour Declaration of 1926. This initiative, which was several years in negotiation, “provided the theoretical explanation for the autonomy of the Dominions within the British Commonwealth. The Dominions were now recognized as nations in the traditional sense of having the right to control fully both internal and external policies.”⁵³ In both politics and art, Canada was returning ritualistically to the colonial centre for recognition of its independence and difference gained during the war, while at the same time redeclaring its solidarity with the empire. Much rode on these shows, in which various audiences and publics compared Canadian modern landscapes with those from other areas of the empire, such as Australia, India, New Zealand, Burma, and South Africa, as well as England.

Although art had taken an important place in world fairs and colonial exhibitions since Paris’s *Exposition Internationale* in 1855, many of the issues in London in 1924 and 1925 that influenced the Canadian works’ reception were unique to the time.⁵⁴ England staged the two back-to-back spectacles to proclaim primacy of place in postwar Europe. However, this assumption of innate imperial superiority was extremely precarious and under threat on several fronts. Although Germany had been defeated, America and Japan were in the ascendancy. Further, the imperial centre

was fragmenting internally in a postwar depression accompanied by unprecedented unemployment and general strikes, while socialist and antimonarchist movements threatened the stability of the social and political structure. On a less well-publicized note, then, the exhibition of 1924 was designed to shore up support from audiences at home for nationalism, capitalism, and the Crown through recourse to a ritualistic display of solidarity within the empire.⁵⁵ However, the expected crowds did not materialize, and the exhibition was repeated, with some alterations, the following year.

But the exhibitions had a larger dimension. They were also designed to showcase the developments and progress of the loyal colonies and dominions. This demonstration was especially important at a time when the empire itself was undergoing an anxious transitional period. Critical questions about its identity were arising as it took on the form of a Commonwealth composed of independent dominions. King George V gave voice to some of these concerns in his opening address on 23 April 1924. Basing the empire on a contained model that conflated the intimacy of family and the breadth of international capital, he stated:

The exhibition may be said to reveal to us the whole Empire in little, containing ... a vivid model of the architecture, art, and industry of all the races which come under the British flag ... We believe that this exhibition will bring the peoples of the Empire to a better knowledge of how to meet their reciprocal wants and aspirations, and that where brotherly feeling and the habit of united action already exist the growth of inter-Imperial trade will make the bonds of sympathy yet closer and stronger ... Co-operation between brothers for the better development of the family estate can hardly fail to promote affection.⁵⁶

One of the main factors causing disaffection and dissent in the imperial family during the postwar period was the growing recognition of the separate national identities and independent aspirations of its constituent parts, such as Canada.⁵⁷ The exhibitions were a means of drawing these potentially disruptive elements together through a representation of the empire as a harmonious, spectacular, unified, and contained miniature, albeit one reproduced on a monumental scale.⁵⁸ The importance given to these considerations was emphasized by the dimensions of the site. It sprawled over 220 acres, more than half again the size of White

City in Shepherd's Bush, where exhibitions were held from 1908 to 1914, and cost over £10 million before it even opened. The 1924 exhibition was expected to attract over 30 million visitors in its first year.⁵⁹ It was accompanied by the publication of a twelve-volume set that addressed the problems of unity in an empire made up of diversity.⁶⁰ A review of the first four volumes spoke of "the Empire as a union of apparent incompatibles." Problems were also seen as stemming from the lack of constitutional or formal unity and from the emergence of the competing League of Nations, to which various members of the empire were independently linked. Canada was singled out as causing concern with its "recent claims in the matter of treaty negotiations."⁶¹

The arts, as was usual, played a secondary role in the overall spectacle, whose main displays centred on British genius in the area of technology and industry. In the volume on *The Literature and Art of the Empire* in the set noted above, the visual arts received only a cursory treatment and were relegated to a few pages at the back of a text devoted primarily to literature.⁶² Nonetheless, the review of this volume noted that "a true nationalism is not inconsistent with the highest form of art" and that in the painting of the dominions there were "the beginnings of a truly national flowering of art bearing beneath its soil seeds which may some day be fructified by a wider vision and deeper humanity."⁶³ It was precisely this fructification that made the Palace of Arts, even if far smaller than the nearby eleven-acre Palace of Engineering, a major draw. In the compilation itself, Canada was given pride of place with an opening suite of six illustrations, four of which were by Group of Seven members and Thomson. The author of the five-page text on Canada spoke of the "birth of a definite school" of national art and noticed that "our children overseas are growing up, and are becoming powerful sons of the Empire."⁶⁴ This filial imperial loyalty was continuously measured against French influences. Franklin Brownell received praise for having "the right spirit and fortunately [being] not too much influenced by the French school."⁶⁵ Thomson received special attention as "representing at its highest the Canadian school of painting ... produced under local conditions of hardship, and not through French impressionism." Harris was also noticed for being "more Swedish in his outlook than French."⁶⁶ This animus against French influences, which was cast as a type of cultural contagion and even disloyalty to England, may explain one outstanding omission, James Wilson Morrice, who received neither an illustration nor any mention in the text.

The exhibition of Canadian art within the Palace of Arts was displayed along with exhibitions by England and the other colonies and dominions. The two rooms of Canadian painting, sculpture, printmaking, and drawing were, then, situated apart from the imposing Canadian Pavilion. This large, if somewhat solemn, concrete edifice did not feature any indigenous architectural features, which Canada lacked, but was in a generic imperial style termed “Neogrec.” One of several similar pavilions placed at the heart of the exhibition around a picturesque park and lake, it shared its central location with those of Australia and India, whose pavilion, in contrast to Canada’s, was an Orientalist fantasy based on the Taj Mahal and the Jama Masjid at Delhi.⁶⁷ The Canadian pavilion was flanked by two smaller structures dedicated to the country’s main railways, the Canadian National and the Canadian Pacific, which, all acknowledged, had played the role of nation builders for the Dominion. In both of its exhibitions, Canada used the opportunity not only to further assert its own identity as a separate nation, but also to capitalize on the chance to encourage tourism, for which the picturesque landscape was an important attraction.

But if the arts played a lesser, albeit not insignificant, role in the overall exhibition, Canadian Native peoples, cultures, histories, and arts played almost none at all. Contrary to King George V’s opening statements claiming that the exhibition featured all the races of the empire, the indigenous populations of Canada were conspicuous by their absence, in contrast to the presence of indigenous peoples in many of the other colonial pavilions.⁶⁸ As Jonathan King has pointed out, this exclusion was not within the established tradition of British colonial exhibitions and world fairs in general as they had developed since 1851.⁶⁹ He notes, for example, that in the 1886 *Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, “of the 81 [Canadian] exhibits eleven were contributed by Indians,” including “argillite materials.”⁷⁰ Rydell states that “following the example of colonial villages established at the 1889 Paris exhibition, [to which Canada did not contribute,] living ethnological displays of Native Americans and other nonwhite people were introduced en masse at the Chicago fair and appeared at subsequent expositions [such as in St. Louis in 1904] as well.”⁷¹

However, these exhibitions were not under the auspices of the Canadian government or the Department of Indian Affairs. The reconstructed Northwest Coast Native village and its attendant ceremonies at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 were, for example, seen as profoundly embarrassing to the Canadian government, who experienced their “barbarity” as a defiance of Canada’s policies of “civilizing” assimilation,

featured elsewhere in the exhibition in displays of children from residential schools.⁷² Protests were launched and an injunction sought to suppress the popular performances. However, these actions were ineffective, as the display was not part of the country's official contribution but was organized by the American ethnologist Franz Boas, who had views on the validity of Native traditions that were in direct conflict with Canadian policies. Similar exhibits would occur again at St. Louis in 1904.

In London, the 1908 White City exhibition featured no works by Canadian indigenous peoples, although the 1911 *Coronation Exhibition*, also held in that city, featured Kahnawake Iroquois from a reserve near Montreal. Two exhibitions at Earls Court included a "North American Indian Village of 1905 and the Red Man Spectacle of 1909."⁷³ By the 1920s, however, they were no longer to be seen in England.⁷⁴ By this point, Natives officially played no role as exemplars either of the persistence of traditional cultures or of the success of assimilationist "civilizing" policies in the construction and exhibition of a Canadian identity within or without the empire.⁷⁵ They were certainly not presented as Canada's *volk*.

Thus the only full Native figures standing at Wembley, despite their proven track record in England and elsewhere as a popular draw, occurred in a butter sculpture of the Prince of Wales in the Canadian pavilion.⁷⁶ The refrigerated diorama, sculpted for the second year, was ostensibly meant to showcase the progressive dairy productivity of the now domesticated and colonized Prairies. This spectacle of oleaginous virtuosity featured the prince dressed in Native regalia that included a feathered headdress and beaded buckskin robes. He sat relaxed and at his ease next to and in front of a butter teepee housing a Native nuclear family from the Stoney Reserve outside of Banff, Alberta. Native presence here was twice displaced, once in the material and again in the prince's "cultural cross-dressing." The "civilized" butter stood in contrast to their "primitive" life, now past, while their regal, exotic robes and names, and the powers and possessions that these conveyed, were now appropriated by princely, and hence imperial, prerogative. In the exercise of colonial power, the Prairies became colonized homesteads, extensions of the empire supported and preserved by the triumphs of superior English technology. In the process, the Native seems to have been displaced into this double simulacrum.⁷⁷

As King has concluded, even as Canada's postcontact history was spelled out in detail at a special pageant at the exhibition, "little was left to the imagination except the history and culture of the aboriginal population of the country."⁷⁸ Wembley became, for Canada, a site for the "symbolic



FIGURE 2: The Tom Thomson and Group of Seven room in the Canadian Section of Fine Arts at the *British Empire Exhibition*, Wembley, 1924. The three paintings from the left, top row, are Thomson's *The West Wind*; *Northern River*, with his twelve sketches beneath; and *The Jack Pine*. Lawren Harris's *Pines, Kempenfelt Bay* is sixth from the left, top row. MacDonald's *Solemn Land* is tenth from the left, top row.

erasure of Indian presence.”⁷⁹ Given this absence, neither establishing the racial “difference” between the colonizer and the colonized populations nor constructing a knowledge about these populations was an issue for Canada, unlike for the other pavilions, especially those from Africa. The ratification of a national identity that did not include the Indian was far more important. Thus the Canadian art exhibition invested with this aim was exclusively a showcase for white artists. In distinction to previous colonial and international exhibitions, nothing produced by the indigenous peoples of Canada, presented as either art or artifact, appeared. In

the absence of Canadian Indians and their deep histories and different cultures, the English audiences were offered an alternative, unified view of what constituted the “native, autochthonous and indigenous” arts in Canada in the form of the new and modern landscapes of the Group of Seven, which, up to this time, were in harmony with this national vision in that they also excluded Native representations.⁸⁰

Both Canadian exhibitions at Wembley in 1924 and 1925 were organized by the National Gallery, whose board of trustees appointed the jury for selecting the works. The first was a large and mixed affair, with 270 works by 108 artists. The composition of the jury and Brown’s backing ensured that both the Group and Tom Thomson were well represented with twenty canvases and numerous wood-block prints and lithographs as well as twelve oil-on-panel sketches by Thomson.⁸¹ Unlike any other “group,” they were given their own salon (see Figures 2 and 3). Further, Brown’s foreword to the catalogue “took on the tone of a Group manifesto.”⁸² The cover design, featuring their signature motifs – a lake, canoe, rocks, and a single pine tree – was done by J.E.H. MacDonald. The Group was separated out, highlighted, and flagged in both installation and text as deserving special attention apart from the one hundred or so other artists. This treatment led to protests both by the RCA, which felt that it should have been placed in charge of the exhibition, and by those left out who felt that Brown was featuring the Group at their expense. Scandal erupted. A public campaign arose calling for Brown’s resignation on the grounds of bias both in his selection for these and other international shows and in his collecting policies, which had favoured the Group even before its official formation in 1920.⁸³ But even with these setbacks, the Wembley shows were seen as triumphs by the fostering institution. Any gains were worth the troubles, risks, and divisions that they may have exposed.⁸⁴

This was the case because these ruptures were easily concealed through recourse to imperial authority. Most of the British critics proved highly receptive to the Group’s landscapes and to their message of national unity. The NGC collected the reviews from both exhibitions, which highlighted the Group, and handed them on to the Canadian press for national distribution to the widest possible audiences across the country. This tactic justified the composition of the exhibitions, which now had been unequivocally ratified at the imperial centre. The National Gallery also shouldered the expense of publishing the reviews in two booklets as a permanent record of the exhibitions’ successes. The opening lines of the first booklet stated:

The Canadian Section of the Fine Arts at the British Empire Exhibition is the most important exhibition of Canadian art ever held outside of the Dominion and the first opportunity Canadian art has had of measuring itself against that of the other British Dominions. The verdict and views of the British and other art critics therefore becomes of great importance to all Canadian artists and art collectors and it is for the purpose of placing them on record and to show the very great interest and high opinion of Canadian art held abroad that the Trustees of the National Gallery have decided to publish this summary.⁸⁵

It appears from these compilations that British critics of all stripes were now ready and able to distinguish and critically appreciate the Group of Seven and their project and to fully recognize the aspirations and uniqueness – that is, the modernism, nationality, and difference – of the new Canadian landscapes. They perceived no threat to the unified empire in this declaration of artistic independence. The following selection of comments, all from 1924, confirm Brown's earlier predictions, recapitulate the jargon as it had appeared in Canada, and characterize the overall positive critical reception: "Canada is developing a school of landscape painters who are strongly racy of the soil."⁸⁶ "The first impression of the Canadian Galleries is that there is emerging a native school of landscape, awaiting a wider recognition abroad."⁸⁷ "Landscape is the strength of the collection, as is the case with Canada's, but the latter brings surprises, for there is evidence of an original school absorbing 'modern' tendencies in the representation of native scenery."⁸⁸ Hind was again responsive, stating: "These Canadians are standing on their own feet, revealing their own country with gay virility."⁸⁹

In the first year, Anthony Bertram, the critic for the *Saturday Review*, displayed the most competence at deciphering the nationalist codes of the Group's section of the exhibition. Dismissing the work from the other colonies and dominions as of little significance or originality, he declared that, "with Canada ... we can sincerely acclaim a vigorous and original art." Although he did not name the Group of Seven, he listed almost all of its members (with some others) as representing this vision and noted that their works offered "genuine modes of national feeling."⁹⁰ The British critics, albeit to varying degrees, seem to have had no trouble either discerning what could be called the vocabulary of the new Canadian landscapes, including their coded nationalist messages, or singling out and praising those artists whose work was fraught with this meaning,

even though this was for many their first encounter with the paintings.⁹¹ Despite a lack of consensus on these points in Canada, there seemed to be such in England. The recognition of cultural equality and independence, as well as the position of the Group, was completed when the Tate Gallery acquired A.Y. Jackson's *Entrance to Halifax Harbour*. This was a significant choice. Although it was not a characteristic wilderness landscape, it did illustrate Canada's commitment to the protection of the empire and the "mother country," even at the expense of great loss of life.⁹²

This confirmation by England of Canada's cultural independence and its unified national identity, which paralleled a growing recognition of its political autonomy, was reaffirmed at the second staging of the *British Empire Exhibition* in 1925, at which all the galleries were reorganized. England was represented by a series of themed offerings, including portraits of "Empire Builders," a selection of scenes featuring "English Life," and a "Civic Gallery," which included, among others, a landscape by Arnesby Brown.⁹³ In the new Canadian section, the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson now had 21 oils and 12 drawings among the 198 works on display, roughly 15 percent of the total. The six reviews from the London papers cited in the NGC's publication indicate that while the second exhibition attracted fewer critical responses than did the first, these were more precise in their claims.⁹⁴ The *Times* noted that the Canadian exhibition was "more solid than last year."⁹⁵ "Our Art Critic" of the *Sunday Times* noted that "the brilliant and original work of the Canadian painters stands out even more prominently than it did last year. The Empire will have to recognize now that Canada possesses a distinctive national school of landscape painters of the highest merit." However, he did not separate out the Group's artists and mentioned only Thomson and Harris.⁹⁶ The *Christian Science Monitor* asserted that "the exception to the general dullness of the galleries is that of the Canadian rooms, which show us incontrovertibly that Canada is well on the way to producing a school of painting entirely her own. And this because her painters show more audacity, and a greater thirst for experiment than those of any other colony."⁹⁷ As Hill has pointed out, "once again Thomson, Harris, and Morrice received the greatest attention from reviewers, and the Group's success in creating an identity for Canadian art was reconfirmed . . . The artists, the pioneer collectors, Canada, and Canadian art were all vindicated at Wembley."⁹⁸ Again, not all fully concurred. *Connoisseur*, an art magazine devoted largely to specialized and wealthy collectors, scholars, and educated amateurs, declared that "each of the principal colonies – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa – has a gallery full of modern pictures and other works



FIGURE 3: A second view of the Tom Thomson and Group of Seven room in the Canadian Section of Fine Arts at the *British Empire Exhibition*, Wembley, 1924.

of art which, while not showing the high standard of the mother country, indicate promise and an earnest pressing forward.”⁹⁹ However, this was a quibble not reported in the NGC’s compilations.

Within this second wave of appreciation, one response stood out: Konody’s review for the *Observer*. He responded to the second Wembley exhibition with some favour and fervour. Konody’s coverage within this prestigious paper, which was aimed at a more privileged, if much smaller, readership than that targeted by the general press, placed Canada and its art at the top of a hierarchical ordering of the colonies and dominions.

Whereas Australian art presents itself as an offshoot of the Royal Academy, slightly modified by Australian atmosphere, and South African art has not begun to show any sign of individual life, Canada

has not only gained artistic independence, but can boast of a real national school that owes little or nothing to European influence, is racy of the soil, and expresses Canadian landscape and Canadian life in an idiom of its own. Canadian art has progressed with rapid strides. Not more than seven years ago when I visited Toronto and Montreal, the pioneers of this movement, the 'Group of Seven,' who had just lost their leader Tom Thomson, the artists' 'discoverer' of the Canadian landscape, were still an isolated clique fighting bravely against the prejudice of the ignorant public. Now, at Wembley, they have it all their own way. They practically fill the two rooms with their daring, decorative and intensely stimulating landscapes ... I know of no European school that shows such unity of effort, a similar combination of nature-worship and respect for the laws that rule pictorial design, or a similar balance of the representational element and abstract aesthetic principles, as are to be found in the work of these Canadians, and particularly of Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris, A.H. Robynson, Langdon Kihn, F. Carmichael, C.A. Gagnon, Stanley Turner, A. Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and A.Y. Jackson.¹⁰⁰

Not only did Konody name the Group and Thomson, singling them out from the rest of the exhibition, but he also repeated all of the key elements of the narrative that had been put into circulation in Canada. Going beyond what was available in the catalogue, he recapitulated a story of struggle, neglect, and opposition that was already in place as the basic structure of their official history.¹⁰¹ He cited their unified stance, pointed out the philistine public opposition to their work, reinforced their direct relationship with the land, named their pioneering father figure as Thomson, outlined their successful forging of an independent national identity, and noted the absence of any European influence, which implied that the work sprang up spontaneously from the soil, without colonial precedent, and that it was therefore truly Canadian. His figuring of the Group's members as brave combatants equated them with soldiers at the front fighting the good fight against an evil, albeit unnamed, enemy. Indeed, this enemy could not be named. Silence on this point was essential. Somewhat ironically, the foe was England itself as represented in Canada by the colonial institution the Royal Canadian Academy. Konody's tact kept the myth intact while preserving Canadian-British solidarity.

Konody's militarist trope both confirmed the Group's patriotism, dedication, and even sacrifice for their country and positioned their work within the definitions of the avant-garde, as did the terms "discovery"

and “daring.” As modern pioneers, these artists were not only charting out new territory and literally “discovering” the land and their art, but also bravely doing battle with those who would oppose their explorations to map out, define, and claim this new topography. This claim was confirmed by Konody’s comparison of the Group’s project with other movements and by his deployment of the word “decorative,” which occurred extensively in the British critical responses as a catchword indicating a flattening of space, a simplification of form, a richness of colour, and a boldness of facture associated with modernist, European movements since neo-Impressionism. However, he again tactfully evaded making this Continental connection explicit, as it would have called into question the Group’s previous claims to being free of European influence.

While explicit, Konody’s understanding of modernism must be qualified. His normalizing and privileging of “balance” implies a conservative attitude that rejected any of the more radical Continental innovations of the previous three decades.¹⁰² While he claimed a knowledge of Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism and saw the necessity of artists having something of these as a background, his own taste ran to the eclectic: everything from salon society portraits to the less “unbalanced” work of the English avant-garde. Although his critical stance could accept some of the Vorticists’ activities, it did not embrace any of the recent work in Russia, France, or Germany, which he cast as extreme, unbalanced experiments. For the main part, the other English critics who reviewed the exhibition displayed only a slight knowledge of modernism as expressed elsewhere in Europe and, both there and on the home front, rejected the examples of modernism of which they were aware. Konody seemed the most knowledgeable, but even this was tempered. It must be kept in mind that England did not have a long tradition of modernism, that radical art had gained a foothold there only in the previous two decades, and that what did exist at the time was breaking up. Yet both the modernism and nationalism of the Group’s landscapes were ratified by Konody and his audiences. In short, Konody was extremely receptive to the message of the work. He was able to read it and to rearticulate its many and varied, but related and even contradictory, claims with great proficiency. And he had the reasonable expectation that his English audiences, who would be less familiar with the works, would understand and be in sympathy with them.