



124 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Spring, 1916

oil on board, stamped with the Estate stamp and on verso inscribed 1916 *Spring* in graphite and stamped with the Estate stamp

8 ½ x 10 ½ in, 21.6 x 26.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Dr. James MacCallum

Acquired from the above by H.V.F. Jones, Esq.,
Toronto, circa 1920

By descent through the family to the present Private
Collection, Ontario

TOM THOMSON'S *SPRING, 1916* vibrates with life. Birches frame a view of quickly flowing water and ice, and snow and ice are piled up against a distant shore. It is spring in Algonquin Park—cold enough for snow, but warm enough for parts of the soil in the foreground to have turned green. The vigorous birch trees to either side of the scene seem to burst upwards (pale pink at the tops of the trees at the right suggests budding) and the sky overhead whirls with energy. It is a scene in motion, painted with a bold treatment of paint and abbreviated, yet delicate, brushwork. It quietly dazzles, but at the same time, gives a compact portrayal of Thomson's beloved Algonquin Park and his place in it.

After Thomson's death, A.Y. Jackson described Thomson's central position in the Group of Seven as "the guide."¹ At the time this work was painted, Thomson actually *was* the guide. Beginning in late April or early May of 1916, he had taken his friends Lawren Harris, who brought along his cousin Chester Harris, and Dr. James MacCallum on a camping trip in Algonquin Park, starting at Canoe Lake and then canoeing to Lake Cauchon. Here, they had left MacCallum and gone on to Aura Lea Lake, by canoe and portage.

Thomson painted sketches on the trip that can be picked out of his oeuvre, such as the painting *Aura Lee Lake* (Thomson catalogue raisonné #1916.55), titled on the reverse *Spring, Aura Lee Lake* by Thomson himself, so that it is a likely candidate for one of the sketches done on the trip. Another possibility is *Early April* (CR #1916.25). It is the correct date and is a snow scene. *Early Spring, Cauchon Lake* (CR #1916.57) is another possibility, because Harris corrected the title (someone thought it was Petawawa) to read "Cauchon Lake" and described it on the verso as "Background is a high hill covered with budding hardwood & a few spruce," which sounds as though he had been there and knew what he was talking about. Several other works fit the time period, but compared with them, *Spring, 1916* has an exuberance the other sketches mostly lack. Racing, ice-filled water, trees bursting with energy, swirling sky—these are the elements that make this sketch so appealing.

Later, asked about the trip, Harris remembered a dramatic thunderstorm coming up with a high wind while Thomson and he were in an abandoned lumber shack. When the storm broke, Thomson grabbed his sketch box and began to paint the storm, as Harris wrote in his well-known essay "The Story of the Group of Seven."² He also later recalled Thomson as a fine companion on the trip.³ The curious thing is that no sketch of a storm exists except for one in 1915, the famous *Lightning, Canoe Lake*

(CR #1915.62), and it is quite secure in its date, so Harris may have gotten his memories confused. Or perhaps a Thomson sketch of a storm dated 1916 will turn up. Why not? *Spring, 1916* did.

To summarize, *Spring, 1916* is one of the sketches Thomson painted on this camping trip, perhaps of Lake Cauchon. It is so early in the year, for one thing—at least in the Algonquin Park year. Besides, the landscape, filled with rock and tree stumps, looks wilder than Canoe Lake, more as one would expect farther north.

MacCallum is part of the story—he accompanied Thomson on most of the trip. When Thomson died, it is likely MacCallum who added the estate stamp to the back and wrote "1916 Spring" on it. Circa 1920, he sold the sketch to H.V.F. Jones, assistant general manager at the Canadian Bank of Commerce in Toronto, from whom it passed to his son and then to his grandson, the present owner.

In selling *Spring, 1916*, MacCallum was acting as an agent on behalf of some of the Group artists, such as Harris. They had decided among themselves to bolster Thomson's reputation by achieving wider sales of his work. In this way, this—at the time—almost unknown artist would be honoured. It was their plan. Thomson had been one of them—a guiding spirit in their Algonquin Park School. They were trying to enhance his reputation as an artist and give him a new stature, as a genius in their midst.

Harris and MacCallum, his camping companions, were the most active in placing Thomson's work in prominent collections, public and private. Much later, in a 1944 documentary, Harris said: "Tom had many characteristics of genius as a painter."⁴ In the same film, Harris praised Thomson's "concentrated directness that went right to the heart of whatever he was painting." Thomson was already well on his way to becoming a great Canadian artist—one who inspired Canadians to see their rugged landscape through his eyes so that the scene in *Spring, 1916*, of the breaking up of the ice in the North, seems today to capture in essence the power and majesty of a truly *Canadian* landscape.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay. Murray helped to bring the paintings of Tom Thomson to world attention through a series of exhibitions and seven books, including a biography (the most recent is *A Treasury of Tom Thomson*).

Please note: this recently rediscovered work is presently not listed in Joan Murray's catalogue raisonné of the artist's work as published online in 2009. A letter of authenticity from Joan Murray accompanies this work, dated September 2021.

1. A.Y. Jackson to J.E.H. MacDonald, August 4, 1917, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.
2. Lawren Harris, "The Story of the Group of Seven," in Joan Murray, *The Best of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), 28.
3. Mrs. Lawren Harris, Vancouver, to J.D. Young, Toronto, dated "Sunday," 1966, quoted in Ottelyn Addison, *Tom Thomson: The Algonquin Years* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), 51.
4. Harris in *West Wind*, directed by Graham McInnes (National Film Board of Canada, 1944), available at https://www.nfb.ca/film/west_wind.

ESTIMATE: \$600,000 – 800,000