



130 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Dawn on Round Lake (Kawawaymog Lake)

oil on panel, signed and dated 1915 and on verso inscribed
*Year 1912 or about that year / This painting was painted by
Tom Thompson [sic] during a hunting trip near Algonquin Park.
The party was composed of Thompson, Tom Wattie, a park
Ranger, and myself. Thompson gave this picture to me
at that time. R.A. McComb and variously*
8 ¾ x 10 ½ in, 21.3 x 26.7 cm

PROVENANCE

A gift from the Artist to Dr. Robert A. McComb, South River,
Ontario, 1915
By descent to a Private Collection, Alberta
Fine Art, Levis Auction House, April 19, 2009, lot 78, cover lot
Private Collection, British Columbia

LITERATURE

Roger Boulet, *A Legacy of Canadian Art from Kelowna Collections*,
Kelowna Art Gallery, 2017, reproduced page 36

EXHIBITED

Kelowna Art Gallery, *A Legacy of Canadian Art from Kelowna
Collections*, July 1 – October 15, 2017

TOM THOMSON’S BEAUTIFUL *Dawn on Round Lake (Kawawaymog Lake)* is about light, specifically the mysterious way light illuminates sky and land at the start of a new day. Brighter at left, it filters through clouds of white, pale blue, grey and palest pink, scattered with traces of red to indicate the coming sun, and gives the scene of forest and hills a magical peace. The whole work is grounded by the blue hill Thomson painted in the distance and the dark shapes of the hills to either side.

The sketch’s graceful handling and subtlety of effect, notational style and strong design culminate in a complex harmony, which helps us to understand why the artists around Thomson,

the nascent Group of Seven, found him a trailblazer. He was aware of developments in modern art, which earned the approbation of the more traditional among them, such as A.Y. Jackson, who warned others about Thomson’s work of these years, saying, “There is a danger of wandering too far down that road.”¹

Yet paradoxes occur in art as in life: Jackson was the artist who taught Thomson about light and how to paint it. Jackson remembered his role very specifically. The two men shared Studio 1 in the Studio Building in Toronto in December 1913 and January 1914. Jackson had lived in France for four years, studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and seen the work of the Impressionists. He told Thomson about how to combine colour using clean-cut dots. Under his influence, Thomson painted *The Morning Cloud* (1913, in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario) and a painting of moonlight.²

It is tempting to imagine that Thomson chose Algonquin Park, with its disparate moods and moments, as his preferred painting place particularly because of its skies. But he does not seem to have recorded them in earnest until his friend and fellow painter Arthur Lismer camped with him in the spring of 1914. Perhaps Lismer or J.E.H. MacDonald, Thomson’s mentor at Grip Ltd. where he worked, mentioned to him John Constable’s sky studies of a century before, which capture all sorts of shapes, sizes and colours of the clouds, because Thomson painted skies so often that these works can be seen as a series.

Thomson seems to have known too a few scientific names for cloud formations, perhaps from William Brodie, a naturalist, who was a member of the Thomson family and director of the Biological Department at the Ontario Provincial Museum in Toronto (now the Royal Ontario Museum) from 1903 to 1909. *Dawn on Round Lake*, like Thomson’s great *Northern Lights* panel in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, is one of the works Thomson painted on this theme. He painted many others: sunrises and sunsets, and even stormy weather with a flash of a lightning bolt.

Dawn on Round Lake is one of four works he made on a trip to Round Lake (now Kawawaymog Lake) near Algonquin Park in November 1915. These excursions are detailed on the verso of the works, inscriptions that give us information by or from the friends who travelled with him: Dr. Robert A. McComb, the village physician at nearby South River, Ontario, and Tom Wattie, park ranger and guide at Tea Lake, who also lived in South River.³ Mrs. Frank (Albert) “Tootsie” Cooper, Wattie’s daughter, to whom Wattie gave his three sketches when she was a teenager in return for her helping him with some work, made the inscriptions on two of the works and signed them with her name but must have echoed words she heard from Wattie, who had been a friend of Thomson’s since 1913.⁴ Thomson had made an earlier work visiting Wattie in South River that autumn of 1915 and perhaps heard of the plans for the hunting trip at this time.⁵

Wattie owned a cabin on a little island on Mud Bay at the tip of Round Lake⁶ and though the men camped on the island, they slept in a tent they erected, which is pictured in Thomson’s panel *The Tent* (in the McMichael Canadian Art Collection). Mrs. Frank Cooper wrote on its verso, “The tent where Dr. R.M. [sic] McComb, T. Wattie and Tom Thomson Camped. Round Lake 1915.”

While Wattie and McComb went deer hunting, which Dr. McComb described as the purpose of the trip on the back of his painting, Thomson painted two more sketches: *White Birches*,

Round Lake (in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada) and *Round Lake, Mud Bay* (in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario), all three of which he gave to Tom Wattie. The following morning Thomson painted *Dawn on Round Lake (Kawawaymog Lake)*, which he gave to Dr. McComb. Later, in November at the first snow, Thomson left Algonquin Park to travel to Huntsville for a brief stay. He then went on to Toronto, where he lived and had his studio.

A year later, again in the late fall, Thomson made a second trip to Round Lake. This time he went alone. He painted only one sketch this time: *Wild Geese* (Museum London, London, Ontario), which he used as a sketch for a large canvas he painted in the studio that winter, *Chill November* (collection of the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery, Sarnia). *Dawn on Round Lake* is therefore the only sketch from Thomson’s trips to Round Lake that remains in private hands.

These sketches all show an advance in Thomson’s work towards strong and decisive design. Lawren Harris, a keen judge of Thomson’s work, marked *Wild Geese* first class on the back, but that the others belong to major institutions also speaks volumes. Together, they form a group that provides insight into Thomson’s life, soon to be cut short. Thomson’s gifts of his work to his friends Wattie and McComb were valued by them and given or passed down to their families, people who equally treasured them. Mrs. Frank Cooper expressed her thoughts and those of Wattie about Thomson in her words on the back of two of the sketches. On *Round Lake, Mud Bay*, she wrote “Painting by the World’s Best Artist” and on *The Tent*, “Painted by Tom Thomson, The World’s greatest artist.”

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*). Murray is the author of the *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné*.

This work is included in the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné, researched and written by Murray, as catalogue #1915.115: <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=395>.

1. A.Y. Jackson to J.E.H. MacDonald, October 5, 1914, MG30 D111 Vol. 1 Correspondence 1914–24, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
2. Joan Murray interview with A.Y. Jackson, March 4, 1971, Tom Thomson Papers, Edward P. Taylor Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
3. Percy Ghent, “Thomson at Island Camp, Round Lake, November 1915,” *Evening Telegram* (Toronto), November 8, 1949.
4. Doug Mackey, “Tom Thomson in Our Neck of the Woods,” August 9, 2002, Past Forward Heritage Limited, https://www.pastforward.ca/perspectives/august_92002.htm.
5. *Sand Hill* (in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario) probably was painted on the earlier trip that autumn. See “Tom Thomson,” Explore South River, <https://www.exploresouthriver.ca/story/tom-thomson>.
6. Ghent, “Thomson at Island Camp.”

ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000