

## Maurice Cullen and the Group of Seven

Peter Mellen

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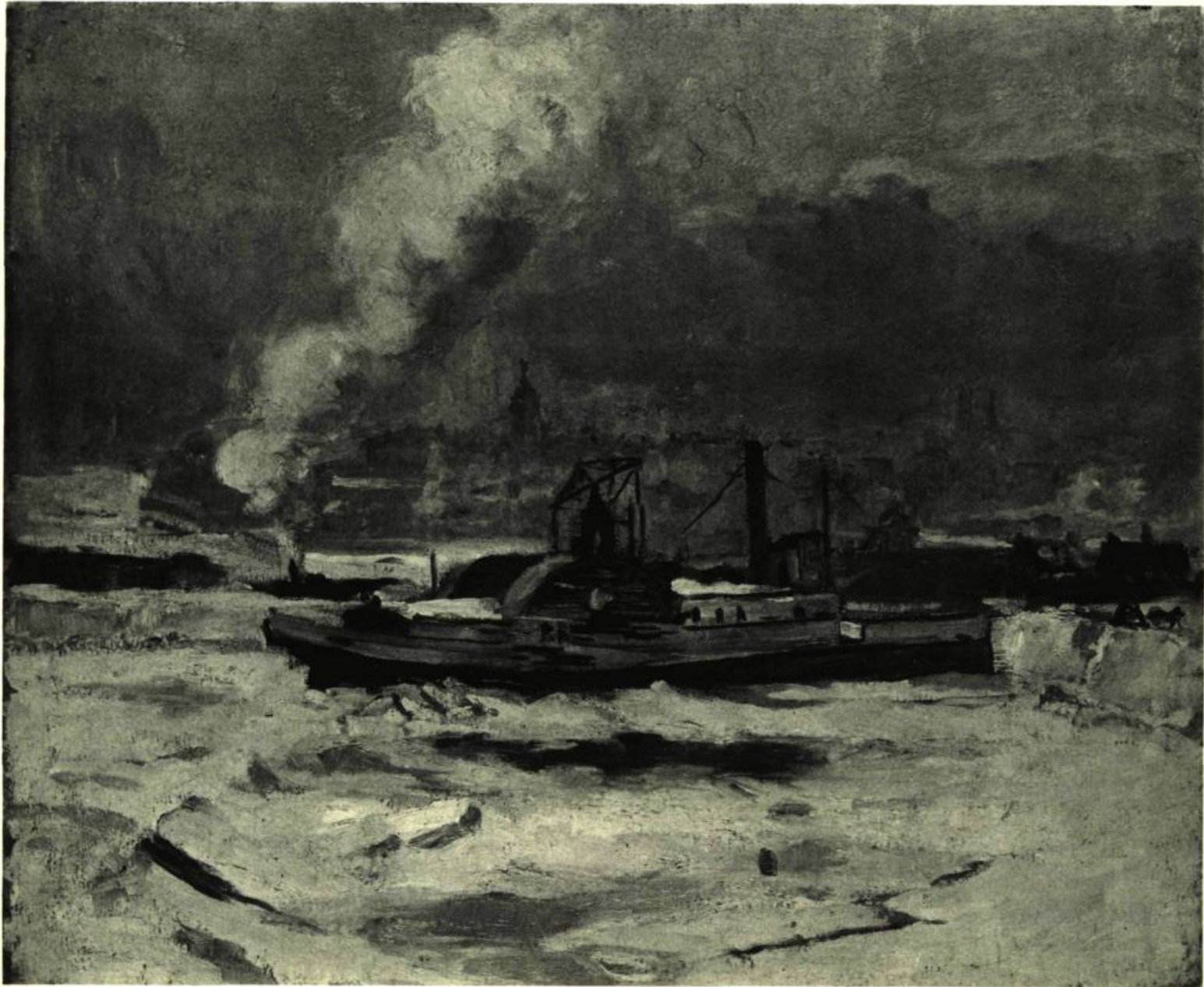
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around a retrospective

# MAURICE CULLEN and the Group of Seven

by Peter MELLEN

*To us he was a hero. His paintings of Quebec City from Levis and along the river are among the most distinguished works produced in Canada, but they brought him little recognition.*  
A. Y. Jackson<sup>1</sup>

The Group of Seven did not spring, fully formed, out of the Canadian wilderness. Among the artists who established important precedents for the Group was Maurice Cullen.<sup>2</sup> He was the first to introduce French Impressionism to Canada and to confront the Canadian landscape on his own terms. He painted the brilliant colours and clear atmosphere of the winter landscape, and broke with the stuffy academic traditions of the Montreal art world. As a result, he underwent tremendous hardship and became something of a hero for the younger artists.

When Cullen first went to study in Paris in 1888, Impressionism had already achieved a certain respectability, and the avant-garde styles were being eagerly discussed in Paris art circles. The older Impressionists such as Monet and Pissarro were still active, even though the last Impressionist exhibition had been held in 1886. This was the exciting period when Van Gogh, Gauguin and Seurat were creating their most important works. But, like most other North American artists, Cullen was attracted to the more acceptable styles and soon mastered the impressionist technique.<sup>3</sup>

By 1894 Cullen was beginning to make a name for himself in Paris, with several works exhibited in the Salon, a painting purchased by the French Government, and an invitation to join the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Then, with the many doors that were opened to him, Cullen unexpectedly decided to return to Canada, and arrived in Montreal in 1894.<sup>4</sup>

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1. *The Old Ferry, Louise Basin, Quebec*. Oil on canvas. 23 ins.  $\frac{3}{4}$  by 28  $\frac{3}{4}$  (60,35 x 73,05 cm).

2. *First Snow*. Oil on canvas. 23 in. by 28 (58,45 x 71,15 cm). The National Gallery of Canada.

The reasons why Cullen returned are not known. Can one assume that he felt nostalgic for Canada and had found a new appreciation for his country after seven years abroad? Canadians at this time were experiencing a growing sense of nationalism which was reflected in the literature, poetry, and historical writing of the period.<sup>5</sup> Cullen must have had a strong national awareness, for his subsequent devotion to the Canadian landscape, and his determination to remain in Canada despite numerous hardships, give clear proof of this. Although he never wrote about these feelings, his actions indicate that he preceded the Group in an area which was generally thought to have been their greatest contribution.

The Montreal to which Cullen returned in 1895 was far from sympathetic to an artist with new ideas. Contemporary collectors purchased nineteenth century Dutch landscapes in dark brown tonalities by now forgotten artists such as Weissenbruch and Israels. Some of the more advanced patrons collected works by Canadian artists like Horatio Walker, whose Barbizon style paintings were immensely successful. They were judged on their resemblance to European art, rather than on any features that were specifically Canadian. Most collectors had no interest whatsoever in scenes representing Canada, and it was not yet fashionable to support Canadian artists.

It is not surprising then, that the works Cullen executed after his return to Canada were criticised or ignored by critics and collectors. For several years Cullen painted along the St. Lawrence river, near Quebec and Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré. He went out sketching directly before nature in sub-zero weather at a time when few people saw any beauty in snow and the cold winter months. He tramped over the rugged and unspoiled countryside on snowshoes, and set up his easel when he saw a likely spot. The paintings he executed during this period had little hope of being sold, as could be expected in a country where snow scenes were thought to discourage immigration.<sup>6</sup>

In Cullen's adaptation of Impressionism to the Canadian landscape, what he rejected from the Impressionists is equally as interesting as what he borrowed. While introducing their brighter palette and broken strokes of colour, he rejected the two dimensional treatment of space found in most impressionist works. His pure landscapes have a strong emphasis placed on structure and depth, as well as light and colour. None of the other Canadian or American Impressionists maintained such a clarity of form, and remain closer to the European prototypes. The works of Cullen's friend and contemporary Suzor-Côté, for example, usually treat a small segment of nature, with the forms often indistinct and the palette darker than that of Cullen.<sup>7</sup> The American Impressionist Twachtman painted many winter scenes, but they are always hazy and atmospheric, with an essentially decorative approach.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Cullen was pursuing a goal of visual truth to nature. While painting the Canadian countryside, he was aware that the quality of light, colour and space was different from that found in France. He saw that a typical winter's day was characterized by the cool crisp atmosphere, the vivid colours and the feeling of clearly defined space. By accurately portraying these features Cullen broke with European tradition and produced the first distinctively Canadian landscapes.



The remarkable sensitivity with which Cullen grasped the character of the Canadian landscape is apparent from the earliest works he executed in Canada. *Logging in Winter, Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré*, is one of his first large canvases, painted in 1896. It presents a striking contrast to the earlier winter scenes of Krieghoff where snow and shadows are seen in varying tones of grey. In Cullen's work, the snow reflects the vivid blue of the sky, according to his view that "snow borrows the colours of the sky and sun. It is blue, it is mauve, it is grey, even black, but never entirely white."<sup>9</sup>

There is a sparkling luminosity to *Logging in Winter* not found before in Canada, and seldom seen later, even with the Group of Seven. Cullen conveys the brilliantly clear atmosphere of a winter's day, with the trees and hills clearly structured and outlined. The three dimensional quality of deep space is emphasized by the sled trails leading into the picture and away to the left, where the oxen struggle up a hill. The foreground is in shade, set off against a sunlit hill in the middle distance, with the blue sky beyond. This technique of recession by horizontal bands of colour moving from dark to light is used often by Cullen. The cool blue tonality contrasts with the bright dabs of red, yellow and green used for the trees.

Many of Cullen's best works were produced in the first decade of this century. One of his major works is the winter view of *Cape Diamond* painted in 1904-5, which has almost twenty different snow tones in it. Cullen acquired an extensive knowledge of the effects of light and snow

from literally thousands of sketches before nature. In his city scenes such as *Old House, Montreal*, c. 1908, and *Old Ferry, Louise Basin*, c. 1907, greater attention is paid to atmospheric effects, but there is still a concern for compositional structure. Here the technique is closer to European Impressionism, mainly because of the choice of subject matter, where the dark skies with the steam and smoke rising suggest a more atmospheric treatment.<sup>10</sup>

After more than a decade in Canada, Cullen was still struggling "to keep one step ahead of the wolf", fighting poverty and ignored by wealthy collectors. However, among his friends and other artists, he was beginning to have a significant influence.

James W. Morrice was a frequent sketching companion of Cullen during his winter visits to Canada.<sup>11</sup> In 1910 he wrote to Newton MacTavish describing Cullen as the "one man in Canada who gets at the guts of things".<sup>12</sup> Two years later MacTavish wrote an article for the *Canadian Magazine* entitled "Maurice Cullen, A Painter of the Snow", in which he pointed out how Canada was "frequently reviled as a country naturally unsuitable for the development of the art of painting".<sup>13</sup> He praised Cullen and suggested that other artists follow his example by painting their surroundings in a "style that will be, if not Canadian, at least distinctive."<sup>14</sup>

Cullen's influential role in Montreal was due as much to his personality and teaching as to his work. The younger artists admired his honesty and





