

John O'Brian and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art.* Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 400 pp., 130 colour illus., \$49.95 Cdn.

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[See table of contents](#)

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John O'Brian and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 400 pp., 130 colour illus., \$49.95 Cdn.

It would be difficult to overstate the quality and significance of this timely study of three interrelated obsessions rampant in Canada for much of the past one hundred years: national identity, wilderness, and the Group of Seven. O'Brian and White have presented the history of the Group's relevance through a collection of texts and images. With great precision, they have linked this legacy to persistent attempts to understand Canadianess as "wildercentric" (p. 21) and as a quality captured by the Group. Proceeding both thematically and chronologically, the editors bind together a laudable range of materials through which readers can retrace and re-evaluate the Group's legacies. We may review in full colour canonical Group paintings as well as many plastic responses to them. A critical exhibition history is broached through excerpts from and complaints about touchstone presentations of the Group and its still seductive ethos. The often uncritical roles of the National Gallery of Canada and the McMichael collection in this history are amply exposed, from the *Art for a Nation* exhibition initiated by the NGC in 1995 to the permanent display (and artists' graveyard) in Kleinburg, Ontario. Anne Whitelaw's essay on the NGC and Richard William Hill's on the McMichael collection stand out. The list of artists and writers affected by the Group is long and well accounted for in these pages. A variety of dissenters' opinions about the Group's work and its legacies is made accessible. There is pleasure and edification to be found in revisiting groundbreaking analyses such as Roald Nasgaard's "The Mystic North" and in more recent texts that probe issues such as the museological mystifications of the Group. Those most notably excluded from discussion in the heyday of the Group of Seven—women, First Nations, those from outside central Canada—are given voice.

O'Brian and White have organized *Beyond Wilderness* into seven chapters with brief introductions, each of which presents artworks and texts crucial to a re-evaluation of the Group. Each thematic unit gives the reader a sense of events, attitudes, and works of art that have supervened since the 1920s to insist on a rethinking of the Group and what it has come to stand for. The accumulated critical acumen of the works of art and commentaries collected here suggests that it may be time to move beyond the Group both temporally and in terms of its circle of influence, not to forget them, but to make their work and concerns properly historical. Referring to revelations gathered in the last chapter, "The Expression of a Difference," Peter White forcefully expresses the need for revision: "[I]f Canadian landscape continues to be thought about in the same way, it is ... only in blatant contempt of the country's contemporary character" (p. 20). As

the sustained critique of the notion of "wilderness" as national definition in the first chapter makes clear, the Group promoted a charged view of Canadian nature and its artist explorers that was anything but neutral. Today, Canada is one of the most urban-focused countries in the world. Fewer and fewer people define themselves or their country in terms of wilderness. Yet the mythology of the "pure" and empty north remains appealing, as witnessed in part by the ever-increasing popularity of the Group of Seven and closely associated artists Tom Thomson and Emily Carr. To say *why* "we" have trouble getting "beyond" the Group is no simple matter; an answer requires precisely the book produced by O'Brian and White.

Nature is the least "natural" category in human experience. The second chapter examines the shaping impact of various technologies on our understanding of this category, including its subset, the landscape genre that of course the Group practiced. Marshall McLuhan's delphic "Technology and Environment" (1967) sets the tone for the essays and images that follow: "The sudden discovery of nature was made possible by the railway and the factories that were so very different from nature," he writes (p. 47). Where the Group members largely masked their own dependence on technology and its impact on the environment, since the 1960s, scholars and artists have been describing the factitiousness of the external world. Here we can, for example, revisit Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual* (1969), Michael Snow's masterly *La Région Centrale* (1969), and appreciate the close connection between Snow's work and that of Joyce Wieland in Johanne Sloan's "Conceptual Landscape Art." Much of the material in chapter four—"Northern Development"—specifies the imbrication of technology and nature in the Group's work and in the contemporary.

Canada's centennial year—1967—was a watershed for the reception of the Group and arguably the starting point for contemporary art in Canada. In their third chapter, "Post-Centennial Histories," O'Brian and White note that J. Russell Harper's pioneering *Painting in Canada: A History of 1966* was produced for the centennial. It set a new standard for the art history of Canadian work and was soon followed by the first scholarly studies of the Group, those by Peter Mellen and Dennis Reid. In 1974, Barry Lord analyzed the class orientations of the Group's work.

A long fifth chapter, titled "Contest and Controversy," fittingly anchors the centre of *Beyond Wilderness*. Here we are in the present and able to think through the many issues that continue to flavour the Group's reception. Anne Whitelaw reveals how the longstanding exhibition practices of the National Gallery of Canada support the mythology of the Group. Lynda Jessup forcefully questions the anachronistic protocols of the NGC's 1995 *Art for a Nation* exhibition. Joyce Zemans and Richard William Hill excoriate the Ontario government for its

collaboration with the collecting and exhibiting policies of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. In addition to many other pertinent reflections, this section also includes a sustained discussion of Emily Carr. Attempts to ground a Canadian essence in the land are revealed and opened to the pointed critiques that follow in chapter six, "What is Canadian in Canadian Landscape?" To say that it is no surprise that a singular Canadianess is absent in these pages is not to diminish the import of authors' and artists' insistence on difference in contemporary Canada.

The concluding chapter takes up this theme by canvassing a range of inflected perspectives on the Group, on nature, and on Canadian and other modes of identity. The Group's regional as well as gendered appeal is thrown into relief in "The Expression of Difference: The Milieu of Quebec Art and the Group of Seven" by Esther Trépanier, in an interview with Johanne Lamoureux about landscape versus urbanism in Québec, and in contributions about British Columbia and Newfoundland. Gender stereotypes about the North and Wilderness are challenged in Shawna Dempsey & Lorri Millan's *Lesbian National Parks and Service* project (1997–), and the pressing issues of racial exclusion and belonging are addressed, whether of newcomers in Yin-Me Yoon's telling portraits in *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996) or of aboriginals, as in Edward Poitras's *Offensive/Defensive* (1988) and Rebecca Belmore's recent performances on and about the land.

While I cannot imagine how one could improve this publication, it lends itself more to use as a source book than as a sustained argument that one would read from cover to cover. Because the Group is a constant reference point, across the texts assembled there is an inevitable repetition of basic information and of well-known criticisms. But most readers will dip into chapters, not read them sequentially. And who will read this book? The topic could not be more appealing to a Canadian audience interested in art history and the book simply looks good too. A "popular" audience may not tolerate what amounts to a deflation of the Group's claims and those made on their

behalf, if not the attention its members perennially receive, though many readers will genuinely learn from the revisionist approaches featured here. A more critically informed reader will already know and value much of the writing presented. Crucially, though, there is a large group poised in-between the art intelligentsia and a popular audience: students. There is no more significant constituency, and this book is ideal for them.

In the introductory essays by White and O'Brian, we are reminded that the Group, Canadian national identity, and contemporary art intersect with what has come to be called "landscape theory," a sustained revisionist focus on the genre of landscape art and its critical implications. W.J.T. Mitchell's now rightly famous collection *Landscape and Power* (2nd Edition, 2002) is here a frequent resource for theoretical perspectives on landscape. Yet Mitchell's volume is but one prominent actor in a now busy field that collects not only thinking in art history but also geography, anthropology, science and technology studies, and aesthetics into an area of concern that I would dub "Geo-Aesthetics." *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* draws effectively on Mitchell and his collaborators. What it promises, though does not fully deliver, is a sense of reciprocity: what do the integrated topics of its subtitle contribute to landscape theory beyond the regional and national contexts?

*Beyond Wilderness* is a book with a mission. O'Brian, White, and their many de facto collaborators take the Group of Seven as a starting point for reflections much more pressing today than the Group's work itself. In taking us (finally!) beyond the Group, this collection makes possible a reckoning of contemporary art's role in mediating our ideas of landscape, place, nation, and most urgently of all, nature. With sophistication, balance, and purpose, it points to the future.

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Elizabeth Cumming, *Hand, Heart and Soul: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Scotland*. Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2006, 240 pp., 90 colour and 20 black-and-white illus., £ 16.99.

Recently two major arts and crafts exhibitions opened accompanied by lavishly illustrated books comprised of essays by leading scholars in the field: *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America* opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in December 2004, followed by *International Arts and Crafts* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in March 2005. Elizabeth Cumming's *Hand, Heart and Soul* also complemented and

accompanied an exhibition that opened in Edinburgh's City Art Centre in June 2007, then travelled to the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield and Aberdeen.<sup>1</sup> According to Edinburgh's *Evening News*, the exhibition demonstrated "how arts and crafts in Scotland transformed into modernism and the effect as a movement that it had on the whole country" (13 June 2007). Thus, unlike the celebrations of "international" arts and crafts, Cumming's book and the exhibition make a close reading of the impact of the local. The London and Los Angeles exhibitions and books also celebrated the English origins of the movement along with its global dissemination; however, as Alan Crawford maintains,