

## Maurice Cullen and the Group of Seven

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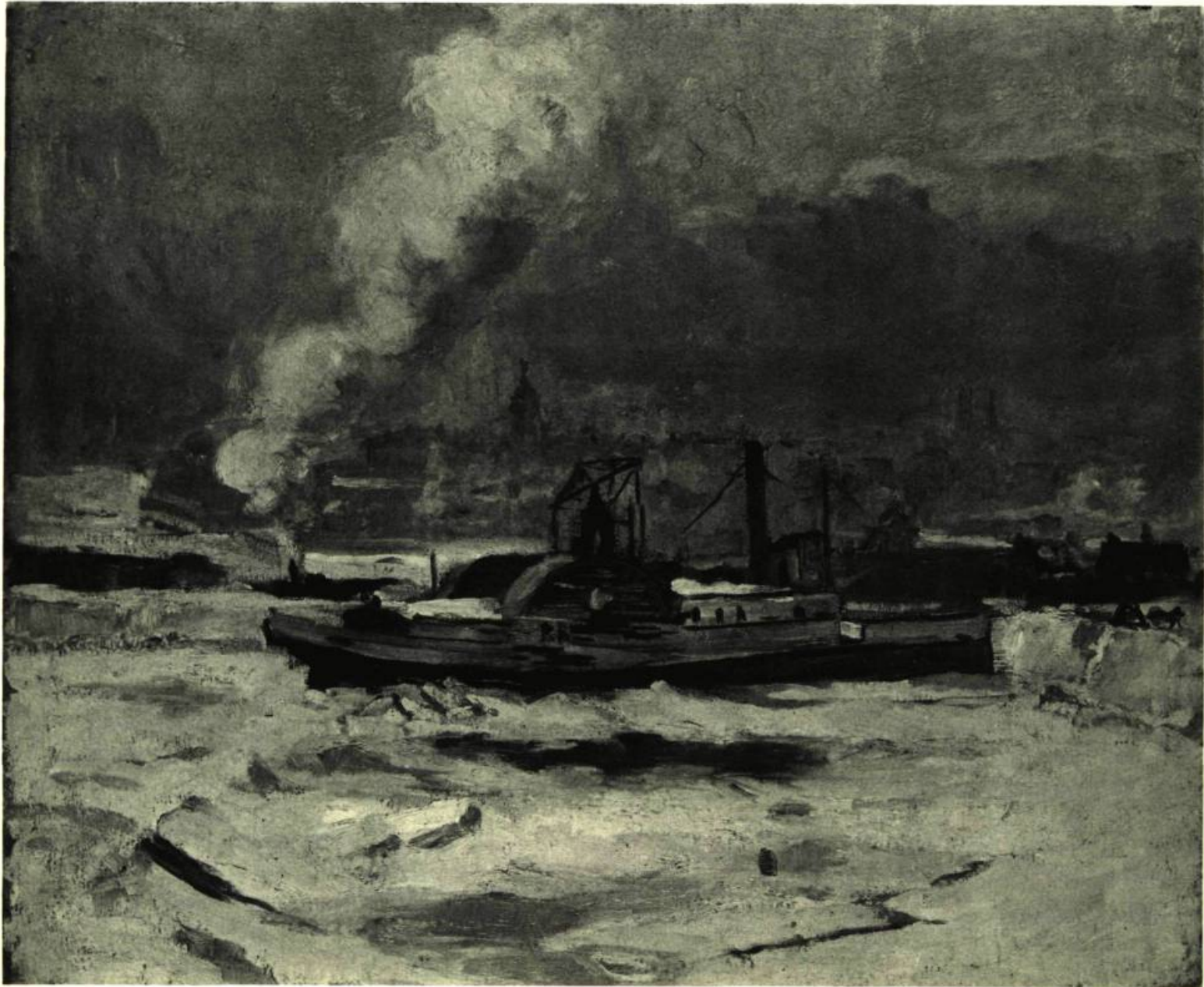
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I



## 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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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.



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 71,15cm). The National Gallery of Canada.



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



M. Cullen





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3. *The Ice Harvest*. Oil on canvas. 29 in.  $\frac{1}{2}$  by 39  $\frac{1}{2}$  (74,95 x 100,35cm).
4. *Ice-breaking, L'Assomption*. Oil on canvas. 22 in. by 28  $\frac{1}{2}$  (55,9 x 72,4cm).
5. *The Valley of the Devil River*. Oil on canvas. 30 in. by 40 (76,25 x 101,65cm). The National Gallery of Canada.

integrity, and respected his courage and perseverance in facing public disapproval. He was known as a generous, sensitive person, always friendly and helpful. His friend Albert Robinson once recalled how he visited Cullen's studio when discouraged and came away "cheered and inspired".<sup>15</sup> As a teacher Cullen took his students on field trips in the summer and taught in his Beaver Hall Square studio during the winter. Evenings were spent discussing Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, and the newest trends in art. There was a lively spirit of debate, and the group was often joined by artists such as Morrice, Brymner, Gagnon and Robinson.

Among the visitors to Cullen's studio was A. Y. Jackson, who returned from France in 1909. He later wrote about this period saying,

"It was through Cullen and Morrice that we in Montreal first became aware of the fresh and invigorating movements going on in the art circles of France; and it was their influence that weakened the respect of the younger generation of painters for the stuffy traditions that prevailed in that city."<sup>16</sup>

Jackson became the main link with the Group in Toronto when he moved there in 1913. He had a tremendous impact on the artists who were later to form the Group of Seven, for it was not until after his arrival that they began using the bright, pure colours of the Impressionists. It was this discovery which enabled them to take the next step towards a mature style.

Although Jackson's early use of Impressionism in *Edge of the Maple Woods*, 1910 (National Gallery of Canada), is probably due mostly to his European training, he has often acknowledged his debt to Cullen in such statements as "to us he was a hero".<sup>17</sup> Nearly all his accounts of the Group, mention Cullen, who he speaks of as "one of the pioneer figures of Canadian art for me".<sup>18</sup> Arthur Lismer was another member of the Group who recognized Cullen's importance. When he came to Toronto from England in 1911, Cullen's *Logging in Winter* was among the first Canadian works that he saw. He praised it as one of the best landscapes he had seen by a Canadian artist and commented on how Cullen "combined the impressionistic mood with a Canadian Spirit".<sup>19</sup>

While it is difficult to show any direct stylistic relationship between the works of Cullen and the early Group members it is certain they saw his works in Toronto exhibitions, and were impressed by them. Undoubtedly he exerted an influence in his use of impressionist techniques and in his feeling for the Canadian landscape.

In retrospect, it is clear that Cullen deserves greater recognition. Most authors dismiss him as an artist who never developed beyond an early style, but neglect to mention that many of the Group were to do the same thing. In the first years of the century Cullen had set many important precedents and fought the same battle that the Group were to fight in years to come. By the example of his life, his works and his teaching, he enabled Canadian artists to see and to paint the landscape in a new way. He was a man who loved nature, simplicity, and the freedom to paint. When asked what material necessities he would need for an ideal life, he replied, "A studio of my own, a shack in the mountains, a garden for an acre of flowers, and a heavy snow-fall every winter."<sup>20</sup>

(Traduction française p. 79)

1. A. Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country*, Toronto, Clarke Irwin, (1958), P. 19.
2. The most important writing on Cullen are: W. Watson, *Maurice Cullen*, Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1931; R. Gour, *Maurice Cullen, un maître de l'art au Canada*, Montréal, Éditions Éoliennes, 1952; Art Gallery of Hamilton, *Maurice Cullen, 1866-1934*, Exhibition catalogue, 1956. Introduction by Robert Pilot.
3. Cullen was a close friend of James W. Morrice during this period and travelled with him to Brittany and other parts of France, as well as Italy.
4. Before leaving, the art critic Thiébaud-Sisson wrote to Cullen and encouraged him to stay, saying that it would be disastrous for him to stay away from Paris too long. See: Introduction of Exhibition Catalogue of The Art Gallery of Hamilton.
5. C. Berger, "The True North Strong and Free", *Nationalism in Canada*, Toronto, McGraw Hill (1966), P. 3-26.
6. R. Pilot, "Maurice Cullen, R.C.A.", *Educational Record* (1954), P. 137.
7. Compare Suzor-Côté's *Winter Landscape*, 1909, N.G.C., with Cullen's *March Afternoon, North River*, 1897, Coll. W. Watson.
8. Compare Twachtman's *Winter Harmony*, c. 1900, N.G.W., with Cullen's *March Afternoon, North River*, 1897, Coll. W. Watson.
9. J. Chauvin, *Ateliers*, Montréal, L. Carrier, 1928, P. 112. Translation by the present writer.

10. R. Pilot describes Cullen's technique in some detail in an *Address given at the Arts Club of Montreal*, 1937 (Typescript on file at N.G.C.). Cullen also painted a fall view of *Cape Diamond* now in the Musée du Québec.
11. Morrice made regular trips to Canada until 1914. See Buchanan, *Morrice*, 1936.
12. Buchanan, *Morrice*, 1936, P. 36.
13. N. MacTavish, "Maurice Cullen; A Painter of Snow." *Canadian Magazine* (1912), P. 544.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Art Gallery of Hamilton, *Cullen*, 1956. Introduction.
16. Jackson, *A Painter's Country*, 1958, P. 19. Jackson also stated that "Cullen influenced us more than Morrice did". See above, Introduction.
17. See Note 1.
18. Gour, *Maurice Cullen*, 1952, P. 22. This letter was written in 1931.
19. Lismer made this statement in an opening address given for the Cullen retrospective in Hamilton, Ontario, reported in the *Hamilton Spectator*, November 10, 1956. His statement about *Logging in Winter* was made to T. R. MacDonald, Director of the Hamilton Art Gallery.
20. Watson, *Maurice Cullen*, 1931, P. 18.