

## PREFACE

### GEORGE A. WALKER

**W**e all ‘read’ a vast array of images that present themselves to our attention daily. Our world is filled with signs and symbols. Our distant ancestors once read the stars as a compass, and we still study the sky to forecast weather. The surface of the ground at our feet can tell an experienced tracker just who or what may have been prowling in the vicinity. The earliest cave paintings were inspired by interactions between humans, animals and the world they shared. These sorts of natural signs and signifiers provided the basis for what would eventually become a multitude of written languages. Our essential need to preserve and to communicate our stories has evolved into a complex system of writing that is rooted in the simplicity of the pictogram. Presented thoughtfully, pictures can still convey information, evoke pleasure or warning, influence behaviour and, most importantly, tell a story.

*The Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson* is the second of my wordless narratives to be published in a trade edition by the Porcupine’s Quill. In it I tell the story of the Canadian painter and cultural icon Tom Thomson (1877–1917). There is no shortage of art historians who recognize Thomson as a key influence on the Group of Seven and instrumental in the shift of Canadian art towards modernism. Most Canadians, however, know of him from the enduring controversy surrounding the curious circumstances of his death.

It has often intrigued me that Thomson chose to avoid depicting the industry that surrounded him in the city; though, admittedly, a clearly art-nouveau urban approach does

appear in the commercial work that he produced for the Toronto design firm Grip Ltd. Canada underwent dramatic changes during Thomson's lifetime, and the artist found himself in the midst of an industrial landscape cluttered with machines and booming population growth—all coloured by mounting political tensions that would lead to the First World War. Rather than document the grim realities of Toronto, Thomson set out to discover and depict the untamed wilderness of Northern Ontario. Through Thomson's impressionistic style, the paintings from this period communicate the harshness of the Canadian landscape as well as Thomson's steadfast love for a land now threatened by the rise of industrialization. It is Thomson's unceasing search for the definitive expression of an emotionally charged landscape that appeals most to us in his legacy. I hope it seems appropriate that such an artist, who rarely wrote a word but painted and sketched hundreds of images, will have his story retold in the language he understood best—the language of pictures.

As images provide the means of communication in this book, a basic understanding of the process of engraving is critical to an appreciation of the medium. I tell the story of *The Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson* through one hundred and nine engravings carved into handmade blocks of hardwood. Wood engraving and woodcut were techniques favoured by the German Expressionists, many of whom were active around the time Thomson was painting. Though Thomson himself had little interest in art theory, his paintings confirm that he did hold some of the same beliefs as the Expressionists who sought to articulate emotional meaning through a primal response in their art.

In addition to the obvious connection between Thomson and wood engraving, all of the images in this biography were carved into blocks I manufactured myself from Canadian

maple. Wood is an organic material, part of the natural world that Thomson depicted in his landscapes, and like the woodlands he painted it speaks to the artist through the idiosyncrasies it retains, the knots and anomalies buried in the block's rings of time. The tree I used to make the blocks was very likely alive when Thomson was painting in Algonquin Park where part of this story is set. To strengthen the connection between the story of Thomson and the medium used to tell it, my friend Tom Smart presented me with some decaying branches that he believes fell from the trees Thomson painted in *Byng Inlet*. I took these branches and fashioned them into the block that I used to make the last image in the book.

A final note: I should mention that I've divided the narrative into two parts, that of the city and that of the country, to mirror the reality that Thomson led two distinct lives, a duality that was key to both his art and his personal life. When Thomson left the city to live in the bush of Northern Ontario, he became fully immersed in the life of the backwoodsman. Abandoning the city and his commercial artist's work at Grip, he was transformed. His patron, Dr James MacCallum, has said that, 'Thomson had but one method of expressing himself, and that one was by means of paint'.

For myself I believe the body of Tom Thomson still rests at Canoe Lake, and it is also my opinion that the true story of the Tom Thomson tragedy will never be known. Thomson lived, painted, loved and died under a veil of mystery and to this day, stories of Thomson's ghost still circulate in Algonquin Park. What does remain of Thomson now is a potent body of work that defines a moment in time and one man's vivid engagement with nature. My hope is that I have succeeded in communicating some of the same passion in my visual narrative that Thomson achieved in paintings such as *The Jack Pine* and *The West Wind*.