

THE DEATH OF TOM THOMSON / THEORIES & HYPOTHESES

No one can know for certain what happened on Sunday, July 8th, 1917, the day Tom Thomson suddenly disappeared. Some contemporaries, including Ranger Mark Robinson, Mrs Thomas (wife of the local railway section head) and Mrs Colson (wife of the owner of the Hotel Algonquin on Joe Lake), have claimed they saw Thomson alive that morning ... walking down to Joe Lake dam with Shannon Fraser, but many were equally convinced he must have died the night before.

What is known, is that Tom Thomson's body surfaced eight days later and was sighted by a vacationer on Canoe Lake who happened coincidentally to be a physician and a neurologist. Dr G.W. Howland examined the body and determined Thomson had suffered a mishap in his canoe. Others on the lake, who knew Thomson well, felt his death was no accident.

A hundred years later there are still half a dozen theories as to what might have occurred; some, perhaps, more persuasive than others, but all six theories have their advocates, and in each case there is source material to support the various suppositions. Look closely at each of the images towards the end of George Walker's *Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson*. Are there clues, worked into the images (starting around p 171) that would suggest which of the various theories George Walker believes to be the correct one? And do you agree?



The body was found with a length of fishing line wrapped around one ankle, which *could* be consistent with death by accidental drowning, though there are other plausible explanations for the fishing line that are equally persuasive.

ACCIDENTAL DROWNING

Goldwin W. Howland was a Toronto physician and professor of neurology at the University of Toronto, vacationing on Little Wapomeo Island, who saw an unidentifiable object in the water off Hayhurst Point on the morning of Monday, July 16 and asked two local guides, George Rowe and Laurie Dickson, who were in a canoe on the water at the time, to investigate. It was Rowe and Dickson who recovered Tom's body (see page 207 of *The Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson*).

Dr G.W. Howland, Toronto, July 17, 1917:

'Body of Tom Thomson, artist, found floating in Canoe Lake, July 16, 1917. Certified to be the person named by Mark Robinson, Park Ranger. Body clothed in grey lumberman's shirt, khaki trousers and canvas shoes. Head shows marked swelling of face, decomposition has set in, air issuing from mouth. Head has a bruise over left temple as if produced by falling on rock. Examination of body shows no bruises, body greatly swollen, blisters on limbs, putrefaction setting in on surface. There are no signs of any external force having caused death, and there is no doubt but that death occurred from drowning.'

Dr Howland examined the body the next morning, Tuesday, July 17 because the arrival of the coroner, Arthur Ranney of North Bay, had been delayed. By his sworn deposition (above) Dr Howland would seem to be convinced, in his own mind, that Tom had drowned, but Howland was not acting as a

coroner and did not comment, either way, as to whether he thought the ‘drowning’ was accidental. By the time the coroner did arrive at Canoe Lake (the evening of July 17) Tom’s body had already been buried in Mowat cemetery.

One problem with Dr Howland’s deposition is that one such version specifies a ‘bruise’, consistent with a fall, as being found over the left temple, and yet another version (supposedly delivered to Tom’s brother, George) talks about a bruise over the *right* temple. The apparent confusion is odd, though the bruise itself *could* be consistent with accidental drowning if Tom had perhaps tripped in his canoe, fallen, hit his head on a gunwale, knocked himself unconscious, rolled off the canoe into the water and drowned. Particularly if Tom had been drunk at the time of the accident, except that early afternoon (particularly on a Sunday) sounds a bit unlikely of a time for Tom to have been drunk enough to do himself harm. And this does not sound like the sort of misadventure that would happen to an expert canoeist, which Tom was.

Mark Robinson was the Park Ranger who identified the body at the request of Dr Howland. Mark’s testimony is perhaps more credible than that of others, specifically because part of his job as Park Ranger required him to meet incoming rail traffic at Canoe Lake station, and to familiarize himself with the identities of new arrivals. Mark was looking, in particular, for possible poachers, but he also had a keen sense of the composition of the Canoe Lake community in general. Blodwen Davies was a reporter, originally from Fort William (Thunder Bay), who later moved to Toronto and in 1935 wrote and self-published a biography of Tom Thomson called *Paddle and Palette*. Martin Blecher and his sister Bessie found Tom’s canoe on the afternoon of July 8th, and towed it to Mowat

Lodge (pages 207, 209, 211).

Mark Robinson to Blodwen Davies, 1930:

‘We buried his remains in the little cemetery at Canoe Lake, Martin Blecher Sr. reading the Anglican funeral service at the grave. Later his remains were taken up and went to Owen Sound for burial. Dr Ranney of North Bay conducted what inquest was held. Tom was said to have been drowned. It may be quite true but the mystery remains.’

Dr A.E. Ranney [Coroner], Letter to Blodwen Davies, May 7, 1931:

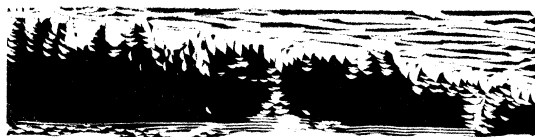
‘The body was in such a state of decomposition when found that it had to be buried as quickly as possible. The body was thoroughly examined by Dr G.W. Howland, qualified Medical Practitioner of Toronto, before inquest, who gave me a full description of the condition of the body. There was only one bruise on the right side of head, temple region about 4 inches long, this, no doubt, was caused by striking some abstacle, like a stone, when the body was drowned. Dr Howland swore that death was caused from drowning, also the evidence from the other six witnesses points that the cause of death was drowning. Those who were present at the inquest were as follows: Dr G.W. Howland, Miss Bessie Belcher [Blecher?], Mr J.E. Colson, Prop Algonquin Hotel, Mr J.S. Fraser, Prop Mowat Lodge, Canoe Lake, Mr Mark Robinson, Park Ranger, Mr Martyn Belcher [Blecher?], tourist and Mr G. Rowe, resident guide.’

One problem with the accidental drowning theory is that Tom Thomson *was* an expert canoeist (see pgs 115, 117, 119 &c); Tom did, however, drink alcohol (p 157, 173) which sometimes led to fights (p 155). Alcohol could have been a

contributing factor, which would not have been evident when Dr Howland examined the body on July 17, after it had been in the water over a week.

And then there's the curious circumstance that the body was found with a length of fishing line wrapped around one ankle, which could, perhaps, support a theory of accidental drowning, unless of course the fishing line was perhaps attached to a weight of some sort, intended to deliberately sink the body, in which case the fishing line supports a theory of manslaughter at least, and possibly murder. There is one other suggestion ... that Tom may have sprained his ankle and had wrapped the ankle himself in fishing line, for support, to relieve the pain. This seems not terribly likely, because it would take a *lot* of fishing line to tape an ankle.

Thomson biographer David Silcox has suggested a variation on the Accidental Drowning theory in which Tom may have stood up in his canoe to urinate over the side, tripped on his fishing line, fell, hit his head on a gunwale on the way down, knocked himself unconscious, rolled off the canoe into the water and drowned. Except that an experienced canoeist would never stand up in a canoe to urinate, and David Silcox, an accomplished canoeist himself, would know that.



THE FISHING LINE

The fishing line that was found wrapped around Tom's right ankle is troublesome.

It is unlikely, as some have suggested, that Tom may have wrapped the line himself to relieve the discomfort of a sprained ankle ... simply because fishing line is thin and it would take a LOT of tedious winding to build up sufficient rigidity to support a sprained ankle. If Tom did not wrap the line himself then we do have to consider the possibility that Tom inadvertently got himself tangled in fishing line, but that does not sound like the sort of thing an expert canoeist would allow to happen, and it is also inconsistent with Mark Robinson's description of the state of the canoe when it was recovered, which made mention of the fact that Tom's camping gear was neatly stowed and at least one paddle was lashed to the inside of the canoe (as it would be to facilitate a portage) though Robinson also noted that the paddle was secured with a type of knot that Tom Thomson did not favour.

If we suspect that Tom, deliberately or inadvertently, did *not* wrap the fishing line himself, that leaves the real possibility that someone else (possibly the murderer) may have done the wrapping as part of an attempt to ensure the body, once dumped, stayed sunk in Canoe Lake.

Typically, in the case of a drowning, the victim's lungs fill with water which weights the corpse enough to sink it until gases

released by decomposition of the flesh generate enough buoyancy to force the body back to the surface. This process can be quite rapid but it is variable and dependent on the temperature of the water. Canoe Lake is not large, but it does include 21 km of shoreline, so it is substantial and the lake is as much as 150 feet deep in places, where the water would be very cold and could partially explain why the body did not surface until a week later.

Or, perhaps the body *had* surfaced earlier, and no-one noticed it. But that's not likely because Canoe Lake, at its widest, is still just four hundred yards across to the far shore.

It is also curious that Dr Howland noticed there was no water in Tom's lungs, even after eight days' submersion. This condition is not common with victims of drowning though it is not unheard of either and could have been the result of a spasm in the throat that blocked the windpipe. If Tom's lungs were filled with air, however, then one would have expected the body to surface sooner, unless, of course, the corpse had been weighted with some sort of anchor.

As recently as 1969 the CBC interviewed pathologist Dr Noble Sharpe and asked, amongst other things, if Dr Sharpe could agree that it *might* have been possible for the submerged body to have entangled itself in fishing line simply by the action of currents in the water. Dr Sharpe agreed that such a scenario was within the realm of possibility though he added that he had no first-hand experience of any such occurrence and Dr Sharpe had been, at one time, Ontario's chief forensic medical investigator.

The fishing line that was wrapped around Tom Thomson's

right ankle was not anything like the monofilament line that followed from DuPont's invention of nylon in 1938 and remains in common use today.

We know, for example, that the Chinese used line made of silk for angling as early as the fourth century. We can only assume that people before this may have used vines as line or perhaps fine thread made from plant fibre. We know from the journals of Samuel Pepys that the fishing line he used in 1667 was made from catgut or silk. Woven horsehair was popular in the early 20th century so it is possible that Thomson may have used horsehair. Silk threads were long and much stronger than horsehair and silk line could be made by machines, which was an advantage because horsehair line had to be made by hand. Silk line had drawbacks though, because it had to be rinsed and dried on open spools after every use and it was vulnerable to damage from ultraviolet light from the sun.

Thomson certainly could have used either silk or horsehair but some have suggested that he may have used copper line.

We do not know, and we will never know, exactly what type of line was wrapped around Thomson's ankle but line made of braided horsehair wears quickly if used frequently. The individual strands tend to break and fray which weakens the line at that spot and the line would break eventually. For many fishermen silk line replaced horsehair in 1908 because it could be produced mechanically and hence it was cheaper to buy. Thomson could also have used linen thread as fishing line, though linen line was also susceptible to damage from bacteria, mold and ultraviolet light. Linen or silk would likely have rotted if used to hold Thomson's body under water. This could explain why it rose to the surface a week after his death.

Copper line would have proved more resilient as a tether.

Tom's fishing pole, that might have been attached to one end of the fishing line, was never found.



CURRICULUM NOTE—

Using Reading Comprehension Strategies.

According to the Ontario secondary school curriculum, students must be able to select and use appropriate reading comprehension strategies to understand texts. The wordless novel and its attendant focus on visual literacy requires students to engage a different set of comprehension strategies than might be occasioned by reading a novel or a poem. The exercises, activities and discussions fostered by this Guide invite students to analyse emotions, reactions, behaviours and motives that are implied through visual cues rather than through word choice, dialogue or reported thought.



Shannon Fraser was known to have a temper particularly when drinking. And Tom had loaned Shannon some money, which Tom may have needed repaid.

Tom may have indulged in a brief affair with Annie Fraser which could have been another issue between the two men.

MANSLAUGHTER

Daphne Crombie was a guest at Mowat Lodge who would later reveal some pertinent information she claimed Annie Fraser had told her about the relationship between Tom Thomson and Winnifred Trainor. Ron Pittaway was an Algonquin Park historian who interviewed Daphne Crombie in 1977, sixty years after Tom's death. Shannon and Annie Fraser were the proprietors of Mowat Lodge, where Tom often stayed on Canoe Lake, particularly when the weather was inclement for camping. We can certainly see evidence of a fight (p 183, 185) and possibly Tom's body being dragged (p 189) and put into a canoe (p 191, 193, 195). Dr James MacCallum was Tom's patron.

Daphne Crombie to Ron Pittaway, 1977:

'Tom and George [Rowe?]. . . they'd had a party. They were all pretty good drinkers, Tom as well. Well, they went up and had this party. They were all tight and Tom asked Shannon Fraser for the money that he owed him because he had to go and get a new suit. . . . Anyway, they had a fight and Shannon hit Tom, you see, knocked him down by the fire grate, and he had a mark on his forehead . . . Annie [Fraser] told me all this and also Dr MacCallum. Tom was completely knocked out by this fight. Of course, Fraser was terrified because he thought he'd killed Tom. This is my conception, and I don't know about other people's. My conception is that Shannon took Tom's body and put it into a canoe and dropped it in the lake. That's how he died.'

Shannon Fraser was known to have a temper, and Tom had loaned Shannon money to buy canoes for Mowat Lodge. It's conceivable, as well, that Tom may have been feeling pressure from Winnifred Trainor and may have needed the loan repaid for a wedding (hence the reference to 'a new suit'), especially if (as some have suggested) Winnifred was in fact pregnant. In 1917 the prospect of the extreme sort of social stigma that would be attached to an unwed mother could likely have driven Winnifred near to desperation, and hence multiplied the pressure on Tom severalfold. And there is some suggestion that Tom may have indulged in a brief affair with Shannon's wife Annie (p 109?) which in itself would have provided ample motive for a fight with Shannon, not to mention the added complexities of his ongoing relationship with Winnifred.

Mark Robinson was the Park Ranger who had identified Tom's body at the request of Dr Howland. The detail about the fishing line (see below) is curious; and it's odd that Mark Robinson found 'no marks on the body' if Shannon Fraser had, in fact, killed Tom in a fist fight.

Mark Robinson to biographer Blodwen Davies, 1930:

'I assisted Roy Dixon, undertaker of Sprucedale, Ontario, to take the body from the water in the presence of Dr Howland. There were no marks on the body except a slight bruise over the left eye. His fishing line was wound several times around his left ankle and broken off. There was no sign of the rod. His provisions and kit bag were in the front end of the Canoe when found. The lake was not rough.'

Tom's brother George was alleged (by some) to have accompanied the casket by rail to Owen Sound for burial, though he

later denied it. The only means of access to Canoe Lake was by train. (p 65, 83, 85, 111)

George Thomson to Blodwen Davies, June 8, 1931:

'I had heard that there was some ill feeling between Tom and some man in that region [Mowat village]. It was somewhat casually referred to by someone at Canoe Lake, possibly one of the Rangers, but as this was while we were still looking for Tom and I was still hopeful of his safe recovery, I didn't at the time attach any serious importance to the report.'

The 'man' in the region *could* have been Shannon Fraser, or it could have been Martin Blecher who may have harboured romantic designs of his own on Winnifred Trainor.

Ranger Mark Robinson to Blodwen Davies, 1930:

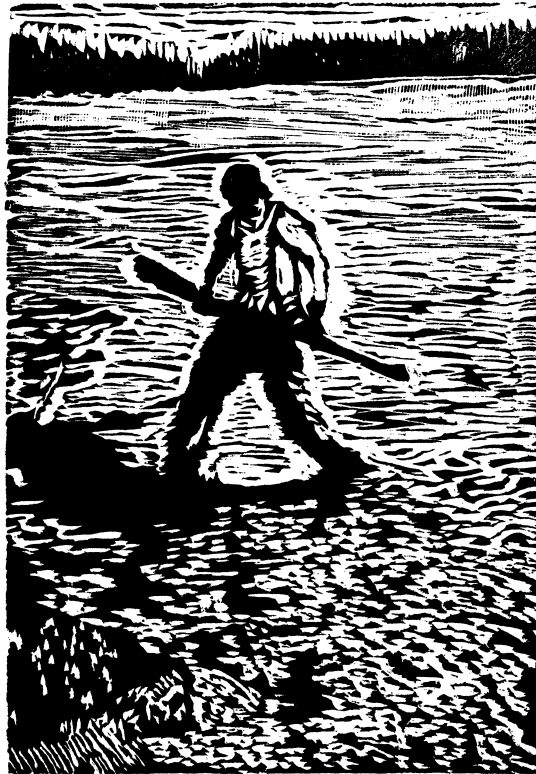
'J. Shannon Fraser and wife of Canoe Lake Ont., and daughter Mrs Arthur Briggs all knew Tom extra well, and if Fraser will tell the truth, much could be got from him, but weigh well his remarks. You might [also] interview Martin and Bessie Blecher, but again be careful. They possibly know more about Tom's sad end than any other person.'

Mark Robinson may have been suspicious that it was the Blechers (Martin and Bessie) who found Tom's canoe and returned it to Mowat Lodge very promptly, the afternoon of July 8, the same day Tom had gone missing. Mark may have been suspicious, as well, that the inquest was held at the Blechers' cottage rather than Mowat Lodge. And Mark may have thought it curious that Martin Blecher served beer to the attendees at the inquest.

CURRICULUM NOTE—

Making Inferences and Extending Understanding
of Texts.

One of the specific expectations of the high school English reading curriculum is to encourage students to make and explain inferences derived from texts. The exercises in the Guide test students' ability to understand visual narratives by asking them to explain their own creative interpretations of the images and what they reveal about characters, situations, historical context and other relevant story elements. Furthermore, students are expected to make connections between the ideas presented in a given text and with the world around them.





The 'zoom' is one of the common visual effects that appears frequently in silent films of the 1920s as well as wordless novels that were first developed about the same time.

MURDER WITH A PADDLE

Harry Ebbs was a counsellor at Ahmek Camp, a Taylor Stat-ten camp for boys on the east shore of Canoe Lake, in 1924, then later became a medical doctor. Harry Ebbs was also part of a small team of amateur forensics, under the direction of William Little, who exhumed a body at Mowat Cemetery in 1956. Rory MacKay was a historian, primarily interested in nineteenth-century logging (p 147, 149). Martin Blecher Sr had been a successful furniture dealer in Buffalo, New York who retired to a cottage in Algonquin Park in 1909. The Blechers had a son, Martin Jr, and a daughter, Bessie. Martin Jr was later suspected of being a German spy though there is not a lot of persuasive evidence to support the theory. Martin Jr was, however, not well liked by the locals at Canoe Lake.

Dr Harry Ebbs, at Ahmek Camp, interviewed Nov. 26, 1975
by Rory MacKay:

‘I was there in 1924, that’s seven years after the event—and the person who was suspected or whose name was whispered most often was Martin Blecher [...] I had 75 workmen up there and I had to bring all my food in from the train and I had to get my order out every day [...]. I could see the smoke from the train and I was late [...] I could see Martin Blecher coming down the creek in his little boat, there was quite a big curve and I knew that if I didn’t get there first, that I would have to go way out around him and I would lose quite a lot of valuable time. Well I did beat him [...] and as I went by, he picked up a paddle and swung it, and if I hadn’t ducked he would have

crowned me right there on the spot.’

Dr Goldwin Howland did notice, at the time of his examination (July 17) that Tom’s face was swollen, and also that there was a bruise over the left temple. Both the swelling, and the bruise, *could* be consistent with a quick shot to the head with a paddle, and could also be consistent with a loss of consciousness, particularly if the paddle hit Tom’s head forcefully in the vicinity of his temple.

Harry Ebbs’ commentary is perhaps all the more credible because he was not part of Canoe Lake ‘community’ in 1917, so he would not necessarily have been swayed by any common prejudice against the Blechers, or Martin Jr in particular. On the other hand, the incident described by Harry Ebbs took place in 1924, seven years after the fact, though it *could* (maybe) substantiate a supposition that Martin Blecher may have been predisposed to wield a paddle in anger, and may have done so more than once.

And we have motive ... not simply that Martin Blecher was unpopular, but also that Martin *may* have been involved with Winnifred Trainor (and Tom may not have appreciated the competition?). Then there was the War, already in its third year by the spring of 1917. Tom had, apparently, tried to enlist at the outbreak of hostilities, and was refused (apparently on medical grounds; possibly because James MacCallum, unbeknownst to Tom, had pulled strings in Ottawa). Blecher was American, of German descent. There is some suggestion that Tom may have sided with the Allies in an argument with Blecher over which side would likely prevail in the end. There is another suggestion that Tom may have accused Blecher of being a deserter from the US military. Possibly true, but Tom

would have been on thin ice, making any such accusation, particularly given that his own service had been declined on somewhat flimsy medical grounds.

Ranger Mark Robinson journal entry, July 10, 1917:

‘Tuesday, July 10. Morning wet and cool. Mr Shannon Fraser came to house about 9:15 am and reported that Martin Bletcher had found Tom Thompson’s canoe floating upside down in Canoe Lake and wanted us to drag for Mr Thompson’s body. We went to Canoe Lake and interviewed Miss Bletcher who was with her brother on Sunday in his little motor boat. Going to Tea Lake dam they had passed a canoe floating upside down between Statton’s Point and the Bertram Island. They didn’t stop to examine the canoe as they had heard there was a canoe that had drifted away from its moorings and had not been found, but they intended to pick up the same as they returned. They passed the canoe at 3pm on Sunday the 8th.’

This journal entry *sounds* as if Ranger Mark Robinson may have been suspicious ... in the first instance because Martin Blecher apparently noticed the overturned canoe on Sunday (July 8) but didn’t bother to report the discovery or to recover the canoe until the next day. Mark Robinson also had some concerns about the inquest, and we’ll get to those as well.

Mark Robinson to Blodwen Davies, 1930:

‘J. Shannon Fraser was at the lake as Tom left and was the last man (as far as the Public know) to see Tom alive. He left at about 12:50 pm and at the inquest it came out that Martin and Bessie Blecher, American-German tourists with a cottage at Canoe Lake had found Tom’s canoe floating not three-quarters of a mile from where he started out from the Trainor

cottage at about 3 p.m. An east wind was blowing and this canoe could *not* have been there under ordinary conditions. They [the Blechers] did not report finding the canoe until the following morning when the canoe was brought in from behind Little Wapomeo Island.'

This account is highly circumstantial, and tainted by the fact that the interview was conducted thirteen years after Tom died, but it does suggest that Ranger Mark Robinson, even as late as 1930, was still suspicious of Martin Blecher.



CURRICULUM NOTE—

Interconnected Skills.

The curriculum articulates a need for students to be able to explain how a variety of skills can help them read more effectively. To address this goal, the Guide asks students to demonstrate a mix of reading, writing, artistic and communication strategies. For example, students may be asked to write a vignette inspired by images in *The Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson*; to draw a graphic novel that incorporates people or places from the book; to write a poem or series of poems about specific scenes depicted in the book; or to present a short speech on an issue important during Tom Thomson's lifetime. After each of these, students may reflect on how their creative endeavours have deepened their appreciation of the text.



From this image it appears clear
that Tom has lost consciousness; and that
his left temple is resting on jagged rock.

The question becomes ... did he fall,
perhaps as the result of drinking?
or for some other reason?

SUBDURAL HEMATOMA

... a collection of blood between the covering of the brain and the surface of the brain; can be fatal when caused by a severe head injury (p 187?) which Tom could have suffered if the fight with Shannon Fraser occurred at Mowat Lodge, and Tom fell against a heavy iron grate in the fireplace, as was suggested by Daphne Crombie, or if the fight continued outdoors and Tom bashed his head on the rocks.

Dr Noble Sharpe received his M.B. from the University of Toronto in 1911, and served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps in Europe until 1919. From 1919 to 1923, he served as Assistant Professor of Pharmacology at the University of Toronto and from 1923 to 1950, as Pathologist at Old Grace Hospital, the Toronto Hospital for Consumptives, and Toronto Western Hospital. In 1951 he was appointed Medical Director of the Ontario Attorney-General's Laboratory, retiring in 1967. After his retirement, Sharpe served as a Consultant Pathologist with the Ontario Centre of Forensic Sciences. His medical credentials are impeccable.

Dr Noble Sharpe, 'The Canoe Lake Mystery', *Canadian Society of Forensic Science Journal*, June 1970, 34-40.

'I do not criticize Dr Howland for failing to make an internal examination. Decomposition would have masked indications of drowning as the cause of death. Even the absence of water in the lungs would not rule out the possibility. I am, however, puzzled by the bleeding from the ear. If this, whatever the

cause, occurred in the water, it would in all probability have been washed away. Dried blood implies a time lapse before immersion.'

Dr Sharpe's argument recognizes that any injury to the head that may have been occasioned by a mishap in the canoe ... presuming that Tom tripped over his own fishing line, fell and whacked the side of his head on a gunwale before rolling off and in to the water ... would have produced liquid blood that almost certainly would have been washed clean by the wave action of currents in the lake. Dried blood, on the other hand, could well be (and apparently was) still visible in the ear cavity even after the body had been in the water for eight days. This suggests that some significant trauma to the head had occurred some time prior to the body's immersion in the lake, and also suggests that the person who dumped the body was also complicit in the head injury.



MURDER WITH A GUN

In spite of his deserved reputation as a rugged outdoorsman Tom Thomson was certainly interested in the ladies (p 99, 103, 105).

Charles F. Plewman, 'Reflections on The Passing of Tom Thomson', *Canadian Camping Magazine*, 1972.

'When the body was found Miss Winnie Trainor, Tom's girl friend from Huntsville, whose parents had a cottage on Canoe Lake in front of the Lodge, appeared on the scene and demanded the right to see the remains, saying that there must have been foul play as she was certain that Tom didn't drown by accident in a small lake like Canoe Lake. This, Mark Robinson stoutly refused to grant. (The body had been in the lake about eight days and was not very presentable).'

Dr Noble Sharpe, 'The Canoe Lake Mystery', *Canadian Society of Forensic Science Journal*, June 1970, 34-40.

'Tom was socially inclined, and he was said to be interested in a local lady [Winnifred Trainor]. (I had a telephone conversation with this charming person in 1956, and she told me she was engaged to him.) It was also said Tom had a rival [Martin Blecher?] and they had quarrelled. Their altercations reached a climax when Tom accused the other man of being a deserter from the American Army. Tom, incidentally, had been rejected on account of flat feet. Rumours relating to his rival's implication were rife. It was stated that on the night before Tom Thomson disappeared that a man threatened him. Still

later it was rumoured a shot had been heard coming from the direction Tom had taken when he was last seen.'

William Little was supervisor of the reformatory in Brampton, Ontario, during the 1950s and 60s during which time he also pursued an avid interest in the Tom Thomson tragedy. In the late 1960s, Little became a Judge. He also worked with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1969 to produce a television documentary about Thomson's death. In 1970, he published *The Tom Thomson Mystery*, a summary of his research regarding Thomson's death in which he described how he had excavated (in 1956) Thomson's original grave at Canoe lake with three of his friends, one of whom was Harry Ebbs. They found remains—including a skull with a hole in it—which they naturally assumed *must* have belonged to Thomson but Dr Noble Sharpe ultimately concluded that the remains exhumed by Little belonged to an unidentified Indigenous man, and that the hole in the skull had been caused by surgical intervention, and not a bullet.

It would, of course, be fascinating to do some digging at the Thomson family plot at Leith, but the family has never sanctioned any such intervention, and the plot at Leith lies within consecrated ground (whereas the Mowat Cemetery was not so designated).



SUICIDE

Charles F. Plewman, 'Reflections on The Passing of Tom Thomson', *Canadian Camping Magazine*, 1972.

'After the funeral, Shannon Fraser who operated Mowat Lodge where Tom had stayed, and who was more intimate with Tom than anyone else, confided in me what he felt had actually happened. Tom Thomson [...] was engaged to marry Miss Trainor. She was pressing him to go through with the marriage. He intimated that she was coming up to see Tom to have a showdown on the fatal week. He mentioned that Tom was a shy and sensitive person and that he felt he just could not face the music. The impression Shannon left me with was that somehow Tom had come to the conclusion that a settled, married life was not for him, but that he just could not say so to Miss Trainor. Recalling Tom's previous statements of not to worry if he didn't return on time, Shannon said that had made him feel that Tom had contemplated doing something on earlier occasions but had not mustered sufficient courage to go through with this intention.'

One problem with the Suicide theory is that a note was never found. Another problem with this narrative (as above) is that Shannon Fraser, himself, remains a prime suspect and would naturally be anxious to shift attention elsewhere. On the other hand it is very possible that Winnifred Trainor may have been pregnant at the time, which would have put enormous pressure on Tom to 'make an honest woman of her'.



The last block in *The Mysterious Death of Tom Thomson* was fashioned from wood taken from a limb that may have fallen from a tree that appears in Tom's painting called *Byng Inlet*.

INTERMENT

Tom Thomson died, very likely, on the afternoon of Sunday, July 8th, 1917, sometime after Ranger Mark Robinson saw him walking to Joe Lake dam with Shannon Fraser in the morning and sometime before Martin Blecher found his canoe overturned on Canoe Lake in the afternoon.

It is perhaps conceivable that Tom had died the previous evening (July 7), possibly as the result of a fight with Shannon Fraser or Martin Blecher, but that scenario assumes that Mark Robinson was mistaken, which seems unlikely.

Tom's body was spotted by Dr Goldwin Howland in the water off Little Wapomeo Island on the morning of Monday, July 16, and was towed to shore by George Rowe and Laurie Dickson. The body was identified by Chief Park Ranger Mark Robinson who contacted undertaker Robert H. Flavelle of Kearney, and his embalmer, Michael R. Dixon (Robinson's cousin, coincidentally), who arrived together at Canoe Lake on Monday, July 16. (Flavelle billed for lodging from 3:45 p.m., Monday to 6:45 p.m., Tuesday while Dixon stayed at Robinson's cabin.)

Dr Howland examined the body the next morning (Tuesday, July 16) and found it to be in a state of advanced decomposition. The body was embalmed by Dixon, transferred to the mainland and buried in Mowat Cemetery by Flavelle before the Coroner, Arthur Ranney, arrived from North Bay that

same evening (July 16), and despite the protestations of Winnifred Trainor who had likely arrived on the morning train.

When the body was located, Tom had been missing for over a week. Winnifred Trainor had, presumably, been in contact with the Thomson family in the interim and would have known the family's wishes as to the preferred burial site in the family plot at Leith. Trainor later complained that her advice had been ignored, or overruled (probably by Mark Robinson), possibly because of the advanced state of decomposition of the body.

A telephone bill from the Huntsville office of Bell Telephone records two calls placed by 'Miss Traynor' from Huntsville to 'Mr Thompson' in Owen Sound, and four telephone calls to 'Mr Flavelle' in Kearney, all of them made on Wednesday, July 18 after Winnifred had attended Thomson's late Tuesday afternoon burial in Mowat Cemetery and returned (presumably) on the evening train to Huntsville.

The inquest, such as it was, and the Coroner's verdict of Accidental Drowning, are both somewhat suspect ... in the first instance because the Coroner did not, himself, examine the body but rather relied on second-hand information from Dr Howland. And the inquest was held at Martin Blecher's cottage (which is odd), rather than Mowat Lodge; and Blecher served beer and cigars at the proceeding, which seems out of keeping with the gravity of the proceeding; and George Rowe, who had assisted in the recovery of the body, had not been summonsed but attended only after Mark Robinson went to fetch him. Winnifred Trainor did not attend the inquest.

Arthur Ranney's determination of Accidental Drowning was

never particularly convincing at the time, and was formally challenged in 1930 when journalist Blodwen Davies published *Paddle and Palette* with Ryerson Press and then filed an 'Application for the exhumation of the body of one Thos. Thomson drowned in Canoe Lake in 1917' with the Attorney General in 1931. Arthur Ranney's verdict would, eventually, be overturned in 2008 by Dr Michael Pollanen, then chief forensic pathologist for the Province of Ontario, who changed the cause of death to 'unknown'.

Ranger Mark Robinson diary, Thursday, 19 July:

'Mr Churchill undertaker of Huntsville arrived last night and took up body of Thomas Thomson artist under direction of Mr Geo Thompson of Conn USA. The body went out on evening train to Owen Sound to be buried in the family plot.'

From this diary entry it seems clear that Mark Robinson thought Tom's body had been exhumed, perhaps on the Thursday morning, by Mr Churchill from Huntsville and shipped to Owen Sound, perhaps on the evening train. Shannon Fraser would seem to corroborate that supposition ...

Shannon Fraser, Letter to James MacCallum, July 24, 1917:

'the Paddles was tied up in the canoe and canoe turned over when we found him he was in a bad state so we buried him he and his brother came up and took him a way with him he was dug up and put in a sealed coffin.'

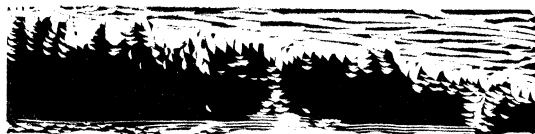
But Mark Robinson has also indicated that he visited the Mowat cemetery shortly thereafter and found no evidence that the soil had been disturbed. One theory suggests that Mr Churchill may have sent a coffin filled with rocks to Owen



Winnifred Trainor insists she was at Canoe Lake Station on the day Tom's coffin was loaded for shipment to Owen Sound.

Sound, a charge he vigorously denied when he was interrogated on the subject in 1956 by Dr Noble Sharpe, Ontario's chief forensic medical investigator.

Dr Sharpe also spoke to Winnifred Trainor (in 1956) who testified that both she and her father were present at the Canoe Lake railroad station when the casket was loaded aboard the train (presumably Thursday, 19 July because we know from telephone records that Winnifred was in Huntsville on Wednesday, 18 July) and they were convinced that the body was in it. The Thomson family in Owen Sound was similarly convinced, and made mention of the strong odour emanating from the casket.



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