

“closer in many ways to Achebe *Things Fall Apart* (1958) than Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, though only published a year after” (17).

Judith Scherer Herz

John O’Brian and Peter White, ed. *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007. Pp. 392. \$49.95 paperback.

Of all the media through which the Group of Seven’s conservative, empty and overwhelmingly white wilderness-based aesthetic of Canadian nationhood has been disseminated, the lavishly illustrated coffee-table book must rank—alongside an endless stream of calendars and reproduction prints—among the most pervasive. Continuing this tradition in the last decade or so, widely available, impeccably presented volumes such as Charles C. Hill’s *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (1995) and David P. Silcox’s *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* (2003) have worked to preserve a mythic association between these artists and their nation. Radical artistic and critical reappraisals of this mythic link, meanwhile, have all-too-often operated at a much lower level on the public radar, reaching (with a few notable exceptions) only the relatively small readerships of academic journals and art-critical essay collections.

At first glance, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* seems set to follow in this tradition. This weighty, immaculately produced and colourful book, its cover adorned with detail from Tom Thomson’s *Jack Pine*, appears unlikely to offer a substantial challenge to the orthodoxy epitomized by Thomson’s iconic canvas. Yet closer examination reveals a blurring of the beloved masterpiece: this is *Jack Pine* with a difference, as photographed by Michael Snow for his dizzyingly disorienting 1977 exhibition *Plus Tard*. It is fitting that an image from *Plus Tard*, a selection of blurry photographs of the Group of Seven collection on display at Canada’s National Gallery, forms the cover of *Beyond Wilderness*. Like *Plus Tard*, John O’Brian and Peter White’s collection seeks to defamiliarize the experience of viewing the Group’s landscapes, blurring the edges of their bold assertions and allowing the troublingly silent voices at their margins to articulate themselves.

The book’s manifesto is articulated explicitly in a short introduction by the editors, whose opening sentence declares “This book is about the reinvention of landscape art in Canada” (3). With such a bold aim as their stated goal,

there is little time for the editors to apologize for omissions: in an ironic echo of Hill's two-sentence dismissal of dissenting voices at the beginning of *Art for a Nation*, they account for his absence and that of Silcox in their collection by stating simply that these two prominent critics "have worked within the myth and its assumptions" (5). Instead, it is those dissenting voices—a grand total of sixty-six artists and critics—who are centre-stage for this collection. Only a handful of Group paintings (at least in their unmediated versions) are reproduced for this volume; the remainder of its full-colour reproductions are given over to artistic revisions of the myth by artists as diverse as Jeff Wall, Jin-Me Yoon, Zacharius Kunuk and Joyce Wieland. Such works are never allowed to appear in a vacuum: in the index, every artwork reproduced is cross-referenced with the critical pieces in which it is mentioned, contributing towards a synthesis of theory and practice which is for the most part both highly successful and deeply satisfying.

Divided approximately equally between reproductions of artworks, and criticism which addresses these revisionist works as well as the Group's own aesthetic and the exhibition practices which have led to its enshrinement, *Beyond Wilderness* attempts nothing less than a wholesale deconstruction of the Group's wilderness-based myth of nation—and largely succeeds. Marshalling such a huge range of material into distinct logical sections is a near-impossible task, and if some sections—such as "Northern Development"—are topically defined with relative clarity, it is not always evident what separates a section entitled "Contest and Controversy" from "The Expression of a Difference," or how, in turn, the challenges posed in these sections differ from those under the heading "What is Canadian in Canadian Landscape?". As the book progresses, however, the included artworks and critical engagements with them become steadily more challenging, and by its conclusion, even readers who came to the collection already aware of the problematics inherent in the Group's national vision will find their understanding of such notions as "landscape" and "wilderness" disturbed.

Particularly effective in (re)situating the previously published work that constitutes the bulk of the collection are new pieces by the editors—one by each—that appear in an opening section entitled "Wilderness Myths." These essays—highlights in terms of their balance between readability and critical engagement—serve both to contextualize the volume's critical and creative engagements with the Group's aesthetic, and to position it commercially, in relation to the far more conservative coffee-table books with which it is likely to jostle for space on bookstore shelves. After describing the extensive history of radical challenges to the Group's aesthetic, White notes with frustration

that “[t]his body of criticism [...] has nevertheless continued to have difficulty sticking publicly” (13). The desire to make such criticism “stick” *this* time, one suspects, lies behind the book’s curious hybrid nature: part polished aesthetic object; part critical anthology.

The question of audience that this generic hybridity raises is the one issue surrounding the editors’ intent that remains somewhat unclear throughout. Jonathan Bordo’s highly theoretical essay “Jack Pine: Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape” is a complex and difficult read for a career deconstructionist; without at least a passing familiarity with the discursive approach to images pioneered by W.J.T. Mitchell (whose work, perhaps inevitably, is referenced in O’Brian’s introductory piece) it is borderline incomprehensible. Similarly, in the absence of some theoretical background in postcolonialism, debates surrounding ideologies of nation lose much of their force, and Scott Watson’s explosive phrase “cultural genocide” is reduced to hyperbole of almost ludicrous magnitude. These considerations seem to preclude the general, educated readership towards which the less theory-heavy, more biographically-oriented works of the likes of Silcox and Hill are aimed, and to push the collection towards the academic audience its university press imprint would imply. However, many of the critical essays reprinted here already enjoy canonical status in scholarly discussions of the Group’s work, and if *Beyond Wilderness* is a more accessible place to turn than the frequently obscure and long out-of-print locations in which many of them first appeared, the emphasis on broad coverage means that most are included in excerpted form only, ultimately requiring recourse to the originals for serious scholarly study.

Generically, then, *Beyond Wilderness* sits—at times somewhat uneasily—midway between the glossy art books it keeps company with in the bookstore and its function as a kind of *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* for Canada. Its sheer depth and scope are, however, admirable (if occasionally bewildering), and, most importantly, it seems destined to make the critical approaches it espouses “stick” publicly more than any publication before it. O’Brian and White’s beautifully presented volume is a highly engaging as well as a deeply enjoyable experience, an essential reference for anyone with an interest in Canadian art, settler-colonial technologies of representation, or the discursive properties of images—and a pleasingly unorthodox take on the coffee-table book.

Richard Brock