

F.S. COBURN'S ANTIMODERN-MODERN LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS OF QUEBEC LOGGERS IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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Abstract

Through representations of Frederick Simpson Coburn's paintings of loggers in winter, his illustrations for W.H. Drummond and Louis Fréchette's publications, and historic photographs, this research examines a modern century (1860–1960) in Quebec history that overlaps with the artist's lifetime (1871–1960). Themes and theories relating to nationhood and identity are explored relative to their influence in shaping the province's complex cultural landscape. The role of landscape art in reinforcing the ideals and interests of the elite is pivotal to this study. I argue that the landscape representations of the period can be understood as culturally constructed antimodern spaces that offered escape from modern anxieties stemming from a heightened sense of alienation from the natural environment.

Résumé

Par des représentations de l'œuvre de Frederick Simpson Coburn, soit ses peintures hivernales de bûcherons, ses illustrations pour les publications de W. H. Drummond et de Louis Fréchette ainsi que des photographes historiques, cet article étudie un siècle moderne (1860–1960) dans l'histoire du Québec en superposition à la vie de l'artiste (1871–1960). L'article explore les thèmes et les théories liés aux concepts de la nation et de l'identité en lien avec leur influence sur la construction du paysage culturel complexe de la province. Au cœur de cette étude se retrouve le rôle de l'art paysager dans le renforcement des idéaux et des intérêts de l'élite. L'article soutient que les représentations du paysage au cours de cette période peuvent être considérées comme des espaces de production culturelle antimoderniste offrant une évocation des inquiétudes modernes soulevées par un sentiment accru d'aliénation de l'environnement naturel.

Introduction

This paper examines landscape as a culturally constructed phenomenon that is well recognized as an agent of modernity within the visual and material cultural fields. It seeks to underscore how social tensions and ambiguities, so often deeply imbedded in landscape representations, echo modernity's rather complex, regularly conflicting, and prevalent anxieties and aspirations. As such, landscapes are understood as negotiated spaces. To borrow from Lynda Jessup (2006:109), this study's objective is to "make the culturally constructed nature of landscape apparent to viewers." This goal is undertaken while further arguing that Frederick Simpson Coburn's (1871–1960) paintings of loggers travelling along snow covered trails in winter harbor an anti-modernist and Romantic vision of nature "that was conventionally naturalized in the operation of landscape representations." Coburn was a prolific and versatile Canadian artist who is best known for his paintings and illustrations of rural sceneries and ordinary people experiencing the Eastern Townships' landscape, most often in winter. He spent his childhood in the township of Melbourne, Quebec, where he returned following the outbreak of WWI after having studied abroad for several years. His paintings of teamsters in winter are interpretations of the loggers he often saw passing to and from the forest on their way to local sawmills, pulp and paper factories, frozen river beds, and railways surrounding his home and studio in Melbourne. J. Derek Booth (65) has described how the pattern of annual log driving in the St. Francis basin began during the mid nineteenth century, due in large part to the implementation of a railway that facilitated the export of lumber and linked Montréal, Quebec to Portland, Maine, while passing through the heart of the St. Francis watershed, stopping in Richmond, adjacent to Coburn's hometown.

As the turn of the twentieth century approached in the Townships, workers typically laboured daily to chop, clear, damn, plant, and harvest the landscape that offered the necessary resources to prosper. It was not uncommon for lumberjacks during this era to work fifteen-hour days. One such labourer recalled how he had worked 57 years without ever having been fired from a job, and had often worked "seven days a week from six in the morning sometimes to nearly midnight" (Mackay, 113). In partial response to modernity's call for progress and prosperity, these early Townshippers' labour gradually transformed the landscape from densely forested and vastly uncultivated natural spaces into developing rural communities and picturesque villages. Small mills developed into larger industries as the region's abundant natural resources fuelled the growing modern economy. Manpower

was needed to harvest those resources and transform them into commodities for foreign or domestic sale. This modern era's process of converting resources into commodities for trade, in Canada, has been compellingly documented through landscape representations including paintings, photographs, postcards, drawings, and prints that circulated for purposes such as promoting, collecting, advertising, recruiting, recording, and denouncing. Landscapes, like all commodities, are products of modernity.

Although Coburn left home as a teenager to study in Montréal, New York and Europe, he regularly returned to Melbourne throughout his career. He eventually died in his home, down the hill from the house where he had been born 89 years earlier. The artist enjoyed commercial success during his lifetime, winning several awards, many distinctions and various appointments. His artworks are part of several prestigious collections such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts, the city of Quebec's Musée des Beaux-Arts, Library and Archives Canada, the city of Sherbrooke's Musée des Beaux-Arts, the Governor General of Canada's official residence – Rideau Hall – and the Bank of Montreal. During the early twentieth century, his paintings were collected by prominent patrons that included, among many others, Harry Norton (1870–1948), his sister Helen Norton (1876–1967), Sir William Van Horne (1843–1915), Henry Birks (1840–1928), Maurice Duplessis (1890–1959), and Lady Allan (1873–1957). He also sold to a variety of clubs including the Mount Tremblant Lodge, the Seigneurie Club, and Montréal's Engineer's Club. In his biography on Coburn, Gerald Stevens (70) listed 112 individuals, institutions, or estates that owned at least one of the artist's works. Coburn was described by a Montréal art critic as “a pastoral, naturalist painter with impressionistic tendencies [...] In subject matter, and in his vision of Quebec, he followed Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–1872), Horatio Walker (1858–1938), Henri Julien (1852–1908), and Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942) (Wilson, 18).” During his career he was respected by several fellow Canadian landscape painters, including Horatio Walker, Maurice Cullen (1866–1934), Albert Robinson (1881–1956), Clarence Gagnon, Marc Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté (1871–1953), F.W. Hutchison (1871–1953), and Arthur Lismer (1885–1969) (Stevens, 24). Between 1904 and 1937, Coburn had 148 paintings on record and many were exhibited at venues including the Art Association of Montreal, the Canadian National Gallery, the Royal Canadian Academy, and the Ontario Society of Art (ETRCa). In “Landscapes of Sport, Landscapes of Exclusion,” Jessup compellingly argues that Romantic and picturesque landscapes were frequently collected and exhibited by art patrons, along with other sportsman trophies,

as a means to counter their perceived sense of lost masculinity in the wake of an increasingly commodity-based, modern and urban everyday lifestyle. A variety of objects were collected and showcased in masculine spaces situated in private clubs, personal studies, lodges and offices, for example, as a means to alleviate modern man's sense of alienation from nature, while simultaneously reinforcing his sense of good cultural taste.



Figure 1. Detail of Harry Norton's study at his Coaticook residence, Eastern Townships of Quebec. 1942. Photographed by George Nakash. Courtesy of Le Musée Beaulne, Coaticook, Quebec.

Figure 1 is a photograph that represents such a masculine space, one that belonged to Harry Norton. The room pictured in the photograph was Mr. Norton's personal study at his Coaticook residence, located in the Eastern Townships. Norton was a regular and prominent patron of Coburn's who purchased several of the artist's landscapes throughout his career. Note how the room's decor balances nature and sportsman trophies with objects that reflect good cultural taste. The study's outdoor and adventurous male tropes include a *trompe-l'œil* representation of dead game that is ceremoniously hanging by a string after the kill, placed beside a deer buck head with hooves mounted on a customized wooden frame, positioned next to a pair of snow shoes

hanging diagonally across a hearth made of local natural field stones. These sportsmanly artefacts are tempered by evidence of good cultural taste and material wealth scattered throughout the room in the form of a framed formal photograph portrait of Harry Norton, a collection of rare and exotic vases atop a cabinet next to the portrait, an open book displayed on its stand, a large woven woolen rug, well crafted, carved wooden furnishings, and thick, dark mouldings. Jessup (2006:89) has described how “in the interior decoration of these [masculine] spaces were such emblems of sport as horns, animal heads, mounted fish, and pelts. Although rarely mentioned in this context by historians, landscape paintings were also present, having already become a significant part of the iconography of sport.” Significantly, seventeen paintings out of the twenty from the Norton Coaticook residence collection featured Romantic, picturesque landscapes¹. In addition to six Coburn canvases, the Coaticook collection also included works by Cornelius Krieghoff, Horatio Walker, Clarence Gagnon, Maurice Cullen, and James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924), most of whom were previously cited by Wilson in *The Montreal Downtowner* for sharing Coburn’s “subject matter and vision of Quebec.” Each one of the twenty paintings in the collection embraced nostalgic themes or values reminiscent of a pre-industrial age.

An antimodern/modern artist

During the period Coburn was illustrating and painting, it was not uncommon for affluent males to seek opportunities to assert their masculinity, as Jessup (2006:79) noted, “in light of spreading industrialization, the decline of rural farming life, and the rise of mass production and the factory system that challenged the traditional division of labor based on gender.” Coburn’s aesthetic and Romantic response to the theme of rural Quebecois labor can thus be situated as an antimodern reaction, one that looked to the natural environment for spaces of escape from what Jackson Lears has described as “an ‘overcivilized’ modern existence,” in order to pursue “more intense forms of physical or spiritual existence².” Although the artist’s subject matter and vision of Quebec were nostalgic and antimodern, his formal approach to painting clearly adhered to the period’s modern painting conventions as rendered in *Cloud Shadows, St. Francis Valley* (fig. 2).

Note the thick, impasto application of pigment, the use of vivid colors applied with spontaneous and gestural fluidity, a blurring of line and details, the classical linear perspective abandoned at last, without any preoccupation with guiding the viewer’s eye to a clear vanishing point on the horizon. Coburn created movement throughout his



Figure 2. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *Cloud Shadows, St. Francis Valley*. 1923. Oil on canvas, 66.5 x 80.4 cm. National Gallery of Canada (No 3128). <<https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=12816>>, consulted August 15, 2016.

canvases by inserting his unique “whiplash” (Stevens, 36) curves that added a sense of dynamism and rhythm to his compositions. The viewer’s entrance point into his pictures converge with the painted subject’s exit point along the trail, enhancing the viewer’s accessibility to the image and reinforcing a stronger sense of immediacy, effectively drawing the viewers into the scenery and away from their current or ordinary circumstances. Stevens (36) also noted how Coburn’s compositions always “provided some such avenue of ‘escape;’ some handling of light or terrain which subtly leads the eye and mind of the viewer outward, not only from the room in which a painting hangs but also from the painting itself.” As a painter, Coburn rarely resisted the lure of a trail bend which gradually curved throughout tall clusters of pines and cedars; trails that were travelled on by muscular pairs of contrasting horses in their prime, set within vast picturesque sceneries of undulating hills, often occupied by a lone figure within the landscape, riding along the ice trail beneath a broad sky of rolling clouds that filled more than half of the picture plane.

Coburn's paintings radiate vigor and motion set within the natural environment, which he vividly reinforced through his use of vibrant colours. In canvas after canvas Coburn privileged color over line. His liberal use of white purified the landscape and allowed for enchanting plays of light and shadow, as the artist lightly blended his pigments into subtle nuances of tints and tones that join together in the landscape to create a harmonious symphony of shades. The ensemble of Coburn's paintings can be well described as nostalgic and lyrical wintery snowscapes. In his landscapes, the loggers' actual labour and hardships are, however, frequently and conspicuously omitted as the teamsters plod along the logging trail delivering valuable natural resources in the service of industry.

Industry

The earliest Canadian affinity for landscape representations was fuelled by Montréal's elite industrial barons who pioneered the vision of a unified "Nation" which promoted the terrain's natural resources as symbols of an emerging national identity that responded to calls for progress and prosperity. The resulting campaign to foster the notion of a national identity was complicit with capitalist agendas that sought to harvest and convert the nation's resources for profit as undertaken by, for example, the Canadian Pacific Railway's elaborate and sustained promotional program led by Sir William Cornelius Van Horne. Because many of the nation's merchants were making fortunes from the forests' natural resources as early as the nineteenth century, the lumber trade was deemed a suitable subject for artists during that era. Throughout much of young Canada's modern history, landscape artworks were thus admired as collectable commodities that glorified the natural environment's wholesome essence, as they simultaneously reaffirmed its commercial potential due to the land's abundant supply of primary resources. Landscape representations further offered a desirable alternative or retreat from modern, urban, everyday life to elite merchant art patrons who were seeking, as Donald Wright (134) has explained, a "therapeutic tonic to the unease of modern life" as they struggled "to make sense of modernity not through rejection but through the creation of a psychological retreat." It is worth reiterating here how Stevens (36) emphasized the way Coburn's compositions always "provided some such avenue of escape." The escape, in this context, can be understood as a psychological retreat from the "unease of modern life" that was facilitated by landscapes which, whether as culturally constructed sites of wilderness or as rural and natural environments, seemingly functioned as antidotes to the undesirable urban effects spreading throughout expanding

industrial environments. Harry Norton was at one time a captain of industry, albeit a reluctant one, who, according to Montréal gallery owner William R. Watson, did not care at all for business. Watson (52-3) described how in 1920 Norton “took a trip to the town of Hell, in Denmark. From there he sent postcards to all his customers with the message, ‘I am now in Hell and this is the last time you will hear from me.’” After selling the business he had inherited from his father, he devoted his time to pursuing his interests in gardening, botany, composing music, and collecting art. Watson further recalled how Norton found great pleasure in buying “paintings from Canadian artists which he collected for love and not as an investment.” Harry’s business-minded father, Arthur Osmore Norton (1845–1919), made a fortune after purchasing a patent for a lifting jack that was subsequently used for trains at the height of the railway industry’s operations. As the son of a wealthy self-made industrialist, Harry enjoyed a life of privilege. He and his sister Helen were well-respected philanthropists who generously supported several educational, health, and cultural institutions.

By the turn of the twentieth century the nation’s elite embraced modernity and change when it came to business, yet the dominant taste for art in Montréal remained essentially conservative and antimodern well into the thirties, at which time the socio-cultural climate in Quebec, as elsewhere, began to shift. Coburn’s paintings and illustrations of the Townships’ rural labourers visually document an often marginalized class of people’s everyday experience during an era in post confederate Canadian history that was subject to two world wars, depression, industrial innovations, the advent of mechanization, tremendous immigration, and an explosive transition from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial living. Today, it is hard to imagine that “in the first quarter of the twentieth century the entire population of Canada, geographically the second largest country in the world, was roughly the same as that of greater London, the imperial capital” (Anderson, 97). World War I had a significant impact on Canada’s economy: “between 1914 and 1918, industrial employment increased by more than a third, and between 1913 and 1920 the value of exports more than tripled” (Anderson, 97). Due in large part to industrialization, during the forty year period between 1891 and 1931, Quebec’s population nearly doubled rising from 1.5 to 2.9 million people, and the proportion of urban dwellers in the province rose from 28 to 60% (Fortier, 17).

Coburn’s artistic career was at its height during those same four decades, a period characterized by such unprecedented growth and urban development. Additionally, the era’s sweeping trans-national

tendency peaked in 1920 with the creation of the League of Nations “as custodian of a new world order” (Anderson, 98). The nation states were in collusion and competition with one another, and the need to establish national histories and identities was a priority to compete internationally, culturally, economically, and politically. As a result, heritage industry and tourism flourished during that era and contributed to a significant “interest in sponsoring, financing, steering, vending, stimulating, planning, and authenticating universally grounded particularity and originality” (Anderson, 98). Such activities were, without question, firmly grounded within national landscape ideologies and discourses. I contend that Coburn’s paintings of loggers can be understood as products of what Anderson (98) has identified as an antimodern-modern quest for “‘authenticity’, ‘roots’, ‘originality’, and ‘history’” by referencing Canada’s oldest and natural industry, during an era when it was gradually being overshadowed by new technology and spreading industrialization. Coburn’s representations of rural loggers are symbols of this changing industry. Such paintings challenged modern calls for “progress,” by embracing an antimodern desire for, what Jessup (2001:3) has identified as “the type of ‘authentic,’ immediate experience supposedly embodied in pre-industrial societies,” the very type of experience loggers and teamsters would have encountered on a daily basis within the region’s forests, and along its well established nexus of trails and waterways. By the 1930s, as noted by François-Marc Gagnon (6), “the most intensive urbanization was taking place in Quebec. The old agriculturalist ideologies were unable to contain the masses of people who swelled the urban working classes.” Moreover, during that decade in Quebec, a strong contemporary art current that favored a more universal and international approach was gaining popularity amongst artists. John Lyman, for example, “believed that the time had come for Canadian painters to enter the international scene. It was urgent that painters become less preoccupied by subject matter and more concerned with style” (Gagnon, 17). The 1930s were clearly a transitional and volatile decade for Quebec artists as they struggled to position themselves between regionalism and internationalism.

Paradoxes and Dualities

At the turn of the twentieth century, abandonment of modernity, as Versluis (100) noted, “was not yet perceived as an option by socio-cultural critics. Instead, critics sought to create a safe haven, a refuge away from the depredations of modernity in works of art.” Two well educated and affluent Anglophone poets living in Montréal, W.H. Drummond (1854–1907), a doctor, and W.D. Lighthall (1857–1954),

a lawyer, promoted traditional folksongs, legends, and social customs in their writings as a refuge from modern excesses. Through each one of their romanticized vision's of rural Quebec's *Habitant* figure, the writers found that "the best traditions of seventeenth century France were being preserved – love of music, warmth of sentiment, romance, pleasure in work, delight in the charms of nature" (Wright, 137). Their poetry's antimodern sentiment was also very much a commercially successful antimodernism, one that Wright (142) has perceived as "an accommodation with modernity as much as it was a resistance to it." He cited how "Lighthall's 1892 book, *Montreal After Two Hundred and Fifty Years* was, 15 years later, republished as *Sights and Shrines of Montreal. A Guide Book for Tourists*." The very things he wanted to preserve from "the march of progress" he now packaged as tourist attractions. Similarly, Drummond's book *The Habitant And Other French-Canadian Poems* met with such commercial success that it was reprinted fifteen times by November 1900, three years after its first edition. Anderson (102) observed how, during that era, there was much concern about "the asphyxiation of Québécois 'peasant originality' through [...] commercialization and standardization." Such concerns were not unfounded in light of how Drummond's *Habitant* met with such commercial success, most notably during the Christmas Holiday season, that it was reprinted twice in December 1897 and three times in December 1898.

Coburn's detailed representations of rural Quebec's figures to illustrate Drummond's various publications individualize the subjects and characters with an earnestness and sensitivity that contrasts significantly with Drummond's lighthearted, mimicking verse as the "poet" endeavoured to emulate the French Canadian habitant's accent when speaking English, despite how he felt compelled to inform the public, in his preface, that he had "not written the verses as examples of a dialect, or with any thought of ridicule (Drummond, xi)." Many of the tales and anecdotes stem from habitant folklore that was cherished in the lumber camps during the nineteenth century as entertainment to amuse the lumberjacks after work. Such legends had been preserved from generation to generation through a culture's oral history, much of which Louis Fréchette identified as originating in France. Figure 3 is a portrait of a mature man, created by Coburn in 1896, that was used as a template for the cover illustration of Drummond's 1897 publication *The Habitant and Other French Canadian Poems*. The accompanying verse, written by Drummond, underscores a striking discrepancy between the author's text and the artist's illustration.

Coburn chose to portray the old habitant as a strong and self-assured individual. These qualities are conveyed by the figure's direct

gaze and reinforced by his weathered skin worn with confidence as a mask of wisdom. The viewer readily senses how the old man's aged skin has been transformed from a lifetime of outdoor labour, each one of his lines a natural scar that symbolizes his seasonal exposure to the burning sun, powerful winds, and bitter cold. The artist's representation

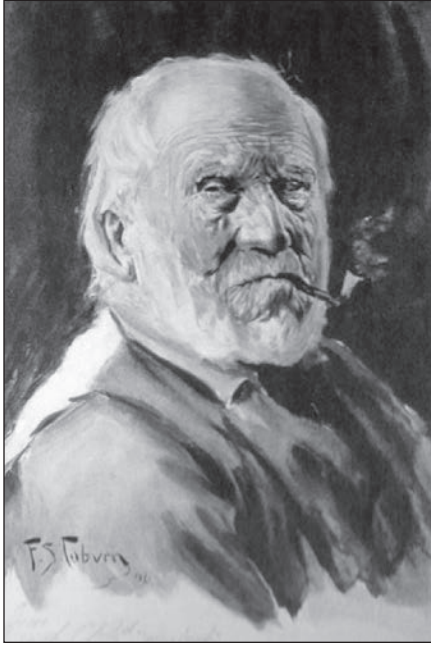


Figure 3. Frederick Simpson Coburn, illustration for W.H. Drummond's *The Habitant*. 1897. Published by G.P. Putnam's Sons. N.P. Author's collection.

suggests a determination and resolve that stems from a lifelong accumulation of experience, while Drummond's (1–2) prose alludes to circumstantial inevitability and poverty, packaged as a predetermined habitant's cultural legacy: “*De fader of me, he was habitant farmer, Ma gran' fader too, an' hees fader also, Dey don't mak' no monee, but dat is n't fonny, For it 's not easy get ev'ryt'ing, you mus' know.*” The cult of the habitant and rural life, according to Wright (138), served an important function in helping conservative Canada “confront the more ‘palpable realities’ of modern society, which was cosmopolitan, urban and disconnected.”

Coburn's illustrations for Drummond and Fréchette's publications relating to the French Canadian habitant's lifestyle, traditions, and folklore

De place I get born, me, is up on de reever
 Near foot of de rapide dats call Cheval Blanc
 De fader of me, he was habitant farmer,
 Ma gran' fader too, an' hees fader also,
 Dey don't mak' no monee, but dat is n't fonny
 For it 's not easy get ev'ryt'ing, you mus' know—
 So I'm workin' away dere, an' happy for stay dere,
 On farm by de reever, so long I was leev.
 Mos' ev'ry day raf' it is pass on de rapide
 De voyageurs singin' some ole chanson
 'Bout girl down de reever – too bad dey mus' leave her,
 But comin' back soon' wit' beaucoup d'argent.
 (W.H. Drummond, *Habitant*, 1–3)

are often inspired by, if not directly sketched from, the people and places he encountered while in the Townships. In a particularly extraordinary situation relating to a model for one of his illustrations, the artist described his developments to Drummond in a letter dated September 8, 1898 regarding his sketches (fig. 4) for the poet's Philorum character in *Phil-O-Rum's Canoe and Madeleine Verchères*, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons that same year.

My dear Dr. Drummond. I have just got back from Ste. George de Windsor whether I was hunting up "Philorum". He was sick in bed but got up & dressed & posed when I told him 25 000 people were clamoring for his picture. I've been working like the Devil and although none of the drawings are positively completed still if necessary I could let you have three next week finished.
(ETRCb)



Figure 4. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *Philorum frontispiece*. 1898. Published by G.P. Putnam's Sons. N.P. Author's collection. The story is a nostalgic exchange between the old man and his canoe that suggests better times in the past, times that were simpler and easier.

In December of the same year, Coburn's father wrote to Drummond informing him of news regarding the model for Philorum:

Poor old Philorum was buried here on the 3rd November. They had to send him to the R. C. Hospital in Sherbooke just two weeks after Fred got him for his last sitting. He was very feeble then & it took Fred 2 days to get the painting done. He could only sit up for a few minutes at a time. Fred heard he was ill so he started at once & had to drive 12 miles back of Windsor Mills & he feared very

much that the old fellow would not sit outside long enough, but a big package of tobacco had a stimulating effect - & they managed it. (ETRCc)

Many of Drummond's publications were influenced by the folklore he had learned and the stories he had heard while working in Quebec lumber camps. Donald Mackay (33) has described how "there was little to read in a pine camp and few who knew how in the old days and a good story teller was almost as welcome as a good cook." Quebec's storytellers were referred to as *conteurs des contes* who became famous due to how well they, as Mackay (243) explained, "spun yarns of the *voyageurs*, of the *bûcheron's* hero Joe Montferrand, and of the *loup-garou*, the werewolf who travelled hundreds of miles in one night through the great north woods [...] The liveliest storyteller of all was Joseph Lemieux, known as 'Joe Violon'." Several of these characters figured prominently in Drummond's work.

With *Lumber Camp Scene* (fig. 5), Coburn created an oil painting which featured lumber camp labourers assembled in front of a cabin in the forest in autumn, patiently looking on as two men engage in an animated discussion. Coburn brings to this canvas a composite array of figures that are strikingly similar to those he studied and illustrated for Drummond and Fréchette's respective publications. Within the group one recognizes the habitant, voyageur, Johnnie Courteau, Phil-O-Rums, and Joe Violon characters he had represented with such detail as illustrations. Those figures and characters represent the



Figure 5. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *Lumber Camp Scene*. 1900.
Oil painting, 58.0 x 88.2 cm. MNBAQ.

nation's colorful lumberjack legends that were featured in the writers' publications, as they both, each in their own way, documented the labourers' traditional songs, folklore, values, and beliefs. In a newspaper article that appeared in *La Patrie* on April 27th 1901, this particular oil painting (*Le squelette de fer*) was created by Coburn as an illustration for Fréchette's story entitled "The Iron Skeleton." The two figures engaged in conversation are the English-speaking Irish camp foreman, facing the viewer, and Joe Violon, the French Canadian crew chief and liveliest storyteller of all, who, with outstretched hands, is in the process of describing an absurd tale to his incredulous boss. The quantity and scope of publications, illustrations, and paintings of rural figures including the French Canadian habitant, lumberjacks, and teamsters that circulated at the turn of twentieth century can be attributed to their popularity as anti-modern guises, in light of how painters and poets including Coburn, Julien, Fréchette, Georges Bouchard (1888–1956), Edwin Holgate (1892–1977), and Drummond re-presented them as symbols of traditional labourers whose work contrasted significantly with factory employment. Versluis (106) identified antimodernism "as the most characteristic and, in many respects, the most creative aspect of modernity," insisting that it "represents an instinctive reaction against the mechanization and bureaucratization of life, against the destruction of the natural world, against the destruction of traditional cultures, and against the destruction of the quality of human life" (122).

Several ambiguities punctuated the prevalent and dichotomous French/English cultural environment in Quebec which was exacerbated by the modern era's ambivalent perceptions of landscape relative to its everyday engagement with, and industrial apprehension of, the natural environment. Such perceptions and uses of nature included recreation, resource, livelihood, property, and prospect. This was the very socio-cultural climate that Coburn grew up in and experienced on a daily basis in the Eastern Townships as a child. Initially as an illustrator and then as a painter, Coburn closely observed the region's local populations, customs, and terrain. Janet Brooke (14) has addressed how "the poetry of Drummond and Fréchette broke new ground in Canada for its affectionate and colourful evocation of life in rural Québec- its legends, traditions and religion and the joys, sorrows and daily realities of its ordinary citizens." She also noted how these works "reflect a growing nationalism which, for the first time, focused on everyday life rather than on accomplishments of the wealthy and powerful, making heroes of simple men and women." Coburn's illustrations for these authors' texts visually reinforced the nostalgic sentiments and ordinary themes that included rural

loggers hauling or chopping lumber in winter, and developed into one of his preferred subjects throughout his lengthy painting career. Works such as Drummond's *Habitant* and Fréchette's *Christmas in French Canada* were "motivated by an international trend in the arts that sought to preserve traditional values in the face of radical social change, urbanization, worldwide immigration and industrialization" (Brooke, 14), at the turn of the century. This trend was very much an antimodern one. Anderson (102) further addressed how "the end of 'traditionality' in Quebec [presented] a real challenge to Anglophone Canadian hegemony," which adds another layer to the Anglophone population's interest in publications like Fréchette's, Bouchard's and Drummond's, in light of how they celebrated French Canada's traditions, rural life, countryside, and old habitant lifestyle.

One of Canada's inherent "internal divisions is its linguistic dualism—the historical cohabitation of a French-speaking minority concentrated in Quebec and an English-speaking population that constitutes the vast majority of every other province" (Adams and Bressani, 75). Award winning Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan addressed this duality in his 1945 novel aptly named *Two Solitudes*, summarized by critics as "a penetrating study of the beliefs and behaviors, the myths and animosities, which have caused French-Canadians and English-Canadians to resist amalgamation into a homogeneous nation and to exist as two separate peoples, uncommunicative and isolated" (e-Notes). In this fictional novel, MacLennan confronted Quebec's French-English cultural dynamic, while emphasizing the socio-political power and influence of the Catholic Church and elite merchant class. The story unfolds in Montréal and its rural surroundings between 1917 and 1939. Although published in 1945, the author reverts to the era and the very landscapes and people Coburn and his peers were studying and painting. The particular point of interest to this study is how MacLennan inserted Coburn's unmistakable signature style of landscape painting into his work of fiction. At one point in his story, which stretches from Montréal to rural Chambly to Lake Memphremagog between world wars, the author described how one of his main characters, Janet,

had a recurrent dream in which she entered General Methuen's library in the big house on the side of Mount Royal and saw her father-in-law sitting very straight in his leather armchair next to the red draperies under the gilt-framed landscape in which a French-Canadian farmer drove a white horse and black horse through the snow (MacLennan 169).

In the story, General Methuen represented the very heart of Anglophone power in Montréal, and through MacLennan's

description and details, it is easy for the reader to imagine Methuen as the city's Golden Square Mile leader, Sir Hugh Allan, sitting in his library at Ravenscrag, the most commanding mansion on the face of Mount-Royal. Coburn's *The Edge of the Wood* (fig. 6) exemplifies MacLennan's description of the painting hanging in the general's library, and highlights Coburn's well known affinity for pairing a white horse with a dark one in his landscapes.

It is not unsurprising that MacLennan chose Coburn's signature style landscape to convey to his readers how a prestigious Mount-Royal mansion's library would appear, given the composition's popularity amongst Montréal's art patrons during that era. In 1917, for example, the artist had sold two such paintings at the AAM exhibit: *The Lonely Road*, and *Logging—The Creek Road* (ETRCa). Watson (62), a prominent art dealer in Montréal, recalled how Coburn "favoured the Eastern Townships near Melbourne, where he was born, and more than half his pictures are winter logging scenes painted entirely in his studio. He began painting such pictures about 1910." They became so popular



Figure 6. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *The Edge of the Wood*.
Signed and dated '28. Oil on canvas, 15" x 18 1/2".
Watson Art Galleries, Montreal label verso.



Figure 7. Detail of the Norton Family sitting room, Coaticook summer residence. 1942. Photographed by George Nakash. Courtesy of Le Musée Beaulne, Coaticook, Quebec.

that one collector proclaimed “it looks as if every house should have a piano and a Coburn.”

Figure 7 is a photograph of the Norton family’s sitting room taken in 1942 at their residence in Coaticook and it certainly reinforces the preferred taste of the elite for “a piano and a Coburn” (Watson, 62). Note the large Coburn panoramic painting of a team of dark and light horses returning home at night on the mantel of the fireplace, along with a baby grand piano nestled between a pair of chairs by the windows in the background. The large, unframed painting *Returning Home by Moonlight* (fig. 8) appears incongruous in the luxuriously appointed room amidst Nortons’ delicate crystal and rare vase collections, fine tapestry and rugs, and ornately carved hardwood mouldings and furniture.

The painting’s humble theme of a rural labourer returning to his cabin after dark, appears to conflict with the modernly lit room filled with ornate and luxury products- many of which are wooden commodities produced from lumber similar to the logs the teamster in the painting would have recently finished transporting throughout the day before “returning home by moonlight.”



Figure 8. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *Returning Home by Moonlight*. 1930. Oil on canvas, 66 x 170.8 cm. La Galerie Walter Klinkhoff. <http://fscoburn.com/pictures_f/pic21.html>, consulted November 6, 2015.

Conclusion

Coburn, Drummond, and Fréchette's antimodern values were manifest as artistic expressions that responded to a perceived sense of loss - in particular, the loss of a former 'authentic' experience. As the turn of the twentieth century approached, Coburn grew increasingly intent on treating Canadian history as a subject. In a letter to Fréchette in 1898, the artist stressed how he was "more determined than ever to devote [him]self to painting the early history in Canada" (Kennell, 47-8). In a subsequent letter written in 1900, again addressed to Fréchette, Coburn reaffirmed his interest in focusing on Canada's social history:

It has always been my desire to treat French Canada pictorially & as I said to Dr. Drummond over the object of my study abroad was to come to the work with no bungling hand. I am far from it heavens knows but I'm struggling towards that goal [...] When the light is turned on Canadian history and the Habitant as yet unexplored fields of highways & byways. This time is not far off, if I can read the signs of the times aright (Kennell,48).

Jessup (2001:6) has emphasized how "the antimodern response constituted a great variety of personal and collective quests for innocence, for authenticity, and for simpler, safer premodern spaces within the broader borders of the modern world." In Fréchette's preface to his 1899 publication *Christmas in French Canada*, illustrated by Coburn, the author eloquently expressed the essence of such an antimodern response. He explained to his readers:

My objective was to do something to popularize, among exclusive English readers, this portion of the American soil called French Canada, with the characteristic features that she borrows [...] from her people, whose language, manner, customs, traditions, and popular beliefs bear an exceptional stamp [...] I have tried to convey some idea of the wild rigor of our winters, by putting,

in turn, face to face with them, our valiant pioneers of the forest, our bold adventurers of the North - West, and our sturdy tamers of the flocs, whose exploits of the past are gradually being forgotten in the presence of invading progress (Fréchette, vii-viii).

Jessup (2001:6) also noted how “antimodernism sentiment was usually a compromised expression that was rarely seen in its purest form as a rejection of the modern world,” as such it did not embrace a full scale rejection of modern life, but required, rather, an almost inevitable or necessary accommodation with it. This research paper has endeavoured to demonstrate how many of these values and themes are embedded within Coburn’s rural representations of the Eastern Townships’ landscape. His “great-grand-daddy” of all paintings was one he consistently refused to sell, preferring to keep it faithfully on display in his home studio (Stevens, 42). Coburn informed Stevens that his 1912 etching entitled *The Last Load* (fig. 9) was inspired by that beloved “great-grand-daddy” of all paintings.

The coloured print features what appears to be an exhausted and ageing teamster sitting sideways, curled forward in resignation, protectively turning his back to the wind. The contrasting colored pair of horses pull the logs and labourer along, heads hanging low as they strain forward beneath a darkening sky. The horses’ hooves barely leave the ground. The trio appear to lack the strength or energy to keep their heads up during this journey, their last load. This



Figure 9. Frederick Simpson Coburn, *The Last Load*. 1912. Colour etching and aquatint on woven paper, 65.1 x 79.5 cm. Sherbrooke Museum of Fine Arts.

image reads as an antimodern allegory that anticipated impending change: man and horse soon to be replaced by machine, on the very eve of progress, their last load a symbol of a fading era. The team is unhurried to complete its journey, unable to keep pace with the new century's rapidly changing environment. As the sun sets beyond them, they ease into twilight as Coburn anticipated the imminence of the teamster's last load. Dan Brown (18) has referred to how "Marshall McLuhan often stated that while most individuals are limited by a 'rearview mirror' perspective – where the present is comprehended in terms of past modes of understanding – artists tend to possess greater sensitivity to cultural transformations, resulting in their works appearing uncannily prescient and forward thinking." *The Last Load* suggests that, in 1912, Coburn foresaw the inevitable transformation of the teamster's livelihood as the lumber industry shifted from relying on traditional manual labour and horsepower to innovative industrial machinery.

ENDNOTES

1. Colour copy of slides from Norton's Coaticook residence art collection, courtesy of Monique Nadeau-Saumier and Le Musée Beaulne.
2. Jackson Lears qtd. in Jessup, L., 2001, 3.

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