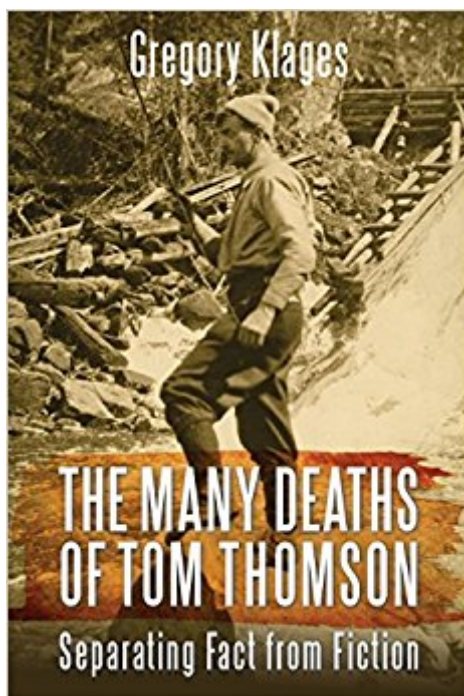


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# The Many Deaths Of Tom Thomson: Separating Fact From Fiction



## Synopsis

A National Post Bestseller! How did Tom Thomson die in the summer of 1917? Was landscape painter Tom Thomson shot by poachers, or by a German-American draft dodger? Did a blow from a canoe paddle knock him unconscious and into the water? Was he fatally injured in a drunken fight? Did he end his life out of fear of being forced to marry his pregnant girlfriend? Commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the death of the renowned Canadian landscape painter, *The Many Deaths of Tom Thomson* offers an authoritative review of the historical record, as well as some theories you might not have thought of in a hundred years. Cultural historian Gregory Klages surveys first-hand testimony and archival records about Thomson's tragic demise, attempting to sort fact from legend in the death of this Canadian icon.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Klages's forensic archival sleuthing does provide, for the first time in almost a century, some degree of certainty surrounding this event. (Kathleen Garay and Christl Verduyn Archival Narratives for Canada) *The Many Deaths of Tom Thomson* stands as both a conscientious case study and a larger investigation into what history can and cannot do. (Canada's History) Klages has produced a timely and valuable contribution to the literature on Thomson that certainly will be of interest to historians, artists, and popular audiences. (Canadian Historical Review) Klages examines each hypothesis in turn, in clean, crisp prose. (writerstrust.com)

Gregory Klages is the research director for *Death on a Painted Lake: The Tom Thomson Tragedy*,

one of twelve archival websites produced by the international award-winning Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project. His research concerning Thomson has appeared in Canadian and American publications, and been talked about in national newspapers. He has also shared his insights on television and radio across the country. He lives in Toronto.

It is unfortunate that Tom Thomson is renowned at least as much for his death as for his art. His art is stunning, unique and lauded worldwide. His death was early, sudden and unwitnessed, which has led to an entire industry of theories, books and stories. Thomson was a natural. Without formal training or apprenticeship, he developed a style of landscape painting that is world class, and in only five years. In France, a critic of Thomson's work noted that "any landscape ever painted in France made you feel the presence of man, but that in Canadian landscapes you feel his absence." Thomson caught the real, natural, vacant Canada whose unsurpassed beauty has never been represented better. Tom Thomson would make God proud of His work. Klages is very precise. He has examined all the available evidence, compared it among the rapporteurs and against original documents. His fact checking is intensive, extensive and impressive. His findings are just as precise: Tom Thomson must have slipped, hit his head on a rock, log or gunwale, and drowned. At the scene, in 1917, there was no disagreement or alternate scenario considered. It was obvious, and there was no evidence whatsoever for other intrigues. It was really only in the 1930s that the rot started to set in. Over the decades, more and more phony stories appeared, and much like internet facts, the more places they appeared, the more truthful they became. By this century, it was out of control, with books, songs and even a board game. Authors who got it wrong the first time came back with new offerings making it even worse: drunken fights the night before, threats that never occurred, a (non) pregnancy and forced wedding to avoid, an empty coffin sent home "all published to credible reception. This included tv investigative shows, docudramas, news magazines and book. The facts seemed hardly to matter. We make up stories, write them down, and believe them. The Many Deaths of Tom Thomson is almost a courtroom drama of evidence and witnesses. It is fair, balanced, and clear. You are definitely there at the scene, and you get to know all the characters thoroughly and intimately. There simply can't be more than this; it is definitive. We can only hope. David Wineberg

The idea that Tom Thomson was murdered has been a staple of Canadian popular culture for decades, but until now it doesn't seem to have been the subject of serious historical inquiry. Well, now Gregory Klages, a historian at York University, has examined it. His book is a thorough and

highly competent examination of purported evidence that Thomson was murdered, that (as some claim) he committed suicide, or that (as the inquest found) he died in an accident. I won't spoil the experience of reading the book by revealing his conclusion, but it is extremely well argued. Klages also gets to the point quickly about each piece of evidence -- no welter of unnecessary detail here -- and the book moves along quickly in an intelligent and clear style. I also found the book interesting as a case study in the development of legend. Saying any more about that might also betray the conclusion, but the book is worth reading for that, too. He also is illuminating about Thomson's position in the art world during his life and after -- it's essential to evaluating the evidence, but also interesting in itself. I've always thought Canadian painters were underestimated internationally, but it seems Thomson wasn't. This book is a model of what popular history should be -- interesting, pertinent, cogent, significant, and a damn good read.

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