THE INVISIBLE COMPANION

THE INVISIBLE COMPANION: A CRITICAL HISTORY OF JOAN LAVIS MACDONALD

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to establish Joan Lavis MacDonald (1871–1962) as the intellectual and philosophical companion of her spouse, Canadian painter J.E.H. MacDonald. Her journals and articles are central resources in this reconstruction of the life and circumstances of a woman living in southern Ontario, Canada at the end of the Victorian-era. By the dawn of the twentieth century, urbanization, industrialization, opportunities for women to pursue post-secondary education, and social reformations found Joan Lavis at a point of conflict between the newly-available educational opportunities and traditions of homemaking, and the thesis is divided accordingly. Although the points of conflict are examined separately, the thesis nonetheless affirms Joan Lavis MacDonald’s ability to combine the two by drawing on cultural and art movements like transcendentalism and the arts and crafts movement.

The thesis moves beyond the male-dominated sphere in which the Group of Seven operated to examine Joan Lavis MacDonald as a contributor, and in turn influenced by, the distinctly Canadian domestic environment that permeates J.E.H. MacDonald and the Group of Seven’s insistence that nature is synonymous with Canaian-ness. This creates additional space for women in a national history intertwined with ideals of masculinity that are in turn fabricated by men, and studies an important art movement from outside the mythologized individuals and locations that have become indivisible from it. Thus, the thesis also creates a new avenue by which J.E.H. MacDonald may be studied and understood.

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i. Joan Lavis MacDonald and her brothers Tom and Frank Lavis, c. 1900. Photograph. MacDonald Private Collection.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The name Joan Lavis MacDonald might not ring a bell throughout Group of Seven histories, so much as a dull chime. “Joan” is what she was called by family and friends, but she is primarily known—or unknown, most regularly—for being married to James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald (1873–1932), one of the most prominent members of the Group of Seven. Joan Lavis MacDonald is a peripheral mention within Group of Seven scholarship, flitting through the small collection of biographies devoted to J.E.H. MacDonald, and appearing briefly throughout several of the journals and book introductions written by her son, Thoreau MacDonald (1901–1989), otherwise focused on Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, and his own career as an artist.

The only publication wholly devoted to Joan Lavis MacDonald is a nineteen-page article in *The York Pioneer*, “The Journal of Harriet Joan Lavis, 1888–1896,” compiled and published by Susan M. MacDonald, great-niece of Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald. Moreover, until “The Invisible Companion” prompted further archival research, Joan Lavis’ pseudonym Penelope, and her column devoted to homemaking published in the *Canadian Baptist Magazine*, “The Girl’s Corner,” was unheard of. Suffice to say, a proper study of Joan Lavis MacDonald’s character and contributions is well overdue.

The initial formation of “The Invisible Companion’s” thesis statement was dependent on the research that could be produced about Joan Lavis MacDonald, due to the fact that Lavis MacDonald has never been researched or written about in this analytical capacity. The initial hypothesis, prior to completed research, was a consideration of Lavis MacDonald’s direct influence on J.E.H. MacDonald’s artistic work and the notion that she, like her husband, contributed to the sort of aesthetic nation-building the Group of Seven introduced in the early twentieth century, of romanticizing northern wilderness as vacant, hostile land while nonetheless retreating into it. While the thesis does successfully pull together the primary materials necessary to recreate Lavis MacDonald’s character and legacy, and creates a greater understanding of her position as a young woman living in, and attending gendered social environments and institutions, these archival materials are not as extensive and organized as those about J.E.H. MacDonald. Several archivists consulted during the writing process at the Toronto Archives, the Archives of Ontario, and the local Oshawa Historical Society assumed my inquiries were for a personal genealogical project, because Lavis MacDonald’s census and employment information is separate from the chronologies devoted to J.E.H. MacDonald and his contemporaries. Lavis MacDonald’s letters and photographs, in turn, are part of the MacDonald Private Collection managed by Susan MacDonald, whose references to her “Aunt Joan” and “Uncle Jim” further solidified the importance of the individual, versus historical romanticization throughout the production of the thesis.

Thus, the thesis statement was revised, and the dynamic of Lavis MacDonald’s companionship to J.E.H. MacDonald was altered as research did not reveal the explicit connections between Joan Lavis MacDonald and her husband’s painting that had been outlined in preliminary draft work. Not finding the sources necessary for the early thesis statement did not deter from the project, however, but underlined an important question about Lavis MacDonald, which is that of her invisibility.

The objective of “The Invisible Companion,” then, is to step outside of the accepted Group of Seven histories and biographies by first identifying its socially homogenous makeup, to subsequently establish Joan Lavis MacDonald as a contributor to the domestic environment she shared with J.E.H. MacDonald, while at the same time acknowledging her predisposition towards his influence, especially in terms of connecting with nature, even within their shared domestic environment. The following chapters therefore examine her philosophical and aesthetic ideals, as projected through her roles as educator and homemaker. The two roles are fluid, often contradicting one another in such a way that weighs on her conscience, and they occupy varying degrees of prominence at different periods of her life. The thesis examines them individually in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the ways in which they closely mirrored her husband’s values and ambitions, even years prior to their meeting. In this way, the thesis establishes the relationship between Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald as a give-and-take companionship that was founded on shared artistic and literary appreciations.

Joan Lavis MacDonald was a central figure in her husband’s life “not only [as] the spouse but also the intellectual companion of one of Canada’s leading landscape painters” (Wheatcroft “Introduction” 3). She was one of the only Group of Seven wives present during the Group’s period of early development (c. 1911–1920) who occupied a place in her husband’s creative and professional life as well as within the domestic. In contrast, another of the Group’s most prominent members, Lawren Harris (1885–1970), “compartmentalize[d] his daily existence” by leading an “ordinary” domestic life with first wife Beatrice “Trixie” (née Phillips) Harris (1885–1962), who had no interest in art while Lawren Harris spent the majority of his time away from home “with other artists and like-minded individuals” (J. King 57). Joan Lavis MacDonald was not a painter, but she and J.E.H. MacDonald were extraordinarily like-minded and shared interests beyond painting such as artisanry (travelling to Boston together in 1900 to inquire into the Roycroft arts and crafts colony), botany, writing (both successfully published), and reading, with a great admiration for the transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), after whom they named their only child.

This thesis is, ultimately, as much about Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s marriage and comradeship as it is about Joan Lavis MacDonald’s individual efforts and achievements. It offers answers, not only to the question of what it meant to be married to a leader of one of the nation’s most influential art movements, but also seeks to understand the circumstances of a young woman born into a late-Victorian Canada and hurtled into a twentieth century marked by industrial revolution, progressive strides for women in education, and the economic and social hardships accompanying the First World War. In order to avoid historical digressions throughout the thesis, and to offer a thorough understanding of Joan Lavis MacDonald from the outset, the following biography will allot more room in later chapters for critical discussions of a virtually unknown historical figure, and her body of writings.

Harriet Joanna Dionysius (née Lavis) MacDonald—always called “Joan”—was, as recalled by her great-niece, Susan M. MacDonald, “filled with … gentleness and kindness” and was “well-raised and articulate” (J. MacDonald 12). Photographs from the MacDonald Private Collection show her to be well-dressed without appearing ornate, her hair always pinned or plaited in a bun. She was poised. When conscious of a camera’s presence, she looked directly at the photographer with the same repressed yet warm smile as her husband. She was nonetheless caught unawares in the occasional photograph, huddled rapt over a book or leaning comfortably against a fence, gazing across a field.

Joan Lavis’ quiet demeanour was a stark contrast to the bustling household environment into which she was born on 14 September 1871, in Whitby, Ontario, Canada. Her parents, Susanna “Susan” Helena (née Prior) Lavis (c. 1845–1899) and John Richard “J.R.” Lavis (c. 1835–1926), were born in England (J.R. Lavis in North Lew, in Devon) and had immigrated to Canada by the 1860s, where J.R. Lavis worked as a waggon maker.[[1]](#footnote-1) Their first son, John “Frank” Lavis (b. 1867), was four years old at the time of Joan Lavis’ birth; he also later worked as a waggon maker. A second brother, Thomas “Tom” Lavis (b. 1874), arrived three years later. Because William Lavis’ family lived nearby, and Lavis noted in August of 1888 that her grandparents were interred in Oshawa’s Methodist cemetery, it is doubtful that her immediate family were the only unit of Lavis’ to have immigrated to Canada. Likewise, in her maternal line, Joan Lavis often visited her Aunty Jo, in Brooklin, Ontario, and later in her life, her aunt Esther, who lived further north in Burke’s Falls, Ontario.

The Lavises moved several times throughout what is today the eastern Greater Toronto Area, between the towns of Cannington, Whitby, and Oshawa.[[2]](#footnote-2) The latter community is where Joan Lavis began her journals (integral this study) in the first half of 1888 (Wheatcroft “Introduction” 3). Oshawa is also where the Lavises settled, and where Joan Lavis spent the most of her youth and adolescence. Her mother was a presence in the community and congregation and was involved in the choir and leading a “young ladies” class, which Lavis declined in favour of “Bible class. In so doing, she insisted, “I am not a young lady” (Lavis 6). Beyond the divergence on the issue of young ladies, Joan Lavis and her mother were close, and Susan Lavis’ influence was extensive in her daughter’s life.

One of the fundamental aspects of Lavis’ character, especially evident during these adolescent and young adult years, was an extraordinarily high level of ambition. In addition to waking up at five o’clock in the morning to complete household chores throughout the day, Lavis, by the age of seventeen, was an avid reader, attending Sunday School as well as the aforementioned Bible classes, keeping a regular journal, and attending additional meetings such as a missionary meeting on 3 November 1888 (6).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Susan Lavis encouraged her daughter in all her endeavours, and if she did not outright encourage she was nonetheless enthusiastic, just as Joan Lavis was, in turn, unendingly supportive of her mother. It was, she believed, a divine duty to be a mother’s right hand in affairs of the home; she considered herself an extension of her mother, Susan Lavis’ early death on 25 August1889, at the age of 45, was an emotional blow to Joan Lavis. For months following her mother’s passing, Lavis became ill—this was no doubt caused in large part by grieving, though she often battled ailments throughout her life.

By the spring of 1890, she had recovered and resumed her regular tasks and hobbies. On 18 March she was “able to do little things again,” and on the following day read Bishop Tayler’s *Golden Grove,* read[ing] [her] Bible very much every day and … beginning to study Botany,” as well as “learn[ing] a good many hymns and psalms” (6-7). That year was also busy on account of abrupt travel plans, when J.R. Lavis decided “all at once” to return to England (8). Her brother Frank Lavis was no longer living at home, but Joan Lavis and her younger brother, Tom, were sent to Brooklin, a community near Whitby, Ontario, to stay with their “Aunty Jo” and cousin—and Lavis’ closest friend—Roberta “Roby” Whiteside. Many of Lavis’ journal entries were written from Brooklin; this was a break in the monotony of her work and studies at home in Oshawa. Brooklin, and her cousin’s good company brought outdoor excursions, picnics and a lot of time spent reading.

It is difficult to situate the Lavises within a distinct socioeconomic class beyond that of “comfortable.” Joan Lavis attended school—likely a college, as she was twenty years old by this time—in the Oshawa region beginning in January of 1891, and could afford required books for her classes as well as a newly-styled gymnastics uniform for the following year, as a part of her “first dress reform garments” that she declared an “emancipation” (13).[[4]](#footnote-4) Additionally, her father was able and willing to support her (“as long as you like”) before her marriage, which did not occur until Joan Lavis was several months shy of twenty-eight years old (qtd. in Lavis 10).[[5]](#footnote-5) She also lived in Toronto while studying at McMaster University, then located at McMaster Hall, 273 Bloor St. West, between 1896 and 1899, and the cost of living would still have been paid by J.R. Lavis. Thus, although Joan Lavis’ later life would be marked by financial hardships, her years as a youth and young adult were seemingly free of any financial hindrances. Rather, her finances enabled her to exercise a level of socially progressive development through her participation in the dress reform movement, for instance, and access to literatures even after the passing of her mother, her greatest source of encouragement in matters of education and creative pursuits.

The year 1892 saw many of Lavis’ quiet ambitions beginning to manifest themselves in a series of outward commitments. On a summer evening in late August, a large crowd of members from the Methodist Church gathered to hear Joan Lavis deliver a lecture as part of the Christian Education meeting. The outcome was a positive one, both in terms of the listeners’ response and also in terms of literally providing her with a platform on which to find her voice and agency as a public educator. In the very next, very brief, journal entry she noted that she was also made president of the Mission Band, which was affiliated with the Sunday School program through the Methodist Church.[[6]](#footnote-6) Her election is hardly surprising, given that five months earlier she walked out from the parsonage one evening, in her eager fashion, with arms heaping with books to help her prepare mission programmes pertaining to “the Oka Indians” (Lavis 13).

Another extension of Joan Lavis’ keen desire to impart knowledge and advice to others manifested itself in “The Girl’s Corner,” a column in the *Canadian Baptist Magazine*, which Lavis started in 1894 under the pseudonym ‘Penelope’. The column lasted well into 1896, though it seems her studies at McMaster University, or her conversion from the Baptist Church to Christian Science in 1897, ended the two-year publication devoted “largely of the things of Home – sweetest, to [her] of all subjects” (16).

After six years of keeping a journal and attempting (or at least intending) to dabble in poetry, “The Girl’s Corner” was a notable benchmark in Lavis’ devotion to writing, because it marked her putting her ideals and difficult, sometimes conflicting thoughts to paper successfully. Many times throughout her journal she struggled, writing, “I wanted to go away off to myself. It [the rain and landscape] filled me so with thoughts and feelings. But I cannot write them down – I never can” (5). “The Girl’s Corner” allowed her this outlet through writing, but also allowed her to do so before a readership who wrote letters to her, from whom she received feedback and validation as she, in turn, validated their experiences as homemakers and as young women.

Joan Lavis traveled with her brothers throughout southern Ontario, and Frank, her eldest brother, accompanied her on one particularly notable trip to Toronto in April 1893. They spent several days in the city where she “visited the new Parliament Bldgs.,” and noted wistfully, “how I loved McMaster and yearned to go there some day” (15). Though Lavis did go on to study Literature at McMaster from 1895 to 1897, her initial visit brought only wishful thinking. “But this is not for me,” she concluded, and it is unsurprising that university was not a certainty at that period (15).

Earlier that month she left from the Methodist Church, and on 14 May, was baptized as a member of the Baptist Church. Furthermore, as 1893 drew to a close, her father J.R. Lavis announced his engagement to Margaret Ann Carmichael, and the two were married on 29 November.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even with these major changes that occurred in Lavis’ life in 1893, her closing entry for the year nonetheless recalled, “waging within [her] of late, a battle, the victory of which seemed to be first on one side and then on the other,” the battle being “an independent life” versus “the womanly instinct for home” (16). She conceded that “this [home] at last [had] gained supremacy” (16).

The perpetual conflict of education over homemaking is central to her character, and subsequently to her future familial environment with her husband and son. It is then useful to examine briefly the cyclical nature of her thoughts, which she herself described as such: “Sometimes I feel as if I should lend all my energies to housework … Then again I find these things irksome to me, and my whole nature longing intensely for intellectual pursuits. … Neither will satisfy me alone. I want them united—that is it—but how?” (8). The two desires of “housework” and “intellectual pursuits,” most simply put, became self-fulfilling of one another in her life. She gravitated towards idealized natural environments because that is the type of rural region in which she grew up; however, it took an education and an extensive amount of reading in order to garner the theories and national (or North American during the nineteenth century) discourses—most notably transcendentalism—to articulate the value she saw in the physical environment. As Lavis herself surmises, “They [country young men and women] are superior but they need to be educated to an appreciation of the beautiful in nature” (18).

Lavis began her education at McMaster University in 1895, where she was listed as a part-time student in the Arts program. Her place of residence was still registered as Oshawa, Ontario, which suggests that even as she attended classes, she continued to devote her time to working at home—unless ill health or low funds were a cause for distributing her terms as such. It is difficult to know what “part-time” meant in terms of course length and distribution, as she did not write any journal entries for the year of 1895; however, by the 1896-97 academic year she was listed as residing permanently in Toronto, which more or less marked her leaving Oshawa behind for the remainder of her life.

At this point, Joan Lavis began an ongoing, very successful correspondence with a young commercial designer, two years her junior; thin and tall with a head of orange curls and warm yet perceptive pale blue eyes. With a wry sense of humour and northern dialect, he was sometimes mistaken by colleagues for a Scot, but James Edward Hervey MacDonald was in fact born near Durham, England on 12 May 1873 to William H. MacDonald (1850–1936), a cabinet maker, and Margaret (née Usher) MacDonald (1852-1929). In England, he attended the Boy’s Model School, where he excelled in literature. In March of 1887, aged 13, MacDonald immigrated to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with his parents and three younger siblings: William MacDonald (b. 1876), Margaret “Daisy” MacDonald (b. 1883) and Bertha MacDonald (1885–1910).

Had MacDonald pursued his interest and talents in the field of literature, he might have pursued the same path as Joan MacDonald in attaining a university degree; however, the MacDonalds were not so financially “comfortable” as the Lavises, and when MacDonald arrived in Canada he took an apprenticeship as a designer at the Duncan Lithographic Company. He was also enrolled in night classes at the Hamilton Art School, studying under far-northern-landscape artist Arthur Heming (1870–1940), who was a mere three years older than MacDonald.[[8]](#footnote-8)

His schedule remained equally busy following the MacDonalds’ move to Toronto in 1890-91, where he apprenticed at yet two more lithographic studios, and by 1893 was attending evening and weekend art courses at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design (COSAD). MacDonald was rather late in coming into his talents as a painter; however, at the COSAD, studying under George A. Reid (1860-1947), MacDonald began to work on his artistic orientation, remarking, “I am weak in drawing, but according to Mr. Reid, I put my ‘notes’ of colour true. Perhaps I would do better in landscape than in figure, tho’, of course, poor drawing is detrimental to either” (qtd. in Duval 18-19).

Generally, because of his all-consuming work and school schedule, the 1890s were not particularly ambitious years for MacDonald, who referred to himself in hindsight as a “hermit” with “no definite aim” (15-16). He read extensively and dabbled in poetry, inspired by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759–1796), whom Joan Lavis also frequently cited in “The Girl’s Corner.” Ultimately, though J.E.H. MacDonald demonstrated artistic and creative inclinations, he had not yet found a sense of direction or deeper engagement with the materials than “foolish amusements” (16).

The inciting event that most obviously started MacDonald down the path towards his future as a landscape painter was being hired at the Grip Printing & Publishing Co. Grip allowed him to connect with young artists, engravers and designers such as Norman Price (1877–1951), Thomas Greene (1875–1955) and William Wallace (c. 1875–1950). The young men formed artist’s leagues and clubs with local painters and designers outside the immediate sphere of Grip, most notably the Toronto Art Students’ League, wherein “there was a great stirring of the Canadian ideal,” as MacDonald recalled (qtd. in R. King 21). Members went on sketching trips in groups—sometimes several hours north, but often around the High Park and Humber River areas of Toronto, which were ideal, given MacDonald’s constrained schedule. Busy as he was, being a part of the Toronto Art Students’ League evoked, for the first time, a correlation in MacDonald’s life between national values and ideals, and visual arts, thus beginning his long-term project to achieve a distinctly Canadian aesthetic form.

One of the most important relationships J.E.H. MacDonald formed was with a Haligonian artist who joined Grip in 1896 named Lewis Smith (1871–1926). MacDonald got to work one morning to find Smith working at his table, and the two men became close friends very quickly (Kelly 10). In an 1898 letter to Joan Lavis, J.E.H. MacDonald wrote in regards to his friendship with Smith, “For the first time since my boyhood I had a friend. Many companions I had all along, but Lewis was different” (qtd. in Duval 16). Unfortunately, Smith did not linger in one place or occupation for long. He had an inquiring mind and a desire to expand himself and his experiences which drove him to travel often despite an artificial leg, which was heavy with burdensome leather straps (Kelly 9).

Quickly as Smith had come into MacDonald’s life he left; however, “the defining characteristic of their friendship … and one often acknowledged by MacDonald, was that theirs was a spiritual union which transcended distance and the passing of time” (9). MacDonald did visit Smith in Nova Scotia on several occasions, most notably in the summers of 1898 and 1922, though their extensive letters are evidence enough of how close they were, and it was this correspondence which ultimately brought Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald together.

By 1896, Joan Lavis was listed in the annual McMaster University students’ pamphlet as a part-time student of Arts residing in Toronto. Her journal notes her arrival at 68 Robert St., Toronto on a Monday evening in January, and Lavis was also said to be good friends with her fellow Christian Scientist-to-be, Anna “Annie” Harris (1865–1942). Lavis found in Harris a shared enthusiasm for education (Harris was a Sunday School teacher in the Christian Science Church), playing the piano, and embroidering and painting kerchiefs and china pieces (J. King 44). Despite shared interests, Harris was six years older, and while Lavis’ courting with J.E.H. MacDonald was only in its beginnings, Annie Harris was widowed since two years and had two sons, Howard and Lawren Harris (1885–1970).

It is unclear how Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald initially made one another’s acquaintance. In a letter recalling their origins, J.E.H. MacDonald wrote that Lewis Smith told him of “[Joan’s] good will towards [him]” which implies some previous acquaintance (Duval 16). Their three-year courtship was mostly by correspondence despite living in the same city, because as a student at McMaster University and subsequently as a Kindergarten teacher (from 1897 to 1899), Joan Lavis faced strict curfews and regulations as to whom she could be seen in public with. Generally, young women were not allowed to ride in carriages or cars with men other than her father or brothers, which would have made seeing J.E.H. MacDonald difficult. They nonetheless grew close through shared letters, writing of work, of the books they read and their best-loved poets and philosophers, in a union of shared intellect and philosophical ideals.

On 12 May 1899, on J.E.H. MacDonald’s twenty-sixth birthday (he, being two years her junior), the two married in Swansea, a Toronto neighbourhood near High Park. Lewis Smith was in attendance, as J.E.H. MacDonald seemed to have dashed off a letter the moment the engagement took place to inform his friend, “the friendship which you were the visible means of beginning is now to pass into a higher stage. Joan and I are to be married this spring” (17). His fellow-Toronto Art Students League members Norman Price and William Wallace were in attendance, and the marriage took place very near High Park, a pivotal location in J.E.H. MacDonald’s development as a painter. Joan Lavis MacDonald was, in that very moment, directly marrying into her husband’s social sphere and professional career.[[9]](#footnote-9) Conversely, from a biographical perspective, although Joan Lavis MacDonald was a constant presence in J.E.H. MacDonald’s life, the details of her life grow thinner as the nineteenth century ends. She discontinued her journal, and the Group of Seven discourses begin to seep in, narrowing on J.E.H. MacDonald.

The newlywed MacDonalds took their honeymoon in nearby Bronte, Ontario, where J.E.H. MacDonald actually produced several canvases, and returned on subsequent painting trips. Upon their return, they settled into a rented “roughcast house on an acre of land” on Quebec Avenue, Toronto, with a pet collie dog and cat (T. MacDonald 7). It was, at the time, still quite a heavily wooded area close to High Park and their neighbours were far and few in between. Perhaps in a commemoration of their first shared home together, after three years of knowing one another merely through correspondence, J.EH. MacDonald designed a bookplate for Joan with the motto “My home, my books, my friends, my world.” The words are simple, yet they summarize many of the core values this entire thesis develops, and the notion of the simplest words and aesthetics being able to contain a multitude of representations was a notion that Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald both felt keenly.

In October of 1900, the two travelled to East Aurora, in New York state to visit the Rycroft Studio, which hosted a collective of artists involved in the Arts & Crafts movement, which, despite their decision not to stay in New York, was nonetheless a focal interest to Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald, and will be examined at greater length in Chapter Three. J.E.H. MacDonald returned to work at Grip, and they designed and built a new house on Quebec Avenue. It was in this house that their only child, Thoreau MacDonald, was raised, although he was born at the Toronto General Hospital on 21 April 1901. Joan Lavis MacDonald hired two ten-year-old sisters (twins, in fact) to help her care for Thoreau, but the boy, like his namesake, also spent a good deal of time outdoors. Thoreau himself recalled his mother saying that by ten months he could walk, and was off into the woods after his father (7).

J.E.H. MacDonald evidently still held the idea of working abroad in mind after his trip to New York, because in 1903 he took a job in England at Carlton Studios as a book designer. Joan and Thoreau remained on Quebec Avenue during this time, though barely a year later they travelled to England which, despite J.R. Lavis’ frequent travels to England, marked Joan Lavis MacDonald’s first crossing of the Atlantic. Nearly everything to do with the MacDonalds in England is muddled by contradiction or lack of information; however, what seems clear is that while her husband lived in Loughton, Joan and Thoreau travelled, living in country houses on account of her weak health at that time.

As ever, the MacDonalds kept in touch by correspondence, and several postcards Joan Lavis MacDonald sent to her husband still remain in the Arts and Letters Club archives and the MacDonald Private Collection. Many of their conversations were about the art they were seeing in the respective galleries they visited around Europe, and J.E.H. MacDonald’s ongoing difficulty in finding his artistic focus, as he was not yet painting full time. They were well-acquainted with carrying on their relationship at a long distance, which brought them back to their origins in a manner of speaking; however, there was some strain during their time spent in England, together yet apart, perhaps because of the unfamiliarity, with Joan never having been to England, while J.E.H. was born and raised up north near Durham.

By 1907 they were back in Canada, and J.E.H. MacDonald became head designer at Grip. Their travelling continued following their return from England, and by most chronologies it appears they did so together no less than twice per year over the course of their marriage, discounting J.E.H. MacDonald’s independent trips with members of the Group of Seven. In 1909 they travelled to Burk’s Falls in central Ontario where Joan Lavis MacDonald’s Aunt Esther lived in a house directly on the river, which served as a logging track in the spring time. Burk’s Falls became a frequent summer trip for the MacDonalds, which brought them within close proximity of J.E.H. MacDonald’s friend and patron, Dr. James MacCallum, who owned a cottage on Go Home Bay, several kilometers southwest of Burk’s Falls, on Georgian Bay.

Their summer at Go Home Bay in 1912 was well-documented by an eleven-year-old Thoreau MacDonald in his journal, in which he recounted events like rescuing his mother’s usual sitting area from a water snake with such enthusiasm and accompanying illustrations, that both Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s influences as keen observers of their environment are readily apparent. Like his namesake, Thoreau MacDonald was taught to appreciate the natural environment and lived his whole life accordingly. He was a vegetarian, and though he owned a rifle and was a self-professed firearm enthusiast, he fired thousands of rounds at targets, but never killed an animal (T. MacDonald “Introduction” 11).

Their once-wooded area of Quebec Avenue was becoming progressively more crowded, and by 1912, the desire for a quiet environment outweighed the practicality of central-Toronto. In 1912 they moved north to the community of Thornhill, first in a small, rented home, before buying a four-acre parcel of land up Centre Street in 1914. They named it Four Elms, for the elm trees standing on the otherwise flat farmland, broken up by a creek running through the property. The property was, most notably, the site where J.E.H. MacDonald painted *The Tangled Garden* in 1916. Beyond that, it became a social center, a communal garden when the economy crashed with the dawn of the First World War, and it was shared, for a time, with future-Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer, his wife Esther and daughter Marjorie. Joan was not well during that period, and with her husband busy gardening and taking art commissions to support them, her father and step-mother Margaret Ann Lavis moved in to take care of her. Suddenly, by 1914 Joan found herself in a household as crowded as that which she was born into; however, prospects now were somber and finances inhibited everyone.

Though Four Elms was a busy environment, being out of the immediately bustle of war-time Toronto was preferable to Joan. It meant considerable commute-time to Toronto for her husband, but by 1914, he could easily stay in Toronto at the Studio Building, which was opened on 25 Severn Street in the heart of Toronto, the construction of which was funded by J.E.H. MacDonald’s closest Group of Seven comrade, Lawren Harris, and Dr. James MacCallum. Joan stayed at the Studio on occasion, as each apartment had a loft and sleeping quarters. Though she preferred being outside the city, the Studio nonetheless allowed her to see friends from the Christian Science Church.

The war progressed, the MacDonalds’ prospects did not improve, though they reached out when they could to help friends and members of their social collectives, as they were helped in turn. By 1917 the gardens at Four Elms had been turned into community gardens for members of the Arts & Letters Club who were also struggling financially. J.E.H. MacDonald was a member, archivist, and eventual president of the club, and though Joan would have been familiar with several of its members, namely Arthur Lismer, she likely never visited the club, which did not accept women members until 1985.

The same year, the MacDonalds were forced to rent out Four Elms, and this time a friend of Joan’s named Lucile Taylor, a fellow Christian Scientist, offered them her home in Toronto. The day after the move, J.E.H. MacDonald suffered what would be the first of several strokes over the following fifteen years, which left him bedridden for several months, and still feeling the effects of the collapse over a year later. Despite the toll on his health, J.E.H. MacDonald continued to lead art committees, take on freelance projects, and teach, eventually becoming principal of the Ontario College of Art (OCA) while acting as head of the Graphic and Commercial Art department. “I would gladly become a vagabond myself and often feel that I’d like to do nothing the rest of my life but sketch and paint and study nature outdoors,” J.E.H. MacDonald wrote to Joan during a trip to visit Lewis Smith in Nova Scotia in 1922, “I *loathe* school and the thoughts of teaching” (qtd. in Duval 141).[[10]](#footnote-10)

After her husband’s second collapse, Joan insisted they travel—not to the Rockies, as Joan had suggested he do in 1924 (she later accompanied him on a 1926 trip west), but rather to a kinder climate. In the winter of 1932 the two travelled to Barbados, where, for a short while, the couple resumed their old habits of carrying notebooks, sketching and noting—and by that period, photographing—seemingly mundane details. Barbados is, conversely, often overlooked, the palm trees permeating J.E.H. MacDonald’s canvases deemed irrelevant to his aims of Canadian nation-making, and were out of place in exhibitions.[[11]](#footnote-11) Nonetheless, it was a necessary and valuable trip for the two to leave their hardships (however temporarily) and to “live deliberately,” in the words of their shared Henry David Thoreau.

Six months after their return to Canada, on 26 November 1932, J.E.H. MacDonald died. After suffering a third collapse four days previous in his office at the Ontario College of Art, he was found and brought home by his friend and fellow artist Dr. Frederick Banting. He was in a bad way for four days, never regaining consciousness before passing away. As per Joan’s request, he was given a Christian Science funeral service, and was buried in Toronto’s Prospect Cemetery.

Joan remained at Four Elms with Thoreau after the death of her husband. The Group of Seven were already a successful presence on the national art stage, and both Joan and Thoreau quietly dedicated themselves to supporting the legacy of J.E.H. MacDonald’s art and character. Thoreau seemingly inherited his mother’s patience and kindness towards children, although he never married nor had children of his own. Young students from surrounding schools sometimes visited Four Elms to sketch on the property and to collect rocks and fallen leaves for assignments, and asked questions about J.E.H. MacDonald’s work, as well as Thoreau’s own art, which by then had garnered him a considerable reputation as an engraver and bookplate designer (S. MacDonald 5).

Joan also continued to engage in arts and crafts, and would enclose simple homemade, florally embroidered kerchiefs in birthday and Christmas cards for friends and relatives. The subtle patterns on the corners of the kerchiefs in Fig. vi appear as a resolution of artistic goals in response to an old journal entry from roughly fifty years ago, in which she lamented, “I have finished embroidering the pillow shams. They took me such a long long while – and I do not care for them now – they are too elaborate. I like a simpler design” (Lavis 7).

Joan Lavis MacDonald passed away in 1962. She was buried in the Prospect Cemetery alongside J.E.H. MacDonald. Thoreau MacDonald remained at Four Elms until the mid-1980s, when worsening Parkinson’s disease no longer permitted him to live alone. He passed away on 30 May 1989, and Four Elms, the MacDonald House, was sold to the City of Vaughan as a historic site. The house still stands, hidden from the suburban streets by the very trees that Thoreau planted in his later years. The creek still runs through the property, the gardens still bloom in summer and are tended by members of the community, and the structural skeleton of the barn that once served as the backdrop of *The Tangled Garden* has been restored. Although the interior of the house has been renovated with a new kitchen and washroom to accommodate its status as a community building, the silent yard and modest backwoods continue to reflect the spirit of the family that lived there.

It is a peculiar thing that an artist’s work can be so valuable and representative of a critical period in Canadian national discourse, while the individual behind the canvas remains unnoticed. The Group of Seven are an interesting case in this regard, having dominated the Canadian art scene since their formation in 1920, while the individuals within the collective remained culturally silent. A.Y. Jackson is the only member to have written an autobiography: *A Painter’s Country* (1958), and until James King’s recent publication, *Inward Journey: The Life of Lawren Harris* (2012), there was not even a substantial biography for the Group’s best-recognized member. The majority of the foundational Group of Seven scholarship by art historians Dennis Reid, Joan Murray, and even Ross King, whose book *Defiant Spirits* (2010) is an innovative rewriting of the Group of Seven’s formation, nonetheless focus on the Group of Seven as an artistic collective rather than as individual historical figures.

Comparatively—though forever mentioned in the same breath as the Group of Seven—Tom Thomson is one of Canada’s most mythologized historical figures. He has become an abstraction of Canadian ideas (ideals) of northern-ness and masculinity, who “left so little behind him in personal markers of identity (few letters, no memoirs, no journals; no intimate friends, spouse, or children), [that] it is easy for others to imagine the man and invent a life for him” (Grace 3). In effect, Thomson receives much individual attention with insufficient historical substantiation.

In a total reversal of Thomson’s biographical reconstruction, however, J.E.H. MacDonald receives very little individual recognition despite having left behind journals, letters, lecture notes, and family. There has been no definitive biography of him, and his character is built upon limited yet oft-quoted descriptions that are continually romanticized and reiterated. There is a fixation on his body as something broken, the image of an artist who “demanded relentless perfection in art and craft from a body that was often beleaguered by ill-health” (Duval 13). A.Y. Jackson’s account, in his autobiography *A Painter’s Country*, that MacDonald “could not swim, or paddle, or swing an axe, or find his way in the bush” also has persistent staying-power in this perception (56). Despite the way his physical state is diminished by scholarship, there is always a retaliation of his artistic talent and his spirit that led the Group of Seven into being, and the emphasis on his frailty really only reinforces the idea of J.E.H. MacDonald as an unceasingly hard worker.

In regards to his professional life, scarcely a thing has been written about MacDonald which does not include references to Grip, his place of employment between 1894–1903 and 1908–1911, and the Arts and Letters Club, of which he was a member from 1911 till his death in 1932. The language used in discussing MacDonald’s association with both places conjures allusions to a home life, with the Arts and Letters Club being “a home-away-from-home for many of the great figures in the cultural history of this country, including the Group of Seven” (James 5), and Grip Ltd. as “the home of a group of artists who were later destined to have a real influence on Canadian art” (“Leonard”).

The allusion to home identifies the Group of Seven and their Anglo-Canadian, predominantly male contemporaries as a tightly-knit network, and the ease with which they were able to push desired art movements and national discourses stemmed from what R.M. Kanter calls “homosocial reproduction” (Kanter 49). Homosociality is the creation of friendships and mentorships amongst men, which, when applied to a collective such as the Group of Seven or the Arts and Letters Club, can preserve patriarchal dominance, as well as establish male-male friendships as being superior to male-female friendships. Because the Group of Seven, and every artistic collective they belonged to, hosted members of similar socioeconomic, ethnic and philosophical backgrounds, this guaranteed a degree of “ease of communication” and “social certainty” in regards to the kinds of national aesthetics they wanted to project. The friendships and mentorships that contributed to such an atmosphere of homosociality amongst the artists, and for a subsequent fifty years afterwards, determined the way historians and biographers documented them, left out most individuals who did not adhere to that particular set of characteristics (49).

These “homes away from home” were central to the direct development of the ideologies that eventually formed the Group of Seven, and they have dominated the majority of the biographical works that have emerged since. As a result, they simultaneously neglect J.E.H. MacDonald’s *actual* places of residence beyond the singular garden that became the iconic *The Tangled Garden* (1916). One of the objectives this thesis hopes to achieve, therefore, is to step out of homosocial constraints determining so much of the Group of Seven’s histories and to move towards developing a deeper understanding of MacDonald’s domestic environment—be it that of Quebec Avenue in Toronto, or 121 Center Street in Thornhill—by speaking to an important exclusion from J.E.H. MacDonald biography: his wife and friend, Joan Lavis MacDonald.

There is a considerable body of research relating to the wives of artists, most commonly considering the wife as a muse, or as someone fighting the husband’s muse for attention. Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s marriage, however, is one of friendship and shared intellect, interests, and ideals. Their marriage resonates particularly within the Group of Seven sphere of characters and the ways in which relationships are emphasized, because at its heart is companionship and collaboration: qualities upon which the Group of Seven was built. When Group of Seven member Franklin Carmichael moved into Tom Thomson’s old shack of an art studio, Carmichael wrote teasingly to Ada Went, his fiancée, “Tom Thomson and I have got married and we cook and share our meals together, giving half and half” (“Franklin”).

Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s marriage is not unlike Carmichael’s and Thomson’s comradeship. Joan Lavis MacDonald’s creativity and love of knowledge mirrors and inspires that of her husband, and she never relinquished her own artistic freedom even as social obligations lingering well into the first half of the twentieth century kept her at home, and prevented her from forming the valuable relationships and networks her husband had. She possessed an independence and self-determination which drove her to excel as a student of literature at McMaster University, as a public speaker in church groups, and as a Kindergarten teacher.

Cultural theorist Sunera Thobani suggests that “modernist accounts of the subject as a stable, conscious, unified, and enduring figure, whose actions are shaped primarily by reason, are deeply ingrained within Canadian national mythology” (7). What becomes difficult in considering Joan Lavis MacDonald in particular within this framework is that she was born a mere four years after Confederation. Her journal entries and articles depict a very clear struggle in her desire for domestic structure and responsibility, versus creative and intellectual pursuits, as she confides, “I am alone all the day. … I am half inclined to think myself very easily influenced. So many conflicting thoughts as I have” (Lavis 8).

Lavis MacDonald is not altogether “stable, conscious, [and] unified,” as the national mythology would have her, In fact, she is as fluid between her roles as educator and homemaker as the nation is fluid in its early identity. That is to say, Canada simultaneously represented rugged, idealized self-sufficiency in the face of a wilderness rendered symbolically barren by Indigenous erasure, but was also propagated toward those British citizens looking for better prospects as a nation of urbanized industry. Joan Lavis lived during a time of new educational reform in a new province, wherein the University of Toronto admitted the first women in 1884, and by 1894 McMaster University’s first graduating class included three women. The ability to pursue academic interests was suddenly *actually* *viable*, even while the role of women as domestic caregivers held fast. Thus, Lavis MacDonald’s indecisive and sometimes contradictory ideas are a result of living during a drastically changing time period in Canada’s history. To return to Thobani: “the subjection/subjectification of individuals, communities, and nations takes shape within historically specific contexts and conditions,” and in considering this, we can “attribute such [seemingly personal] characterizations to politicized social processes” (7). Therefore, various interior and exterior spaces, their forms and their functions become important and even necessary backdrops for the thesis as well.

This is not a strictly chronological study, in part because it is structured in a way that allows for an examination of Lavis MacDonald’s dual roles of educator and home-maker, and these components of her character are fluid and hold particular degrees of importance at varying periods in her life. Furthermore, the thesis actively avoids any suggestion of linear *improvement* in Joan’s life correlating directly with the development of her relationship with J.E.H. MacDonald. The thesis does, however, span from 1888, when Joan Lavis MacDonald began writing in her journal, through to 1919, which marks five years at 121 Centre Street (an important setting in the thesis), and brings the MacDonald family history up to the year just prior to the formation of the Group of Seven.

What ultimately emerges during this time frame is Joan Lavis MacDonald’s struggle to find balance between the domestic responsibilities of a young, unmarried woman, and her creative and intellectual pursuits, as embodied initially in her relationships with her parents: her mother was fully supportive of her interest in pursuing university education while her father stifled both her intellectual and artistic inclinations, insisting she remain at home with him until a man should marry her. By the time of her marriage to J.E.H. MacDonald on 12 May 1899, she had amassed these experiences as an educator and as a published writer and prolific reader, and her philosophical views mirrored those of J.E.H. MacDonald. Since their first meeting in 1896, J.E.H. MacDonald was inclined towards her ideologies and influences, and she to his. The thesis will approach Joan Lavis MacDonald’s development of character by devoting the following chapters to “literature and education,” and “homemaking and indoor environments,” respectively.

Chapter Two emphasizes Joan Lavis MacDonald’s literary and educational interests, which enabled her to exercise an exceptional level of sociability within controlled and gendered social boundaries. Through extensive reading, and subsequent writing, she was further able to translate her attention to aesthetic environment into thought, philosophy and internal reflection put to page. This chapter is broken down into three points of analysis: The first point of interest is the very act of reading, and as an extension of that, the idea of literature as companionable. This evidently includes the novels and scholarly articles which pervade Lavis MacDonald’s own writing, but also extends to the reading and memorization of hymns. The second point examines Joan Lavis MacDonalds’ journals, articles and letters, considering the ways in which she utilizes writing in her capacity as an educator. The third and final point considers Lavis’ early relationship with education as both a student and instructor, which speak to her level of agency within church and local groups—not only through teaching Sunday School and kindergarten children, but also (in a reconnection to her act of writing) by imparting advice through “The Girl’s Corner,” a column in the *Canadian Baptist Magazine*.

At times it seems that Lavis MacDonald’s anxieties stemmed from the notion that in order to pursue creative endeavours, she would have to relinquish her domestic interests, which—although they intrude on her time to read and write—she does not necessarily want to forego. Chapter Three is therefore an analysis of Lavis MacDonald’s keen awareness of her visual environment and of the ways through which art was being incorporated into practical things like household chores (embroidery and sewing) and gardening. I will therefore also consider how Lavis MacDonald’s artisanship potentially correlates with her level of involvement in the Arts & Crafts Movement.

The focal point of Chapter Three—and a central point of the thesis itself—is the way in which Four Elms (the MacDonald home in Thornhill from 1914 till Thoreau MacDonald sold the property to the City of Vaughan in 1989) is an embodiment of Joan Lavis MacDonald’s desire for art, intellectual environment and domestic rural life combined as one. This entails a consideration of the space as a canvas itself, as its walls have botany notes and illustrations etched onto them by various people, and the image of sunlight casting patterns upon the floor is a reoccurring image throughout unrelated artworks and writings. The house also fulfilled practical financial needs for the MacDonald, Lismer and Johnston families, as well as other members of the Toronto Arts and Letters Club, during the economic hardships of World War One. The land was a self-sustained agricultural center, and was a center of social gathering wherein there was a consistent stream of artistic and intellectual exchange. What is unfortunate in regards to a project about Joan Lavis MacDonald, is that first-hand recounts about Four Elms come predominantly from correspondence and testimonies by members of the Group of Seven. In their narratives, Joan Lavis MacDonald is scarcely mentioned. It is therefore difficult at times to locate her within her own home.

Chapter Two: The Literary and Educational Ambitions of Lavis MacDonald

When Joan Lavis MacDonald was born on 14 September 1871, Canada as a federal Dominion was barely four years old. Sir John A. Macdonald (1815–1891) was still in office, and would remain intermittently for another fifteen years. Construction on the Canadian Pacific Railway would not begin for another ten. Only weeks previous to Joan Lavis’ birth, the Chippewa, Swampy Cree and Ojibwa First Nations of the southern Manitoba region signed Treaties 1 and 2, and British Columbia entered Confederation two months prior to that, with six provinces and territories still missing from modern Canada’s provincial makeup.

In 1871 there were four universities in Canada, the Confederation Poets were only children, and Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) was still a relatively new account of the Canadian mania that seized middle- and lower-class British citizens looking for better prospects in North America. There was not yet a canonical body of Anglo-Canadian literature or art, and none of the members of the Group of Seven were yet born. The representations of settler life in the backwoods, rendered by Cornelius Kreighoff (1815-1872) and Frances Anne Hopkins (1838-1919), were the works most popularly depicting the Canadian art scene.

The ever-changing political and cultural landscape of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Canada forms the backdrop of this thesis. At the outset, however, this rudimentary overview is necessary not only to situate our subject within a national timeline but also to emphasize that Joan Lavis was born into an active nation taking its first wobbly steps out of being a colony and into a federal Dominion. Although 1871 was a year of extensive change and nation-building, there was, for all appearances, very little about Lavis’ rural hometown of Hampton, Ontario to suggest that Canada was undergoing any such large-scale transitions. Today, Hampton is part of the census metropolitan area of Oshawa in the eastern Greater Toronto Area. Situated several miles north of Lake Ontario, on Mississauga land, the town began to grow—though always maintaining a modest population—in 1841, after a saw mill was built on its river bank.

Joan Lavis’ mother Susan was a presence in the community, attending classes held through the Methodist church and leading a “class of young ladies” (6). She always encouraged her daughter to practice a similar level of community involvement, and was an inspiring figure in Lavis’ life predominantly where her intellectual and educational interests were concerned. If the two women assumed their primary responsibilities of household affairs, from selecting wallpapers to sewing clothes for the family, there was also a parenthetical (over J.R. Lavis’ head, in any case) push for Joan Lavis to pursue an education: “Mother tell[s] me I must not read too much but go out all I can which I do,” she notes in an 1888 journal entry, but is quick to add: “But I must read some of course” (4). The brief passage highlights her mother’s support of Lavis’ reading, but in insisting she “go out,” can signify both going into the community, as well as simply going outdoors; the latter of which becomes intertwined with Lavis’ intellectual pursuits, as her rural origins and eventual access to education came to be dependent of one another.

Self-education and leisurely reading were as much a part of Joan Lavis’ daily tasks as preparing meals. Her mother was an insistent supporter in that regard, as Lavis recalled, “My mother intended that I should have the fullest education that were possible for a girl to have” (10). Conversely, J.R. Lavis’ opinion of his daughter’s desire to attend university was far less optimistic, as Joan Lavis added, “When I speak to my father about it – he says ‘What does a girl want with such nonsense – her place is at home’” (10). Regardless of the push-and-pull between her parents, Joan Lavis’ enthusiasm for literature, arts and acquiring knowledge was a prevalent aspect of her character that stayed with her even after her mother’s early passing on 25 August 1889, when Lavis was only seventeen. Ultimately, limited sources make it difficult to create a detailed or extensive portrait of Lavis’ character, but she was, as affirmed by her great-niece Susan MacDonald, an “articulate and well-raised” woman who “never spoke down to you, and was interested in what you had to say no matter what your age” (S. MacDonald 12). She was remembered, not only for her kindness, but for her ambitions as an educator.

As late as the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, unmarried women working in education and attending religious and/or educational institutions faced stifling restrictions concerning where they could go, and with whom. As late as the mid-twentieth century, unmarried teachers were not allowed to frequent taverns, “socially ‘inappropriate’ houses” and other “unseemly places,” nor were they permitted to dance too close to their partners, drink alcohol, smoke, or ride in a carriage or vehicle with any man other than their father or brother (Cavanagh 251). The specific restrictions that affected Lavis’ eventual employment as a Kindergarten teacher are unknown, though it is nonetheless important to bear such limiting social conditions in mind while considering her dedication to a self-imposed structure and ambition in regards to her own self-education.

It is unclear exactly how common it was for young women to engage in such organized forms of self-education as Lavis did, but she very deliberately made it a part of her daily responsibilities alongside housekeeping and church attendance. There was a weighted self-accountability involved in this facet of her work, as she lamented in her journal on 2 April 1894, “It is 10 o’clock and I am so tired – and have done no reading to-day. Must keep on reading. Why have women no time?” (Lavis 17). Among those subjects which she took up at home were botany, which she encouraged other young women to pursue in an article titled “In Touch With the Heart of Nature,” as well as Latin and French, gesturing towards a breadth of knowledge rather than one singular specialization.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Extensive learning demanded extensive reading, and as “Appendix B” indicates, the breadth of Lavis’ reading was remarkable. Over the course of her journal entries and published articles, she lists well over seventy novels, essays and poems, despite her insistence that a few well-chosen books would suffice. Though the Ontario Schools Act of 1841 offered higher literacy rates amongst children and adolescents, *access* to books was another matter altogether (de Castell 92). Lavis addressed the very issue of reading access in an article from “The Girl’s Corner,” insisting:

Do not give up your books. You say you cannot have many. Well; then choose wisely, and truly; one does not need many. With your Bible, your Shakespeare, your histories, your Tennyson and Longfellow, and Scott’s novels, which you say you have, you are a rich girl and really better off than the girl who has access to a circulating library. (Penelope “Country”)

The large number of titles to which Lavis refers throughout her writings suggest that she herself had access to such a circulating library. Her reading was not only extensive but varied in genre and form, consisting of, on one hand, the entire series of *Pansy Books*. Pansy was the penname of American writer Isabella Macdonald Alden (1841–1930), who hailed from Rochester, New York, although her books gained success throughout all of North America and Western Europe.[[13]](#footnote-13) The series, which consisted of over one hundred books, were selling approximately one hundred thousand copies per year by 1900 and “were synonymous with good, wholesome stories that taught Christian life-lessons” (“Isabella”).

Another central theme of the series was the seeming importance of a husband towards the success and wellbeing of a young woman, a sentiment Lavis did not share in her adolescence, given a very brief journal entry dated 24 May 1890 in which she asserts, “Will D. invited me to go with him to a picnic. I declined. I don’t like young men. I believe I never shall” (Lavis 7).[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is easy to understand why Lavis idolized Alden and her work, for the two shared fundamental views of helping and educating others, and it is likely that Alden inspired Lavis in that regard. Alden purportedly answered every letter she received, and read every piece of creative writing mailed to her by fans desiring her input. Alden lived by the notion that, “If I shall succeed in helping some hearts to realize, what the intellect already understands, the all-important fact that Jesus Christ is ‘the same yesterday, to-day and for ever,’ the object of my writing will have been attained” (“Isabella”). As the writer of “The Girl’s Corner” column in the *Canadian Baptist Magazine*, also writing under a pseudonym, called Penelope, Joan Lavis would have felt Alden’s dedication and patience in responding to her readers on quite a personal and practically applicable level. As will be discussed, Lavis, too, made a consistent effort to keep in touch with her readership, and to address their questions and concerns where she had the space to do so within the column.

Lavis may also have been inspired by Pansy in donning her own penname for “The Girl’s Corner:” Penelope. In December of 1892, almost exactly a year prior to her beginnings in writing for the Canadian Baptist Magazine, Lavis “[wrote] an essay on Greek women – [she] enjoyed reading up on [it] and of late seem[ed] more in touch [and sympathetic] with Greek life than that around [her]” (Lavis 14). Given her engrossed interest in classical Greek studies, and her experience of writing specifically about Greek women, it is likely that the name Penelope came to her in literary terms, as an allusion of Odysseus’ wife in Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*. The Homeric Penelope is “the good woman, the faithful support of her husband, unquestioningly accepting his need to be absent and dutifully looking after his son and home” (Van Zyl Smit 394). These aspects of Penelope’s character reinforce Joan Lavis’ central, most emphasized point in “The Girl’s Corner,” to devote oneself to helping others: “Is it not when we come out of ourselves and do something for some other one; when we forget to seek after our own pleasure and seek it for another; when we are lost to our own comfort and find it for those around us—is it not then that we are making happiest the day?” (Penelope “Little Things”). The Homeric Penelope is further an exact parallel of the role she would assume later in her life: Often staying home with her son while her husband ventured into the Algoma canyons with a collective of men.

The Homeric Penelope is also patient and cunning in deterring the suitors who attempt to woo her while Odysseus is away. Odysseus’ primary characteristic is also his cunning; as such, Penelope’s behaviour marks her in some respects as her husband’s intellectual equal, something Lavis herself seeks in her relationships and conversations with the men around her. Thus, both Pansy and Penelope’s names are directly relevant to the themes of homemaking and familial support which are central to their writings.

At the opposite end of Lavis’ literary repertoire were texts like *The Drawback of our Civilization* and John Tyndall’s *Culture Demanded by Modern Life*, as well as *Hours with working Women*, which made her “more sympathetic with others” (8), and *The Old Regime in Canada*, which she refers to as “a book lighter in vein” even at two hundred and fifty pages—which can be held as a further testament to her rigorous reading. It is evident by these latter titles that Lavis was interested in and possessed a not-inconsiderable knowledge of cultural studies, though as noted by Les Wheatcroft in an annotation to Lavis’ journals, there is a lack of explicit social, political and historical insight in her writings. She notes in a journal entry from 26 February 1891, however, “I go to political meetings. And very enthusiastic. I study politics with great ardor,” and in yet another she references her new dress reform garments as emancipation, which demonstrates her awareness of a social movement towards making clothing more practical and not as physically detrimental to women (Lavis 11, 13). Therefore, although Lavis did not use her journal as a platform from which to delve into the political goings-on of the time, entries such as those listed are nonetheless inherently political and gesture to a young woman with a careful awareness of her own position in society.

Her interest and eventual involvement in the Mission Band is a further, exceptionally political point that warrants mentioning, and offers an additional example of the level of engagement which Lavis harnessed through reading. Her interest in Indigenous individuals began by casual interest, reading *Pocahontas* and remarking on the lack of attention paid to Pocahontas herself (9). In 1892 she joined the Methodist Mission, and shortly after “called the parsonage … and left with a pile of books under [her] arms – books on missions to help [her] prepare the programmes” (13). Critical and self-reflexive as she was in her reading, it is unsurprising that Lavis applied her readings to an external cause, one which enabled her to exercise her ideologies of educating others, and helping others to—as far as she, and other young prospective educators of the period were concerned—improve the characters of young Indigenous students.

For Lavis, reading was in part a form of self-education, as well as a leisurely hobby at times, but it was also socially fulfilling wherein she was expected to spend most of her time at home. Hymns, for instance, connected Lavis with her late mother and served as a lingering reminder of her encouragement towards her creative endeavours. Furthermore, several texts and authors, such as Tennyson in particular, assumed companionable roles for Lavis as she sought their company in an otherwise, vastly solitary life at home, under the brooding presence of her father. After her mother’s passing, with J.R. Lavis as her single parent, his oppressive presence and often foul moods found their way into her journal entries. She noted on a mid-summer day in 1890, “I want to go on with my music, but father says he cannot bear hearing me practice so I forego. … And father is always so very low spirited. He weighs tons on my mind. I feel so oppressed at times as though something were crushing me” (7-8).

Communication was parse between father and daughter, as even his trip to England in 1890 was, for all appearances, unannounced, considering a 6 August 1890 journal entry that notes, “Wed. morning. Here I am at Brooklin. All at once Father has decided to go to England” (8). More distanced yet is a terse entry from 1893, “In bed. Father to be married soon. I will be good” (16). Lavis never notes the name of her father’s second wife, Margaret Ann Carmichael, in her journals, and never mentions her again after the brief mention of marriage, though she would move in to Four Elms much later in Lavis MacDonald’s life to care for her while she was in ill health.[[15]](#footnote-15)

With her brothers often gone and her father scarcely an avenue for sociability, Lavis sought a connection to her mother through reading hymns and psalms, which—due to her father’s quoted aversion to hearing her practice music—she recited alone in her room after dark: “I learn a good many hymns and psalms too, so that when I lie awake at night, as I do for hours together, I can repeat them over and over” (7). Two months after writing that entry, she “found an old hymn book of [her] mother’s with notes. With her maiden name Susie Helena Prior,” and, seemingly without her father’s protest this time, she notes, “I have been playing the old tunes to my heart’s content. They comfort me” (7). Her reading and performance of hymns functioned both as a connection to her mother, whose absence was felt deeply, and was undoubtedly a means of withdrawing from and all at once defying her father’s oppressive moods in a quiet way.

In the same journal entry in which Lavis notes her father’s oppressive influence, she writes, “My life is so fearfully prosaic. I have literally no resource but my books. No friends or society – none whatever” (7). Without company, reading once again fulfills an important role in Lavis’ often tremendously lonely days, by becoming companionable to her. She was particularly close to the works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), recounting, “I sleep with my little Tennyson under my pillow. In the morning as soon as I can see I have a little read” (9). She also brought Tennyson to lake-side picnics with her cousin and close friend Roberta “Roby” Whiteside, and read Tennyson in the evenings on the veranda until it was too dark to do so (4). Of course, *memorizing* Tennyson allowed her to share and enjoy the poetry even after dark. She memorized a good number of his works, noting “Crossing the Bar” specifically and, at midnight on New Years of 1892, she wrote in her journal that she learned “Ring out Wild Bells” (12).

The ability to recite poetry on command during this period also functioned as a sort of rite of passage in some respects, into the cultured, and often male-dominated, sphere of literary and arts societies. As was explained in drawing connections between Lavis and her penname, Penelope, Lavis sought the intellectual company of men, and likewise revealed in the exchange of ideas, such as her meeting with a Professor H. on 22 August 1890 in Mariposa, Ontario, whom she liked and spoke with “for a long time about music, nature, birds and insects” (8). In memorizing Tennyson, thus, Lavis affirmed her familiarity with British canonical literatures as well as the lingering Victorian, Anglo-Canadian culture prevalent in the middle- and upper-creative classes.

A further characteristic of the ability to recite poems is that they then become

mobile, taken from the page and imbued in the body, and in turn projected onto the space in which they are spoken. This choice pairing of poem and environment means that the environment, natural landscape in this instance, is a subjective experience rather than a wholly tangible reality. This relates closely to the transcendentalist movement, which will be thoroughly analyzed in coming pages, however, it is enough to presently clarify the notion that “[nature] consists not only in itself, objectively, but at least just as much in its subjective reflection from the person, spirit, age, looking at it, in the midst of it, and absorbing it—faithfully sends back the characteristic beliefs of the time or individual” (qtd. in Davis 165). That is a quote from American essayist and poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892), which is useful in considering Lavis’ emersion in rural landscape as she experiences it through literature.

This idea of Tennyson—of literature—as companionable is not a widely-developed field. J.M. Tyree, in his article “Thoreau, Whitman, and the Matter of New York,” briefly touches on one interpretation of what it means for an author to be “companionable” to their readers, which, in Tyree’s opinion, is reliant on the author’s very act of writing. While Henry David Thoreau was in New York City he sent works to several publishing houses but was rejected on account of the fact that, in a city teeming with access to literatures, “[his] bait [would] not tempt the rats; they are too well fed. … [He] could not write anything companionable” (qtd. in Tyree 65). The majority of Thoreau’s writings during his time in New York were rejections of urban environment, and though he was sending materials to urban publishing houses, he would not alter his stance on the superiority of rural living. The opposite of being companionable, Tyree then argues, is to be “solitary and remote” (66). To Canadian sensibilities, however, to be solitary and remote was not an antithesis to being companionable. Rather, remote northern-ness was already a central component of a national identity that was still very much in flux, and someone like Lavis, whose free time was very often spent outdoors by lakes and forests, would—and very emphatically *did*—find Thoreau’s “solitary and remote” narratives to be companionable. It is therefore more accurate to suggest that whether an author or text is companionable relies on the reader. The companionability of a text is as subjectively flexible as the landscape.

Joan Lavis’ quote of her life being “fearfully prosaic,” revolving around literature, is mirrored in a startlingly similar way by J.E.H. MacDonald, in a letter written to Joan several years prior to their marriage, in which he admits, “I was a hermit in those days [c. 1890-94]. Though I had companions, I had no friends, except these speaking spirits of books” (qtd. in Duval 15). As Joan Lavis spent time in Bellwood Park, “quite alone, but for Froebel and the sweet growing things” (Penelope “In Touch”), J.E.H. MacDonald kept Robert Burns as a companion: “In my walks in the woods I had Burns with me, and many a Sunday morn have he and I spent together in Rosedale (qtd. in Duval 15). Both Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald read British literary canon, but physically taking the literature outdoors (not into “wilderness,” as parks are constructed Western idealizations of natural environment) is appealing to the national gravitation towards nature that would later define J.E.H. MacDonald’s artistic career, and subsequent national image.

There is very little known of the period between Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s meeting in 1896, and their marriage three years later, on 12 May 1899, J.E.H. MacDonald’s twenty-sixth birthday. The best man at the wedding was Lewis E. Smith, an artist and graphic designer from Nova Scotia, whose “inquiring mind and … desire to extend himself” brought him to Grip Ltd. for a brief period of employment in 1896 (Kelly 10). He formed an immediate and profound friendship with J.E.H. MacDonald, and must have formed an acquaintanceship or shared a mutual friend with Joan Lavis during that time as well, as Smith was the one who introduced the two. Reflecting on the early union, J.E.H. MacDonald wrote to her in an 1898 letter, “I had such a feeling of solitude that I wrote to Lewis telling him how strongly I wished to have some good girl friend. The next letter brought me news of your good will towards me, and I have rejoiced since then in the possession of a perfect friend” (qtd. in Kelly 12). The fact that Joan Lavis already had “good will towards” her husband in 1896 suggests they likely met on a previous occasion; however, it is currently unknown where this earlier meeting might have taken place.

J.E.H. MacDonald possessed a vivid, engaging, and sometimes exasperatingly lengthy (a dozen pages with margins and both sides filled) style of composing letters, the which is obvious in a letter he wrote on 29 January 1898 to Lewis Smith.

I’m seated in a big rocking chair, in my shirt sleeves, my Helicon in the form of a glass of water before me on the table… This is how we’d go. We’ll cross the road and pass through the gates of the grounds containing that elm avenue I’ve told you of. Then we’d turn up a road leading straight towards the dim north star. … And we’d walk quietly over the soft tree shadows on the snow and listen to the [?] faint city sounds, & look up at the young moon through willows’ boughs & see the stars in the branches of the elms—oh, Lewis, who can say anything about these Canadian winter nights? (qtd. in Kelly 11).

It is easy to imagine such a romantic as MacDonald wooing his future wife, who shared in the admiration of a good story and the well-noted beauty of a landscape. Such intimacies as J.E.H. MacDonald shared with his best friend might be found within his correspondence with her; notably in the following letter, dated 4 January 4 1904:

I am just home from work a little while. Now the bell of St. Paul’s which you write about is chiming a quarter to eleven. So you see I ought to be creeping into bed. But I know you like to think of me writing you, however little, and perhaps at this very moment (about seven o’clock Friday night with you) you are writing to me. Dear lassie, I do miss you. … coming home [from work] and seeing the stars and streets – everything so much like Toronto, it seems as though you might be waiting for me at home, and yet I cannot see you there. And tonight, in particular, it seemed as though you ought to be here. (qtd. in Duval 21-22)

It is clear that correspondence was an integral part in the creation, sustenance and growth of the MacDonald family.[[16]](#footnote-16) After his early retirement from Grip Ltd. in 1911, J.E.H. MacDonald often spent weeks at a time up north in the Algoma Region, west in the Rocky Mountains, and one on the east coast visiting Lewis Smith. Letters and postcards remain from all of these sketching trips, as the couple wrote often during their time apart, discussing everything from art, to weather and landscape, and their financial struggles. Even their son Thoreau partook in letter writing from a young age. He and his father incorporated drawings into their letters, so that there was not only a teaching of reading and writing but of identifying and portraying animals and other outdoor aspects (Fig. iv).

Despite her own extensive reading and education in literature, Joan Lavis’ early outlook on childhood education was a preference for natural sciences rather than Latin and grammar, as she explained to her cousin Roby Whiteside, “I don’t care if mine knows his ABC’s I’ll put him out in a field and let him learn the ABC of nature” (Lavis 8-9). Although the exchange is inconsistent with her own educational experiences and aspirations, it is important to note that her hypothetical future child in this exchange is a son; she uses male pronouns. Therefore, with Lavis being at the center of a societal shift wherein young women were deemed the best suited for teaching, it is unsurprising to hear that she would have her son outdoors.

Of course her real son, like his parents, learned earth sciences, literature and art by an indivisible combination of the three, such as his letters demonstrate. (Fig. iv) Thoreau MacDonald’s 1912 summer journal, written during the MacDonalds’ trip to Dr. James MacCallum’s cottage at Go Home Bay, on Georgian Bay, demonstrates not only his own early skills in illustrating, but a keen level of attentiveness to his surroundings, noting weather, identifying various species of fish and birds, coupled with a penchant for storytelling. One such example of all of these elements working together tells the story of how the family went for a canoe ride, and at the end of the day received a tow-ride back to the cottage from a motor-boat. The story is completed with a drawing of the family (including the dog) sitting in the boats (Flood 26).

Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald were wholly devoted to the transcendentalist movement, which began under The Transcendental Club in Boston, Massachusetts in 1836, with Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) regarded in some respects as the movement’s forerunner, alongside Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), and its youngest member, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). It was a philosophical, spiritual and literary movement best described as “post-Unitarian and freethinking in religion, Kantian and idealistic in philosophy, and Romantic and individualistic in literature” (Davis 43). The fundamental component of transcendentalism that resonated most strongly amongst Canadians, and the Group of Seven in particular, was the manner by which “it sought to reach the depth of things by a direct, immediate encounter with reality” (43).

The young Thoreau was named for American transcendentalist, essayist and abolitionist, Henry David Thoreau. J.E.H. MacDonald’s admiration for H.D. Thoreau is one of the oft-quoted anecdotes about him, in large part because H.D. Thoreau informed MacDonald’s spiritual, but not religiously ascribed, encounters with the landscape, though the fact that he and Joan went to the length of naming their child after him lends additional interest, and additional understanding to just how prevalent H.D. Thoreau was within both MacDonalds’ lives. His most famous book, *Walden*, documents a two-year venture into an isolated, self-sustaining lifestyle, which entailed his living in a small hut on Walden Pond, [Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concord,_Massachusetts), from 1845 till 1847, living off the land and reflecting on the destructive qualities of civilization during his time spent withdrawn from it.

Similar philosophies of simplicity and minimalism as both aesthetics and ways of life were also prominent in Joan Lavis’ journals as well as within “The Girl’s Corner.” She devoted an article to the subject, entitled “Sweet Simplicity.” Lavis claims the “bustling hurry scurry is doing no good to our lives. It is making them ineffective, poor, and superficial,” and she rejects the institutions and systems that serve as the foundation for her career goals, writing that “present-day education demands that you know almost something of everything. Charity demands your time and interest. Your church supplicates your untiring service” (Penelope “Sweet”). Lavis was nowhere near relinquishing her involvement with her church or education; however, she nonetheless felt quite keenly the strain of institutionalized systems, and recognized that they were detrimental to the human condition.

This aversion to institutions was shared by J.E.H. MacDonald, who confided his desire to run away from his teaching post at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design in a letter to Joan, written during a brief vacation: “I like the lonely shore and the sound of the waves and the little spruce trees and the terns chipping and scolding. But I have no doubt I’ll be a very good little boy and join properly in the lockstep when I come back to my prison” (qtd. in Duval 141). Knowing that J.E.H. MacDonald’s “prison” and his extensive work schedules cost him his life lend a bitter irony to his connection to Henry David Thoreau throughout Group of Seven scholarship; however, the First World War and its devastating impact on art sales, and interest in the arts in general, forced MacDonald to assume his teaching post, which Joan Lavis MacDonald—being married—could not, in addition to his freelance projects. “We buried poor old Jim MacDonald this afternoon,” Group of Seven member A.Y. Jackson wrote to fellow artist and friend, Anne Savage (1896–1971), and added a sentence that today is often used to summarize J.E.H. MacDonald’s career: “Too much of his work was done just to earn his daily bread” (qtd. in Larsen 159). Despite Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s longing for a quiet, simple life amidst nature, they were a family unit, and their overwhelming degree of community involvement would have made any attempts to permanently withdraw from Toronto impossible.

The connection between writing and the natural environment is perhaps most evident in the MacDonalds’ encouragement of their son, whose very namesake, Henry David Thoreau, was an exemplification to Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald of the desire for, and importance of, rural space in a rapidly expanding urban city. In Lavis’ writings—both her journals and her articles—she also demonstrates a vivid connection to her natural surroundings, and in particular images of weather and sunlight permeate her works. What her journals give the most attention to beyond internal reflection are illustrative passages veering into creative writing, such as, “The maples are getting all aglow. This is my best loved season and I take walks all alone drinking in the beauty of it all. The sunshine is so full of warm richness. It simply glows” (Lavis 5).

Lavis’ portrayals of landscape also reflect the simultaneous “desire for and … fear of reconciliation with nature” (Davis 165). There are instances of romanticizing aggressive landscape, such as an account of “a regular blizzard. I went out into it and thoroughly enjoyed it. … How it took one’s breath! To face it always was impossible. But it did not seem angry. Simply mischievously playful” (Lavis 16). In another entry she writes, “went to the lake, which was very rough—and how I enjoyed it!” (15).

This rendering of the landscape as something potentially dangerous is something J.E.H. MacDonald later incorporated into paintings like *The Solemn Land* (1921) and *The Elements* (1916), which have themselves become crucial representations of Canadian wilderness; however, Joan Lavis is writing herself *within* the landscape even as she acknowledges its danger, much like the reduced figures in the latter painting by J.E.H. MacDonald. By including herself amidst the elements, she asserts an independence and ability outside of the home, within which her independence is otherwise stifled and her ability pre-determined by her gender. Characteristics such as “manliness, solitary independence, [and] practical skill in the northern bush” are synonymous with a particular set of Canadian values, and Lavis conjures these in her writings (Grace 5). She goes, “we girls off for an all-day ramble,” to a creek for fishing and collects plants for her botany journal, which were regarded as masculine activities, indicative of some skill and knowledge of her natural environment, which later permeate the 1912 journals of her son Thoreau, twenty-two years later (Lavis 8).

Even in the city, in an article from *The Canadian Baptist*, Lavis demonstrates an awareness of and gravitation towards nature, writing, “The day had been gray, so gray; but I remembered, while in the busy street, how I had glanced through the car-window and up; how the clouds had parted, and the deep, tender blue of heaven had shown a rift of beauty” (Penelope “Little Things”). While visual art, especially large canvases, became the focal component of J.E.H. MacDonald’s representation of his and Canada’s relationship with the natural landscape, the writings of Joan Lavis MacDonald and her fixation upon the natural environment cannot by any means be dismissed as an example of the anxiety caused by living on the outskirts of a rapidly expanding urban center.

Thus far, Joan Lavis MacDonald’s height of perception for the details of her natural environment and comrades have served as an ideal example of the self-awareness and attention that defined the movement, and this very philosophy by which she determined to forge relationships and foster a thriving home environment, J.E.H. MacDonald and the Group of Seven utilized the same in fronting a Canadian art movement. Transcendentalism provided them with the raw connection to the Canadian landscape that enabled them to break away from the Romantic art permeating the national scene, with its sublime St. Lawrence banks and composition reminiscent of the works hanging in European galleries.

The following excerpt from Lawren Harris’ essay “Revelation of Art in Canada” published in 1926 speaks on behalf of the Group of Seven’s incorporation of art with transcendentalism, and how the two combined enable the (always male) artist to create a national aesthetic.

[The North] gives him a difference in emphasis from the bodily effect of the very coolness and clarity of its air, the feel of solid and rocks, the rhythms of its hills and the roll of its valleys, from its clear skies, great waters, endless little lakes, streams and forests, from snows and horizons of swift silver. These move into a man’s whole nature and evolve a growing, living response that melts his personal barriers, intensifies his awareness, and projects his vision through appearances to the underlying hidden reality. This in time, in and through many men creates a persisting, culminating mood that pervades a land, colouring the life of its people. (Harris 68)

The “North” and the landscape that Harris speaks to in his essay addresses mainly the canyons of Algoma that marked the height of the Group of Seven’s aesthetic, as well as the later, northern scenes of which Harris’ iconic works consist, namely *North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926) and *Lake and Mountains* (1928). This period of forming a national aesthetic, which lingered well into Canada’s Centennial-Era of the 1960s, relied heavily on notions of *absolute vacant* wilderness, and there was disappointment in maintaining only a half hazard life of self-reliance in an increasingly suburban “natural landscape.” Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald skirted the edges of the city of Toronto in this way, and Ross King effectively illustrates the sense of growing disillusionment that befell J.E.H. MacDonald in particular as “[the] asperities of the war [World War I] had forced MacDonald into the kind of self-sufficiency practiced by the man after whom he named his son,” which “might have provided some consolation for the frail MacDonald as he leaned on his hoe in the garden at Four Elms” (176-7).

Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s preoccupations with their natural environment were tied not only into their shared philosophies, but were foundational to their ambitions as artist and artisan respectively. It also inspired their respective teachings, from Joan Lavis MacDonald’s “ABC of nature” theory of educating children and J.E.H. MacDonald’s Central Ontario School of Art and Design lectures regarding the texts of Walt Whitman in relation to national reconstructions of landscape. As a result of their desire for quiet, rural environments, they not only moved several times—away from Toronto, as will be discussed in Chapter Three—but strove to share their philosophies concerning closeness to the land and the need to practice self-reliance. Joan Lavis dedicated two articles in *The Canadian Baptist* to nature, titled “In Touch with the Heart of Nature,” and “To a Girl of the Country,” in which her personable voice combines almost colloquial discussion of the importance and preciousness of rural living and natural environment with underlying academic intentions; encouraging other young women to pursue the study of botany and quoting the German pedagogue and theorist Friedrich Froebel.

*The Canadian Baptist* magazine was, for Lavis, a means of creating a safe space through which to share ideas with young girls and women of the community; as Lavis wrote in regards to the column: “May it long be ours for mutual helpfulness” (Penelope “Girl’s Corner”). In early 1894, she sent “a little sketch” (likely a short personal essay, as her style suggests) to the magazine, and two weeks later received “a beautiful letter” from the editor, offering her a position as a weekly writer, writing “largely of the things of Home – sweetest, to [her] of all subjects” (Lavis 16). Lavis followed through with the editor’s request, writing regularly for *The Canadian Baptist* through 1894-95, and by 1896, a proper column was dedicated to her writings. “The Girl’s Corner” appeared for the first time in the 9 January 1896 issue, and though the format and subheading was different, Lavis addresses her readership as old friends, “It is a real pleasure to me, my girlfriends, to come back to you and ‘our corner’ again. … This little corner is all our own and it is ours to make it what we will” (Penelope “Girl’s Corner”).

Lavis, likely inspired by her *Pansy Books*, donned the aforementioned penname of Penelope in her role as columnist of “The Girl’s Corner.” Though the common assumption for a woman writer taking on a penname is, and was ever at the time, the need for a gender-ambiguous identity to increase public reception, because “a woman could not work for any cause without being unwomanly” (Billings 84), Joan Lavis’ penname certainly did not mask her gender, but more probably served to hide her personal identity in a small community. The column was a platform for fostering friendship and mentorship during a time when women travelled and attended functions and institutions that were laden with social restrictions, and so “The Girl’s Corner” removed many of these restrictions simply by existing beyond the structure of an on-location club. However, due to these same restrictions and Lavis’ early ambitions of becoming a teacher, it was in her best interest to operate with a degree of anonymity, given the then-progressive nature of some of her articles.

Many of the ideas immerging from the articles are connected to the recent granted access of university education to women as well as the growing role of young women as educators. In the two-part articles “The Talk We Had” and “Our Talk,” Jo, one of Lavis’ friends, is handling an overwhelming number of gatherings, from heading committees to attending prayer meetings, and when asked why she takes on so much, she does not hold back in saying, “I like to be popular and at the head of things” (Penelope “Our Talk”). This is a revelation which Lavis also confronts through journal ruminations, which already begin to hint towards her own skills and eventual role as an educator:

Led the C.E. meeting tonight. The large lecture room of the [Methodist] Church full. I was not at all nervous. It was advertised in the Church News and people came doubtless out of curiosity – to hear a young girl address a meeting so – I had my notes but I forgot all about them. I forgot all about the people too and was able to speak in a way quite foreign to me. Afterward I had such an enlarged expansive feeling that I cannot express. (Lavis 13)

With the opportunity to address an audience, her “foreign” manner of speaking was undoubtedly the ability to speak, as a woman, with an authoritative infliction, and to be heard, which was enormously important to Lavis. The suggestion that people came largely on account of the fact that it was “a young girl” addressing the assembly makes it evident that this was not a common occurrence, and the “enlarged expansive feeling” to which Lavis speaks is surely that of moving beyond her “fearfully prosaic” home environment, where she felt “so oppressed at times as though something were crushing [her]” (7-8). By incorporating these experiences into her articles in “The Girl’s Corner,” Lavis not only validates her own experiences and desires to share intellectual, theological ideas, but encourages other young women to pursue the same, or to—at the very least—let them know that it is becoming increasingly possible.

Lavis MacDonald was, at the heart of her character, an educator. It is one of the few things that is certain and readily evident about her personality, and it is one of the few traits of which *she* appears certain, and often defers to.[[17]](#footnote-17) In yet another perhaps autobiographical excerpt from a writing sketch, Lavis writes, “You know I cannot help but know that I have a gift for teaching, and don’t I owe it to myself as well as to others to use and develop it?” (Penelope “Quiet”). Whether it was her mother who alerted her to the talent and the value inherent in it, or because young women were sought-after as the ideal educators for a nearing twentieth-century Canada, Lavis was aware of her ability and desire to teach from adolescence, and sought opportunities to develop this through congregation meetings, as well as the then-readily available missionary projects. In her capacity as an educator, this manner of perceiving and engaging with her environment influenced the way she formed relationships and strived to understand herself and her physical environment, both in broader societal terms, as well as within her own home.

Chapter Three: Domesticity and the Visualization of Space

What is readily apparent throughout Lavis’ writings is the notion of homemaking as an inherent skill imbued, or “planted” as she specifically suggests, by God. Contrary to this innate “love of home life,” the ambition for a woman to pursue education “comes only to those who have realized what Life, in its fullness, may mean” (Penelope “Quiet”). In attributing her position as a homemaker to God, Lavis incidentally reveals the thoroughly engrained patriarchal determination of gender roles within her environment. To mind the home was divine purpose, and to stray from it—as Lavis did for a time—was to deny God’s intention.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Meanwhile, by the end of the nineteenth century the University of Toronto and McMaster University—both located in Toronto at that time—accepted female students. The city’s population was nearly 200,000, and was expanding rapidly outwards, creeping into surrounding rural districts. This widespread urbanization was a partial cause for the rising admittance of women within post-secondary institutions, particularly amongst members of Methodist congregations to which Lavis initially belonged, although McMaster University was founded by Baptists, first existing as the Toronto Baptist College before the university’s official founding in 1887. The spike in enrollment amongst women was due, in part, to an increasing desire to see children in schools and subsequently entering a career-oriented workforce.

As a result of this, anxieties of being confined to or “left behind” in rural towns began to surface, with Toronto as a space of enlightenment and ostensible moral superiority by way of culture. By this time in history, young women were being pulled in two directions: by a new opportunity for learning, and by an apparently innate responsibility for their household.

Lavis received a letter from a reader of “The Girl’s Corner” in 1896, writing of how she tired of “her hum-drum life in the country, with its lack of opportunities for culture” (Penelope “Country”). It is unsurprising that Lavis’ response is sympathetic to the sender and her preoccupations, for she acknowledges that, “like [the sender], [she] had longed for a wider ‘culture.’ And this longing is a legitimate and worthy one, which [she is] always glad to hear of in … girl-friends, for it means growth and awakening” (“Country”). It is notable, however, that while Lavis’ personal journals refer extensively to her education, “The Girl’s Corner” does not reference McMaster University once, and only speaks about self-education. Though Lavis frequently encourages an interest in pursuing the cultures that an urban environment might offer, she does not provide any thorough outline of this process in the same way she addresses household affairs, and that in itself might have made her column a source of comfort to those young women worried about the seemingly inevitable devaluing of their positions as homemakers. Her gesture of reaching out to concerned readers within that public space makes it doubly so, acknowledging and validating it as a shared anxiety and experience.

“The Girl’s Corner” is ultimately about home, and despite the previous chapter’s discussion of Lavis’ desire to be away from home, her advice to her concerned reader—and the prevalent advice throughout her articles—is to find culture *within* that rural household environment. In line with these ideas, she recalls, in the same response column, a quote that she considers personally influential: “If there’s one word I despise more than another, in the way folks use it now-a-days, its ‘Culture’! As if God didn’t know how to make souls grow! You just take root where He puts you, and go to work and live! He’ll take care of the cultivating!” (qtd. in Penelope “Country”).

By drawing on conversational quotations to express the possibility of culture within a rural environment, Lavis’ subsequent discussion of home life is not demeaning, nor does it reinforce the idleness of which her readers are apprehensive. In fact, in a journal entry dated 16 June 1894, two years prior to the letter pertaining to the “hum drum” life to which she responded in “The Girl’s Corner,” she recalls a conversation with a neighbouring farmer, Mr. Wabson, about “the differences of town and country life,” which reads as such:

[Mr. Wabson] thought country young men and women superior morally. I thought they needed education. And so they do. They are superior but they need to be educated to an appreciation of the beautiful in nature, literature and art. I asked if a farmer going out into the beauty of a rare morning takes notice – (with his ready Irish wit) – “Yes – He would say A fine morning – but the cows have to be milked! (Lavis 18)

Lavis’ opinion that country life is superior, but lacking in value for the individual who does not have an education, runs counter to her assurance in her response to the reader that she ought to simply grow in the place she is in, and needn’t pursue education. Her exchange with Mr. Wabson highlights an important aspect of the rural living versus urban education conflict, which is that Lavis is speaking in a strictly aesthetic sense when she speaks of the farmer admiring his surroundings; however, Mr. Wabson acknowledges the practical, the realistic implications and experience of living in a rural environment, wherein education in literature may allow him to better understand the cultural and aesthetic significance of a sunrise, but will surely not inform him on how to do his farming.

The same restlessness and focus which Lavis applied to academic studies were obviously as much a part of her domestic work, and she did not altogether *dislike* her duties of homemaking, but revelled in the same sense of responsibility and guiding purpose that propelled her into academia and public speaking. J.R. Miller’s “Secrets of a Happy Home Life” is one of several essays featured in “The Girl’s Corner,” and towards matters of homemaking, Miller writes, “though our home be not what we would like it to be, though it lack warmth and tenderness and congeniality, still, while it is our home, it is our duty to stay in it contentedly, and grow in it to beauty” (“Secrets”). Lavis finds in this essay encouragement, not merely to endure home life through its hardships as she herself did through the loss of her mother and struggles with her own illness, but to take initiative and bring into it a positive or productive character and sociability through her own behaviour and—as the focal point of this chapter—aesthetic, or “beauty” as the word so often occurs within Lavis’ own writing.

The notion of homemaking “as a peculiarly feminine form of nation-building” is an interesting way of examining Lavis as a national subject, both as an individual, partnered with her husband whose form of nation-building (the Group of Seven) exists on a more immediately apparent scale, and as a group of women with a “collective political identity of nation builders” (Boutilier 67). The most obvious function of homemaking as a component of nation-building, veiled by its normalcy, is to secure gender norms in a Canadian society that both mirror British—more particularly Victorian—classist culture, while simultaneously distancing oneself from its genteel image by promoting the idea of the hearty, hard-working woman. Of course, contrary to that discourse, Joan Lavis possessed a university education, while J.E.H. MacDonald was largely without full-time employment, working from home on freelance projects, and did not enlist in the First World War as was expected of all able-bodied men. Thus, their individual familial unit points less to a performative or exemplary example of nation-building, and more to the forthright scenario of rendering particular national aesthetics through artisanship and painting, which will make up a central focus of this chapter.

Joan Lavis MacDonald possessed such a level of agency that enabled her to fulfill the idealized household environment she envisioned as an adolescent; however, it is important to note that Lavis is acting within a particular national framework, and although there was not a singular prominent national identity or aesthetic there were nonetheless idealizations and values in place. As such, when Lavis names things which she would eventually like as an adult, her desires are self-fulfilling. To provide an explicit example of the ways in which Lavis’ individual efforts and national environment contributed to the fulfillment of her ideal lifestyle, this chapter will develop a close reading and extrapolation of the following 5 August 1888 journal entry, written when Lavis was sixteen years old:

If ever I get married I should like to marry a farmer and live in the country. I would go horseback riding & go for the cows and churn the butter and have a painted floor with the doors and windows open for the sunshine to make patterns on. And all kinds of animals about especially horses and dogs. And a great woods near, and shady lanes – Oh! but I would like that. And I would have a rag carpet in the little sitting room and a best one for the parlour and yellow painted floors everywhere else with flowers in every room. Such a big kitchen with lots of plenty about and the vines growing up the windows. … And I would love every body and have every body come and be happy. (Lavis 4-5)

In part, the entry mirrors a later “Girl’s Corner” article from 1896, wherein Lavis writes of her self-professed romanticization of her “sister of long ago … preparing breakfast in the clean, homely houseplace, surrounded by the utensils of her early use … churning the rich cream into golden masses of butter” (Penelope “Sweet”). Immediately apparent is the reflected chore of churning butter, while the satisfying presence of being “surrounded by the utensils” in her article, and “lots of plenty about” in her journal entry gestures to Lavis’ industrious nature and her desire to visualize that which she creates.

Despite being in the midst of a national industrial revolution, Lavis gravitates towards the industrious, seemingly self-governing woman of the past (without specifying how far into the past), with “no societies to steal away every evening; … no *isms* or *ologies* to puzzle and distract” (“Sweet”). What the productivity associated with the past further denotes is the aforementioned interest in self-sustainability, which in turn ensures higher quality work and products. This is why Lavis is so happy with her canned goods shelved in the cellar as opposed to the meals consumed in minutes. She is able to see not only her finished product, but her energy, her value as a creator fully engaged in her work. The only purchases Lavis mentions in her journals are wallpaper for their new Oshawa home, and a visit to the tailor to have the season’s clothing made. Thus, by using history to discuss her desire for simplicity, Lavis safety, hypothetically rejects her social and education pursuits, while further validating her experiences as a homemaker (Boutilier 70), and emphasizing the simplicity of that lifestyle as a Canadian responsibility that has existed for women for several generations. Thus, in considering Lavis and her family unit as contributing to the perpetuation of this national identity and idealization, Canadian histories are as necessary and valuable to the creation of these narratives as the present circumstances and prospective positions.

In 1973, Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald’s only child, Thoreau, recalled, in the “Autobiographical Note” of Margaret E. Edison’s *Thoreau MacDonald* that his “earliest memory [was] of being wheeled in a go-cart along High Park Avenue through the pines and oaks. … bumping along through the sunny open woods full of flowers and bushes never seen now,” with his mother and twin nurses who helped Lavis MacDonald with household chores (7). Similarly, another of his early memories was of his father, cutting trees to clear a property for their second Quebec Avenue home, which J.E.H. MacDonald designed and built (Whiteman 15). It is useful to consult Thoreau MacDonald, who, despite indulging in his own share of nostalgic idealization, reinforces the prominence of the “great woods” and “shady lanes” that a young Joan Lavis desired, which eventually did permeate the MacDonald family environments. Thoreau’s remark on “bushes and flowers never seen now” also gesture to a lingering anxiety of urban expansion as late as 1973, the same year construction began on Canada’s tallest radio and television communication platform: the CN Tower. The gravitation towards a secluded, almost technophobic lifestyle was in-line with that of his namesake, Henry David Thoreau, but was more directly passed down to him by his parents, who were reluctant towards automobiles, electricity, and other technologies rapidly creeping into a twentieth century Canada.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Hydro was first used in Toronto by roughly the 1880s, but the MacDonalds never used it in their households, and spent perhaps more time outdoors than they did within, excluding their stays at the Studio Building, the construction of which was funded by J.E.H. MacDonald’s closest Group of Seven comrade, Lawren Harris, and their patron, Dr. James MacCallum. MacDonald initially kept Studio 6, on the third floor, but due to his and Joan Lavis MacDonald’s periods of illness, they moved to the first floor for easier access, next to another Group of Seven member, Franklin Carmichael. Carmichael wrote in February of 1914 that Joan Lavis MacDonald was “an invalid—or rather, invalidated most of the time,” and that the first floor apartment was “an ideal place for [J.E.H. MacDonald] especially as I believe the hard times are hitting Jimmie pretty badly, perhaps worse than the rest of us” (qtd. in R. King 176).

The Studio Building, located at 25 Severn Street in Toronto was the MacDonald’s center-city base, and—with a small loft and sleeping quarters—their residence for brief periods when physical health or financial stability failed them, as it often did in the wake of the economic collapse caused by the First World War. Though Joan Lavis MacDonald’s ill health was a persistent concern throughout her life, which she acknowledged as early as her journal entries from the late-nineteenth century, it was not a complete hindrance to her productivity, nor did it confine her to remain indoors. At the various residences the MacDonalds owned and rented through their thirty-one years, the land surrounding the home was always as much a part of the household—if not more so—than the houses themselves, and at no residence was this more notable than 121 Centre Street, Thornhill, the farmhouse which came to be known as Four Elms.

In terms of indoor environments, women did not have what could be counted as exclusively *their own space* within the home, the way men occupied the head of the table, or the den. Certainly, the kitchen and bedroom were often attributed to women, but ultimately were “hers only as spaces in which she [was] expected to provide services to and for her man. Private space—space in which she [could] just be, space where she [did] not have to justify her presence by being engaged in work—[was] nonexistent unless she actively creat[ed] and maintain[ed] it” (Graham 250).[[20]](#footnote-20) Because the property surrounding the house was such a prominent and often frequented space for the MacDonalds, this issue of space indoors and Joan Lavis MacDonald’s ties to it becomes slightly less weighted. Also, because both Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald utilised and took up space in similar ways, it is easy to imagine a seamless convergence of the house as a storage space for the art and literature which they created and consumed outdoors.

When Lavis MacDonald still lived with her parents, her writing desk was one such example of a space at which she was not bound by work obligations—though, due to her diligent behaviour, she was bound to her own self-imposed work obligations. The desk was often so crowded with her textbooks that she scarcely had enough room to write in her notebook (Lavis 14). This desk was wholly devoted to school, to writing articles and keeping a journal, and she made a conscientious effort to sit there at the end of each day, after her homemaking duties. Interestingly paralleling Joan Lavis MacDonald’s cluttered space of creative productivity, an anecdote about J.E.H. MacDonald’s work habits by an associate at Grip Ltd. named Leonard Russell, recalls that “His desk was covered with sketches, notebooks, paints and brushes, all in utter confusion. It was said that, when he left Grip, he found on his desk material which had been missing for years. … I do know his table seemed always full and he did his work on one corner” (qtd. in Duval 24).

If the state and use of their workspaces are of any indication, indoors, for the MacDonalds, was predominantly conducive to arts and literature, while gendered spaces like the kitchen are displaced by Joan Lavis MacDonald in her writings, either outdoors, “on the cool, shady grass-plot churning the kick cream into golden masses of butter” (Penelope “Sweet”), or to the cellar, where she enjoys going to “look over [her] rows and rows of fruit & jelly” (Lavis 14). The boundaries between indoor and outdoor functionality were further blurred as there were no electric lights and its primary light source was the natural light through the large windows with lanterns in the evening. Furthermore, coats and boots were required indoors during the cold seasons, because the large, two-storey home was heated by coal, with no electrical heating even well into the twenty-first century (S. MacDonald 6).

One of the most striking examples of this incorporation of natural environment into the house itself was the gesture of naming their Thornhill farmhouse on 121 Centre Street Four Elms, simply for the four, large elm trees on the property when they made the purchase. Today, the house is shielded from the surrounding suburbs by trees, planted by Thoreau MacDonald as the farmlands of Thornhill began to give way to urban city blocks, but in 1914 when the property was initially purchased, it was four acres of field. Inside the back entrance of the house—still there and legible today—are notes jotted down by the MacDonalds about an illness which seized the elm trees, monitoring their decline. The fact that they wrote these things on the walls, when Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald were notorious for never being seen without a notebook or sketchbook in hand, is significant in securing their home as not only a space that encourages the study of botany and written observation, but as a shared space in which this takes place. The notes are not confined to a notebook, they are upon the wall and multiple handwritings contribute to the development.

Keeping in focus the notion of the household as an art piece in itself, it is useful to consider the MacDonalds’ involvement in the Arts & Crafts Movement, and Joan Lavis MacDonald’s early gravitation towards the form and its ideologies; however, this first requires a further understanding of Lavis MacDonald’s relationship with her physical household environment. Her feelings towards housework were very mixed. In many regards, she disliked it. She disliked the perpetual cycle, what she called “this incessant round of housework” (Lavis 17), and she loathed “to take several hours in preparing a dinner and then seeing it consumed in less than half an hour” (14). Lavis MacDonald’s interest in teaching, as taken up previously, already gestured towards her desire for visible results, and housework, with its continuous need for repetition and no long-lasting sense of completion, was often unfulfilling, as the following 1894 journal entry illustrates:

I get up at 5 o’clock. Tried to write until time to get breakfast but accomplished so little. And this morning how I longed and longed for an hour’s reading but I must keep on with the housework – did up the morning work. Swept and dusted – washed my curtains – and prepared the dinner – From one to two is my rest hour but I dusted & arranged my room – then until 3:30 I sewed. Then went out for a walk which I enjoyed and came home quite hungry. After tea was looking forward to such a cosy evening with my books when suddenly I remembered that it was Mission Circle evg. Was tempted to let it go by but thought better. … It is now 10 o’clock and I am so tired – and have done no reading to-day. Must keep on reading. Why have women no time? (17)

While Lavis’ aforementioned intellectual pursuits occurred, officially, outside the household, the house in which she lived as an adolescent was a full-time occupation on account of her gender. Because the house was always there, it could be easily misconstrued as her primary responsibility. Essentially, she could choose to pursue academia, but she could not choose *not* to be a housekeeper.

The Arts & Crafts Movement was the means by which Lavis MacDonald could act as homemaker while pursuing the aesthetic and philosophical tasks of nation-building, both prior to and after her marriage to J.E.H. MacDonald, with Four Elms as, ultimately, that successful coming together of the nostalgic romanticism of rural Canada, the comfort and responsibility of a home environment, along with the freedom to engage in artisanship. The movement first emerged in England, in the 1850s with the artistic and written endeavours of William Morris (1834–1896), who was disturbed by the industrial revolution and the way in which it was “despoiling the landscape,” “dehumanizing … the workers, both by the dreadful social conditions they were forced to endure and by the way the division of labour, central to the industrialized system, denied them creative pride,” and “guaranteed … a floor of poorly designed, shoddy wares” (Reid 66). Morris’ proposed solution, which “lay in the affirmation of national artistic values,” appealed greatly to Canadians who, by the 1880s, were facing the similar threat of industrial revolution—although in Canada there was the added fear that industrialization and urban expansion meant *Americanization*. As such, national artistic values became tantamount.

What made the Arts & Crafts Movement readily accessible to Lavis MacDonald, who insisted on multiple occasions that she was not an artist but nonetheless possessed an attention and appreciation for her natural environment, was that it did not adhere to one single particular style, but was a value-based aesthetic, “to establish in each person the potential for creativity, while supporting a non-hierarchical integration of the arts that would bring reflective, aesthetic consideration to all aspects of life, encouraging honest simplicity, dignity and health, in close communion with nature” (71). In Chapter Two, writing was examined as being a creative means by which Lavis MacDonald connected to her natural environment, and this chapter will further examine the various forms of artisanry with which Lavis MacDonald engaged to project her perceived national artistic values. Ultimately, Lavis MacDonald’s connection and attention to her visual environment closely mirrored that of her husband, and though she did not put her observations and sentiments to canvas, she sought other artistic means of capturing nature and the Canadian spirit.

To return to the focal passage from Lavis MacDonald’s adolescence, one very direct aesthetic detail which she favoured, and which was ultimately incorporated into her home was that of having “the doors and windows open for the sunshine to make patterns on” (Lavis 4). The windows at Four Elms, in Thornhill, were frosted with patterned frames, so that the very sunlight itself painted art on the floors and windowsills in a seamless integration of nature and art. The rag carpets featured in the passage, meanwhile, speak not only to Lavis MacDonald’s ambition in weaving the carpets herself—such were rag carpets of the time—but also to an economic consciousness in reusing materials, as rag carpets are most often woven out of spare and scrap pieces of fabric. Their socioeconomic situation was perhaps the worst of all J.E.H. MacDonald’s peers following the outbreak of the First World War, and therefore the lived experience of poverty contributed to the creation of rag carpets, of an aesthetic component of her interior environment.

Once again, Lavis MacDonald’s creative endeavours and her position as a national subject self-fulfill themselves. Being able to forge beauty out of necessary, minimal resources touches on the simplistic quality of the Arts & Crafts Movement but also the hardy, financially precarious values associated with Canadian rural environments. Lavis MacDonald was not fulfilling the image of the hardy English woman, forging the nation through her domestic management (Boutilier 69), just as J.E.H. MacDonald was not fulfilling the role of the hardy canoeist and woodsman attributed to Tom Thomson, and Group of Seven member A.Y. Jackson. Nonetheless, their shared sensibilities towards simplicity and seclusion ultimately enabled them to immerse themselves as a family into this aesthetic which has, since the Group of Seven’s formation in 1920, become inextricably bound with national ideals and values.

I am not an artist, but I had never realized the force and beauty of simple truth and goodness until I learned what the spirit of all true art (or beauty) meant. … And when I speak of art here, I mean art in its widest sense, the ministry of beauty, whether in paintings, music, poetry, or flowers. And to you, girls, called to be daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in the home, has it been given in large measure to minister of the things of beauty.” (Penelope “Sunsine”)

The final section of Lavis’ idealized home environment is a step away from visual artisanry to focus instead on her determination to foster a sociable home environment., in that she “would love every body and have every body come and be happy” (Lavis 5). As early as her 1888 journal entries, Lavis possessed a keen devotion to aiding her mother, and a contrasting anxiety towards her seeming inability to alleviate her father’s emotional burdens. The notion that taking an active role in fostering positivity amongst family members was something that could be regarded as home-making was featured frequently in “The Girl’s Corner.” By examining Lavis’ philosophies concerning a daughter’s duty to her mother, and most interestingly, a sister’s duty of bettering her brothers, it is clear that Lavis possesses a strong awareness of the individual self and the incessant emanation of one’s influence upon others. This notion was especially important in women responsible for minding and managing their home environment, because they, as the center of the space, were in turn largely, if not solely, responsible for ensuring its comfortable spirit for the others; usually for the men. It is, she explained, so imbued as to be an invisible force which “speaks, … walks, [and] moves; it is powerful in every look of my eye, in every word of my lips, in every act of my life” (Penelope “Church”). It, too, makes a home.

In “The Girl’s Corner” article “The Sunshine of the Home,” printed seven years after the passing of Susan Lavis in April of 1896, Lavis continued to write of a daughter’s responsibilities to her mother with heavy conviction: “To be your mother’s right hand in making the home atmosphere one of peace and love is your God-appointed work. And that statement means more than a nicely-sounding sentiment. It means a continual forgetting of self and seeking not one’s own,” for the benefit “of the mother’s health” (“Sunshine”). In the previous article, Lavis again insists that young girls should “relive [their] failing and fading mother of much care” by assuming extra responsibilities (qtd. in “Messages”). Her focus on the figure of the tired and fading mother is almost certainly an autobiographical priority and lingering gloom across the two articles; however, where these advisories read as regretful, cautionary messages to her readership, those articles concerning a sister’s relationship with her brother hint at beneficial social prospects.

Recall that most educational institutions in the nineteenth century held a series of rigid social rules and restrictions exclusive to young women students and instructors. Rules consisted of curfews, of public establishments women were not permitted to frequent, such as pubs, and they were often not allowed to ride in carriages or cars with any man who was not their father, or their brother. Thus, when Lavis devotes articles to informing young women of how to best treat and please their brothers, one cannot help but see not only an attempt to improve one’s home environment, but a honed social skillset designed to get young women *out* of one’s home environment, in their brothers company.

The article “To the Girl Who Has a Brother” is wholly devoted to the young girl and her brother, and might as well constitute a separate essay in itself for the connotations it carries regarding gentlemanly behaviour, especially as these suggestions and expected behaviours are coming from a young woman who thus far has proven herself to be well set to leave the Victorian era behind by bracing for the twentieth century in every way, from her clothing to her education-oriented goals. All the same, the article reads,

Dress for him … wear the hat he likes best when you go out with him. You can treat him as if he were a thorough gentleman, even though he may not always show himself one; and by so doing you are taking the quickest and surest way to helping him be one. … Just a little touch in passing; a bright good-morning to greet him; a good-bye when he leaves; -- these little things you can do that will go far to win the heart and life of your brother to all things that are lovely and of good report.” (“Brother”)

The relationship between brother and sister during a time when women lived in controlled, gendered environments inevitably lead to this sort of reliance of the sister on her brother, with the added benefit of fostering a relationship that might otherwise go unacknowledged, as young men and women nonetheless occupied opposing roles within their shared home environment. In Lavis’ case she was fortunate to travel frequently with her brothers—particularly Tom, who despite behind younger than her, was nonetheless socially equipped to accompany her into town, or to Brooklin whenever J.R. Lavis was away from Oshawa.

Lavis MacDonald’s mindful kindness towards others was a consistent quality throughout her life, and she believed unwaveringly, through her conversions from Methodism, to being Baptist, and an eventual Christian Scientist, that the most important thing was to help others and to never pass up an opportunity to make another’s day better. This is not, therefore, to suggest that Lavis’ advice for how to appear to one’s brother is wholly a manipulative tactic, but it is nonetheless important that she chose to put this particular relationship of brother and sister to page, rather than that of how to promote good relationships between girl friends, for instance. In a column predominantly devoted to providing young women with guides to achieving happy and full days, “To the Girl Who Has a Brother” is nothing less.

There are few resources by which Lavis MacDonald’s later social accommodations towards guests within her home might be examined. Susan MacDonald, who met and wrote to her great-aunt on many occasions as a child attested to her kind and extraordinarily generous personality, and though she is scarcely mentioned by those members of her husband’s art collectives who so often surrounded her—especially during the First World War when Four Elms became a support and social center of sorts—she nonetheless attained that desired environment in which friends and colleagues gathered and were, despite the circumstances, happy. In the spring of 1915, Arthur Lismer, his wife Esther (1885–1969) and their daughter Marjorie (aged two) moved into Four Elms with the MacDonalds in order to disperse the cost of living and to work together on the gardens, sharing produce and selling whatever little was left for extra money. By 1917, with the War and economic prospects in Canada looking bleak as ever, the MacDonalds extended their resources and hospitality by creating a community garden out of their four acres for members of the Arts and Letters Club.

Founded in 1908, the Arts and Letters Club was initially held together by “dinners anywhere downtown and no place to pay rent” by a small group of commercial designers and other creative types—all men, as late as 1985 (Bridle 1). By 23 March 1908, however, the Club came together officially, and J.E.H. MacDonald was, from its beginnings, a key figure in most aspects, from designing its coat of arms, to acting as president from 1928 till 1930, taking it upon himself to organize an archive for the Club, and beyond its administrative duties, he also delivered lectures there and took part in its theatrical events (Whiteman 21). Most notably, the Arts and Letters Club was also where J.E.H. MacDonald held his first solo exhibition, at the annual spring exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) (J. King 61).

J.E.H. MacDonald would therefore have been extraordinarily well-known to those members of the Club whom he invited to participate in the shared garden project at Four Elms, and many of them already visited the MacDonald home regularly, to sketch on the property or simply to visit. Despite being at the center of this social hub (never in the Arts and Letters Club, but nonetheless surrounded by its members because it was so deeply entrenched in her husband’s life and career) Joan Lavis MacDonald is seldom mentioned by J.E.H. MacDonald’s contemporaries, and in turn, if she was, these references have not been compiled. Similarly, Esther Lismer, who lived at Four Elms for several months, is also absent from the circulating correspondence.

What is exceedingly clear is that despite Joan Lavis MacDonald’s absence within the primary sources, she was, during that period in time, immersed in her own home environment, with groups of men whom she was otherwise unable to see on account of the clubs that did not allow women members and focused primarily on painting and design as prominent forms of visual arts, of which she was not a part. Despite the fact that she did not ascribe nor belong to that homogeneous social sphere to which her husband belonged, there is little doubt, given Lavis MacDonald’s ease in conversing with men, from Professor H., to Mr. Wabson, that she would allow herself to remain unaccounted for in conversation amongst the artists and poets of Toronto. There are several letters and postcards worth of discussions about painting, such as J.E.H. MacDonald’s letter to Lavis MacDonald from 15 July 1906:

I went to South Kensington to look at the De Wint watercolours … I was especially interested in a little forest picture by Diaz – one of the Barbizon men – being inclined to look on myself as a forest specialist. Standing back, contemplating these little pictures, I seemed to get a clear feeling, though faint and far off, that someday I, too, would be an artist and produce similar things. What do you think of that? (qtd. in Duval 22).

Their letters also extended into subjects of commercial and bookplate design, and ultimately, nearly twenty years of marriage to one of the most community-oriented, involved artists in the Greater Toronto Area suggests that although she had never put a brush to canvas, Lavis MacDonald was in no sense ignorant of the artistic and professional activities of J.E.H. MacDonald and his contemporaries.

From the very start of her correspondence with J.E.H. MacDonald twenty years previous, Joan Lavis MacDonald had established herself as someone interested and thoroughly implicated in the exchange of ideas, and of meaningful dialog, and as such it is not difficult to imagine that she would have held the same heightened standards of discussion to her husband’s peers. Although the details of her life are few, it is not at all trivial that she is consistently referred to, if not by name, then as “attending McMaster University” (Duval 16), as “a McMaster University student” (Whiteman 19), a “student at McMaster University” (J. King 60), and as “a primary school teacher” to cite but a few (R. King 21). Her intellect and achievements as a university student, especially where her husband, nor any member of the Group of Seven, held such an education, have been made into the primary characteristic of her scarcely-known personality. As this thesis has proven, that emphasis is not unfounded, and the focus on her intellectual capabilities quickly and effectively paint her as a compatible partner to J.E.H. MacDonald, who is already continually cast as the quiet avid reader and poet.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This thesis offers a focused study of a previously unstudied individual. This often seemed to call for a fuller biographical portrait and a fuller rendition of the life and times of Joan Lavis MacDonald. Ultimately, “The Invisible Companion” is a first step in that direction, and simultaneously offers a renewed first step for J.E.H. MacDonald scholarship, from which we can begin reassessing his environment and influences. With Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven as the untouchable center of Canadian art history and of national cultural movements, it is easy to lose sight of their contemporaries—artists and otherwise. A study of Joan Lavis MacDonald is an opportunity to jostle that closed sphere, to shift the attention from what visionaries like J.E.H. MacDonald and Lawren Harris were crafting in the way of national discourse, and to examine the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century landscape that gave birth to the Group of Seven from outside of their homogenous social group.

“The Journal of Harriet Joan Lavis, 1888-1896,” the invaluable discovery of Penelope: Joan Lavis’ columnist pseudonym, and the private family collections of photographs, correspondence and Joan Lavis MacDonald’s embroidery projects and small writing desk, owned and managed by Lavis MacDonald’s great-niece Susan M. MacDonald, are dwarfed by the immensity of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven and their continued influence within Canadian culture. To wield these three primary sources and suggest that Joan Lavis MacDonald was a substantial influence in the life of J.E.H. MacDonald is daunting, but it is a crucial step towards dismantling mythology by introducing historical fact, and is a contribution towards the effort to create spaces for women in a national history thoroughly intertwined with ideals of masculinity in turn fabricated by men.

Joan Lavis MacDonald, as a writer, public speaker and educator, reinforces the notion that women are not at all missing-in-action within Canadian art and history, but rather they are excluded from it, often as the histories themselves are developing as was the case with collectives such as the Arts and Letters Club, or they are later excluded, or allotted less cultural clout and longstanding influence. Mary Wrinch (1877–1969), for example, was a member of the Toronto Art Students’ League despite not being featured on any lists compiled by Hunter Bishop or Robert Stacey, the late, leading researchers of J.E.H. MacDonald’s artistic environment. She owned a cottage in Muskoka, and prior to Tom Thomson’s first venture into Algonquin Park in 1912, she took solitary canoe trips to sketch and paint the landscape. She exhibited her work alongside the Group of Seven in the Canadian Painting Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario), yet her name and art are not etched into the collective consciousness of the nation (cite). Emily Carr alone stands as a famous woman artist in Canada, on par with Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven.

In addition to returning a voice to one of too many female historical figures who have gone without, highlighting Joan Lavis MacDonald, rather than a professional artist such as Mary Wrinch, does the additional service of gesturing to the importance of individuals who are not mythologized and the stereotyped. What made this project challenging was the inability to turn to the index of any Group of Seven or Canadian art history book to find Joan MacDonald, or Joan Lavis, or so much as “spouse” or “wife” under the J.E.H. MacDonald index items. This project consisted of mornings sifting through census forms and church registries, and afternoons listening to silence over telephone lines as local historical societies insist they had never heard of a “Joan Lavis MacDonald,” yet here we have a woman who had contributed regularly to her local newspaper, and was involved in church committees and studied Literature.

In considering the weight of influence this thesis has assigned her, it is somehow simultaneously disheartening and exciting to imagine the multitude of individuals out of which the national collective is composed. Lavis MacDonald had the historical and biographical benefits of marrying a young commercial designer who would become one of Canada’s most prominent artists, and her slightly-more-visible position still required trips to regular city directories, where her name and relatives were filed on microfilm alongside everyone else.

Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald are a formidable pair to loosen the nationally prevalent gendered binaries of the domestic, genteel woman and the strong, aggressive woodsman that stood—and in many instances still stand—as core Canadian gender values. Joan and J.E.H. MacDonald, these two social variances, published articles and essays, shared their art, assumed teaching positions, and prompted their contemporaries and youths to consider the state of rapid change around them. Joan Lavis MacDonald was a published voice at the forefront of women’s beginnings in higher education, while J.E.H. MacDonald was a visual presence at the forefront of a distinctly Canadian representation of national environment, and their shared progressive ambitions in turn guaranteed that they, too, prompted and inspired one another, casting Joan Lavis MacDonald as more than the archetype as the artists wife and muse.

Illustrations



**Fig i** Joan Lavis MacDonald and brothers Tom (l) and Frank (r)

**Fig ii** Joan LavisMacDonald at Quebec Ave. **Fig iii** Joan and Thoreau MacDonald



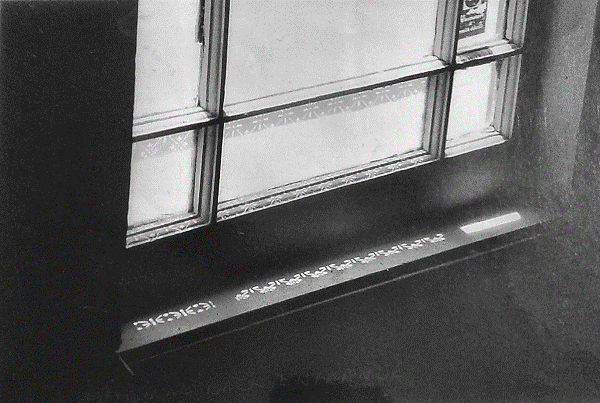
**Fig iv** Letter from J.E.H. MacDonad to Thoreau MacDonald



**Fig v** Joan Lavis MacDonald at the Studio Building



**Fig vi** Kerchiefs embroidered by Joan Lavis MacDonald



**Fig vii** Sunlight casting patterns on the window sill at Four Elms

Appendix: A List of Joan Lavis MacDonald’s Readings

1888

*Interrupted*, by Pansy (Isabella Macdonald Alden)

*Hours with Working Women*

1890

*Golden Grove*, by Bishop Tayler

*Felix Holt*, by George Eliot

*Records of a Later Life*, by Fanny Kemble

*Chautauqua Journal* [Literary journal]

*Pocahontas*

“Crossing the Bar,” by Tennyson

“In Memoriam,” by Tennyson

“Rousseau’s Comparison of Socrates with Jesus”

*The Drawbacks of Our Civilization*

Sermon by Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage

1891

“Holy Grail,” by Tennyson

*Culture Demanded by Modern Life: A Series of Addresses and Arguments on the Claims*

*of Scientific Education*

*The Study of Physics*, by Dr. Tyndall

*Powers of the Human Mind*, by Dr. Wayland Hoyt

*The Better Part*, by Annie Swan

“Ring out Wild Bells,” by Tennyson

1892

*The Old Regime in Canada*, by Francis Parkman

*Life of Florence Nightingale*, by Edward Cook

“[Articles] from the Review of Reviews on Woman’s Suffrage in England and ‘The

American Woman’” (Lavis 13).

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1. An eighteen year old boy named Lewis Hobbs, never mentioned through MacDonald’s writings, immigrated to Canada in the year of 1871, living with the family as well, likely as an apprentice to J.R. Lavis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because the region, which would eventually come to encompass the Greater Toronto Area, was in a period of constant flux in terms of names and geographical borders, it is unclear whether the Lavis’ moved often, or whether the primary documents and subsequent citations regarding the Lavis’ residence are referring to regions by their modern names or as they were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. MacDonald’s interest in being a missionary predated the November 3rd, 1888 meeting; however, it was after the meeting that she told her mother of it. Susan Lavis was pleased to hear it, but insisted she wait. Missionaries across multiple Churches, by the dawn of the twentieth century, were beginning to implicate youth in their programs, which aligned historically with the rise of young women in education. In a McMaster University pamphlet from 1896-97, the Mission Band involvement was mandatory for all Christian students, and for MacDonald, whose central goal was that of being an educator, the notion of “enlightening” Indigenous children would have appealed to her. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Dress Reform Movement, reaching North America in 1851, was a shift in primarily women’s fashion away from the restricting corsets and heavy dress cages of the Victorian period, towards healthier, more practical clothing (Kelcey 229). It was also an indirectly political means by which women worked towards societal emancipation, since “the restrictive nature of their corsets epitomized their continued position in society,” and subdued women physically, which almost certainly accounts for a portion of Joan MacDonald’s frequent bouts of illness (230). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The average age of marriage in Canada in the nineteenth century was between twenty and twenty-five for women, and twenty-five and twenty-nine for men. By the time of their marriage, which took place on J.E.H. MacDonald’s twenty-sixth birthday (12 May 1873), Joan MacDonald was 27 years old (“History of Marriage”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are no clear clues or sources to indicate whether the Lavis’ belonged to the Metcalf Street Methodist Church or the Simcoe Street Methodist Church; however, the latter is featured in The Robert McLaughlin Gallery as hosting the “Simcoe St. Methodist Church Mission Band” in 1920. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. No known relation of Group of Seven member Franklin Carmichael. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. By 1914, he became a fellow Studio Building-dweller, along with Tom Thomson, and several other members of the Group of Seven. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the York wedding registry for 1899, Joan MacDonald’s “Occupation or Profession” is listed as “Gentlewoman,” while for other wives there is only a dash or nothing at all. Given the various connotations of the word, it might gesture to MacDonald’s age upon marriage, only two years shy of thirty. In some instances, North American gentlewomen were perceived as activists or feminists, thought it could also gesture to her holding a university degree, which at that time would have placed her in some higher standing, as a woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although J.E.H. MacDonald disliked teaching, he was extraordinarily popular amongst students, who threatened to go on strike if MacDonald was not selected as G.A. Reid’s successor as principal (Bishop 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Despite it being so often overlooked, Barbados was a well-documented trip, rather than merely being pieced together by remaining correspondence as most were. J.E.H. MacDonald’s *The Barbados Journal, 1932* offers a published account, and the Arts and Letters Club archives contain many of the photographs he and Joan MacDonald took during the trip. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Despite her French (maiden) surname, Lavis, MacDonald is not listed as French-speaking on census forms. She did enroll her son, Thoreau MacDonald, in a private French school under Miss Elise Guillet, who was purportedly a relative of the young MacDonald’s namesake, Henry David Thoreau (T. MacDonald “Introduction” 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The choice of the penname “Pansy” has its origins in the very domestic environment that her writings encourage. As a small child, Alden was always looking for ways to be the ideal helper to her mother. On one occasion this entailed picking every pansy from the garden to use as table centerpieces, though rather than picking stem and flower to place them in vases, the young girl picked only the flower, leaving the stem, and scattered them over the table cloth. Her mother was livid, and it was her father who came to her rescue, and from then on imparted the name Pansy to her as a gesture towards her overzealous attitude towards helping her mother, and creating a beautiful home environment (“Isabella”). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. MacDonald would later write, “There is much of good and inspiration to be gained from a great man, [and] a good book,” in 1896, which marks her first acknowledgement in “The Girl’s Corner” of a man as a “dearest friend,” and—given the tell-tale inclusion of a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote—undoubtedly marks the early stages of her courtship with J.E.H. MacDonald, who was a great admirer of Emerson. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. No known relation to Group of Seven member Franklin Carmichael. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. J.E.H. MacDonald’s 1904 letter to Joan recalls a later, 1919 letter written by Group of Seven member Frank Johnston to his wife during the second Algoma boxcar painting trip, in which he admitted, “I feel quite homesick when I think of you all and what I am missing being away from you all. These chaps don’t seem to miss their womenfolk much” (qtd. in R. King 325). Johnston is referring to J.E.H. MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris, though he evidently misjudged the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. MacDonald’s great-niece Susan M. MacDonald’s immediate response to my request to use materials from the MacDonald private collection was one of enthusiasm, because she consciously echoes the value which Joan, J.E.H., and Thoreau MacDonald placed upon education, and in helping students. J.E.H. MacDonald himself, as the chronology indicates, held several teaching positions. Thoreau MacDonald always welcomed students to sketch outdoors at Four Elms, answered their questions about J.E.H. MacDonald and the Group of Seven, and “their curiosity and thirst for knowledge were important to [him]” (T. MacDonald 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. We might trace MacDonald’s three shifts in religion, from Methodist (1871–1893), to Baptist (1893 –1897) and Christian Scientist (1897–1962), to the degrees to which she felt restraints upon her desire to pursue education, as well as more frequent time spent in Toronto, at McMaster University, by the late 1890s. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to Susan M. MacDonald, Thoreau MacDonald bought an automobile, which J.E.H. MacDonald requested he return almost immediately. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Verb tense has been changed from Graham’s use of present tense to suit sentence structure, not to suggest this issue of space no longer exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)