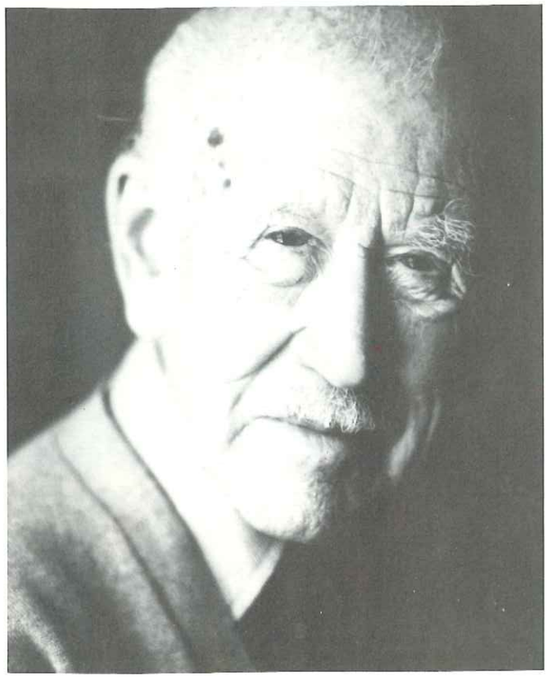
A PAINTER'S LIFE

A.J. Casson looks back on 60 years at the easel



GAIL HARVEY

By HUBERT de SANTANA

A. J. Casson is relaxing on a sofa in the living room of his handsome, two-storey Georgian brick house in north Toronto, a home he has shared with his wife, Margaret, for more than half a century. The room has a comfortable, lived-in look and is brightened with bowls of fresh flowers. The walls are hung with Casson's Cassons, the largest of which is a new, as yet unnamed, landscape of battered spruce trees overlooking a small valley in northern Ontario. There are pastel-soft paintings of Quebec villages and a set of early sketches made around Bancroft, done in brooding, blue-grey tones. A bronze head of Casson by Winnipeg sculptor Leo Mol stares sightlessly at a rare little Casson painting of Rock Island, near Vermont, on the opposite wall. A tall bookcase is crammed with art books. But there is one tome that's so big it sits on a side table. Its title is *A.J. Casson: A Tribute,* published by Cerebrus Press and Prentice-Hall in 1980, when the artist was 82.

He is now 86, and his rugged, kindly face has an elemental look, as though carved from quartz. The hair that is left on his balding, freckled head is as fine and glossy as cornsilk; his eyebrows and moustache are white as hoar frost. He has an engaging, gap-toothed grin that gives him a boyish, mischievous air. When he laughs, which he does often, his lined, seamed face softens wonderfully and silver points of light stir in his blue eyes.

On this morning Casson is ebullient as champagne, for a friend will soon be coming to take him to lunch at the Arts and Letters Club, of which he is the oldest standing member. He is neatly dressed, wearing grey trousers, a green cardigan and a maroon tie with a trillium pattern. It will be his first excursion in four months. Until very recently, the vigorous Casson never knew what it was to be seriously ill. But last year, he developed circulatory problems and was brought suddenly face to face with his own mortality.

He speaks of his brush with death with an almost eerie tranquillity: "It's a thing I'd never thought of—dying—really. Because I've always been on the go. At 86, I was still on the go. When I was lying in intensive care for three or four days, I thought, 'Here I am, just hanging on the edge'—and it didn't bother me whether I would wake up in the morning or not. I wasn't frightened, or anything: I just accepted it."

What he finds harder to accept is the draining of his physical energy. "I think I'm on the mend now," he says, but adds poignantly: "I wish I could get a little more pep. I wish I could stop this watch going around in a circle here." He pulls back the cuff of his sleeve to show a watch turning loosely on his shrunken wrist. "I don't wear glasses, and my hands are steady. If I could get 10 or 15 pounds back on me, and get some more strength, I'd start to paint."

It's very moving to see Casson, who abhors idleness, chafing against the chains that keep him from the work he loves. He consoles himself by planning ahead: "I think what I'm going to do after Christmas, when I get a little strength back, is start to make some sketches. I won't be able to go out—I have to keep out of the cold—but I think I'll start to do some 12 by 15's. What I may do is take an old sketch that didn't come off and redo it, just to get my hand in with the paint, and get the colours going again."

Country Store (1930), watercolour, 35.2 x 40.3 cm. (14" x 16"). Private collection. Courtesy: Cerebrus/Prentice-Hall.

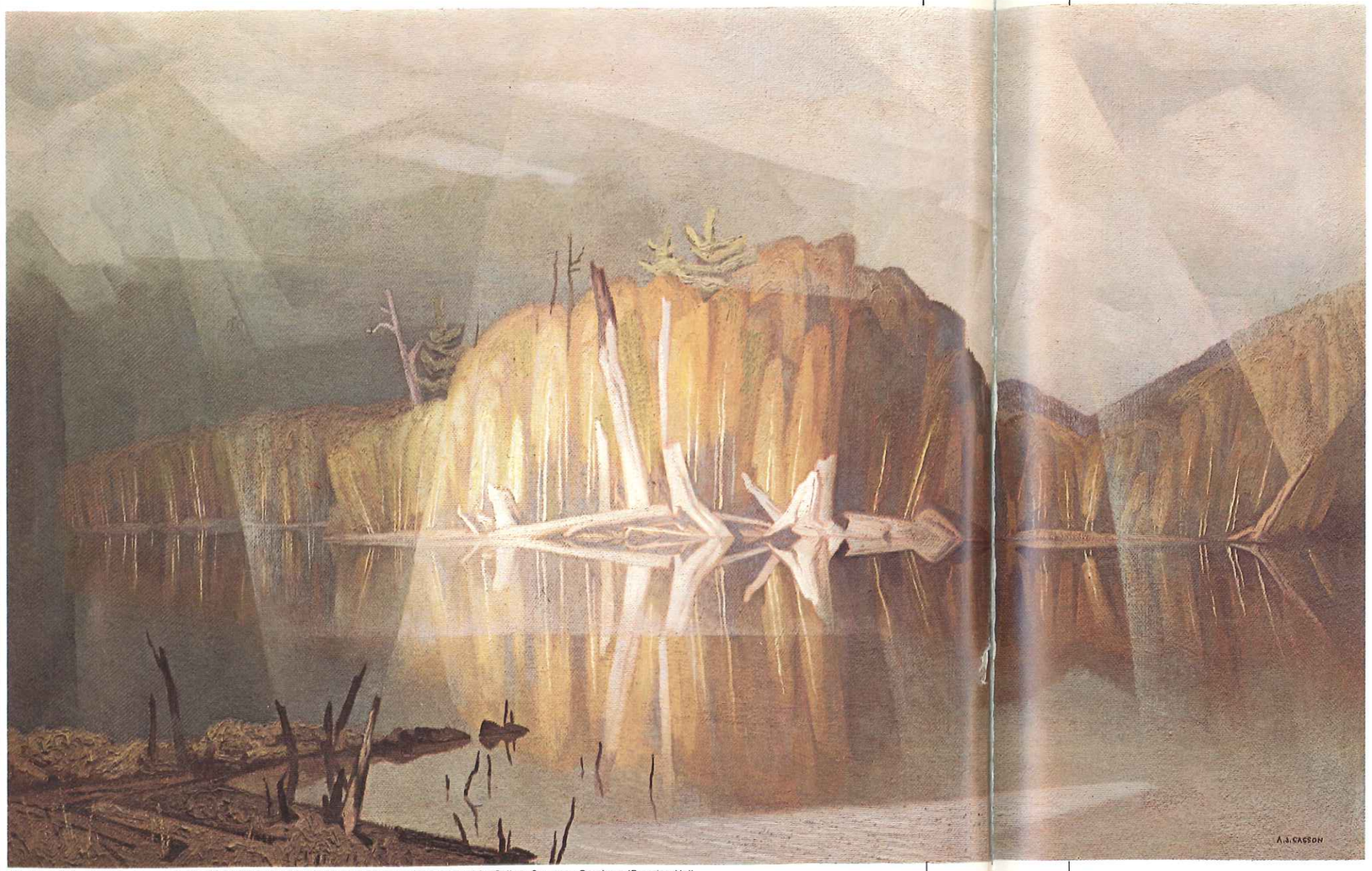
Casson's love for the vanishing Ontario village shows through in his nostalgic portrayal of scenes such as this watercolour sketch of an old country store located northwest of Toronto. He regards his depiction of Ontario rural life as his particular contribution to Canadian art: "It is a record of a disappearing society and a disappearing world."

Alfred Joseph Casson's lifetime commitment to painting has made him one of the most famous, sought-after and honoured artists in the country. His paintings hang in public and private collections throughout Canada. Four universities have conferred honorary doctorates on him; he has received many official honours, including the Order of Canada in 1979. He has even had a lake and a township in Ontario named after him. Casson has a special place in the public's affection, not only for his unfailing humility and courtesy, but because a certain mystique attaches to him as the last living link with the legendary Group of Seven.

The Group was formally organized in 1920, though its members had been painting together since 1911. The original members included Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frederick H. Varley, Frank Johnston and Franklin Carmichael.

Casson bristles at any criticism of the Group of Seven. "There is a lot of nit-picking about the Group, as there is about every art movement," he says with a touch of asperity, "but what isn't realized is that the Group did something that was desperately needed. They made Canadian artists paint as Canadians, instead of using imported techniques. If you look back before 1900, at some of the European-trained men—they were good, but they had that brown and grey look. The Group killed that. The Group brought a breath of fresh air into Canadian art. But sometimes I think they opened the window a bit too wide."

They did, indeed. Their motives may



Mist, Rain & Sun (1958), oil on masonite, 76.2 x 96.5 cm. (30" x 38"). Collection: London Regional Art Gallery. Courtesy: Cerebrus/Prentice-Hall.

Casson developed a style he calls "overlapping planes," a modified cubism employed in this superb 1958 view of Baptiste Lake suggesting intermittent rain shot through with rays of sunlight. But he found that paintings in this style "sold as fast as I did them." Sensing that he'd adopted a gimmick, Casson abandoned the technique.

have been admirable, but their influence on Canadian art has been unfortunate. The Group of Seven was idolized for its pioneering work, and what was really only one phase of growth in Canadian painting was embalmed and enshrined as a national ideal. The Group disbanded in 1931, but more than half a century later, galleries all over Canada display landscapes produced by artists whose imaginations suffer from radiation damage caused by fallout from the Group of Seven.

Casson, who had worked as a commercial artist and designer since his teens, was apprenticed to Frank Carmichael when he joined the design firm of Rous and Mann in 1919. They became lifelong friends, and Carmichael introduced Casson to the other members of the Group of Seven, who met regularly for lunch at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. When Frank Johnston left the Group in 1926, Casson was invited to take his place, and he was soon accompanying Carmichael, Harris and Jackson on their now legendary sketching trips.

Casson was friendly with all the Group members, but "Carmichael was the closest friend I had. I owe more to him than to anybody. We sketched together and camped together an awful lot. I suppose, he being a designer, and me being one, too, we had a little more in common." Casson quickly realized, however, that he needed to make a stylistic break. "I was beginning to paint a bit like Carmichael," he observes. He is right. A comparison of *Fog Clearing* (1929) with Carmichael's *Mirror Lake* (1929) shows just how strongly Casson was influenced by his older friend—not just in style and technique, but also in composition. Lawren Harris, too, had a strong influence on the young artist—an influence particularly apparent in Casson's *October, Lake Superior* (1929), with its deafening echoes of Harris's *Above Lake Superior* (ca. 1922).

Casson wisely decided to search for fresh and original subjects for his art. Although born in Toronto, he had been brought up in the country, near Guelph, and his idyllic boyhood—roaming the fields, fishing on the river, hunting rabbits—left him with an abiding love of rural Ontario. "I realized nobody was doing anything with the Ontario villages: they were bypassing them. So I started working on those, both near here and up north. I concentrated on them for 15 or 20 years. I'm glad I did that, because they're gone. The old stores are torn down or changed."

Paul Duval, Casson's biographer, calls him "unquestionably the bard of the Ontario village." The artist's portrayals of Ontario villages are full of nostalgic charm, but they are hardly realistic: his celebrated watercolour *Saturday Afternoon* (1927) is a composite of several sketches that he made of Rockwood, and the village, as set out in Casson's painting, exists only in his imagination.

The sentimentality of these canvases is not confined to their subject matter; Casson's style is contrived and theatrical as well. The houses are stylized and flattened until they look like cardboard props, or backdrops on a stage. This effect is heightened by the highly artificial lighting and the deliberate placement of stiff human figures in frozen attitudes. But Casson values these pictures highly, and has said: "If I have to define my contribution to the Canadian art scene, what was particularly mine were really the rural villages and houses. In a way it is a record of a disappearing society and a disappearing world."

Dennis Reid, curator of Canadian historical art at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the author of *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, has reservations about Casson's claim. He sees Casson's landscapes of the late '20s and early '30s as "probably greater achievements than most of the smaller studies of villages." Reid allows that "there are some canvases of small northern towns that are very striking and somewhat unusual in their historical context. But they're basically illustration. They're not reflective, and they're not asking any great questions about art that challenge the viewer in any sense."

Some of Casson's best work was also done in the late '50s, when he developed a style which he calls "overlapping planes," a sort of modified cubism in the manner of the American artist Lyonel Feininger. *Mist, Rain & Sun* (1958), painted at Baptiste Lake on "one of those days when it was raining a bit, there was a mist, and there were flashes of sunlight," is a superb painting. The composition is strong, and the atmospheric effects are brilliant. *Sun After Thunder* (1958) is powerful and dramatic, with the pigment laid on in thick, confident swirls. For the exquisite *Early Morning Mist*, painted two years earlier, Casson used the palest of colours to produce an oil as luminous and delicate as a watercolour.

Yet Casson found that these paintings were becoming so popular that "they sold as fast as I did them." His reaction was unusual: "I stopped cold. Much as I was enjoying it, I found that I'd got a gimmick,

> "There is something about sitting in front of a bare canvas and wondering, 'What can I pull out of this?'"

and I wasn't going to carry that on." Casson's integrity has tended to disarm his critics, and admirers tend to gloss over his failures, such as the saccharine *Autumn Decoration* (1931), a cluttered, sentimental Canadian idyll. When he attempted to paint flaming fall colours, the results could be embarrassing—an example is *Country Road, October* (1938)—and, as evidenced by the ludicrous rhomboids of *Poplar Grove* (1954), his cubism was often overplayed.

Over the years, Casson's painting methods have never varied. "There is something about sitting in front of a bare canvas and wondering, 'What can I pull out of this?' It's a challenge. I work in the old way. I put down an underpainting in monochrome: very thin. I don't like bare canvas, I don't like the feel of it; I like to get something to kill that white. To work out my composition, I usually work in a sort of greyish mauve colour. Sometimes I just use raw umber on white, and then overpaint it. It would perhaps take me two days to lay a picture out and do the underpainting, which is just a wash, almost. Then the finish of that would perhaps take three days."

Although watercolours constitute only one-eighth of Casson's total output, they are among his most accomplished works. Paul Duval, always fulsome in his praise of Casson, has declared that by 1930 the artist had become "one of the most powerful and expressive watercolour painters Canada had ever known." In fact it was Casson and Frank Carmichael who were largely responsible for rescuing watercolour from the contempt in which it was held in Canada. Casson, Carmichael and Fred Brigden founded the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour in 1925

and it is still flourishing today, something of which Casson is justly proud. "I like watercolour better than anything," he admits. "There is something sensuous about that feel of velvety washes. The only thing with watercolour is that you can't make a mistake: if you do something wrong, that's it, whereas with oil, you can change it."

He prefers to work on dry paper, because the washes are easier to control than on wet paper. Sometimes he fills in his detailed pencil drawings with dense, saturated colour, so that they look like stained glass, but more often than not he uses delicate washes to achieve his effects. Casson's skill with watercolours is evident in *On the Don* (1924), in which he captured the texture of mossy river stones by using mauve and umber washes on 90-pound Whatman paper, allowing the stipple of the paper's rough surface to provide the required texture.

Fisherman's Point (1948) is another virtuoso piece, with blue-grey washes used with a delicate and sure touch to express squally weather over a gently-rippling lake in the Cloche Hills. Casson cannot bear comparison to the American master Winslow Homer, but in this painting, he comes close. In old age Homer said to his dealer, "You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolours." The same can be said of Casson.

Both Casson and Carmichael often painted large oil canvases from watercolour sketches, and vice versa. In Casson's case, the oils were almost always less successful. *The Blue Heron* (1957), based on the watercolour *Backwater* (1954), is a case in point; it is overworked, and the lightness and spontaneity of the original watercolour has been lost.

Common to Casson's work in both media, however, is his use of a limited palette. He recalls that at the beginning of his career, "Exhibitions were flaming with colour. Well, I've always thought that if you want to stand out, don't follow the herd. I was inclined to go into subtle greys, to get away from the gaudy. I painted a few gaudy ones, but they never appealed to me."

Casson had been painting for nearly 40 years when he retired as vice-president and art director of the firm of Sampson Matthews in 1958. But it was only then that he began to paint full-time. Incredibly, he was 60 when he had his first one-man exhibition, at the Roberts Gallery in Toronto in 1959. Casson has now been with the Roberts Gallery for nearly 30 years, and he has implicit faith in his dealer, Jack Wildridge. "They've handled everything of mine," he says. "I leave the prices and everything to them."

But by the late '60s, the members of the Group of Seven had come to be seen as no less than the patron saints of Canadian art, and the extravagant attention given to the Group by a nationalistic news media and a general expansion of the art market combined to send prices for the Group's work through the roof. It was as if, as Robert Fulford suggested in *Saturday Night* in 1969, Canadians were trying to "buy a piece of the great Canadian myth."

Casson, who has never painted with an eye to profit, was appalled. "In my whole life," he says, "I have never painted anything thinking of selling it." But being a member of the Group, Casson was caught up in the boom. His prices soared, and he became a target for speculators.

Although his works lack psychological complexity and depth, they communicate his love of the landscape.

Group of Seven fakes proliferated with the speed of spores on a petri dish, and Casson was called in to help the Ontario Provincial Police identify the fraudulent works. He remembers Group of Seven imitations—including fake Cassons—being brought to his door "by the bushel." The trade in fakes was eventually stopped, but the genuine works continued to sell for absurdly inflated prices. Things came to a head at the opening of Casson's 1968 show at the Roberts Gallery. Customers who had queued on the sidewalk for hours rushed into the gallery and literally snatched the paintings off the walls. One man grabbed a large canvas and triumphantly held the trophy aloft. Jack Wildridge recalls that, "Cass, who never swears, said, 'The damned fool is going to put his head through it!'"

"I think prices in Toronto got completely out of hand," Casson says uncomfortably. In the late '70s, Casson watercolours were fetching up to $25,000 at auction; a Casson painting, *Country Crisis* (1940), was sold to a Vancouver dealer for $70,000 in 1979. Wildridge says that "someone has intimated" that he would be willing to pay more than $100,000 for a Casson that Wildridge owns.

But the art market has stabilized of late, and buyers have become more discriminating. On the opening night of Casson's most recent exhibition, in March 1984, only a modest line-up had formed before the doors opened, there was no mob scene, and just 12 of the 25 available works were sold. A 1983 Casson canvas, *Approaching Squall—Georgian Bay*, hanging in Wildridge's gallery office is priced at $22,000. And at the November 1984 auction at Sotheby's in Toronto, some small Casson panels fetched only $3,300 to $6,600.

Casson has been treated reverentially by most Canadian critics and reviewers, who tend to regard him as a living national monument. But he remains serenely indifferent to their opinions. "An artist who is worth his salt pays little attention to critics," he says. "He goes his own way. There is only one real critic, and that is time."

It is not easy to predict what time's verdict on A.J. Casson will be. His quest as an artist has taken him in directions for which there seem to be no philosophical motivation. Nor does his work display anything that can be identified as "the Casson style." Perhaps that is why this chameleon-like painter belonged simultaneously to the radical Group of Seven, the conservative Ontario Society of Artists and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

Casson's subject matter—and his artistic vision—is narrow and circumscribed, and although within his self-imposed limits Casson has done some fine things, his importance should not be exaggerated. Dennis Reid says that as a painter Casson "is not important in the overall sense. I think that if there had not been that concrete link with the Group of Seven, we would not be hearing as much of A.J. Casson as we are." Reid sums up Casson's work as "a solid, minor accomplishment."

But this remains a minority view. Gushing tributes are still the vogue as far as Casson's fans are concerned: "An important artist... a leading figure in Canadian landscape painting"—Paul Duval. "The last of Canada's 'old masters'"—Bill Dampier. "One of our great painters"—*Canadian Heritage*. In their book *A.J. Casson,* Margaret Gray, Margaret Rand and Lois Steen write, "Few Canadians would not be proud to hang a Casson in their homes," and they note approvingly: "There is appeal in Casson's work because of its detachment from the strife and ugliness of life. He preaches no sermon, makes no social comment. He does not probe our guilty motives nor make us feel ashamed. He simply distills for us a scene of primordial beauty or monumental calm and offers it to us as a purely aesthetic experience." That is precisely why Casson is not a great artist. Even his best work lacks the psychological complexity and depth of great art. It delights the eye, but it never engages or challenges the mind.

On the Don (1924), watercolour, 34.9 x 40 cm. (13¾" x 15¾"). Private collection. Courtesy: Cerebrus/Prentice-Hall.

Casson is a modest, immensely likable man who has devoted his life to communicating his love of the Canadian landscape, and he has given pleasure to thousands of people. For this we have cause for nothing but gratitude. But it does a disservice to both the man and his admirers when extravagant and undeserved claims are made for him.

It is time for Casson to leave for his lunch at the Arts and Letters Club. He exchanges his cardigan for a smart tweed jacket, with the rosette of the Order of Canada on the lapel. While he waits for his friend to arrive, he stands by the window and muses on his longevity. He has outlived not only the Group of Seven, but also his neighbours, doctors and dentists. His wife reminds him that all the artists they knew are now dead. "Well, I'm not!" retorts Casson. He is not in sympathy with new and younger artists, and stays away from art societies. "I don't go to meetings, because I've had 50 years of meetings—OSA for five years; president of the Academy for four years; and the watercolour society.... I've done my bit."

He has no regrets. "I don't regret a *bit* of the commercial work I did. A lot of artists try to bury that. It made me a good living when you couldn't make a living painting—and it freed me to paint. I suppose I can look back on a long life and say I've enjoyed myself." CA

Along with his close friend and mentor Frank Carmichael, Casson revived the status of the watercolour, which had fallen into disrepute. Carmichael, Casson and Fred Brigden founded the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour in 1925 to create a forum for Canadian watercolourists such as Walter J. Phillips, L.A.C. Panton and C.W. Jefferys.

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