

Emily Carr

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Emily Carr, A Biography, Maria Tippett. Illus. Oxford University Press, 1979. 314 pp. \$16.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-19-540314-2.

Emily Carr, Doris Shadbolt. Illus. J.J. Douglas Ltd., 1977. 96 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88894-075-0.

Emily Carr, The Story of An Artist, Marion Endicott. Photographs. The Women's Press, 1981. 64 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88961-070-3.

Because Emily Carr was born and bred in British Columbia, she has frequently been regarded as an advocate of Western Canada. Yet, despite the fact that many of her mature works were produced in Victoria, the very city where she had been born in 1867, her training was largely international, centering in San Francisco (1891-93), London (1899-1904), and Paris (1910-11). It was under John Whiteley, for example, at the Meadows Studio in Bushey just outside London, that she concentrated on Tregenna Wood to such an extent that she began to become aware of the movement of trees. Eventually she was to study in Paris as well, under the influence of a Scottish Cézannesque painter known as "Harry" Gibb, although she went first to the Académie Colarossi, where Whistler, Gauguin and Matisse had already worked, and then to the private studio of a Scottish Fauvist named John Duncan Ferguson. She left Paris for the Breton port of Concarneau to study, according to her own account, directly under Gibb himself, but according to Maria Tippett, under the watercolourist Francis Hodgkins of New Zealand. In any event, the landscapes she produced in Brittany were of such high calibre that Miss Carr had the immediate honour of having two works, *Le Collier* and *Le Paysage*, hung in Paris at the Salon d'Automne of 1911, when the Artist was in her mid-forties. She returned to Vancouver in 1912.

Emily Carr's development as an artist is a revealing illustration of the many difficulties facing creative efforts in this country. For this reason, the authors of three biographies of Carr have not only chosen an excellent topic, but one of particular significance for young people in Canada. Maria Tippett's penetrating and carefully researched biography is so well written that, like *Klee Wyck*, it received the Governor General's award for non-fiction. Composed largely as a very readable study of personality, it has been meticulous in documenting most of the available evidence.

Marion Endicott has attempted something of the same thing, and likewise includes a representative collection of good illustrations, some

in colour and some in black and white; except that in this case, she has the specific intent of appealing to a very young audience. As a result, she offers a much briefer text, carefully avoiding the use of footnotes, in the apparent hope of inspiring her audience. It is unfortunate, however, that since she seems to have no idea of what is involved in the development of an artist, she naively imagines that Miss Carr became a painter, not by seeing other art, but simply by being emotionally moved by the British Columbia scene itself. This critic's concept of art in general is very narrowly expressionistic.

This kind of limitation has easily been avoided by Doris Shadbolt, whose whole focus has been on Emily Carr not only as a painter, but also as a painter in a well-documented historical perspective. The artist's style is consequently seen as a highly intelligent reflection of her training and experience. This well-illustrated catalogue for the Vancouver Art Gallery has the advantage of offering a pithy analysis of Miss Carr's achievement in terms that can be fairly readily grasped by all readers, young and old.

Like most of her English-speaking compatriots, Emily Carr was to focus on landscape painting throughout her career, although she herself thought that it was her Canadian awareness of big spaces that made her unable to tolerate the airlessness of studios for life-drawing. Maria Tippett's thorough biography has indicated that even while she was studying in San Francisco, Emily Carr demonstrated her preference for picturesque subject-matter and her exceptional accuracy of depiction, an accuracy so precise that the spectator might seem to be carried to the very spot where the painting had been executed. This was initially her approach to painting Red Indian subjects, too, despite the rather Romantic tendency to idealize the noble savage in the vein of Alexander Pope, whose *Essay on Man* she had partially copied in a cedar-bound book. In 1921, when the Vancouver mining engineering Mortimer Lamb saw her pre-1913 Indian paintings, he wrote to the Director of the National Gallery, Eric Brown, that the work possessed real value primarily from an anthropological point of view, that is to say, because of its clear fidelity to material facts, and in spite of the exceptional pictorial charm of the treatment. Brown consequently thought that the pictures would be of particular interest to a museum rather than to an art gallery. As a truly creative person, the artist herself claimed that since she painted to satisfy her own ideals, she did not "give a whoop" what the public liked. Maria Tippett concludes that she was not merely painting the West Coast landscape in a French way, but "attempting to give it something of her own feeling and experience."

She had always been an extremely difficult person to befriend, and this caustic quality remained unchanged even after she received specialized psychiatric treatment in England. She rejected her suitor, the Irish-born "Mayo" Paddon, on the grounds that she was perverse. Her rejection of Paddon seems to have left her with such a profound sense

of inferiority and guilt that by January, 1903, she entered the East Anglia Sanatorium in Suffolk as a mental patient suffering from "hysteria," the term then applied to various forms of depression. About four months after her release in March, 1904, when she returned fat and vulgar to Canada, she quickly revisited the remote Indian village of Ucluelet, presumably because there she could feel free of the scandalizing criticism and pity of Victoria society, despite the harsh cold and depressing economic conditions of such aboriginal communities.

"This is my country," she explained to Arnold Watson, a reporter for the contemporary Victoria newspaper the *Week*, a place with "a grandeur of its own for anyone who appreciates the beautiful." It was likely this somewhat Fauvist focus on a personal relationship to the land that prompted Marion Endicott not only to claim wishfully that Emily had "wanted to create her own Canadian style," but even to imagine that as a child Carr had already dreamt of painting the mysterious forests of British Columbia. After her return from France, however, the artist still had "to locate her own ideology and image" before she could develop an individual form that, according to Doris Shadbolt, would be "deeply rooted in her psychic nature." It was only in 1924, therefore, when she was close to sixty years old, that she began to contribute regularly to the Victoria and Seattle art societies, and in 1925 that her painting *By the Shore* was shown in the 48th Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association.

Prompted by Marius Barbeau, the Director of the National Gallery contacted Miss Carr in 1927 in connection with a showing of West Coast Indian Art. She subsequently shipped twenty-seven watercolours and eleven oils, all from her 1912 period, for the Ottawa showing, travelling east herself on a CPR pass for the opening of the exhibition. En route to Ottawa, she met the Group of Seven in Toronto at the Studio Building on Severn Street, where she spent November 17 in the studio of the German-trained Theosophist Lawren Harris. His work seemed to her to be a true revelation of the very soul of her own country, so that whereas formerly she had never given a thought to anything identified as Canadian art, she now claimed that "Two things had hold of me with a double clutch. Canada and art." Harris encouraged her to return to the painting she had virtually stopped because it had seemed that there was nobody who understood it. By 1928, she was even to return to the Queen Charlotte Islands, though because she was unable to make enough sketches of Indian communities to occupy her through the following winter, she also used earlier sketches as the basis of her new pictures.

That year, she invited the American Expressionist painter Mark Tobey, a member of the Baha'i faith, to stay with her in Victoria and to teach in her own studio. In a letter to Eric Brown dated October 1, 1928, she indicated that during this period, Tobey's influence on her style had been tremendous. Maria Tippett notes that it had clearly been

responsible for heightening the sense of rhythm and contrast in her compositions, without negating the importance of her reliance on local Indian subject-matter. Doris Shadbolt appropriately identifies her work during the next two years as dynamic, citing paintings like *Raven* and *Vanquished* as typically mannered examples in which the order, rather than being inherent, had been deliberately imposed. By 1932, when the artist was about sixty-five years old, she even began to combine the portability of watercolours with the intensity of oils, by sketching in a combination of oil and turpentine on Manila paper, unfortunately unconcerned that turpentine was not a durable binder. Although throughout her development she never really abandoned her basically Christian outlook, the paintings she finished between 1933 and 1936 were primarily powerful expressions of the universality of all growth, a point of view fairly compatible with the perspective of both Tobey and Harris.

She gradually had to give up painting, however, after a heart attack in January, 1937. Since she had already begun to write short stories as early as the 1920s, when she was apparently deeply discouraged by the lack of public response to her painting, she was readily able to rediscover writing as a feasible creative outlet. She completed the draft of *Pause*, her account of life in an English sanatorium, early in 1938, and by the end of that year, a group of her childhood stories as well. By February, 1940, Ira Dilworth had arranged for a selection of her childhood and Indian stories to be read over the CBC; and by 1941, he had been responsible for the publication of *Klee Wyck*, a recipient of the Governor General's award for non-fiction the following year. By late August, 1942, the Oxford University Press had also published *The Book of Small*, and by 1944, a collection of apartment house stories called *The House of All Sorts*. Meanwhile, Dilworth rapidly became such a close friend of the author that she allowed him the right to omit unworthy sections of her manuscripts at his own discretion; and when she died on March 2, 1945, her will gave him complete control over her remaining publications, including *Pause: A Sketch Book* published by Clark Irwin in 1953, *The Heart of a Peacock*, published that same year by Oxford, and *An Address* Oxford, 1955. Her autobiographical sketches entitled *Hundreds and Thousands* were published by Clark Irwin in 1966, some four years after Dilworth's death, and twenty-one years after the artist herself had died.

All three biographies under review here are thought-provoking. Each one offers some remarkable evidence towards a profound understanding of the slow and painful development of a Canadian identity.

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