

# The Trees in Emily Carr's Forest: The Book of Small as Aesthetic and Environmental Text

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**Résumé :** Dans *The Book of Small*, les souvenirs d'enfance romancés d'Emily Carr offrent un nouveau regard sur son interprétation artistique du paysage de l'Ouest canadien. Le fait qu'elle se sert d'un personnage enfant pour communiquer son approche esthétique révèle qu'elle considère que l'enfant et l'artiste abordent l'expérience de façons semblables. Les choix lexicaux dans ce texte démontrent les tentatives expérimentales d'une enfant (ou d'un poète) vis-à-vis les liens entre la perception et le langage. Ce lexique sert non seulement à décrire mais à évoquer l'action et la qualité de cette rencontre.

**Summary:** Emily Carr's fictionalized remembrances of her childhood experiences in *The Book of Small* provide insight into Carr's artistic interpretation of the Canadian West Coast landscape. Her choice to convey her artistic (aesthetic) approach to experience through a child character demonstrates her belief that the child and the artist approach experience in similar ways. The language in *The Book of Small* emulates a child's (or a poet's) experimentation with the links between perception and language. Language is used not simply to describe but to evoke the action and the quality of the encounter. Carr's autobiographical fiction has implications for contemporary attitudes toward childhood and toward the environment, both of which play important roles in children's literature. Renewed literary interest in this great Canadian modernist artist is shaping the "Canadian aesthetic" in ways that may influence how "setting" in Canadian children's literature is constructed and received.

The adage “she cannot see the forest for the trees” does not apply to Emily Carr (1871-1945), who spent her life learning to see and portray the trees as well as the forest on what she termed her “side of Canada — the Great West” (*The Book of Small* 18). She was an artistic contemporary of the Group of Seven, who were engaged in a similar task primarily in northern Ontario. A well-known image of the Group is the lonely jack pine that stands against the vast Canadian landscape, as in F.H. Varley’s “Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay” (1921). Most Canadians would identify such a jack pine as particularly Canadian and might even consider it, however unconsciously, an essential part of a Canadian aesthetic. Carr did not claim anything as grand for her work, but many Canadians nonetheless recognize an Emily Carr tree when they see it growing on the West Coast or represented in a painting. *Emily Carr: Eccentric, Artist, Author, Genius*, a 2002 exhibition at the Royal British Columbia Museum, reveals that Carr depicted two main types of evergreen. Her early trees from the totem pole period of her work are heavy; they drip with moss and grow densely in the forest. Her later, sky-loving trees stand alone against the clouds.<sup>1</sup>

In her visual art and in her books, Emily Carr provides viewers and readers with her artistic vision of the west coast landscape and a written account of her fictionalized childhood relationship with that landscape and its creatures. Particularly in *The Book of Small* (1942), her fictionalized autobiographical account of her childhood, Carr shows readers something of what it means to see *aesthetically*, by which I mean those aspects of a subject, object, or activity that elicit human sensitivities, attractions, and propensities in terms of emotions and sensory and imaginative play. Aesthetic works of literature, for example, convey the complexity of experience, pose open-ended questions, and are variously interpretable. Carr’s writing provides a valuable record of her attempt to gain an artistic or aesthetic understanding of her art that depicts coastal landscapes. Of interest in this paper is Carr’s choice, in *The Book of Small*, to portray such mature understanding through a child character whose main interest is the natural world of animal and plant life. This reversal of the usual adult-teacher to child-student continuum demonstrates Carr’s belief that the child and the artist approach experience in similar ways.

In her writing, Carr made connections between her two art forms. She thereby created a “double approach” to her painting subject matter. Her articulation through language often preceded her articulation through colour and form, as demonstrated in *Growing Pains: An Autobiography* (1946):

I always took in my sketch-sack a little notebook. When I had discovered my subject, I sat before it for some while before I touched a brush, feeling my way into it, asking myself these particular questions, “What attracted you to this particular subject? Why do you want to paint it? What is its core, the thing you are trying to express?”

Clearly, and in as few words as possible, I had answered these questions from myself to myself, wording them in my little note book, presenting essentials only, discarding everything of minor importance. I had found this method very helpful. This saying in words as well as in colour and form gave me double approach. (264-65)

B.K. Sandwell is quoted in *Saturday Night* as saying that "The art of Emily Carr is exactly the same in her writing as in her pictures. It is the art of eliminating all but the essentials — the essentials for her, that is, the elements which contribute to her impression — and then setting these down in the starkest, most compressed form."<sup>2</sup>

Although Carr received the Governor General's award for *Klee Wyck* in 1941 and published six books in all, little scholarly attention has been directed to her writing<sup>3</sup> and a search revealed only one critical chapter about her writing for children.<sup>4</sup> Carr's name does not appear in any reference book on Canadian children's literature; even Sheila Egoff does not mention Carr in any of her numerous critical surveys of the field. It is difficult to understand why Carr has been so neglected, although it seems to be a common fate of Modernist women writers who have largely been overlooked in Canadian literary scholarship. A notable exception is Carr's renowned contemporary, L.M. Montgomery (1874-1942), whose work has attracted considerable critical attention since the 1990s.

This paper centres on the nature of Carr's writing in *The Book of Small* — that is, how the writing creates its effects as well as how the content and style of the text emulate Carr's artistic process and vision. Carr's autobiographical writing is interpreted as not being mediated by a remembering author. Instead, her child character Small infuses the text with a child's urgency. Inanimate beings as well as verbs that have an existence of their own represent a child's fresh seeing and not the adult remembering. Like a child who drags the adult into the garden to see the wondrous thing, Small wants the reader to see what she sees, to experience what she experiences — in other words, she wants to share her world with the reader.

The poetic writing in *The Book of Small* provides the reader with a synesthetic experience. Carr's strong visual images describe and simultaneously suggest sound, movement, and feeling. The quality of her writing is such that it conveys a rich sense of Carr's imaginative life. The ability to convey such a multimodal feast is similar to that of visual artists who plumb the "depth of the visible" (as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and discussed below), but not through the media of colour and texture which visual artists have at their disposal. Instead, literature conveys its effects through unspoken words immobilized in text.

Carr called *The Book of Small* "a collection of childhood (our childhood) stories" (*Growing Pains* 276) and claimed that these anecdotal accounts were autobiographical. Although they were not expressly written for children,

young people have read and loved them, as the continued publication of the book as well as fan mail from children to Carr attest. The writing in *The Book of Small* is deceptively simple, although it is clear that Carr worked hard on this manuscript, as she indicated in her journal: "I've put all I know into it ["The Cow Yard"]. Lived the whole thing over, been a kid again in the old cow yard" (*Hundreds and Thousands* 98-99). In *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (1987), Laurie Ricou devotes a chapter entitled "Emily Carr and the Language of Small" to a discussion of Carr's talent, which he argues is "seldom acknowledged in studies of Canadian writing" (73). Ricou's excellent analysis of *The Book of Small* is important to the discussion here.

The genre of Carr's book is difficult to specify. Her own discussion of her writing-in-progress in her journal suggests that it is both autobiography and fiction. Of "The Cow Yard," she notes that "It's honest and every incident is true" (*Hundreds and Thousands* 98), thus autobiographical. But her tone when commenting on the blazing role of memory suggests a creative/fictional overlay produced by reconstructing the past from an adult gaze: "You raid the attic and blow the dust and the sparks of memory ignite. Memory is not dead, she just needs a jog. Biff! Off she blazes" (*Hundreds and Thousands* 221).

The work is fictional, however, in the ways that all text is fictional. There is no child, no cow yard, no Orange Lily. There are only images, symbols, words, projections, personae, contortions, deformations — indeed, there are only marks on pages. Poets (and Carr's imagistic and multimodal writing is poetry) work within the confines of artifice, not to create an alternate reality but in order to see what in the natural world, without the aid of the imagination, is not likely to be seen at all. And so poets invent, fabricate, and conspire in the attempt to show how the world in all its multidimensionality seems to them. They collect "perceptual bits" (Buell 98) glued together with the stimuli that the poem registers.

Ricou calls *The Book of Small* a "fictional memoir" and claims that identifying Carr's text as fictional, given its third-person narrator, appropriately "shows [her] dissatisfaction with the potential superficiality of a memoir in which the writer records strictly what is remembered in her own past" (74). And so Carr does not adhere to a straightforward retelling of her growing-up years, but rather, she "develops a memoir, in the third person and past tense, in which the experiences she remembers, and shapes, appear to the reader as the spontaneous encounters of a child" (74). Instead, Ricou adds, Carr's telling of a story of childhood that was "*prima facie* unfinished, where the subject's attention span is shorter, where diverse experiences have equal significance, demands an alternate, more segmented form" (74). It seems that the term autobiographical fiction best addresses the reality of both elements in Carr's work.

Carr's resistance to more traditional genres of autobiography or memoir

results in a work that displays a lack of continuity between working writer and child character. Adults do not normally speak with Small's childish urgency, nor are they as linguistically adventurous as this girl character who turns verbs into nouns and verbs into adjectives and who animates nouns on a regular basis. There is no sense of an adult teller or for that matter of what can be described as adult (rational) intelligence. Ironically, this lack of continuity becomes a continuum between the adult artist Carr and her child character. A child's approach to and vision of the world serve Carr the adult. On the few occasions when she spoke in public or addressed the process of her art, Carr referred to the unique properties of the child's vision. In her writing and speech, she turned to the child to illustrate: "The child's mind goes all round his idea. He may show both sides of his house at once. He feels the house as a whole, why shouldn't he show it? By and by he goes to school and they train all the feeling out of him" (*Fresh Seeing* 8; qtd. in Ricou 74-75).

Because the stories in *The Book of Small* are told by Carr's persona, Small, notably in third person, there is little evident authorial intrusion or sense of a remembering author who is reflecting upon her own experience. Rather, the stories are immediate, written in a childlike language replete with invented words such as "splankety" (3) and irregular syntax such as "the up ends of all the logs higgledy-piggledied into the sky" (128). They also reflect a seemingly effortless fluidity among disparate aspects of an experience evident when Carr, in speaking of the "top grandness" of Victoria's Driard Hotel, describes the red plush upholstery and carpets as "All of its red softness sopped up and hugged noises and smells" (163). The language in *The Book of Small* emulates a child's (and a poet's) experimentation with the links between perception and language. Language is used not to simply describe but to evoke the action and the quality of the encounter.

Carr shapes the autobiography in ways that reflect her attitude toward experience, particularly her attitude toward the natural world. From the outset, Carr identifies imaginatively with the natural environment, even embellishing the account of her birth during a snowstorm in December 1871. As if they heralded her birth, Carr writes that "A row of sparrows, puffed with cold, sat on the rail of the balcony outside Mother's window, bracing themselves" (*Growing Pains* 5).

The anecdotes or sketches that comprise *The Book of Small* often seem incomplete or partial. This lack of regular story sequence gives the impression of a child narrator bursting to tell her story. She provides details that compel her, without apology for either repetition or the limitations on the background details. Carr writes as a child for whom the world — especially the natural world — is a surprising place. She forfeits regularity of syntax and conventional prose forms for disjointed, often poetic,<sup>5</sup> turns and shifts of attention. To read this book is to overhear, so to speak, a child talking to herself as she plays alone or as she skips ahead (of the reader) on

a path through a garden or wood, pointing out observations and details. *The Book of Small* is written without a sense of reminiscence or nostalgia. In Carr's world, the natural world is not a Tinkerbell kind of magical place. There is magic and mystery, to be sure, but not of the superficial Disney sort. Rather, for the child Carr, the mystery of the non-human world lies in the intersection between the biological and the cosmological. Magic is concrete rather than abstract. Sensory experience is a force or power. Carr's relationship to the natural world is experiential and aesthetic, in keeping with the definition given above.

### From the Human World

Small locates her world and her point of view in the "Cow Yard," which is the name she confers on her backyard. In the "Cow Yard" Small feels "most strongly the warm life-giving existence" (15). It makes Small so happy that when she opens her mouth the "noise [of singing] jumped out" and "the singing did itself" (29). This sense of exchange describes the reciprocal relationship between the human and non-human (or natural) world valued by Merleau-Ponty.

A sub-theme of this paper is Carr's engagement with the natural world. Her stories reveal that her adult as well as her childhood engagement with nature — at the level of perceptual participation — is an aesthetic one in which a sense of growing community and continuity with nature is possible. Carr's aesthetic, which was formed through her often dramatic relations to the natural world, has implications for children's literature and is especially significant to a consideration of the impact of remembrances in and on children's literature: Carr, like other authors studied in this issue of *Canadian Children's Literature*, demonstrates vital continuity between childhood and adulthood. She does not hearken back to childhood for a nostalgic memory-fix. In Carr's case, the continuity is essential for her life as an artist and a human being who acknowledges the organic, physical basis of her thoughts and intelligence, a posture that aligns the Canadian artist-writer with the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

In his essay "Eye and Mind" appearing in *The Primacy of Perception* (1964), Merleau-Ponty uses visual art to describe what he calls his "ontological formula," the same formula environmental critics depend upon in reconceptualizing human relationships with the non-human world (297). He claims that painting is the medium in which viewers can perceive the informing, invisible "depth of the visible" (296) or the animating presence that is accessible in a good work of art. The viewer sees not just the colour and texture of paint but can respond to the "Being which itself comes to show forth its own meaning" (296). Merleau-Ponty extends his "formula" to the artist as well. For the painter, he suggests, there is no break in the "circuit" of nature's meanings: "It is impossible to say that nature ends

here and that man or expression starts here" (296). The "expression" to which Merleau-Ponty refers is a sensory reciprocity that nurtures participation in the here-and-now and rejuvenates a sense of wonder. It acknowledges the universe's existence from the perspective of human, subjective participation in that world. In her chapter titled "Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology," Monika Langer extends to the natural world the connections between painting and the "new ontology" needed to accomplish Merleau-Ponty's mutuality in which self and non-self, human and non-human, create a relational "embrace":

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations and descriptions suggest that painting . . . has the potential to transform us experientially in a manner consonant with the new ontology that deep ecology demands. Further, philosophical reflection on painting can help us articulate and develop such a new ontology [in which art breaks through] the one-dimensional reality maintained by operational (objective) thought. (127)

Carr's embodiment — through visual art — of Merleau-Ponty's "new ontology" is beyond the scope of this paper, but her writing shows readers something of the mindset and struggle necessary to accomplish this kind of ontological breakthrough. Through great effort and in defiance of the cultural and familial norms of her day, Carr achieved the kind of transformation Noel Gough calls for — namely, a "transformation from being the kind of people who are alienated from nature-as-other toward becoming people whose identity is inextricable from our environments" (13).

However laudable Carr's transformation, it was her defiance — directed mainly at her family — that in part propelled her into the woods. Carr's pleasure in nature was also due to her (negative) need for a space in which to work out the stresses of the adult and societal pressures imposed upon her. The natural world was a strong link to the world at large. When Carr's sister accused her of being disloyal to her family, Carr insisted in her autobiography that "I had to show what drove me to the woods and to the creatures for comfort, what caused the real starting point of my turn to Art" (*Growing Pains* 267). Thus, Small's psychic direction is away *from* the (mostly adult) human world and *toward* the non-human world. She moves from the adult world of authority figures such as older sisters, rationality, and Victorian standards and impositions. Perhaps for this reason, Small is most often described in an outdoor setting.

In Carr's world, adults signal interference and death of imaginative play. When adults impinge on the landscape, "the most beautiful thing fell apart" (54). The magic disappears and the world resumes its adult order: "The bees and the butterflies and the mauvy-pink flowers and the smell, stopped being one and sat down in their own four places" (54). Such imaginative things not only fall apart when adults appear, but they cease:

Some wonders started inside you like a stomach-ache. Some started in outside things when you saw, smelled, heard or felt them. The wonder tickled your thinking — coming from nowhere it got into your head running round and round inside until you asked a grown-up about this particular wonder and then it stopped. . . . (65)

And so Carr distances her character from human relations. She both abstracts her family members by naming them and by concretizing their essential characteristics. With regard to the latter, Carr contrasts Small “hugging a kitten” (17) with her older sister Bigger, who sat with “her hands folded in a spotless lap,” and Middle, who sat “hugging a doll” (17). Carr aligns each sister with an image that conveys her particular passion and attitude to the world. Small, like Middle, embraces something, but unlike Middle and her material object, Small embraces a living creature. Bigger seems to need nothing but her own spotlessness and in Carr’s writing is always presented as a distant, disconnected (from Small), mostly destructive force. Carr’s names for Small’s oldest sister and father represent this relationship well.

Small does not contort herself to fit adult expectations any more than she is reluctantly obliged to. But there are adults who are able to make the transition to the child’s world and thus enter into a limited but playful relationship with Small, who responds by reaching out — often ineffectually — to them. Mrs. Crane is such a person: “Suddenly now while I could reach her, I wanted to put my arms round her and cry. . . . My hands trembled up in that silly way pieces of us have of doing on their own, but the rest of me pulled them down quickly before Mrs. Crane saw” (52). Carr reconfigures the struggle that conventionally resides in the mind or the will and assigns it to the body. This repositioning enables the reader as well to experience the dilemma in the body — it is, after all, the body that best understands touching and holding. Carr captures the *body’s* conversation around the struggle whether *to touch* or *not to touch*.

Merleau-Ponty also speaks in the active voice about things that conventionally are thought to be inert. He writes, “I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 212). To Merleau-Ponty, breath is a self-directed agent that chooses to enter his near-sleeping self.

To be sure, positing this struggle as a body-problem is also true to the time of childhood, when the dance between language and perception is still weighted in favour of the body. But Carr is doing more than that. She is seeing and writing as a painter-artist intent on conveying the multidimensionality of the experience (the “depth of the visible”) to her audience.

## Toward the Non-Human World

Through Small, Carr invites her readers to enter into intimate relationships with their natural surroundings. Small responds to the innate agency of all things, non-human as well as human. She reaches out to a consciousness that reaches out to her in return. When Carr claimed that "The new West called me" (*Growing Pains* 211) upon deciding to return to Canada from Europe, where she was living early in the twentieth century, we know she was not speaking conventionally but as one agent reciprocating the imperative of the other. The reader can imaginatively hear the West's voice and feel its pull. By capitalizing nouns, Carr bestows a sense of autonomy, and thus agency, not only upon characters but also concepts and places.

When earlier she visited the Indian villages and the totem poles on the coast of British Columbia, she spoke about the Native artists she saw at work. She attributed the artists' hands with consciousness: "The lean, neat Indian hands carved what the Indian mind comprehended" (*Growing Pains* 211-12). As if by deconstructing the Indian (in much the same way she did Small's hands, as noted above), she could undo her presumptions and see freshly in the hope of better knowing the other. Body parts take on a life of their own, but so do inanimate objects revel in their own particulars. When she approaches her friends' house, she notes that "their gate did not know which road it liked best, Moss or Fairfield, so it straddled the corner and gaped wide" (*The Book of Small* 60).

The levels of perception and relationship illustrated a section of *The Book of Small* titled "The Orange Lily" are complex and continuous. Carr's remembered child-self becomes the character Small who, in words and actions, not only demonstrates but also *is* the continuity between Carr's aesthetics and the resulting art works. Textual examples provided in the following passages speak to Carr's efforts to know the "depth of the visible" (Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" 296). The reader is first introduced to the lily as a persona: "The turn brought Small face to face with the Orange Lily." But in the next line, Lily is once again a plant: "The lily grew" (56). Lily (as persona) next "rolled her petals grandly wide as sentinelled doors roll back for royalty. The entrance to her trumpet was guarded by a group of rust-powdered stamens — her powerful perfume pushed past these. What was in the bottom of Lily's trumpet? What was it that the stamens were so carefully guarding?" (56). Turning her gaze brings Small face to face with a creature that asserts itself, hence the capitalization. Carr recreates the sense of surprised acquaintance for the reader. In the next line, Small acknowledges Lily's plant qualities, which guides her next observation of plant features such as petals. But the word "grand" signals an entourage of royal diction. This hyperbole is countered, however, by the simple physical action of a curious child who dives deeply into her subject in an attempt to learn more. Carr's skill in manipulating language enables

her to convey this child character's experience in a convincing manner.

Fluidity of relationships, tone and structures, questions and action-dominated writing are Carr's strategies of discovering not only the surfaces but also the inner workings of the natural world. This process is much like that of writing a poem. To Carr, language is a tool by which to explore the world rather than a tool for the exposition of facts. It is the perceptually attentive and open child character who serves Carr's purposes and who gives expression to Carr's attitude toward the natural world from her childhood on through adulthood. When an adult Carr, frustrated with a painting, reminds herself to "get the essence from Nature herself . . . you have the 'innards' of the experience of nature to go by" (*Fresh Seeing* 259), we readers know this is true; Carr does have/know the "innards" and the "experience" of nature.

Carr's heightened receptivity to the natural world includes solicitations from plant life as well as from natural smells that perform their invitational tasks dramatically: "If the currants were just a wee bit clearer, then perhaps you could see them living, inside. The colour and the *smell took you and wrapped you up* in themselves. The *smell called the bees and the butterflies* from ever so far" (*The Book of Small* 53-54; emphasis added). What a swimmingly multi-sensuous world this child inhabits! Small cavorts with a "delighted" family cow (18) and a fledgling calf who wondered "whose legs these were, and never dreamed that they were his own" (20). She collapses the psychological distance between things and herself; she is able to enter them and to allow them to enter her.

In struggling to recreate the living experience of her encounters rather than to define or to merely narrate them, Carr, through her persona, focuses on the nature of the experience itself. Her written accounts are her reflections of lived experience. And so "songs sing themselves" and also "jump" her back. Or something as benign as the word hush "melted and tendered everything" (44). Beauty draws Small, absorbs her, aches her. It has the power "to make you part of itself . . . raising you right up out of yourself, to make you part of itself" (30). The collapse of boundaries between self and other creates a reciprocity through which Small absorbs and is absorbed. Small is as much part of the natural world as it is of her.

This heightened sense of community (in terms of unity and reciprocity) enabled Carr to step outside the cultural boundaries so strongly asserted by Middle and Bigger sisters and to learn to make contact with as well as to learn from the powers in the land. Carr's paintings and writing convey her ability to read the intelligence that lives in non-human nature as well as her ability to see deeply into things and convey their power and presence. As Rilke admonishes, most adults must continually strive to shatter habitual ways of seeing and feeling, whereas in Carr's world it is a given that hands, gates, cows, and smells pulse with agency and purpose. In his *Letters to a Young Poet* (1954), Rainer Maria Rilke signifies the value of

childhood as a “strong-room of memories,” which to him is the source of art. Studying Carr’s writing offers an understanding of memories functioning in just this way. Rilke advises his readers that “it is to that [strong-room] that you should turn your attention. Try to bring up the buried sensations of that vast past” (4). Carr’s well-remembered childhood experiences in and of nature help the reader understand how her childhood sensations were developed and brought to maturity in her later practice. Her childhood experiences were the source of her approach to artistic interpretation of the Canadian landscape. The significant phrase in Rilke’s admonition is “Try to bring up the buried sensations of that vast past.” In writing the sensations — that is, the impulses of her childhood — Carr provides her readers with an aesthetic approach to the natural world that many children share.

Writers and critics of children’s literature demand that the genre carry the weight of their memories, passions, and desires of childhood. All good writers help adults better understand childhood experiences, but few suggest we incorporate the childhood attitudes, beliefs, postures, and actions into our adult lives. It is hard for adults to imagine how children might truly be their fathers and mothers — their teachers — thereby to accept Wordsworth’s claim, in “My Heart Leaps Up,” that “The Child is father of the Man” (7).

### The Adult Artist Carr

At all points in her life, Carr is unsatisfied with the equivalents of “normal” hillsides of “no particular pattern.” As a conscious, behaving agent, Carr negotiates a conscious, behaving world that is alive, “weighted with sap, burning green in every leaf, every scrap of it vital!” (*Growing Pains* 262). After meeting Lawren Harris, Carr considers that she “was not ready for abstraction. I clung to earth and her dear shapes, her density, her herbage, her juice. I wanted her volume, and I wanted to hear her throb” (*Growing Pains* 260).

In the late nineteenth century of British Columbia, the elite segment of immigrant society to which Carr’s family belonged was intensely dedicated to everything stereotypically British. In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), Lawrence Buell highlights the difficulties of creating a home in the new country, stating that

the art of bringing to full personal consciousness and articulation a sense of place is arduous, and for new world settler cultures especially so, given the relative shortness of their history in place. These cultures face the uphill battle of jump-starting the invention of place-sense by superimposing imported traditions and jerry-building new ones — Anglo-American whole-

sale borrowings and fabrications of Indian stories being a conspicuous example of this kind. (257)

In light of her cultural background, Carr's attitude is remarkable. Through her exposure to Native peoples and places, Carr was able to align herself with the wilderness and with Native peoples at the cost of her own comfort. About her several summers spent traveling up and down British Columbia's coast, she writes that "to reach the [Indian] villages was difficult and accomodation [sic] a serious problem. I slept in tents, in roadmakers' toolsheds, in missions, and in Indian houses. I travelled in anything that floated in water or crawled over land" (*Growing Pains* 211). In her great desire to know the West Coast she bemoaned the fact that her father's English garden, with view-blocking poplars, "shut out beauty along with everyday Canadian reality" (Crean 66). Carr's whole life was dedicated to seeing the forest well enough to paint it. She was told it could not be done.

No artist that I knew, no Art School had taught Art this size. Still, these French painters who had been taught there [in the west] said, "Western Canada is unpaintable!" How bothersome! I nibbled at silhouetted edges. I drew boats and houses, things made out of tangible stuff. Unknowingly I was storing, storing, all unconscious, my working ideas against the time when I should be ready to use this material. (*Growing Pains* 79)

As a young woman, Carr pondered her "problem" in big cities in France and England. In London, she saw human beings massed in bumping, jostling crowds:

I puzzled, wondering. What was the sameness with a difference between a crowd and a forest? Density, immensity, intensity, that was it — overwhelming vastness. One was roaring, the other still, but each made you feel that you were nothing, just plain nothing at all. (*Growing Pains* 90)

When Carr returned from Europe, she travelled to the northern parts of Vancouver Island and as far north up the coast as the Queen Charlotte Islands (now known by their Native name, Haida Gwaii). She sketched and painted the totem poles and the Native people who made them.

The Indian caught first at the inner intensity of his subject, worked outward to the surfaces. His spiritual conception he buried deep in the wood he was about to carve. Then — chip! chip! his crude tools released the symbols that were to clothe his thought — no sham, no mannerism. The lean, neat Indian hands carved what the Indian mind comprehended. (*Growing Pains* 211-12)

Carr attempted to understand the forest in the way the Native carvers understood the trees that they carved — from the inside "outward to the sur-

faces." In their works, she claimed, the Indian carvers were not trying to describe anything. Rather, they were reaching out to touch "the inner intensity" of their subject. In her art, Carr attempted to do likewise.

Carr's approach to the trees and the forest create a sense of place, of what can be termed the placedness of experience. In spite of her colonial upbringing in a very British Victoria, Carr's childhood sensory education gave her the tools to perceive where she was physically located.<sup>6</sup> Through her painting and writing, she not only described that place but also conveyed the experience of that place. The deeper Carr's experience of her home, the more it provided her with a way of offsetting, if not altogether overcoming, her Victorian inheritance of imported, colonial cultural practices and attitudes.

Max Van Maanen questions whether "the phenomenological value of a great novel lies first of all in the living knowledge of the precritical response which is always a unique and personal response" (180), and claims that it is. When he rereads any good or great novel he is able to reflect upon the encounters he has lived through. Substituting "an experience with the non-human world" for "novel" here enables the reader to reconstruct Carr's writing process. The remembered quality of her childhood makes possible Carr's reflection upon those pre-critical experiences and subsequent reconstruction of events into fiction. Carr's poetic text, composed of "tiny energizer[s]," is able to disperse "the reader's attention, in imitation of the poet's own, out to various points of environmental contact" (Buell 98).

The reader is able to reverse Carr's operation. Having read Carr, seen what she sees, and felt what she feels, the reader becomes educated in experiencing the natural world with artistic qualities and intensities. This sense of a literature that points outward, beyond its pages, back to careful observation of the natural world is what is often missing in settings in Canadian children's literature. The joke among nature writers is that, unlike mainstream writers who want to keep their readers reading for what happens next, a successful nature writer must encourage readers to do the opposite, that is, to close the book and go outside. *The Book of Small* reminds us that the physical world is more than a setting or backdrop to human affairs. Carr's text shatters habitual modes of perception and stirs her readers to attention and awareness of the world around them.

## Notes

- 1 Visual artist Ted Goodden made this verbal observation during a private tour of the exhibition.
- 2 This quotation, unsourced, is reproduced on the initial page of the 1986 edition of *Klee Wyck* (1941).
- 3 See the excellent bibliography in Susan Crean's *The Laughing Oute: A Journey to Emily Carr* (2001).

- 4 See Laurie Ricou's chapter "Emily Carr and the Language of Small," discussed later in this paper.
- 5 A poetic approach is based on aesthetic engagement with imaginative possibilities and emotional depth. Poetic language embodies the physical and perceptual realms. Sensual experience is valued by poets, so that what they see, feel, intuit, touch, taste, and hear are as important as the factual or scientific construction of an event or object. My ongoing research attempts to make clear how closely related the adult notions of artistic practice are to notions of play; see Hoogland.
- 6 Should *The Book of Small* be entirely fictional, Carr's autobiographical writing in *Hundreds and Thousands* and in *Growing Pains* indicates similar sensual experiences to those described above.

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