

# SERIOUSLY, EMILY

## *A Review Essay*

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NANCY PAGH

*The Laughing One: A Journey to Emily Carr*

Susan Crean

Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2001. 496 pp. Illus. \$32 cloth.

*Carr, O'Keeffe, Kablo: Places of Their Own*

Sharyn Rohlfen Udall

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 366 pp. Illus. US\$45 cloth.

I'M NOT SURE why British Columbia's – and arguably Canada's – greatest artist is so determinedly pedalled as Victoria's kooky eccentric. Yes, sometimes Emily Carr (1871–1945) cultivated an autobiographical image that played into the stereotype. But as Carr scholars know, she created and protected many versions of her life and self, and the aged-weirdo-with-the-monkey version is probably the least interesting. Maybe it's because the “outsider” Emily appeals to Canadians who see themselves as marginal on the world stage or to British Columbians who see themselves as misfits on the Canadian stage. Popular culture still dictates that any unmarried mature woman must be unacceptably bizarre; undoubtedly sexism plays a role in the perpetuation of the nutty Emily image. Most recently the stereotype was thoughtlessly used by the Royal British Columbia Museum to market an archival exhibit on Carr. “EMILY CARR: ECCENTRIC” beckons a huge banner atop the building. The smaller

text – “Artist, Author, Genius” – fades into the background. Curators, authors, and teachers who over-employ that “eccentric” stereotype continue to interfere with the ability of audiences to seriously view and critique Carr's efforts.

Two new books on Carr accomplish the rare and marvelous feat of completely resisting this overwhelming stereotype. Both contribute new and fascinating ideas to the large body of scholarship surrounding Emily Carr. Both will also appeal to very large audiences beyond the circles of Carr fans and Carr critics. These texts, each in its own way, provide a “fresh seeing” of Emily Carr that penetrates far beyond the superficial labels that have become so familiar and so limiting.

Susan Crean's *The Laughing One: A Journey to Emily Carr* is the most impressive and beautifully written consideration of Carr created by anyone to date. It is a thoughtful blend of cultural criticism and history, fiction inspired by Carr and her social context, and Crean's own memoirs, all

organized around a metaphorical journey (through time, space, archives, and layers of myths). As we travel with Crean we uncover much more than another “version” of Emily Carr; instead, we begin to understand the desires of a culture and a nation, and how these desires led to the many versions of Emily Carr. Crean has succeeded in writing an “Emily Carr book” that defies the outsider stereotype, instead positing that, in many ways, Carr existed at the very centre of White Canadian culture – indeed, that the issues in Carr’s life (such as her important but incomplete relationship with First Nations peoples) mirror the painful and unresolved issues at the heart of Canadian identity. It is as much a reading of British Columbia’s and Canada’s myth making and image making as it is a profile of one artist.

Crean’s own autobiographical reflections are woven into this fabric with expertise and relevance. Her personal stories of travels to significant places in Carr’s past are offered not simply to ground the reader in concrete time and place, to compare Carr’s era to ours; rather, these narratives allow Crean to reflect on her own culpability, her own projections, and her own unresolved and sometimes uneasy stance towards Carr and towards the national consciousness Carr often represents. Writing about a trip to the Skeena River in 1991 and being outed as a reporter by a local, she comments:

Arnie’s question was likewise provocative, meant to put me on the spot, but I admired the irreverence behind it. Why shouldn’t a writer be asked to declare her intentions? Why shouldn’t I define my

relationship to the cliché of the southern White professional who comes here to collect material or to dispense expertise to the Aboriginal population? To get her story, to make the fee, to get out? I am here collecting, too, collecting historical information about an artist who came here, to Indian country, a lifetime ago and found something to anchor her own art. As I travel I am searching for a way to understand Carr’s problematic relationship with Aboriginal culture, in so many ways a metaphor for the puzzle that is Canada. (266)

Crean’s research on the Carr biography is meticulous and brings many of those (particularly Marius Barbeau) who were involved in the making of the artist and her image to life in their own right. Crean’s fiction (e.g., Mayo Paddon’s story of accompanying Carr to Ucluelet aboard the *Willapa* in 1899) focuses upon characters who were selected for their unique and previously unheard perceptions of Carr and Carr’s world (Paddon, Crean poses, “is the first person to see Carr for herself, to recognize the ambitious artist she had become” [19]). Some fiction is imagined through Carr’s point of view. I found this strategy off-putting at first. Carr’s own voice in books such as *The Book of Small* and *Klee Wyck* is so strong and distinctive. No one – not even Crean – can begin to compete with it. However, as I read I soon understood that Crean is not competing with Carr’s voice at all; rather, she is offering us a way “around” that childish voice Carr cultivated – a voice that enabled Carr to sidestep reflection and critical thinking.

The only weakness I found in Crean's inventive and articulate study was a long section on Georgia O'Keeffe that seemed out of place. O'Keeffe's life is fascinating but well told (and much told) elsewhere. It is less convincingly linked to the important questions of the book than are all the other stories-within-stories. I had the sense that Crean felt obliged to "do something" with O'Keeffe because so many other writers (such as poet Kate Braid) have been imaginatively linking the two artists over the past decade. It is a small confusion in an otherwise magnificent and daring book.

Art historian Sharyn Rohlfen Udall also offers an excellent new view of Carr in her gorgeous, oversized text, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own*. This work will undoubtedly find its largest audience with Americans who are very familiar with Georgia O'Keeffe, already intrigued by Frida Kahlo, and oblivious to Emily Carr. The book accompanies a parallel exhibition first organized at the McMichael Gallery and now travelling the continent (opening at the Vancouver Art Gallery on 15 June 2002). The quality and number of reproductions in Udall's book will seduce anyone interested in twentieth-century art, and the text is extremely insightful.

Udall's goal is to explore how place, nationality, nature, and gender are expressed through these three artists living in roughly the same era in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. The text is conceived in three parts: "Landscape and Identity," "The

Private Self," and "A Public Career." Udall expertly points out patterns and connections between the lives, contexts, and work of these artists but does not force them into a particular thesis. The biographical background of each artist plays an important role in the study, but Udall knows that her real contribution comes with her analyses of the works themselves.

It is incredibly refreshing to have an opportunity to appreciate Carr in the company of her peers. Charges of eccentricity are entirely beside the point when Carr's life and work are examined within this context, and the brilliance of Carr's talent is undeniably equal to that of O'Keeffe and Kahlo when displayed in this fashion. Udall's organization of the text allows her, within individual sections, to move gracefully between considerations of each artist. The thoughtful arrangement of images on the page (e.g., O'Keeffe's "Ranchos Church, 1929" facing Carr's "Indian Church, 1929") invites readers to sense connections before Udall articulates them for us. Udall writes in a concrete style that can reach novice art historians; at the same time, she explores such complex social and aesthetic issues as the significance of appropriation of Aboriginal designs.

Serious scholarship on Emily Carr has been almost entirely directed at what her words and actions tell us about her life and about "our" cultural past. Sharyn Rohlfen Udall offers an extended and groundbreaking consideration of what Carr herself would undoubtedly have wished us to consider: her paintings.