

OUR EMILY

A Review Essay

By Nancy Pagh

Beloved Land: The World of Emily Carr

Robin Laurence, Introduced by

Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of
Washington Press, 1996. 104 pp. Illus. \$19.95 paper.

Emily Carr: An Introduction to Her Life and Art

Anne Newlands

Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly, 1996. 64 pp. Illus. \$14.95 paper.

This Woman in Particular:

Contexts for the Biographical Image of Emily Carr

Stephanie Kirkwood Walker

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996. xvi, 212 pp.
Illus. \$34.95 cloth.

A “LITTLE OLD LADY on the edge of nowhere,” as she described herself, has probably drawn more national and international attention to British Columbia than has any other person. As a painter, Emily Carr (1871-1945) intrigued eastern Canada with her contribution to the National Gallery of Canada’s *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art* in 1927. She went on to become British Columbia’s — and arguably Canada’s — most renowned artist. “Convinced that the old way of seeing was inadequate to express this big country of ours,” especially the landscapes and people of British Columbia, Carr brought freshness and intensity to BC landscape art and to regional writing. Reproductions of her images decorate posters, t-shirts, books by other writers, stamps, mugs, shopping bags, and the like, and her autobiographical books

(including *Klee Wyck*, which won the Governor General’s Award for 1941) remain in print and have even been collected into a popular “omnibus.” She is the subject of several biographical studies. Whether she is being discussed in *Canadian Art* as an appropriator of Native culture or being discovered by a class of kids touring the Vancouver Art Gallery, Carr remains visible and prominent in considerations of BC culture and identity. Two new collections of her images are a testament to her continuing relevance and popularity as an artist, while Walker’s text is a critical study of the role Carr’s biographical image has played in our fascination with her.

Robin Laurence’s *Beloved Land: The World of Emily Carr* and Anne Newlands’ *Emily Carr: An Introduction to Her Life and Art* both offer affordable anthologies featuring high-

quality reproductions and interesting background information on the painter and some of the contexts for her work. Either is a better choice than is the weighty coffee table book offered several years ago by the University of Washington Press, which featured very poor colour reproductions. Although these books are slimmer and have smaller pages, the images are well chosen and are printed on quality paper. Carr's "darker" paintings appear vibrant, not muddy or dull. These two works seem somewhat redundant, both vying for the same audience — persons who would like a home reference to show-case some of her best work and to provide interesting details about her life and artistry. However, there are some significant differences between the two.

Beloved Land, which focuses on Carr's relationship with the environment and her sense of nationalism, offers more illustrations than does *Emily Carr*, along with images that are larger and better displayed, without text or busyness to clutter the page. Several of the reproductions straddle two pages (and are aligned well) so that the viewer can better appreciate the movement and detail Carr sought. I felt the best feature of this collection was the way Laurence separated her well-written twenty-six-page introduction from the rest of the book and honoured Carr's words and vision by placing substantial quotations from her writing on the pages facing her images. These quotations are carefully selected and usually comment directly either on what is depicted in the corresponding images or on the process of those works. Because Carr wrote with such inventiveness and tenderness, these pages balance the beautiful reproductions well.

Newlands's *Emily Carr: An Introduction to Her Life and Art* is slightly

less expensive and significantly shorter than is Laurence's book, however the variety of its images is superior. *Beloved Land* only features reproductions from the Vancouver Art Gallery (which, admittedly, houses a very large collection of her work). Newlands's text incorporates images from the VAG and from at least nine other collections, including those of the National Gallery of Canada, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, and the BC Archives and Records Service. As a result, Newlands offers images that cover a broader spectrum, including more of Carr's earlier work and some of her most recognized pieces, such as "Indian Church, 1929," which is missing from *Beloved Land*. Newlands's writing focuses on Carr's life experiences and, to support this, the text includes more black-and-white photos of Carr at different stages of her life. Notably, Newlands has also brought in more contextual material. I found the inclusion of Lawren Harris's "Above Lake Superior" and photographs from Carr's first National Gallery of Canada appearance quite appropriate; Newlands has worked to show some of the movements that shaped Carr and has tried to give us a sense of how her contemporaries greeted her work.

Choosing between these two good works is a matter of taste. Laurence offers more and larger images and more specific information about the particular images included, and she focuses on Carr's sense of the importance of place. Newlands has divided her text into numerous short, thematic sections that are organized chronologically. She takes us on a voyage through stages in Carr's life, offering fewer and smaller illustrations but a greater variety of them.

This Woman in Particular addresses a much more scholarly audience — namely, theorists of language, culture, and subjectivity. Walker's project is to examine the capacity of the genre of biography, focusing on one biographical subject: Carr. As noted in the foreword contributed by William Closson James, Walker argues for abandoning historical biography's pretence of objectivity (a pretence that has, I think, largely been shed in the last decade). More compelling is her insistence that biography is a spiritual/religious act; she explains that her "primary interest here lies in biography as a literary form able to convey or display religious matters within a milieu perceived as predominantly secular." Writing any life history, she explains, "requires an act of imagination directed toward the order of being." I was especially intrigued by her attributing Carr's recent appeal to "an increasingly common spirituality allied to ecological perspectives."

Because of Carr's position as a female artist at a time when women were not heralded as great artists, and her propensity for reinventing herself again and again in her own writing, Walker has chosen an excellent subject for her project. These elements allow Walker to show how important the emergence of feminism and modernity has been to the changing appreciation of Carr's greatness. This argument is not especially new; I know of three essays

published in 1992 alone (*Journal of Canadian Studies* 27/2, *Studies in Canadian Literature* 17/2, and *Mosaic* 25/4, only one of which Walker acknowledges) that contain the genesis of these thoughts. All of these essays, by relying on feminist analyses of subjectivity and modern definitions of the self, defend Carr against charges of "lying" in her writing. However, Walker engages in this project with skill and in much greater depth than has any previous thinking in this direction. Carr's greatness, Walker concludes, lies not in her genius as a painter but in the multitude of ways she fashioned her life and the multitude of ways we have sought to conceive of her. Because of Carr's own strong and appealing sense of spirituality, we are bound to appreciate Walker's emphasis on the positive nature of these rebirths and/or transformations.

Walker makes peripheral mention of the "mystique" of the BC coastal landscape and the new power of British Columbia as "a cultural centre on its own terms"; this study is not crucial for scholarship about British Columbia. However, I think this work deserves genuine interest from literary and cultural critics concerned with biography, autobiography, and subjectivity, and its existence demonstrates the growing importance of "our Emily" to scholarship outside of British Columbia.

The Schoolnet Emily Carr web site provides in-depth information about the life and work of Canadian artist and author Emily Carr. There are six sections to the site: a Virtual House Tour of the Victorian house where Emily Carr was born; a Writing section containing descriptions of her books, and articles about her (contributed by the National Library of Canada); a Family Album of archival images and brief biographies of the Carr Family; an On-Line Exhibition of over 400 examples of Emily Carr's paintings, drawings, and pottery from the various collections in BC and Canada; a Current Events and Issues section; a Team and Sponsors section with information about the people who created this site and those who funded the project. The site is located at: <http://www.schoolnet.ca/collections/carr> and is mirrored at: <http://www.tbc.gov.bc.ca/culture/schoolnet/carr>.