

THE ENIGMA OF EMILY CARR

A Review Essay

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*Unsettling Encounters:
First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr*
Gerta Moray

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006. 400 pp. Illus. \$75.00 cloth.

Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon

Charles C. Hill, Johanne Lamoureux, and Ian M. Thom

(Vancouver: Douglas & MacIntyre, with the National Gallery of Canada and the Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006). 336 pp. Illus. \$75.00 cloth.

NO CANADIAN ARTIST has generated, or produced, more textual material than Emily Carr. That this is still true is evident from the two books on the artist that appeared in the summer of 2006. The National Gallery of Canada and the Vancouver Art Gallery produced *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, the catalogue for the latest Carr retrospective. Concurrently, UBC Press published Gerta Moray's long awaited monograph *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr*. The two complementary studies combine the formats of lavishly illustrated coffee table books with scholarly writings that attempt definitive statements on this protean artist. Both address the contentious and complex concerns currently surrounding Carr, which now implicate such issues as feminism, postcolonialism, cultural appropriation, modernism, primitivism, the con-

struction of personal and national identities and the place of Aboriginal peoples and cultures within them.

The exhibition catalogue contains eight essays by ten contributors from various disciplines, arranged more or less chronologically. Ethnologists Peter Macnair and Jay Stewart open by reinvestigating Carr's 1907 tourist excursion to Alaska, during which she formed the project for painting a documentary record of the poles of the Aboriginal villages of the Canadian Northwest Coast. Contributing to the discussion on the veracity of Carr's later autobiographical writings, they compare her published recollections with archival records and the remaining fragments of Carr's missing Alaska journal, a humorous pictorial narrative of the trip that Carr drew for her sister. Their findings demonstrate that, at the time, Carr had neither the extensive experiences nor the deep appreciation of Aboriginal art which she later

ascribed to herself. This would support the contention that, when she wrote her memoirs in the 1930s, she exaggerated her early knowledge of and sympathy for Aboriginal peoples.

Macnair and Stewart also reidentify the American artist whom Carr encountered in Sitka and who served as a model for her enterprise. Unnamed in Carr's memoirs, her biographer, Maria Tippett, proposed Theodore Richardson.¹ Macnair and Stewart suggest a lesser painter, James Everett Stuart, who is more in keeping with Carr's description. Their research underscores the importance of critically rereading both Carr's own fictionalized accounts and the embroidered biographies based on them, and taking neither at face value.

In the catalogue's second essay, curator Johanne Lamoureux reappraises the next major stage of Carr's development: her engagement with French modernism during her study trip to France in 1910/11. The author asserts that this episode has been marginalized in order to support the myth that the Group of Seven developed independently of French influence. Instead, Lamoureux shows how Carr's totem pole project was inflected, albeit indirectly, by both primitivism and cubism. Although Lamoureux's semiotic terminology may alienate the average reader, her study offers new insights into Carr's fascination with, and representation of, Aboriginal poles.

Working from their artistic performance piece, First Nations artist Shirley Bear and writer Susan Crean employ an innovative combination of script and essay based on Carr's own

writings as well as on an invented correspondence to search for clues to the identity of Sophie Frank, Carr's long-time Aboriginal friend. They too question both Carr's claim to having a special rapport with Aboriginal peoples and the accuracy of her memoirs. They problematize her relationships with Frank and the Russes, a Haida family who figure prominently in her writings as hosts and guides. They report that the latter relationship ended when *Klee Wyck* was published because the Russes felt Carr's account was "full of lies." Bear and Crean also propose that Carr adopted the position of a white, male missionary because she was motivated by the precept that both poles and their owners were disappearing and that she treated her sources without "proper respect."

The intervening years between 1913 and 1927 remain, as usual, neglected. Only briefly represented in the works illustrated, they have received scant coverage. This lacuna supports the (incorrect) contention that Carr only returned to painting after her "discovery," staged by the ethnologist Marius Barbeau and Eric Brown (the director of the National Gallery of Canada [NGC]) at the 1927 Exhibition of *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* – a focus of the current exhibition and catalogue. Bypassing this transitional period, during which Carr exhibited internationally, the NGC's curator of Canadian art, Charles Hill, devotes his lengthy essay more to the context of the 1927 exhibition than to Carr herself. Although surrounded with a scholarly apparatus, the essay is, as its postscript states, "deeply indebted" to other sources.² While glossing the research contained within

¹ Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979), 74.

² Hill lists Anne Morrison, Marcia Crosby, Sandra Dyck, and Leslie Dawn.

them, Hill appears, however, to have excised any conclusions that might discomfit the NGC or other government institutions. For a more complete and complex, if more contested, account the reader would be better served turning to the originals.

Also lacking is any commentary on the many illustrations of Northwest Coast Aboriginal art, presumably included because the pieces were part of the 1927 exhibition. This glaring omission echoes the most reprehensible aspects of the original project by reaffirming the perception held then that the Aboriginal material had no intrinsic cultural meaning, that it was an empty shell awaiting appropriation by non-Aboriginal artists and institutions as “Canadian” subject matter.

Hill does include the contribution of the American artist William Langdon Kihn, whose striking portraits of Aboriginal peoples, done in western Canada in the 1920s while working with Barbeau, testify to the continuity of Northwest Coast cultures by showing living individuals in their traditional regalia. Having his long-neglected work brought back to light is a welcome addition. Note, however, that Kihn’s *Portrait of Ts’ilwa, George Derrick of the Raven Phratry, Medicine Man from Gitanyow*, which Hill spells inconsistently and cites as “whereabouts unknown,” is in the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

Haida scholar Marcia Crosby takes a different strategy from that of her polemical 1991 essay, whose frontal assault on the popular image of Carr provoked many of the current debates.³ Here, Crosby examines Carr’s 1928 trip

to the Gitksan village of Kitwancool (now Gitanyow). The community was a well-known site of resistance to colonization. It restricted access to the area: both Barbeau and Kihn had been expelled in 1924, as had, at various times, surveyors, settlers, and others. Crosby addresses Carr’s recollections of her trip and her encounter with Chief Miriam Douse Gamlakyeltqu (who offered her hospitality) in terms of the intersection and gap between personal memory and public history.

Crosby’s presentation raises several interesting questions. Carr reports that she informed her host that she wanted to paint her poles because Aboriginal youths were no longer interested in their traditional culture. Her remark was astonishingly impolitic. Gitanyow leaders took every opportunity to educate non-Aboriginals on the continuity and vitality of their culture and the validity of their territorial claims, as when they had forcibly instructed Kihn and Barbeau. Yet, although Carr respected her host, she did not remember nor report on a resourceful and powerful community (or individuals) defying government laws, maintaining its culture and territories, and strategically organizing its activities; rather, Carr’s memoirs present the people of Gitanyow as largely assimilated and motivated by the informal satisfaction of creature comforts, while her pictures show the village as being deserted.

Crosby also demonstrates that, thematically, Carr’s Aboriginal narratives are morbid – especially prominent is the death of children. As a metaphor for the imminent extinction of Aboriginal cultures, this trope underwrites the assertion that their art had no future and was vital only as a subject for non-Aboriginal artists. This, in turn, justified Carr’s own

³ Marcia Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 267–91.

appropriations, which is what forms the theme of Crosby's 1991 essay.

Andrew Hunter follows a line he has been pursuing for some time: that the Canadian national landscapes preferred by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven were anything but untouched and were already logged over and mined out.⁴ But in turning to Carr, he misses an essential point: in the mid-1930s Carr would have believed that the national landscape was figured within representations of virginal nature as it was consistently presented as such. Her early 1930s landscapes featured precisely such imagery. Her subsequent depictions of sites close to Victoria, which showed explicit signs of clear-cut logging, abjured the icons of Canadian national identity and were painted against the image projected by the Group. The important, unasked question is: what motivated her to resist the prescribed national format and take up this openly oppositional and alienated position?

Both Ian Thom, curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and art historian Gerta Moray address Carr's later exhibitions. Thom examines how critical writings from the 1945 and 1971 retrospectives and books by Doris Shadbolt, Edythe Hembroff-Schliecher, and Maria Tippett defined her for the general public as a nationalist figure identified with the landscape, Aboriginal subjects, and the Group of Seven. Moray reviews the details of the 1945 and 1990 retrospectives.

Moray's major contribution to Carr studies, however, is saved for her own book. Here, she defines her purpose clearly. In readable prose, she argues that the artist consistently attempted to

change racist colonial attitudes towards British Columbia's indigenous peoples. Moray proposes that Carr's Aboriginal productions "challenged stereotypes" and "redressed the historical record" between Aboriginals and settlers and "championed" and "vindicated" the Indian, that she worked "in partnership" with Aboriginal peoples and even asserted the "endurance of Native traditions."

While Moray acknowledges that Carr may have been enmeshed in colonial discourse, any discussion as to how or where this was present in her productions, or by what means and for what reasons her position may have shifted, is largely omitted in favour of showing her ongoing resistance to colonial norms. Moray's unified, if simplified, concept validates the culture of affirmation surrounding Carr that has been challenged by recent writings but tends to polarize the discussion into a positive/negative dichotomy that could eliminate nuance and complexity.

Fortunately, in her examination of the complicated context within which Carr lived and worked, Moray avoids this pitfall. She draws on a wide range of ongoing discussions and summarizes a large number of secondary sources, supplemented with archival research. Her synopses are admirable for their breadth and depth, and serve as reasonably complete introductions to their topic.

Moray's "concentric," non-chronological organization of these issues does not immediately address Carr's art; instead, Moray opens with a discussion of Carr's role in the 1927 Canadian West Coast Art exhibition, her place in the formation of a national image, and her reception as a modernist in the 1930s and 1940s. She then outlines the interlocking discursive frameworks that

⁴ See Andrew Hunter, "Mapping Tom," in *Tom Thomson*, ed. Dennis Reid, (Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 2002), 19-45.

characterized colonial relationships during Carr's early period in the late 1800s. She dissects the social, gender, and racial hierarchies of Victoria's society; the land claims issues in British Columbia; and the intersecting roles of missionaries, anthropologists, and Indian agents.

Her reliance on secondary sources does lead to minor errors. The *Jeu de Paume* exhibition of Canadian art held in Paris in early 1927 was not the result of an invitation from France. This was a fiction concocted by Eric Brown. Conversely, according to the archival record, the inclusion of the Northwest Coast material in that show was initiated by the French sponsors rather than by Brown, who was not an enthusiastic advocate of Northwest Coast art. Moray also cites without question Carr's memoirs of her 1907 Alaska trip, reaffirming the latter's claim to being "profoundly moved" by the Aboriginal art she saw, as well as repeating Tippet's suggestion that Richardson was Carr's model. These are precisely the points Macnair and Stewart dispute.

Other small errors creep in. The claim that "over forty" of Kihn's paintings were exhibited in the Canadian West Coast Art show is supported by neither the photographs of the installation nor the catalogue.

Moray also resists discussing discrepancies between Carr's later self-constructions and her earlier productions. She twice cites "Ucluelet", a story Carr wrote about a trip in 1899 more than thirty years after the event, as evidence of Carr's early resistance to colonial attitudes. Ignoring Carr's propensity for exaggeration, Moray concludes that Carr was "fascinated by the people and their way of life and felt critical of the missionaries' attempt to impose white ways" (49). Yet other

evidence, including the drawings done during the trip, as Moray admits, indicates no such position. Although Moray notes the discrepancy between the early visual representations and the later textual recollections, she leaves this gap unexamined.

Where Moray excels is in her extended discussion of Carr's 1912 forays into Aboriginal territories and villages, both deserted and inhabited, and in reconstructing her experiences there. Proposing a new itinerary, she gives separate chapters to Carr's visits to the Gitksan, Haida, and Kwakwaka'wakw. The detailed accounts of the activities of Carr's relatives in the area acknowledge her connection to the region. Moray's reference to land speculation around Hazelton suggests financial motives for Carr's trip, particularly since she was looking for profitable places in which to invest her diminished inheritance, but Moray does not examine this possibility. She recounts the Vancouver press's attention to Gitksan resistance to colonization, which made the Upper Skeena a contested landscape, one that Carr represents as reassuringly "serene." Moray's summary of colonial activity in the region is thorough but says little about the potlatch ban, Gitksan reactions to cultural suppression, and Gitksan strategies for maintaining their culture, all of which would have given balance to her discussion. Indeed, the Aboriginal viewpoint is largely absent.

But it is her intimate knowledge of Carr's entire body of Aboriginal images that allows Moray to show how Carr's materials, working methods, and approach to her motifs were inter-related. Separated from the contextual discussion, the analysis of the works is primarily formal, emphasizing the evolution of Carr's brushwork, colour,

form, space, and line as she became more adept with her subject.

To contextualize Carr's production, Moray relies extensively on Carr's 1913 public "Lecture on Totem Poles," which accompanied a large exhibition of her Aboriginal works in Vancouver.⁵ Moray's major problem is dealing with Carr's opening statement that Aboriginal cultures and arts belonged to the past and were on the border of extinction. Moray circumvents this colonialist cliché by claiming, somewhat disingenuously, that while Carr saw indigenous cultures as disappearing, she saw Aboriginal peoples as still surviving. As what, Moray does not say. The implication is, however, that with no identity, language, ceremonies, territories, or art, they would be completely assimilated; they would have only a vague memory of the past and would disappear into non-Aboriginal culture, hence justifying Carr's enterprise.

Although much of Carr's essay is appropriated verbatim from ethnographic sources, her appreciation of Aboriginal art and culture is, as Crosby noted, framed by repeated images of death that are Carr's alone. Her travel vignettes in the lecture touch obsessively on mortuary poles, infant mortality, burial practices, graveyards, and the like. Symptomatically, Carr reported extensively on the Haida, in whose deserted villages she found the most evidence of cultural disruption. She said almost nothing of her experiences among the Gitksan, who had preserved their culture, still lived in their traditional villages, and were still raising new poles (with attendant

ceremonies), except to mention their unique grave houses. The imbalance is significant. Despite these problems, Moray's extensive knowledge of the works from this period give them an importance that has been denied by previous authors.

Unsettling Encounters abruptly bifurcates the 1913 and the 1927 exhibitions, divided by ninety pages of colour plates, some familiar but many rarely, if ever, reproduced. During the intervening years, Carr turned to other subjects, especially pure landscapes. She took up her Aboriginal themes again in 1928 after returning from Ottawa and meeting the Group of Seven. Although Moray's accounts of Carr's later trips are primarily drawn uncritically from the memoirs, and her analysis of the works produced are briefer than are those of the pre-1913 excursions, she does offer valuable insights into the meanings of Carr's productions.

But once again, Moray is confronted with Carr's position on Aboriginal culture. And again, she poses Carr as identifying positively with First Nations peoples and "champion[ing] their traditions." This is hard to support when it was precisely at this time that the state was prosecuting the continuing potlatch among the Gitksan, Kwakwaka'wakw, and others, and denying land claims – policies that, as Crean and Bear point out, Carr never seems to have protested. Moray nonetheless reads Carr's 1929 *McGill News* essay on Aboriginal art as testimony to her belief in Aboriginal survival, although a case can be made to the contrary.⁶ For example, Carr – fully cognizant of the potlatch ban – states that a potlatch must accompany the

⁵ Emily Carr, "Lecture on Totem Poles," in *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings*, ed. Susan Crean (Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 2003), 177-203.

⁶ Emily Carr, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast," *McGill News* (suppl.), June 1929, 18-22.

erection of a pole. The implication is obvious: no more potlatches, no more poles, and no more art or culture, hence her use of the past tense.

To maintain her affirmative image of Carr, Moray must ignore a statement made by the artist in 1935. At the same time as Carr was writing about herself as a champion of the Indian and their arts, she was also stating publicly:

Why cannot the Indians of today create the art that their ancestors did? Some of them carve well, but the objective and the desire has [sic] gone out of their work. The "something plus" is there no longer. The younger generations do not believe in the power of the totem – when they carve it is for money. The greatness of their art has died with their belief in these things. It was inevitable. Great art must have more than fine workmanship behind it.⁷

⁷ Emily Carr, "Talk on Art", British Columbia Provincial Archives, MS 1077, box 17, file 3, 8-9.

Carr clearly saw neither cultural continuity nor the possibility of a "revival," a position which Crosby points out Carr re-iterated in 1942. Either would be inauthentic and debased. Aboriginal arts, cultures, and identities were dead. By contrast, only non-Aboriginal art – that is, her art – presumably not painted for money, currently had this "something plus." Charlie James, Mungo Martin, Willie Seaweed, and many other active carvers of the period would undoubtedly have had something else to say on the matter.

While Moray's research adds much to our knowledge of Carr, bypassing these problematic areas in favour of reaffirming a simplified, heroic image of the artist does her subject a disservice. Carr was more complex than this, and her relationships with her Aboriginal subjects and colonial discourses more conflicted. The book needs to be read, but carefully, with the knowledge that there is still more to be said and discussed. Carr remains an enigma yet to be more fully defined.