

# Maria Tippet, "A Paste Solitaire in a Steel Claw Setting: Emily Carr and her Public (*BC Studies*, No. 20): A Reply

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Miss Tippet's purpose is "to show that the western public has borne an undeserved guilt, imposed by a myth, a myth created by the artist and a few friends, then perpetuated by later journalists and writers." The origin of the myth is said to be "the idea that humiliating press notices and public ridicule caused Emily Carr to lay down her palette in 1913," and that western recognition came only after she had "... contributed to the Canadian West Coast Exhibition" (held in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto in 1927).

The early part of Miss Tippet's essay gives an interesting and carefully documented account of the beginnings of Emily Carr's career — going back as far as 1894 when "she won first place for her pen and ink sketches." And quotations from both the Victoria and Vancouver press reveal an appreciation of paintings exhibited at various times. But these early paintings neither startled or dismayed: British Columbians whose experience of art was limited to the traditional and the conservative could and did enjoy this early work.

Quotations and paraphrases naturally play an important part in the essay and the accompanying notes give the sources of these. But as one reads on, one finds that the impression gained from the source of the quotation may differ significantly from that conveyed by the text. Page 11, for example develops the theory that Emily Carr's hostility to the press "became a merit" — a statement which may lend meritorious overtones to the quotation a few lines later: "I have dodged publicity, hated write-ups and all that splutter." But the source, page 287 of *Hundreds and Thousands* (Emily Carr's journals) reveals the writer in a mood of contrition: "I have been thinking that I am a shirker. I have dodged publicity, hated write-ups and all that splutter. Well, that's selfish conceit that embarrassed me. I have been forgetting Canada, and forgetting women painters. It's them I ought to be upholding, nothing to do with puny me at all."

Page 8 reports that the comments and silence of Emily Carr's sisters when faced with her paintings "often resulted in her abusing them." But Edythe Hembroff Schleicher's *M.E. — A Portrayal*, the source indicated by the note, reads "Emily abused her sisters roundly at times, but nevertheless had a real affection for them." Moreover, the context of the quotation has nothing whatever to do with Emily Carr's paintings—much less the reactions of her sisters to them.

Quotations given out of context, or shorn of significant words, must always risk being misleading. This essay, unfortunately, contains a number of both. For instance, page 76 of the journals, written in Chicago (referred to by note 89), gives the background of Emily Carr's description of herself as "a paste solitaire in a steel claw setting." She had come to Chicago to see an exhibition of internationally famous paintings. The day was "brooding and oppressed." Chicago was "still and sullen," the lake looking "cruel, bottomless and hard." Expected letters from Toronto friends had not arrived. And the exhibition which she had travelled so far to see had closed the day before her arrival. But the entry for the following day begins, "The Lord be praised! I leave Chicago tomorrow at 9:15 a.m. I have felt bouncy ever since I made up my mind to migrate. I do look forward to seeing those dear folk in Toronto and their pictures. . . ."

With one exception, the proponents of the "myth" assembled on page 13 strike one as a surprising choice. It seems strange that Miss Tippet should take seriously the assertion of one rash journalist that Emily Carr, "ignored and scoffed at while she lived," was nevertheless honoured only ten years after her death. And it is more surprising that she should quote even the phrase "skewered with rejection" from a grotesquely inaccurate article in *The Globe and Mail* of February 14, 1972, written by Zena Cherry, best known for her articles on Toronto's leading socialites. The newspaper hastened to print, on the following day, a sensitive and sensible article by its art critic, Kay Kritzwiser. The evidence of the continuing existence of the myth ends with a reference to an article in the *Vancouver Province* of August 8, 1972, more notable for the effusiveness of its style than for its content.

On page 13 Miss Tippet also says that Emily Carr "detested publicity," "was embarrassed to confront her work in public," questioned "the sincerity of praise" and was "not nice" to people who visited her studio. While self-questioning is a noticeable feature of the journals, the entry on page 43 (to which note 86 refers), is found to read as follows:

I wonder why being confronted with my work in the face of the public always embarrasses and reproaches me so terribly. Is it because there is dishonesty or lack of sincerity, something that doesn't ring true, a lack of integrity in my presentation of the subject, or is it a sort of reaction arising from the perpetual snubbing of my work in my younger days, the days after I went away [to France?] and had broken loose from the old photographic, pretty-picture work? Gee Whiz, how those snubs and titters hurt in those days! I don't care half so much now, and yet those old scars are still tender after all these years.

Miss Tippett's use of the phrase "the sincerity of praise" may be a slip overlooked in proof reading. The final note of the article invites the same conjecture. Here Emily Carr's reply to a question by a newspaper reporter is attributed to *The Heart of a Peacock*, a posthumous miscellany of stories, sketches or birds and animals, plus the sixty-seven page *Woo's Life*.

The number of references in the essay to the autobiography, *Growing Pains*, suggests that Miss Tippett considers this book and the journals to be equally important sources. But the journals reflect the moods, thoughts, and incidents of the present, while the autobiography attempts not very successfully — to recreate the past, often the distant past.

Miss Tippett does not indicate to which edition of *Growing Pains* her notes refer, although note 10 refers (though not for purposes of reference) to the original Oxford University Press edition of 1944 and the reprint of 1946. The 1946 edition must be ruled out, since there is a discrepancy of eighty pages between the pagination of this reprint and the page numbers given in the notes. A paperback edition of 1966, still in print, is the probable alternative.

It was clearly not Miss Tippett's intention to give a "character sketch" of Emily Carr. But, inevitably, as the themes of the essay are developed, an image does emerge, the image of a resentful woman taking refuge in a "self-imposed" solitude. A very different image is presented in an article in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* of November 8, 1964 — "Emily Carr: Modest, Kindly and Full of Fun," written by a friend of over twenty-five years' standing. This Emily Carr, instead of being dependent on her animals for companionship (page 13 of essay) "liked having the opportunity of 'savoring' her friends, and so preferred only one or two at a time."