

# EMILY CARR'S

## *Klee Wyck*

*Maria Tippett*

**E**MILY CARR'S *Klee Wyck* was awarded the Governor General's medal for non-fiction literature in 1941. The Oxford University Press publication of the twenty-one sketches, "made out of memories which had been stored up in Miss Carr's mind as she went into lonely places along the British Columbia coast seeking subject-matter for her painting," marked not only the culmination of her northern excursions, but also the end of long frustrating attempts to see these stories into print. The process of recalling, and in some cases embellishing upon those experiences, which have made Carr into somewhat of a legendary figure, is the subject of this essay.

From Emily Carr's childhood recollections in the later *Growing Pains* (1946) and *The Book of Small* (1942), one would assume that, apart from "Wash Mary," the family's native washerwoman, the very English Carr family had little contact with the native Indians of British Columbia. The journals of Richard Carr, however, reveal that as a young traveller in North and Central America, he possessed a lively sympathy towards all native peoples. In Mackinac he found the Indians "civil and obliging and very honest, much more so than their white neighbours", while in the Yucatan "the poor Indians" were "badly treated". In Victoria, British Columbia, where he settled in July 1863 Richard Carr would have come into frequent contact with the numerous Indians who were enticed there by the colonial city's glitter, though his first exposure to the more traditional villages probably came during his voyage around Vancouver Island on the Hudson's Bay Company's steamer the *Princess Louise* in August 1879. None of the voyaging Carrs (Richard was accompanied by his daughters, Alice and Elizabeth) left a record of their impressions, but doubtlessly shared the excitement of a fellow traveller who recorded seeing "numerous carvings", then at their apogee. Though Emily Carr leads us to believe that the discovery of the Indian was her own — beginning with her idle curiosity near Trial Island in "Sleep", and culminating with her two major northern excursions of 1912 and 1928 — one may suspect that the seeds of her wish to have "been born an Indian" were sown in the Carr home.

Nevertheless, it was not until 1898, at the age of twenty-seven, that Emily Carr

first lived in an Indian village. Miss Armstrong, a Methodist missionary at the Toxis mission and school directed by the Rev. Melvin Swartout, was a close friend of her sister Elizabeth. In the spring of that year Miss Armstrong invited Carr to that west coast village near Ucluelet. Carr, now trained in art at San Francisco, sketched the Indians and delighted in being called by them "Klee Wyck" — "Laughing One" in Nootkan language.<sup>1</sup> Though she later recalled that Ucluelet "made a lasting impression on me," the experience does not seem to have been more than a pleasant and exotic sojourn. The decisive event in Carr's life-long love affair with the Indian came yet another nine years later when, with her sister Alice, she travelled to Alaska.

In the summer of 1907, Carr embarked from Seattle, Washington, on the *Dolphin* and travelled to Sitka. There she met an American artist, probably Theodore Richardson, whose pictures of the Tlingit poles and houses inspired her to emulation. She returned to her Vancouver studio with the resolution "to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could."

The following summer, 1908, Carr made the first of three visits to Alert Bay, an accessible Kwakiutl village with notable figures and house posts which had already attracted artists F. M. Bell Smith, John Kyle and Statira Frame. It was also during these years that she met Sophie Frank, a native of North Vancouver's Coast Salish reserve, well-known locally for the enormous woven baskets and lush blackberries which she sold door-to-door in Vancouver. Through Mrs. Frank, Carr learned much of the Indian ways. It was probably her nieces living in areas of northern British Columbia who made Carr's 1912 trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Skeena River district and points along the coast practicable. Daughters of her elder sister Clara, Lillian Nicholles, school teacher in Masset, Q.C.I., and Emily English, wife of a cannery boss at Balmoral on the Skeena, together with Methodist missionary friends of her other sisters, provided Carr with bases and contacts for exploration on perhaps the most significant of her northern excursions. So monumental was this trip for Carr, that after working up her summer sketches during the winter, she felt by spring capable of giving an exhibition and lecture based on her summer's work.

Carr was optimistic that financing for a northern visit the following summer might be aided by the provincial government. The Provincial Archives was in the process of being reorganized and, hopeful that her paintings might find a place on the walls of the new building in exchange for financial assistance, Carr approached the minister of education Dr. Henry Esson Young. The museum official whom Young appointed to examine Carr's work found the totems "faithfully drawn," but "too brilliant and vivid to be true to the actual conditions of the coast villages." This rebuff is not mentioned by Carr in any of her autobiographical writing. It can only be an hypothesis that it had something to do, perhaps a very great

deal to do, with the considerable redirection of her activities at the time of her move to Victoria in the following year. Dropping most of her painting and entirely forgetting her ambition of artistically preserving the totems and houses of the British Columbia Indians, Carr began a life of landladying, dog-breeding and souvenir-making. Significantly, however, her souvenirs, selling as far east as Montreal, were small pottery objects after Indian motifs and hooked rugs incorporating Indian designs. The pottery was signed EMC or more often "Klee Wyck" with a hook-shaped symbol.<sup>2</sup> Though little documentation of her contact with the Indians during this 1913-1927 period is available, she did continue her friendship with Sophie Frank in North Vancouver and visited the Cowichan and Ahousat Indian reserves on Vancouver Island.

It was not until 1927, after the success of the "North West Coast Exhibition of Indian Art" in Ottawa, which exhibited pottery and rugs as well as paintings from her 1912 northern excursion, that Carr renewed her interest in painting Indian artifacts. The following summer she travelled north. The trip, though "very interesting in some ways," was "disappointing [*sic*] in many." She missed many points of her intended itinerary. Her Skidigate friends, the "Jimmie and Louisa" who had provided her with transportation in 1912, and Emily English's husband, now managing the South Bay cannery on the Charlottes, were unable to provide boats at the height of the fishing season. Though she found an Indian willing to take her to perhaps the most interesting Indian villages on the Islands — Tanoo, Skedans and Cumshewa — it "rained *incessantly*" and rough seas prevented them getting any further than Skedans. She was, however, able to visit, for the first time, Niska villages on the Nass, though here the mosquitoes hampered her severely. On the Skeena River she was saddened to find that since her 1912 trip the Gitskan poles had "greatly deteriorated" and "the 'restored' ones have lost so much of interest and subtlety." But the Skeena region provided what was certainly the highlight of her trip — the journey to Kitwancool. Unbelievably remote in 1928, the village lying adjacent to the Kitwanga River still requires a dusty, bumpy journey, but Carr had to endure a seven-hour wagon trip to a village whose inhabitants had only recently, she heard, "chased missionaries out and drove surveyors off with axes."

It is difficult to overestimate the physical courage and heartiness of Carr on her 1928 trip. True, her passage was arranged by Eric Brown of the National Gallery through the Canadian National Railway, Marius Barbeau of the National Museum made connections for her with the manager of the Arrandale cannery at the mouth of the Nass River, and she still had contacts through her nieces, Indians and missionary friends. But she was a portly fifty-six. Travel and overnight facilities were rude or non-existent, and such amenities as insect repellent on the mosquito-infested Nass consisted of mosquito oil and her own improvised protective costume. The wonder is not that Carr's major northern excursions were terminated

by this 1928 visit; it is that she had the courage and endurance not only to undertake, but to complete her trip. Carr was, of course, aware of its arduous nature; she had, she wrote Eric Brown, "stood it remarkably well." Though she travelled the following two summers to northern Vancouver Island to paint the totems, this 1928 visit marked the end of her mission to make "as complete a collection of them as I could." After 1930 contact with the Indian was limited to day visits to reserves on lower Vancouver Island and to North Vancouver.

**I**N THE LATE 1920's when Carr first began to write of these experiences in what eventually became *Klee Wyck*, she was confronted with several difficulties. She had kept a journal of her first, 1907, northern visit, but that journey seems to have provided her with little material. For her later excursions, she had "to rely on memory." She had generally been "too buisy [*sic*] painting from dawn to dark to do more than write home." Carr "intended to use these letters later perhaps," but the sister to whom she had written "had burnt them as received." Thus when she did come to write, remembering, filling in the gaps, separating the villages, bridging the smells and the feelings with words, were things that caused her much concern. "I've been tramping round these old villages," she wrote to a friend, but "— my pickings are pretty *bumm*." Carr inserted "bits of dialogue here & there to break [the] monotony" of recording village after village. She wanted to be "true to the places as well as to the people," but found it difficult "to avoid slopping over to fill up." Old notes, like the "Story of Mrs. Russ's Grandmothers Pole at Tanuu," recorded when visiting the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1912, were probably used to "fill up."<sup>3</sup> So too was a 1929 article, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast", the last portion of which appears in "Canoe".<sup>4</sup> Because she had "sketched intensely" the places came to her "with great vividness," though early photographs of remote coastal villages taken by herself, George M. Dawson and C. F. Newcombe were also invaluable in helping her to recall the layout of many villages. Aside from notes, articles, photographs and sketches, Carr no doubt drew from her often repeated repertoire of stories about her experiences among the Indians.

To decipher which incidents in *Klee Wyck* were drawn from memory and which were a product of filling in the gaps is difficult. The authenticity of "Salt Water" may be verified by comparing the sequence of events recorded in two letters written shortly after the incident with the story, as may portions of "Greenville" and "Kitwancool". The only inconsistency in "Salt Water" is that in one of the letters she speaks of the two Indian children as the man's son and daughter; in the story they appear as his nephew and niece. On the other hand, the strict veracity of how Carr learned the meaning of "D'Sonoqua", the Kwakiutl "wild

woman of the woods" totem figure, in the story of that same name may be questioned. She had written to C. F. Newcombe in 1912 asking "the name and pronunciation and meaning of that figure," that "wild red woman with outstretched hands among the nettles." "You called it by name," she continued, "what do they mean and why erected?" In *Klee Wyck* it is the Koskimo, Tom, who explains to her the story of his big carved woman who steals children from their mothers.

Carr oscillates between fact and fabrication in naming the participants in her stories. In some cases names are made up, in others they are consciously altered. Carr probably forgot the name of the Indian, Fred McKay, who took her up to Greenville from the Arrandale cannery, so called him Sam. Mr. Walter Walker, manager of the same cannery on the Nass, becomes "the cannery boss," and the two ladies at Ucluelet, Miss Armstrong and Mrs. Swartout, "the Greater" and "the Lesser" missionary. For the most part the white man remains anonymous; the farm girl of "Cha-atl," Maria, is an exception, the seamen, Jones and Smith, of "Salt Water" less so. Her Indian characters are more often named, though sometimes altered from their life models. Sophie Frank remains Sophie, but Carr's Indian friends at Skidigate, Will and Clara Russ, whose names she would certainly have not forgotten, are referred to as Jimmie and Louisa in the five stories in which they figure. Their sons, Will and Walt, are altered to the equally alliterative Jim and Joe, while Clara's mother, the remarkable pipe-smoking Mrs. Brown, becomes Mrs. Green. The Douse family of the upper Skeena River, remain Douses in "Kitwancool," though Carr does change the chief's son Albert, to Aleck. While some changes and omissions may be attributed to lapse of memory, it is not uncommon to find that elsewhere in Carr's autobiographical writing names have been altered.

Paucity of sources and difficulty of remembering were not, however, Carr's greatest concern in recording her experiences. Having skipped her last year of "High", she felt inadequately equipped to write. To bridge the gap between "feels" and "words" would only come easier, she thought, if she "were better educated." In 1926 she had taken the Palmer Institute of Authorship's correspondence course in writing and in the summer of 1934 she enrolled in Mrs. N. de Bertrand Lugin Shaw's short story course at Victoria College. She even sent one story, "Hully-Up Paper", to the International Correspondence Criticism Service. The usefulness of such courses and criticism, however, bears no comparison to the help and encouragement that she was to receive from Flora Hamilton Burns, Ruth Humphrey and later Ira Dilworth.

For many years Flora Hamilton Burns was the only person who knew that Emily was writing. Carr asked Miss Burns to be her critic "and read or sent her manuscripts for criticism." Though she was "very shy of anyone who taught at a University," in the spring of 1936 she allowed Ruth Humphrey, an English teacher at

Victoria College, to join Burns as her critic. The degree of help and moral support offered by Miss Humphrey was so immense that when the latter left for a world tour in 1937, Carr wrote:

Ruth has gone. I did not know how blue I'd be without her. She has meant an awful lot these last months.

Emily acknowledged that both "Ruth and Flora have helped me, but their way of expressing is not my way." Nor did they "see with the same eye": "Flora wants too much sentiment," she complained, "and Ruth strips and leaves them cold and inhuman." Carr knew she was "raw", that the mechanics of her writing were weak, but somehow felt that she could turn her vice — simplicity — into a virtue. For only "if one says something ultra-honest, ultra-true, some deep realizing of life, can it make the grade, ride over the top, having surmounted mechanics." Others — Margaret Clay, Carol Pearson, Fred Housser, Eric Brown and Lawren Harris — were the recipients of her manuscripts for criticism, and Victoria College stenographer, Mrs. Chapell, and a lawyer, Oswyn Boulton, typed them before Carr taught herself. Carr accepted all this help with reserve. Her belief that truth, honesty would somehow compensate for her rawness, prohibited her from accepting, without some resentment, the help of the more sophisticated critics. When she met Ira Dilworth it was, however, a different matter. He was "a million times younger, a million times cleverer," but never made her "feel an old fool, or finished, or stupid or ignorant."

Six years prior to meeting Ira Dilworth, Carr had received rejections from *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Countryman*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Maclean's Magazine*. Her hopes soared, however, when in the spring of 1937 Ruth Humphrey showed her stories to University of British Columbia English professor, Dr. Garnett Sedgewick. Though Dr. Sedgewick had seen Carr's stories "some years back", he agreed to read them again. Carr was pleased that he "likes my stories and will be glad to write an introduction if Macmillan's [*sic*] will publish them." Dr. Sedgewick was even willing to edit them.<sup>5</sup> Despite the enthusiasm of both Mr. Ayres of Macmillan and Dr. Sedgewick, they feared the book "would not find a big appreciative audience." It was not surprising that shortly after its submission to Macmillan, Carr was notified that they would be unable even to consider acceptance for some time. Though disheartened, she continued to pursue other publishers, sending "D'Sonoqua" to the British *Blackwood's Magazine* in July. Meanwhile Carr waited for Dr. Sedgewick. It was not until February of 1938 a year later, that, after much prodding, the stories were returned with "spelling and punct." corrected. Upon receipt, Carr sent them to Ryerson Press who reported, three months later, that they had lost her only fair copy.<sup>6</sup> Her animosity towards publishers now reached its zenith: "I hate 'em all." By the fall of 1939 even

Humphrey and Burns had disappointed her and she resolved that "this is the last time I shall hand my manuscript over to others."

Though prospects for publication in the autumn of 1939 remained bleak, Carr had, in June of that year, been corresponding with Ira Dilworth regarding the possibility of having her stories read on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "One of the faithful 'listening ladies,'" Ruth Humphrey, had taken her manuscripts "to Vancouver and showed them to Dilworth" who felt they "had great quality" and "great literary appeal". As former neighbour on both Government and Simcoe streets, one-time principal of Victoria High School, University of British Columbia English professor and current regional director of the CBC in Vancouver, Dilworth would certainly have not been unknown to Carr. Though Carr and Dilworth had been in correspondence by June 1939, it was not until the winter that they began working together on her stories. The following spring she informed a friend that someone, no doubt Dilworth, was taking the stories back east to have them evaluated. It was only shortly after this that Carr received an appreciative letter from King Gordon of Toronto's Oxford University Press, the future publisher of *Klee Wyck*.

Emily Carr's dependence upon Dilworth began immediately. In July 1940 he read the stories on the CBC. In September of the same year he was "East again", and we can assume that negotiations with William Clarke of Oxford University Press were well under way. By late September Dilworth was proposing the publication of a "mixed bag *soon*" which displeased Carr who preferred the "Indian stories" and "Reminiscences of the Old Carr House" to be kept separate. This seems to have resolved itself by June 1941 when Carr reported that "Ira was East a couple of weeks back, says Clarke is *delighted* with material." The pace picked up that summer when Carr was "looking forward to the change in Vancouver & to working with Ira — the book!!!!!" Though by this time the work for Carr's second publication, *The Book of Small*, was being selected, the only thing holding the first back was a title — "Stories in Cedar" was vying with "Klee Wyck" as the title. By October *Klee Wyck* was "a real *object* at least even though only in her underwear" — the book lacked a dust jacket.

Dilworth's assistance was limited to grammatical correction and minor word changes. Carr wrote that he "never added or omitted anything without consulting me," and if he made suggestions "he made me re-word the thought myself." She came to rely on his "final judgement"; no manuscript was complete without it.

THE TWENTY-ONE "short sketches or glimpses" emerged largely out of Carr's last two northern excursions. "Tanoo", "Cumshewa", "Sailing to Yan", and "Cha-atl", were based on her 1912 visit, while "Greenville",

“Friends”, “Salt Water”, “Kitwancool”, and “Canoe” on her 1928 visit. “D’Sonoqua” and “Two Bits and a Wheel-Barrow”, are set in Koskimo villages visited in 1912, 1929 and 1930, “Juice” in the Cariboo after her six-week visit en route to Victoria from England in 1904, and “Sleep” and “Wash Mary” in her Victoria childhood. “Ucluelet” and “Century Time” are derived from her first visit to that Indian village in 1898 and in 1905 respectively. “Sophie” is a product of her friendship with Sophie Frank encompassing 1908-1930’s, while “The Blouse” and “The Stare” are difficult to place or to date.

Carr told even Dilworth that she wrote these stories while in hospital beginning in 1937. She recalled that “I have been lucky indeed to have words come to me when I had to give up the woods and sketching and prepare for long inactivity”; the writing took her “back so vividly on those sketching trips,” that she forgot being sick. Actually, they were started much earlier. “D’Sonoqua” was begun in 1934 and by June 1937 sixteen Indian stories had been posted to Dr. Sedgewick “for his reading and criticism”. Writing was not an alternative to painting for the bed-ridden artist in 1937. The verse and the short story, based closely upon her experiences, were not new forms. About twenty sketch books riddled with rhyming verse she called “jingles”, in addition to prose fragments dating from 1912, were found after her death. Writing and painting were complementary means of expression. By 1934, long before her 1937 heart attack, the creative experience of writing had become so intense that “I want to write and write longer spells than I want to paint,” because “writing is more human than painting.”

Though *Klee Wyck* may have been written for the “pure joy of reliving and travelling among the places and people” she loved, it is also didactic. She tells us that she had seen Sophie Frank drunk, that Aleck Douse was “straight from jail” and that the Indian in “Sleep” was “dirty all over”. But like the smallpox epidemic in Cha-atl and Cumshewa, the influenza in Ucluelet, the starving dogs in Greenville or the resentment on Indian Tom’s face, all was the fault of the white man. Was it not the missionary who “came and took the Indians away from their old villages and the totem poles,” and made them rely on “a store instead of . . . nature”? Was the Indian reserve across the water from Vancouver not “a different world — no hurry, no business”. Could the old Indian in Ucluelet not “speak with authority to white people” on the wild things? Was the “Lesser Missionary” not “glad when she came out of the dark forest,” while the Indians were linked to the land, slipping “in and out of their places like animals” as the tides and the seasons directed. To Carr, the Indians were in harmony with nature — the white man was not.

If Carr romanticises the Indian, she idealizes herself even more. From her first contact with the Indians in “Ucluelet”, she is heartily accepted. They tell her she has “no fear”, is not “stuck up”, and, since she knows how to laugh, they call her “Klee Wyck”. She is accepted in every village, even the hostile Kitwancool where



the Indians are “peculiar and resent white intrusion greatly.” She is throughout the doer of good deeds — removing porcupine quills from the starving dogs, offering a Bartlett pear to the thirsty Doctor Cabbage, giving her blouse to the dying Mary and writing Louisa’s and Mrs. Green’s catalogue orders. And, of course, there is her mission: “to make pictures of them [the totems], so that your young people as well as the white people will see how fine your totem poles used to be.”

Carr, the well-wisher, the saviour not of souls but of culture, is, however, humble before the Indians. In Ucluelet she “felt so young and empty standing there before the Indians”; in North Vancouver she was “Sophie’s Em’ly”. Though twenty-seven years old in Ucluelet, she writes of herself as a mere school girl of fifteen. Gesticulating conversations with the old man in Ucluelet and the old woman in Greenville, perpetuate the child-like atmosphere.

Though Carr portrays herself as a person of good deeds, encountering everyone amicably, there are occasions when the harmonization is not complete. Upon leaving Greenville only the dogs follow her to the wharf. They were “more domestic and more responsive than Indians.” “The thought of Lizzie’s tongue licking the jam-tin,” prohibits her from sharing the Douse’s food. And when sleeping in the big room with the same family, she told Eric Brown that she maintained her privacy by hanging a tent fly across her corner of the room.

Carr idealizes herself in yet another way. She diminishes her contacts with the white man by rarely mentioning him. At Toxis where Carr recalls that “visitors were rare,” there was a large white community, Ucluelet, across the bay. At the Arrandale cannery on the Nass River, she lived in a cottage and ate her meals in the mess. Although she “kept pretty much to herself,” she took tea daily with “the cannery boss” and his wife. On her trips to Alert Bay and the Queen Charlotte Islands before 1928 she always travelled in the company of a white person. Though one cannot steal from Carr the courage displayed, especially on her later trips, the idea that she lived with the Indians is exaggerated.

**A**FTER THE EXCURSIONS into remote Indian villages, after the trauma of writing and remembering, and after the failures of acceptance, *Klee Wyck* was finally published by Oxford University Press in the autumn of 1941. Despite Dr. Sedgewick’s pessimism that it would not appeal to a larger public, it did. In fact, it won the highest award for non-fiction in Canada, and has been almost continuously in print ever since.

Carr, approaching seventy, had a great sense of satisfaction over its success. She received many congratulatory letters, though one clergyman did complain about her treatment of the west coast missionaries. The most comforting aspect of the

reception, was the revenge against those Victorians, especially her sisters, who thought her a puttering eccentric. "Klee Wyck continues to sell," she wrote, "they tell me she is a Canadian Classic & is to be put into special edition for the schools." This made her "laugh and laugh because you know Aunt Betty always thought me such a *poor* example for the children at Alices [school] I smoked and I occasionally used to swear, and my manners were not up to scratch." Now to think that school children across Canada are "studying Klee Wyck makes me 'he-haw'."<sup>7</sup>

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1971; original edition, 1941), p. 8. I am indebted to Mr. Peter McNair and Mr. Allan Hoover of the Ethnology Department of the British Columbia Museum for their kind assistance on this matter.
- <sup>2</sup> This symbol could possibly be either the phonemic glottal stop or the Cree syllabary symbol for L plus a vowel, though neither seems appropriate in the context.
- <sup>3</sup> B.C. Archives, Newcombe Collection. One may compare this story with that on p. 13 of *Klee Wyck*.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare Carr, *The McGill News*, Supplement, 29 June 1929, p. 3 and Carr, *Klee Wyck*, p. 111.
- <sup>5</sup> Carr to Humphrey, 10 August [1937], in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XLI, 111; Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, p. 291. Dr. Sedgewick initially saw Carr's stories in the early 1930's when Frederick Brand, lecturer in the Mathematics Department of the University of British Columbia showed them to him.
- <sup>6</sup> It was not until January 1939 that Ryerson found and returned her manuscript.
- <sup>7</sup> Carr to Mrs. C. Pearson, n.d., copy in author's possession. The author would like to express appreciation to Fran Gundry for her stimulating comments and to the Canada Council for a grant which has made the research for this article possible.

## RIVERGRASS CONSIDERING HUMAN HABITS

*Alexandre L. Amprimoz*

when they stay home  
children grow roots  
that is why their feet  
are sore when they leave  
with new shoes

I want to follow  
the water  
along this river  
to find out  
why only old men  
like to repair  
older clocks