



EXTRAORDINARY
CANADIANS

Emily Carr
by LEWIS DESOTO



A Meeting

I didn't like Emily Carr. The paintings, that is. I knew nothing of the woman herself. I first encountered her work when I was studying painting in Vancouver at what would later be renamed the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, housed in a building within sight of the spot where she once had a studio.

When I used to visit the Vancouver Art Gallery, it seemed as though most of the rooms were given over to Carr's paintings—dark and brooding pictures of forests and totem poles. What I wanted to see instead was the new, bright, contemporary art that was being made in New York and London, not paintings made a hundred years ago by some little old lady who lived in the woods.

Some years later, a painter myself and interested in the landscape, I paid a visit to my father on Saturna Island, an hour's boat ride from Victoria. One afternoon, I took what I thought was a shortcut back from the cove and somehow missed a fork in the path. Within minutes I found myself

standing alone in the deep forest that covers most of the island.

The silence was absolute, almost a palpable physical presence. The tall, rust-coloured tree trunks of fir and cedar soared upward like the pillars of an ancient temple, and the shafts of sunlight falling down through the canopy glowed like molten gold. The swooping boughs of foliage seemed to hang in frozen waves of green—such a variety of greens.

A raven croaked overhead, with that deep hollow sound they sometimes make, and in the following silence I heard its wings like a whisper in the trees.

I sensed the vastness of this country, the emptiness of it, all the ancient days of it. I felt as if I were standing in a place where no human had stood, and none might ever stand again. I was nothing, an insignificant passing sigh on the breeze. A moment of unaccountable terror shivered over me.

An image of an Emily Carr painting came to my mind, of a forest like this one, with the same primeval grandeur. But in that painting, the dread and solitude had been subsumed into a reverent harmony, as if the silence and the awe, the leaves and the raven, and the lone human being were part of a grand creation that could be approached only with wonder and celebration. I realized how much the scene in front of me

looked like an Emily Carr painting. It was almost as if I were seeing it through her eyes. Those paintings that I used to frown at and dismiss had somehow imprinted themselves on my consciousness, in such a powerful manner that what I saw before me now was less a forest of trees and leaves and more a work of art, half nature, half Emily Carr.

Later, I went back to the art gallery and looked again at the paintings. I began to be interested in this woman, whom I really knew nothing about. Who was she? Where did she come from? How had she lived? And, above all, how had she arrived at her extraordinary paintings?

I would encounter a truly remarkable and talented woman who lived with bravado and curiosity. Not only was she physically brave and strong, but she also possessed deep psychological courage. She was not some little old lady in the woods, but a complex and contradictory individual who lived a noteworthy and varied existence of great originality, and in so doing made a part of the world visible in all its beauty and mystery.

The tourist who visits the museums, the hiker in the rain-forest, the visitor who buys a postcard of a Carr painting because it seems to contain some essence of this part of the country, the new immigrant turning the pages of a history of Canada, even the descendants of the original inhabitants of

the West Coast—all see this place with just a little bit of Emily Carr in their vision.

Emily Carr, the person, defies easy description. Painter, writer, world traveller, adventurer—she was also an original, a rebel, a free spirit, and a visionary mystic. She is one of those unique individuals, those few, who have created and articulated the symbols and images by which Canada knows itself, and through which we know ourselves.