

Emily Carr in God's Country
1871-1945

By James Reed

Orthodoxy and Insurrection, 1871-1899

Emily Carr was raised in a conventionally religious British colonial family notable for its strict religious discipline. Sabbath observance was exacting. At precisely seven o'clock on Sunday morning her father, Richard Carr, would appear at her bedside and proclaim, "Rise up! Rise Up! It's Sunday, children." In the Carr household Sunday meant a day-long regimen of family prayer, readings from the Bible, the Cranmer Prayer Book, and *Pilgrim's Progress*, together with attendance at two religious services. "Father's religion was grim and stern, Mother's gentle," Emily recalled in the *Book of Small*. "Father's operated through the Presbyterian, Mother's through the Anglican Church. *Our* religion was hybrid: on Sunday morning we were Presbyterian, Sunday evening we were Anglican." Sunday dinner, prepared the night before in conformity with the prohibition of work on the Lord's Day, was invariably "cold saddle of mutton."¹

This dual religious heritage -- Presbyterianism with its long sermon and moral rigor, and Anglicanism with its sweet Evensong and its "mild Bishop" whose favorite word was "Ah!" -- had Protestant orthodoxy as its common denominator, and it was against this that Emily perhaps inevitably rebelled as an adolescent. Though she later claimed to have resisted infant baptism -- "an unpleasant memory," she said -- her deep and ambivalent relationship to institutional religion, its shams and hypocrisies, came later, in her teenage years. It expressed itself at first in criticism of clerical foibles and social conformity and culminated in her refusal to attend church. For her "insurrection" and "insubordination" she was whipped by her father.² The distance between the two

increased when her father indelicately broached the subject of sexuality, “filling me with horror” as Emily recalled the pivotal incident five decades later. The sudden death of her father when Emily was sixteen -- her mother had died two years earlier -- left her an orphan with memories of having been “the disturbing element in the family.” Emily observed, in typically self-serving fashion, that “the others were prim, orthodox, religious.”³

Yet for all their strictness the Carr family had encouraged Emily to pursue art lessons -- a typically harmless Victorian female frivolity -- and it was art that gave the young woman a pronounced sense of calling. Later it provided a way out of religious orthodoxy and opened broad avenues to pursue a protracted and wide-ranging spiritual quest.

After the death of her parents, when her older sibling Lizzie assumed responsibility for the five orphaned Carrs, Emily escaped into her art and at length decided to escape Victoria by attending art school in San Francisco. Richard Carr, whatever his faults, had provided well for his girls in his will, so that money was not a problem. Of course a chaperone would be necessary, and one of the sisters fulfilled this role as Emily embarked on three years of study (1891-1893) at the California School of Design, which later became the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art on Nob Hill. Yet this move, while demonstrating an unusual commitment to career for a Victorian female, was well within the conventional boundaries of upper-class British individualism and eccentricity.

In her San Francisco years Emily continued her genteel rebellion but had by no means broken with religious orthodoxy. Her inbred Presbyterian morality led her to shun

the Bohemian pastimes of her fellow art students and, at considerable cost to her development as a painter, she absolutely refused to draw from the nude. In matters of religion, escaping from Victoria meant escaping the weekly obligation to attend worship service with her sisters at the Reformed Episcopal Church, an evangelical offshoot of Christchurch Cathedral (which had High Church tendencies) yet very much a church of the Establishment. In San Francisco Emily could attend church wherever she wanted, including Grace Cathedral with its “hush and holiness,” where the “incense and flower-perfume mixed and strayed up to the roof” and the liturgy was so High Church that in Victoria “they would have called it Popish.”⁴

When she returned home in 1893 to teach art, the first foray in what would be her extensive education completed, Carr instinctively resumed her on-and-off resistance to the Reformed Episcopal Church and its social demands, and by extension institutional religion generally. She would carp about the pretense and sham and hypocrisy, like any good romantic rebel and aspiring artist, but, a spotty record of church attendance aside, there is no evidence that Emily seriously questioned the basics of Christian belief, which she defined as the Bible, Christ, and prayer. In 1899, on the eve of her departure for art school in London, it is recorded that she partook of the Lord’s Supper with one of her male suitors.

At this stage her art was thoroughly orthodox -- literal, representational, thick with detail but perhaps deficient in symbol and metaphor. And so, as she would later come to think, was her Christian religion.

Nature, Indians, and Post-Impressionism, 1899-1912

Before her departure for England, Emily made the first of what would become many sketching trips to Indian villages in remote districts on Vancouver Island and elsewhere on the Northwest Coast. This was to have a profound effect on both her religious and artistic development, although it would take many years to work through the implications. The concepts with which she was grappling intuitively were simple enough -- the immanence of the divine in nature, and a general (and at least partially valid) religious sensibility even in heathen peoples -- as had long been familiar in metropolitan circles in Britain and America. But under conditions of "colonial lag," Carr had to struggle with them alone, "on the edge of nowhere."

Emily's enthusiasm for the forest and the Indian -- they were always closely associated in her mind -- was a continuation of her rebellion against Victorian society and its civilized norms. Where Victoria symbolized British civilization, Emily embraced the wilderness; where Victorian ladies and gentlemen esteemed well-manicured English gardens, she sought solace in the primeval forest; where the church ladies of Victoria sponsored Christian missions among the Indians of Vancouver Island, Emily would find enlightenment and inspiration in Indian religious art -- totem poles, community houses, masks, the big canoes -- if not necessarily in the Indians as human beings. What makes this recapitulation of the Romantic rebellion interesting is not the ideas, which are invariably derivative, but the often stunning visual images that eventually appear in Carr's watercolors and oils.

In the spring of 1899, as Emily tells the story, “the Missionary blight” had afflicted her Victorian home as part of a general malady whereby religion “was forced upon you in large, furious helps.” Lizzie, “my second sister, wanted to be a Missionary and filled our house with long-faced samples. Missionaries roosted on us during migration, others hopped in to meals while waiting for boats.” But on a fortuitous occasion one of the missionaries invited Emily to visit the mission at Ucluelet, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. There Emily proceeded by steamer, but on arrival at the mission she could scarcely keep her mind on organized religion and the Indians, for all the natural splendor, particularly “a grand balsam pine tree.” “The Missionaries’ ‘trespasses’ jumped me back from the pine tree to the Lord’s prayer just in time to ‘amen,’” but she remained transfixed by the shapely pine, “his top tapering to heaven.” So Carr began to sketch, and for her un-missionary good humor the Nootka natives called her “Klee Wyck,” the laughing one.⁵

The initial trip to Ucluelet was followed by Northern trips in 1907, when she saw her first totem poles *in situ*, in 1908 and 1909, and finally an arduous trip in 1912 to the major sites of the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida civilizations -- the high cultures of the Northwest Coast.

Just as Carr intuited by her own lights a spiritual presence in nature, her experience of the handiwork of the Indian carvers -- representing a fantastic world of animals possessing magical powers and performing heroic deeds -- suggested a deeper and perhaps darker realm. Contemplating one particular totem in a kind of trance, the much analyzed D’Somoqua totem or “wild woman of the woods,” Carr concluded, “The power I felt was not in the thing itself, but in some tremendous force behind it that the carver