

UNSETTLING ENCOUNTERS

**First Nations Imagery in the Art
of Emily Carr**

Gerta MORAY

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Emily Carr is to Canadian art what Louis Riel is to Canadian history. They both incite extreme reactions and their lives and work provide a seemingly endless field for exploration, conjecture and debate. Ignored for much of her lifetime, championed by feminists in the 1980s, vilified in the 1990s for cultural appropriation, Carr's writing and artwork have been the subject of numerous publications; yet she appears to be a far from exhausted subject. Her numerous eccentricities, her status as a marginalized, unmarried female artist in a community still dominated by late-Victorian attitudes, her fictionalized autobiographical writings and most importantly, her distinctive paintings insure our continued interest. Gerta Moray's work on Emily Carr influenced this discourse several years before the publication of the book under review. Douglas Cole's 2000 article "The Invented Indian/The Imagined Emily" in *BC Studies* relies heavily on Moray's doctoral dissertation, "Northwest Coast Culture and the Early Indian Paintings of Emily Carr, 1899-1913," completed in 1993. It is Emily Carr's early work that has been Gerta Moray's project and through careful consideration, she constructs a pointed yet compassionate window into the life and work of a woman who lived uneasily on the overlapping boundaries of gender, race and the social conventions of her time. Moray's title, *Unsettling Encounters*, is derived from the notion that Carr's encounters with the Haida, Coast Salish, Tlingit and Nuuchahnulth (among the nine North West Coast nations whose territories she painted), were deeply unsettling to her and subsequently, to her audience.

In the preface, Moray describes the book as a recontextualization project, a positioning and re-positioning of Carr within a series of “concentric circles: demographic change, missionary activity, the development of anthropology, and the collection of First Nations artifacts.” She reconstructs the attitudes and historical context in which Carr worked, particularly the oppressive policies of the Canadian government implemented through the authority of the Indian Act, which outlawed potlatches, confiscated valuable cultural property and removed children to residential schools. In addition to this careful reconstruction of social and historical context, Moray uses Carr’s early work to construct a compelling visual narrative. Dismissed by Cole as mere salvage anthropology, by others as the less interesting floundering of an artist who had yet to find her oeuvre, Moray invites the reader to take another look. Lacking the somber drama of the later works, the earlier images are more intimate portraits of village life and older abandoned sites. Not the empty lands, the colonial fantasies for which she and the Group of Seven have been critiqued, these paintings and drawings are inhabited: boys perch on war canoes, children and dogs play in the shadows of totem poles. This is an intensely human world and while Carr may have initially been invested in the notion of the “vanishing Indian,” Moray convincingly argues that she came to see that she was witnessing profound change, rather than death; the people were becoming “modern, but still Indian.” During her research, Moray endeavored to retrace Carr’s artistic journeys, travelling to most of the villages she visited and interviewing the people who still remembered her. The nature of Carr’s relationships with First Nations people has been alternately exaggerated and ridiculed as sham. Moray carefully reconstructs Carr’s complex and subtle relationships with the people who were her guides, advisors and friends. Negotiated within the constraints of social distance in an essentially racist environment, Carr’s interactions are significant on this point alone.

Moray also describes the process by which Carr’s voice and vision is endorsed as authentic, while the people whose work she celebrates became increasingly silenced. Her discussion of the early curatorial essays and journalistic response to Carr’s paintings makes for chilling reading. She provides the complete text of an editorial review of the 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*, which is particularly useful in helping the reader understand the prevalent attitudes of the day. She describes the growing enthusiasm for Carr’s work, which from its inception emphasized her role as medium for the spectral presence and “Indian feeling” of the nations of the North West Coast. However the degree to which Carr is implicated in these fictions during her lifetime remains unclear. She had a strong sense of her own artistic importance, so that her position as self-appointed spokesperson and artist was a slippery one.

The book is not without its shortcomings. Carr’s clumsy identification with the people whose vigorous creative life she celebrated in her own work and who

were the uncomfortable recipients of her “love,” is not adequately addressed. Her appropriation of First Nations imagery in her own craft production also warrants further discussion. A troubling flaw is the short description of contemporary North West Coast art that closes the book, unfortunately titled “Beyond Emily Carr.” Too brief to do justice to the vibrancy of contemporary North West Coast artistic and ceremonial practice, the device of inserting a fictionalized “what would Carr think” echoes the very paternalism that Moray has worked so hard to deconstruct. It inserts Emily Carr into an artistic and cultural revitalization in which she had absolutely no involvement, real or imagined. It would have been much better to conclude with the real incident describing Emily Carr’s gift of her art supplies to Nuu-chah-nulth artist George Clutesi, with whom she visited in the mid-1940s; or perhaps to expand on Carr’s continued posthumous role in displacing and diminishing both the historic and contemporary work of North West Coast artists. Other sections also beg for expansion. Moray’s discussion of Carr’s intimate spiritual and artistic connection with female carvings is among the most interesting in the book and the images are certainly among Carr’s most powerful. One of these, *Guyasdoms D’Sonoqua*, was chosen as the cover illustration and it can only be hoped that the too-brief analysis of Carr’s personal symbolism will be the subject of further attention by the author.

Marcia Crosby, a Tsimshian-Haida art historian and cultural critic, wrote the forward to the book and in a recent newspaper interview, Moray credited her with “intervening into the Carr literature.” She acknowledged the importance of their “extended conversations,” which no doubt ended in Crosby’s contribution to this publication. Crosby’s forward, gentler than her 1991 critique in *Vancouver Anthology*, privileges Haida memory against the better known and fictionalized memoirs constructed by Carr herself. Positioning Carr as a “guest” who only partially understood and inaccurately remembered her experiences, Crosby writes in her forward to *Unsettling Encounters* that “through Moray’s text, I recognize Carr more clearly in a context I know and understand: race relations and the colonial and patriarchal history of British Columbia and Canada.” It is this interdisciplinary merger and her respectful acknowledgement of Carr’s Aboriginal critics that forms the key strength of Moray’s work.

That this publication is sound scholarship is indisputable. Awarded a CLIO Award by the Canadian Historical Association and shortlisted for the British Columbia Award for Canadian Non-Fiction in 2007, *Unsettling Encounters* is meticulously researched, thoughtfully organized and engaging reading. The book’s lavish production is ample proof of Carr’s enduring popularity, but this is much more than a coffee-table tome. The inclusion of detailed maps and Carr’s humorous and anecdotal drawings, the juxtaposition of archival photographs of

coastal villages and people beside Carr's sketches of the same or similar subjects, provide important visual information to support Moray's arguments. The ninety-one plates, including many reproduced in colour for the first time, reveal Carr to be a sensitive observer and a motivated chronicler of one of the most pivotal periods of First Nations history and Canadian art. Together with Moray's skillfully woven text, the carefully selected illustrations make this an important contribution, not only to the literature on Emily Carr and Canadian art, but to the growing body of literature on the mutual and transformative impact of contact across cultural boundaries.

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