

CORRESPONDING INFLUENCE

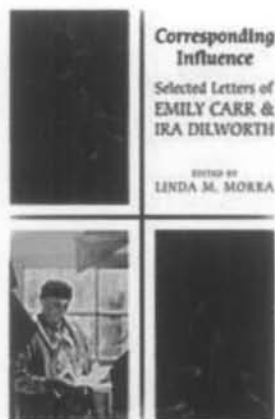
Selected letters of Emily Carr and Ira Dilworth

Edited by Linda M. MORRA

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Almost a decade ago I had hoped to refer in a lecture to *My-E-En*, a painting in the collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria by the Vancouver-based artist Vera Weatherbie (1909-77). Very little about her was readily accessible, other than frequent mentions of having been the 'muse' and lover of Frederick Varley and later the wife of Harold Mortimer-Lamb. Not surprisingly, also wanting was anything substantial about the canvas itself, possibly a depiction of a Chinese fish seller, for which Weatherbie had received the Beatrice Stone Medal in Painting in 1934. This past summer, my quest again proved to be less than satisfactory, even if the Vancouver Art Gallery has a website post on Weatherbie's *Portrait of F.H. Varley*.

There may be a particular but unknown reason why - over thirty years after Weatherbie's death and with numerous paintings in public institutions - her presence is still obscured. Far more likely, a different dynamic accounts for the silence. It is what might be called "the Emily Carr nuisance factor," something akin to a sinkhole that regularly opens up to swallow the efforts of Canadian scholars and museums, leaving many of Carr's contemporaries and near-contemporaries resting above ground on a flat surface. In a 24 April 1942 letter to Ira Dilworth, Carr observed that "a duplex person 'Artist and writer' is extra nuisance" (p.5). She was quite right: part of what has helped enslave the Canadian art world has been her outpouring of words, so many of which coalesce into wonderfully contradictory autobiographical sentences. While her art, her stories and her journals have followings among large publics, all of her words, including fragments of stories, speeches and letters, have been poked and prodded by art writers as they try to decipher the nature and place of her visual production.

Dilworth was purportedly the artist's closest friend in the last five years of her life as well as being her literary executor and co-trustee of The Emily Carr Trust of

paintings. That 1942 letter is part of a lively if sometimes mawkish correspondence between the two, part of which has been introduced, transcribed and edited very capably by Linda M. Morra in *Corresponding Influence*. This hardcover book, now also available on-line through the Canadian Publishers Collection, unleashes another torrent of words guaranteed to offer something to every Carr community. Importantly for those examining the development of her literary career, the accumulated correspondence gives Dilworth his due in terms of both the creation and editorial production of the first six Carr books published: from *Klee Wyck* in 1941 through to *The Heart of a Peacock* and *Pause, a Sketch Book* in 1953. Evidently his privileged position elicited resentment from some of her friends as can be seen in a 24 February 1943 letter from Nan Cheney to Humphrey Toms: "By the way you know [Ira] is her literary editor & nothing of hers can be printed without his permission. You can imagine the biography he will write having only known her for the last 3 years. You could do much better with all the letters you have & could collect as I have no intention of giving Ira mine."¹

In the wake of Morra's labours, Dilworth who at the time was the British Columbia Regional Director for CBC Radio, can no longer be marginalized by anyone. He was largely responsible for securing the completion of what had been until then a 'failed' *Klee Wyck*; and he may well have been the primary reason why the artist kept revising and writing as long as she did, working right up to her death on new stories, some of which have been published only recently.² He is revealed as the gentlest of editors, someone who was prepared to suggest rather than carve up, an approach much more to Carr's liking than what she saw as the aggressiveness of earlier partners like Flora Burns and Ruth Humphrey. If Dilworth remains, both in the Introduction to Morra's book and throughout the correspondence, a somewhat less developed protagonist than Carr, this is probably as it should be. The two were locked in an intense relationship in which her writing work became 'their' work. Nevertheless, given the artist's several references to the significance of CBC Radio in her era, a few more details about Dilworth's responsibilities in the now beleaguered organization would have been welcome.

For those who revel in Carr's rambunctious writing, enjoyment is provided by such passages as; "Stationary is one of the things that marks a true lady I've heard??? – no lady me – would you prefer half a dozen politenesses on real vellum? Then return unopened as threatened & I'll start a heart-to-heart correspondence with Max [Maynard] or Jack [Shadbolt] or both. So there!" (p.47). For those who continue to explore the character of Carr's friendships, there are valuable insights, with – as we have come to expect – some of her former stalwarts coming under heavy criticism. Even Lawren Harris, recognized by all as a powerful force in her life from 1927 on, suffers a little when she compares him to Dilworth: "I agree with you that he is a prince in his own right [,] a grand person [,] but he has nothing on you" (p.262). On a more positive or at the very least a less instrumental note, Dr. Ethlyn Trapp (1891-1972) who had already emerged as important to Carr in the 40s in the published

correspondence with Nan Cheney, now takes on greater prominence. In November 1941, Carr writes: "Vapor & fancy talk are brothers. Doctor Trapp is real [-] that was a real night we had that night. I can't remember a great deal of what was said but the feel of it is with me still" (p.57). Almost a year later this affection is still firmly in place: "[Dr. Trapp] had on lipstick!! Didn't know she wore it – but I love her all the same, though it did not go with her severe mannish hat" (p.160). Clearly, this accomplished and highly educated radiologist, Acting Medical Superintendent and then Acting Director of the British Columbia Cancer Institute during the war years, who much later would donate her "Klee Wyck" estate to the District of West Vancouver for an art centre, garnered and retained Carr's respect at a time when her life is often thought to have been dominated by men.³

Not necessarily constructed with art historians in mind, *Corresponding Influence* is nevertheless worth the reading for those primarily concerned with the visual. Further negotiations through what have come to be seen as troubling aspects of Carr's art are invited as we imagine, for example, the conversation during one of Dilworth's visits to Victoria that prompted his written follow-up: "You are absolutely so right about the Indians, their life and their art. I agree that those things are gone – no that is not right – they are done for all time and not to be done again. We should look upon them with great awe and respect but we should not do what so many people do [-] try to make cheap imitations of them and wallow in sentimental twaddle about them" (p.122). We also learn of Carr's willingness to try new working methods in what would be the final years of her life: "I'm trying an experiment [...] trying to write and paint the cedar sanctuary together. I would not tell another soul about it (not at this stage) – while you are feeling your way it is best not to talk of these things..." (p.91).

Moreover, and to the shock of "Small," Emily's youthful alter ego, we are told of the artist's hour-long discussion about art with a "solitary youth" who had flung his bicycle down and wandered over to interrupt her painting while she was in Mount Douglas Park (p.148). In general, the exchange of letters contains evidence of the significant place of art in the interactions between Carr and Dilworth, whether it be the playful references back and forth to *The Juice of Life* (one of the paintings she gave to the man she nicknamed "Eye"⁴), the discussions of what images to use for book covers or her requests that he select paintings and watercolours for her friends and for extensions to The Trust. Available as well are fascinating insights into the formation of The Trust, with Carr at one point describing how she was forced to insist to Lawren Harris that she be allowed to hold back some of her watercolours as a source of support for her sister and herself (p.290).

As rich in gifts as it is, Morra's book does raise one major question. Of the 440 extant letters between the two friends, only 142 have been published. Indeed, only a snippet from the "nuisance" letter of 1942 is included and used simply to underscore a point in the Introduction. What was fragmentary, repetitive in terms of content or "focused on more mundane affairs such as the weather or gardening," were eliminated, as were letters "that did not contribute to the larger narrative of Carr's

life" (p.x). Some of the decisions are frustrating for the art historian, as when a letter from Carr concerning her last major sketching trip to Mount Douglas Park in 1942 is reduced to two sentences and placed in a footnote (p.147). However, there is a larger issue at stake. Emily Carr seems destined, whether one likes it or not, to remain a focus of national art conversations in the foreseeable future. Healthy attendance figures for the recent National Gallery of Canada and Vancouver Art Gallery's *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon* traveling exhibition and fiery responses to both the exhibition and its catalogue from the likes of Maria Tippet⁵ alone attest to her continuing ability to raise temperatures. The debate about her relationship to the First Nations is edging towards its third decade of prominence and is sure to retain its vigour while other concerns, not yet imagined, emerge.

One must ask, then, what "larger narrative" could have served as an unimpeachable guide for Morra? Might not the costs of the physical publication of *Corresponding Influence* have been better directed toward financing the transcription of the complete set of Carr/Dilworth letters? Such an endeavour, in addition to providing absolute transparency, could then have been made available electronically and supplemented with negotiated, carefully interwoven links to other published Carr correspondence, of which there is a good deal. It might also have gone on to shelter new transcription projects, perhaps the most appreciated of which would be the letters from Lawren Harris, reread and treasured by Carr. None of this, of course, would automatically have offered relief for Vera Weatherbie. A systematic gathering together of Carr correspondence would merely have reduced the depth of the sinkhole, allowing scholars to get in and out of Emily Carr discussions with less exertion and perhaps leave time for other artists, for other kinds of art.

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Notes

1 Emily CARR, *Dear Nan: letters of Emily Carr, Nan Cheney, and Humphrey Toms*, ed. Doreen Walker (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), 391.

2 See Emily CARR, *This and That: The Lost Stories of Emily Carr*, ed. Ann-Lee Switzer (Victoria: Touch Wood Editions, 2007).

3 See Charlotte HACKER, *The Indomitable Lady Doctors* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1974), 226, for a brief account of Dr. Ethlyn Trapp's professional career.

4 Morra asserts (p.37) that Dilworth's *Juice of Life* is the same painting now in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, bequeathed by Trapp, who is the only owner cited in the work's provenance.

5 Maria TIPPETT, "Still Controversial, Sixty Years On," *Literary Review of Canada* 15, no.2 (March 2007): 6-7.