

EMILY CARR AND HER SISTERS

M. E. COLMAN

VICTORIA. The summer of 1899. A small girl is walking along Government Street in the hot summer sun with her parents. They are going to visit the Carrs. The four Carr sisters are among mother's most intimate friends; Betty was her bridesmaid. But for the small girl, of all the unknowns she is to meet, one is already invested with wonder and mystery: Emily. For Emily is an artist.

To adults Emily is a problem. She has already been to Art School in California, and now instead of settling down in a lady-like manner she insists on going to England! Moreover, she wants to go all by herself. Poor Edith is distracted, for though Milly is now in her late twenties and has herself earned the money for her trip, to her elder sister she still seems very young and inexperienced, while London is a wicked city, dangerous to youth and innocence.

The Carrs receive their guests on the lawn under a great maple tree. Mrs. Cridge, wife of Bishop Cridge, is there too, a gentle lady wearing a little white frilled cap.

The round table with its lace-edged cloth is set for tea, and across the sun-dappled lawn advances a sturdy young woman, her round rosy face set in rather glum lines, her mass of dark curly hair piled on her head. She wears a long full-skirted white frock of soft material that billows as she walks and is held at the waist by a bright sash. She comes carefully, for she holds in both hands a large bowl, which proves to be full of a delicious pudding called gooseberry fool.

This is Milly, the difficult one; this is Emily M. Carr, the artist.

Edith, the eldest of the sisters, is the hostess. Edith Carr was an unusual and gifted woman. Had the circumstances of her life been other than they were, she might have been as famous as the youngest sister, who owed so much to her care.

All four of the Carr sisters whom I knew were remarkably gifted. Edith had all the instincts and powers that might have made her a great painter. Elizabeth was perhaps the most intellectually brilliant of the sisters. She had a highly logical mind, and, though untrained in philosophy, a keen grasp of spiritual verities. A discussion with Betty—how she hated the nickname "Lizzie"!—was a stimulating experience. She was

one of the first Canadian women to enter the—new then—profession of physiotherapy, and did valuable work during and after the 1914-18 war at Resthaven, at that time a military hospital.

Alice, a born teacher, was patient and gentle, but a thorough Carr in strength of will and character. Perhaps the best commentary on her teaching is that many a successful business and professional man is proud to be known as one of Alice Carr's ex-pupils and still to call her friend in her old age.

When Mrs. Carr became an invalid, shortly after the birth of her youngest son, Edith, as the eldest, naturally took over from her mother. She nursed the invalid, took care of the younger ones and managed the household while still in her 'teens. Mrs. Carr's death, followed two years later by Mr. Carr's, multiplied Edith's labours and responsibilities. Appointed one of the guardians of her younger sisters, she was almost overwhelmed by the magnitude of her task. She had, however, a strong sense of duty and a vast capacity for love; so laying aside all thought of herself and her own life, she devoted all her capabilities and powers to her young sisters. Elizabeth was sensible; Alice was gentle, but difficult; stormy Emily was at once her greatest trial and her greatest joy.

That Emily and Edith should clash was inevitable—it was inherent in their natures. Both were gifted, determined, humourous, self-willed. To this similarity of character add, on the one hand, the loving anxiety of a young woman who has thrust upon her the responsibilities of a matron with an almost grown family; and, on the other, the normal rebellion of youth against authority (intensified when that authority was wielded by a sister, who in the normal course of things should have been an equal), and the intense discomfort of genius still unrecognized even by its possessor. All the makings of an explosive situation were present.

It is important to remember that Emily Carr was, all her life, to her sisters the cherished and spoiled baby of the family. For years it was difficult for them to realize that she was really grown-up, and Emily, with the normal selfishness of youth and the extraordinary storm and stress of her developing genius resented most bitterly this attitude of her sisters.

When she was in trouble, however, they never failed her. When she fell ill in England in 1902 Betty dropped all her own concerns and went at once to bring her home. Milly refused to come. It was an attitude completely bewildering to her

sisters, who asked nothing better than to coax and nurse their darling back to health.

What none of them knew, what Milly herself hardly recognized as yet, was that she was in the grip of a tremendous creative urge that obliterated every other consideration and was to whip her, drive her through pain and bitter disappointment to the culmination of her life's work—her mystic paintings of the British Columbia forest.

When in 1940 failing health made it impossible for Emily to continue living alone, both sisters took it for granted that the best rooms of Alice's cottage should be turned into a self-contained flat for Milly. Here she lived the remaining years of her life, and here Alice cared devotedly for her younger sister as long as her own health permitted. Milly was not an easy person to care for.

It was during the period of her bitterest trial that I came to know Milly Carr best—from 1917 to 1926. These were the years when she was trying to run an apartment house—at first it was planned as a women's hostel—raising bob-tailed English sheep dogs, making pottery and rag rugs in authentic Indian designs, signed "Klee-Wyk", "The Laughing One". Those were the days when she was considered—even by some of those now loudest in her praise—an eccentric, and her paintings termed simply ugly.

To me they were not ugly—they were tremendously exciting, and I spent many happy hours from time to time in Milly's attic studio. Milly was bitterly emphatic: "I'll never paint again," she declared, over and over again. She was writing then and gave me to read some of her first sketches. They impressed me immensely by the vigor of their expression and the acuteness of their observation, in spite of a lack of polish and amateurishness of technique, faults that are not observable in her published books.

Much has been said about the indifference and actual hostility with which Emily Carr's paintings were received in Victoria, and its effect upon her. I do not believe, however, that any external circumstances had power to paralyze, even for a time, the genius of Emily Carr.

It is an interesting fact that among her paintings there are no transitional works. Between styles is a great gulf—and the new style seems to owe nothing to the one that preceded it. The pleasant pictures of the pre-Paris period, colorful, conventional, might have been painted by another person altogether

from the artist who drew her inspiration from the remote Indian villages that form the subject matter of the post-Paris period.

In the final and climactic period, Emily Carr's paintings of the British Columbia forests give an almost direct interpretation of light and growth; the very essence of life palpitates on the canvasses. That is what makes them so controversial: they are exciting, disturbing, one must hate or admire, one cannot be indifferent to them.

Such work is racked from the artist's very being. The months, even the years between her great bursts of creativity were periods of tremendous and agonizing preparation. It was not the lack of appreciation, it was not the trials of the House of All Sorts, it was not the necessity of earning a living that kept her from painting. The preoccupation with her bob-tailed English sheep dogs, the pottery making, the rug weaving, all these were as superficial as her eccentricities of dress and manner. Underneath it all Emily Carr was possessed by her creative urge. She was filled with bitter disappointment and seething fury at her inability to transfer adequately to her canvas what her mind's eye saw and her heart felt.

Each succeeding style of painting and choice of subject matter show clearly not only her growing mastery of the technique of her art, but above all the growing clarity of her perception, the growing strength of her interpretation.

The last time I saw Emily Carr was some months before her death. She lay propped up in bed, gasping painfully for breath. She had before her a light piece of cardboard upon which was clipped a sheet of paper. With a pencil she was working on the final draft of a book. She had come back from her last trip to her beloved forest; she knew it was the last. She was still painting from her sketches, if only a few moments a day, whenever she had strength to reach her easel. Urgently she whispered, "I want to finish . . ."

An indomitable woman, charged with almost unbelievable vitality, generous, tremendously honest, fiery tempered, resentful, yet capable of great kindness. Emily was not only a great painter, a writer of clear and delicate perception, but a dynamic personality. Like many another creative genius she owed more than it is possible to assess to the love and devotion of her family.