

Emily Florence McNeil. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., Ltd., 1975. Pp. 72.

Emily, a collection of poems by Vancouver writer Florence McNeil, is a poetic tribute to the life and work of one of Canada's greatest painters, Emily Carr. This volume, McNeil's fifth book of poetry, traces Carr's life chronologically from her recollections as an eight-year-old girl to the last year of her life, 1945. Although it is conceived in the same vein as Margaret Atwood's reflections on the life of Susanna Moodie, McNeil does not impose her own vision on this woman's life as Atwood does in The Journals of Susanna Moodie. Ms. McNeil's achievement in this collection is not only her effective capsuling of a biography in forty-six poems, but her convincing rendering of the distinctive voice and spirit of Emily Carr that emerges in her autobiographical writings and her paintings. The first person point of view gives an autobiographical confessional tone to the poetry. The poet's own love for Carr's landscape--the mountains, seas and rain forests of the West Coast--has created an affinity with her fellow artist and thereby a sensitivity to Carr's struggle to forge her own vision of Canada on canvas.

This poetry expresses Emily Carr's development as an artist in both its form and content. The distinctive traits of

her painting--simplicity, directness, stark, powerful imagery--characterize McNeil's verse:

the Indian God is good
cherry blossoms belch from the trees
Spring is volcanic.

Each poem focuses on a condition or a situation that exemplifies a stage in Carr's gradual discovery of her own form, while common themes unify the entire collection: her attempt to come to terms with the Puritanical conditioning of her background--"the tight high collared morals" that her father attempted to instill, and the "respectable framework" of Victoria where she grew up and lived most of her life; her love of the natural world, particularly Canada's west coast woods--"sprawling untamed vastness"--which inspired her greatest paintings; and the conflict at the heart of every poem, as it was in Carr's life, between what society and tradition dictated--"the sombre rules of art"--and her own unconventional impulses and ideas. Thus, a retrospective tone of irony often pervades as the aged artist realizes her former self "a mockery of what I knew I was."

McNeil's free poetic form is diversified to reflect the particular idea embodied in each poem. In "Discoveries I," for example, the artist's endeavour to capture the essence of nature's fluidity on canvas is mirrored in the poem's struc-



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ture--images, thoughts, words are fragmented and isolated so that the effect of straining for release and expression is immanent. In another poem, "London II," the restrictive narrow-mindedness of London society which Emily found so stifling is portrayed in a rigid, chopped, linear verse form while the latter half of the poem depicts, with its sprawling, flowing stanza, the contrasting feeling of freedom and relief which she realizes in the Kew forests.

As the tone of the poems shifts from ironical to exultative, bitter, and finally mellifluous, the fluctuating highs and lows of Emily Carr's life are revealed. But this poetic voice is constantly one of a spirited woman committed to her art, whose determination is evoked in images as appropriately stark and direct as Carr's own:

and the dilettantes who anger all my
paintings
will see my own face
peering through the
leaves hostile wary
cunning as the raven
my beak ready to
tear out their
pastel coloured
minds.

The poetic qualities of Florence McNeil's verse--simplicity, directness, evocative imagery--and the authoritative voice in which the poems are written make this collection a most fitting tribute because these features are congruous with the life and work of Emily

Carr herself. Like Carr's landscapes, Emily is a distillation of the artist in another dimension. As the final poem in the book puts it:

You reflect me
there is some spirit here
and life

Melanie Murray
Fredericton, N.B.

Opportunity for Choice A GOAL FOR
WOMEN IN CANADA. Gail Cook (ed.).
Ottawa: Statistics Canada and the
C.D. Howe Institute, 1976. Pp. 217.

Although there is a great deal of published material available on various aspects of the women's movement and the status of women with respect to the economy, the polity, the society and culture we have need a book such as this one for a long time.

The editor has pulled together four excellent articles on the family, education, work and legal and policy matters around a theme presented initially in the first chapter and assessed in the final chapter. The model which Cook proposes she describes as a criterion by which we can evaluate the statistical data and also evaluate progress towards