

## *Exhibition Reviews*

**Taking Root: Canada from 1700 to 1760.** Records of Our History series. ANDRÉ VACHON assisted by VICTORIN CHABOT and ANDRÉ DESROSIERS. Mounted at the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, December 1985 to March 1986. 22 further venues across Canada 1986-90. Catalogue: Same title and authorship. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1985. xiii, 312 p. illus. ISBN 0-660-11895-5 cl. 0-660-11896-3 pa. \$34.95 cl. \$24.95 pa. Issued also in French under title *L'enracinement*.

Overheard at the PAC travelling exhibit *Taking Root: Canada from 1700 to 1760*: “My God, this is dull”; “How do you follow this thing?”; and more prosaically, “Help me, George, I can’t get up!”. In a way these three pithy comments summarize this reviewer’s impressions as well. *Taking Root...*, the second of a series of exhibitions (called dully *Records of Our History*), is intended by the PAC to be a travelling “celebration and illustration of Canada’s history” and something that “enables visitors to expand their knowledge of the past and get acquainted with the sources of their history.” It is accompanied by a book of the same name, apparently the work of André Vachon, which expands on the themes of the exhibition and provides more illustrative material. Both book and exhibit are “intended for students and the general public.”

All of this is, of course, a laudable idea. Few Canadians have any notion of what the PAC is, scarcely more English-speaking Canadians know much about New France, and very few outside Ontario and Quebec ever get the opportunity to see original records of the *ancien régime*. A handsome (although at \$35.00 relatively expensive) book to amplify the presentation is equally sensible. Too bad, then, that the execution of these fine ideas is less than successful.

Much of the problem — although not all, by any means — is a result of the limitations imposed by a travelling format. This exhibit consists entirely of reproduced documents, prints, maps, portraits, and other graphic materials arranged on beige panels which are to be followed like a cock-eyed convoy zigzagging through an undersize lake. The feeling of going in circles is underlined by the scarcity of any directional signals: it is almost impossible to determine the physical flow of images. This sense of uncertainty is compounded by the use of double panels: the top range of exhibits is eye-level for an average adult but a viewer can only read and observe the lower panels by performing a grotesque and exhausting kind of duck-walk.

Occasionally this flat, two-dimensional plane is broken by a panel that folds out like a drop-leaf table but these are few and far between. Without question, the quality of reproduction of originals is high. I have used some of the originals — or seen them at any rate — at the PAC and elsewhere and the technical staff should be congratulated for achieving such precise detail and so effectively copying subtleties in coloration and shading.

If the exhibit is something of a physical endurance test, in intellectual terms it falls far short of an acceptable grade. Do the exhibitors have the faintest idea of who is likely to view such an exhibit? This one cannot satisfy many: it is both too obtuse and too detailed for comprehension by public school children, it is too sketchy for college and university students, it is entirely incomprehensible to foreign visitors — so it must be intended for that rare individual, the average, adult Canadian. What does she find?

The exhibit focuses on the years 1700 to 1760 — the height of New France. It does not refer to the period before that which was the interest of an earlier exhibit *Dreams of Empire*. Do the exhibitors assume all have seen that earlier show? Surely some summary of French/English experience to 1700 would have made what follows with *Taking Root* more meaningful.

The display is thematic rather than chronological, and ranges from “Exploration and Discovery” to “Population and Settlement,” “Government,” “Wars,” “Economy,” “Society,” and finally “Religion.” There is a great deal of overlapping here and some confusion. Why necessarily start with “Exploration” if you are being thematic, and if you do, why not conclude the exhibit with “Wars” and the final tragic collision with Britain at Quebec? At least the viewer would then have some kind of vehicle into which to insert the thematic elements — or at least come away with his impressions fashioned in some orderly manner.

Some of the exhibits are very successful. I was pleased to see good coverage of the French presence in Acadia and Louisiana. Effective contrast is also achieved between Anglo-American and French styles in government, and the nature of the economy is well-outlined, although the exact role of agriculture could be addressed more pointedly. Much less successful, in my view, is the portrait of the military nature of New France, the frontier experience of the far-flung colony, the admittedly small cultural and intellectual life, and the Conquest itself. The question of the role of Indians, so tirelessly pursued by anthropologists, is given only two perfunctory panels and the English experience (in Nova Scotia and elsewhere) gets scarcely more attention. In short, the viewer emerges from this exhibit without a comprehensive overview.

But does the viewer gain a better appreciation of the stuff of which history is made? In a restricted way, yes — although the captions could have benefitted greatly from an explanation of how researchers employ certain documents to chronicle and analyze the past. The accompanying book is not much better in this regard: it is a generally fluid and readable *petite histoire* — and suitably francocentric. It is occasionally myopic (French victories are paraded handsomely with the final British conquest seemingly a straggling afterthought) and once in a while unintentionally hilarious (we learn, on p. 239, under “Entertainment,” that “In Canada people knew how to enjoy themselves, as they did also on Île Royale and in Louisiana.” Fancy that.).

How to improve it? It’s easier to upgrade the format than the intellectual aspect, but there is an interplay between the two. The whole exhibition could benefit from a sound slide show which could set the tone and the scene and help direct a visitor through both

the exhibit and the history of New France. Also, it would be wise to introduce a few three-dimensional objects in display cases to give more varied texture to the exhibits. A simple colour-coding of the panels to go with the themes and introducing a few arrows to indicate the flow would provide a better sense of unity. Finally, the production of a more useful short guide to the exhibit (rather than the self-congratulatory hype handed out) is essential — one that explains how documents are used as well as tells us what they are.

In sum, the PAC has missed an opportunity there. New France is a rich subject and much more than some of its parts.

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**Emily Carr: Her Later Years.** KERRY DODD. Mounted at the Emily Carr Gallery, Victoria, 20 May 1986. No catalogue.

*Emily Carr: Her Later Years* opened on May 20 at the Emily Carr Gallery in Victoria, operated by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. The news release accompanying the exhibition states that its focus is upon the achievements of Emily Carr between 1930 and 1945, when her sketching, writing, and painting activity was at its most intense. Paintings from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, the Edmonton Art Gallery, the Glenbow Museum, and the Vancouver Art Gallery have been assembled for the exhibition.

The display consists primarily of fifteen landscape paintings (three of which depict totem poles), grouped aesthetically rather than chronologically. They are labelled with titles, dates, media descriptions, and names of collectors. In glass cases beneath the paintings are vintage newspaper clippings, along with the curator's descriptions of Emily Carr's life and work, including a few extracts from the artist's writings.

The paintings exhibited are superb, most of them depicting the intensity of wind and light in the forest and the sky which, to Emily Carr, distinguished the Pacific coast from the placid landscapes that she had sketched in England as a young woman. Some of the clippings shown are also superb. A *Star Weekly* feature about the artist, published in 1928, is headlined "Some Ladies Prefer Indians"; another article about her appears in a local newspaper on the "Women's Work" page. Her courage in painting seriously and in attempting to document the culture of British Columbia's native people is easily inferred.

Along with the clippings, the textual descriptions prepared as background to the paintings contain important information. Emily Carr's relationship to an artistic community in central Canada, for instance, is noted. Unfortunately, both the clippings and the descriptions are too general in nature. There is no discussion of individual paintings, and some of the clippings actually originate outside of the dates chosen to bound the exhibition.

In addition, in spite of the reference in the news release to a "creative outpouring in sketching, writing and painting", the display is not multi-faceted. It contains neither sketches nor any of the poems, short stories, or letters which Emily Carr produced in great quantity during this period. It is disconcerting to be shown clippings about her newly-published books without being given the opportunity to see any of them in their original