Series makes the connections

NELLIE McCLUNG

By Charlotte Gray Penguin Canada, 204 pages, \$26

EMILY CARR

By Lewis DeSoto Penguin Canada, 185 pages, \$26

REVIEWED BY PAULA TODD

nce as a child I stayed the night in midwestern Canada at a wealthy collector's mansion crammed with original art – a Renoir in the foyer, a Cézanne over the fireplace, a small Rodin sculpture in the guest bedroom. But the elegant dining room was reserved for canvas after canvas by Emily Carr. "He's snatching them up because Canadians still don't realize what they're worth," noted the house-sitter.

Even Carr's new biographer, artist Lewis DeSoto, admits that at first he did not like the Victoria native's "dark and brooding pictures of forests and totem poles." Today he believes they should hang shoulder-to-shoulder with Cézanne, van Gogh and Munch in the best international galleries. If Emily Carr was - and is - so important to the world of art, to the Canadian sensibility, to our understanding of coastal landscape and people, why do we know so little about her? Or quick, if I say the name "Nellie McClung, what do you think? "An actress," guesses a young woman behind a bar in Halifax this week. In Vancouver, a man rolls his eyes, "Oh, the teetotalling suffragette ...'

Perhaps we have such a difficult time defining what our country means because we know so little about the people who made it mean something. The new Extraordinary Canadians series can help, with its promise to explore "our society's most remark-

able figures."
Nellie Letitia Mooney
McClung was an aggressive
Prohibitionist at the beginning of the last century, but
more as a pragmatist than a
prude, after she saw booze
soak up pay cheques and dignity, and drunks threaten
women and children. She was
a suffragette at the forefront
of winning Canadian women
the vote and the legal right to



Carr's work should hang shoulder-to-shoulder with Cézanne, van Gogh and Munch, biographer believes. CP

speaker, elected politician, entertainer, activist, mother, wife and bestselling author – even though she did not learn to read until she was 10.

"She kept feminism mainstream, and she set the tone and pattern for the next century of women's political activity," says seasoned biographer Charlotte Gray. Both McClung and Gray have set the bar high for women and writers alike, and this is an inspired pairing of tale and teller; kudos to commissioning editor John Ralston Saul. "What is it that makes them relevant to us so long after their deaths?" he asks.

Gray, a vigorous researcher, plunges in to deliver an analytical essay and the requisite climbing around in the family tree – where, by the way, she uncovers the fact that McClung had personal, if whispered, crises with a psychologically fragile husband and hard-drinking sons. And Gray does not shy away from the unattractive, including McClung's then-modern and now unacceptable affection for eugenics.

Lewis DeSoto, on the other hand, sketches a portrait of Emily Carr as an unknowable woman in which missing details are subsumed by sensual lessons in art and colour and texture. Without piles of primary sources, there is much we cannot reconstruct about the past, but here again Ralston Saul's clever coupling means DeSoto, also a painter and writer, can surmise what Carr may have felt while wrestling earthly perceptions from palette to canvas.

... And now, here in the great stillness on the edge of nowhere, she makes something for eternity."

This is DeSoto's strength more than biography, channelling the self-created Carr as she samples art school in San Francisco at 18 (in 1890!), grapples with finding her own post-Impressionist style at the Westminster School of Art in London, then thrills at finally seeing her pieces hang with the avant-garde at the annual Salon d'Automne at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1911. And we have yet to talk about her life on the Canadian West Coast, where she lost her parents early, bristled under the bossiness of her sister, and evolved a bold, brilliant use of shape and colour that mystified, or appalled, her audience for much of her life.

Among the events not deciphered in this slim volume is the sexual darkness that clearly haunted Carr's childhood, which may or may not have accounted for her decision to refuse marriage, and her unrelenting bouts of depression. What does emerge, though, is a unique individual who was neither bitter spinster nor weird woman, but a soul hungry for the vibrancy she sensed in native art and culture, along with the comfort of the primeval forest. Despite flagging health and the early sting of artistic rejection, Carr painted, wove, wrote, cooked, cleaned, created and nurtured her friends, including artistic soulmate Lawren Harris, one of her greatest advocates.

DeSoto and especially Gray bring us steps closer to understanding - or debating - those who left such tangible marks on our country, which is precisely the point of the Extraordinary Canadians series. These books are not definitive biography; rather, they are opportunities to deepen the relationship between Canadians of the past and Canadians of the present. May this dialogue continue, so that today's biographers themselves will be the subject of the next wave of writers. Or, as Carr wrote on the final day of her diary in 1941: Carry on, carry on, carry on.

)) Paula Todd is a Toronto writer, lawyer and investigative repor-