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## PEGI NICOL MacLEOD: A MARITIME ARTIST

PEGI NICOL MacLEOD<sup>1</sup>, artist and enthusiast extraordinary, first knew the Maritimes in 1940 when she went to Fredericton, N.B. There she met a few local people who understood and appreciated her dynamic love for painting and who were willing to help promote a cause. In New Brunswick during successive summer visits, she implanted an interest in creative painting and a love of art which has blossomed into a rich and living fullness. The story of Pegi Nicol, her activities, the way in which others co-operated with her and responded to her teaching, is a wonderful tale of what can be accomplished with the most meagre of resources. She brought into the Maritimes not any material things but rather those of the mind, and with them a real vision and freshness of spirit, a buoyancy of one older in years but with the outlook of the university generation, the age group with whom she primarily worked.

Pegi had the exuberance of perennial youth; it broke forth in her own painting. She exhibited her then most recent works at Acadia University in February, 1946, and found that they "offended the old, delighted the young". Two years later in Winnipeg she put on view some New York street vistas and studies of life in a great metropolis. Joe Plaskett, the principal of the art school there who sponsored the exhibition, said that in Winnipeg the paintings were "Fun for students, unfixed people, the best they have seen, but fury to the older folks". The artist herself remarked about her exhibition, which had then toured to several cities, that "Perhaps it has gone far enough"; she seems to have been rebuffed by criticism and for the first time was slightly discouraged, uttering a sad note which may have been a forewarning of her career's fast approaching end. The same New York paintings, when exhibited in Toronto, disturbed the older viewers. Augustus Bridle, one of Canada's better known art critics, august and somewhat aloof, perceptive but unsure, wrote that "When Toronto becomes a metropolis a sixth the size of Manhattan's big-top leviathan—as shown in Pegi Nicol's scenario . . . these pictures by

the Emily Carr of the big town will be either ten times the market price of 1947 or in the junk heaps of civilization." His instinctive sensibility felt that there was something great in the paintings, but that the conservatism of old age (for he was an elderly man) would not quite accept such free interpretations of life, since older people in every community across Canada refused to enjoy them.

It was no mere accident when Bridle linked the names of Emily Carr and Pegi Nicol, for their careers parallel each other in many respects. Older people were similarly indignant with Emily Carr's paintings. Victoria Art Club ladies habitually hung her contributions to the annual harbour-front exhibitions on the backs of the display boards. They placed their pretty, spineless flower studies in the most prominent position, for Emily's Indians and woods offended them mightily. Late in life and slightly discouraged, as Pegi Nicol may have been, Emily Carr wrote: "I am ashamed often that I have not done my bit better in Victoria, but really the Arts & Crafts Society are like a necklace of millstones round the neck of Art. I asked 8 of the ladies to tea to see my new mounted sketches last week. They sat in a row saying the most asinine things, one after another, and utterly exhausted me for days after."<sup>2</sup>

Margaret Kathleen Nichol, known universally as "Pegi Nicol", not only in the Maritimes but wherever she had friends, was born in Listowel, Ontario, in 1904. Her parents moved to the Glebe district in Ottawa while she was still very young. She was a sensitive child who began writing poetry at an early age; a parental rebuff over what they considered a trivial and foolish waste of time caused a certain estrangement which was never completely healed. She studied under Franklin Brownell, a competent and forward-looking academician at the old Ottawa Art School, and followed with a year in Montreal at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. She painted briefly in Alberta in 1927 in emulation of the Group of Seven, who ranged far and wide in Canada. Next year she was painting Indians in British Columbia. Earlier that same summer Emily Carr had sketched the Skeena River natives, but torrential rains virtually flooded her out. She wrote of her delight when Pegi had better weather. Until 1934, Pegi Nicol painted chiefly in the Ottawa district countryside. Then she moved to Toronto to continue painting, but also turned to stage designing for Hart House Theatre, and worked at store window display under Cera, the leading Canadian in this field. In Toronto there was opportunity to re-analyze long familiar "Group of Seven" paintings and to publish some critical articles on J. E. H. MacDonald. She spent much of her life in New York after her marriage in 1937 to Norman MacLeod, but she made many visits back to her beloved

Canada. Most of these were her annual summer trips to Fredericton. She died in 1949.

Pegi Nicol received honours from the recognized art world in Canada. Her paintings, however, were bought chiefly by connoisseurs, and incidentally at very low prices until shortly before her death, when sales became more frequent. She was a member of both the Canadian Group of Painters and the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour. Her works appeared in exhibitions of the Royal Canadian Academy and of the Ontario Society of Artists. Her first triumph was winning the Willingdon Art Competition in 1931. There were Pegi Nicol paintings in large Canadian exhibitions in London, New York and Brazil from 1938 to 1945. After her death, a retrospective show toured Canada under the auspices of the National Gallery of Canada.

Both Pegi Nicol and Emily Carr were women whose overwhelming interest in art forced each to strike out like dedicated pioneer missionaries, determined to instil their personal appreciation of painting into others. Peg, with her dynamic personality and vital approach, initiated the University of New Brunswick Art Centre in co-operation with Lucy Jarvis and others. Through it she foresaw New Brunswickers appreciating painting as she knew it. Her successful efforts are attested by the Centre's present vitality after nearly a quarter-century of operation. Before recounting some anecdotes related to its founding, it may be of interest to trace the pathetic attempt of Emily Carr to initiate an art promotional scheme in Victoria eight years before the Fredericton experiment. The older woman did not have the same winsome way with people.

Emily Carr, landlady of the "House of All Sorts", fed up with the continually distressing wants of her tenants, cleared them out in December, 1932; she intended to devote her life solely to her art. She continued to paint upstairs but converted her downstairs rooms into a kind of "People's Art Gallery". Her dream was not only to provide exhibition space to help local artists, but give Victoria citizens an opportunity to see "real pictures". Saturday morning she envisaged as a special day for children, while Sunday would be free for all who wished to "sit and look". A small fee on other days was intended to cover her expenses. At a meeting of local ladies, she explained how people wanted to see genuine paintings:

You would be surprised, as I have been at the Art love popping out of odd corners. The other day a negro came to my house delivering coal. I came to the door with my hand full of paint brushes. As I signed the book he said, "Gee! I envy you!" "Why?", I asked, "because I own a monkey?" For I had heard him joking with the monkey below. "No", he replied, "because you can paint. Gee! I'd love to go out to

nature and paint." Another day I came to my studio to find two men, hands shading their eyes and noses flattened against the big north window. I flew to the door, angry as a wild cat. "What do you want?" I asked them, "Don't you know it is rude to peep into people's windows?" The man, a baker, drew back—"I'm sorry", he said, "I did not realize it was rude, I do admire those pictures, and this other man likes pictures too, so I said I'd show him some." As for the old vegetable Chinaman, he never misses an opportunity to look in and show real interest. When he went home to China, I gave him a picture to take to his wife. He was much pleased, he had three to choose from, and unerringly chose the best.

Emily opened her "People's Gallery" for three days between Christmas and New Year's and found that

First day *one* came. Next day *four*. Next day *fourteen*. They were interested but Oh my! how ignorant, tho' most were people of more or less education. One old dame hoped it would go through ardently, so I said, "Well, will you become an associate member if it does?" She looked embarrassed and said, "Well, O you see I've never been much of a painter. I don't know if I can do it." When I told her she had only to pay a dollar to support it and not to exhibit, she was much relieved. Oh my, they were funny.

Support was necessary from the antagonistic Art Club members and others to make the venture a success. The Lieutenant-Governor refused patronage to such a lowly scheme and talked in terms of thousand-dollar individual donations for founding a real art gallery. By the end of January, Emily Carr, the promoter, reported that

She's dead [the Proposed People's Art Gallery]. There was a meeting two nights ago when she should have been decently buried as '*we*' (the workers) wished. But '*they*' (the 'Talkers') insisted on pricking another kick out of her so the obsequies are postponed till next week when the 'Talkers' will fail to turn up and the 'workers' will have to be corpse, parson, hearse and pallbearers all conglomerate.

Emily Carr, in spite of her natural timidity, would not be completely subdued. Four years later she told of one of the occasional activities which paralleled that of Pegi Nicol:

Sometimes I gave an evening to the College Normal or Summer School students (when I have a new bunch of summer sketches) and find them very appreciative and keen. I can only accommodate about 25 or 30 in the cottage and show my sketches on the easel in the kitchen being the large room. I mount them . . . like maps and hang them up one at a time. It is a makeshift way of exhibiting but works well and the young people go round the rooms as they like and look at the canvases and chatter over them. I wish I was better at talking. It is very difficult for me. I can't find what I want to say in books and copy it out because lots of it I don't believe and lots

I don't understand and lots doesn't interest me, and it is no good talking much about what you have not experienced.

In contrast to the virtual failure of Canada's leading woman artist to promote organized art appreciation on the Pacific, Pegi Nicol, a younger, more vigorous person, and an extrovert, had similar vision, persisted in her efforts over the years, and was much more successful in the Atlantic area. She went first to Fredericton early in the Second World War, when her husband hoped to settle there permanently. She saw a door opened to an opportunity and wrote as follows from that city in November, 1940:

I am in a very interesting situation here and would like to tell you about it. This is a very good hen without a head and in a way perhaps I could be a head for a time—an art club, drama,—I feel secretive about this but bursting with excitement because Mrs. Mackenzie [wife of the then President of the University of New Brunswick] and I have discovered a building, once an observatory, disused, small, wood-heated but smack in the middle of the campus and we'd like to start something in it. The walls are naturals for a few good reproductions of paintings—I would teach in it.

The town has beautiful relics to be preserved and an art project could centre round these and a dramatic project could centre on its historical people.

As all this is secret and depending on the reception and some very tentative ideas from the students of U.N.B., all I can ask you is, could the National Gallery suggest how to get prints or what have you.

Later that month permission was given to put experimental plans for the old Observatory into operation, and Pegi Nicol was sizing the walls with the aid of Mrs. Mackenzie. Mrs. Mackenzie organized exhibitions of prints and lectures, and even managed to bring modelling clay to Fredericton from the Deichmann Potteries on the Kingston Peninsula. Pegi wrote on December 28 that "The Observatory is finished and adorable—a perfect studio." One month later she was back in New York when her husband failed to find a Canadian position, but was delighted that "the Observatory Art Centre who's creation occurred (while I was in Canada) is now functioning with great force. I gave three distinct (but queer) lectures the week before I left Fredericton and hear that all goes well." So art came to the University of New Brunswick campus, and all that first spring "the observatory seemed to buzz along like mad".

Pegi's subsequent work in Fredericton was devoted entirely to teaching during the summer, for she left others to keep the project alive in winter. Returning next June, she found seven students awaiting her. There were two nuns, one of whom she declared had come there to paint: the other, who had been "told off to look after her", was soon the more enthusiastic of the two. The others were an Air

Force lad and four ladies. "My interest in getting all I can get", she declared, "is aroused." In mid-August she could report,

*Our class has ended with more than success. All the pictures (done by the seven students) are framed and ready for show in lovely gesso frames we did ourselves.*

We have a lot of pictures now (scattered around the campus for the students to see). Muhlstock is very generous—15, Humphrey and Marion Scott and Brandtner coming up. Big impression being made about art. Probably subversive as taking minds off war.

The summer of work was the first of a recurring pattern. Sometimes Pegi Nicol resented the drains on her time, but always a sense of values prevailed when she saw accomplishments coming out of it. She declared in 1942 that "I won't teach again. I get nothing painted. [But she did teach again many times.] It is an interesting class however. Miss Beals from Wolfville and some nice teachers. Great fun at the Experimental farm drawing animals."

By 1943 seven different students at the Centre were busily painting abstractions. War clouds were even darker, and Pegi had her first close association with the servicemen stationed at the University. She wrote to Ottawa that she had been encouraging them to draw and sent along a selection of their sketches: "I'm sending you these sailor boy's drawings to give you an idea of what I did at the Art Centre (UNB) this summer. There are 60 "naval ratings" stationed here for a radio course. Five of them come from 4 to 6 every day for the past month and *enjoyed* it. This was apart from the normal summer course of 6 weeks which was conducted with *éclat*." The word "enjoyed", which she had underlined, is the key to her outlook in painting. It is remarkable that, throughout all of Pegi Nicol's contact with the art world, the sense of enjoyment, of bursting life, seems to be always uppermost; she found continual pleasure in creativity and accomplishment.

The campus crusade for more art continued in 1944. Pegi was hunting for large paintings to hang on bare university walls: "The space is colossal; the need is colossal!" She was searching for canvas on which CWACs newly stationed on the campus could paint. Enrolment for her classes that year was so large that the "colossal" drafting room with its equipment was turned into a studio and the observatory reserved exclusively for exhibitions. There was a different group of sailors, some of whom she sketched herself. While teaching painting to the CWACs, she noted one "raving beauty" whom she wanted to paint. She wrote from her room in the Lady Beaverbrook residence that

. . . as to art this spot is barren tho' so lovely to see. I had my class in a field where

grows every fern, every tree and flower of all the county, and from it one sees several miles of Saint John Valley.

I've inaugurated tea at 4 in the studio and with such can influence a good fifty teachers who haven't seemed to meet much painting. I have six CWACs twice per week, and they are more than keen.

The National Gallery arranged a grant to pay her expenses in Ottawa during the autumn to paint service women in their wartime barracks; it is a remarkable series of sketches of impetuous flowing line, brilliant colours, energetic splashing; she was always attempting to transmit to paper the emotions she felt as she looked at young people in the somewhat uninhibited wartime environment.

War was ending in 1945, and the many "repats" were beginning to come into the summer school at the University of New Brunswick. Pegi said that

They've settled in and I can't tell who is who but one airman had ten lessons from me. The returned man is subject too. [She had just finished a huge canvas of sailors eating in the dining room of the Lady Beaverbrook residence.] I'm glad that you don't find my work indecent. Neither do I, also my work *here* is *good* work. I know that now for I really give them the goods. I have 25 people and teach nights too.

The Mackenzies left the President's house that year, but she reported favourably on their replacements: "The Greggs are much loved and very helpful to me. A trench is being dug and water coming into my building (the observatory) after a 5 year wait."

She reported 1946 as a year when "I rapidly lose interest although I have 29 rather good students but not painting makes me quite unhappy." The important thing was that the Art Centre was by then a living institution, and when Pegi felt no longer the urge to carry on, she turned over part of her activity to that equally great enthusiast, now living in Nova Scotia, who had done so much for art promotion herself in the university, to "Lucy Jarvis who is very individualistic but who has the liveliest beehive of an art centre there is."

Two other facets of Pegi Nicol's New Brunswick activities deserve mention. A well-told story describes how Violet Gillett of Andover took her to tea at the Woodstock Vocational School, and how, before leaving that same afternoon, Pegi had resolved to paint a mural on the bare walls. The idea excited her. Only a few days later, on August 19, 1941, she wrote: "The Woodstock mural is a design on paper (beautiful I think!) A raging epidemic makes me want to do it on canvas. Have you any books on mural painting in oil?" In the interim of a few days, she had developed and roughly sketched out, with her characteristic speed and impetuosity, an ambitious plan illustrating the history of the school, showing its founder,

various teaching programme activities, and including a philosophical symbol of life's fulness for New Brunswick youth. The mural was completed in a few days after the next year's summer teaching assignment had been completed. She offered originally to paint it for bed, board, and colours; actually the school compensated her with lengths of tweed woven in school classes. And the use to which she put the tweed? That winter in New York just after Pearl Harbour, she wrote: "Our fates being in abeyance, I am doing a sign for Mike the Tailor in return for having him make me a new suit (yes, tweed from New Brunswick)".

Another New Brunswick dream, one for which time was insufficient to carry to fruitful completion, was Pegi Nicol's plan to assist in improving local handicraft design. The same year that the Woodstock mural was painted, she created hooked-rug designs using local motifs. Madge Smith, her great Fredericton ally, who was equally interested in local handicrafts, sent a rug to Ottawa for examination:

Am sending separately the hooked rug which Pegi has designed and I have had made up by one of our local farmer folk who seems to be able to interpret her designs beautifully. This is one of a series of mats—a good many with floral design—that we are having made. Later will try for larger mats when the right hooker ladies can be found and wool is more plentiful."

Emily Carr had applied local designs to handicraft. She used them on pottery which she made herself, as seems more appropriate to her introspective character. In contrast, Pegi Nicol, the extrovert, always worked for the other man. Contacts then made with various commercial firms came to nothing. She revived the idea after the war, planning new rug designs in her New York apartment and declaring that she had "some scorchers" up her sleeve. Her death came too soon for her plans to be brought to a practical conclusion.

Examining the achievement of Pegi Nicol in its widest sense, one must conclude that her own paintings were probably her chief contribution to Canadian culture. They go through a remarkable metamorphosis during the two decades of her creative painting career. She grew up steeped in the "Group of Seven" tradition, that of artists who rendered the Laurentian shield and the Canadian northland in clear bright colours and stylized pattern, devoid of the human form; such painting came to be recognized as symbolizing great rugged Canada, "the true north strong and free". Many of Pegi Nicol's early works were Gatineau River landscapes painted in this same spirit; her Willingdon Award painting of 1931 shows a river bend with log drive and rolling hills, all carefully worked out as to design, but overlaid with a mosaic of curved brush strokes which betrays an



emotional force that cannot be quite suppressed into any rationalized and stylized pattern. The subject matter is similar to that which Tom Thomson or Lawren Harris might have used. But Pegi Nicol's inner fire and feelings towards life gradually asserted themselves, and changes were certain to result. She felt a throb within her and about her; in haste to transmit her fleeting vision to canvas, she adopted a calligraphic style of pulsating, flowing line, used fresh and vivid colours laid on side by side, expressing momentary and fleeting impressions. When in later years she painted an occasional pure landscape, the land heaves and throbs, not with the force of primeval cataclysm but rather with the surging growth within it.

Emily Carr was moved similarly in the presence of nature and wrote a paragraph which might equally have been written by Pegi Nicol. It does much to lay bare the artists' inner feelings in the presence of nature and the vision which prompts the artists' paintings. Emily Carr said of her landscapes:

One night I had a dream of greenery, I never attacked the painting of growing foliage quite the same after that dream I think; growing foliage had become something different to me. In my dream I saw a wooded hillside, an ordinary slope such as one might see along any roadside, tree-covered, normal, no particular pattern or design to catch an artist's eye were he seeing subject matter. But in my dream that hillside suddenly lived—weighted with sap, burning green in every leaf, every scrap of it vital.

Emily Carr spoke on other occasions about the vitality of the "bigness of nature" and of how she tried to catch such a feeling, and again of how she "clung to earth and her dear shapes, her density, her herbage, her juice. I wanted her volume and I wanted to hear her throb." And as an old woman after a heart attack when she went out again to paint the woods, her joy at being loose in them once more was terrific; and when she went at things as she had done before, in her kickish way, she was like a pricked balloon.

Pegi Nicol was completely intolerant of mediocrity in painting. She felt instinctively when a style had become dry and arid. By the mid 1930's she realized that followers of the Group of Seven were repeating conventions without developing or working out their own personal reactions to life and were mere shadows in the artistic scene. She echoed these thoughts in commenting on the Canadian Water Colour Society show, where many of the second generation of the landscape group exhibited:

The water colour show is the crime of the century, worse than the O.S.A. because it is more competent, neater and neater. So neat it makes your hair curl. You can see them all putting on the washes through a thing like a gasket in a car, neatly and with much labour, and then sighing heavily and daring to call it a water-colour.

No one, however, who loved people as did Pegi Nicol, was able to paint such pictures, dry stylistically and dry because man was absent. She was not only a humanist in her relations with others; human qualities flowed into her canvas through the figures which she introduced. The use of the figure began in a small way when she painted children gardening in vacant lots near her Ottawa home. Illustrating French Canadian folk tales helped the process. Her Toronto theatre sets were designed as backgrounds which were meaningless unless peopled by actors. The tendency to use man as a theme increased throughout the war years in her compositions of Canadian servicemen and women. There were busy market scenes around the Fredericton City Hall, and she painted the life in old Saint John. The whole trend of development culminated in New York when, surrounded by mass humanity on every side, she built up compositions purely of moving figures. She painted the local "characters" of the block, the gossips, the iceman and the messenger, people celebrating festivals of weddings and thanksgivings, the contemplative faces at tenement windows, and the crowds in the street below which formed a ballet of everlasting interest. Men play ball, children skip, the string band goes down the shady side of the pavement, and there is a riotous celebration on V-J day. Here lies Pegi Nicol's unique contribution to Canadian painting. She pioneered in going beyond the lonely Canadian landscape to use life as a motif. She belonged to the Canadian Group of Painters, and to the same generation as Paraskeva Clark, Carl Schaeffer, George Pepper, Kathleen Daly, Charles Comfort, and Will Ogilvie. None made more than a tentative attempt to do what she did, for she alone painted live beings. There is something very human in all her paintings, even those of horses in the field, pigeons, or the pig suckling her young.

Pegi Nicol's paintings are among the finest examples of romanticism in modern Canadian painting. Her paintings were set down for the sheer joy of a vivid recording of her personal feelings. She was profoundly moved by the beauty of her little daughter Jane; for weeks she drew her every day. Robert Ayre wrote of Pegi Nicol, at the time of her death, in words that sum up her painting and enunciate her romanticism:

Like herself, her paintings are alive all over. She animated the whole surface with impetuous drawing. Whether in water colour or oils, her works are like cartoons, painted with a large and generous gesture. She seemed to be always in a hurry. She had to catch life alive and get it down, alive, before it changed. Cutting great swathes out of the walls of life, she shows it to us in teeming disorder. Sometimes . . . she paused long enough to build a composition and she could compose, but it was urgent, joyous life she wanted and the fun she got out of life lives after her.

Pegi Nicol was much loved in Fredericton. One Maritimer, in her own quiet and sincere way, paid tribute to her when she said, in 1942, "It's wonderful for us to have such a grand artist and personality in our midst." But there is a saying about those whom the gods love. In December, 1948, Pegi said that she had been out of combat for two months but was now back at work: "My troubles are over . . . . but . . . . I am painting so much that the canvas problem drives me mad. Who ever had enough! ! ! ! My own standards don't allow me to ever be satisfied. . . ." A letter from Fredericton written on February 15, 1949, expressed the feelings of many students, friends, and admirers:

I am sending to you a clipping from yesterday's local newspaper, the Daily Gleaner—telling of the death of *Pegi Nicol MacLeod*. Pegi has been a most valuable and kind friend to me and her energy and interest in promoting many creative activities in this community seemed tireless. We will greatly miss her annual visits to the summer school here. She was such an inspiration to her students and the many friends she met. Pegi's help and friendship I have been privileged to enjoy.

#### NOTES

1. Born Pegi Nichol, she changed the spelling during adult life to "Nicol".
2. This and other extracts from letters by Pegi Nicol and Emily Carr are taken from many which were mailed to officials of the National Gallery of Canada.