

## **Euphemia Betty McNaught 1901-2002** **Pioneer Artist of the Peace**

By Catherine McLaughlin © 2005

**Fourth Place:** Wondrous Western Women Story Contest to Celebrate Alberta's Centennial  
Famous 5 Foundation ([www.famous5.org](http://www.famous5.org)) and Light Hearted Concepts ([www.lightheartedconcepts.com](http://www.lightheartedconcepts.com))

Dear Betty,

Yesterday we were at the lake for a day of art-making at the Third Annual McNaught Festival. Your friends said that when they looked up from their sketchbooks they expected to see you, sitting on the high-backed bench by the fire.

My teachers are your former students. We learned to make and use reed pens the way Arthur Lismer taught you. I like the pen which was cut from a slim, straight willow branch. Reed pen was one of your favourite mediums. Maybe you enjoyed the way it feels, a little wild and rough.

You studied at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, taught by members of the Group of Seven, especially Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald. An excellent sculptor, on your return to Alberta in 1929 you found that there wasn't much call for monuments.

Your college essay about life in the Peace River Country and travel on the Edson Trail hints that, even then, you understood the path you were to take. "But above all, there lies a country fresh from the dawn, pulsating with life and colour, just awaiting the painter's brush." (Betty McNaught)

Edson Trail Days, tempera, 1927: The child wears a red dress; the mother, sky blue. Oxen muscles strain as they pull the wagon over rough corduroy trail. The land is luminous, welcoming. In 1912 you walked in on that Trail with your family. Just 10 years old, you were excited by the journey and sketched along the way, using whatever material was at hand. Throughout your long life your family encouraged and supported your art. In turn, you were devoted to family, friends, community.

Trees Where The Trail Divides, reed pen, 1975: Through an economy of lines you show us beauty where, perhaps, there is none apparent or exceptional. The bold curve of tree boughs is, for me, one of your signatures.

You produced a large body of work, not surprising considering you were only three when you first sketched, and you still painted and sketched just weeks before you died, at 100. Much of your work preserved this region's heritage: schools, churches,

main streets, homesteads, rivers and lakes, animals and people. Many important awards acknowledged your achievement and your work hangs in the National Gallery and countless other public and private buildings.

But even more important than the work that you produced is the person who you were. You taught the first art classes in the region and helped form and sustain local art clubs.

Teaching was deeply satisfying for you as you helped others believe that they, too, could make art and appreciate art and culture. Your students learned to see in a new way, to express themselves creatively. And you modeled an artist's life. You made it okay to be an artist.

You were fearless, on the road for 3 summers in the 1940s with Evy McBryan to paint and document the building of the Alaska Highway during the war. They suspected you of spying when you set up your easels on a hilltop overlooking the military encampment. And they accused you of being 'camp followers'! How you must have laughed. But I wasn't there.

I met you once though, at your home. We tried to plan a sketching trip. I said that I would photograph you and the other artists. You replied, "We all sketch!" You left us before we could take that trip but soon after your passing, when I saw beginner drawing classes advertised, I enrolled, for reasons you may understand better than I. That first class was followed by others where I learned the joy of seeing more fully as I make art.

You felt a high duty to give back, to encourage. Later, even a simple cup of tea with you was an occasion as you continued to extend the traditional McNaught hospitality. Towards the end, did you wonder what you would do when you could no longer paint? When the last dab of oils was washed from your hands? Not even a bit of paint on your sleeve. Did you remember the feel of the brush and pen, scent of the oils and ink, new canvas waiting?

You could have had the world. But you chose the Peace. Was it the light that seduced you? Your paintings are luminous.

In your last years you painted from memory, your mind full of images: Nose Mountain, McNaught Lake, paths through spruce and poplar on the farm, your beloved horses. You saw it all clearly. It was always the land.

You could have had the world. But you chose us. You made your mark on us, then traced it, like a trail, through the Peace.

