

Maud Lewis

By Philip A. Baer, MDCM, FRCPC, FACR

Twice a year, the CRAJ Editorial Board meets and brainstorms regarding ideas for future themes and individual articles. Fortunately, we have more good suggestions than room to print them for the foreseeable future. Of course, some come to fruition and others languish.

One of the laggards was an article on the Canadian folk art painter Maud Lewis (1903-1970). A great suggestion, and at various times we had leads to people who knew people who had known her and could write about her remarkable life, overcoming the burden of juvenile inflammatory arthritis and a life of material deprivation to produce art of remarkable depth and beauty. However, nothing ever was produced.

Recently, an opportunity to correct this deficiency presented itself. A new movie about Maud Lewis' life debuted in Canada in the autumn of 2016 at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). The film, *Maudie*, was directed by Aisling Walsh, and stars Sally Hawkins as Maud, and Ethan Hawke as Everett Lewis, her husband. Newfoundland substitutes for Nova Scotia, where Maud Lewis lived her entire life in the counties of Yarmouth and Digby. She had learned to paint from her mother and was largely self-taught. After her parents died, her brother made little provision for her, and she ended up living unhappily with her aunt. Eventually, she found work as a live-in housekeeper for Everett Lewis, a local fisherman. They married soon after and lived in a tiny house with no indoor plumbing or other conveniences. Maud Lewis began painting the interior and exterior surfaces of the house, as well as postcards and small paintings which she sold to passersby for \$2-5. Her difficulties with the physical aspects of painting are reminiscent of those of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis (RA) during the last 25 years of his life. She painted mainly from memory, focusing on scenes from her childhood in Nova Scotia, often featuring flowers, boats, animals and the sea. Her art style has been compared to Grandma Moses, the American folk art painter. Late in life, she was discovered by the CBC and other media, and two of her paintings were purchased by the Nixon White House. She died of pneumonia and lung disease, likely related to exposure to fumes from paint and a wood-burning stove.

While Maud Lewis never sold a painting for more than \$10 during her life, her larger works now sell for \$10-20,000. With the popularity of *Maudie*, the painting *Portrait of Eddie Barnes and Ed Murphy, Lobster Fishermen, Bay View, N.S.*, found in a thrift shop, was auctioned in the



spring of 2017 with bids exceeding \$125,000. Her house has been restored and is now on display at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax.

The movie is evocatively filmed, with moving performances by both leads. I highly recommend it, either in theatres, during a flight, or via online download or streaming.

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