

Bestsellers in the backwoods: a Canadian tale

Susanna Rustin reads the captivating double-biography of two English sisters who became both writers and New World pioneers

SISTERS IN THE WILDERNESS

by Charlotte Gray

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Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill emigrated from England to Upper Canada – now Ontario, then one of the five colonies of British North America – in 1832. The year is remarkable in British history for the Great Reform Bill extending the franchise; that it also marked the peak of emigration to Canada is less widely known. But British colonial history is full of such holes, and it is one of the many virtues of Charlotte Gray's captivating double-biography that she succeeds in knitting the Canadian experiences of the emigrant sisters, and their brother Sam Strickland, into the very English lives of the Stricklands who remained at home.

If Susanna and Catharine, brought up in a large, respectable Suffolk family fallen on hard times, were hardly typical characters – Gray compares their household's bookish atmosphere to that of Jane Austen's childhood, while Susanna self-consciously likened herself to the Brontës – neither was their situation unique. The economic downturn which followed the Napoleonic wars had placed many families in difficulties; while the Stricklands struggled not to slip down the social pecking order, others lost homes and farms. But when first Susanna, and then

Catharine, married pensioned-off officers without prospects, both were persuaded to quit their lives of quiet desperation – John Moodie punned that he was “Suffolkating” in Southwold – and head for the New World.

The story of the Atlantic crossing, the revelations of arrival amid sickness and squalor, and the shocking hardship of the colonists' first years is the stuff of pioneering legend. After an unhappy start in Hamilton township, the Moodies



Fiercely outspoken: Susanna Moodie

followed the Traills north to Peterborough, where Sam Strickland was already comfortably established. Under his guidance both couples built log houses and set about the back-breaking business of clearing their land.

These were the best of times, according to Gray's account. The sisters were content in each other's company, and Gray paints a fairytale picture of the Moodie children

running along the path through the woods to their aunt's. Here, on an excursion to Stony Lake, nature offered itself to Susanna as a Romantic epiphany – “what a magnificent scene of wild and lonely grandeur burst upon us”, she would write later – while the local Chippewa Indians made helpful and interesting neighbours.

That Thomas Traill was painfully ill-suited to the great outdoors became obvious, however, as he sank into depression. Catharine soldiered on, producing her bestselling settlers' manual *The Backwoods of Canada* in 1836. But the income from her writing was not enough to keep them going, and in 1839 Susanna was the last of the group to leave the “green prison” that the wilderness had become.

Politics and publishing dominate the next phase of the Moodies' history, while the debt-ridden Traills were headed for ruin. Once established in Belleville, Susanna pursued her writing career with vigour, contributing to the new Canadian periodicals and editing *The Victoria Magazine* with her husband. But John's job as sheriff was fraught with difficulty. The town's ruling clique of Anglican Tories and its fiercely partisan Orange Lodge took against him, suspecting him of liberal sympathies, and he had constantly to guard against these enemies.

Back in England, Susanna had described “the fatal obey” of the marriage service. “My blue stockings, since I became a wife, have turned so pale that I think they will soon be quite white,” she quipped after her wedding. But in John

she had found a true life partner, who supported her ambitions and fulfilled her needs. The Traill marriage was less successful – Gray portrays Thomas as clinically depressed – but Catharine's affectionate mothering earned her the devotion of her children.

Susanna's other relationships were more awkward. Gray celebrates the love between the sisters without smoothing over its rough edges, and suggests that the



Heroic survivor: Catharine Parr Traill

Moodie children may have felt excluded by their parents' passionate bond. But Susanna's falling-out with her formidable elder sister Agnes is more interesting historically, since this was a matter of politics as well as personality.

A prolific and celebrated royal biographer, Agnes Strickland was the epitome of Victorian snobbery. She quarrelled with Susanna over the publication of *Roughing it in*

the Bush (1852), the lively and honest record of her early years in Upper Canada that was Mrs Moodie's best book. As a new immigrant, Susanna had been appalled by the lack of a clearly defined social hierarchy in the colony. Over time, her attitudes softened, and in *Roughing It* she adopted a fresh and more democratic Canadian voice.

But if Agnes Strickland rejected “that disgusting book” for its tasteless betrayal of English convention, Canadian literature would take the author of *Roughing It* to its heart. In an awkward preface that her book would have been better off without, Charlotte Gray pays tribute to the authors – Margaret Atwood among them – who got to Susanna Moodie's story first. Mrs Traill has remained a shadier figure, and Gray's most original contribution is a fine final section about Catharine's botanical research. “No aspect of the Strickland sisters' achievements has been more neglected than Catharine's interest in natural history,” she explains in a note.

Placid, stoical Catharine continued publishing her notes on the native flora into her 90s. Before her death an appeal went out on behalf of “the oldest living author in the British Empire”. She makes a picturesque figure, this survivor, if a less obvious heroine than her outspoken sister. But it is as a pair that Gray's book asks us to remember them, and to this end she offers a final tableau: two grand white-haired widows, sitting side by side on their nephews' steamer – bound for Stony Lake, and a place in literary history.