

A simple tribute of affection

MARK ABLEY

Charlotte Gray

SISTERS IN THE WILDERNESS

The lives of Susanna Moodie and

Catharine Parr Traill

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Like many Canadians, I discovered Susanna Moodie through the dry, polemical voice of Margaret Atwood. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, her third volume of poetry, Atwood used Victorian motifs to shed light on modern concerns: "Whether the wilderness is / real or not / depends on who lives there." It was a bravura performance. But it obscured some complex, unexpected truths about her nineteenth-century original. As Charlotte Gray writes in this fine and astringent book, "Atwood's stark depiction of Susanna as hopelessly torn between English gentility and pioneer pragmatism has distorted all subsequent discussion . . .".

Sisters in the Wilderness is, on one level, an attempt to see Susanna Moodie without the powerful intervening lens of Margaret Atwood. Susanna Strickland, as she was until marriage, grew up in Suffolk, the youngest of six daughters in a family struggling to maintain its place among the landed gentry on not quite enough money. (Jane Austen was all too familiar with the type.) "It was an extraordinarily intense family", Gray writes, "[the sisters] had all read more by the age of ten than most girls of their era and class read in a lifetime. Of the six sisters, five would become published authors." Susanna was closest in age and affinity to Catharine, who was born in 1802 and saw her first book published at sixteen. After their father died in near-bankruptcy, writing became not just a pleasure but a way for the young women to remain solvent. When Susanna fell head over heels for an Orkney half-pay officer named John Moodie, she soon called off the engagement, fearful that marriage would ruin

her blossoming career.

Moodie won her heart again – their relationship was always a passionate one – but if he was good at love, he was bad at business, and had no prospects in Britain. He was also a writer of sorts: the author of such forgotten tomes as *Ten Years in South Africa, Including a Particular Description of the Wild Sports*. Susanna hated slavery and had little desire to shoot big game; so, in 1832, instead of sailing back to the Cape, Moodie led his wife and young family to the wilds of Upper Canada (now rural Ontario). For Susanna, the primitive conditions were an unimaginable fall from grace. She battled to maintain her sense of propriety in a land where class distinctions had little meaning. She also struggled, against all odds, to remain a writer in a colony devoid of literature. *Roughing It in the Bush*, a vivid account of her first years in Canada, came out in London in 1852; it was an immediate success.

John Moodie had an old friend named Thomas Traill, another Orkneyman with a small military pension. And after the Moodies

had married, Traill wooed Catharine Strickland. In 1832 they, too, emigrated to Upper Canada. But where Moodie was exuberant, Traill was introspective. A man with a scholar's temperament, he was desperately unsuited to the life of a pioneer, and no wiser with money than his friend. Traill spent the last twenty-seven years of his life in Canada, many of them miserable. Catharine bore him nine children – most of whom survived into adulthood, no thanks to their father. As well as raising the family, running the home and growing most of the food, she kept on writing. Books such as *The Backwoods of Canada* and *The Canadian Settler's Guide* were both useful and lively; even so, they barely kept the wolf from her door.

Gray beautifully catches the tensions arising from the sisters' emigration by outlining their difficult relationship – conducted, over four decades, entirely by letter – with their famous sister Agnes Strickland, who wrote many gushing biographies of queens and princesses. Agnes sent much-needed money, supplies and news about London publishers. Yet she failed to grasp what her sisters faced in Canada, giving them useless advice on what they should accomplish in their "free time". She was also a determined social climber, and when Susanna dedicated *Roughing It in the Bush* to her as "a simple Tribute of Affection", she was horrified. "While Agnes had stayed at Chatsworth," Gray explains, "Susanna had lived in a pigsty. Susanna had written pages about tasks that no lady would be interested in, let alone perform: making sugar from maple trees, milking cows, digging potatoes." Twenty-two years later, Agnes was found to have cut

Susanna out of her will.

Gray, herself an immigrant from England, has achieved a rare balance in this book. She seems to have no axes to grind: she does not use England to bash Canada, Canada to bash England, or one sister to bash another. Her writing is crisp but not lavish; her insights are sharp but seldom extraordinary. What distinguishes this book is – a most enviable quality in any biography – a superb trustworthiness. That trust is born out of intelligence and sympathy alike. Even when Gray plainly disapproves of her subjects' behaviour (Susanna's view of Jews and Irishmen, for example, was downright racist), she puts that behaviour in the context of its time and place. If, as I suspect, she grew to prefer Catharine to her better-known sister, Gray never makes that preference overt.

Catharine's remarkable strength was balanced by an equally remarkable sweetness. In certain ways she much resembles a Canadian writer of a later generation: Lucy Maud Montgomery, the author of the popular *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* series. Both women were committed writers years before they became wives and mothers. Both struggled to maintain their delight in nature and faith in humanity under conditions of middle-aged distress. Both sometimes felt exiled in Ontario. Above all, both married weak, impractical men prone to severe depression. Lucy Maud finally sank into extreme melancholy herself. But Catharine outlived her sad husband and several of her children, becoming fêted as "the oldest living author in Her Majesty's dominion" and achieving an admirable serenity in the face of physical ailments and endless financial worries. In 1818, she had a small book for children published in London; in 1895, she had a small book for children published in Toronto. Four years later, she died in her sleep.