

# IN SEARCH OF AGNES STRICKLAND'S SISTERS

*Michael Peterman*

**I**N 1978, WITH VERY LITTLE EXPERIENCE in the use of archival resources, I began a sabbatical project — to compile “complete” (which is to say, as complete as possible) bibliographies of the writings of Susanna Moodie and her elder sister, Catharine Parr Traill. The suggestion came from Gordon Roper, a senior colleague at Trent University, who was convinced that there was much of value to be learned from a comprehensive listing of all of Moodie’s and Traill’s books in their various editions and of their respective contributions to periodicals particularly in Canada, the United States, and their native England. For my own part, in discussing Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) with undergraduates on the banks of the Otonabee, that definitive river in the pioneering and immigrant experiences of the Moodies and the Traills, I had already become something of an imaginative participant in their adventures and struggles. That Moodie’s “fierce, impetuous” river had become by then Margaret Laurence’s river that “flowed both ways” added a piquancy to the identificative element.

Like many readers of *Roughing It in the Bush* and *The Backwoods of Canada*, I wondered about the historical accuracy of these texts. Where did fact end and fiction or elaboration begin? What important personal detail and background data did the respective narratives ignore or fail to provide? To what extent could the two narratives be seen to be interconnected? How did these narratives relate to other writing they undertook during these years and to their earlier writing in England? How, too, did they come to be published and how much authorial control did they exercise in the process of publication? At the same time, I was particularly concerned about the distorting effects created by the edited versions of *Roughing It in the Bush* and *The Backwoods of Canada* then available to students. Clara Thomas’s *Backwoods* edition not only cut out much original textual material but included two chapters written by Traill *after* the 1836 publication. Carl Klinck’s *Roughing It* had been stripped of much of its Otonabee essence, its balance and flavour dramatically altered by those excisions. Faced with the publisher’s stipulations about length, Klinck, like Thomas, had to make choices. The inadvertent effect was, in the latter instance, to remove much of the bush from *Roughing It*.

In beginning to track down bibliographical clues to the literary pasts of Moodie and Traill, I was neither well prepared nor methodologically well trained. I doubt that I was even very enthusiastic, for it was the texts that really interested me. I hardly knew where to start other than to gather together existing bibliographical sources (beginning with R. E. Watters's *A Checklist of Canadian Literature, 1628-1960*), then to organize and verify the information available.

My interest picked up considerably, however, when I looked at Carl Ballstadt's "The Literary History of the Stricklands," an unpublished doctoral thesis written for the University of London in 1965. Here was bibliographical information aplenty about all the scribbling Strickland sisters — Eliza, Agnes, Jane Margaret, Catharine, and Susanna — a mine of data drawn from extensive research of British and Canadian magazines and from close checking of the various surviving editions of books by the Stricklands. Ballstadt's careful work outstripped anything available in print. So rich were his Strickland bibliographies that it seemed most of the work I had set out to do was already done. How much more was there to be found?

Much more, as it turned out. Ballstadt's thesis led me first to the *Albion*, a weekly paper specializing in British and European news, published in New York by John Sherrin Bartlett. The thesis had listed two Moodie poems, both appearing in 1835. In the volume for 1833 (2 March), however, I came upon two other poems and a letter. Dated 14 February 1833 — thus only five months after her arrival — Moodie offered Dr. Bartlett "the first flight of my muse on Canadian shores" (*Letters of a Lifetime*, 90). In itself not a particularly revealing letter, it nevertheless transfixed me. Here was discovery, something that was new. Something hidden was suddenly revealed. Something I had intuited was now confirmed. Moodie, I had felt, was too much the writer to cease writing, however demanding and uncomfortable her new living conditions in rural Upper Canada. Her remark in *Roughing It* — "I had never been able to turn my thoughts towards literature during my sojourn in the bush. When the body is fatigued with labour, unwonted and beyond its strength, the mind is in no condition for mental occupation" (Ballstadt, 440) — suggested cessation of writing. Such, however, had not been the case, at least initially. Situated at first near the front in Hamilton Township, only four miles from Port Hope, the Moodies did not, after all, venture north into the bush until 1834.

**F**URTHER BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INVESTIGATION confirmed Moodie's efforts to keep her writing career alive despite the disadvantages of conditions in "a new colony." Her poems appeared, for instance, in such places as the Cobourg *Star*, John Kent's *Canadian Literary Magazine* (York), the *Canadian Magazine* (York), and Sumner Lincoln Fairfield's *North American Quarterly Magazine*.<sup>1</sup>

She received little, if any, remuneration for these efforts, only the satisfaction of continuing to see her name in print. Her name, however, was a source of confusion in itself. Dr. Bartlett at first mistook her for her better-known sister, Agnes. He apologized for his public gaff when he published a third Moodie poem, "There's Rest," in the *Albion* for 25 May 1833. Even in 1833 in Upper Canada there were both benefits and drawbacks to being Agnes Strickland's sister.

Agnes Strickland was still very much the significant Strickland sister when in 1960 Carl Ballstadt set off for London intending to study Moodie and Traill in relation to their Suffolk upbringing and English background. He was told that the Canadian sisters were not in themselves of sufficient interest to justify a thesis. It would be far better to concentrate on the Strickland family background as it related to the literary career of Agnes, particularly her very popular *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840-1848), a multi-volume history co-authored by the eldest sister, Eliza. The Canadian Stricklands — Moodie and Traill, as well as brother Samuel — could only be tangential concerns.

Little had changed when, nearly two decades later, I made my first research trip to England. But as I was soon to discover, while one still faced a paternalistic blind spot with regard to the achievements of colonial writers, important new evidence was awaiting discovery. Such was the case with the Glyde Collection housed in the centralized archives of the Ipswich Public Record Office. This material had not been available during Carl Ballstadt's research in the early 1960s.

No doubt it was largely Agnes Strickland's fame that led John Glyde, a Suffolk antiquarian of the late nineteenth century, to collect and preserve the letters James and Emma Bird received from Agnes and various of her sisters. As an established poet of local note, Bird and his wife, who lived in Yoxford (a village some ten miles from Reydon Hall), had been friends and encouragers particularly of Agnes, Susanna, and Catharine. The letters the Birds preserved — twenty-five from Susanna and nineteen from Catharine — constituted an extraordinary find. They provide a rich source of information about the pre-emigration lives of the Canadian Stricklands, offering glimpses of personality, allusions to publications and writing projects, comments on travels and experiences, even references to amorous involvements. It was possible to see at close hand not only the religious intensity and enthusiasm of Susanna but also the wit and determination of the unmarried Catharine. Moreover, since the collection included a letter from Catharine written from Canada (7 January 1834), one also had a means of comparing the kinds of letters she actually wrote from the bush to the "letters" that make up *The Backwoods of Canada*.

Here again was discovery, but this time of a far larger, far more formidable kind. If archives are a mirror of the past, then the reflections that this mirror offers, sometimes clear and revealing, can often be frustratingly oblique and difficult to identify, let alone explain. By now working as a team, Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth

Hopkins, and I collectively faced the task of reading into that mirror, of understanding and interpreting the complex networks of references, allusions, and assumptions that characterized these early letters. We had to track down bibliographical references in Suffolk and London newspapers, annuals, and magazines. We had to identify the participants and trace the social lives of the Strickland girls at home and in London, and we had to make sense of the ebb and flow of their interests and passions insofar as the letters revealed such things. One archival source led us to another; we moved from one kind of mirror to another, clearing up some mysteries to our satisfaction even as, in time, we had to admit that others would at least temporarily remain unresolved. Who, for instance, was Asker, the young man to whom Susanna may well have been engaged in 1828 and whose “extravagant career” she lamented (*Letters*, 25)? And, what was wrong with Mrs. Thomas Harral that led her to behave in so nasty a way to Catharine, then affianced to her son Francis?<sup>22</sup>

*Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* (1985) evolved from a series of such archival discoveries. By the time we found the Glyde Collection, we were also at work on the Moodie letters that were part of the extensive Traill Family Collection in the National Archives of Canada. As well, new material — including eight Moodie letters — became available in the Richard Bentley Collection in the British Library.<sup>3</sup> It was clear from internal evidence, however, that many of Moodie’s letters to Bentley were missing. Since the kindly Bentley had been Moodie’s most important literary correspondent through the 1850s and 1860s, we were very frustrated by this apparent dead-end. It was only when we realized that the Bentley Collection had been sold in blocks to three libraries — the University of Illinois in Chicago, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the British Library — that we were able to track down most of the missing letters (twenty-two at Illinois and one at California) and thus fill out this significant stage of Moodie’s writing career. Collectively, the Bentley letters tell us a great deal about Moodie’s literary isolation, the making of *Roughing It in the Bush*, *Life in the Clearings*, and *Flora Lyndsay*, her literary tastes and reading interests, her view of herself as a writer, and the importance to her of having a congenial friend in the literary world of London.

Other archives held isolated letters. The Douglas Library at Queen’s provided a brief note by Moodie to Charles Sangster, one of her few communications on record with a Canadian writer still held in some critical esteem.<sup>4</sup> As well, what seemed then to be her only surviving letter to John Lovell, the publisher of the *Literary Garland*, the *Montreal Transcript*, and other papers in which her work appeared, was at Queen’s.<sup>5</sup> Three Moodie letters turned up in eastern American archives, amplifying our sense of the range of her several connections south of the border from the eccentric poet Sumner Lincoln Fairfield to Henry David Thoreau’s admirer and acquaintance, Daniel Ricketson. Among the Moodie letters found in

newspapers, one of the most interesting and suggestive is a formal note written in the wake of the Mackenzie Rebellion to Charles Fothergill, the editor of the (Toronto) *Palladium*. Fothergill published it in the paper for 11 October 1838 along with the poem she enclosed, "The Burning of the Caroline." In discovering that issue of the *Palladium* among a few surviving and unbound copies of the newspaper in the Archives of Ontario, we again enjoyed that feeling of "unhiding the hidden." In the process we also came across several previously unknown Moodie poems, most notably "On Reading the Proclamation Delivered by William Lyon Mackenzie, on Navy Island" (17 January 1838).<sup>6</sup> Given the broken run of the *Palladium*, we had to accept the fact that those lost weekly issues likely contained other Moodie contributions, perhaps of similar note. Through tracing the reprinting of certain Moodie poems in other newspapers, however, it was possible to make note of some other appearances of her work in the *Palladium*.

Newspapers are of course a crucial resource in the act of historical reclamation. What the Archives of Ontario has managed to preserve of the *Palladium* is a bounty, but what is lost is cause for lament. Similarly, the broken runs of the Peterborough and Belleville papers of the 1830s and 1840s were, and continue to be, a great frustration for us. There is, for instance, no way to measure whether Moodie wrote very much for the Hastings (or Victoria) *Chronicle*, Belleville's reform paper, though from the late 1830s on she shared firm reformist convictions with her husband. Neither can we study with any exactness the extent to which George Benjamin, the powerful editor of the conservative Belleville *Intelligencer* and leader of the city's Orange Order, used his position to criticize, even to slander, Dunbar Moodie and his family during the first fifteen years of his long and difficult tenure as the first sheriff of Hastings County. When Susanna itemized some of her complaints and cruelly satirized Benjamin as the "Jew Editor" in her story, "Richard Redpath" (*Letters of a Lifetime*, 147), she doubtless delighted in a literary kind of revenge.<sup>7</sup> What survives of the *Intelligencer* or its opposition the *Chronicle* is, however, too spotty to provide a sufficient record of the basis for her — and others' — outrage. One is forced, therefore, to track stories reprinted from the *Intelligencer* in other Upper Canada papers to provide some evidence of Benjamin's partisanship and cruelty and thus to measure the grounds of Susanna's pain, indignation, and coarsely racist riposte.

**B**UT IF ARCHIVAL DISCOVERIES and the process of drawing together useable archival material were at the heart of our efforts in putting together *Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* (and in the work still underway in preparing Catharine Parr Traill's approximately 475 surviving letters), we as editors also became archival agents. When, for instance, the opportunity arose to purchase

a Traill letter to George P. Putnam, the American publisher who in 1852 so quickly pirated Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, we did so on behalf of Trent University. In speaking to a seniors' group in Toronto, Beth Hopkins made a connection with a Moodie descendant, Mrs. Hope Vickers, who turned over to her a shoe-box full of Susanna's letters. This material, along with letters from another descendant, Miss Kathleen McMurrich, we helped to direct to the National Archives where it now, appropriately, resides.

A book such as *Letters of a Lifetime* is but a first venture, a literary trap to draw flies. Over the seven years it took to find the material and to prepare introductions and annotations we were both delighted that we had found so much and frustrated by obvious and significant gaps in the collection. Our letters to, and contacts with, descendants had unearthed some valuable material but had led to many more dead-ends, not to mention various stories of family burnings of Moodie papers to preserve and ensure privacy. One of those dead-ends was Patrick Hamilton Ewing who, as it turned out, died at age 71 shortly after *Letters of a Lifetime* appeared. The great-great-grandson of Moodie, Ewing, who likely never went through the papers himself, kept them for decades in his attic in Red Hook, New York.<sup>8</sup> He did, however, leave instructions that the material be properly cared for. Accordingly, his friend Eric McLean of Montreal negotiated the sale of the collection to Claude LeMoine, manuscript curator of the National Library of Canada.

The appearance of new Moodie letters and material was not in itself surprising. Since the publication of *Letters of a Lifetime*, two new letters had already surfaced, one from New Zealand and one at Guelph. What was astonishing, however, was the breadth of the Ewing collection. As Mary Lu MacDonald observed in the *National Library News* (December 1987, 19: 12, p. 5), "Manuscript collections of pre-Confederation writers in either French or English are so rare as to be almost non-existent. The originals of a few letters, by a few writers, survive in archival collections devoted to some other purpose, and some copies of letters by a few writers, held in private collections or in foreign repositories, have been assembled in Canada. However, even for the most diligent researcher, early nineteenth-century literary manuscript sources are extremely scarce. The Patrick Hamilton Ewing collection . . ." she concluded, "is possibly the greatest single find in Canadian literary history. Scholars will be mining this rich source for years to come."

While the Ewing Collection contains manuscripts, parts of the Moodies's library and various kinds of memorabilia, two particular aspects are worth special notice. As might perhaps be expected, there aren't many Susanna Moodie letters in the collection. Of the fifteen from her pen, more than half were written to her husband during his absences in 1838 and 1839 while serving militia appointments along the Upper Canadian front. These letters, paralleled by a number written by him to her from Toronto, the Niagara, and the Victoria districts, constitute a crucial record of the actual events that lie behind the final few chapters of *Roughing It*

*in the Bush*. We learn in detail, for instance, of harrowing illnesses suffered by Susanna and her children, her competence in running the bush farm on her own, her deep affection for her husband, and the sensitive operations of genteel society in the backwoods. From Dunbar there are glimpses of his near involvement in the Short Hills Raid, commentary on the alcoholic excesses and misbehaviour of military officers, the factor of patronage in militia appointments, even his responses to Lord Durham's highly controversial report. Writing from Belleville on 24 May 1839, he noted in a postscript, "I sometimes wish I could clear out from this unhappy distracted country where I can see nothing but ultra selfish Toryism or Revolutionary Radicalism. . . . A black cloud hangs over Canada. . . . Lord Durham's report has stirred up a hornet's nest. Hardly anyone can talk or think coolly [*sic*] about it. I believe the middle course is the only safe one in this case, as in many others. . . . If the British Gov<sup>t</sup> has the discernment to adopt his [Durham's] suggestions on some very important points it is my firm belief that he will yet be regarded as the best friend Canada ever had. . . ." In reply, noting that "another long separation from you would almost break my heart," Susanna declared that "this must be the *last winter* of exile and widowhood." Should we "desert poor Canada in her day of distress," she added, "let us go to the Cape at once, and have, naught to do with brother Jonathan and his scampish progeny" (1 June 1839).<sup>9</sup> She could not really forget the persecutions she had endured at the hands of her rough American neighbours while living in Hamilton Township.

The second noteworthy part of the Ewing Collection is Dunbar Moodie's spiritualism diary, a ledger book of some 250 pages recording experiments he was witness to from 1857 to 1863 in Belleville, Toronto, and New York. A fascinating document simply as a record of the experiences of Susanna and Catharine Parr as mediums, it is also a kind of subtext to the psychological preoccupations that underlay the conscious lives of these two women even as it provides a suggestive record of the ways in which they unconsciously sought to put troubling memories to rest. In preserving her father's diary, the Moodies's eldest daughter, Catherine Mary Vickers, deliberately destroyed most of the sections dealing with the spiritualist activities of her sister, Agnes (Fitzgibbon) Chamberlin. While she believed that her father "lived to see the fallacy of the intention," she had no doubt that he had maintained a "perfect faith" in spiritualism during the time of the diary and was "in every way faithful and sincere" about these experiments.

**T**O LOOK BACKWARD NOW is to realize that it was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that sufficient archival material became available to make possible collections of letters and increasingly sophisticated study of writers like Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. Why, we might ask? The passage

of time and accidents of possession had something to do with it. So too, in both cases, did the Strickland name. Of greatest importance, however, was the extraordinary growth of interest in both the universities and the media (dare one say the culture as a whole?) in the subjects of writing in Canada and Canadian culture, past and present. Born in the early 1970s and still gaining momentum today, these initiatives have been allowed increasingly to flourish through a variety of support institutions like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and a constantly improving network of library and archival resources. For many reasons, then, the time was right.

Still, in the cases of Moodie and Trill, it would be wrongheaded to put undue emphasis on the excitement of discovering important documents and large caches of letters. Gratifying as they are, such moments are rare. Far more germane to the process is the daily methodological searching, the persistent checking into such standard resources as land records, newspapers, and local histories. One learns in the process a great deal about libraries and archives and their resources; indeed, one learns, above all, the worth of a thoughtful librarian's or archivist's help.

In this regard let me turn to an archival resource of special value in the work of our research group, one that I suspect is not known to enough Canadianists. Founded in 1812, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, is an independent institution devoted to all material printed in the United States prior to 1876. Its library has the world's largest collection of early American newspapers as well as fine collections of American children's books, yearbooks, cookbooks, etc. What we found in Worcester was a series of glimpses of Moodie and Trill in America — evidence of their deliberate connections to the United States, of the extent to which their works were pirated there and of the ways in which their writings were reviewed. It was surprising to discover, for instance, that in its editions of 28 August and 4 September 1852, the *Saturday Evening Post*, a "Family Newspaper" in Philadelphia, printed chapters from Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* on its front page under the title "Pictures from Life." Suggestive, too, were the number of highly positive reviews of Moodie's books from the 1850s in American newspapers. One was able there to move directly from Edwin Bruce Kirkham and John W. Fink's *Indices to American literary annuals and giftbooks: 1825-1865* (1975) to the annuals themselves noting the extent to which Moodie and Trill material had been pirated to fill these American imitations. Moreover, it was a thoughtful librarian at the AAS who suggested I have a look at the micro-filmed *Index to Early American Periodicals*, edited by N. F. Adkins. The result of a WPA project in New York headed up by Oscar Cargill in the 1930s, the *Index* provides an itemizing of the contents of some 340 early American magazines. You won't be disappointed, the librarian told me, and I wasn't. There I found access to previously unknown appearances of fiction and poetry by Moodie and Trill — mostly pirated — as well as to several more reviews of their work.

Bibliographies, I have discovered, are best measured in decades, not years. In compiling a list of the poems that Susanna Moodie published in various kinds of periodicals over her lifetime, I can now list close to 170. The record, which continues to develop,<sup>10</sup> reminds us that Moodie was as much a poet as a writer of sketches and fiction and that her poetry appeared widely in England, Canada, and the United States during her lifetime. Through the thoughtful help of scholars such as Mary Lu MacDonald, Carole Gerson, and Mary Jane Edwards, it has been possible to amplify this documentation. MacDonald, for instance, provided me with a list of the Moodie (and Traill) poems she had found in her close study and analysis of the newspapers of Upper and Lower Canada prior to 1850. Such documentation allows us to realize that the aforementioned poem, "The Burning of the Caroline," first printed in the *Palladium*, appeared in at least three other Canadian newspapers. Another rebellion poem, "Canadians Will You Join the Band. A Loyal Song," did even better, appearing first in the *Palladium* (20 December 1837) to be reprinted within a few weeks in at least eight Canadian newspapers.

The work goes on. Archival resources continue to be mined. With each discovery — small or large, bibliographical and historical — we can add to the picture, step by step informing ourselves more fully about what it is that we should know about and learn from the past. The work helps to make possible not only improved understanding but also better criticism. As scholarly editions of texts, books of letters, and bibliographies emerge, informed literary and cultural criticism can take place. The literary lives of authors such as Moodie and Traill in this sense become one of our most compelling reference-banks to the lives of ordinary people and in particular to the lives of women in nineteenth-century Canada. They take us beyond official history, away from the lives of the politicians and the effects of government reports and closer both to life as it was lived and to writing as an act consistent with that living. In such work literature meets history, sociology, economics, politics, and geography, and is the better for it. And, as Moodie and Traill take their places in a fuller mosaic of nineteenth-century Canadian experience, we can be grateful that one very good reason so many resources are still available to us lies in the fame of their sister, Agnes, who could never understand why anyone would immigrate to, let alone stay in, a colony like Canada.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> More than ten Moodie pieces appeared in the *North American Quarterly Magazine*. Some of her work also appeared in English periodicals and annuals after her emigration.
- <sup>2</sup> The Traill letters are currently being prepared for publication. The Glyde Collection is, however, available on microfilm at the National Archives in Ottawa (see the Traill Family Collection).
- <sup>3</sup> Royal Gettman, Richard Bentley's biographer, told Ballstadt that he was not aware of any Moodie correspondence in the collection.

- <sup>4</sup> See also Moodie's letter to Louisa May Murray held in the Scott Library archives of York University.
- <sup>5</sup> A second Lovell letter has recently turned up in the Patrick Hamilton Ewing Collection now held by the National Library of Canada. The apparent loss of most of Moodie's correspondence with Lovell and *The Literary Garland* creates a significant gap in the picture of her literary life.
- <sup>6</sup> Carl Ballstadt's article, "Secure in Conscious Worth: Susanna Moodie and the Rebellion of 1837," studies the Proclamation poem in detail. See *Canadian Poetry*, 19 (1986), 88-98.
- <sup>7</sup> The question of George Benjamin's racial origin is not addressed in the extensive entry on him in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, ix, 44-46.
- <sup>8</sup> See the *National Library News*, 19 (December 1987).
- <sup>9</sup> Dunbar Moodie owned land in South Africa prior to his marriage to Susanna and their subsequent immigration to Canada.
- <sup>10</sup> A copybook of Moodie's poems now available in the Ewing Collection reveals what are likely two new sources for early (pre-1825) Susanna Strickland appearances in English periodicals.
- <sup>11</sup> An examination of the catalogue of the British Library reveals the extent to which, even in apparently authoritative bibliographical entries, errors persist concerning authorship of various Strickland books. Agnes often receives credit for work written by Catharine and Susanna. The business of sorting out authorship and of tracing publications of books by Catharine and Susanna written in the 1820s is another important aspect of the bibliographical work to be done. An important recent contribution to this subject is Rupert Schieder's "Catharine Parr Traill: Three Bibliographical Questions" in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, 24 (1985), 8-25.

## REDUCTIO

*John Baglow*

say if you will  
 to these constituents:  
 do not enter, you will drown  
 in captive sunshine, and return  
 to the numb soil,  
 trouble and dreams scattered  
 like prints in limestone —