

JOURNEYS TO FREEDOM

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“**A**NNA, SUSANNA, AND CATHARINE PARR TRAILL” — their names bounce together with the rhythm of a good musical-comedy title song. Certainly a libretto written out of the variety of their lives and works would not be dull, and might even be a piquant memorial to their adventurings in nineteenth-century Canada.

All three women came to Canada in the 1830's. Anna Murphy Jameson was the wife of Robert Jameson, Attorney-General of Upper Canada and then the province's first Vice-Chancellor. She was a professional “woman of letters”; this phrase suggests more clearly than any other the scope of her ambition, and her success, in writing. She was not a poet or a novelist, and neither journalist nor critic is entirely accurate in her description. When, in 1836, she came to Toronto to visit her husband, she had been writing professionally for about fifteen years. After the publication, in 1832, of *Characteristics of Women*, a study of Shakespeare's heroines, her work was known and respected, not only in England, but also in Germany and America. She was forty-two years old when she arrived in Canada, a practised writer with heavy financial responsibilities towards the support of her mother and sisters; she was by no means committed to being a colonial official's wife, and she was certainly not a prospective settler. She had expected that a book would be one of the results of her trip and had begun to consider its themes before she left England. *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* was published shortly after her return to England in 1838.

The Strickland sisters, Catharine and Susanna, came with their husbands to settle in Upper Canada in 1832. They too had written for publication before emigrating — sentimental, moralizing tales thought suitable for the children's literature and the proliferating ladies' periodicals of the eighteen twenties. In 1836 Catharine's letters home were published in the six-penny “Library of Entertaining Knowledge,” the immensely popular enterprise launched in 1829 for the

education and improvement of the masses by the reforming enthusiasts of "The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge." By 1836, Susanna was well into the writing of sketches for John Lovell's *Literary Garland*, just beginning in Montreal, and, in fact, weeping with joy over the first twenty-dollar bill she received from him for her work.

All three ladies encountered and recorded the dragons of a new land — its external elements of fierce climate, raw, hard work and crudity of culture, and the haunting, all-pervasive, internal struggle against loneliness, isolation and longing for the unattainable homes. Each one, however, had and developed her own defenses of temperament and talent, and for each woman the Canadian experience was a liberating one though often unrecognized or unacknowledged as such. Though her letters give other dimensions to her experience here, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles* is Anna Jameson's only published book on Canada. But to begin to assess the intention or appreciate the achievement of Susanna Moodie or Catharine Traill, we can and we need to read further: *Life in the Clearings* as well as *Roughing It in The Bush*, and *The Canadian Settler's Guide* as well as *The Backwoods of Canada*. And for a really just assessment of any of them, of course, we need the complete editions.¹

These women were not "Victorians" — not in any sense that connotes the great middle-class edifice of custom, appearance and convention or the massive empire-mystique that grew in the minds of men as the century advanced. Anna was born in 1794, Catherine in 1803 and Susanna in 1805. They grew up in a society that was more open and more robustly permissive than it later became and at a time, in the afterglow of Waterloo, when the major chords of national security and confidence had their minor counterpoint in the personal insecurity, penury or desperation that impelled the emigrant ships to Canada. Jane Austen's novels and Muriel Jaeger's *Before Victoria* illuminate the kind of society the Stricklands knew and the hopes and ambitions they had, as Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* and John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances* show the stark necessities behind the emigration of the Scots and the Irish whom they met in Canada.

A NNA MURPHY had grown up in circumstances radically different from the Stricklands. She was the eldest of five daughters of Denis Murphy, an Irish miniature painter who had been embroiled a little on the periphery of the disastrous revolution of 1798 and who then found it prudent to

leave Ireland. Mr. Murphy was both talented and charming and for a time he had a heady success in England. He was appointed a Court Miniaturist and he lived in the midst of a lively company of people with intellectual and cultural awareness and interests. His success did not prevail for a long time, nor did it serve to provide for his family's future; but during its time Anna was growing up, both clever and ambitious, eager and willing to make the most of any opportunities her father could arrange for her. She became a governess at the age of sixteen and, far from being broken by the gloomy tyranny that was very often the fate of the governess, she found in nine years of intermittent service plenty of opportunity in the two areas that intrigued her most — travelling and writing. In fact she made full use of a degree of freedom that was forbidden to the young women she was engaged to instruct. Furthermore she continued what she had long since begun — a self-education in European languages, literatures and social customs that was to make her a “new woman” in her time. She moved towards the literary circles, the life and the reputation which suited her best with a determination and a constant, dogged industry that makes “choice” too superficial a word and “temperamental necessity” a far juster assessment of her motivation. By the time she and Robert Jameson married in 1825, she was on her way to becoming a popular author and by the time he came to Canada in 1833 she was a famous one.

The Jamesons' marriage had not been successful from its first days and it certainly had small chance of surviving against the separation of colonial postings for Robert, and growing literary success and increasing family responsibilities for Anna. Her decision to come to Canada in 1836 was partially motivated by a sense of marital obligation, but even more by the need to come to some firm agreement with Robert Jameson about separation. There was also that secondary but always present factor, the knowledge that out of such an experience she would certainly write a book. Long before she left England she was tantalized by the notions of making a “wild expedition” to the west and of investigating the situations and prospects of women in Canada, both among settlers and among the Indian tribes.

She spent about eight months in Canada, from December of 1836 to August of 1837. She got her work ready for the publisher in the months she spent in America waiting for her legal separation papers from Robert Jameson; *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* was published in three volumes by John Murray, shortly after her return to England in the spring of 1838.

From it, and from letters to family and friends, her methods are clear — and by the standards of her day they were notably scholarly. She read widely before travelling, she kept careful and copious notes, and then she did more reading to support and extend her own observations. For instance, she inserted and worked carefully into her text a good deal of material on the history of Pontiac from Alexander Henry, incidents from George Loskiel's *History of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Indians of North America*, and Indian legends which she had heard directly from Henry Schoolcraft and his wife and which, incidentally, were printed for the first time in her book.

She also knew, by this time, a good deal about the techniques of successful writing. She had superficially fictionalized the narrator of her first book, *The Diary of an Ennuyee* (1826), making her into a romantic young lady who, when the tour was all over, Europe seen and commented upon, died of a mysteriously broken heart. This dramatization had given Mrs. Jameson a certain notoriety and her book a special success among the spate of travel diaries produced in the decade of Europe's re-opening to the touring British after Waterloo. Some dozen years later in a Toronto January, "imprisoned in this relentless climate" in "a fourth or fifth rate provincial town with the pretensions of a capital city," Anna did not have to imagine a romantic *persona* to give her journal an ironic tension — she herself, *was* incongruous to her situation. She had only to characterize herself as she had become, a cosmopolitan, urban intellectual, to give a double edge to her work.

I wished to throw open my house in the evening, and break or thaw the social frost around me; but such a novel and unheard of idea would startle all the inhabitants from their propriety. . . . I must look around for some thing to try my strength — and force and fix my attention.

I must get "a file for the serpent." (*Winter Studies*).

And so Anna set about translating Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* and commenting on German art and literature in her journal — thus vanquishing her dragons and, simultaneously, heightening the effective incongruity of her own self-portrait.

As reporter and critic, Anna was free, frank and sharply intelligent — far too much so to please the Toronto society she could neither tolerate nor penetrate.

I did not expect to find here in this new capital of a new country, with the boundless forest within half a mile of us on almost every side — concentrated as it were the worst evils of our old and most artificial social system at home, with none of its

agremens, and none of its advantages. . . . We have here a petty colonial oligarchy, a self-constituted aristocracy, based upon nothing real, nor even upon anything imaginary; and we have all the mutual jealousy and fear, and petty gossip, and mutual meddling and mean rivalry, which are common in a small society of which the members are well known to each other. (*Winter Studies*).

Her acid observations are witty and convincing in a timeless way, because to look at any small, closed society from her literary-sophisticated point of view is always to see cultural desolation. And over all the years since 1837 a swelling chorus of voices of gloom has continued to belabour our provincialism — though not often with the wit and perception of Anna Jameson or with her genuine integration into European cosmopolitanism.

Her *Winter Studies* end and *Summer Rambles* begin with her departure from Toronto to the west of the province in May of 1837. She did truly make the “wild expedition” that her family letters show she was planning before she came to Canada. She travelled alone overland through the province to Detroit, then up the lakes by steamer to Michilimackinac and on, by *bateau*, to the Sault. She declared with great satisfaction that she was the first white woman to shoot the rapids at Sault Ste. Marie — and it is unlikely that anyone would care to dispute her claim.

Anna was a particularly astute observer of customs and politics in Toronto, but there were others who left their records: here on tour however, her work becomes unique and uniquely interesting. She enjoyed touring, even under travel conditions that were often primitive and her tone loses both its acid and an intermittent note of sentimental self-pity. She was protected by her genuine enthusiasm and carelessness of physical hardship — and she also took care to be known as “the Chancellor’s Lady” whenever such a connection might pay dividends in comfort or courtesy. Above all, she made easy and genuinely friendly connections with people on her way: Henry Schoolcraft left an admiring memoir of Anna’s “hearty and warm affections . . . notwithstanding her strong author-like traits and peculiarities.” He also recorded her and, in general, all Europeans’ focus on the American wilderness with particular insight.

It seems to me that Englishmen and Englishwomen, for I have had a good many of both sexes to visit me recently, look on America very much as one does when he peeps through a magnifying glass at pictures of foreign scenes, and the picturesque ruins of old cities and the like. They are really very fine, but it is difficult to realise that such things are. It is all an optical illusion.²

“You must be content to be immortalized in my fashion,” Anna wrote to Mr. McMurray, Anglican missionary to the Sault, as she was making the final revisions in her manuscript before *Winter Studies*’ publication. She meant just that; she was an author, confident and, at times, ruthless in her processes. Most important of all, an essential detachment underlies her work, giving it great possibilities in range, but just as surely limiting its depth. She had, in Henry Schoolcraft’s opinion, “the most accurate and artistic eye” of any of his visitors, but she was, for all that, a tourist. Her talents, her perceptions and her interests went far beyond the ordinary, but her springboard had the timeless security of all tourists’ poise — she did not have to stay.

SUSANNA AND HER HUSBAND, William Dunbar Moodie, had both aspired in England to the kind of literary life and society that Anna Jameson had achieved, and on one of its many levels, *Roughing It In the Bush* is a dismal elegy to those ambitions and to the Moodies’ practical expectations of emigration as well. Their friend, Tom Wilson, warned them justly, as Susanna admits.

I don’t want you to weep, said Tom, but as to our qualifications, Moodie, I think them pretty equal. . . . You go with the intention of clearing land, and working for yourself, and doing a great deal. . . . You expect, by going to Canada, to make your fortune, or at least secure a comfortable independence. I anticipate no such results. . . . I mean to purchase a farm with the three hundred pounds I received last week from the sale of my father’s property; and if the Canadian soil yields only half what Mr. C — says it does, I need not starve. But the refined habits in which you have been brought up, and your unfortunate literary propensities — (I say unfortunate, because you will seldom meet people in a colony who can or will sympathize with you in these pursuits) — they will make you an object of mistrust and envy to those who cannot appreciate them, and will be a source of constant mortification and disappointment to yourself. . . . There was more truth in poor Tom’s words than at that moment we were willing to allow; for youth and hope were on our side in those days. . . . (*Roughing It*).

Temperamentally, Susanna Moodie had much in common with Anna Jameson, but Anna’s radical choices towards personal freedom had begun very early and Susanna never at any time contemplated such choices or their price. Instead, like most of us, she accepted both social conventions and economic pressures and then fought the battles within herself towards some balance. Unlike most of us, however, Susanna had the means to free herself through her writing; in the very

process of recording her conflicts she transcended them. She beat her dragons by fighting them living on the page, and the energy of her struggle suffuses *Roughing It in the Bush*, giving it an enduring, undeniable, though maddeningly fragmented, power.

Susanna's interests, like Anna Jameson's, were centred in people — more specifically in her own encounters with and reactions to people. There is really no more depth of response to the Canadian wilderness in Susanna than Schoolcraft records in Anna. Such lines as these voice a conventional response already trite when she wrote them:

And silence — awful silence broods
 Profoundly o'er these solitudes . . .
 A sense of desolation reigns
 O'er these unpeopled forest plains. (*Roughing It*).

There are discomfort, economic disaster and inconvenience in Canadian nature for Susanna: but there is no terror. In fact she and Anna, and Catharine Traill, were extraordinarily rugged women and physically very brave ones. But Susanna could not go home again and she *was* afraid of the strange people she met in Canada, who seemed so unruly to her, so appallingly likely to upset her only real security, her confidence in the order of society as she knew it. She suffered real “culture shock” from the moment of landing at Grosse Isle where several hundred Irish immigrants, “each shouting or yelling in his or her uncouth dialect, and all accompanying their vociferations with violent and extraordinary gestures, [were] quite incomprehensible to the uninitiated.” What was more frightening still was to find that their fellow passengers, “honest Scotch labourers and mechanics from the vicinity of Edinburgh,” who had behaved with orderly propriety on board ship, “no sooner set foot upon the island than they became infected by the same spirit of insubordination and misrule, and were just as noisy and insolent as the rest.”

Susanna survived the initial shock of “detrribalization” and many others. She recorded her adventures with the people she met, playing them against her own dramatized *persona*, a version of the workaday Susanna who did, in spite of her storms within, bear seven children, learn to bake and work in the fields, and with her husband, gradually secure the family establishment they had come for.

When she arrived in Canada she was a writer of sentimental tales in which virtue always, finally, triumphed and the sun shone again. But her perceptions deepened as her notions of life and order were shattered and in the wondering

pity of her treatment of Brian, the lonely hunter, in *Roughing It*, or the stark realism of her treatment of Grace Marks, the murderess, in *Life in the Clearings*, she moved from sentimental innocence to the recognition, with both acceptance and sympathy, of the irreconcilable presence of the tragic.

Susanna never achieved a consistency of tragic vision in her writing — and in her life she was not seriously undermined by bitterness or despair. Instead, conflict was very often deflected into comedy as her vision of herself, and others, was tempered by humour which she found socially unacceptable, but which in fact kept her going.

I wish nature had not given me such a quick perception of the ridiculous — such a perverse inclination to laugh in the wrong place: for though one cannot help deriving from it a wicked enjoyment, it is a very troublesome gift, and very difficult to conceal (*Life in the Clearings*).

It is a fascinating exercise to look at *Roughing It* and see Susanna's pen — and her personality — at work. The book is a bewildering, contradictory amalgam of personal moods and literary modes — sentimental, comic, tragic, didactic. It is also, unmistakably, the work of a gifted, but embryonic, novelist who, in a dozen or so characters and as many scattered scenes, moved from the raw world she lived in towards the timeless reality of a contained world of the imagination.

Anna Jameson had reported Canadian settlers' wives as being "repining and discontented," almost without exception. "I never met with *one* woman recently settled here who considered herself happy in her new home and country: I *heard* of one, and doubtless there are others, but they are exceptions to the general rule." (*Winter Studies*)

CATHARINE TRAILL was certainly the one contented woman. With her, it was simply a matter of being perfectly fitted by both nature and training to adapt to and find fulfillment and freedom in the new land. She liked to think of her experience as a "Crusoe adventure"; she called one of her books for children *Canadian Crusoes*. In it, remarkably for her time, she advocated intermarriage among the Indian and Scottish, French and English children who were her protagonists. And like a Crusoe herself, she wrote of emigration as an eminently rational, confident and purposeful movement towards the founding of a property, "that their children may be placed in a situation in which, by industry and activity, the substantial comforts of life may be permanently obtained,

and a landed property handed down to them and their children after them.” (*The Backwoods*).

She did not relate to people less easily than Anna and Susanna — on the contrary, people almost certainly found her easier to love. She did, however, react to others less emotionally and far less egocentrically. She did not have their kind of creative imagination which made adventure of every movement and themselves the heroines. She was creative, nonetheless, inspired with a scientist’s endless curiosity about things and with a scientist’s patience for collecting, tabulating, describing and classifying. She simply walked past — or through — the dragons which beset the others to look at, then to study, then to describe and classify, the life, especially the plant-life, of the world around her.

The Backwoods of Canada was certainly edited in a way thought best for its didactic purpose, and it suffers accordingly from a monotone blandness: there is no struggle recorded and therefore no present energy on the page. But Catharine’s other books, particularly *The Canadian Settler’s Guide* and *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* have edge and point because, by the time she wrote them, she knew so much, and she told it all with beautiful precision — and sometimes wit. To look back at her life and her works is to see one indivisible structure, equally remarkable for its practical solidity and for the beauty of its poise. Catharine Traill came the closest of all our writers to finding benign perfection in this land — not Eden, however, but Canaan, a new freedom for herself and her family, and freedom for all the lost and wandering in the land’s own promise of fruitfulness.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ The *New Canadian Library* editions of *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles* and *The Backwoods of Canada* were massively cut to the requirements of that series. Carl Klinck explains his editorial decisions about *Roughing it in the Bush* in his introduction to the NCL edition. *Life in the Clearings*, edited by Robert MacDougall, is complete in the Carleton Library series, but is not available in paperback at all. Only *The Canadian Emigrant’s Guide* (NCL) carries the complete text of the author. It has been edited of certain parts of its appendices.
- ² Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontier* (Philadelphia, 1851), 567.