

# SUSANNA MOODIE AND THE ENGLISH SKETCH

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**S**USANNA MOODIE'S *Roughing It in the Bush* has long been recognized as a significant and valuable account of pioneer life in Upper Canada in the mid-nineteenth century. From among a host of journals, diaries, and travelogues, it is surely safe to say, her book is the one most often quoted when the historian, literary or social, needs commentary on backwoods people, frontier living conditions, or the difficulty of adjustment experienced by such upper middle-class immigrants as Mrs. Moodie and her husband.

The reasons for the pre-eminence of *Roughing It in the Bush* have also long been recognized. Mrs. Moodie's lively and humorous style, the vividness and dramatic quality of her characterization, the strength and good humour of her own personality as she encountered people and events have contributed to make her book a very readable one. For these reasons it enjoys a prominent position in any survey of our literary history, and, indeed, it has become a "touchstone" of our literary development. W. H. Magee, for example, uses *Roughing It in the Bush* as the prototype of local colour fiction against which to measure the degree of success of later Canadian local colourists.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Carl F. Klinck observes that Mrs. Moodie's book represents a significant advance in the development of our literature from "statistical accounts and running narratives" toward novels and romances of pioneer experience.<sup>2</sup> Professor Klinck, in noting the fictive aspects of Mrs. Moodie's writing, sees it as part of an inevitable, indigenous development of Canadian writing, even though, in Mrs. Moodie's case, that development was strongly conditioned by her practice as a writer of children's stories before she came to Canada, and as the author of serialized fiction with English settings for the *Literary Garland* of Montreal.

Except for passing reference, Susanna Moodie's literary practice and acquaintanceships in England have not been considered in relationship to the form and techniques of her most successful book. As a member of a literary family which drew some attention to itself amongst minor English literary circles, Susanna Strickland sought and established literary friendships, and as a writer she followed an established pattern which, even had she remained in England, would very probably have led her to produce a book similar in many respects to *Roughing It in the Bush*. At the very least, however, when Susanna emigrated to Canada, she brought with her an awareness of models for a book of sketches about a region and its people.

Susanna's early career involved three kinds of writing, the first of which was literature for children. The writing of children's books certainly gave her practice in the description of characters, in the writing of dialogue, and in the use of the rhetoric proper to religious, moral, and didactic tales, a rhetoric which she was never willing to abandon. But the children's stories were simply the first stage in a pattern followed by many young women of the early nineteenth century who tried to forge literary careers for themselves. They progressed to poems and stories for the elegant annuals and gift books, and then, perhaps, to longer forms such as romances or biographies. Such was the pattern of the careers of Mrs. S. C. Hall, or Mary Howitt,<sup>3</sup> or Susanna's own sisters, Eliza and Agnes, who distinguished themselves in the 1840's as the biographers of the Queens of England. It was virtually inevitable, therefore, that Susanna should proceed to contribute sentimental and religious poems to the annuals and gift books, and that these poems should be collected and brought out by subscription as *Enthusiasm and Other Poems* (1831). Her sister Agnes had done much the same before her.<sup>4</sup>

It is, however, another phase of Susanna Strickland's career which is most pertinent to *Roughing It in the Bush*. During the years 1827-1829, Susanna Strickland contributed a series of prose sketches to a London periodical for ladies entitled *La Belle Assemblée* which was edited by a Suffolk native and friend of the Strickland family, Thomas Harral. The series, "Sketches from the Country", consists of five pieces: "The Witch of East Cliff", "The Two Fishermen", "Naomi", "The Dead Man's Grave", and "Old Hannah, or, the Charm".<sup>5</sup> The first four involve Suffolk legends told to the author by elderly natives of the region. Unfortunately, they are marred by an excessively metaphorical style and are without restraint on sentiment. Only in the introduction does the author exercise economy and limit her pen to what she really knows. The fifth sketch is Susanna's personal recollection of a maid-servant at Reydon Hall, the Strickland

home in Suffolk, near Southwold. It reflects warmth and good humour, and, perhaps because it is personal, is characterized by a greater directness and simplicity of style than the preceding sketches.

THE IMPORTANCE of this series of sketches is that it represents Susanna's early attempt to emulate the writing of Mary Russell Mitford and to do for Suffolk what Miss Mitford did so prolifically and so well for Berkshire. Miss Mitford in turn was an admirer of Washington Irving's *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1818), and, although she was also inspired by her own "hearty love of her subject",<sup>6</sup> shortly after the publication of Irving's book she began contributing country sketches to the *New Monthly Magazine* and to annuals and gift books. In 1824 the first volume of a five volume series, *Our Village; Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (1824-1837), was published in London. Her first series was followed by *Belford Regis; or Sketches of a Country Town* (3 vols., 1835).

Susanna Strickland was a reader of the annuals and of the *New Monthly Magazine*, a journal to which her sister Agnes also contributed in 1824 and 1825. Having read and admired Mitford's sketches in these sources, she began to correspond with her in 1829, first addressing a poetic tribute to the celebrated Mitford in June of that year. Miss Mitford responded with a letter in July, 1829, and there followed an exchange of letters over the course of a year.

The published letters of Susanna to Miss Mitford clearly establish her admiration of Mitford's work:

I had always ranked Miss Mitford as one of the first of our female writers, and though my knowledge of your writings was entirely confined to the sketches in the annuals, and to some extracts from the 'Foscari', these were sufficient to make me feel the deepest interest in your name, and even to rejoice in the success that ever attended the publication of your works.<sup>7</sup>

The letter in which this statement of admiration appears also contains Susanna's wish that she could visit Miss Mitford in London, as well as an invitation for the latter to visit the Strickland home in Suffolk where she would find "such sweet woodland lanes as you so inimitably describe."

Succeeding letters from Susanna to Miss Mitford include comments on her family and their literary pursuits; Susanna's own temptation to emigrate to Canada because of the attractive accounts which her brother, Samuel, had sent home; a visit to London during which she resided with her "dear adopted father",

Thomas Pringle;<sup>8</sup> and characters and customs described in Mitford's sketches. The recurring references to these sketches and the occasional tributes to Miss Mitford's skills make it very clear, I think, that Susanna's admiration was sufficient to lead her to emulate Mitford's subjects and techniques.

Such emulation is indicated in the titles and contents of Susanna's country sketches. In the *Our Village* sketches, Miss Mitford was wont to include portraits of rural characters, accounts of country walks, and tributes to rural institutions. A few titles from her first volume give a reasonable indication of the kind of contents: "Walks in the Country: the First Primrose", "Tom Cordery", "A Village Beau", "A Great Farm House". They usually begin with a general passage of reflection or description which eases the reader into a particular topic or event, or some portion of an individual's history, including his eccentricities, dress, occupation, and perhaps some crisis in which he has been involved. The style is familiar and direct, exhibiting a fine attention to detail; the tone is delicate and quiet. They are sketches of ordinary life and the emphasis is upon the colour and charm of rural living. The introduction to "Hannah Bint" is a good example of her loving attention to nature, as a prelude to the character and situation of a country friend:

The Shaw, leading to Hannah Bint's habitation, is, as I perhaps have said before, a very pretty mixture of wood and coppice; that is to say, a track of thirty or forty acres covered with fine growing timber — ash, and oak, and elm — very regularly planted; and interspersed here and there with large patches of underwood, hazel, maple, birch, holly, and hawthorn, woven into almost impenetrable thickets by long wreaths of the bramble, the briony, and the briar-rose, or by the pliant and twisting garlands of the wild honey-suckle. In other parts, the Shaw is quite clear of its bosky undergrowth, and clothed only with large beds of feathery fern, or carpets of flowers, primroses, orchises, cowslips, ground-ivy, crane's-bill, cotton-grass, Solomon's seal, and forget-me-not, crowded together with a profusion and brilliancy of colour such as I have rarely seen equalled even in a garden. Here the wild hyacinth really enamels the ground with its fresh and lovely purple. . . . The variety is much greater than I have enumerated; for the ground is so unequal, now swelling in gentle ascents, now dimpling into dells and hollows, and the soil so different in different parts, that the sylvan flora is unusually extensive and complete.

The same kind of introduction is employed by Susanna in her country scenes, particularly in "Old Hannah" and "The Dead Man's Grave." The latter is characterized by the similar attention to the particulars of a locale related to a specific history or event:

Should any of the readers of *La Belle Assemblée* wish to become better acquainted with the spot known by the designation of The Dead Man's Grave, they may find it at the end of a long narrow lane, in the well-known village of Reydon, where four cross country roads terminate, in the entrance to Goose Green, a piece of common so called from the number of geese which are bred upon it. Each of these roads forms a pleasant summer's walk, shaded from the heat of the sun by tall hawthorn hedges full of fine old trees. The grave rises to a considerable height in the centre of a pretty waste, of a triangular form, which attracts the notice of the traveller from each of its approaches. Generally, it is covered with a soft mantle of verdure, rivaling the emerald in brightness. The ground about it is thickly studded with broom and stunted blackthorn bushes, seldom rising to the height of four feet above the turf, and affording, with their low branches, a shelter for the violets that open their deep blue eyes beneath, and grows in profusion around the grave, while the more aspiring primrose rears her pale star-like crest above the mossy mound, and encircles it with a diadem of living gems.<sup>10</sup>

In the introductions to four of her sketches and throughout her reminiscence of Old Hannah, Susanna Strickland's series reminds one of Mitford's attention to a region and its people; it is local colour fiction.

It seems very likely, then, that when Susanna Moodie decided to write of her Canadian experiences near Cobourg and Peterborough, she would have thought of Miss Mitford's books on rural life and scenery. A connection seems indicated not only by her early interest in *Our Village*, but by the fact that parts of *Roughing It in the Bush* were first published as a series of "Canadian Sketches" in the *Literary Garland*.<sup>11</sup> That series of six sketches includes a country walk, a backwoods custom, and portraits of eccentric or peculiar characters, all categories used by Mary Mitford, and all assuming an important place in *Roughing It in the Bush* when it was published in 1852. For the British reader of the mid-nineteenth century, large sections of "Uncle Joe and his Family", "Brian the Still Hunter", "The Charivari", "The Wilderness and Our Indian Friends", and "The Walk to Dummer" would satisfy an appetite for impressions of the peculiarities of custom and character in British North America.

Of course, *Roughing It* was conditioned by other important factors and, therefore, has different components and tones than *Our Village*. Mrs. Moodie had more functions than one to fulfil in writing her book. She wished to convey information to prospective immigrants, to tell her personal story of fortunes and misfortunes, and to create impressions and descriptions. She is, therefore, the essayist as well as the story-teller, and *Roughing It* is both a didactic book, an autobiography, and a sketch-book of pioneer life.

In *Our Village* the author's personality as a unifying factor is much less important. Although the sketches which are entirely devoted to seasonal country walks express Mitford's personal delight in nature, she is generally objective and does not obtrude with her personal fortunes.

Differences in the tone and flavour of the two books are largely due to the landscape which each writer focuses on. While Miss Mitford's sketches take on the gentle and fertile character of the Berkshire countryside, Mrs. Moodie's reflect the larger dimensions of the Canadian scene and the sense of challenge which the bold extremes of Canadian climate and landscape demanded.

An interesting coincidence may serve to conclude and to support the suggestion that *Roughing It in the Bush* has connections with *Our Village*. In 1840, a book very similar to Mrs. Moodie's, *A New Home — Who'll Follow?*, was published in Boston. Its author, Caroline Kirkland, was a refined New England lady who settled with her husband in Michigan in the 1830's. Many of her attitudes and responses to the wilderness and its inhabitants are similar to Mrs. Moodie's, as are many of her disappointments. Although her prose is more pretentious and sentimental than Susanna's, her book progresses by sketches of custom, character, and anecdote, and many of her topics are inevitably the same as those of *Roughing It*. But Mrs. Kirkland also serves to indicate the extent of Miss Mitford's influence:

If Miss Mitford, who has given us such charming glimpses of Aberleigh . . . had by some happy chance been translated to Michigan, what would she not have made of such materials as Tinkerville, Montacute, and Turnip?<sup>12</sup>

Very probably Miss Mitford would have made much the same of Caroline Kirkland's backwoods towns as she herself did, or as Mrs. Moodie did of her Cobourg and Peterborough environs.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Local Colour in Canadian Fiction". *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 28 (Jan. 1959), 176-189.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction, *Roughing It in the Bush*, New Canadian Library edition, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Howitt was the author of *Sketches of Natural History*, for children, and she later produced *Biographical Sketches of the Queens of Great Britain* (1851) in the wake of the success of the Strickland sisters, Agnes and Eliza. Mrs. Samuel Hall, having begun as an author of children's stories followed Mitford's successes with *Sketches of Irish Character* (1829) and *Lights and Shadows of Irish Life* (1838).

<sup>4</sup> Agnes Strickland was the author of several volumes of verse, including *Worcester Field; or, The Cavalier* (1826) in the manner of Sir Walter Scott. She also pro-

- duced *Old Friends and New Acquaintances* (1860 and 1861), two series of Suffolk sketches which it might have been Susanna's lot to write had she remained in England.
- <sup>5</sup> *La Belle Assemblée*, n.s. VI (1827) 15-19, 109-114, 247-251; n.s. VII (1828), 51-55; n.s. IX (1829), 21-24.
- <sup>6</sup> Preface to *Our Village*, vol. 1 (London, 1824).
- <sup>7</sup> The poetic tribute and the letters of Susanna Strickland to Mary Russell Mitford are in *The Friendships of Mary Russell Mitford as Recorded in Letters from Her Literary Correspondents*, edited by The Reverend A. G. L'Estrange, 2 vols. (London, 1882), vol. 1, pp. 196-198, 204-208, 212-213, 222-223. The tribute is dated June 2, 1829 and the last letter August 12, 1830. The quotation is from the first letter, July 31, 1829.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Pringle was another friend of the Strickland family, in fact, the person who carried the correspondence from Susanna to Mitford. Pringle was probably the man who introduced Susanna to John Dunbar Moodie. Both men had been in South Africa. At the time of Susanna's visit to London, Pringle was secretary to the Anti-Slavery Society. He was the author of *African Sketches* (1834) and *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (1835).
- <sup>9</sup> *Sketches of English life and Character* (London, The Weekend Library, 1928), pp. 152-3.
- <sup>10</sup> *La Belle Assemblée*, n.s. VII (1828), 51-55.
- <sup>11</sup> The sketches, "Old Woodruff and his Three Wives", "The Walk to Dummer", "Our Borrowing", "Tom Wilson's Emigration", "Uncle Joe and his Family", and "Brian, the Still Hunter", appeared in the *Literary Garland*, n.s. V (1847).
- <sup>12</sup> *A New Home*, p. 11.