

# HAPPILY EVER AFTER

*Canadian Women*

*in Fiction and Fact*

*Clara Thomas*

WHO CAN FIND A VIRTUOUS WOMAN? for her price is far above rubies”, said Solomon, and forthwith sketched her in some detail. His definition has constituted the ideal, and divergencies in fact and fiction have been merely variations from his standards. Fictionally, the model pattern has been the representation of the modest, capable, energetic wife and mother, bearing sorrows with fortitude and earning joy in her family’s devotion and the achievements of her home-making. The most familiar variation of the pattern, still well within the structure of “virtue”, has been the romantic rebel, revolting against her predestined “place”, but so charming, or gifted, or both, that *sometimes* an indulgent Providence has allowed her a happy ending.

In Canadian fiction, Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist* establishes memorable portrayals of the types in Mrs. Murchison and her daughter, Advena. Mrs. Murchison is the wife of John Murchison, a benignly patriarchal, hard-working, modestly prosperous manufacturer of stoves, a pillar of the small Ontario town of Elgin. She is introduced in her kitchen disposing of the affairs of her household, her husband, and her children with entire competence and a charm that is partly rooted in our nostalgic memories of grandmothers who seemed just like that, and partly in Miss Duncan’s combination of affection, acute observation and impeccable skill in her portraiture.

On such occasions as the entertaining of Dr. Drummond, the clergyman, Mrs. Murchison's pride in her housewifery finds its own triumphant manifestation:

The chicken salad gleamed at one end of the table and the scalloped oysters smoked delicious at the other. Lorne had charge of the cold tongue and Advena was entrusted with the pickled pears. The rest of the family were expected to think about the tea biscuits and the cake, for Lobelia had never yet had a successor that was any hand with company. . . . It was a table to do anybody credit, with its glossy damask and the old-fashioned silver and best china that Mrs. Murchison had brought as a bride to her housekeeping — for, thank goodness, her mother had known what was what in such matters . . . Mrs. Murchison came of a family of noted housekeepers; where she got her charm I don't know.

And all who read must share her satisfaction, both in the sheer physical appeal of the laden table and in the more formal appreciation of a ritual occasion, the company dinner. Mrs. Murchison is cut perfectly to the proverbial pattern of virtue, with skilful adaptations to her Canadian place and time, and she is rewarded traditionally — her children and her husband “rise up and call her blessed.”

Daughter Advena, however, cracks the mould. She reads when she should be cooking, retires to the roof of the house and pulls the ladder up after her in protest to taking music-lessons, cannot be counted upon to manage a day's preserving of cherries or strawberries, or indeed, for anything requiring the talents and application of the traditional housewife. A radical to the role of women, she puzzles and frustrates her mother who looks upon her enterprises with an uneasy mixture of forbearance, impatience and amazement:

Advena, indeed, might have married and removed no prop of the family economy. Mrs. Murchison would have been “sorry for the man” — she maintained a candour toward and about those belonging to her that permitted no illusions — but she would have stood cheerfully out of the way on her own account. . . .

Advena justified her existence by taking the university course for women at Toronto, and afterward teaching the English branches to the junior forms in the Collegiate Institute, which placed her arbitrarily outside the sphere of domestic criticism. Mrs. Murchison was thankful to have her there — outside — where little more could reasonably be expected of her than that she should be down in time for breakfast.

When Providence, in the form of Dr. Drummond, arranges a happy ending for Advena and the Rev. Hugh Finlay, Mrs. Murchison can be sure that one unworldly person has been well mated with another. But, in all practicality, she must still be a little “sorry for the man.”

IN THE STRICKLAND SISTERS, Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, Canada had remarkable prototypes, in fact, for Mrs. Murchison's and Advena's fictional types. In the decade between 1830 and 1840 Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill came, settled, endured and prevailed — but each in her own distinctive way. To neither was emigration in any way a radical move. The Stricklands were a solidly middle class family; when their father retired from his position as manager of the Greenland docks, in London, he bought a country house in Suffolk and devoted himself first to the education of his large family and then to the various cultivated pursuits of an educated country gentleman of the early nineteenth century. It was to perpetuate this kind of living that both the Traills and the Moodies emigrated. For Catharine Traill, the decision was a willing one:

Canada is the land of hope; here everything is new; everything is going forward; it is scarcely possible for arts, sciences, agriculture, manufacturers to retrograde. . . .

Children should be taught to appreciate the devoted love that has induced their parents to overcome the natural reluctance felt by all persons to quit forever the land of their forefathers . . . 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. *(Backwoods of Canada)*

On the contrary, Susanna Moodie rebelled at the thought of leaving England, particularly its congenial company and intellectual pursuits, for she and John Moodie were strongly disposed toward a literary life, and she describes her husband as “the poet, the author, the musician, the man of books, of refined taste and gentlemanly habits.” She was dismayed and appalled at an economic situation which made emigration the only prudent course, yet she recognized that “the half-pay of a subaltern officer, managed with a most rigid economy, is too small to supply the wants of a family; and if, of good family, not enough to maintain his original standing in society.” *(Roughing it in the Bush)*.

To marriage and to the Canadian plans, Catharine brought all the capabilities, the calm optimism, and the common sense of a nature which was essentially and strongly practical, empiric and pragmatic in its bent. She saw their early Canadian situation as a “Robinson Crusoe” sort of life; she welcomed the challenge, accepted the situation, and adapted to it with astonishing aptitude and grace. Beyond that, she wrote — patterns for living for other Canadian women, the Mrs. Murchisons of the future. *The Backwoods of Canada*, a record of the Traill's first

three years, published in 1936 in Charles Knight's "Library of Entertaining Knowledge", is exactly what it announces itself to be: it gives "information regarding the domestic economy of a settler's life" and it affords "every possible information to the wives and daughters of emigrants of the higher class who contemplate seeking a home among our Canadian Wilds." More than a third of the book describes the Traill's long journey to their land and the rest describes the flora and fauna, the Indians, and the customs and conditions that all settlers must expect to meet. Catharine's love of nature was, from the first, an absorbing hobby and a major sustaining interest which, when she embarked on a programme of self-education, carried her finally beyond the status of an amateur enthusiast and made her something of an international authority on Canada's plants and flowers. It was typical of the outward-going nature of her interests that, in *The Backwoods*, she devoted two paragraphs only to the attack of cholera which nearly killed her on arrival in Montreal, but she required more than forty pages to describe the birds, small animals and particularly the flowers which she observed around their holding near Peterborough.

She was frankly delighted to be rid of the pretentiousness which she deplored in English society: "We bush-ladies have a wholesome disregard of what Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so thinks and says. We pride ourselves on conforming to circumstances." In her writings, she was an eminent instructress on the skills of conformity: *The Backwoods'* final appendix of thirty-five pages of useful information of all kinds, including a collection of recipes for making maple-syrup, soft-soap, candles and vinegar, processes which might be unfamiliar to an Englishwoman-settler, is only a small beginning toward her *Female Emigrant's Guide* of 1855, a complete compendium of pioneer housewifery.

Catharine Traill is the Mrs. Beeton and the Fanny Farmer of nineteenth-century Canada, but she goes beyond either of these worthy pattern-makers. The pioneer wife's knowledge and capabilities had to extend far beyond the home, the kitchen and the promotion of gracious and thrifty living — ideally, she must also be competent in the garden, the fields, with the animals, as nurse and mid-wife, as manufacturer of clothing and, in emergencies, she must have hands as strong and head as clear as a man's. To wear out was frightfully common for the female pioneer; only the incorrigibly slovenly could rust out.

All the sections of the *Guide* ring with the authenticity of personal experience and the conviction of one who can instruct the newcomer, because for twenty years she has herself been evolving the pattern for maximum usefulness. Beyond that, her writing style provides a large bonus of enjoyment to the reader, for when

Catharine Traill wrote of what she knew, she commanded her language with a Jane Austenish clarity, precision and, sometimes, wit. On the dangers of fire, for instance, she writes:

Help from our neighbours we could not obtain. When we sent a messenger for one, he and all his family were battling with the fire on their own clearing; to a second, his fences were on fire — all hands were employed in saving the crops; a third, the barn was in danger; and so we were forced to rouse every energy that we could to overcome the danger. Ourselves, women and little children — all had to help; and this continued day after day. . . . The Autumn rains finally extinguished the fires all over the country, and the dread of their ravages was at an end for that year. . . .

In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one's hands and sit down in abject terror; it is better to be up and doing.

(*Female Emigrant's Guide*)

MANY OF THE SKETCHES for Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* were written contemporaneously with Catharine Traill's *Backwoods*. Though some of them had been published in Mr. Lovell's *Literary Garland*, the Montreal publication which, from 1838-1851, catered to the demands and desires of the female reader, *Roughing it* was not published as a book until 1852. In its conclusion Susanna Moodie announces an intention in direct contrast to her sister's: "If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain."

Susanna was, in fact, not a diarist, not a writer of calm expository prose, certainly not an instructress of prospective emigrants, but a gifted recorder of character, dialogue and incident, especially of a humourous nature. Like her sister, she had written and been published before coming to Canada, but her early life here made a great impact on her, extending talents of character-drawing and the recording of incident that she had exercised before, and releasing another that she had scarcely practised — the ability to see with a humourist's slant and to communicate, by description and dialogue, her amusement to others. She never lived comfortably with her comic vision, however, or lost her embarrassment at its incorrigible presence. She deplores her "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*).

In Canada, Susanna was thrust into the company of all sorts of people, few of whom were of her own social class and many of whom she found reprehensible, but almost always amusing. She could write of them without inhibition and she captured a whole gallery of them, in the very accents in which she heard them speak. From the ship's captain, through a long list — Satan, Tom Wilson, Betty Frye, John Monaghan, to the "little stumpy man", *Roughing it in the Bush* is alive with their presences. And in her sketches, no person comes as fully alive as Susanna, their authoress, for, first among our writers, she had the novelist's impulse and talent to demonstrate the changes and modifications effected by experience on personality — in this case, her own. She is recklessly self-revealing: a prejudiced, class-conscious, ill-equipped pioneer, sometimes the butt of her own stories, sometimes the heroine, passionately revolting against her circumstances, while slowly and uncomfortably adapting to them. Catharine Traill quietly states the achievement, while Susanna dramatizes the struggle with herself the storm centre, and her self-characterization has the energy and the contained variety of a successful fictional characterization.

In many ways she was, and she saw herself as, the rebel to her place and role, the Canadian ancestress of all the Advena Murchisons who step out of woman's accepted place because, temperamentally, they must, and who adapt to women's conventional place painfully, or not at all. In fact, Susanna was no less gallant than her sister: she endured primitive conditions for far longer than Catharine, because John Moodie, unlike Thomas Traill, was neither a prudently wise nor a successful settler; she bore several children while living in the bush and she won a succession of battles over fear and pride. Finally, the Englishwoman who had been the joke of her neighbours because she could not bake bread, could say with satisfaction: "I have contemplated a well-hoed ridge of potatoes on that bush farm with as much delight as in years long past I had experienced in examining a fine painting in some well-appointed drawing room." (*Roughing it in the Bush*).

In Canadian fiction, there is no more convincing descendant of the Susanna - Advena line than Penelope Wain, in Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*. Penny is doubly branded. She has moved away from society's moral standard for women by having an affair with Neil Macrae before he went to war, and she is the mother of a daughter whose birth she has kept secret from him. Socially, she has moved from her place to the man's world of the shipyards. She is a successful ship-designer and that rarest of fictional creatures, a "career woman" treated

with great insight, understanding and sensitivity by her creator. The steps in Penny's journey from the cold control that has become her armour, through the acceptance as inevitable of a renewal of her life with Neil, to finally, a tentative but grateful welcoming of his love, are told with imaginative comprehension and great delicacy of shading:

She was tied to this man, and the realization made her shiver. She was a prisoner of his maleness because once she had wanted him and he had refused to forget it. . . .

Then she knew that it was inevitable for him and Jean and herself to go on together, even if they could do nothing better than preserve themselves blindly for a future she felt to be epitomized by the events of the past few days. . . .

Suddenly Penny required his tenderness so greatly that it was as though all her life she had been starving for it. . . . but the habit of restraint, the cold control she had trained herself to acquire, was still unbreakable. . . .

Tears welled up in her eyes and receded without overflowing, and her fingers closed over his.

THERE IS A THIRD TYPE among Canada's virtuous women abundantly foreshadowed in the nineteenth century and well characterized in the fiction of the twentieth — the woman who could not prevail over circumstances, who did not have the sympathetic attention of Providence to provide her with the rewards due to her efforts. In December of 1836, when Catharine Traill and Susanna Moodie had already served their pioneer apprenticeships and were planning soon to move to relatively civilized areas, Anna Jameson, an Irishwoman-author, arrived in Upper Canada. Her husband, Robert Jameson, was Upper Canada's Attorney General, soon to be appointed Vice-Chancellor; though his wife had come over with some degree of hope for mending their long-standing separation and estrangement, it must be admitted that she was more hopeful of writing a book about her observations of life in Canada, particularly women's life, and perhaps, even, more determined to do so.

Her comments range over the whole of society, from the tight little oligarchy of Toronto to Chippewa Lodges at Sault Ste Marie, for her *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* is a journal of her entire stay, the winter of 1837 in Toronto, and a three month trip in the summer, to Sault Ste Marie and back. Anna Jameson did not meet Catharine Traill or Susanna Moodie and their achievements are triumphs in the face of her conclusions, at the same time sup-

porting her opinion that it is women of their class and of superior mind and talents who are most apt to adapt well to Canadian conditions.

I have not often in my life met with contented and cheerful-minded women, but I never met with so many repining and discontented women as in Canada. 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. . . .

I have observed that really accomplished women, accustomed to what is called the best society, have more resources here, and manage better than some women who have no pretensions of any kind.

Can you imagine the position of a fretful, frivolous woman, strong neither in mind or frame, abandoned to her own resources in the wilds of Upper Canada? I do not believe you *can* imagine anything so pitiable, so ridiculous, and, to borrow the Canadian word, "so shiftless." (*Winter Studies*)

She records many sad examples of ruined families: a man designated as "C", who "must sell all off, or see his wife perish before his eyes"; "Mrs. A. and Mrs. B., who came out here, as I well remember, full of health and bloom — what are they now? premature old women, sickly, careworn, without nerve or cheerfulness." Most pathetic of all is her sketch of the young woman whose husband is helpless from drink, the "Canadian nectar", as Catharine Traill called it: "a very young, very pretty, sad-looking creature, with her first baby at her bosom, whose husband was staggering and talking drunken gibberish at her side." Susanna Moodie and Catharine Traill joined Anna Jameson in designating free-flowing "spirits" as the greatest single hazard to the growth of civilized society in Upper Canada; true to her remarkable common sense, Catharine Traill enlarges on the comparatively benign qualities of beer and offers simple recipes for its brewing.

Anna Jameson does find hope for the future, however, in such settlements as the Scottish one north of Port Talbot on Lake Erie where the "Highlanders . . . bring hither all their clannish attachments, and their thrifty, dirty habits — and also their pride and their honesty." The ragged brood of ten children, speaking only Gaelic, with whom she is surrounded at Campbell's Inn, do represent a generation which may well better itself, for these people can already be considered prosperous and fortunate in their new country: "They have a property of two hundred acres of excellent land, of which sixty are cleared, and in cultivation: five cows and forty sheep." (*Winter Studies*, II). She finds hope, indeed, in all those who were "born here, or brought here by their parents." They "seemed to me very happy, and many of them had adopted a sort of pride in their country which I liked much." (*Winter Studies*, I).



In *The Imperialist*, Mrs. Crowe, who sells vegetables in the Elgin market every week, is a type of the latter, and a vindication of Anna Jameson's hope. As she waits in her farmhouse parlour which smelled of "varnish and whatever was inside the 'suite' of which [she] occupied the sofa" for the men who are coming to supper before the political meeting in the local school-house, Sara Jeannette Duncan sees in her, and quite truly so, "the sum of a certain measure of opportunity and service, an imperial figure in her bead trimming if the truth were known." Miss Duncan has romanticized Mrs. Crowe by that last epithet, but her description is infallible in its detail and its utterly convincing realism gives Mrs. Crowe both the dignity and the pathos which is her due.

She sat on the sofa in her best black dress with the bead trimming on neck and sleeves, a good deal pushed up and wrinkled across the bosom which had done all that would ever be required of it when it gave Elmore and Abe their start in life. Her wiry hands were crossed in her lap in the moment of waiting: you could tell by the look of them that they were not often crossed there. They were strenuous hands; the whole worn figure was strenuous, and the narrow set mouth, and the eyes which had looked after so many matters for so long, and the way the hair was drawn back into a knot in a fashion that would have given a phrenologist his opportunity.

This is the Canadian verbal parallel to Grant Wood's visual "American Gothic", both representations of enormous conviction, finely balanced between a sense of achievement and of the price it has exacted.

In *Fruits of the Earth*, Frederick Philip Grove deepened and darkened the portrait to near-tragic intensity. Abe Spalding with his wife Ruth, moved from settled Brant country, in Ontario, to take up land in Manitoba. Abe is a fine, even heroic figure, of whom many of us must say with pride, "here is an ancestor." But his drive to work the land, to make it produce and to make his community a decent and prosperous oasis in the vastness of the west, leaves him no time for marriage as partnership. To the land and its demands Ruth must be sacrificed, physically exhausted and emotionally starved by her life:

Abe had been dimly aware of changes going on about him. . . . Slow work, the work of the farm! Every step took a year. But the last step had been taken. He could afford to look back.

Yes, there in the door of the kitchen, stood Ruth. That was how she looked; not a sight to make a man's glance linger. Between her heavy bust and her wide massive hips, the last trace of a waistline had vanished. In the short, wide face, the wrinkles furrowing cheeks and forehead showed a thickness of skin such as to

preclude any delicacy in the mouldings which increasing years were bound to bring. Her expression betrayed a sense of disappointment with life.

There are thousands of such women in Canada's history. For them, as for Grove's Ruth, no effort was enough, there were no rewards of achievement or leisure to anticipate, because the land was insatiable in its demands, and so were the men whose lives were dominated by it:

Ruth sat down at the table. The silence was full of unexpected meanings. "Abe", she said, looking first down then straight at him. "I don't know —" And tears ran down her cheeks.

Uncomfortably he leaned back in his chair.

"This crop," Ruth went on: "it means a future. Why build?"

Abe gasped. "Why build? What else?"

"We have enough to live on. Move to town."

"Do you mean retire?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you know that I am not yet fifty?"

"Well" — Ruth moved a dish with nervous fingers. "I feel sixty."

**H**AGAR SHIPLEY, in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, is the culmination of all the Ruths in our fiction. Corroded and distorted by her environment and the self-willed tragedies of her life, physically grotesque in the ugliness of old age, yet Hagar is never quite dominated. Unloving and unloveable, yet wanting above all else to be loved, she is a total, completely believable, tragically mistaken human being. And before death, through the agency of the little clergyman whom she despises, but reluctantly admires as he sings a hymn for her, she comes to her moment of truth and self-knowledge:

This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that — simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed. . . .

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out and shackled all I touched.

Hagar is tragic, but above all, Hagar is real, with the energy of presence of the completely successful fictional characterization. Her reality can pierce any armour

that her reader may assemble; stunning is the recognition that, though we look to the Mrs. Murchisons of our past with complacency, the Hagers have been there all the time, desperately needing our understanding, while just as desperately repelling it.

Finally and predictably, given some knowledge of Susanna Moodie's temperament and talents, we look back to her work for the first portrait-vignette in our literature of the Mrs. Crowe — Ruth — Hager figure, and it is with a nice sense of the fitting that we find it. In her passage from rebel to the competencies and the satisfactions of the housewife-mother, Susanna had experienced the changes that a hard life made in a woman, and her fictional talent, its limitations themselves a part of the restrictions of her life, impelled her to record them. As she leaves the bush, finally, to begin a long-desired life in the comparative civilization of the town of Belleville, she describes herself as the life has made her:

For seven years I had lived out of the world entirely: my person had been rendered coarse by hard work and exposure to the weather, I looked double the age I really was, and my hair was already thickly sprinkled with grey. I clung to my solitude.

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