



Susanna Strickland was impulsive and defiant, with a wicked sense of humour.

Two against the wilds

Charlotte Gray writes of the famous sister pioneers with a literary bent

REVIEWED BY ROSEMARY SULLIVAN



Catharine Parr Strickland, sweet-tempered and placid, was her father's favourite child.

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill

By Charlotte Gray
Viking; 362 pages; \$35

IN THE HEYDAY OF LITERARY NATIONALISM when writers were busy scouring the past for Canadian stories, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill became familiar icons. They have walk-on parts in books by Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies and others. Moodie became the model for what Ms. Atwood called our national schizophrenia. She wrote *Roughing It in the Bush*, a narrative of the brutal life of the new settler, in order to deter gentlemen from immigrating to this country.

By contrast, her sister Catharine seems a bit of a Pollyanna. Her best-known book, *The Backwoods of Canada*, is a portrait of the industrious pioneer wife. One of the first to catalogue the flora and fauna of the new colony, Catharine was always more interesting as a naturalist than as a writer.

Charlotte Gray contends that our version of these two women is based on their rather pious 19th-century prose and poetry which was crafted to meet the tastes of a genteel audience. To find the real women, we must turn to their correspondence and occasional journalism. *Sisters in the Wilderness* is a masterly biography of the two sisters distilled from these sources.

Is there anything to match those middle-class achieving daughters? The Strickland girls were not quite the prodigies the three Brontë sisters were. Still, in a family of six daughters, five of them wrote. Their father, Thomas Strickland, had risen from penniless respectability to become manager of shipping docks on the Thames. At the age of 45, he retired to the Suffolk countryside and transformed himself into a bookish country squire who might have stepped out of a novel by Jane Austen. His most treasured possessions were books and memorabilia of Sir Isaac Newton and the desk of General Wolfe, hero of the Plains of Abraham. In the nursery, his children made up plays and wrote stories and, as they grew older, ransacked their father's library for his books on history, exotic voyages, astrology and witchcraft. To his daughter Catharine, he imparted his serious passion for botany.

In 1818, this bucolic world was shattered by the economic depression that followed the Napoleonic wars. The shock of near bankruptcy triggered Strickland's death at the age of 60. He left behind a widow of 46, six unmarried daughters and two adolescent sons.

For girls, there were two ways out of genteel poverty: they could marry or write books. Though it was still not considered respectable for a gentlewoman to earn her own living from writing (Horace Walpole had called Mary Wollstonecraft and her followers "hyenas in petticoats"), this is exactly what the Strickland daughters set out to do. There were more than 300 newspapers in England in the 1820s, and numerous booksellers and publishers had discovered that women's writing sold. Eliza was soon editing *The Court Journal*, Agnes and Jane were publishing "rapture-filled poetry," Catharine was writing children's books and Susanna was trying her hand at being a literary bluestocking in London.

According to Ms. Gray, Susanna was the more complex of the sisters. As a teenager she had affronted her family by becoming a Nonconformist and by writing pamphlets



Catharine at 96, on the porch at Westove in 1898, with two of her granddaughters: undeniably 'a wonderful old lady.'

against slavery for the Abolitionist movement. Soon, writing poems, book reviews, songs and stories, she was being touted as one of the brightest among the new women writers. Ms. Gray reports that Susanna was both "intoxicated and embarrassed by her hunger for fame." But she lacked the confidence to sustain a career on her own. To avoid the prospect of ending up an impecunious spinster writer, both she and Catharine opted for marriage.

They married penniless Scotsmen pensioned off by the British army at half-pay, "a class disastrously familiar to the mothers of eligible daughters in early 19th-century England." Land agents from the colonies were flooding England with stories of free land and the salubrious Canadian climate. Knowing they could not afford a gentleman's life in England, soon Moodie and Traill were musing about estates in the New World. None of the hucksters mentioned the back-breaking toil. In 1832, leaving comfortable if threadbare lives and promising literary careers, the sisters headed to the colonies. Their brother Samuel was already there. Catharine was 30 and Susanna 29. They would never see their mother and sisters again.

Ms. Gray is particularly moving in her portrait of pioneer life: the raw landscape, the endless journeys, the hazards of travel, the terrors of lonely settlements. Alternating between stories of the Moodie and Traill families, she slowly builds a portrait of disaster.

The stamina of the women is astonishing. Both were more practical than their men. Susanna's husband, John Dunbar Moodie "was never a man to weigh his options wisely." He made disastrous decisions, pulling out of a property just when it might have succeeded, or digging himself into debt to the Cobourg moneylenders to buy farm equipment and hire men. Thomas Traill was equally incompetent, and sank into melancholy and clinical depression. Both men managed to run through their wives' small inheritances.

Life in the backwoods was "a back-breaking, soul-destroying struggle," but still, they might have succeeded had the bottom not fallen out of the Canadian economy in the late 1830s. They found themselves sitting on properties no one would buy. Malaria was rampant on the frontier, and both sisters went through several winters of hunger. Only family charity from England saved them. Pathetically, because they couldn't bear to confess how destitute they really were, sometimes those Suffolk Care packages contained impractical ball gowns and dancing shoes.

In 1838, Susanna's husband wangled a commission in the Queen's Own Regiment, fighting William Lyon Mackenzie's Yankee rebels who were staging raids across the border to free Canada. Susanna was left to run the isolated farm on her own. Moodie wrote heartfelt letters back home: "Dearest Susie, my good old wife and sweet babes ... I could not live long without seeing you all

again." At least, according to Ms. Gray, Susanna was consoled by the fact that she loved her husband passionately. They were friends and collaborators. He always supported her in her writing.

Catharine had no such consolation. As her husband sank into debilitating melancholy, her children went hungry. They were even too poor to afford tallow for candles; at night they burnt pine knots to provide light. Her hungry five-year-old son planted his mother's crested silver spoons in the garden, hoping they would grow.

Despite their penury, Susanna and Catharine tried hard to maintain their social standing. In their own minds, education put them at the top of the social hierarchy well above their Irish and Yankee neighbours. Oddly enough, however, Native people were exempt from their snobbery. As Ms. Gray speculates, the sisters had read books in their father's library about the Noble Savages of North America and so they treated their Native neighbours as friends. Catharine wore deerskin moccasins and dosed her children with Native remedies. An Indian visitor could sit at Susanna's table, though the Irish servant was never accorded the same courtesy.

Like all pioneer women, the sisters were productive. Susanna had seven babies in 11 years; Catharine had nine in 15 years, her last when she was 46. They considered themselves professional authors earning money on which their families' welfare depended, and, with ruthless and impressive self-discipline, both structured their days and family duties around their writing.

Back in England, their elder sisters also continued the "scribbling mania." Agnes Strickland became famous for her string of imperious royal biographies, including the multi-volumed *The Queens of England*. When Susanna dedicated *Roughing It in the Bush* to her, Agnes was not impressed. In her opinion, the book smeared the family's good name. Susanna had described herself as living in a log cabin like an Irish servant and mixing with farm labourers, drunks and "barbarous Yankee squatters." Agnes never forgave Susanna this mortification and cut her out of her substantial will.

Constantly cheated by London publishers, neither Susanna nor Catharine ever got much money for their books, but they secured fame for themselves in Canada. Ms. Gray describes Susanna: "The citizens of Belleville held in awe this accomplished woman who smoked a clay pipe as she hoed her vegetables or scattered seed for the hens in the backyard." At the end of her long life (she died at the age of 97), Catharine was honoured with a Testimonial Fund raised by Sir Sanford Fleming, and signed by the Who's Who of the intellectual establishment of the 1890s. Journalists made pilgrimages to Lakefield to interview her as a living legend.

Were the sisters good writers? *Roughing It in the Bush* was a bestseller, and came close to outselling one of the all-time commercial successes of 19th-century America: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Because of American copyright infringements, Susanna saw little of the money.)

If they weren't the Brontës, still they left their mark, helping to establish a literary tradition in Canada. And their progeny were as numerous as their books. Between them, Catharine, Susanna and their brother Sam left 111 grandchildren to populate the new Canada.

Rosemary Sullivan is a biographer fascinated by family histories. In the spring she will publish her third collection of poems, *The Bone Ladder: Poems Selected and New*.