



## Written into history

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

By Charlotte Gray  
*Viking, 379 pp., \$35*

BY DIANE SCHOEMPERLEN

**S**usanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill have long been icons in the Canadian literary landscape, thanks to their own works — Susanna is known for *Roughing It in the Bush* and Catharine for *The Backwoods of Canada* — and to their frequent guest appearances in the books of many other Canadian writers. In Charlotte Gray's wonderful new biography, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, the icons are brought to life as two remarkable women whose close relationship never faltered throughout their long and often challenging lives. Relying not only on the sisters' own published works, but also on their personal papers and three recently released volumes of their correspondence, Gray draws a compelling and insightful picture of these two very different women and the time in which they lived.

The two youngest girls in a family of six daughters and two sons, the sisters had an idyllic childhood in rural England. One year older than Susanna, Catharine was the family pet and clearly their father's favourite, a relationship that Susanna envied and from which she felt excluded. The differences between the two girls were apparent from the beginning: Catharine was a cheerful, loving child with a sunny and confident disposition. Susanna, on the other hand, was "red-haired and short-tempered" and, by her own admission, "the creature of extremes, the child of impulse."

Their comfortable lives were forever changed by the death of their father, Thomas Strickland, in 1818, at the age of 60. Plunged into a life "now constricted by genteel poverty and rural isolation," the

adolescent sisters became even closer: "Only Catharine could cope with Susanna's emotional intensity. While Susanna resented Catharine's imperturbable patience, she also adored her."

Of the six Strickland daughters, five would go on to become published authors. In England, it was an era of intellectual ferment, when writing "was beginning to be both respectable and lucrative for women." The first of the family to appear in print was Agnes, the second-oldest sister who would exert an important, not always positive, influence in the lives of Catharine and Susanna.

In 1831, Susanna married Lieutenant John Dunbar Moodie. She had some reservations, afraid that her decision to marry would interfere with her ambition to be a famous writer. Wryly, she observed: "My blue stockings, since I became a wife, have turned so pale that I think they will soon be quite white, or at least only tinged with a hue of London smoke." A year later, Catharine married Thomas Traill, an old friend of John Moodie. It was a marriage disapproved of by Catharine's family, described by Agnes as "a most upsetting affair, from which their mother never really recovered."

Although the two men "were complete opposites in looks and personality," by Gray's estimation, they had one important thing in common: Neither was having much success in England. Both couples soon made the decision to join "the flood tide of emigrants to Canada." The sisters and their husbands had more or less convinced themselves that this would be a great adventure and that, "with their brains, education and manners, they would effortlessly rise to the top of the colonial society ... [and] form the land-owning cream of Upper Canada." They were wrong.

Although they were reunited with their brother, Samuel, who was flourishing in Canada, Catharine and Susanna would never see England, their mother, or their sisters again. As Gray observes, "Being



Susanna Moodie

wrenched from one's homeland leaves deep scars in the psyche of every emigrant in any era: Susanna and Catharine bore these scars for the rest of their long lives."

In Canada, it quickly became clear that "survival was a back-breaking, soul-destroying struggle." Catharine and Susanna stepped into a world in which the advantages and accomplishments they had taken for granted back in England were of no consequence at all. Their lives were consistently made even more difficult by the fact that neither of their husbands possessed "the physical skills and abilities required to be pioneers in a hostile frontier landscape."

Throughout the following chapters, Gray makes it clear that the two women were far more resilient and competent than their spouses. Not only did they persevere through the physical hardships of life in the wilderness, they had babies, wrote books, and made money, too. The motto of both women could well have been these words from Catharine's *The Canadian Settler's Guide*: "In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one's hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror: it is better to be up and doing." Up and doing, indeed they were, being faced, it seems, with one emergency after another.

With meticulous research and an immensely readable style, Gray chronicles the sisters' never-ending struggles and



Catharine Parr Traill

their eventual rise to literary fame in the new land. Although they did not always live within easy visiting distance, Catharine, with her cheerful stoicism, and Susanna, with her darker intensity, remained extremely close, each providing essential support to the other.

They were both long-lived. Susanna died "a wretched, anguished death" in Toronto in March, 1885, with Catharine at her bedside. She was 82 years old. Catharine lived for another 14 years: "Catharine's final hours were far more peaceful than those of her sister, Susanna. With the blessed calm she had radiated throughout her life, she died quietly in her sleep ... on August 29, 1899." A Canadian icon by then, she had outlived all family members of her generation and three of her own children. At the end of her life, she was "one of the few souls ... who could remember the celebrations after the Battle of Waterloo, and who knew the Dominion of Canada when it was still a wilderness."

*Sisters in the Wilderness* is an essential and outstanding addition to the annals of Canadian history and will surely be recognized as the definitive biography of two of our most important writers.

Diane Schoemperlen is the author of *Forms of Devotion*. She is currently at work on a novel.