

Weekend BOOKS

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The biography of my biography

As author Charlotte Gray hits the road to promote her new work, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, she meditates on readers' — and her own — fascination with other people's lives



Biography is enjoying a minor Golden Age. There is more to this assertion than self-interest — although I'd like to cash in. The claim originates in a rash of academic conferences and learned articles about the popularity of biography.

And publishers have been quick to exploit this Golden Age: Did we really need a fifth biography of Lord Byron, or the story of C.M. Doughty, yet another "intrepid, romantic 19th-century traveller?" Publishers have also obligingly accommodated readers' short attention spans. Long lives are poured into short books in biography collections from Weidenfeld & Nicolson (Marcel Proust in 128 pages), Macmillan (James Joyce in 144 pages) and Sutton Publishing (Winston Churchill in 105 pages.) In Canada, we have our own version of snapshot biography: potted prime ministers. No less than four books containing short essays on Canada's prime ministers have appeared in the past two to three months.

What lies behind the appetite for other people's lives? A good biography tells two stories: the life, and the social and political context in which the life was lived. That's why Benjamin Disraeli advised: "Read no history, only biography, for that is life without theory." There is no better source on Canada's role in the First World War, for example, and our growing sense of nationhood, than Sandra Gwyn's *Tapestry of War*, an enthralling account of a handful of Canadians caught up in European politics between 1914 and 1918.

But there is a more profound reason for the fascination with biography. A biography engenders a thrilling intimacy between reader and subject. We peek behind the public achievements to touch the daily life of an exceptional individual. We can see how a fellow human being dealt with loss, romance, failure, success, appalling family politics,

bankruptcy or untold wealth. No matter that the biographer's subject is separated from us by time or gender. The age-old questions resonate down the centuries: Do worldly achievements come at a price? Are hidden lives important or interesting? Are character flaws more interesting than strengths? What insight into my life can I gain from looking at some else's? These questions used to be the stuff of fiction. Characters in 19th-century epics by George Eliot or Leo Tolstoy wrestle with the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. But modern novels are too self-conscious and ironic for such moralizing. So readers who want Real Life turn to real lives.

If a biography gives a reader a thrilling sense of intimacy, then how much more absorbing is the relationship between biographer and subject! I have spent the past two years with the Strickland sisters, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. I now feel that I know them as well as I do most of my friends. The sisters, both published authors, arrived in Upper Canada in 1832: Their lives, and gradual adaptation to a raw landscape and a young country, mirror the story of Canada in the 19th century.

My relationship with each sister is different. Susanna was first and foremost a writer, and only in her most intimate, wax-spattered letters to her husband did I catch her true voice — sharp, humorous and affectionate. As I tunneled deeper into her life, I watched with admiration as she shaped experience into narrative. An anecdote might first appear in a letter to her husband, pop up again with amusing embellishments for the Canadian readers of Susanna's *Victoria Magazine*, then make a third appearance, with gruesome details omitted, for the genteel British purchasers of Susanna's most famous book: *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852).

Her sister, Catharine Parr Traill, was always more of a talker than a writer. As soon as I started

to read her letters and journals, I could hear her speak. She chattered on about spring flowers, children's illnesses, birdsong, money troubles, rheumatism and relatives. Her cheery (and ill-placed) optimism bubbled up in her best-known publication: *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836).

These two women are Susanna and Kate to me. I have suffered with them through childbirth, the treachery of publishers, widowhood. I have to remind myself that the relationship is one-way: They don't know me.

And I also have to remind myself of the distance between them and myself. I write in the strange grey area of "creative non-fiction": a genre that straddles the ever-more-porous border between stuff-you-get-from-records and stuff-you-make-up. The "draperies and decencies" (in Virginia Woolf's phrase) of Victorian biography have been yanked aside: These days, writers speculate freely about sex lives, hidden scandals and psychological tensions. A cardinal rule of biography used to be that you couldn't make up dialogue, but several recent biographies, and the newly-published "autobiography" of Joseph Stalin by Richard Lourie, have trampled that taboo.

I place myself firmly on the "fact" side of the border. I don't invent. But I take known facts, and imagine. I imagine Susanna in the act of writing in her cold, damp log cabin. I picture the elderly Catharine struggling to tighten the screws of her flower press, her hands gnarled with arthritis. From the relatively little documentation available, I tried to read between the lines of those of their letters that have survived. I used my judgment in what to include and what to omit; what to emphasize and what to ignore; how to distill an untidy, sprawling mass of facts into a tidy package.

All biographers face this challenge: how to give shape and meaning to a life. "The dead are

friend, "I will neither marry a soldier nor leave my country for ever. You may call me a jilt or a flirt or what you please ..."

But was it as simple as a distaste for the life of a soldier's wife in a foreign country? Surely there was more to her decision than fear of change. I pored over her exuberant accounts of literary society in Regency London, and her delight in being noticed in the salons as an up-and-coming bluestocking (the fashionable term for a female intellectual.) "There is to me a charm in literary society which none other can give," she noted. Her career was taking off: She notes all the publications that were buying her stories. I became convinced that Susanna had resolved to put literary ambition ahead of marital security.

But then the narrative lurched off in another direction. Susanna changed her mind again. On April 4, 1831, six months after she had jilted her fiancé, she walked up the aisle of St. Pancras Parish Church, London, and promised to love, honour and obey John Moodie.

As I sketched this out, I stuck to my interpretation of Susanna's motives. I suggested that she had faced a very modern dilemma: career or marriage. I know that, when faced with the same dilemma myself 150 years later — whether to stay in England and make my career as a writer there, or move to Canada for personal reasons — I dithered around just as Susanna had. And Susanna Moodie dropped enough hints that she knew, after her wedding, she had turned her back on a promising career in England when she pronounced that "fatal obey." She made a plaintive note that "my blue stockings, since I became a wife, have turned ... pale."

Nevertheless, a "but" lingers in my mind. Perhaps, 170 years ago, the idea of leaving her country really was enough to kill romance. I may be

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at our mercy," Woolf observed. Biographers presumptuously impose a recognizable plot line onto the messy, incoherent details of a life. The "truth" packaged in a biography often reflects more on the attitudes and context of the biographer's life than the subject's.

A case in point. In 1830, the young, beautiful and talented Susanna Strickland became engaged to Lieutenant John Moodie, recently returned from South Africa. They had met only a few weeks earlier, but both were in the market for marriage. It was a magical romance, and even now John's love letters to his "dearest Suky" pulse with erotic intensity. "My dearest, how long shall my arms on awaking from some sweet dream of you return empty to my breast."

However, a few weeks later, Susanna broke off the engagement.

Susanna's own explanation for this abrupt change of mind was that, as she wrote to a

convinced that Susanna was torn between career and marriage, but how would a 19th-century biographer have handled the material?

When I finished writing *Sisters in the Wilderness*, I felt bereaved. For two years, I have lived in a private bubble with Kate and Susanna: now I have to launch my version of their lives into the world. Neither of them is my alter ego: I'm not even sure that if I met either of the Strickland sisters in the flesh, we would become friends. Although I am fond of them both, I have found them at different times infuriating, impressive and pathetic. But that is the lopsided nature of the intimacy between biographer and subject: I'll never know what they would think of me.

Charlotte Gray will discuss her latest book, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill (Viking, 379 pp., \$35), at the 10-day International Festival of Authors at Toronto's Harbourfront on Sat., Oct. 30.