Sisters wielded their pen against 'harpies of hunger'

SISTERS IN THE WILDERNESS
The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill
By Charlotte Gray
Viking, 379 pages, $35

REVIEWED BY
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It is a truth that Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill are icons of Canadian literature. A score of biographers and academics (notably Michael Peterman, John Thurston and Clara Thomas), have put the sisters and their writings under the microscope, and a number of creative writers (notably Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields and Timothy Findley) have used them — particularly the complex Moodie — in their works.

Besides reading one or both of their most famous books — Susanna's *Roughing it in the Bush*, Catharine's *The Backwoods of Canada* — way back when, references keep cropping up, and some of us make vague resolutions to one day sort these mythic dramas out. Now, in her elegant and well-researched *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Charlotte Gray has done it for us.

Catharine Strickland was born in 1802, and her sister Susanna the following year, about the time that their parents, a well-educated merchant couple, moved from London to Suffolk to set up as gentry. Despite their big house, they never got beyond the fringes of county society, and their six daughters and two sons grew up in a world of their own reminiscent of the Brontës': lessons in Latin and Shakespeare from their father, long rambles through the countryside, the spinning of imaginary sagas in the evenings. It was a perfect nursery for writers.

In 1819, their father's investments crashed. Already frail, he soon died. The servants disappeared; the brothers set off for the colonies; the sisters were left in penny-pinching seclusion with their mother. It was Agnes, the second eldest sister, who first began writing for money, and four of the others — Eliza, Jane, Catharine and Susanna — soon followed, showering the magazines and literary annuals of Regency London with their stories and poems. Before long, they achieved a minor niche in London literary society.

This modest success was particularly stimulating for Susanna. Highly strung and ambitious, she was the family tease and irritating rebel. Catharine, in contrast, was the family pet: steady, sweet-tempered, ever-optimistic. As the youngest of the sisters, they were very close. Wrote Susanna: "I know I would rather give up the pen than lose the affection of my beloved sister Catharine, who is dearer to me than all the world."

In 1830, when the sisters were seemingly headed for bluestocking spinsterhood, their lives took a sudden turn. Lieutenant John Moodie, an exuberant Orkneyman back from a fling at settlement in South Africa, swept Susanna off her feet. Within a year they married (their passion for each other would last all their lives), and in their honeymoon cottage John Moodie introduced his sister-in-law Catharine to a friend and fellow Orkneyman, Thomas Traill. They, too, soon married. Like John, Thomas's only income was his half-pay from service in the Napoleonic wars. Unlike John, Thomas lacked energy and was inclined to melancholy. This match worried her family, but Catharine wrote to a friend: "My dear husband is . . . all that a faithful heart can desire in a partner for life." Thomas would turn out to be a broken reed in the Canadian wilderness, but Catharine would always love him.

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What were the Moodies and the Traills to live on? In an England in depression, there was a lot of slick propaganda in circulation promising landed gentry lives in the New World. Inevitably, the newlyweds caught emigration fever. It was a huge step, but as retired officers, John and Thomas were eligible for land in Upper Canada. In 1832, Susanna and Catharine sailed away with their husbands, leaving behind promising literary careers. Two months later, they found themselves standing in "the land of stumps" on the Rice Lake Plains, north of Cobourg.

Given their ladylike backgrounds, the hardships facing the sisters were appalling, and they were perfectly unprepared for it. They were far from alone in their dismay, but the significant fact for Canadian memory and literature is that Susanna and Catharine, toiling to maintain an air of gentility through frightening shifts of fortune, and raising their numerous children in drafty cabins over which "hunger and want hovered like harpies," wrote it all down.

Susanna lived until 1885, Catharine until 1889. Decade after decade they wrote books, some good, some bad. Besides their scary books on Canada, and their instructive books on Canada (Catharine was particularly good on botany), they churned out cautionary tales for children, romantic novels set in Europe and reams of articles and poems. Given that they grew up with a conviction that they were writers before all, given that they were constantly in need of money, *how* did they find the time? This is a delicious read.

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Anne Hart, who lives in St. John's, is the author of The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple *and* The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot. *In 1998, her documentary on Mina Benson Hubbard, an early explorer of Labrador who grew up on a backwoods farm on the Rice Lake Plains, was broadcast by CBC Radio One's* Ideas.

Like the Brontës, the Strickland sisters, among them the two who later became Susanna Moodie (top) and Catharine Parr Traill, turned to writing to make a desperate living.