Traill's Canadian Settlers

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In the decade of the 1820's, after the financial disaster and subsequent death of their father, the Stricklands of Reydon Hall, in Suffolk, became a writing family. They were eventually to become a kind of writing corporation, working with tireless industry and a large measure of success in a wide range of fields. Agnes and Elizabeth engaged in the English and Scottish historical research which resulted in *Lives of the Queens of England*, Jane in Roman history, Susanna in fiction and poetry, and Catharine in stories for children in which curiosity about the world of nature and sympathy for its creatures were equally major components. Two of Catharine's children's books were *The Young Emigrants* and *Canadian Crusoes*--both set in pioneer Canada. For Catharine was intrigued by this country; in 1826--six years before she married Thomas Traill and emigrated to Canada--*The Young Emigrants* was published anonymously in London. It was followed, two decades after immigration, by *Canadian Crusoes*.

For her earlier book, Miss Strickland credited two contemporary travelogues with background information: Lieutenant Hall's *Travels in Canada* 1816-17 and John Howison's *Sketches of Upper Canada;* as well, she almost certainly used material from the letters of friends of the family who had emigrated to Canada in 1821. She was also infected with an enthusiasm for emigration because her brother, Samuel, had emigrated to Canada in 1825 and had at first gone to stay with "Colonel B" and his family, the friends whose letters were her source. Before her book went to the printer the first of her brother's letters home may even have reached Reydon Hall. In any case both Catharine's attitude to life and her philosophy of emigration are already formed in *The Young Emigrants*. In her later writings of Canada, she accumulated masses of information, but her tone remained constant--a recognition of opportunity in the venture, a large element of adventure, and a large measure of acceptance, both of hard work and duty. However, her social attitudes were modified and levelled by her own experiences in Canada.

The Young Emigrants tells the story of the Clarence family–father, mother, and their children, Richard, Agnes and Ellen—who, because of financial reverses, are forced to emigrate to Canada. Because of ill-health, Ellen is left in England with an elderly aunt. As a narrative device, the separation of the rest of the family from Ellen is very useful; it allows the major portion of the book to be taken up with Agnes' and Richard's letters to their sister and it also provides the occasion for a dramatic finale when Ellen at last joins her family in the new land.

The book was written for children and it is packed with sensible moral and practical advice. Its subtitle is *Pictures of Canada, Calculated To Amuse and Instruct the Mind of The Young Human.* It is strong in moral didacticism: young Richard, for instance, does not uselessly rebel against giving up his "classical education"; instead, he goes to learn some of the rudiments of farming from a helpful neighbour (Many years later Samuel Strickland himself founded a school at Lakefield for the training of English youths who wished to become Canadian

farmers). His sister Agnes goes to the same farmer's wife to take lessons in gardening, cooking, preserving fruits and vegetables, and the care of poultry. Both of them comfort and advise each other and their reluctant sister, Ellen, with high moral sentiments:

> "In America, what will be the use of those accomplishments, that Agnes and I have spent so much time in attaining? Will not our skill in music, French, and Drawing, be all thrown away, among the wild woods of Canada?"
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> "My dear sister," said Richard, "if you see things in their right light you will perceive that your French will be useful to you in conversing with the Canadians, who speak that language. Music will cheer our evenings, after the toils of the day; and as to drawing, remember, Ellen, how many beautiful flowers Canada produces, which will form new and interesting studies for your pencil . . . ."
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> "Our brother is right, my dear Ellen," said Agnes. "We ought not to expect to pass all our lives in sloth and inactivity; neither, in fact, can we do so. For my part, I am so well convinced of the wisdom and propriety of Richard's advice, that I shall feel proud in regulating my future conduct by his excellent example, convinced that, by so doing, I can hardly act amiss."
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> When Ellen heard this, she felt ashamed of her discontented and repining feelings. "I know," said she, sighing, "that I am very weak, in suffering myself to feel so unhappy; but this has been such a sudden shock, that it will take some little time to overcome it. Besides, I have always conceived such a great dislike to the character of the Americans that I cannot endure the idea of living among them."
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> "And so have I, my dear Ellen," replied Richard: "but perhaps it is to cure us of such an ungenerous prejudice, that it has pleased God to appoint our future dwellings among them" (*The Young Emigrants,* pp. 12-13).

Though the Clarences are deprived of their fortune at home, they are obviously among a privileged class when they arrive in Canada. Richard describes their first "small log-house" as containing five rooms, "the largest of which was barely seven feet in height and fifteen feet by thirteen in size. The upper rooms were very inconvenient as the roof of a Canadian log-hut is built so slanting, that you can but just stand upright in the middle of them: There was a kitchen and store-room, ice-house and root-house." Even more indicative of their status is their befriending of, and then hiring of, a destitute Scottish family whom Richard encounters in Quebec City. He sees a ragged boy with a starving baby, buys the child some buns, and persuades his father to visit the family in their miserable corner of a French widow's shanty. The Clarences find that these people are Gordons from the county of Sutherland in Scotland, that the mother has died on the voyage over, leaving the baby, Annie, an older daughter, Flora, and the son, Andrew. Their father is just recovering from a bout of fever, and they are out of both food and money. The Gordons are at least as strange and alien to the Clarences as are the French Canadians, because both their present destitution and their background of marginal poverty are outside the experience of a formerly well-to-do English family.

> "And what can you do, Andrew?" said my father. Andrew said he could plow and harrow and reap; tend cattle, and do any other work that was within his strength. "Besides these things," said he, "I can spin yarn and knit stockings, and

comforters, and mittens, and night-caps.''

We could not help laughing at this enumeration of Andrew's accomplishments. ''Whoever heard before, of a boy of your age knitting stockings and night-caps?'' said I, with some indignation, for which indeed I was much to blame (*The Young Emigrants,* p. 79).

Never after she actually came herself to Canada, did Catharine Traill write of an actual example of destitution as she did in this book. Her transposition of Mr. Gordon's account of his family eviction from his land in Scotland is authenticated in every account of the Highland Clearances. Its wording is almost exactly reproduced, for instance, in the various documented reports used by John Prebble in his *The Highland Clearances.* In the words of *The Young Emigrants*:

Our good laird died and the lands fell under the guardianship of strangers, and shortly afterwards I, and many more of my unfortunate countrymen, received orders to quit the farms which we had rented for so many years, and seek other homes for ourselves and our children. We exposulated, but in vain: The orders were positive. The heiress was in another country, where our lamentations did not and could not reach her. . . .

Fifty families left our district that day. And oh! Sir, there were tears, and lamentations, and breaking hearts, as we stood on the top of the hill that overlooked our native valley, and cast a last, long look at our beloved homes, which we were leaving forever. Not a wreath of smoke was to be seen from our chimneys; the sound of labour and joy was hushed in our desolate cabins: all was silent and gloomy like our own sad feelings. There were bitter wailings among the old and young that day. It was like the lamentations spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah, foretelling the captivity of Judah: ''Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him; but weep sore for him that goeth away, for he shall return no more, nor see his native country'' (pp. 73-74).

The context of destitution that the Gordons had known is not Catharine's own, but she knows it exists and her knowledge colours this, and all her later, writing of Canada. To make opportunity of the necessity of emigration and to see in that necessity the work of divine providence is a part of her personal faith and, significantly, the accepted ethos of British middle-class society in her day. Catharine thinks in terms of systems and structures--a divinely-ordained structure with every part appointed. She may not be any less troubled by individual deviants from an accepted social system than her sister, Susanna Moodie, but to Catharine it was unbefitting her function as a writer to dwell on these.

Instead it is always the positive hope towards which she directs her pen. In *The Young Emigrants,* the Clarence family befriends the Gordons and then engages them as servants. They journey to Upper Canada, and together they succeed in the process of establishing themselves on their new land in the Bronte district, overlooking Lake Ontario. ''Roselands,'' called after the Clarences' English home, is a holding of something over 800 acres. Although Richard's letter to Ellen had called it a ''crude log-hut'' with not even a ''*wild rose* on the estate when we came,'' it is quite obviously meant eventually to fulfill an English ''Gentleman's'' expectations of Canada. Even in its first ''crude state'' it certainly far exceeded the actuality which Thomas and Catharine Traill met when they came to Canada six years later.

With the help of their neighbours, the Clarences set about building a house more to their taste. Also, with help they cut trees, cleared land, and planted and harvested their first crop. Letters home to Ellen are full of the details of their lives. If these details, read by prospective emigrants of a poorer status than the Clarences, would arouse false expectations about the ease and success of the settling enterprise, they would also give to their readers a great variety of detailed information about *flora* and *fauna,* agricultural processes, the proximity and customs of the Indians, and a general spirit of optimism about Canada's future.

> Papa has given us a waste bit of land, on which we are to build a school-house for the benefit of the children of the Irish neighbours who inhabit the village and who are almost as little acquainted with the duties of Christianity as the poor Indians themselves. We hope to induce the Iroquois to send their children to us, that we may educate them and teach them the knowledge of God; and I hope it will please Him to bless our endeavours with success (*The Young Emigrants,* p. 126).

Four months later Agnes reports to Ellen that the school is beginning to prosper. Though at first poorly attended and regarded with suspicion by both the Irish and the neighboring Indians, "we have now twenty-five regular scholars; and I am happy to say that a considerable alteration has already taken place in the manners and behavior of the inhabitants of the village, which, when we first settled here, was a sad, wicked, disorderly place" (*The Young Emigrants,* p. 148).

Ruth Marks of the Toronto Public Library, who wrote the introduction to the facsimile addition of *The Young Emigrants* (Johnson reprint, 1969), points out that travelogues for children were a popular method of imparting instruction and information about foreign lands, and that this book "seems to be the only known account written especially for children of travel and settlement in Upper Canada as it was in that period of early colonization" (*The Young Emigrants,* Preface, ix). These young emigrants were privileged children; even their destitute protégés, the Gordons, under the protection of the Clarences became privileged, though they were definitely dependent in terms of the only social structure which Catharine Strickland could envisage--the only one of which, in 1826, she had any experience:

> Andrew and Flora have made many comfortable additions to our travelling attire, by knitting warm mittens and comforters, which we find very useful. . . . we are very fortunate in having such faithful and industrious domestics: both father and children seem to vie with each other in attention to our comforts, and endeavour by every possible means, to show their gratitude for the kindness they received at our hands, when they were in sickness and distress, and without friends or anyone to pity and relieve them (*The Young Emigrants,* p. 138).

Catharine Strickland's social attitudes were modified and levelled by her own experiences in Canada. Her naturalist's enthusiasm, precision of detail, and curiosity — qualities which account for a large part of the textual detail of *The Young Emigrants* — were extended and fulfilled by her years in Canada. And her experience of pioneering dimmed neither her enthusiasm nor her sense of opportunity in the enterprise of Canadian settlement. *The Canadian Crusoes* (1852), later published as *Lost in the Backwoods* (1882),[1] is a pleasant adaptation and transposition of one of the most powerful fables in western literature to a Canadian setting. It is also its author's own fantasy of wish-fulfillment

for the future peace, prosperity, and Christian brotherhood of the Canadian people. The book was written for children after Catharine Traill had been in Canada for nearly twenty years, and after she had assimilated knowledge of the land in the Rice Lake area where she lived--a most precise, botanist's knowledge. *The Canadian Crusoes* tells the story of four children lost in the woods and of their ability to live off the land by using their natural resourcefulness to harvest the fruitfulness of the wilderness in its function as the provider of life and livelihood for mankind. The book is strongly coloured by Catharine Traill's basic conviction that, according to God's will, man is designed to be an ordering agent, and not a conqueror, in the world of nature. Nature is not without its dangers, its harshness and its hazards. But nature's produce, both plant and animal, is there to be cultivated and harvested by man. By their resourcefulness the children overcome many dangers and, when they cannot overcome a danger, they are spared by God's mercy.

The Canadian Crusoes starts with their parents' generation: the marriage of Duncan Maxwell, a Scottish soldier who fought at the battle of the Plains of Abraham, to Catharine Perron, a French-Canadian whose mother had befriended Maxwell when he was wounded in the battle. Pierre, the brother of Catharine, became a friend of Duncan Maxwell, and he and his wife settled near the Maxwells in the Rice Lake district. Pierre's son Louis, and Duncan and Catharine's son and daughter, Hector and Catharine, are lost in the woods. Hector saves a young Mohawk girl from torture and death at the hands of an Indian tribe hostile to her own. Indiana, as they call her, teaches them many wilderness skills and finally reciprocates for her salvation by offering her life for Catharine who, later in the story, is also captured by hostile Indians. In a footnote Catharine Traill validates the story she tells of the massacre of Indiana's people. "The Indian who related this narrative to the author was a son of a Rice Lake chief, Mosang Poudash by name. He vouched for its truth as a historic fact remembered by his father, whose grandsire had been one of the actors in the massacre" (*The Canadian Crusoes,* p. 195). Hector, Catharine, Louis and Indiana are finally led to their homes and families again, but only after three years have past and they are well on the way to the formation of their own successful clearing and settling enterprise:

> The little log-house presented a neat and comfortable appearance both within and without. Indiana had woven a handsome mat of bass bark for the floor; Louis and Hector had furnished it with seats and a table, rough, but still very respectably constructed, considering their only tools were a tomahawk, a knife, and wooden wedges for splitting the wood into slabs. These Louis afterwards smoothed with great care and patience. Their bedsteads were furnished with thick, soft mats, woven by Indiana and Catharine from rushes which they cut and dried; but the little squaw herself preferred lying on a mat or deerskin on the floor before the fire as she had been accustomed.
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> A new field had been enclosed, and a fresh crop of corn planted, which was now green and florishing. Peace and happiness dwelt within the log-house (*Lost in the Backwoods,* pp. 247-8).

In 1850 Catharine Traill considered herself as an inheritor of generations of settlement--we consider her as a pioneer. To imagine the realities of life for the first pioneers, she devised this story and a

microcosmic natural world of virgin forest, removed from the tiny settlement. At first the children had nothing with which to protect and sustain themselves except Hector's axe and Louis' hunting knife. Later, and painstakingly, they make a shelter, kill animals and fish for food, learn to clothe themselves with skins, and to feed themselves from edible roots and berries as well as from fish and game.

The Canadian Crusoes demonstrates Catharine Traill's notions of the relative roles of men and women--and those roles are extremely finely balanced. The boys are the hunters and providers of shelter; Catharine is the domesticator, the comfort-provider and the innovator. She also takes the initiative in rituals which join the children, though lost, to their families, their society and God:

> Hector with his axe, soon lopped the boughs from one of the adjacent pines, which Louis sharpened with his knife and, with Catharine's assistance, drove into the ground, arranging them in such a way as to make the upturned oak, with its roots and the earth which adhered to them, form the back part of the hut, which, when completed, formed by no means a contemptible shelter. Catharine then cut fern and deer grass with Louis' *couteau de chasse* which he always carried in a sheath at his girdle, and spread two beds--one, parted off by dry bows and bark, for herself in the interior of the wigwam; and one for her brother and cousin, near the entrance. When all was finished to her satisfaction, she called the two boys, and, according to the custom of her parents, joined them in the lifting up of their hands as an evening sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. (*Lost in the Backwoods,* p. 30).

On many occasions Catharine's strength is acknowledged to be less than the boys', but on at least an equal number of occasions her choice of a course of action is accepted by Hector and Louis: "Catharine's counsel was deemed the most prudent." She, like the boys, hunts with a bow and arrow. The boys and Catharine together prepare skins to sew them into clothing with the fishbone needles they make. They also devise means of baking and they make containers for their food.

If there is an edge between the portraits of male and female roles, it is in fact, Catharine's. She has a domestic lore about the "edible wild" that the boys do not have: "Catharine had made tea with the leaves of the sweet fern--a graceful wood fern, with a fine aromatic scent like nutmeg." Finally, she has great bravery and moral strength. The book's climactic episode is the capture of both Indiana and Catharine by hostile Indians and Catharine's defiance of fear to beg for Indiana's release from the powerful "medicine woman" of the tribe.

Although none of Catharine Traill's writings contain the slightest hint of self-pity or complaint, she may well have been as convinced as her sister Susanna that the future of Canada lay with the working class, and that they, and not "the gentlemen", were best fitted and most well-advised to emigrate. Certainly *The Canadian Crusoes* makes it very clear that the families of Duncan Maxwell and Pierre Perron are of lowly origin, poor but hardworking, proud, and ideally suited to be Canadian settlers. She specifically delineates her notions of the racial characteristics of the Scots and the French-Canadians--by 1854 it is plain to be seen that racial stereotypes have been firmly established. The boys' fathers' characteristics are strongly differentiated by Mrs. Traill, and the two boys inherit their fathers' temperaments.

> No two creatures could be more unlike than Pierre and Duncan. The Highlander, stern, steady, persevering, cautious, always giving ample reasons for his doing or not doing. The Canadian, hopeful, lively, fertile in expedients, and gay as a lark; if one scheme failed, another was sure to present itself. Pierre and Duncan were admirably suited to be friends and neighbours. The steady perseverance of the Scot helped to temper the volatile temperament of the Frenchman. They generally contrived to compass the same end by different means, as two streams descending from opposite hills will meet in one broad river in the same valley." (*Lost in the Backwoods,* p. 14).

Catharine, however, possesses the best attributes of both races:

> With the gaiety and naivete´ of the Frenchwoman, Catharine possessed, when occasion called it into action, a thoughtful and well-regulated mind, abilities which would well have repaid the care of mental cultivation. . . . To her knowledge of religious truths, young Catharine added an intimate acquaintance with the songs and legends of her father's romantic country; often would her plaintive ballads and old tales, related in the hut or the wigwam to her attentive auditors, while away heavy thoughts (*Lost in the Backwoods,* pp. 15-16).

The children's Indian comrade is gentle, meek, and ready to adapt to their ways and to bring her own nature-lore to enrich their lives and add to their chances of survival. She, as befits the indigenous "natural Canadian," is completely self-reliant in the wilderness and knows the secrets of the plants and animals. She is also, when among her own people, extremely strong in her moral code, ready to sacrifice her life as a ransom for Catharine's, brave and stoic in the face of the stake and the torture from which the girls are both, finally, saved by the intervention of the Mohawk Medicine Woman:

> Shrouded in a mantle of dark cloth, her long black hair unbound and streaming over her shoulders, appears the Mohawk widow, the daughter of the Ojebwa chief. The gathering throng fall back as she approaches, awed by her sudden appearance among them. She stretches out the hand on which dark stains are visible--it is the blood of her husband, sacrificed by her on that day of fearful deeds. . . . a knife is placed in her hand, while a deafening yell of triumph bursts from the excited squaws as this, their great high priestess, as they deem her, advances to the criminal. But it is not to shed the heart's blood of the Mohawk girl [Indiana], but to sever the thongs that bind her to the deadly stake, for which the glittering blade is drawn, and to let her depart in peace whethersoever she would go.
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> She then laid her hands on the head of the young Mohawk, blessed her, and enveloping herself in the dark mantle slowly retired back to her solitary tent once more (*Lost in the Backwoods,* p. 300).

Different as their characteristics are, Catherine Traill is saying that these four children are capable of melding together and assimilating one another's strengths. The primary agent of their joining is first of all the necessity to survive; the secondary agent is Christianity. The piety of the three lost children does not falter, and Indiana is converted by them.

Finally, the book ends with their restoration to their homes and their intermarriage:

> Some travelling fur merchants brought the news to Donald Maxwell that a party of Highlanders had made a settlement above Montreal, and among them were some of his kindred. The old soldier resolved to join them, and it was not hard to prevail upon his brother-in-law to accompany him, for they were all now weary of living so far from their fellow men; and bidding farewell to the little log houses at Cold Springs, they now journeyed downwards to the new settlement, where they were gladly received, their long experience of the country making their company a most valued acquisition to the new-come colonists.
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> Not long after, the Maxwells took possession of a grant of land, and cleared and built for themselves and their family. Hector, now a fine industrious young man, presented at the baptisimal font, as a candidate for baptism, the Indian girl and then received, at the altar, his newly-baptized bride. Catharine and Louis were married on the same day as Hector and Indiana. They lived happy and prosperous lives; and often, by their firesides, would delight their children by recounting the history of their wanderings over the Rice Lake plains (*Lost in the Backwoods,* pp. 318-9).

This book was first published in London in 1850. Its plot-line quite obviously transposes the fable of Robinson Crusoe to a Canadian Setting --the children, lost in the wilderness, survive and, more than that, they succeed in the beginnings of a successful farm. The event of the Christianizing of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* is parallelled in *The Canadian Crusoes* by Catharine Traill's story of Indiana. Robinson Crusoe's island was without women, but Catharine Traill's wilderness is made fruitful and prosperous by a balanced combination of male and female. She sees men and women as partners in progress, blessed by God and rewarded in their time by happiness and prosperity. *The Canadian Crusoes* is a pleasant exercise in myth-making for a new land; it also reflects Catharine Traill's minute knowledge of nature and animal life in the Rice Lake region where she and her husband settled. Pre-eminently her book reflects the balance of her own nature--her optimism, acceptance, endurance and vision.

The two works, *The Young Emigrants* of 1826 and *The Canadian Crusoes* of 1850, belong in different sub-genres of Children's Literature: the former is a moral and didactic travelogue; the latter is an adventure-story, no less morally didactic but also supplied with movement, incident and suspense. The two come together, however, in Catharine Traill's basic impulse, equally strong in both books. She is indefatigably an instructor, imparting information which in the first book is purely hearsay, but in the second is the product of years of curiosity, enthusiasm and close observation about the natural world around her in the Otonabee and Rice Lake areas of Ontario.

NOTES

[1] All references to *The Canadian Crusoes* in this article are to its Nelson edition, *Lost in the Backwoods* (1901).

Clara Thomas, Professor of English at York University (Toronto), is author of various articles on the Strickland sisters. Most recent among her books is The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence.