Marshall Saunders' mid-Victorian Cinderella; or, the mating game in Victorian Scotland

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Margaret Marshall Saunders is renowned for her animal stories. Who has not read or at least heard of *Beautiful Joe* (1894), an international best seller, reputed to have sold over a million copies in fourteen languages?[1] *Joe's* spectacular success led Saunders to continue in the same vein, producing a series of stories about dogs, cats, ponies, monkeys, canaries, pigeons, etc.

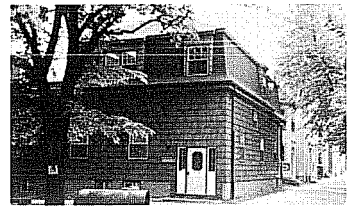
From time to time, however, Saunders turned her attention to human protagonists, although animals always played some part in the action, and her novels of human adventure and romance, like her animal stories, always contained moral lessons.

One lesson the writer herself learned early, from the lack of success of her first novel, *My Spanish sailor* (1889),[2] was to use settings with which she was familiar and, to some degree, to use her personal experience. She writes of "assuring my indulgent parents that it was absolutely necessary that I should be on the scene where my story was laid. Hence trips to Boston, New York, the Southern States, Germany, Belgium, California, etc. . . ."[3] *Beautiful Joe* was a clear vindication of Saunders' argument. Joe was modelled on a friend's dog who had had, like Joe, the early unhappy experience of having his ears and tail cropped. Joe's adoptive family was modelled on Saunders' own family, his young mistress on her sister Laura.

When in 1927 Saunders undertook one of her rare ventures away from the animal protagonists which had been her forte for so many years, she sought in her own experience settings and events that would lend reality to her story. For *Esther de Warren: The Story of a Mid-Victorian Maiden,* she turned to experiences of some fifty years earlier. In 1876, fifteen-year-old Margaret Marshall Saunders, then known as Maggie, spent a year at a girls' boarding school in Edinburgh. It is this experience which Saunders used for the setting of her novel, and she confirms in "The Story of My Life" that it is this school which she described in her novel.[4]

Esther de Warren, like her prototype, Maggie Saunders, is the fifteen-year-old daughter of a Baptist minister in Halifax, the eldest of his five children. Esther, like Maggie, is homesick for her parents and brothers and sisters; she frequently refers to her siblings — Peggy and little Adela, Jimmie and Dickie. Maggie was too homesick to stay away for four years, as originally planned;

after a year in Edinburgh and a year in Orleans learning French, she returned to her parents' home in Halifax.



Marshall Saunders' Home in Halifax

As a record of her experiences during her first months at school, Maggie Saunders kept a diary, now in the Margaret Marshall Saunders papers at Acadia University.[5] To read the diary along with the novel is to be convinced that Saunders did indeed use her own experiences as a point of departure for her book, and that she must have had the diary at hand when, fifty years after the fact, she wrote her novel of a Canadian girl's experiences abroad.

Saunders' diary begins with her departure from Halifax on September 21, 1876, and concludes in Edinburgh on December 29, 1876. The novel begins with a letter dated September 21, 1876, written aboard the liner *Martian* sailing from Halifax to Liverpool. The novel is epistolary, consisting of nineteen letters from Esther to her parents. The first fourteen letters parallel Maggie's diary, recounting Esther's experiences on board ship, then in Liverpool during her brief stopover, and, from early October to December 24, 1876, in Edinburgh. The last five letters are set in the coastal resort town of North Berwick, twenty-two miles from Edinburgh. Saunders mentions in her diary that close family friends in Edinburgh, the Blaikies, whom she visited frequently, had a house at North Berwick. This setting, too, described in some detail in the novel, formed part of the experience of the young Saunders.

In *Esther de Warren,* Saunders wrote a Cinderella tale of the young daughter of a Baptist clergyman who discovers that she is heiress to a fortune and who falls in love with a Scottish nobleman. Unlike the original Cinderella story, in which only Cinderella is in masquerade, and then only for the ball, in this novel almost everyone is in disguise.

The complications of the plot begin on board ship when Esther meets an aristocratic Scottish couple, Sir Hugh and Lady Kelvie, and, through the Kelvies, Nicky Kerval, the attractive young son of an impoverished Scottish nobleman. She also meets David Gennifer, an obstreperous, unhappy American boy her own age and uncannily like her in appearance. Not surprisingly for a Saunders novel, Esther meets David through his pet squirrel. Who but Saunders would have her lonely young heroine say, on hearing a faint scratching in her cabin, "Oh Lord!... send me something, if it is only a rat!"[6] and, finding the noisemaker to be a squirrel, settle to sleep while the squirrel makes a bed in her hair on the pillow?

The central revelation of the novel is that Esther is not the daughter of the Reverend Richard de Warren nor the granddaughter of the dashing Captain de Warren nor the descendant of William the Conqueror as she has always assumed; rather, she is the daughter of a Jewish-American father, Henri Salas, and a Yankee mother, Eleanor Gennifer, whose father is a wealthy Boston jeweller. And that is only the beginning. David Gennifer, the boy Esther meets on board ship through his pet squirrel, is her twin brother. Her great-uncle Matthew, who four times a year visited the de Warren family, bringing gifts to the children of his niece, Melinda Gennifer de Warren, Esther's supposed mother, is her grandfather. Mademoiselle Dulaurier, the temporary French teacher at Esther's Edinburgh school and the adopted daughter of Madame Clothilde Dulaurier of Orleans, is Esther's mother, Eleanor Gennifer. The aesthete Gaspard Coligny de Saint-Aunaire adopted son of a French banker is Esther's father, Henri Salas.

Esther is not the only one who, with the reader, is surprised by these revelations. David, who thought himself an orphan, also discovers his parents. Eleanor, who had left her husband some sixteen years earlier on discovering that he was not French, as he had told her, but Jewish, now finds herself in love with another Frenchman, Gaspard. Only after she has accepted his proposal of marriage does he reveal himself as the husband she had left years earlier. The irony in her being tricked twice by the same person in the same disguise seems lost on author and characters alike.

Along with Esther, the reader learns the complicated series of events leading to the present situation. Eleanor, after leaving her husband, gave birth to twins, Esther and David. She left the boy with her father and took the girl to Nova Scotia. A few months later, she left this child with the De Warrens, along with a small bag of gold and a small portrait of herself. As the De Warrens had recently lost an infant daughter, they readily agreed to bring up Esther as their own daughter. The woman of the portrait and the gold has been explained to Esther as a benefactor who had visited briefly with her parents and wished to help their child. Eleanor has now arranged for Esther to go to school in Edinburgh and plans to meet her there, not as her mother, nor as her benefactor, but as her French teacher, Mademoiselle Dulaurier. When David sees the portrait of Esther's benefactor, he recognizes his supposedly long dead mother and begins to hope she is alive. At this point, we might wonder whether we are reading a Canadian version of *The importance of being Ernest*, without Wilde's wit.

The realistic setting helps to give some credence to the improbable story, the most realistic aspects of which are taken from Saunders' own experience. Esther is clearly Saunders. Both diary and novel portray a homesick young girl setting off on her new life, self-conscious about her drab clothes, eager to do well at school to please her parents, very serious about the practice of her religion. In the diary, Maggie notes that she dreams of her family every

night. In the novel, Esther writes, after she discovers her real parentage, that she is "homesick once more, just as if I were still Esther de Warren and not Esther Salas" (p. 135).

Parallels between diary and novel exist from the beginning. Both start on September 21, 1876. In both novel and diary, the narrator mentions playing the piano at the nightly prayer meetings on board ship, being met at Liverpool and taken to the home of an old college friend of her father (the friend, Vaughan in the diary, becomes Vanning in the novel), and attending at a religious service in Liverpool celebrated by the Reverend Hugh Stowell Brown, "a minister," Esther explains, "of our own denomination" (p. 82).

In "Margaret Marshall Saunders: the Author of 'Beautiful Joe,' " Phyllis R. Blakeley calls the school Saunders attended "Trafalgar School." A letter from Maggie to her mother, dated 30 September 1876, is headed "Trafalgar House, Chalmers Crescent, The Grange, Edinburgh."[7] The *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory, 1876-1877* lists no school named "Trafalgar" or "Trafalgar House," but among the private schools it lists is "Miss Deuchar's Boarding and Day School," at 4 Chalmers Crescent. It seems altogether likely that this was Saunders' school, since her headmistress was a Miss Deuchar, and her school was on Chalmers Crescent.

Deuchar's School in Edinburgh

In the novel, the school is called Alma Villa. Miss Deuchar becomes Miss Darsey, romanticized as the ever faithful fiancée of Captain Davie MacGregor, killed in the Crimean War, whose portrait dominates her sitting room. Indeed, there is little in the novel that is not romanticized.

Many of Esther's experiences in Edinburgh parallel those Maggie noted in her diary. Like Miss Deuchar, who had a large dog called Nelson and a terrier called Prince which Maggie enjoyed walking, the fictional Miss Darsey has a Newfoundland called Malahoff and a Skye terrier called Florence Nightingale — names associated with the Crimean War — which Esther enjoys walking. Like Miss Deuchar's school, Alma Villa, too, is on Chalmers Crescent. Esther comments on a walk from the school, "We all went down the [Chalmers] Crescent, past David's house, across the Middle Meadow walk, and through the busy streets to the precipitous rock on which the Castle. . . is situated" (p. 138).

Both novel and diary contain many references to Edinburgh sights which

will be familiar to any reader who has visited there. The fictional Esther describes arriving at Waverley Station and driving through the Meadows and into the Grange area to reach the school, and, later, on the way to Charlotte Square, passing the former home of Sir Walter Scott, on George Square, not far from Chalmers Crescent. Maggie, too, mentions walks past the Scott House, to Charlotte Square, the charming and fashionable eighteenth-century square north of Princes Street. In the novel, the Kelvies' townhouse is situated, appropriately, on Charlotte Square. In the diary, Maggie mentions the usual historic sites visited by tourists: Holyrood Palace and the Castle, the Parliament Houses, John Knox's house, Arthur's Seat, St. Giles church. Most of these Esther also mentions. Both Maggie and Esther mention a concert at which they heard Hallé, "a most highly esteemed musician here, play on the piano most beautifully" (p. 137).[8]

The diary, unlike the novel, contains no romance. According to the diary, teasing by schoolboys, whom the girls meet on their walks or at church, is as close as Maggie comes to romance. The girls seem to enjoy these incidents as much as the boys.

One incident noted in the diary is repeated in the novel. Maggie and a friend, walking back to school on a Saturday, find affixed to the school gate a sign saying "Private Reformatory for incorrigible young ladies." The girls report the incident to the headmistress, who sends a servant to remove the placard. In the novel, Esther reports that on one of their walks boys teased them by saying, "Look at the inmates of the Private Reformatory for Incorrigible Young Ladies," "an allusion," Esther explains, "to a placard that someone pasted on our entrance gate late one Friday night, and it was there for a part of Saturday before it was discovered and removed after much effort on the part of Eppie [a servant]" (p. 141).

A house which Saunders refers to in her diary made quite an impression on her, for she uses it as the setting for a chapter of the novel. The diary notes several walks the school girls took to the "Pretty House" — "a long, low cottage set in a garden and having a huge, holly hedge" (novel, pp. 140-41). In Esther de Warren, the Pretty House becomes the Edinburgh residence of the Comte de Saint-Aunaire and his adopted son Gaspard. From the descriptions of the walk from the school to this house in both diary and novel (Diary, p. 17, 44, 50; Novel, pp. 140-41) it can be identified as a house in Dick Place near Lovers' Loan, originally the lodge house leading into Craigmount House, designed by Pilkington. Craigmount House is now demolished.[9]

In her diary Maggie is much concerned with her studies. She wants to do well to validate her parents' financial sacrifice. She reports on class assignments, tests, and her standing in each subject — usually at or near the top — and dutifully reports such lapses from grace as a spelling mistake which sent her almost to the bottom of the class — temporarily, of course. Her best subjects are English literature, French and modern history. In Roman history and

arithmetic, Maggie confesses, she "did not distinguish" herself. From an early age Saunders had been accustomed to reading books from her father's library, and at eight she began studying Latin with her father.[10] It is not surprising, then, to read her reaction on beginning to work on an antimaccassar, "I do not care about that kind of work, I had rather do two hundred lines of Virgil."[11]

On Sundays Maggie attends morning and afternoon church services and writes reports on the sermons. In her diary she comments on the preachers. For the most part, she attends Barclay Presbyterian Church, where the Reverend Mr. Wilson is minister and the Reverend Henry Drummond his assistant. In the novel, Esther also attends Barclay Presbyterian Church and also mentions Wilson and Drummond. Drummond, author of *Natural law in the spiritual world*, was to become a notable figure in the church, particularly in reconciling science with religion. It is not surprising that he is given a part in the novel, or that he and Esther become slightly acquainted on his occasional visits to the school.

Diary and novel give much the same picture of the school and its students, although Esther makes a more forthright comment about her schoolmates than Maggie does. "Some of my school-mates I like, and some I do not like, and I know exactly how they feel toward me. The language of the eye tells me that" (p. 106). The differences between diary and novel — from replacing drab utilitarian clothes to finding a devoted twin brother (how many lonely children have dreamed of finding a twin?), a wealthy family, and an aristocratic young Scottish suitor — suggest some of the daydreaming that may have been Saunders' as a homesick fifteen-year-old. At school, Esther soon becomes a leader among the girls, and is elevated to "parlour student" when her brother joins her and her upper-class connections are discovered. Although she still takes lessons with the other girls, she spends her free time with the headmistress in her sitting room, and rambles with her brother replace the supervised walks of the diary. The twins help Miss Darsey to entertain her guests, and David, who resembles Miss Darsey's lost fiancé, Davie MacGregor, becomes her special friend. Esther writes to her father: "I seem fated not to lead the normal life of the ordinary school-girl. I am really a self-emancipated pupil, for thanks to David, I have been promoted to parlour-boardership" (p. 136). Through Esther, the socially conscious Saunders comments, as young Maggie does not, on the poverty in Edinburgh: "Some of these Scottish people are very poor — such pathetic poverty. We have nothing in Canada like many of the packed, unwholesome closes and wynds of this dear old city" (p. 137).

A major theme of the novel is anti-Semitism. Matthew Gennifer, whose most intense business competitors were Jewish, became "one of the worst enemies of their race in Boston" (p. 67), and his attitude rubbed off on his daughter. Eleanor left her husband not because he was deceitful but because he was Jewish. Later, Matthew's attitude comes out in his grandson. "How the boys

at school will laugh," David exclaims when he learns of his parentage, "David Gennifer, the grandson of Matthew Gennifer, has a Jew father" (p. 188). On the other hand, Sir Hugh Kelvie is an ardent supporter of the Jewish race and has an extensive collection of Jewish memorabilia. As for Esther, so far in her young life she has had to give only lip service to the brotherhood of man. "I admire them [the Hebrew race] but oh! how glad I am that we are of straight British ancestry" (p. 59), she says in one of her attempts to indicate her freedom from prejudice. In Britain, Esther has frequent occasion to point with pride to her British ancestry, in emphasis of which her second name is Grundida, after her ancestor the daughter of William the Conqueror. It is with some dismay, then, that she learns she has a Jewish father. "Imagine half of my ancestors in a Ghetto!" she exclaims. "It's incredible. Is it possible that I must give up the daughter of William the Conqueror, Grundida who married the first Earl of Warren? Yes, I must, but I *am* a de Warren, by upbringing anyway" (p. 135). By the conclusion of the novel, however, Esther is reconciled to her Jewish heritage, Eleanor to her Jewish husband, and Matthew and David to the Jewish race. It is no coincidence, we finally realize, that the twins have prominent Old Testament names.

In fact, there are significant parallels between the Biblical Esther and our young Canadian Esther which add an extra fillip to the novel. The Biblical Esther was an orphan brought up by a cousin, Mordecai, in Persia, during the reign of King Anasewus, just as our Canadian Esther was brought up by a distant cousin in Nova Scotia. The Biblical Esther, like our Canadian one, grew into a beautiful maiden. When Anasewus put away his first wife, he chose Esther, of all the maidens of the land, to be his queen. Our Canadian Esther attracted not a king but at least a nobleman. Her newly discovered brother frequently addressed her as Queenie, an allusion to her descent from William the Conqueror. The title further underlines her parallel with the Biblical Esther. Queen Esther did not for some years reveal her Jewish antecedents, while our Canadian Esther's Jewish antecedents were unknown to herself as well as to most of those she grew up with.[12]

Not surprisingly in a novel by Saunders, birds and animals come in for their share of attention — caged birds and tame animals, not those which might be encountered in city or country outings. David's pet squirrel, from its introduction in the early pages of the novel, figures prominently, for this reader to the point of tedium. Midway through the novel, Saunders uses a visit to Gaspard's house as a pretext to describe an aviary which is probably modelled on one she built in her Carleton Street house in Halifax with royalties from *Beautiful Joe*:[13]

The birds were in a greenhouse beyond the kitchen which is more convenient than having them in the front of the house, the dear old man explained, for much of their food must come through Franòise's hands, as it has to be cooked. Papa, I poised on the threshold — a Canadian snowbird, in an ecstasy. There

was our dream come true, for so many times in surveying our large cages of canaries, have we said, "Oh! to pull down and build greater. Oh! for a real aviary — a place where these darling captives could stretch freely and fully the beautiful wings that God has given them."

Imagine glass walls, but a covered roof for protection, shrubs from the hills standing round the walls, birds building nests in them quite careless of our presence, as we stood at one end of the long building. Running water in the middle of the room and a shallow basin where little beauties were bathing and shaking their glittering wings. So many food dishes — egg food, ant eggs, bread and milk, and many kinds of seeds, and more fruit than on any human being's table that I have seen here.

For a long time the bird enthusiast held us spellbound, and while he addressed us, his little dear friends, canaries and foreign birds too, hopped all over him, looking under his coat collar, and in the creases of his sleeves and on the top of his head for their favourite hemp seed, or simply using him as a perching post while they scratched themselves with their cute little claws, like babies' hands, or drew their feathers through their beaks.

"Every feather must be cleaned once a day," he said, and he praised the most cleanly ones, calling them by their names, Manon and Babette, and Julie and Lulu, and Simon and Pierre, and many others, some of them having Scottish names, notably Mary Queen of Scots who was a bewitching bullfinch with a black crown, and a gray body. (pp. 166-67)

Esther mentions having an aviary in her Halifax home, but Saunders' first experience in keeping an aviary occurred in California in 1899, when she built an aviary to house small owls she was caring for.[14]

Marshall Saunders

Esther de Warren could well have been titled *The Mating Game.* To start off the marriage parade, a crotchety retired Captain met on the voyage to Britain is introduced to a middle-aged stewardess, and by the end of the voyage they are engaged to be married. By the end of the novel, all of the central characters, and some of the peripheral ones as well, have been paired off. Three generations are involved. Eleanor's elderly benefactor, Clothilde, is to marry a friend of long standing. Esther's grandfather, Matthew, is to marry an old flame. Esther, of course, is to marry the aristocratic Nicky when she is eighteen, and David is linked romantically with Esther's best school friend. Even a young Scottish governess admired by a university student teaching English literature at the school becomes engaged to him. Only the headmistress remains alone. But, forever committed to the fallen Davie, she may be considered united to him in spirit. Matthew Gennifer, fairy godfather to a number of the less well situated characters, ensures Miss Darsey's financial security by presenting her with the deed to her school. He also helps Nicky's improvished father by leasing his house which he plans to develop, with true American initiative, for commercial purposes. Nicky finds yet another fairy godfather in a neighboring aristocrat, remotely related, who takes a liking to him and proposes turning over to him his prosperous estate. There seems no end to the satisfactory arrangements that can and will be made. The author is clearly determined to leave no stone unturned to achieve a happy ending for everyone, "happy ending" being construed as finding a mate — and wealth, or at least financial independence. The Cinderella heroine receives the ultimate prize, a title, as well.

Looking back on the novel, one can see that all the action is either in the past or yet to come. The present consists in discovering the past and planning the future. That Esther and Nicky fall in love, for example, is a development more reported by the author than observed by the reader, for, according to the letters which recount the incidents of the novel, Esther has only a few friendly conversations with the young nobleman, first on board ship and later at North Berwick.

This novel is the story of an innocent abroad, an innocent basically unchanged by her experiences, which involve dramatic revelation rather than dramatic action. In fact, the unravelling of the complex relationships of the characters is the main focus of the story. While this is clearly a tale for young readers, the reader of any age will find its realistic picture of Edinburgh and of the lonely young girl in her new surroundings genuine and interesting features of the novel. Possibly because it so realistically recalled a memorable year in a much-loved place, Saunders selected it at the end of her career as her favourite book.[15]

Notes

[1]Gordon Roper, Rupert Schieder, S. Ross Beharriell, *Literary history of Canada,* gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1965), p. 307.
[2]*My Spanish sailor* (London: Ward, 1889); published in the United States with some revision as *Her sailor* (Boston: Page, 1900).
[3]Marshall Saunders, "The Story of My Life," *Ontario library review* 2, no. 2 (Nov. 1927), p. 43.
[4]Saunders, "The Story of My Life," p. 42.
[5]Acadia University, Archives, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, B0P 1X0 Vaughan Memorial Library. Margaret Marshall Saunders Papers. Diary of Margaret Marshall Saunders dated September 21, 1876, to December 29, 1876.
[6]Marshall Saunders, *Esther de Warren: The story of a mid-Victorian maiden* (New York: Doran, 1927), p. 10. Page references in parentheses are from this edition.
[7]Queen's University Archives. Lorne Pierce Papers. TS copy. Marshall Saunders to Maria Saunders, dated 30 September 1876.
[8]See also *Diary,* December 9, p. 51.
[9]I am indebted to John Gerrard, architect, Glasgow, and Professor Margaret Mackay, University of Glasgow, for identifying the "Pretty House."
[10]Phyllis R. Blakeley, "Margaret Marshall Saunders: the Author of 'Beautiful Joe,' " *The Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly, l, no. 1 (Sept. 1971), p. 228.*
[11]*Saunders, Diary,* December 15, p. 8.
[12]*Bible:* book of Esther. It was only when the Jews were threatened with massacre that Queen Esther revealed her origins, interceding with her husband to spare her people.
[13]Blakeley, p. 233.
[14]Marshall Saunders, *My pets: real happenings in my aviary* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1935), p. 9.
[15]Queen's University Archives. Lorne Pierce Papers. ALS. Marshall Saunders to Lorne Pierce, dated 11 December 1935.

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