Women and children first? Some observations from the field

Carole Gerson

Résumé: *"Identifier les premiers ouvrages canadiens pour enfants écrits par des femmes est une tâche ingrate." Cet article s'attelle à la tâche et ouvre des avenues nouvelles pour de futures recherches.*

While we await an as yet unwritten historical examination of literature written by women for children in what is now Canada, I would like to share with the hypothetical doctoral student who might embark upon this project some notes on a few problems, gleanings, and observed patterns.

Before the researcher working on early Canadian children's literature can even begin to examine published texts, she must juggle a number of problems, each of which raises new questions. What is a children's book: is it defined by its intended audience or by its actual readership? (And can we know who reads which books?) What is a Canadian book: is it a book published in Canada, or written by a Canadian, or describing Canadian experience? (And who qualifies as a Canadian author?) Is a Canadian children's book necessarily directed towards Canadian children? Two well-known examples illustrate the complexity of the situation, which was even more problematic during the nineteenth century when Canada offered meagre opportunities for publication and a small and unreliable readership. Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* was written in Upper Canada about Canadian life, but published in England in 1852 for a juvenile audience that was clearly defined as British. Many of Charles G.D. Roberts' animal stories, dating from the 1890s through the 1930s, are set in Canada, but were written and published in the United States for an international audience that was not specifically juvenile, although they have since been frequently classified as children's literature.

Compounding the problem is the lack of a reliable bibliography or checklist. In his *Early Canadian children's books 1763-1840* (1976) and *Bibliography of Canadian children's books for young people 1841-1867* (1977), Bernard Amtmann presents a grab-bag of possible titles selected from other bibliographies and checklists, with no consideration for the actual texts. Operating under the principle that "Children's books are those read by children, not necessarily those written for children,"[1] Amtmann does not distinguish between writing explicitly intended for youthful readers and items that children may

have happened to see. Hence his surprisingly broad selection of monographs includes booksellers' catalogues as well as sermons, catechisms, and school texts. As his only evident criterion is some notion of Canadianness (with reference to content, imprint, or authorship), he includes many works that would probably have been withheld from children, such as John Richardson's pornographic novel, *The monk knight of Saint John* (1850), and Cassie Fairbanks' documentary poem on a grisly local murder, *The lone house: A poem partly founded on fact* (1859). Nor does Amtmann distinguish books representing Canadian experience (with Canadian authors or settings) from Canadian reprints of foreign texts. While the existence of Canadian editions of popular American novels like Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791; rpt. Hallowell, Upper Canada, 1832) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A tale of the great dismal swamp* (Montreal 1856) attests to the likelihood that these were read in Canada – and indeed by children – neither can be considered a Canadian book. In this regard, R.E. Watters' *A checklist of Canadian literature and background materials (1628-1960)*, which omits Canadian reprints of foreign works, is helpful in establishing a preliminary Canadian bibliography. It is therefore unfortunate that Watters' generic distinctions fail to acknowledge children's books as a distinct category, especially as he manages to separate "Local history and description" from both "Social history" and "Travel and description." The revised chapter on early Canadian children's books in Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman's *The new republic of childhood* (1990) offers considerable amplification over its predecessor, but still does little more than skim the surface of the past on a quick journey to the present.

To identify early Canadian children's books written by women is an even more daunting task, given the frequency of anonymous and pseudonymous publication. Any discussion of patterns of authorship for children among English-language Canadian women writers is necessarily limited by the way children's books and women authors have both been marginalized in the Canadian literary institution. One way to counteract this historical marginalization is to apply the notions of "Canadian" and "children" broadly, erring in favour of inclusion rather than exclusion. Documented residence in what is now Canada is a useful criterion for distinguishing Canadian women writers, many of whom published abroad, or were born or died outside of Canada. And, especially before the 1880s – that is, before more than a handful of Canadian women writers wrote explicitly for younger children – the category of children's books may include conduct fiction that would have been deemed suitable for adolescent girls, such as the novels of Susanna Moodie and Rosanna Leprohon, but should stop short of sermons and booksellers' catalogues even if these works might have found their way into youthful hands.

American sources offer some information about the situation of the woman author for young readers on part of this continent, not all of which applies to Canada. That juvenile literature was one of the few areas where women could

achieve distinction is demonstrated by the *Dictionary of literary biography*. Of all the literary activities covered by this reference series, writing for children is that where American women attain the greatest representation: nearly 40% of the authors in *American writers for children before 1900* (vol. 42) are female, and more than half of those in *American writers for children, 1900-1960* (vol. 22).[2] Figures for Canada, while more recent and less accessible, suggest a similar ratio. In the Macmillan Company of Canada's list of books published by Canadian authors from 1921 to 1929, 20 of the juvenile books were authored by women, 12 by men (10 by Charles G.D. Roberts alone), and 4 jointly by a man and a woman. Anne Innis Dagg's compilation of books published in Canada from spring 1984 to spring 1985 shows that women wrote 57% of the texts classed as "juvenile and young adult."[3] Although only a few Canadian women were to enjoy the blockbuster financial success achieved by many of their American counterparts, the example of the latter must have justified and inspired women in Canada. It is therefore helpful to remember that *Uncle Tom's cabin*, which Harriet Beecher Stowe regarded as a children's book, earned its author $10,000 in royalties in the first four months after its publication in 1852. Mary Mapes Dodge's *Hans Brinker* sold 300,000 copies in 1865, thus classing her book, along with *Our mutual friend*, as one of the two best-sellers of that year.[4] Louisa May Alcott, who had the foresight to retain the copyright to *Little women* (1868) rather than sell it outright for $1000, achieved financial solvency with her first royalty cheque for $8500.[5] For Frances Hodgson Burnett, the "golden age of children's literature" – which she helped create – was not just metaphorical. Successful Canadian authors fared less well regarding the profits that were their due. Although *Beautiful Joe* (1894) reportedly sold over a million copies and still remains in print, Marshall Saunders spent her last years in penury and, like L.M. Montgomery, was ill-treated by her Boston publisher, L.C. Page. Montgomery became the first Canadian woman author known to have earned a substantial income from juvenile literature, due to her sheer determination to exploit the large American literary marketplace.[6]

Although women were to become the major creators of children's literature in Canada, during the pre-Confederation era, women entered the field of juvenile writing with diffidence and difficulty. Canadian writing overtly intended for children was almost exclusively instructional or religious, and male-authored.[7] Authorship premises authority, and few woman possessed sufficient authority to compete with schoolmasters and clergymen. Of the women who engaged in instructive writing before 1867, most have been identified as teachers. Ann Cuthbert Fleming published two volumes of poetry in Scotland before her permanent emigration. In Montreal during the 1840s she developed a new approach to the teaching of reading and channelled her creative energy into the contents of three readers for her own pupils, one aptly titled *First book for Canadian children* (1843). *Little Grace; or, scenes in Nova Scotia* (1846),

the first children's book published in that province, was written by Miss Elizabeth P. Grove, for many years the proprietor of a girls' school in Halifax, to inform her students about the past and present of their current home. A Toronto teacher known only as Mrs. Gordon prepared *Outlines of chronology for the use of schools* (1859), and in New Brunswick, Sarah French issued *Letters to a young lady on leaving school and entering the world* in 1855, followed the next year by *A book for the young*, an anthology of original and selected verse and prose. In Canada, women begin to appear as authors for young readers more prominently in relation to imaginative literature – where they could claim some authority as the primary rearers and entertainers of children – and due to the immigration of women who, like Mrs. Fleming, had first established their credentials abroad.

The most visible pre-Confederation writers were two pairs of sisters from literary families where authorship had already been established as an acceptable activity for women. In England, after the death of her father in 1818, Susanna Strickland published at least half a dozen children's books (mostly didactic fiction) before emigrating to Canada as Mrs. Moodie, and Catharine Parr Strickland (later Mrs. Traill) produced twice that number, her output including nature studies as well as fiction. Like several other British women writing for children at this time, including Priscilla Wakefield (*Excursions in America* 1806) and Mary Martha Sherwood (*The Indian Chief* 1830), Catharine Strickland created a story about North America based entirely upon her reading of travellers' narratives. The ease with which the Clarence family of *The young emigrants* (1826) settles in the New World contrasts rather ironically with the difficulties Traill would herself experience when she emigrated six years later.

The other pair were Harriet Vaughan Cheney and Eliza Lanesford Cushing, two daughters of Hannah Webster Foster of Massachusetts, author of the best-selling early American novel, *The coquette* (1797). During the 1820s they wrote several books of fiction suitable for youthful readers before emigrating to Montreal, within a few years of the Strickland sisters' settlement in Upper Canada. Slightly younger than the American women of letters Sara Josepha Hale and Lydia Sigourney, who, through the first half of the nineteenth century pioneered literary professionalism for women (as authors for both women and children) in the United States, these four authors found that Canada, in contrast, offered few opportunities for literary activity. Periodicals proved a more hospitable medium than books.[8] While the work that these authors published in family-oriented periodicals (such as the *Literary garland*, the *Victoria magazine*, the Montreal *Family herald*) was quite suitable for older children, Cushing and Cheney took a particularly brave step towards the fostering of literature for children in Canada with their founding of *The snow drop; or, Juvenile magazine* (1847-53).[9] They wrote some of their own material and published a few items by Moodie and Traill, but their contents were mostly selected

from American and British sources. The *Maple leaf* (1852-55), the *Snow drop*'s rival, contained somewhat more significant work created by Strickland pens.

The *Maple leaf* published Moodie's first piece of writing specifically directed towards the youth of the New World, whose welfare, she declared, involved her as "the mother and grandmother of Canadian children."[10] This was not, however, to be followed by a surge of writing for a local audience. Moodie's publisher and established market were in Britain, and her six subsequent novels, although not unsuitable for older Canadian children, reveal next to nothing about their author's connection with Canada.[11] The publishing history of Traill's major contribution to the *Maple leaf* cogently illustrates the problem of trying to create a children's literature in a colonial society at the time when writing and publishing for children were beginning to flourish in larger literary centres. Through 1853 the *Maple leaf* serialized "The Governor's daughter; or, Rambles in the Canadian forest." This sequence of nature lessons set within the frame story of a newly arrived-child clearly purposed to acquaint the children of the Canadas with their own environment. Thus it falls into the genre of settlement literature (like Traill's *Canadian settlers' guide* and Moodie's *Roughing it in the bush*), its intention to assist with the process of settlement and local cultural development. But the work received book publication only in England and the United States under titles that suggest that strangeness rather than familiarity became its main attraction: in England it was issued first as *Lady Mary and her nurse: or, A peep into the Canadian forest* (1856) and later as *Afar in the forest; or, pictures of life and scenery in the wilds of Canada* (1869); the American edition, which removed many references to English class structure, was *Stories of the Canadian forest; or, Little Mary and her nurse* (1857).

Accessibility plays a significant role in determining canonicity. Due to its recent appearance in a scholarly edition produced by the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts, Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* (1852) is now likely to become the most canonical Canadian children's book published before *Beautiful Joe* and *Anne of Green Gables*. That it was eventually widely read by Canadian children is attested to by Rupert Schieder,[12] although its original intended audience was British. We will not know if this book's fascinating combination of expected Victorian conventions and unexpected New World departures represents a paradigm for early Canadian children's literature until more texts are read critically by people like the doctoral student invented for the purpose of this discussion. Traill's overt didacticism expressed in her unsubtle imparting of facts and her advocacy of a highly-gendered social code are curiously subverted by her presentation of Indian characters. While her young white heroine learns to be a model housewife, Indian women present strong countervailing images of knowledge and power. Moreover, Traill sanctions miscegenation in a Canadian society drawing strength from a blend of French, Indian and Scottish heritages – so long as the English language and British

values prevail.

The high profiles of the Strickland sisters obscure the presence of several women who achieved firsts for Canadian children. Diana Bayley, an established English author whom one authority identifies as "the first resident of Canada to write for children,"[13] does not appear in the *Dictionary of Canadian biography* – although her son, Frederick W.N. Bayley, a minor literary journalist, merits an entry in the *British dictionary of national biography*. A biographical reference would be impossible for the author of *A peep at the Esquimaux* (1825), the sole volume of poetry about Canada published for children during the entire pre-Confederation period, who followed the example of scores of her peers by identifying herself only as "A Lady."[14]

Also published anonymously was the book that was probably more widely read in Canada than any other locally written narrative: *The adopted daughter, or the trials of Sabra. A tale of real life*, which advocates fortitude and forbearance in an almost charmingly naïve style that is quite accessible to children. In 1858, Sara McDonald, an impoverished and enterprising resident of Lyn, Upper Canada, ordered a first edition of 5,000 copies. These she peddled so successfully that the book was reissued in three successive editions (1863, 1867, 1873). The extent to which the book was read is suggested by its presence today in libraries all across Canada yet it has, to my knowledge, received no attention beyond a brief note.[15]

Although not a text that would initially attract the attention of the literary analyst, *The adopted daughter* reached an extensive audience and therefore raises important questions of canonicity and context that have to be examined by the hypothetical author of this hypothetical dissertation. If we want to know about the books written by Canadian women that shaped the minds of Canadian children a century ago, we have to look at popular works as well as literary ones. We also have to think of the books that were not written for Canadian children. Both Rosanna Leprohon and Mary Anne Sadlier, accomplished authors and busy mothers, seem to have produced no works for younger children. Does this absence represent a lack of interest, or a lack of opportunity to publish? In 1865, Isabella Campbell brought out (likely at her own expense) *Rough and smooth: or, Ho! for an Australian gold field*, claiming that her book was merely "a journal written for the instruction and amusement of my own children, which I have thought of too egotistical and personal a nature to interest other little ones than them. My friends, however, think otherwise; and have urged the printing, on the plea, that children like *true* stories better than fictitious ones, and never tire of reading travels."[16] These remarks suggest that much writing for children may have remained unpublished and might even be retrievable from archives, like Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon's *An illustrated comic alphabet*, created in 1859 but not published until 1966.[17] We have to venture onto the shelves of Sunday-school libraries, which would have included books by Canadian women like Margaret Murray Robert-

son, Adeline Boardman Todd, Emma Louise Estey, Hattie Colter, Agnes Maule Machar, and Mary Eliza Herbert. Moving into the later decades of the nineteenth century, we have to place Margaret Marshall Saunders within the context of Humane Society writing, earlier represented by Annie Gregg Savigny. And we might examine how the notion of separate spheres extended into the animal story, where men (Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton) focused on adventures in the wilderness, while women (Saunders and Savigny) stressed children's humanitarian treatment of domestic animals.

The field of early Canadian children's literature remains largely unexplored; that written by women, doubly obscure. We should all look forward to reading the dissertation and eventually, the book waiting to be written on this topic.

NOTES

1 Bernard Amtmann, *Early Canadian children's books (1763-1840)* (Montreal: Bernard Amtmann, 1976) v.

2 There are no volumes on British writers for children. Women are less than a third of the authors in the two volumes on Victorian novelists (vols. 18, 21), less than 20% of the authors in *British novelists 1890-1926: Traditionalists* (vol. 34) and less than a quarter of the authors in volume 12, *American realists and naturalists*. Only in vol. 36, *British novelists 1890-1929* and vol. 78, *American short story writers 1880-1910*, does the proportion of women (48% and 43%) approach that for children's writers. It is important to note that figures from the *DLB* represent the current reputations of women writers, not their actual proportion of literary activity, which was a good deal higher.

3 *The Macmillans in Canada present this list of books by Canadian authors*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929); Ann Innis Dagg, *The 50% solution: Why should women pay for men's culture?*, (Waterloo: Otter Press, 1986) 30.

4 Estes, Glenn E., ed. *American writers for children before 1900. Dictionary of literary biography* 42. (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1985) 150, 345.

5 Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A modern biography of Louisa May Alcott*(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 296, 300.

6 See Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds., *The selected journals of L.M. Montgomery, vol. II: 1910-1921* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 193, 313. Montgomery's account books, at the Guelph University Library, record every penny of her earnings and her determination to amass a substantial nest egg for her children.

7 See Amtmann's two bibliographies (note 1).

8 During the 1840s, Cheney published two religious children's books in Boston,, where she may have resided at that time. (*DLB* 99: 71). These texts have nothing to do with Canada, in contrast with Charlotte Tonna's *The Newfoundland fisherman* (1835; rpt 1846, 1853), a children's religious chapbook making interesting use of its author's earlier experience in a colony that would later join Canada.

9 See Carole Gerson, "*The snow drop* and *Maple leaf: Canada's first periodicals for Children*," *Canadian children's literature*, 18/19 (1980): 10-23.

10 "The foundling of the storm," *Maple leaf* 1 (1852) 13.

11 The attribution of *The little black pony, and other stories* (Boston 1850) to Susanna Moodie is rather misleading as Moodie's only contribution is the title story. This originally appeared as "Black Jenny: A tale founded on facts," in England in

Marshall's Christmas box (1832), a juvenile annual, and may have simply been pirated by the compiler of the Boston volume. My thanks to Professor Carl Ballstadt for this piece of information.

12 Rupert Schieder, "Editor's preface," Catharine Parr Traill, *Canadian Crusoes: A tale of the Rice Lake Plains* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1986) xviii.

13 Marjorie McDowell, "Children's books," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) 624.

14 See Judith St. John, "A peep at the Esquimaux through early children's books," *The beaver*, Winter 1965: 38-44.

15 Jack Brown, "'The adopted daughter' identified," *Canadian notes and queries* 15 (1975): 11-12.

16 Mrs. A. Campbell, "Preface," *Rough and smooth: or, Ho! for an Australian gold field* (Quebec: Hunter Rose, 1865), n. pag.

17 Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman, *The new republic of childhood: A critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 133-34.

Carole Gerson *teaches Canadian Literature in the English Department at Simon Fraser University.*