

# Canadian Crusoes: and the teaching of a Canadian classic

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**Résumé:** Dans cet article à la forme assez particulière, Elin Elgaard analyse d'abord l'impact du livre *Canadian Crusoes* de Catherine Parr Traill, une des nombreuses imitations du roman de Daniel Defoë. Elle voit dans *Canadian Crusoes* une oeuvre archétypale pour toute la littérature subséquente au Canada anglais. En seconde partie, l'article reproduit une discussion portant sur ce roman dans un cours universitaire enseigné par E. Elgaard.

If Daniel Defoe is, as many critics claim, "the father of the English novel," particularly the novel for children, then Catherine Parr Traill may be called the mother of its Canadian counterpart. Her *Canadian Crusoes* (1852) is the first notable full-length work of children's fiction produced by an author domiciled in this country. Diana Bayley's earlier book, *Little Henry, or the juvenile traveller* (1836) was, as its subtitle suggests, a travel account rather than a carefully-plotted work of fiction; Frederick Marryat's *The Canadian settlers* (1844), like R. M. Ballantyne's later book *The young fur traders* (1856), though recounting actual experience in Canada, was based only on a brief sojourn here, whereas Catherine Parr Traill stayed on. James de Mille, the first children's writer to be born here, did not become popular till the 1870s. His *The "B.O.W.C."* [Brethren of the White Cross] appeared in 1869, introducing a series of boys' adventure stories. Juvenile magazines such as *The snow drop*, founded in 1847, preceded the appearance of Traill's work, but published brief stories and articles; *The Canadian Crusoes* is a fully achieved novel.

Like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Traill's work represents a genre-within-the-genre – the "Robinsonnade" or story of castaway life, focussing on means of survival. This sub-genre has flourished since Defoe, in Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), Marryatt's *Masterman Ready* (1841), Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1857) and *The Dog Crusoe* (1861). Traill's sister, Agnes Strickland, also tried her hand at a Robinsonnade, with *The rival Crusoes* (1826). Defoe echoes were many and unvaried in 19th century works: God is there, to be counted on; the innate superiority of the white race is accepted with cheery optimism; action is everywhere chosen over inaction. This last feature, hardly surprisingly, made the subgenre immensely popular with children.

The Robinsonnade has continued popular into our own time with books

like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1969). Obviously some of the characteristics of the type have changed in recent years. But Catherine Parr Traill also, to some extent inadvertently, subverted the Robinson scenario, rendering inappropriate any sum-up of her book as "typical" of its time, "inevitably dated," or "purely imitative." She tells a fresh story of Hector and Catherine Maxwell, children of a Scots immigrant and his French Canadian wife. With their cousin Louis Perron, the children lose their way in the Ontario backwoods, settle into the business of survival, and rescue a Mohawk girl, Indiana; after three adventurous years these young Canadian Crusoes are rescued by an old trapper – and learn they are no more than seven miles from their home.

Like the original Crusoe novel, Traill's book is a classic. It continues to startle the reader: it haunts the imagination after the book is closed, and it amazes anew in a re-reading. As a classic, Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* serves me well when I begin my courses on Canadian children's literature, or on international children's literature. We use the Carleton University Press reissue of the original text.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to this edition of the novel, Rupert Schieder affectionately records his own first reading of *Canadian Crusoes* some sixty years ago, in a one-room school, and reports the instant and repeated pleasure the book has given him. This is the way Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* gripped *his* readers, old and young; certainly the instant response is duplicated in my own classes, where ages range from the tenderest twenty-odd to the lively sixties. The way this hundred-and-fifty year old children's book works in an adult classroom seems to me to demonstrate something about the reading and evaluating processes, as well as something about the way a gifted author appeals through her subtle blend of generic convention and personal invention.

In his exhaustive foreword, Rupert Schieder, after giving biographical details – the background in England, the marriage and emigration, the relationship with sisters Susanna Strickland Moodie and Agnes Strickland – focuses on the work the latter did as editor of the *Crusoes* in 1852. Schieder emphasizes the question of factual truth versus imaginative fiction. Like Defoe, protesting (of necessity, since fiction in his day was synonymous with idle fancies) that his story was true and based on the real misfortunes of one Alexander Selkirk, Agnes Strickland wrote what amounted to an apologia: "It is to impress on the memory the natural resources of this country by the aid of interesting the imagination that the author... has written the following pages," says sister Agnes.<sup>2</sup> In other words, truth is primary, imagination subsidiary!<sup>3</sup> Traill herself added to her story a number of factual appendices, from A to N, establishing the truthfulness of her *Crusoes*: the fact that children *had* been lost, due to circular wanderings, not far from home (she documents one case, of 1848, in full), and that the locations described *do* exist, if altered somewhat due to the ninety years elapsed since her story took place; with a trium-

phant flourish she produces "educated" (i.e., converted) Indians to tell of their lives, while she in turn instructs us in their arts and artifacts.

This blending of fact and fiction interests members of my classes. They also react strongly to the moralizing which is part of the author's stance, and to the sometimes opposite effect achieved by a fairy-tale quality in plotting. These days, too, questions of sexism, racism, and ecology inevitably rise as new readers confront this book about early days in the bush.

Discussion of *Canadian Crusoes* begins in my course immediately after an introductory session, in which students discuss the qualities they expect from a book; they usually agree that a classic will leave room for reader participation, that it will provoke significant questions, and that it will absorb the reader in a suspension of self, only to bring release, at the end, into a richer sense of self. After this general introduction, the students are thrown head first into the *Canadian Crusoes* and asked to read it before we meet again, for the first of two sessions devoted to the Traill novel.

In that session, the "first-off" reactions of the class fuse with my own teaching notes and assessments. The composite reaction serves as a starting point for comments on other children's books, other classics, and other general issues, literary and critical. Discussion between my students and me, as teacher, which goes something like the following dialogue, suggests the first turmoil of response.

#### The First Session

**One student:** Traill is terribly preachy! She breaks right into Louis's thoughts when he convinces Catherine that it's all right for her to leave her chores and come with him and Hector: "Louis Perron, such is life. The young press gaily onward, gathering the flowers and following the gay butterflies – they forget the grave counsels of the thoughtful" (55). Or this: "Alas, poor Louis, how little did you think of the web of woe you were weaving!" (14).

**Another:** Her landscapes, though, are wonderful. I can see those places, the flowers and the animals: "the tint of autumn,... the splendid colours of the maple" (120).

**The teacher:** Sensuous if conventional language. Is she poetic?

**A student:** When Catherine calls out to her parents, thinking they aren't far away, the author says, "Poor child! The echoes of thy eager voice" – That seems poetic to me. And when Catherine is taken captive by the Indians, Traill says, "One Father, one friend, poor Catherine, thou hast..."

**The teacher:** Does inverting the word order and saying "thou" and "thy" make it poetry? Is the style clear and new, making us see things afresh? Or lulling us, making us inclined to skip it, as we do with any cliché, tuning out?

**A student:** Her characters are certainly presented in clichés. Hector, who "never swerved", "giddy" Louis. And sexist clichés for Catherine, whose "woman's heart" ensures her cousins make up their quarrels. The boys are

"brave knights" who'll defend Catherine with their "trusty knife."

**The teacher:** How does this cry of sexist cliché tally with their being "a sacred brotherhood" of three, or Babes in the Wood, all of them?

**Student:** They're enjoying braving it out, girl and boys together.

**The teacher:** And why? Because "Young minds have a natural poetry in themselves, unfettered by rule or rhyme" (21). True poetry and child territory are tied together. Perhaps you remember that Anne in *Anne of Green Gables* weaves wild flowers around her hat at Sunday school and is considered vaguely blasphemous; but Catherine, who performs the same poetic act in *Canadian Crusoes*, is marvelled at by her author.

On the agenda for the next class we will put further discussion of poetry, and will add that strange species, "the Child," as introduced into Canadian literature by Traill. But now, Indiana – what of her?

**A student:** She's "the young savage." Saved by hero Hector, of course; she calls him "Young Eagle."

**Another:** And she calls Catherine "Ma-Wah-Osh," or "Music of the Winds" (118).

**Another:** Poetry! The sound of it, the whole idea of it, yes, and taken from Indiana's language.

**The teacher:** They try to learn her language. There is an exchange. Unlike Robinson Crusoe and Friday. And from Indiana the white children learn the value of herbs and shrubs. So what can they teach in return?

**A student:** About God – "to enlighten her darkened mind" (127).

**Another:** Indiana seems more real and alive to us than the trio of white paragons whose adaptability never goes wrong. She is the bravest of the children. When they're hiding she says "Indiana is the daughter of a brave; she fears not to die!" But then the next minute, you hear how she's gone into the fold and become a true Christian, and that's her true value!

**The teacher:** So, is there no civilization before Christianity in Traill's view? Is Indiana a "savage" savage? Is Bald Eagle, the chief who gives the children the freedom of his domain to hunt and fish? Or Widow Snowstorm, who returns Catherine's kindness by a gift of ducks?

**Student:** Louis calls them all "untaught heathens." Catherine says she'd be more frightened of them than of the wolves. And Hector says "We are open and they are cunning" (85).

**The teacher:** What does the author say? We know by now that she will insert her own viewpoint.

**A student:** She calls Indiana's natural sadness "the squaw's dark hour." And she lets the children see the Indians as "ravenous wolves", with "catamount eyes."

**Another:** Sounds like a fairy tale.

**The teacher:** How much fairy tale here? How much story telling?

**A student:** At the beginning we hear of Catherine's "intimate acquaintance

with the songs and legends of her father's romantic country [Scotland], which were to her even as fairy land."

**Teacher:** Meaning heroes and villains, danger and victory. Where is Agnes Strickland's apologia now, her insistence on fact? Think about Indiana's self-sacrificing rescuing act, averted by Catherine who pleads with the awe-inspiring Mohawk princess, Beam of Morning –

**A student:** She's just like Andersen's Snow Queen, beautiful and cruel, a fairy tale character.

**Another:** And the Indian who abducts her is straight out of melodrama, with the "deadly glare" of his pair of dark eyes...gleaming with sullen ferocity" (178).

**Another:** Or Catherine's thought, when she believes a squaw is going to kill her, with a hunting knife. (Really the intention is to cut her wrists free from the thongs.) "So young, so young" Catherine thinks, just like a character in a fairy tale "to die by a cruel bloody death!"

**Teacher:** This is a case of an author pouring adult sentiments into a young character's thoughts. Compare what L.M. Montgomery does when she makes her young Anne say: "We *are* rich.... Why, we have sixteen years to our credit, and we're happy as queens." Unlikely that anyone would articulate this, except retrospectively.

**A student:** Of course Catherine's situation is a fake. The author laughs a little, with the squaw, at Catherine's fears.

**Teacher:** How much humour is there in Traill? Subversive, or otherwise? Allowing for authorial omniscience, how far does she use a situation like this as a storyteller's device? How personal is her voice? How much is she working simply in a tradition of Crusoes and Fridays, Christian God versus savage spirit-voices? Where does she finally stand on fact versus fiction, adult "wisdom" versus youthful "folly?"

A quote to end the first session with: "It has ever been my way to extract the sweet rather than the bitter in the cup of life; and surely it is best and wisest to do so."<sup>4</sup>

## The Second Session

Our second class on Traill begins with real interest. Some people have read *The backwoods of Canada*, some even have found *The young emigrants: Pictures of Canada calculated to amuse and instruct the minds of youth* (published in 1826 before Traill left England, and based on friends' letters as well as on John Howison's *Sketches* (1821) – and preceding Marryat's *The settlers in Canada* by some twenty years).

I produce handouts containing examples from the writings of British Maria Edgeworth and American Samuel Goodrich demonstrating that Traill belongs with these contemporaries as a rational moralist.<sup>5</sup> I cite the philosophy implied in Mr. Maxwell's questions to the children: "Have you not hands, have you not

a head, have you not eyes to see, and reason to guide you?" (28). I illustrate Traill's emphasis on usefulness by quoting Catherine: "In Nature there is always some beauty or some usefulness to be found, however lonely the spot" (149), and her belief in rational guidance by mentioning Indiana's "great progress" in exchanging lessons in language: "thus was she united to them in bonds of social and Christian love."

I begin with a question: "Does Traill glory in 'civilization?'"

**A student:** She talks about pretty little villages and churches where silence and loneliness reigned: "Man has curbed the free course of the wild stream;" but the village has not destroyed the "natural beauties of the scene."

**Another student:** But she loves "the wild glens and precipitous hills where the fawn and the shy deer found safe retreats" (29).

**The teacher:** A conservationist's voice?

**A student:** No. She doesn't care that bears, wolves, wolverine and lynx disappear as civilization advances. The animals "that follow man" interest her more: Catherine's pet squirrel, the woodchuck and the porcupine – appear in funny little stories.

**The teacher:** The funny angle may be unintentional. She presents her facts like a humourless schoolmarm: for instance Louis doesn't mean to be wildly funny when he says, "Raspberries I see none, but by and by there'll be May-apples (*Podophyllum Peltatum*). I see good quantities of them in the low grounds." She's a very Anxious Author when it comes to teaching Nature or civilization, Christianity or morals. Is there any room for the children to move naturally?

**One student:** She's on the side of the adults. Louis says, "I cannot enjoy myself as much as I should have done, had father and mother been aware."

**Another:** But still they have a grand old time. Think of the trapper's yarn about the bear caught in a camp fire, handy to be cooked. When Catherine feels for the bear she's laughed down and told she may soon welcome the sight of roasted bear.

**Another:** The crucial remark is Louis's, "We may, for aught we know, be obliged to pass the rest of our lives here" – which seems to faze none of the children!

**Another:** Traill comments "Despair is not a feeling which takes root in the youthful breast – the young are always so hopeful, so confident in their own wisdom."

**Teacher:** But in case adults should take offense at this cheeriness, the author propitiates them: "It was with conversations like this that our poor wanderers whiled away their weariness." She simply forgets her adult audience, then pulls herself up and pacifies them once more. These children *own* the story.

**A student:** There's a lovely picture of Indiana and Catherine sleeping together under the canoe when they're back in camp after captivity, a lovely pair, "one fair as morning, the other dark as night" (222).

**The teacher:** Poetry as picture, without any value judgments attached. Beyond any conventional, simplistic symbolism.

**Student:** Catherine creates poetry from the start, saying : "the aspen... was always dancing, dancing, even when the rest were still."

**The teacher:** So does Indiana: "They left not a drop of living blood in any veins but these." Then Catherine, summoning up courage to whisper to Beam of Morning, "The Great Spirit sends me to thee, O woman of much sorrow. He bids you to save the life of an enemy" (216).

**A student:** And that's wonderfully cross-cultural: Great Spirit is God.

**Teacher:** So, only the boys are left as cardboard?

**Student:** No. We see Hector as having "too good an opinion of his own judgment" whereas Louis shows some insight: "Why anger the Indians by trespassing on their territory?" (103). And both learn from Indiana, most willingly. She leads the hunt, and shows them how to make snowshoes.

**Another:** A realistic, lively scene: Louis putting them on his head first, and she laughing at him. They also play in the snow.

**The teacher:** All having the time of their lives, until the trapper Jacob finds them and actually poses the question, "Have you made up your minds to live and die on the shores of this lake, or do you desire to behold your fathers' home?" (226). Their return is completely natural, especially, as Hector says, "now we are friends with the Indians." The final chapter, indeed, is hymnal, subheaded, "I will arise and go to my father."

**A student:** Loose ends tied, with marriages all round!

**The teacher:** Traill has achieved the cross-cultural: French-Canadian Louis wedded to Scots-Canadian Catherine; the other Scot, Hector, to Indiana, the Mohawk (baptized first). Left, however, blankly facing each other, are the two bits of an enduring paradox which Traill can't handle: Nature and Civilization.

**A student:** The little village, with church and post office, is attractive to the white settlers; to the Indian it represents luxuries "which he can neither obtain nor imitate...The tide of intellect has borne him down and swept his humble wigwam from the earth...Perhaps he murmurs in secret but his voice is low, not heard; he has no representative in the senate." Against this can only be set his "pride in being a Christian."

**The teacher:** Traill's maxim of "extracting only the sweet from the cup of life" will not serve her regarding the clash of cultures. Her tone wavers uncertainly. Within the story her portrait of the Indians veers between dread of them as torturers, moral acceptance of them as brethren and "children of God", practical recognition of them as masters of hut building, hunting, sewing, cooking, fishing.<sup>6</sup> Indiana appears as savage, yet as innocent, to be saved; and finally as "a solitary isolated being – a stranger in the land of her fathers, associating with those whose ways were not her ways, nor their thoughts her thoughts" (150).

Here are paradoxes beyond the reach of a Defoe. The whole question of race-

relations describes a far more intriguing graph than Robinson Crusoe's simple tutoring of Man Friday. To back up her horror of heathen ways Traill repeats Indiana's story of vengeance and terror and appends tales by converted Indians. To counteract any blanket dismissal of the Indian people, however, she has old Jacob's assessment: "The white men have not always kept good faith with them, which I take to be the greater shame, as they have God's laws to guide and teach them" (207).

Another maxim fares much better: "To be up and doing is the maxim of a Canadian. The settler learns to supply all his wants by the exercise of his own energy" (162). Like Defoe, Traill is happy when trumpeting the value of a cheerful work ethic. Most critics, both the early and the more recent ones, have emphasized this aspect of her work.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, however, the classic quality of *Canadian Crusoes* has not been fully addressed. Her work has been treated as an historical document, another Robinsonnade to be filed away for study rather than brought out for a shared read.

The essential difference between Traill and Defoe is that she is writing for and about children. In dealing with children, she affords herself considerably more freedom, becoming their advocate, sharing their love of play and of story-telling. Indeed, she makes her young namesake Catherine a master of stories, in order to "while away heavy thoughts." Unlike the practical Crusoe, the children engage in imaginative leaps across time and space. What remains as most haunting is the fairy-tale ingredient: the love of the marvellous, the child's faith in tomorrow and enjoyment of the now; the comradeship of the three, soon joined by another, who proves more than equal to them in story-telling. Indiana's singing of ballads and hymns moves beyond non-comprehended words, bridging a linguistic gap. When Traill (unlike Defoe) lets love and wonder prevail, she is superb.

**A student:** Would children today appreciate the book?

**Another:** You'd have to break it up – chuck some of the long tirades –

**Another:** But then Traill herself breaks it up: she interrupts, tells a story, paints a picture of the landscape, throws in practical instruction, about making clothes out of animal skins, for instance.

**Another:** Everyone would like Indiana...

**Another:** And Catherine!

**Final voice:** I think my son would love to be Hector!

The sessions on *Canadian Crusoes* are over. But the class members, whether first-year students or experienced school teachers, cannot shake Traill, choosing to focus on her in their final exam or to bring her in for comparison and link her with later Canadian writers. Carl Ballstadt credits Traill with having shaped Canadian literature, having made an inventory of the distinctive features of the new land.<sup>8</sup> He links her with the literature of arrival and adaptation, which points forward to Smucker, Little, and Lunn, on the one hand, and

with the literature of nature on the other hand, which leads to Seton, Roberts, and Montgomery. Certainly Catherine, communing with trees and flowers, has a descendant in Anne Shirley, while Indiana, introverted and courageous, re-surfaces in Montgomery's Emily. Catherine's squeamishness as to the predatory nature of the life cycle is like that of Roberts' Miranda, in *The heart of the ancient wood*; Hector and Louis live again, to be educated beyond mere survival into sensitive and sensuous woodcraft, in Seton's *Two little savages*. Traill raised hackles in Janet Lunn by referring happily to the way "Scots and Irish immigrants left their foolish superstitions behind in their old countries;" Lunn was provoked into creating Mary Urquhart in *Shadow in Hawthorne Bay* (1986; set in 1815).<sup>9</sup> Yet Traill also validates those same old tales: "It is strange," she says, "the charm these marvelous tales possess for the youthful mind, no matter how improbable or how often told; year after year they will be listened to with the same ardour, with an interest that appears to grow with repetition" (51). Finally, her tale foreshadows the modern twist in stories like those by Jean Little, Welwyn Katz and Barbara Smucker, where girls have as much bearing on the outcome as the boys. Truly, Traill's work mothered, directly and indirectly, a great variety of literary progeny.

In her own characters, a wide range of inherent qualities come to the fore through experience: pre-Christian kindness in *Widow Snowstorm*, high tragedy in *Beam of morning*, impulsive kinship in Catherine and Indiana, bantering friendship in Louis, and love in Hector. The whole range of emotions is here, with the adult world merely, but affectionately, framing all.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Canadian Crusoes, A tale of the Rice Lake Plains*, by C. Parr Traill; edited by Rupert Schieder, Carleton University Press, 1986: a reissue of the 1852 text, including the author's appendices and her sister, Agnes Strickland's preface.
- 2 See Schieder's introduction, pp. xxvi and xli, for Agnes' publishing connections and (man-)handling of her sister's manuscript.
- 3 It is interesting to note that, when Charles G.D. Roberts published his *Kindred of the wild*, c1900, he reversed this order: *The animal story at its highest point of development is a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science* (Preface)
- 4 From Traill's *Backwoods of Canada*, 1836, an epistolary novel, in which the first seven letters are devoted to the emigration journey from the old world to the site of the new home: "Imagine our situation at ten o'clock at night, without knowing a single step of our road, put on shore to find the way to the distant town as best we could, or pass the night in the dark forest." But the bewildered immigrant comes to love her new land: – "for all its roughness, I love Canada and I am as happy in my humble loghouse as if it were a courtly hall or bower; habit reconciles us to many things that were at first distasteful –" ending with the statement quoted in my text.
- 5 Both Edgeworth (1767-1849) and Goodrich (1793-1860) wrote immensely popular moral tales aimed at children; the latter, under the pseudonym of Peter Parley, was imitated on both sides of the Atlantic – and satirized by Charles Kingsley (in the character of "cousin Cramchild" in the *Waterbabies* (1863), and Charles Dickens (Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard times*, 1854), both champions of fairy tale, as inveighed against

by Rationalist thought uttered aloud in terms like these: "Do not children love truth? If so, should not history and geography become the elements of juvenile fiction rather than fairies and giants and mere monsters of the imagination?" If, unlike the Sunday School moralists, they did not put religion in the high seat, they always made due obeisance to God. (For a thorough discussion of both groups, and their strong influence on children's literature, see *From instruction to delight, an anthology of Children's Literature*, ed. Demers and Moyles, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982).

- 6 Note Traill's wrath when these admirable qualities fall short of her Rationalist Moralist code: "With his feet stretched to the fire, the Indian cares for nothing else – and it is useless to urge the improvement that might be made in his comfort; he listens with a face of apathy and utters his everlasting guttural, which saves him the trouble of a rational reply" (194).
- 7 Early reviews cited by Carl Ballstadt in *Canadian writers and their work*, Vol 1. (Toronto: ECW, 19--), granted that *Canadian Crusoes* could be enjoyed for its descriptions rather than dialogue or plot – precisely what had recommended it to first reviewers in England and Scotland, when it was published by Hall, Virtue of London (see Schieder's intro., p. xxxi.). Lloyd Scott (Dalhousie Review, 1959) lumped Moodie and Traill together – though no two could be more divergent in their attitudes and writings – as "one voice, expressing middle-class hypocrisy, bigotry, pride and a patronising attitude towards inferiors." Comments by Clara Thomas, Sheila Egoff and, the latest, by Carole Gerson (in *CCL*, 1988), following the Schieder edition) have all still concentrated on the protestant work ethic and the implicit supremacy of white, Anglo, male power, and on Indiana as Noble Savage.
- 8 Ballstadt, 150.
- 9 Interview with Children's Book News, 1987.

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