A walking tour through the children's books of Catharine Parr Traill

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Résumé: *La longue carrière littéraire de Catherine Parr Traill a commencé et s'est terminée par la rédaction d'oeuvres pour enfants. Cet article examine toute sa production narrative et, entre autres textes,* Lady Mary and her nurse, Little Downy, The young emigrants *and* The Canadian Crusoes.

Learning to read

Come, throw aside that foolish toy,
And bring your book, my darling boy,
And I will teach you how to read;
You must not play all day, indeed;
For such an idle waste of time,
My dearest William, is a crime;
And you are often dull, I know,
And cross, because you spend yours so.
You teaze me sadly to amuse;
And when I'm busy, or refuse,
You pout, and say "You wish you could
Tell a nice story, or *I* would."
Now all those tales you love to hear,
And more, are found in books, my dear;
And when you once can read, you may
Enjoy them all the live long day;
And learn, in God's own blessed book,
With pious care, each morn to look,
And find, dear child, what pleasure lies
In being good, and growing wise.

Catharine Parr Traill
The flower garden

Catharine Parr Traill is known as a "grandmother" of Canadian literature largely on the strength of two of her works which still remain in print, *The backwoods of Canada* and *The Canadian settler's guide*. These books are essentially required reading for any serious student of Canadian Literature but they are not entirely representative of Traill's career as a writer. Little known,

because almost all of them are long out-of-print, are Traill's many works for children. In fact, Traill both began and ended her long career as a writer of children's books.

Late in life when she turned some of her attention to autobiography, Traill reflected back on her own childhood initiation into literature:

> We had rabbits and pigeons and kittens and puppies, and many books, but not such books as you young folks have now, with all sorts of gay bindings and pictures to tempt you to read, for in those times when the writer was a child there were few story books, and those in shabby covers and having ugly wood-cuts. Some of the books were hard to read, and yet I think we loved those old books and read them over and over again... we were never dull and never idle. (Osborne collection manuscript, 'The Swiss Herd Boy and His Alpine Mouse,' Traill, 1892, 6-7)

Catharine was a member of the famous Strickland family which produced six well-known writers (Agnes, Eliza, Jane Margaret and Samuel Strickland and Susanna Moodie). Catharine was, however, the first in the family to be published. In May 1818 a family friend, Mr. Morgan, took *The blind highland piper and other stories* to Mr. Harris, a London publisher. Mr. Harris requested that she write more children's stories and Catharine followed up with *Nursery tales*, *The little prisoner* (with Susanna), *Amendment*, *The keepsake guineas*, *Happy because good*, and other works.

The blind highland piper and other stories, also known as *The tell tale*, is a series of stories told by the fictional Mrs. Dormer to her children. This linking framework is evident from the opening lines: "My dear mamma," said William Dormer, as he stood by his mother's knee, "have you no more pretty stories to relate?" Like all of Traill's works for children, the didactic purpose is clearly evident in the device of the "wise parent who guides and informs his or her children" (Ballstadt, *Literary history* 41).

Of particular interest in these early works is Traill's *Prejudice reproved; or, The history of the negro toy-seller* (1826), which falls into a general pattern of Strickland anti-slavery works. Two longstanding traits of Traill's writing were both evident in *Prejudice reproved*: her difficulties with dialogue and dialect, and her desire to impart factual information to her readers. Carl

Ballstadt notes:

> Some attempt is made by Catharine to produce the broken English of the negro but the result is not very convincing... Useful knowledge is added to the ethical purpose by quotations from *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the island of St. Domingo, and by reference to Thomas Clarkson's *History of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave trade* (1808). (48)

Encouraged by her publishing success, four of her sisters also began writing for children. Together they wrote over sixty books for children. Some of these were collaborative efforts and their bibliography is incredibly compli-

cated by the fact that it was not the custom to include the author's name on the title page. It may never be entirely clear as to who authored which book. According to Ballstadt's thesis on the Strickland sisters, the sum total of their contribution was not as great as their output: "perhaps with the exception of Catharine, the Strickland sisters did not produce any significant innovations in the history of children's literature although they wrote much" (40).

That Catharine is an exception is a tribute to her particular writing talents and interests. Since she was basically a teacher at heart, it is fitting that she should be remembered for a contribution to children's literature. Catharine wrote many works for children, most of them slim volumes published before emigrating, but three substantial works were produced in Canada, *Canadian Crusoes, Lady Mary and her nurse*, and *Cot and cradle stories*.

Traill's most successful and enduring English children's work was the story of *Little Downy; or, the history of a field mouse*. The book went through many editions (from 1822 until at least 1855) and shows Traill's greatest strength as a children's author: her ability to accurately describe animal behaviour and to relate natural history. The Osborne catalogue tells, in the author's own words, some of the background of how the story was written:

> Little Downy was a real mouse, and well I remember how I wrote its story. I used to sit under the great oak tree near where it lived, and watch the pretty creature's frisky, frolicking [sic] ways, and write about it on my slate. When I had both sides covered, I ran into the house and transcribed what I had written in an old copy-book, then ran out again to watch the gentle dear and write some more.

The format, again, is a story within a story. The fictional Mrs. Clifford relates the tale to her son Alfred after he insists that a mouse who has eaten his plum cake be caught and killed. "Alfred", writes Traill, "was very fond of hearing a story, if it was not too long" (11). Mrs. Clifford doles out the tale in little bits, breaking the story at crucial moments in order "to give him (Alfred) an opportunity to reflect on the dangers of a mouse's life and to stimulate his curiosity about its fate" (Ballstadt, *Literary history* 50). Mrs. Clifford also draws parallels between the mouse's and Alfred's conduct in order to make optimum moral use of the tale.

In a style which anticipates the later Canadian work *Lady Mary*, there are, interspersed throughout the story, requests by Albert for more information about the animals involved. Question like, "will you tell me, dear mamma, all you know about the owls?" (37) provide Traill with opportunities for her famous digressions on natural history.

The story begins when a mouse is turfed out of her happy, safe home in the barn and all her family is killed. She must move into the field for safety and builds herself a nest and granary and begins to store food. A very industrious mouse, "Downy never came home without bringing something useful for her house, either a bit of straw or hay, a little tuft of moss, or the dried stalk of a

flower" (33). She eventually mates and has four babies but, one by one, three of the offspring and her mate are all killed. Downy herself loses a paw in a mousetrap.

Velvet, Downy's only remaining offspring, makes her mother a new nest which, not surprisingly, is built in the garden of the house where the Cliffords live. In an inevitable twist of fate it turns out to be Velvet who stole Alfred's plum cake to give her mother a treat and was killed in their mousetrap. Downy, it is said, dies of grief.

Moral: "Though it is very necessary to kill them sometimes, or they would soon destroy all our food and clothes, still when we are forced from necessity to kill any thing, we should do it with as much humanity as we can, and never inflict unnecessary pain."

While *Little Downy* is probably the best-written of Traill's English children's literature, another book from her pre-emigration period holds particular interest for Canadians. *The young emigrants* is set in Canada around 1820 and "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" (Marks ix).

In her preface Traill is very forthright about her own objectives for the book: "The author of 'the young emigrants' hopes that the lessons of mental firmness, piety, and industry, which the following pages are intended to inculcate, will prove both pleasing and useful to her youthful readers." These objectives are completely in line with both the didactic purpose of children's literature of the time, as well as her own instructional bent.

According to the introduction by Carl Ballstadt to the Alcuin Society edition of *The Canadian settlers' guide*, Traill augmented friends' letters (the Clarence family who settled around Bronte, Ont.) and her brother's reports to produce *The young emigrants*, with help from John Howison's *Sketches of Upper Canada* (1821), and Lt. Francis Hall's *Travels in Canada and the United States in 1816 and 1817* (1818). Ruth Marks, of the Toronto Public Library, in her introduction to the 1969 reprint edition (used here for page references),

reports that *The young emigrants* is not typical of Traill's work, due to her reliance on these secondary sources, but does display her abiding interests in nature, husbandry, and domestic pursuits.

The story opens when Mr. Clarence loses his government job and is forced to sell the family home of "Roselands." He decides to move to Canada with his wife and three children; Richard (14), Ellen and Agnes. Hartley, a working man who owes a debt of gratitude to Mr. Clarence, insists on helping them out. He has a brother and sister-in-law who have a farm near "Roselands" and offers training for Richard and Agnes before the family emigrates. It is decided that Ellen, who is delicate in health and temperament, will be left in England to care for an aging aunt.

To make themselves feel better about their reduced circumstances, the family begins to intellectualize about their prospective lives before they even set sail for the new land. As Richard says:

> Surely I cannot be degraded by following a plough, when Virgil has dignified the life of an husbandman by his poetry, and the Roman dictator Cincinnatus, by his practice; to say nothing of our modern poets, Burns and Bloomfield, whose poems have been so deservedly admired. (24)

In keeping with their hopes and expectations, the Clarences name their new Canadian "estate" *Roselands* and set busily to work trying to recreate their own little piece of England.

Although she begins by covering the primary work of settlement, Traill soon becomes carried away in her enthusiasm and involves the Clarences in all sorts of projects which they would not realistically have had time for, such as potash works and lumber mills. The most striking example is probably the night-school set up by Richard and Agnes. As related by Richard and Ellen:

> 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 labourers 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. (126)

The book's ending, comprising only three pages, is very abrupt; the aunt dies and Mr. Clarence returns to England to collect Ellen. In one breath the pair have been transported from England and are travelling along the road just a few miles from home. "And who is there, among my youthful readers," sums up Traill, "who would not have witnessed with pleasure, the joy that was felt at that happy meeting by our *Young emigrants*?" (161).

Despite her attempts to make a neat, almost utopian, plot, the book does have structural flaws. For example, because the children keep mentioning a desire to visit Niagara Falls and so not make the trip before the end of the

story, Traill adds a description of Niagara Falls, as well as a definition of Canada, as an afterthought. The description of the Falls should, of course, have been worked into the plot and the definition of Canada is probably not necessary at all after such a detailed story.

Also due to the limitations of working with secondary sources, the book displays a distinct lack of knowledge of the native fauna. For example: "There are a great many kinds of wild animals: such as bears, jackals (coyotes?), raccoons, wolves, panthers (cougars?)... deer, foxes without number, hares rabbits, black and red squirrels, rats (muskrats?), and wild cats (lynxes?)... and a little insect called midges (black flies?), whose bite is very irritable, giving one very much the appearance of a person in the measles" (119-122).

In addition, a reference to the roof of the emigrants' new house as being "thatched with the straw of the maize or Indian corn, which is much warmer and more durable than wheat-straw or reed" seems very unlikely in Canada (111). The frontispiece engraving also betrays a distinct ignorance of Canada as it contains a lovely rural scene which includes palm trees. This was a continuing problem in Traill's books, particularly in *Canadian Crusoes* and *Lady Mary*. The engravings done by English artists to illustrate Traill's natural history stories continually undermined her precise descriptions with inaccurate portraits of Canadian people, wildlife and terrain.

The young emigrants is nonetheless a fascinating glimpse into the hopes and expectations of early nineteenth-century emigrants of Traill's class and background. Needless to say "in her own pioneering experience, Traill found the apothegms and easy steps to success of *The young emigrants* severely tested" (Ballstadt, intro., *Canadian settler's* x). The practical day-to-day information it imparts, while wildly optimistic in the rise in family fortunes in the new land, still provides a revealing description of how farms of the period operated, the types of tasks undertaken, the seasonal jobs done, the division of labour, and so on.

Traill herself emigrated to Canada in 1832 and, far from hindering her flourishing writing career, settling in the new land seems to have liberated it. Only four years later *The backwoods of Canada*, her *magnum opus*, was published. As Ruth Marks explains:

> It is apparent that the major factor in [Catharine Parr Traill's] development was her emigration to Canada. It released her from the strictures which made her early stories for little children immature in style, palely reflecting the qualities of warmth and grace, honesty and candor which she later reveled. (Marks xi)

Although *The backwoods of Canada* (written for adults) is her most important book and *Little Downy* is possibly her best-written children's work, perhaps the one which is the most enjoyable reading for modern Canadians is *Canadian Crusoes*. When it was first published in 1852 by Hall & Virtue it was a great success and was in print for over seventy years, passing through three

different publishing houses. The fact that it is now available in a CEECT edition after being out of print since the 1920s may make it as well-known to adults as any of her works although it has yet to be reprinted in an edition accessible to children.

The plot of *Canadian Crusoes* revolves around the story of three settler's children – Catharine, Louis and Hector – who go out berry picking one day and become lost in the forest for nearly two years. Their practical knowledge of their natural environment and their ability to apply survival skills to the tasks of obtaining food, shelter and clothing enable them to survive quite handily and even to rescue an Indian girl, Indiana, from a rival tribe.

It should be noted that Traill again makes use of some incredible coincidences to smooth out her plot. The children – all Catholic in order that they may marry without ado at the end of the story – are constantly quoting gospel passages (one of the author's favourite pastimes) in spite of the fact that vernacular knowledge of the Bible was prohibited by the Catholic church. This problem is neatly handled by removing the cover and title page from the copy of the New Testament which is in the family possession. The father, Traill claims, "was unconscious of any prohibition to deter him from becoming acquainted with the truths of the Gospel." Also suspicious is the fact that the children happen to take an axe with them when they go berry picking.

There are other signs that Mrs. Traill is not as proficient in technique as some of her contemporaries. Although an ability in dialogue and dialect was considered part of a writer's training, and although her sister Susanna was a master, Traill displays no talent for it. Her young characters, she claims, have grown up in the backwoods with hardly any human contact except for their barely-educated parents, and yet out of their mouths pop such sublime and fully formed sentences as: "But stay, cousin, you are sure my mother gave her consent to my going?" (9).

Two other opportunities for the use of alternate Canadian dialects present themselves in the forms of the young Mohawk, Indiana, and of the French Canadian trapper, Jacob Morelle. Ballstadt's analysis of Traill's attempt at dialect in *Prejudice reproved* as "not very convincing" also applies to *Canadian Crusoes*. Traill very cleverly manages to avoid the issue, for the most part, since neither character talks a great deal. When Morelle is first introduced, for example, he throws a few French words into his conversation, but his English improves very rapidly until he, too, can utter full sentences with complex vocabulary: "I know the Indians; they are suspicious people, they deal much in stratagems, and they are apt to expect treachery in others" (207).

Indiana in particular is silent and watchful, rather than talkative, and her silence is compounded by the fact that she does not speak English and the other children must teach her. There is one crucial point in the story, however, when Indiana relates her sad history to Louis, Hector and Catharine, that her own voice enters the narrative. Again Traill manages to side-step the need for dia-

lect by claiming that "I must render it in my own language, as the broken half-formed sentences in which its facts were conveyed to the ears of my Canadian Crusoes would be unintelligible to my young friends" (133-134).

In summary, Mrs. Traill is altogether unskilled at handling her characters as people, relying on groupings of traits to create characters who are not further developed, but are merely reiterated, through their words and through their actions. The characters do complement each other, however, and this is how they survive: Louis is adventurous, Hector is cautious, and Catharine is a good organizer and domesticates both the boys and the wilderness. Indiana enters the story in late summer, just in time to provide critical information about Indians and survival skills for the winter.

The strength of *Canadian Crusoes* lies neither in plot nor in character, but rather in its capacity for education. Traill is very conscious of the didactic purpose of her book and takes great pains to explain all sorts of things, from botany, to history, to survival techniques, to Indians, to geography and so on. These are her undisputed strong points, and she makes the most of them by including footnotes and appendices for readers who want to know more. This same pattern is obvious throughout all of her books, those for adults as well as those for children.

The preface, written by Agnes Strickland, concurs that the surest means of instruction for children is to provide factual information within an interesting story:

> Our writer has striven to interest children, or rather young people approaching the age of adolescence, in the natural history of this country, simply by showing them how it is possible for children to make the best of it when thrown into a state of destitution as forlorn as the wanderers on the Rice Lake Plains. Perhaps those who would not care for the berry, the root, and the grain, as delineated and classified technically in books of science, might remember their uses and properties when this is brought practically before their notice as the aliments of the famishing fellow-creature, with whom their instinctive feelings must perforce sympathise. (ix)

Another great weakness in the book is, again, the illustrations. The 1852 engravings by Harvey give the overall impression of a foreign place which is definitely not Canada but which might be England. In the first engraving Hector (in Highland bonnet) looks like a French artist (see figure 1). On page 270 it looks like Catharine is wearing tennis shoes. On page 347 there is a modern-looking duffel bag (see figure 2). The dress of the Indians is even stranger; they appear to be wearing biblical vintage apostles' robes or medieval monks' robes. On page 263 the papoose looks like a skinny barrel with a head (see figure 3). On page 320 the Indians look like Roman warriors (see figure 4).

There are many similarities between *Canadian Crusoes* and a later book, *Lady Mary and Her Nurse*. Both are geared to teaching English children about the Canadian environment but *Lady Mary* is intended for younger children.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Ballstadt feels, however, that "Canadian Crusoes" is the more successful book because of its unity and adventurous plot" (Ballstadt, *Literary history* 205).

Lady Mary was very popular in its day and went through many editions. It was variously known as *Stories of the Canadian forest, Afar in the forest, In the forest* and *Little Mary and her nurse*. The latter title change was found on some U.S. editions because the word "Lady" would have been offensive to the republican sensibilities of American readers.

As described by the Osborne catalogue, the story is quite simple in structure. "The nurse, Mrs. Frazer who was born on the shores of Rice Lake in Upper Canada, describes in story form, Canadian animals, flowers, fruits, and reptiles to her young charge, Lady Mary, the daughter of the Governor of Canada."

The mentor and student theme is a very good vehicle for Traill's kind of writing. Lady Mary asks endless questions and Mrs. Frazer is only too happy to answer all of them at great length. The action takes place over about a year, from the middle of one winter to the start of the next one, in order that the passage of the seasons may be followed.

The material covered ranges from flying squirrels, beavers, fawns and birds to wolves, bears and snakes, from Indians, fur and sleighing to wild rice, flowers, fruits and even to the northern lights. This range of subject matter prompted Ballstadt to exclaim that "the volume is virtually a miniature encyclopedia of Canada" (207).

The opening passages are indicative of the tone of the entire book:

> 'Nurse, what is the name of that pretty creature you have in your hand? What bright eyes it has! What a soft tail – just like a gray feather! Is it a little beaver?' asked the Governor's little daughter, as her nurse came into the room where her young charge, whom we shall call Lady Mary, was playing with her doll.
>
> Carefully sheltered against her breast, its velvet nose just peeping from beneath her muslin neckerchief, the nurse held a small gray-furred animal, of the most delicate form and colour.
>
> 'No, my lady,' she replied, 'this is not a young beaver; a beaver is much larger animal. A beaver's tail is not covered with fur; it is scaly, broad, and flat, it looks something like black leather, not very unlike that of my seal-skin slippers. The Indians eat beavers' tails at their great feasts, and they make an excellent dish.'

Traill makes interesting comments on the changes in nature that settlement brings but never lets her tone become less than happy. For example, she does not stress some of the obvious dangers of the forest as she did in *Canadian Crusoes*: "This was all Mrs. Frazer chose to recollect about bears, for she was unwilling to dwell long on any gloomy subject, which she knew was not good for young minds" (136).

The story ends abruptly when the governor is recalled to England. By this point in her career the abruptness of her endings has become familiar and it is not too unexpected that Traill waits until the second last page to tell Mrs.

Frazer's history, more or less as an afterthought. It does, however, seem incongruous that Mrs. Frazer, a native Canadian who has never travelled abroad, would declare that "England and Scotland are finer places than Canada" (184); Mrs. Traill seems to be letting her own personal feelings interfere with her character.

When they leave, the governor gives the nurse a deed to a fine lot of land in Upper Canada in appreciation for all she has taught Lady Mary. This makes a lovely parallel with Mrs. Traill's own grant of an island later in her life by the Government of Canada.

The major problem with the book is, again, the illustrations of the animals which are not accurate. On page 158, for example, the bear has the face of a large smiling cat. Another engraving shows squirrels with funny ears. This is very unfortunate in a book which is attempting to teach children about the realities of Canadian natural history.

Carl Ballstadt offers this overall analysis of the work:

> The variety of its contents and the enthusiasm of both child and nurse in their dialogues reveal Mrs. Traill's own eagerness to tell the children of Britain about her new homeland. (207)

Cot and cradle stories, published in 1895, was Traill's last work. The book was written for, and dedicated to, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, "an audience who believed there never was, nor ever could be, a more delightful story-teller than Aunt Traill," writes her niece, Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon. (5)

In her handwritten preface Traill explains the inspiration behind this work:

> One summer eve as I sat dozing in the warm sunshine on the veranda at Minnewawa – I Dreamed that a wee bird came and whispered, 'The children love to listen to your stories about birds, and bees, and flowers, and squirrels, but you are very old and your voice will cease to be heard among the little ones.'
>
> Then I dreamed that I said 'Wee Birdie, I will write the stories down and make a book that the far away children may read and learn to know and love their "Heavenly Father" and the wild creatures that he cares for so wisely and so well.' (7)

This particular work makes a fine summary to a writing career of almost eighty years, containing stories which span that entire time period. The "The Swiss herd-boy and his alpine mouse," first written in 1818, appears here in print for the first time. Another early story is "The stolen voyage" was reportedly created "from an incident that occurred during a gale on the east coast of England in the year 1824" (196). Later works, from the summer of 1895, include "The Queen bees," "The wrens of 'Westove'," and "Rich relations and poor ones."

In conclusion to her own career Traill wrote: "Now I am ninety years of age I shall write no more. It is time for me to lay down my pen. So I bid my young readers goodbye" ("Swiss herdboy" 12). This is a fitting epitaph, except for one

important detail: Traill meant only to say goodbye as a person, not as a writer. As one of our finest early writers her books for children should not be out-of-print. While scholarly editions of *Canadian Crusoes* and *The young emigrants* are still available for adults, we have yet to see these works, as well as *Lady Mary*, *Little Downy* and others, restored to their rightful owners – the young readers. Surely there will always be children whose curiosity in the natural world can be sparked, as Traill's was, by the story of a bird, a flower, or a little fieldmouse.

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The tell-tale: an original collection of moral and amusing stories. (1818 *The blind highland piper, and other tales.*) London: Harris and son, 1823. [Osborne Collection]

Little Downy; or, The history of a field mouse. A moral tale. London: Dean and Munday, 1822. 12 engravings. [Osborne Collection]

Little Downy (and "Little Mischief"). London: Dean and Munday, 1832. (published under pseudonym "Miss Black"). [Osborne Collection]

Little Downy. (Erroneously attributed to Susanna Strickland). London: Dean and Munday, [ca 1855]. [Osborne Collection]

The flower-basket; or Poetical blossoms: original nursery rhymes and tales. (By the author of *Adventures of a field mouse, Lessons for the nursery, Tell-tale*, etc.) London: A.K. Newman & Co. [ca 1825]. Coloured engravings. [Osborne Collection]

Fables for the nursery; original and select. London: John Harris, 1825. 19 engravings. [Osborne Collection]

With Susanna Strickland. *The little prisoner; or passion and patience*; and *Amendment or, Charles Grant and his sister.* (By the authors of *Hugh Latimer, Little Quaker, Rowland Massingham, Tell tale, Reformation, Disobedience*, etc. London: A.K. Newman & Co. Published by Dean & Munday, 1828.

The keepsake guineas; or, The best use of money. (By the author of *The juvenile forget-me-not, The young emigrants, Prejudice reproved, Nursery fables, Tell-tale, Tales of the school*, etc.) London: A.K. Newman & Co., 1828. [Osborne Collection]

The keepsake guineas, or, The best use of money. London Dean and Munday, 1838. (Erroneously attributed to "Susannah" Strickland). [Osborne Collection]

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Canadian Crusoes

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Lady Mary and her nurse

Lady Mary and her nurse; or, A peep into the Canadian forest. Illus. Harvey. London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1856. [Osborne Collection]

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