

*The Backwoods of Canada: Letters From the Wife of an Emigrant Officer.* By Catharine Parr Traill. (Toronto: Prospero, Canadian Collection, 2003. 351 p., ill. ISBN 1-55267-358-8. \$9.99).

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This book is a facsimile edition of Catharine Parr Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada*, originally published in England in 1836 by Charles Knight as part of the Library of Entertaining Knowledge series. The eighteen letters that constitute the book were ostensibly sent from the backwoods to the author's mother in England. In reality, they were based partly on the diaries and partly on the letters of a middle-class wife and mother who, before her 1832 marriage to Thomas Traill, was already a published author in England. As a young woman, Catharine Parr Strickland obtained independence by writing didactic books for children. As a young married woman in Upper Canada, she recognized that her own settler experience would interest new immigrants of a certain class and began to write for a more varied readership of women, men, and children.

Catharine Parr Traill was open-minded, curious, cheerful, adaptable and adventurous. The letters are a testimony to her keen powers of observation and a well-honed skill in communicating certain aspects of the immigrant experience, contain valuable information about the land and its resources, and also reflect British middle class attitudes and beliefs towards gender, race, class, and the supposed benefits of colonization. The author provides colourful descriptions of her journey across the Atlantic, down the St. Lawrence Valley, and along the edge of the Canadian Shield, and of her encounters with members of settler society and the already displaced Mississauga people. Her observations and descriptions will be of particular interest to the readers of this journal, because the author was a naturalist who, from an early age, was well versed in the European natural history literature and had field experi-

ence. In *The Backwoods*, she wrote knowledgeably about the geological features of Upper Canada, such as the drumlins, eskers, and rock outcrops left behind by the ice ages, as well as the flora and fauna of her new environment. She observed ecological changes due to forest fires. In spite of the hard working life of a settler, she kept a diary, and found time to “discover” plants new to her and of interest to European science, to construct herbaria, and learn about the medicinal properties of plants from indigenous women. She also observed birds and studied their behaviour in the field when most ornithological studies were still done on dead specimens collected with a shotgun. The accuracy of her observations is impressive if we consider that she had no access to ornithological works or collections.

Given the widespread interest in emigration in Britain, the book was well received and soon became compulsory reading among prospective emigrants to Upper Canada. It went through several editions in England, from which she received some income, but there were numerous pirated ones, from which she received none. The book was later reprinted in Canada.

In the 1960s, a new interest in literary circles in Canadian literature and women’s writing prompted the republication and re-evaluation of early nineteenth century works, including those of Traill. McClelland and Stewart published an abridged version of *The Backwoods* with a thoughtful introduction by Clara Thomas, and a more complete edition with an afterword by D. M. R. Bentley.<sup>1</sup> An entirely new annotated version, edited by Michael Peterman, was published by Carleton University’s Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts.<sup>2</sup> During this period, feminist scholars in Canada and Australia mined Catharine Parr Traill’s writings as autobiography, colonial literature and, more recently, science writing, while the journalist Charlotte Gray published *Sisters in the Wilderness*, a popular double biography of Catharine Parr Traill and her sister Susannah Moody.<sup>3</sup>

Given the scholarly and popular interest in Catharine Parr Traill, one wonders why the Prospero Canadian Collection published *The Backwoods* without a new introduction or afterword that would have re-evaluated this book within the context of current scholarship about early Canadian travel, emigrant, and science writing. Although the book is well produced, apart from the flyleaf, there is no reference, explanation, or justification for this edition. The lack of even a brief preface or introduction highlights the differences between merely reproducing a work published in 1836, and producing an updated version of interest for a wide range of readers by providing a background to the author’s life, a context for her experiences, and sufficient annotation to explain the importance of people and events mentioned in *The Backwoods*.

From what I know about the author, having worked on her science writing for more than a decade, I am convinced that she would have preferred the latter.

As the Prospero Canadian Collection edition does not add to the new scholarship, I initially did not want recommend it. But perhaps we should not underestimate its value. Attractively produced and inexpensive, it teases contemporary readers. Its careful perusal will hopefully prompt them to seek out other editions, to read Catharine Parr Traill's later works, and to reflect upon the attitudes, experiences, popular and science writing of this educated settler woman. It may evoke the curiosity of students and others interested in early Canadian settler history, women's history and literature, and the life and work of women scientists.

Marianne Gosztonyi Ainley

- 1 Catharine Parr Strickland Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada: Selections by Catharine Parr Traill*, introduction by Clara Thomas (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966). Idem, *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America*, afterword by D. M. R. Bentley (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989).
2. Idem, *The Backwoods of Canada*, edited by Michael A. Peterman (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1997).
3. Charlotte Gray, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill* (Toronto: Viking, 1999.)

**Biographical Note:** Marianne Gosztonyi Ainley, Ph.D., has contributed to the history of Canadian ornithology and women and science for over two decades. A retired Professor of History and Women's Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia, she is working on a comparative project on the transfer of indigenous knowledge to western science in Canada and Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Address:* 304-1106 Glenora Place, Victoria (British Columbia) V8P 2C3, Canada. *Email:* <marika.ainley@shaw.ca>