SUSANNA AND HER CRITICS: A STRATEGY OF FICTION FOR **ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH**

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Roughing It In The Bush, like the fabled elephant examined by the blind, tends to be classified by one, not the sum, of its parts. In the following article, the major findings of divers critics are assessed in conjunction with what I suggest is a strategy of fiction which amalgamates the disparate findings and the elements of the book into a cohesive if multi-faceted flow.

At this distance, the disparate elements of the story are perhaps insufficiently recognized. Susanna Moodie can't knit, sew, or milk a cow. She is afraid of cows and garter snakes. She has never been alone in a house at night, and walking through a bush with only a female companion — even if it's her woods-wise sister and in broad daylight — makes her uneasy.

Susanna does learn eventually, although her fears persist; toward the end of her sojourn in the bush she milks, knits and sews. She even comes to hoe potatoes with as much satisfaction, retroactive anyway, as is derived from the contemplation of "a fine painting."

Nonetheless, there she is in the middle of the book[1] and the

[1]For convenience, the page references here are to the New Canadian Library edition (McClelland & Stewart, No. 31, 1962) which was abridged from the fuller version by Carl F. Klinck — who suggests in his Introduction that the original work "was padded out in 1852 because the British public apparently wanted 'big' books." The more complete edition published by McClelland & Stewart in 1923 does not, I think, contain any material to contradict the thesis of this article, and, on two important points, the earlier edition provides corroboration. On Susanna's attitude toward the significance of character sketches, the 1923 edition has this statement:

> My dear reader, I am afraid I shall tire you with my Indian stories; but you must bear with me patiently whilst I give you a few more. The real character of a people can be more truly gathered from such seemingly trifling incidents than from any ideas we may form of them from the great facts in their history, and this is my reason for detailing events which might otherwise appear insignificant and unimportant. (p. 277)

And on Susanna's slowness to learn the 'necessary,' the 1923 edition has this statement:

> I would sit for hours at the window as the shades of evening deepened round me, watching the massy foliage of the forests pictured in the waters, till fancy transported me back to England, and the songs of my birds and the lowing of cattle were sounding in my ears. It was long, very long, before I could discipline my mind to learn and practise all the menial employments which are necessary in a good settler's wife. (p. 296)

middle of the bush having to send her barefoot servant lad, John, "to inquire [of old Mrs. R.] what she would charge for knitting him two pairs of socks." Old Mrs. R. is a squatter and one of the odious ill-bred Americans but "there was no other alternative than either to accept her offer [$1 a pair] or for him to go without" (p. 111). It never occurs to Susanna that another alternative is for her to try her hand herself, that a little pioneer enterprise or even British muddling-through might fend off American exploitation. So unenterprising and unaware is she that soon she is recommending further victimization: "Had you not better get old Mrs. R. — to mend that jacket for you?" (p. 114) John's example is an implicit criticism of Susanna and a portent of her future action; he is capable of doing his own mending and, despite his aspirations toward the "jintleman's" life, he stoops to tailor.

Susanna as author allows more explicit criticism of her pioneering inadequacies — from the mouth of another rude American, Mrs. Joe — only when Susanna at the homestead is about to surmount them. Alone and desperate for milk, "required for the tea," she runs across the meadow and begs Mrs. Joe to have "one of her girls . . . milk for me" (p. 128). " 'If you can't milk,' said Mrs. Joe, 'it's high time you should learn' ". And when Susanna pleads fear of cows, Mrs. Joe rejoins: "*Afraid of cows!* Lord bless the woman. A farmer's wife and afraid of cows!" (p. 129).

Although Susanna conquers her aversion and inexperience and bears "my half-pail of milk in triumph to the house," thus learning (at long last, one might think) "a useful lesson of independence," it is difficult to adjust her manifest anomalies — equal perhaps to a mechanic who can't drive a car — to Carol Shields' notion that women in Mrs. Moodie's works have "a strength and resourcefulness which is generally associated with male behaviour" whereas her "male characters . . . are almost always weak, often overtly feminine."[2]

Whatever the validity of the thesis in Susanna's four English novels, there is little evidence of reversed sex-roles in *Roughing It In The Bush*. The servant, John Monaghan, for example, though he sews, is never weak. Susanna's husband may prefer to hire help to do "the menial duties of a servant" but he *is* capable of doing the farm work himself and "did not complain" (p. 106). Furthermore, he

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[2]Carol Shields, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977), p. 7.

is a good fisherman and canoeist, a competent hunter, and when their cabin catches fire and the roof is about to fall in he is "prompt and energetic" with "admirable presence of mind and coolness when others yield to agitation and despair" (p. 195). Susanna's brother Sam also shows his mettle, whisking the heroic Mrs. Moodie and children away to "warmth and safety." Again, at the end of the book, it is Sam who "like a good genius" takes charge of the captainless Moodies and, rather than have them shipped with the luggage, conveys them out of the woods in "his large lumber-sleigh" (p. 230).

It is consistent with Carol Shields' extrapolation of male and female roles that she resists any suggestion that Susanna's apostrophes to the sublimity of natural phenomena provide a source of unity for the book. Shields rejects the major point of R. D. MacDonald's article "Design and Purpose"[3] which argues that Mrs. Moodie uses the romanticized description of nature as a deliberate counter for the unrealistic expectations of advancement in Canada. The descent in Mrs. Moodie's narrative from "romantic anticipation" to disenchantment purportedly exemplifies the pattern and lesson of the book. MacDonald admits that his documentation is weak in places,[4] and his view that in the book's penultimate paragraphs Susanna is describing "the beauty of the winter sleigh ride"[5] or its "good humour"[6] is wholly distorted. "My teeth were chattering with the cold," Susanna reports, "and the children were crying over their aching fingers at the bottom of the sleigh" (p. 234).

Part of MacDonald's motive in attempting, despite conflicting evidence, to uphold the nature thesis is that he thereby would give to the "vigorous, humorous but rather pointless character sketches"[6] an interconnecting and "larger purpose."[7] Their function would be to dramatize the disenchantment, as with Tom Wilson's eccentric forewarnings, and Brian the Hunter's suicidal despair (pp. 28, 29). Another critic, Carl Ballstadt, in an article adjoining MacDonald's, considers the sketches as genre and provides a plausible genesis for them based upon Susanna's early admiration of the work of Mary Russell Mitford, a prolific and popular exponent of the quaintly rural. Ballstadt suggests that Susanna adopted Mitford as mentor and

[3]R. D. MacDonald, *Canadian Literature,* 51 (Winter, 1972), pp. 20-31.
[4]MacDonald, p. 24.
[5]MacDonald, p. 27.
[6]MacDonald, p. 21.
[7]MacDonald, p. 28.

implies that Mrs. Moodie, in Canada, might well have searched out subjects and techniques suitable for a Mitford-like sketch.[8]

That implication, extended somewhat, would suggest that Susanna shaped her materials rather deliberately to a pre-conceived form rather than to a didactic account of pioneer life. Carol Shields agrees with Ballstadt inasmuch as "Mrs. Moodie was unable to resist projecting herself into the scenes she describes" and "her own interaction with local characters absorbed her more than characters viewed in isolation."[9] Neither Shields nor Ballstadt, however, goes so far as to suggest that the viewpoints expressed in the sketches are consciously organized to act as a foil for the private perceptions of the narrating persona, often countering and implicitly criticizing her specious principles and ludicrous inclinations. It seems clear, for example, that Mrs. Joe's perception of the ludicrous and her comment about milking — "it's high time you should learn" — strikes directly to the core of the problem. Susanna, careful not to admit that Mrs. Joe is absolutely right, fulminates about her neighbours' ill-nature and ingratitude, her own indignation, and then undertakes to do exactly what Mrs. Joe suggested: learn.

A more subtle undercutting of British principle occurs with the juxtaposition of Susanna's reflections on the state of servants over home (versus servants in Canada) with her reactions to the charivari's customary censuring of a couple's decision to marry. In Britain, servants are "dependent upon the caprice of their employers for bread. . . ."

> They are brought up in the most servile fear of the higher classes . . . for no effort on their part can better their position. They know that if once they get a bad character they must starve or steal; and to this conviction we are indebted for a great deal of their seeming fidelity and long and laborious service in our families . . . (p. 144)

Almost immediately after these reflections, there comes with sounding horn and drum a charivari and a Mrs. O., "generally a most unwelcome visitor, from her gossiping, mischievous propensities," who, encouraged all the way by Susanna, explains at length and of course with some acceptable gossip, the puzzling custom. Mrs.

[8]Carl Ballstadt, "Susanna Moodie and the English Sketch," *Canadian Literature,* 51 (Winter, 1972), pp. 32-38.
[9]Shields, p. 4.

O. is fairly tolerant — "Ah, my dear! 'Tis the custom of the country, and 'tis not so easy to put it down" (p. 146) — but open-minded nonetheless. If an old man marries a willing young girl, she asks: "What right have they to interfere with his private affairs?" Susanna is righteously on cue: ' "What indeed?' said I, 'feeling a truly British indignation at such a lawless infringement upon the natural rights of man' " (p. 145). She has just explained, in direct contrast, how the "natural rights" of servants among the "lawless" family compact of England's upper classes is part of a "truly British" institution. The contradiction between the two juxtaposed accounts is surely not coincidental but serves the "larger purpose" pointed to by MacDonald. He cites the example of the "humorous eccentric," Tom Wilson, whose gratuitous advice, offered in advance of the Moodies' voyage to Canada, matches quite nicely the conclusion Susanna comes to at the end of the book. The juxtaposition has more attendant irony than MacDonald's label of 'foreshadowing,' or his nature thesis, allows. And that the prophetic truth should issue forth from the mouth of a humorous eccentric is a corroboration of the process whereby Susanna in Canada will learn from the gruff humour of eccentrics such as Mrs. Joe and from eccentric customs such as the charivari.

In his interpretation of Brian the Still Hunter, MacDonald is more comprehensive, terming him "a mad version of the British gentleman, who has gone native."[10] It is difficult, nonetheless, to accept MacDonald's view that lessons from the eccentric are somehow subordinate aspects of the book's general "movement . . . from nature as beautiful and benevolent to nature as a dangerous taskmaster."[11] It is much simpler and more convincing, to my mind, to accept the motion that the "vigorous, humorous but rather pointless character sketches" work in the same way as contradictory, often seemingly pointless, elements in literature generally do work: to suggest a complexity of vision and a precariousness of conclusion. The culmination is, in short, the fictional "idea of life" that Susanna finds embodied in the "ceaseless motion and perpetual sound" of the book under her window and from which "I never could wholly divest myself" (p. 100). In sum, vindictive comments from neighbours and the sad exempla of failed immigrants, as well

[10]MacDonald, p. 29.
[11]MacDonald, p. 31.

perhaps as the changing face of nature, all act to enlarge the account of one family's experience and suggest a much broader consideration of the elements that challenge the immigrant in Canada.

The image of the unceasing brook by the window is seized upon, incidentally, by William D. Gairdner, a critic who extrapolates greatly from the "mysterious awe" Susanna confesses to at that point.[12] From her awe and from her subjective uncertainties in various other places, Gairdner concocts a superstructure which, in potential at least, incorporates "an ontological triad implying the inanimate, the animate and the conscious."[13] The reader can accept, I think, Gairdner's view that Susanna believes "the world is complex, and so is man" without necessarily following his argument that Susanna, compared to her sister, Catharine Parr Traill, structures her experience "around a more mythopoetic [sic] evocation of the dark forces of life and the primal elements of the universe."[14] It is sufficient to agree with him that: "For Moodie, poetry (literature) is the bridge to the eternal, as were flowers (botany) for Traill."[15]

(A similar comparison is suggested by Clara Thomas[16] who proposes Catharine as perhaps "the one contented woman," preoccupied as she was by classifying the objective world around her, and describes Susanna as a developing writer whose "perceptions deepened as her notions of life and order were shattered." Thomas's article includes a comment on Anna Jameson as a practised author and an experienced observer who used her skills [in *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles*] with "an essential detachment." Thomas's assessment of the trio aligns itself with the argument that Susanna was writing in the open-ended way of fiction — "a bewildering, contradictory amalgam.")[17]

The different modes of reality, and "the polarities of a native [Canadian] character" that Gairdner attributes to Traill and Moodie are discerned within Susanna herself by Robert L. McDougall.[18] He suggests that Susanna's second Canadian book, *Life In The*

[12]William D. Gairdner, "Trail and Moodie: Two Realities," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I (Spring, 1972), pp. 35-42.
[13]Gairdner, p. 41.
[14]Gairdner, p. 42.
[15]Gairdner, p. 40.
[16]Clara Thomas, "Journeys to Freedom," *Canadian Literature*, 51 (Winter, 1972), pp. 11-19.
[17]Thomas, p. 18.
[18]Robert L. McDougall, *Introduction to Life In The Clearings* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959), pp. vii-xxiii.

Clearings, gives "a concentrated view of Old World social values reacting to pressure from the New,"[19] that Mrs. Moodie's response "became characteristically a way of compromise"[20] and that "Mrs. Moodie's way was to become the Canadian way."[21]

Robin Mathews does a fuller dissection of the texts and comes to a parallel conclusion. He declares that *Roughing It In The Bush* is a voyage of discovery where the struggle primarily is "within people of the old values and the new terms" (terms dictated by new realities of environment and people).[22] Mathews suggests that in the process of the struggle Susanna Moodie becomes 'Canadian,' moving "towards breakdown of class as it was defined in Europe" and at the same time rejecting American extremes of "individualism" as well as "— in a not fully articulated way — capitalist exploitation."[23]

Mathews' reading may overemphasize Susanna's regard for the Indian (she does say their "beauty, talents, and good qualities have been somewhat overrated, and invested with a poetical interest which they scarcely deserve" [p. 155]), her regard for the 'native Canadians' (they must often stumble on the narrow path charted between 'individualism' and 'individuality'), and perhaps he also overemphasizes the consistency of her distaste for Americans (she does have "sincere respect and affection" for Mr. and Mrs. S., seldom having found "a more worthy couple than this American and his wife" [p. 233]). Both his reading, however, and that of McDougall stress the ongoing education and compromise within Mrs. Moodie and as such their findings can be used to endorse the notion that the melange of seemingly extraneous elements in *Roughing It In The Bush* has much of the reverberating interconnectedness accepted in fiction.

McDougall's comment, for example, that in Mrs. Moodie's compromise "the conservative pole was [not] invariably British and the radical invariably American" can be corroborated by examining in sequence not only Susanna and Mrs. O's discussion of the charivari with the reflections on employment of servants in Britain cited previously, but also those two subjects with the discussion of

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[19]McDougall, p. xvi.
[20]McDougall, p. xvii.
[21]McDougall, p. xx.
[22]Robin Mathews, "Susanna Moodie: Pink Toryism," *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Toronto: Steel Rail, 1978), pp. 27-44.
[23]Mathews, p. 28.

colour prejudice. "A few days after the charivari affair," Mrs. D., an American, drops in while Susanna is "at dinner, the servant-girl . . . at a distance" and accuses the Moodies of pride since servant and master are "of the same flesh and blood" and "the Lord is the maker of them all" (p. 149). When the conversation turns to a Negro colonist, it is Mrs. D.'s turn to admit prejudice — "I never could abide him, for being a black." She vows that if God allows blacks into heaven she "would never wish to go there." Mrs. Moodie sets beside this irrational prejudice her own rationale for social discrimination, education:

> There is no difference in the flesh and blood; but education makes a difference in the mind and manners, and till these can assimilate, it is better to keep apart (p. 149).

That principle justifies keeping apart from the Negro as well as from servants since "colour makes the only difference between him and uneducated men of the same class." The same principle does not, however, justify Mrs. D.'s egalitarian acceptance of whites alone. The British position is more enlightened than the American.

The sequence of philosophies in "The Charivari" chapter (11), then, does more than present a consistent view for the narrator — a view which Ronald Sutherland suggests is all too consistent still in Canadian Anglo-Saxon 'superiority.'[24] The flaws and inconsistencies in other views are also made clear. British society's way with servants is rigid and unjust; American society's way with the Negro is irrationally unjust; and the native Canadian way of permitting social interference with individual freedom to marry is an unjust intrusion upon personal rights. None of these motes in another's eye adds a whit to the wisdom of the narrator's own position, but taken all together the chapter does suggest international dimensions for its concluding question: "Which is more subversive of peace and Christian fellowship — ignorance of our own characters, or of the characters of others?"

The gradual enlightenment of the narrator about her own views and that of others is presented in a non-bewildering fashion, and without the strain of a critical superstructure, if Susanna's education is perceived as emerging from her gleanings from "the characters of

[24]Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1971), pp. 35-37.

others." In the same process, "ignorance of our own" British model is re-examined: for example, Mrs. Moodie's new awareness of the basis for English lower-class placidity, as in the case of the 'better-bred' servants over home, moderates her demands and expectations in Canada.

The cumulative learning process is parallel, as I have suggested, to that of a reader assessing the implications of interweaving event and character in fiction. It is virtually impossible to determine the extent of separation between participator and narrator, between Mrs. Moodie whose character is being portrayed, and Susanna who is doing the portrayal of all the characters in the book. The interplay of parallel and diverging themes in the charivari chapter is surely designed to be so. For characters such as Tom Wilson and Brian the Still Hunter the implications selected as most pertinent will vary according to the judgment of the reader. R. D. MacDonald perceives the unwelcome visitor as a device by which "the issue of propriety or hypocrisy is raised."[25] As such, Malcolm represents the point at which the education or democratization of Mrs. Moodie comes to a halt; she will not agree with him that "in the woods we may dispense with the hypocritical, conventional forms of society and speak as we please" (p. 181). In his first fortnight at least, Malcolm might also be perceived as a manifestation of the idle dream of gentleman immigrants seeking an easier life in the colonies:

> For the first fortnight of his sojourn, our guest did nothing but lie upon that bed, and read, and smoke, and drink whiskey-and-water from morning until night (p. 179).

Although Mrs. Moodie has no patience with such idle dreams now — she has learned to milk, to sew, and to hoe — one point that Malcolm does make, and which is common to Tom Wilson much earlier, is uppermost with Susanna herself at the end of the book. Malcolm says: "Oh, the woods! — the cursed woods! — how I wish I were out of them" (p. 187). Tom says: "That horrid word *bush* became synonymous with all that was hateful and revolting in my mind" (p. 62). Susanna says: "The backwoods of Canada" is a "prison-house." "To the poor, industrious working man, it presents many advantages; to the poor gentleman, *none*!" (p. 236).

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[25]MacDonald, p. 26.

To that one standard Mrs. Moodie clings, both in her role as author and as fictional participant learning from others. It is a standard that is unshaken by the converging force of her critics within and without the book. By using the strategy of fiction, the various implications of character, anecdote and personal data can be synthesized to a unity which affirms: however ameliorated conditions may be, roughing it in the bush is not for the gentle-born.

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