"The Dear Domestic Circle": Frameworks for the Literary Study of Women's Personal Narratives in Archival Collections

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Traditional literary studies are based on the assumption of a separation of art and life: that language functions differently in literature than in life, and that the tropes and figures of speech of literary discourse reveal a more conscious effort at composition than the devices of other speech and writing acts, and therefore become objects for conscious critical study.[1] Theorists and critics concerned with the recovery of a woman's tradition in literature of necessity disagree with the binary opposition of this view of the literary tradition. As Margo Culley observes in "Women's Vernacular Literature":

> In releasing the word "literature" from a capital "L" and giving it the broadest possible construction—texts fashioned of letters—we may include women's diaries and journals, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, essays, speeches, stories, oral narratives, and songs. Texts are everywhere, and the limits to the sources for study are only the limits of our imaginations.[2]

As a result of this enlargement of what is considered worthy of literary examination, materials once thought valuable only as social history are now being examined by literary scholars.[3] In Canada, the attention given to this task, as far as women's documents are concerned, has barely begun.[4] This is an apt time to suggest some appropriate frameworks for examining women's personal narratives. As a beginning, I would suggest

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[2] *Women's Personal Narratives: Essays in Criticism and Pedagogy*, eds. Lenore Hoffman and Margo Culley (New York: MLA, 1985) 13.

[3] Note, for example, excerpts of travel accounts included in Oxford's *Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* or Terry Goldie's semiotic analysis of Samuel Hearne's "Coppermine Massacre" in "Signs of the Themes: The Value of a Politically Grounded Semiotics," ed. John Moss *Future Indicative: Theory and Canadian Literature* (Ottawa: Ottawa UP, 1987).

[4] See, for example, Barbara Godard's discussion of Native women's oral accounts in "Voicing difference: the literary production of native women," in *A Mazing Space*, eds. Shirley Newman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon-NeWest, 1986).

three frameworks that should prove productive: the identification of the generic influences on the account; the discovery of the "context" of each account, that is of its literary, cultural, and personal imperatives dictated by the writer's milieu (especially as they effect the kind of "metaphor of self"[5] the writer is consciously or unconsciously constructing); and an awareness of the possibility of influence from other non-public texts, such as private letters, reports, and journals.

As my examples, I take two nineteenth-century travel journals written ten years apart by two sisters who travelled with the Hudson's Bay Company from England to the Red River Settlement in what is now Manitoba. Frances R. Simpson[6] wrote her journal between May 2 and June 26, 1830, describing her journey by canoe from Montreal to the Hudson's Bay fort at the junction of the Red River and the Assiniboine, and then her additional journey northwards to York Factory on Hudson's Bay. She was 18 and had just married her cousin, George Simpson, the colourful governor of the company, who at age 44 was still proud of his ability to supervise personally his enormous trading territory, and to travel it in record-breaking time. Her sister Isabel (Simpson) Finlayson, one year older than Frances Simpson, did not marry until she was 29, but also married "into the company." Her husband, Duncan Finlayson, was Governor Simpson's friend and trusted lieutenant who was given the governorship of Assiniboia shortly after his marriage to the older Simpson sister. In 1840 he brought his wife out to live at Red River; during the long ocean voyage to Hudson's Bay, the trip from York Factory south to the settlement, and her residence there, Isabel Finlayson recorded her observations in her "notebook." The two sisters' accounts, both in their unique aspects and in the comparisons and contrasts they offer, yield interesting insights when examined using the frameworks I have suggested.

The literary genre that comes closest to describing the two accounts, and the one the two women seem quite consciously to be imitating, is the nineteenth-century travel account, a particularly female version of which reached its zenith in the 1850s. There is no "dearth of reports on America by feminine English visitors,"[7] and their chief attraction, as summarized by Andrew Hill Clark, was their combination of detailed factual information on geography, climate, population, local culture, and industry

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[5] The expression "metaphors of self" comes from James Olney's book *Metaphors of Self* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972).

[6] "Simpson" is both her birth name and her married name since she married her cousin.

[7] Andrew Hill Clark, foreword and notes, *The Englishwoman in America*, by Isabella Lucy Bird (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1966) v.

with the personable autobiographical style of a genteel Englishwoman, who would impress her audience with her high standards of taste and intellectual accomplishments, while maintaining an amused tolerance of the strange spectacles of a ruder culture, a sensitive eye for the grandeurs of nature, and an optimistic attitude to the future possibilities of the land.

Marni L. Stanley, in "Travelers' tales: showing and telling, slamming and questing,"[8] offers a rationale by which we can consider this sub-genre. She focusses on the narrated "I" of each account, adapting the ideas of Gérard Genette on narrative discourse.[9] She proposes four types of persona. The first, the "shower," does not "develop a distinct persona for the narrated 'I' and disguises her own observations as information and records them in the same flat, statement-of-fact style she uses for historical data and population statistics" (53). The "teller," on the other hand, emphasizes the "narration rather than the representation," so that "travel books of this kind have a stronger sense of the fictional notions of narrative, such as plotting a succession of events, and the narrating 'I' creates a persona for the observer who is the narrated 'I'" (54). Besides the Genette-derived "shower/teller" description, Stanley creates two more categories of narrator to help describe female travel writers. One is the "slammer," who "focus[es] on [her] own sensibility . . . extend[s] judgement rather than sympathy or even interest to the places and people [she] encounter[s] . . . from an assumed position of moral, cultural and intellectual superiority" (55). Stanley reserves the highest position for the "questers," who, at their best, come "to travel with apparent joy and . . . a capacity for discovery" (59). Implied in this "discovery" is not only a new knowledge of the territory over which the traveller is moving, but also a self-discovery.

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Frances Simpson signals the nature of her writing persona in the first pages of her journal by narrating an episode early in the sea voyage when, stricken with sea sickness, she takes to her bed: "I felt the Cabin reel, and saw every color of the Rainbow dancing before my eyes: in less than half an hour I was safely deposited in my Berth, where I remained for three weeks."[10] Her

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[8] In *A Mazing Space*.

[9] Genette does not examine "showing and telling" in travel or other autobiographical accounts; he explores how these concepts relate to the strategies of narrators in Marcel Proust's fiction. Stanley's adaptation, however, is applicable to the works under discussion.

[10] Frances Simpson, "Journal: May 2nd-June 26, 1830," Public Archives of Manitoba,

husband, distraught because of her inability to take nourishment, attempts to bribe the captain to go ashore in Ireland, but storms prevent safe landing and the ship resumes its voyage to New York. The fact that this is the only incident regarding the voyage that Simpson chooses to narrate might be partially due to spending it in sea sickness, but the amount of detail she gives—describing the weather, the danger, the captain's reactions, and the amount of the proposed bribe ($5,000)—suggests the close observation she intends to provide, as well as her ability to chose the anecdote that offers the best plotting possibilities. She also signals that the journal will present not a detached observer, but a personable "I" when she closes her narration of this incident with the emotional observation that she suffered so badly from sea sickness, "that I felt at times perfectly indifferent as to whether I lived, or died" (3).

In depicting the settled portion of North America, during her visit to New York and her journey to Montreal, Simpson remains impersonal, filling her pages with the statistics of hotel service, modes of transport and picturesque descriptions typically found in published travel accounts. Her more anecdotal, personal style re-emerges once the canoe trip to remoter places is underway. She immediately adopts a humorous tolerance for the incongruities of ladies and gentlemen engaged in fur-trade travel when she describes the mode by which chief members of her party were ferried around rapids: "Mrs. McTavish & myself were carried in the arms, and the Gentlemen on the backs of our sturdy Canadians, which (as may be supposed) caused a hearty laugh both at, and to, such of the company as were novices" (11). It may shock the twentieth-century reader to realize that the Simpsons and other senior Bay employees never lifted a paddle or walked too many steps during the two thousand mile journey, but we may be comforted by learning that, like even the lowliest member of the crew, Mrs. Simpson was awakened at 2 a.m. "by Mr. Simpson's well known call of 'Lève Lève Lève'" (13). In fact, it is Frances Simpson's ironic good humour about her husband's energetic drive to accomplish the journey at his usual breakneck speed that enlivens the account. Towards the end of the journey, when George Simpson decides to do the trek from Fort Alexander, on Lake Winnipeg, to Upper Fort Garry, at the site of present day Winnipeg, in less than twenty-four hours (an incredible feat considering a good part of it will be against river currents), his wife does not hide the unheroic manner in which he accomplished this:

Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg MB., D6/4 (copy and original), 2-3. All citations are from the typed copy.

> On stopping to prepare for Dinner, Mr. Simpson gave all the Wine & Liquor that remained to the Men, who made it into Punch in their large cooking Kettle, and regaled thereon, till some of them were "powerfully refreshed". This debauch (the first I had seen on the voyage) infused into our Crew a degree of artificial strength & spirits, otherwise we should not have reached the Fort, as they were quite overpowered with sleep and fatigue; but after it began to operate, they paddled and sung, with much gaiety, bringing us to the establishment at 12 P.M. after a hard day's work of 24 hours. (40-41)

Simpson's preference for the colourful and enlightening anecdote partially reflects her husband's personality; he, too, flamboyantly filled his accounts of his time and place with colourful anecdotes.[11] But as well, these vignettes—which seem, on the surface, to be objective descriptions—are, actually, filled with small turns of phrase (including puns) and minimal, but strategically located, personal observations, which leave the reader with the sense of having encountered a skillful "teller" as well as a dutiful "shower." In fact, Frances Simpson's journal gives more of a sense of the spirit of the fur trade—its routes, its rituals, its personalities, its efficiencies and deficiences—than many much longer historical accounts in which the author's personality is effaced.

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Frances Simpson's sister, Isabel Finlayson, who kept a "notebook," provides a resounding example of what Stanley means by a "slammer." Finlayson describes, for example, in great detail, a shipboard encounter with Inuit people. Despite her attempt to maintain a light-hearted, reportorial style, it becomes obvious that this meeting with primitive people brings out personal, and powerfully negative, feelings. She begins the narration of the anecdote by setting the scene in the context of her own reactions:

> I had been suffering severely from headache during the day, and towards evening was obliged to lie down on my bed and through pain and exhaustion had just fallen into a kind of slumber, when I was aroused by such unearthly yells, hootings, and screams, that in the confusion

[11] See the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 8: 812.

> of the moment I could scarcely believe but that I was under the influence of some hideous dream.[12]

By emphasizing the surreal nature of her own mood, she prepares us for the intensity of her later reactions. She enlivens the account by quoting her maid, who calls her to come see "the horrible creatures that had come on board" (14). The entire incident is too long to quote here, but Finlayson gives a full description of the scene that confronted her, the sound of the Inuits' "discordant" voices, the strange jumping dance performed by one of the women, the clothing, expression, manner of bartering, and even the smell of the exotic visitors.

A Mr. Boulton sets out to prove to Finlayson that the "Esquimaux" are such savages that a mother will trade even her child for a "few beads." Although Finlayson observes that this was an "assertion I would not believe, scarcely conceiving it possible that a woman however savage, could be so hardened to the feelings of maternal affection" (18), she watches the experiment and describes the mother's reaction in detail:

> It was some time before she comprehended his meaning, as she began to undress the little creature, thinking he wanted its clothes, but as the truth suddenly flashed upon her mind—she, like a fury, snatched the child from his grasp, and shaking it out of its seal-skin shirt, thrust it perfectly naked into her hood, which she instantly drew over her head not leaving the smallest portion of the unfortunate little being in sight. This was no sooner done than she triumphantly hel[d] up the empty garment, hoping to get the anxiously coveted treasures, but this he [Mr. Boulton] pretended angrily to refuse, upon which she hastily threw the rejected dress aside, to offer something else, leaving the poor child without an article of clothing, till her caprice or tenderness, recalled her attention to its unhappy situation. (18)

Finlayson seems unable to decide if Inuit mothers have maternal feelings, and so concerned is she with the child's unclothed condition that she never suspects that it might have been uncivilized for Mr. Boulton to suggest the experiment, and perhaps more so for the others, including herself, to permit it and watch it. The next day she observes a seal hunt and the "horri-

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[12] Isabel G. Finlayson, "Notebook 1840-43," P.A.M., Hudson's Bay Company Archives, E 6 (copy), E 12/5 (original), 14. All citations are from the copy.

ble repast" that follows, and concludes her account of this encounter with an alien culture with this comment:

> This was the last sight I had of these uncivilized beings for I was so much disgusted with them after the scene that had just occurred that I went to my cabin, and did not return to the deck until we had left their canoes so behind that they could scarcely be seen in the distance. (19-20)

In her four-fold division of personae, Stanley implies that the "slammer" offers us less insight than the "quester," since growth in awareness and tolerance of new experience is undetectable in the former. In terms of vividness of narration or liveliness of characterization, however, whether one is a slammer or a quester would seem to be immaterial. In fact, Isabel Finlayson, who, as a character in her own story, resembles the naive and intolerent Gulliver in Swift's tales, may have produced, through the assumption of a position of cultural superiority, an account at least as valuable as one showing the development of a more anthropologically aware persona.

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Although the genre-based categories of personae offered by Stanley for the analysis of travel accounts are initially useful in analyzing the tone of these archival materials, we must look for more complex, and less traditional, investigative tools in order to realize the full richness of these accounts. The essay collection *Women's Personal Narratives* offers, in its variety of critical and pedagogical discussions, such a method—a composite of "feminist criticism, reader-response theory, and the 'new historicism' all [of which] view literary creation as a complex interaction between writer or speaker and audience, each embedded in the specifics of culture, including the specifics of gender, race, and class."[13] By this method of literary study, generic comparison becomes only a first step which must be followed by a broad, extratextual investigation that will answer such questions as: who were these women writing to and for? what kind of self-image did they wish to present to their readers? what were their class and educational backgrounds? what factors of family and group politics might effect their revelations? what literary consideration would have been consciously part of their stylistics? what historical facts inform their journeys, their observations, and their sense of their own place in the world?

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[13] Lenore Hoffman, introduction, *Women's Personal Narratives*, 1-2.

Finally, we must ask a question that perhaps encompasses all of the previous ones: what concept of themselves *as women* informs their portrayal of the narrated "I" in their written accounts?

To answer the last question first: the Simpson sisters grew up in an age when the phenomenon later known as the "Cult of True Womanhood"[14] was beginning to emerge. Industrial Revolution European man, in his pursuit of commerce, trade, and empire, had little time for less materialistic qualities of character, and so expected, indeed yearned, to find them in his women. The four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, distinguished a true woman from a false one (Welter 152).

In her study of "gentlewomen" in early Canada, Marian Fowler summarizes the "courtesy" books or conduct books that guided women to these virtues in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the earliest books, modesty and diffidence are valued in a lady, along with physical and mental delicacy. This "delicacy" was not the prudery of later Victorianism which led to naming the legs of pianos "limbs," but rather it implied a sense of well-bred decorum that allowed a lady to act correctly and with propriety on all occasions. As Fowler comments, such a lady knew that "even in the wilderness one didn't let one's hair down."[15]

The title of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* denotes a real desire in this era for a lady who had the good "sense" to show a careful emotional restraint and not give way to a too excessive display of "sensibility." Such a lady knew that one never, no matter how bad the circumstances, gave way to "self-pity and pessimism; one faced the world squarely and sanely and maintained a cheerful optimism at all costs" (Fowler 24).

By the time the Simpson sisters were growing up in the 1820s in their father's prosperous London home, it was assumed by conduct book writers that ladies would cultivate the ornamental arts of needlework, sketching, and musical competence; but as well a desire was being expressed that, in addition to these skills, a truly well-turned-out lady would have a fairly well-developed brain. Thus, a knowledge of literature, history, geography, and languages (but not the sterner stuff of mathe-

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[14] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (1966): 151-74.

[15] Marian Fowler, *The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) 23.

matics and science) was added to the list of attributes of a lady. These further accomplishments were not meant to create an independent woman: "Women were . . . still being educated to catch husbands . . . now, however, conduct book writers suggest[ed] a different bait" (Fowler 59).

That the men of the far-flung Hudson's Bay Company trading empire also subscribed to this cult of true womanhood is amply evident in Sylvia Van Kirk's study of women in the fur trade, *Many Tender Ties.* In the early days of the trade, Company men often took "country wives," establishing relationships with Métis or Indian women through which a trader gained important local allies, as well as a woman knowledgeable in skills that would help him survive in the new world. As the trade became more prosperous, the same men began to desire white wives "who would live up to their middle-class ideal of womanhood—a lady pure and devout, of beauty, genteel accomplishment, and dutiful obedience."[16] Governor Simpson, who himself had had several alliances with native women, was the leader in this trend, persuading several of his traders to put aside their country wives in favour of "lovely, tender exotic[s]" (Van Kirk 183) from back home.

Simpson outdid his men in securing the hand of his 18 year-old cousin, Frances Simpson, about whom Chief Factor John Stuart rhapsodized:

> The very first sight of her on the landing at Bas de la Riviere strongly reminded me of the picture Milton has drawn of our first Mother—Grace was in all her steps—heaven in her Eye—In her gestures Dignity & love, while everything I have seen of her since seems to denote her such as the first Lord Lyttleton represents his first Lady to have been—'Polite as all her life in the courts had been—Yet good as she the world had never seen'. (Van Kirk 187)

The journals of both Frances Simpson and Isabel Finlayson embody these high ideals. For example, both writers judge other women by an internalized standard of lady-like behaviour. Simpson remarks that she found the wife of Colonel By "a very agreeable & accomplished young Woman" (15), and she notes that she and Mrs. McTavish (her companion on the trip), while waiting for their husbands to finish their business at one stop, were "kill[ing] time by reading, drawing, writing & chatting,"

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[16] Sylvia Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties': Women in the Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, n.d.) 183.

as well as the more serious endeavour of studying a cook-book from which Mrs. McTavish learned to make some "delicious Cakes" (27).

Similarly, Finlayson deplores the behaviour of one of her travelling companions, a Miss Allen, who, when the ship's bells rang to warn of ice floes, "could never resist screaming in concert" (13). Not only is it important to be passive enough to sit docilely waiting for the greater business of men to be completed, but also it is necessary for a lady to have enough steel in her spine never to complain of discomfort or danger.

This last was certainly true of Isabel Finlayson. The letters of Letitia Hargrave, who shared the crossing with Finlayson, bear witness to how much the new bride suffered during the journey. Hargrave observes before the voyage that "Mrs. Finlayson is very unwell & very unwilling to go but she is apparently determined."[17] During the first leg of the voyage, to Stromness in the Orkneys, she writes:

> Mrs. Finlayson was dreadfully ill yesterday. She was so feverish that I was terrified at her appearance. She is better today and whenever her illness passes away she is perfectly lively. There is a great change upon her, she is so very thin & her nose has got literally transparent. (50)

Hargrave commends Finlayson's proper behaviour in eating whatever is placed before her by the cooks, unlike the less well-behaved Miss Allen: "Poor Mrs. Finlayson who is a pattern as far as amiability & good breeding are concerned had a bad headache & in her distress took & finished what she got & everyone of us but Miss Allen did the same" (52-53). Upon arrival in York Factory she adds: "Mrs. F's feet & hands were covered with chilblains & she wd. not have a fire on her own account" (63-64); later, watching Finlayson depart for the Red River colony, Hargrave worries: "I rather think she will be ill. She suffers well poor thing" (70).

Almost none of this appears in Finlayson's notebook. Instead she emphasizes externals—the sights, the conduct of the ship, the encounter with the natives. Over one's personal pains, as her sister Frances puts it, one "must throw a veil" (1). But to the reader sensitive to the self-image these women feel they must project, the very real, personal trials of these journeys emerge in other ways; for example, through the intensification

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[17] Letitia Hargrave, *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1947) 33.

of more acceptable emotions, such as homesickness (especially for the mother), or a worshipful attitude towards the husband which would perhaps seem excessive to a twentieth-century reader. After carefully restraining herself from writing about her fear and discomfort, Finlayson writes more openly of her feelings on being reunited with her husband: "I had the inexpressible happiness of being locked in the arms of my dear and affectionate Husband" (22). During her September trip south to Red River, she keeps a carefully unemotional account of most of her experiences, but regarding Duncan Finlayson she exudes: "should we be spared to return to our native land, I shall look back to the hours I have passed with him in the solitary wilderness, as among the happiest I have spent during my sojourn in the 'Far West'" (43). If we read the less respectable emotions between the lines, even the formal diction does not wholly obscure the fear that must lie behind "should we be spared," the dislocation felt in the "solitary" wilderness of the "Far West," and the complete dependence these women must have come to feel on the kindness of the men who brought them thousands of miles from home and family.

In fact, Simpson uses her formal, conventional moment of praising her husband to briefly let her reader know exactly what discomforts she has suffered. A no-nonsense list of these "many little inconveniences"—including "rising between 1&2 am, sleeping sometimes on swampy ground, sometimes on hard rocks, and at others on sand . . . living the greater part of the time on salted provisions . . . exposed to a scorching sun, cold winds, and heavy rains"—is quickly followed by this very correct statement: "I possessed the greatest advantage, as Mr. Simpson from frequent experience, knew how to appreciate every comfort that could be obtained" (50).

This reticence regarding emotions helps to explain why, when confronted with the Inuit, Finlayson's reactions are so extreme. Not only would a respectable lady be expected to be revolted by the primitive, but also, having suppressed so much negative and unacceptable fear, pain, and loneliness, she must have found an unbridled expression of the very basic emotion of disgust to be a relief. As well, both women manage to find a subtle way to let off steam vis-à-vis the men they encounter. Although each is careful to say nothing unpleasant about her husband or his close associates, each manages to find gentlemen (usually those whose behaviour to the ladies is exaggerated or amateurish in its courtesy) to mock with her pen. For Finlayson, it is "Mowatt, one of the Red River Settlers" whom she pokes fun at because "we were highly diverted at this man's extreme anxiety to show his politeness to me" (33). The poor man keeps

mistaking other ladies, including her servant, for Finlayson. Simpson engages in the same satire but, as well, comes close to criticizing her husband's obsession with speed and early starts when she remarks:

> I could not help thinking it the height of cruelty to awake them [the crew] at such an hour, having a strong fellow-feeling for them, as it was with the greatest difficulty I managed to keep my eyes open, and more than once fell on the slippery & uneven ground—not much ceremony was however observed, and in a very short time we were all again afloat. (34)

Simpson does not actually name her husband in this moment of complaint, but we know from earlier entries that it is he who calls "Lève" at 1 a.m. and that it is he and not his wife who has no difficulty in falling immediately back to sleep in the canoe as soon as they are underway. It is important to develop a habit of reading for indirection when deciphering the accounts of nineteenth-century ladies—so much of what they must have felt could not be directly expressed.

In this regard we may perhaps understand why Simpson did not write about her more than a year spent at Lower Fort Garry, even though she promises to do so in her final pages. Perhaps there was no style, no matter how indirect, available to her to write of a difficult first pregnancy far from home and family, a hard labour, a slow recuperation, followed by the death of her son (*DCB* 8: 811). George Simpson limited his wife's social circle to a few white women he felt acceptable; yet, when she fell ill, the only person available to care for her was the cast-off Métis wife of one of Simpson's traders, a woman on the other side of the social war begun by George Simpson's decision not to permit the native and Métis wives of traders to be "received" in his wife's company (Van Kirk 194-200). Perhaps in a world as socially inhospitable as Red River, Frances Simpson found no context for the self she had written of on her journey, the young woman capable of shooting rapids and glorying in the wild scenery of the new land. Plagued by illness, she left in 1833 at the age of 21, never to return.

Her sister Isabel allows herself one moment of intimate revelation on the subject of Frances' tragic stay at Lower Fort Garry when, eight years later, on arriving there herself, she writes:

> it is impossible to describe the feeling that oppressed my heart at the sight of the spot, which

> had been her home for so many months. It was a beautiful evening, the sun was shining brilliantly upon the water, and the Canadians were singing their liveliest songs . . . the same as in other days, but she (the tender and affectionate companion of my early years, who had formerly given life and cheerfulness to the place) was no longer there and thousands of miles separated us from each other, and after vainly endeavouring to conceal my emotions, my heart at length found relief in a flood of tears. (46-47)

The full pathos of the passage—created by the literal (but also symbolic) truth of "it is impossible to describe," the contrast between the memory and the present reality, the bracketing of the description of her sister, who remains unnamed, and the careful dramatic build to the "flood of tears"—all this can only be fully appreciated by knowing the cultural context, which necessitated projecting the image of true womanhood, as well as the historical context, which included the sexual politics of Red River (where Finlayson will now represent the new order as her sister once did), and the personal context, which culminates with the sad fate of Frances Simpson in that place.

As well, we should keep in mind that the audience to whom these accounts were addressed would have strictly enforced and confidently expected the expression of these values. Simpson writes that she trusts that

> such of my friends that may take the trouble of perusing the foregoing unconnected Memoranda, will examine them with an indulgent eye; and as they know that this is my first essay at committing my ideas, or the result of my observation to paper, except in the form of a familiar note or letter, I feel assured they will excuse the style, and small degree of merit they possess. (55)

Finlayson also asks indulgence for her account of her "dear domestic circle, for whose amusement it has been written" (55).

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We, too, need to "indulge" in a different kind of reading if we are to fully understand these accounts. Not only should that reading be a contextual one, but it should also revise some of the usual expectations with which we read the literature of the early part of the nineteenth century. While a Byron or a Shelley might

be admired for writing in public rebellion against the values of the conventional world, these women wrote to conform to the world as perceived by that "dear domestic circle." Therefore in measuring their achievement, we cannot look to the ways in which they break the old order and write a new one into existence; rather, we must look to how well they express their unparallelled experience in the new world while giving strict adherence to the constraints and values of the old world.

In this regard they do very well on three counts: they use the contemporary picturesque and romantic conventions of their time to portray effectively the vast contrasts of the territories through which they travel and to express the feelings that departure, travel, and arrival evoke; their intelligent imitation of the travel genre, along with their own educated observation, makes their accounts detailed and vivid recreations of the Canadian scene; and their restraint regarding certain emotions ironically creates more subtly expressive personae than might be the case with a more permissive expression.

Both women begin their journals with a stylized expression of sorrow at the departure from family and home. Lyric and elegaic in tone, elevated in diction, they create formal openings suited to Odyssean voyages of epic proportions. Thus, despite their disclaimers to personal accomplishment, both women subtly persuade the reader to consider their journeys, and their writings, in a grand dimension. As well, the disguise of the elevated language of the departure offers a respectable form for the expression of less ladylike emotions. For example, Finlayson is able to express her real terror and sense of dislocation:

> There are, in our journey through this life, some moments of utter desolation and misery, that if once felt, they can never be forgotten, and while I listened to the voices of the Sailors at the windlass, as they weighed anchor, I almost thought my heart would burst, I felt as if the last link, which bound me to my native land was severed, and I seemed launched upon the wide world desolate and alone. (4)

Each woman shows herself adept at handling the vocabulary of the picturesque school of artistic expression. Simpson, for example, after establishing her literary credentials by comparing the Talon Portage on the Matowa River to the "Scottish Scenery" of Sir Walter Scott's tales, observes:

> the approach to this Portage is truly picturesque . . . on either side are stupendous

> rocks of the most fantastic forms: some bear the appearance of Gothic castles, others exhibit rows of the most regular and beautifully carved Corinthian Pillars; deep caverns are formed in some, while others present a smooth level surface, crowned with tufts of Pines, and Cedars. From the upper end of the portage is seen a beautiful Waterfall, which dashes over immense masses of rocks thro' which it had worn itself many a channel foaming and roaring to a considerable distance, the spray glittering in the Sun with all the varied hues of the Rainbow. (20)

The preference of the picturesque school for the contrast of rough and smooth textures and of light and dark hues, for the drama of water against rock, as well as its view of nature as sophisticated architect, is well served by this particularly well-trained "lady."

But Simpson also shows herself open to other modes of description as her own careful detailing of location, persons, weather, and transport suggests that she saw the Canadian scene in other frames than the picturesque alone. A nascent Canadian "realism" flows from her romantically trained pen, when, after shooting the Maligne River rapids, she offers this brisk compression:

> we made 3 Portages, and ran several Rapids, which before entering had rather an alarming appearance; but once over the brink, the rapidity which they were passed left no time for apprehension; on the contrary, I could but admire the address of the Bowsman in leading our beautiful & airy bark, thro the Breakers Whirlpools & Eddies occasioned by this great body of water pent up between immense walls of Rock, and hurled over huge masses of the same material. (35)

Simpson shows a movement from the set-piece, picturesque description—romantic scenes without human presence—to passages that evoke, not only the grandeur of setting, but also the active world of human endeavour inside a dangerous natural world.[18] Interestingly, the description subtly highlights her own modest self as central perceiving consciousness and as autobiographical consciousness, buffeted but calm, busy admiring a man's skill while making a ladylike disclaimer of courage by

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[18] In "Journey for Frances, II," *The Beaver*, March 1954: 12, Grace Lee Nute informs us that these rapids on the Maligne River are considered too dangerous to "shoot" by twentieth-century canoeists.

reporting that the situation "left no time for apprehension." In such subtle ways do these writers create their own personae.

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One may speculate that these women were more aware than they cared to admit that their private journals might one day reach a broader audience than the "dear domestic circle." Simpson comments on the attitudes of Montrealers toward her proposed journey: "it was regarded as a wonder, was the constant subject of conversation, and seemed to excite a general interest—being the first ever undertaken by Ladies, and one which has always been considered as fraught with danger." But she quickly disavows any claims to uniqueness as she adds: "In order to amuse myself, and likewise to refresh my memory on subjects connected with this voyage, at a future period, I determined on keeping a Journal, which I now commence" (10).

Any sensitive reader who takes up Finlayson's notebook after having examined Simpson's journal can see the ways in which she takes her sister's account as a pattern for her own and can detect the ways in which she attempts to fulfill the various parts of that pattern: elevated introduction, humourous personal anecdotes, carefully detailed description, a day-by-day record of the river routes, literary allusions (to both Scott and Byron in Finlayson's case), close appraisal of Indians' and settlers' customs, the economics of the country, and so on. At each stage, Finlayson tries to rise one step above her model, giving a lengthier and more elevated opening, supplementing her description of natives with drawings, expressing greater homesickness, giving more romantic descriptions of nature. Ironically, her greater literariness and more consciously crafted stances, combined with her occasional lapses in narrative ability, create a sometimes less lively persona than her sister's (or perhaps this is a judgement of a twentieth-century reader, whose own "cult of true womanhood" teaches her to prefer the plucky, boy-like, youthful naiveté of the Simpson persona, as opposed to the serious, more conservative, perhaps more mature persona of the older Finlayson).

To confirm the position that the "metaphor of self" created by each of these women is a persona that is developed for the purpose of the travel account (and thus might be different at another time in her life or in another mode of writing), one would need to investigate other writings. For example, their later letters, some of them kept in archival collections, although outside the scope of this paper, might reveal interesting changes in

self-image as Simpson suffers the declining health of multiple pregnancies, which caused her to spend many years away from Canada and her husband's world and which led to her early death at the age of 41 (*DCB* 8: 812). There are corresponding changes in the life circumstances of Isabel Finlayson, who survived a longer western experience and, while remaining childless, became the mother-surrogate of her sister's children. In doing so, she lived much longer. She died at age 79 in 1890 (*DCB* 11: 824), outliving many of the more spectacular voyageurs to the Hudson's Bay territories of the "Far West."

The reader is tempted, because of the vividness of the presentation of the women we come to know in these unpublished accounts, to examine the final context of the later years of these women's lives. In spirit, that wish to find yet one more realm of information is part of the contextually rich investigation that women's accounts require, since genre-oriented, formal investigations often offer only partial entry into these works. Ironically, however, these "contextual" investigations do not lead to less emphasis on the centrality of the text, for each new context—historical, cultural, personal—leads the critic back to the text with new insight. This re-reading in turn brings a fuller appreciation of the literary achievement of these women.

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