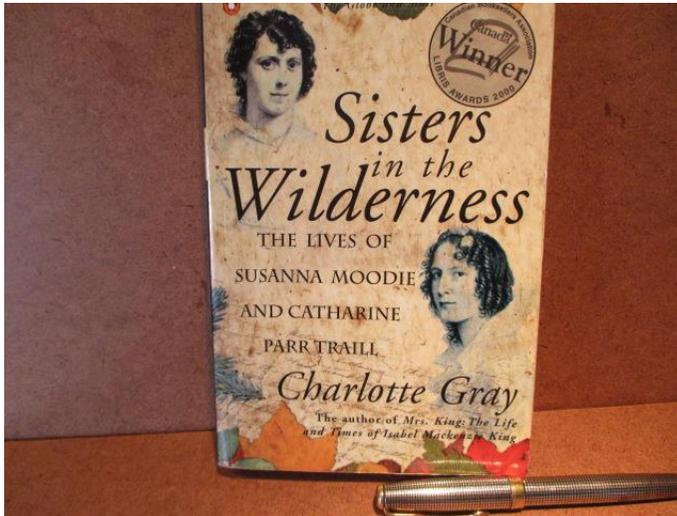


Sisters in the Wilderness

By Rod Fraser



In keeping with my early Canadian history theme of late, I am writing a review of a wonderful book, called, '*Sisters in the Wilderness*', written by Charlotte Gray in 1999.

It tells the story of two sisters, Catharine and Susanna Strickland, who immigrated to Upper Canada in 1832, along with their husbands. The latter were military men, still young, but pensioned off at half-pay after the Napoleonic Wars. The sisters were born in 1802 and 1803 respectively. Their husbands, a few years older than the sisters, were Thomas Traill and John Dunbar.

Since neither husband had great prospects for earning a living in the old country, they persuaded their wives to immigrate to Upper Canada. As former officers in the British Army, they were eligible for free land in the colony.

Their wives, curiously enough, were published authors in England, successful enough to earn a modest income on a regular basis, but never enough to support themselves or their families.

After organizing the trip, these two couples sailed separately for Upper Canada, to take a chance on the 'New World'. They weren't alone. In the decade from 1831 to 1841, there were over 655,000 people that sailed away from British shores.

At that time, the trip to Canada by sailing ship took six to seven weeks to reach Quebec City. The trip from there to Upper Canada was equally difficult.

Fortunately, both couples had cash to pay for cabin accommodation for the ocean portion of the voyage. The alternative was to travel below deck, provide your own food, and live in cramped and uncomfortable quarters with minimal privacy, improvised toilets, rotting food and poor ventilation.

From Quebec City, the trip up-river on the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario was complicated by the rapids at Lachine and Long Sault. Through the use of a stagecoach when necessary, and a steamboat

when there was clear sailing, the Moodies and Traills made their way slowly to Cobourg — the jumping off point to their free land in the backwoods of Upper Canada.



John and Susanna Moodie were first to move to the backwoods. They purchased a cleared two-hundred acre farm in Hamilton Township, eight miles from Cobourg. Two log cabins and a frame barn were already erected on the property, so they were all set to go — had they known anything about farming.

Without the practical knowledge, or the inclination to learn through hard work, John relied on others to do his farming. He hired men to do the work. This was not a success, and as his capital ran out, John decided to sell the farm and take up his free land allotment, near Susanna's brother in Lakefield.

This was a wise decision, as Sam Strickland was a competent individual and a successful farmer. He possessed the knowledge, strength and iron will to make it all happen. He also had farm equipment that the Moodies could borrow — and advice that he freely dispensed. In short, he was a godsend.



Although Thomas Traill, was no better suited to

farming than John Moodie, Catherine Traill quickly realized her husband's inadequacies and sensed that taking up their free land near her brother would be the wisest course of action.

They secured a land grant of waterfront property, and purchased some additional acres, to be adjacent to Sam's property. Within a year, they had built a sturdy log cabin to be their home.

By the end of 1834, the Moodies, Traills and Stricklands were living near Lakefield, each on their own farm, within a mile of each other's home. There they would remain until 1839.



In the years that followed, John was constantly looking for new opportunities and tended to lose interest in any endeavour which required hard work. As for Thomas, he suffered from severe depression and often retreated into his little world of reading and pondering intellectual ideas.

On the other hand, both their wives were tireless workers, skilled writers and eager to earn money as authors. They regularly submitted short stores, practical 'how-to' articles and books for publication.

Two such books were very successful. In 1836, Catharine's '*The Backwoods of Canada*' was published, and went through a number of printings.

Similarly, Susanna's '*Roughing it in the Bush*', published in 1852, was very successful, both in Canada and England.

Unfortunately, the sisters did not make the money they should have from these books. The publishers negotiated small advances to the sisters, who did not share in the success of these books through regular royalty payments.

In short, the Traills and Moodies slowly used up their capital, extended their borrowings and were often badgered by their creditors. In 1839, John Moodie found an exit to his life in the backwoods. He was appointed Sheriff of Victoria District in Belleville.

Although moving to Belleville was a blessing in economic terms, John's new job was very difficult, subject to political pressures, and people hostile to his appointment. He worked at it for thirty years until his death in 1869.

The Traills were not so lucky. Although Thomas tried to get a government appointment, it never happened. The family moved from place to place, each time a little lower on the economic ladder — one step ahead of their creditors — until Thomas Traill died in 1859 at the age of 65.



The two sisters were now widowed. Catharine was

given a small piece of land in Lakefield by her brother, Sam Strickland. With his help, she built a lovely cottage where she lived with her eldest daughter, Kate for the remainder of her days.

Catharine had a lovely, warm personality, a close family and many friends. In retirement, she continued to write articles for publication, letters to family and friends, and took frequent trips to visit the many people who sought her company. In her last years, she was known as the '*oldest living author in Canada*'. She died at age 97, in 1899.

Susanna predeceased Catharine by fourteen years. Her retirement years were not so pleasant. She was a difficult woman with a sharp tongue. She missed her husband desperately and had few friends. Nevertheless, she soldiered on, continued to write and is perhaps the best known of the Strickland family.

There is no doubt that the friendship of Catharine and Susanna was the rock on which their lives were built — at least in part. They were soulmates, confidantes, friends and sisters. This book is quite moving, if only for the story of their friendship.

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