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CATHARINE PARR TRAILL

English-born Canadian writer and naturalist

One of several nineteenth century Canadian women who published influential works on their adopted homeland, Traill wrote popular books about adjusting to frontier life and Canadian natural history that helped to attract immigrants to the colony. She also described the traditions of indigenous peoples and the medicinal qualities of wild plants, while painting clear pictures of the rigors of life in the backwoods.

BORN: January 9, 1802; London, England

DIED: August 28, 1899; Lakefield, Ontario, Canada

ALSO KNOWN AS: Catharine Parr Strickland (birth name); Catherine Parr Traill

AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT: Literature, biology

EARLY LIFE

Catharine Parr Traill was born Catharine Parr Strickland, the daughter of Thomas Strickland, a prosperous English businessperson who invested in property and industry, and his wife, Elizabeth Strickland. She was named after Henry VIII's sixth wife, Catherine Parr, with whom the family claimed an ancestral tie. Catharine was born in London but spent most of her childhood in rural Suffolk, on the east coast of England.

Of the family's six daughters, four—including Catharine—would eventually become published authors. Like other bright women of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Great Britain, such as Elizabeth Carter and Joanna Baillie, Catharine and her sisters were educated through their father's library, in which they read the works of John Locke, John Milton, and William Shakespeare, while their two brothers were sent to the Norwich Grammar School. When their parents left home to visit the boys, the sisters often amused themselves by staging scenes from Shakespearean plays. *Hamlet's* Ophelia and *The Tempest's* Ariel were among Catharine's favorite roles. She was a gentle and whimsical child who mediated among family members when quarrels arose.

Catharine's interest in botany and natural history was sparked by her belief that divine agency could be seen in the works of creation. Her father encouraged her to develop a skill in carefully observing and classifying natural objects. Each of the Strickland girls was given a small garden of her own to tend, and the girls roamed the Suffolk countryside searching for shells, amber, and wildflowers. Even as a child, Catharine spent hours collecting, pressing, mounting, and labeling her finds. Thomas

Strickland ensured that his daughters knew the scientific name of each plant they found. It was a great blow to the family when he died unexpectedly in 1818. Catharine was only sixteen years old at the time.

LIFE'S WORK

Thomas Strickland's death led to the beginning of Catharine's publishing career. When the family guardian, a man named Morgan, discovered some of Catharine's short stories, he submitted them to a publisher at St. Paul's Churchyard, London. The stories were immediately published as *The Tell Tale: An Original Collection of Moral and Amusing Stories* (1818).

Catharine and her sisters realized they could support their family through their writing, but their early publications helped sustain their own basic needs at Reydon Hall, their family home, and paid their brothers' educational fees. During the 1820's, Catharine and her sister Susanna became involved with the British abolitionist movement through their contact with Methodist and Quaker fellowships. Catharine published *Prejudice Re-*

proved: Or, The History of a Negro Toy-Seller in 1826. Susanna transcribed a slave narrative titled *The History of Mary Prince* (1831). Catharine and Susanna's early work is didactic, framed to provide readers with messages regarding personal or social ethics. Catharine published approximately eleven books in the period between 1818 and her marriage in 1832.

Catharine is best known for the guidebooks she published after she married Thomas Traill and moved to Upper Canada in 1832. Her Canadian titles include *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), *Canadian Crusoes: A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains* (1852), *The Female Emigrant's Guide* (1854), *Canadian Wildflowers* (1868), *Studies of Plant Life in Canada: Or, Gleaning from Forest, Lake and Plain* (1885), *Pearls and Pebbles: Or, Notes of an Old Naturalist* (1894), and *Cot and Cradle Stories* (1895). As the titles of her books testify, she fell deeply in love with the Canadian people and landscape. She was set on making the best of the grueling life in the backwoods, but her sister Susanna Strickland Moodie, who also moved to Upper Canada with her

husband, wrote with a different sensibility. Susanna's *Roughing It in the Bush: Or, Life in Canada* (1852) is written in a wry and satirical manner that is absent from Catharine's sincere mixture of friendly advice and natural history.

In *The Backwoods of Canada*, Catharine depicts the Chippewa people empathetically and the wildlife carefully. Catharine writes:

I can yet make myself very happy and contented in this country. If its volume of history is as yet blank, that of Nature is open, and eloquently marked by the finger of God; and from its pages I can easily extract a thousand sources of amusement.

The influence of poet William Wordsworth is clearly evident in Catharine's prose. She adhered to Wordsworth's emphasis on the function of God's creation as a book of moral instruction. Her careful descriptions of trees—from maples to pines—and animals—from beavers to black-

BLACKBIRDS

This passage from The Backwoods of Canada illustrates Catharine Parr Traill's ability to blend poetic imagery with scientific detail.

The blackbird is perhaps our best songster, according to my taste; full as fine as our English blackbird, and much handsomer in its plumage, which is a glossy, changeable, greenish black. The upper part of the wing of the male bird of full growth is of a lively orange; this is not apparent in the younger birds, nor in the female, which is slightly speckled.

Towards the middle of the summer, when the grain begins to ripen, these birds assemble in large flocks: the management of their marauding parties appears to be superintended by the elders of the family. When they are about to descend upon a field of oats or wheat, two or three mount guard as sentinels, and on the approach of danger, cry *Geck-geck-geck*; this precaution seems a work of supererogation, as they are so saucy that they will hardly be frightened away; and if they rise it is only to alight on the same field at a little distance, or fly up to the trees, where their look-out posts are.

They have a peculiarly melancholy call-note at times, which sounds exactly like the sudden twang of a harp-string, vibrating for a second or two on the ear. This, I am inclined to think, they use to collect their distant comrades, as I have never observed it when they were all in full assembly, but when a few were sitting in some tree near the lake's edge. I have called them the "*harpers*" from this peculiar note. . . .

Source: Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America* (London: C. Knight, 1836), Letter 13.

birds—surpass those of Wordsworth in their documentary detail and blend poetic imagery with an almost scientific exactitude.

Catharine found solace in continuing to write accounts of her natural surroundings during years through which she and her husband suffered financial hardship. Thomas was a melancholic man not suited to the rigors of farming. He originally received a plot of free farmland because of his position as a military officer, but he and Catharine sold that land in 1839 and would move five times before Thomas's death in 1859. These were difficult years for Catharine. She lost two babies, and her remaining children were often sick. Nevertheless, nine of her eleven children survived into adulthood. After she was widowed, she moved back to the countryside north of Peterborough and lived with her oldest daughter, Katherine.

During her later years, Catharine acquired a public reputation as an expert on Canadian botany. This reputation was bolstered by her publication of *Canadian Wildflowers* in 1868. The book consisted of hand-painted lithographs by her niece Agnes Fitzgibbon, Susanna Moodie's daughter, and botanical descriptions by Catharine. Catharine continued to write for publication into her ninety-eighth year. She died in her sleep on August 28, 1899.

SIGNIFICANCE

Catharine Parr Traill is often remembered as the older sister of Susanna Moodie. However, interest has been growing in Catharine's unique contributions to early Canadian literary life, which were as significant as her sister's. Indeed, Catharine published more prolifically than Susanna. Catharine is now praised for her intimate knowledge of Canada's northern landscape, wildlife, and indigenous peoples, recorded in her published accounts of settler life. She was the first person to identify and name many Canadian wildflowers and plants, and her catalogs of pressed plants and flowers are currently held in the Museum of Nature in Ottawa, Ontario. She also documented the traditions of the Chippewa people, including their clothing, songs, and use of native plants for healing the sick.

During Traill's lifetime, her publications gained her invitations to meet two governors-general of Canada. She also formed friendships with influential scientists such as Sanford Fleming. In recognition of her role as a gifted early Canadian writer, Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, named its Traill College after her.

—Natasha Duquette

FURTHER READING

- Ballstadt, Carl, Elizabeth Hopkins, and Michael Peterman, eds. *I Bless You in My Heart: Selected Correspondence of Catharine Parr Traill*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. The letters are grouped into three periods of approximately thirty years each, beginning in 1830 and ending in 1899. Each section is prefaced with a short introduction. A useful chronology of Traill's life appears at the front of the book.
- Eaton, Sara. *Lady of the Backwoods: A Biography of Catharine Parr Traill*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969. This short and entertaining biography is written in an anecdotal style. It is deceptively simple in form but contains many fascinating details.
- Fowler, Marian. *The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada: Elizabeth Simcoe, Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, Anna Jameson, Lady Dufferin*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982. In this critical biography Fowler sets Traill among her contemporaries. Fowler's argument is that women's experiences of settler life caused them to negotiate between the feminine propriety of household crafts and the masculine rigor of backwoods survival.
- Gray, Charlotte. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1999. This is an excellent overview of the life of Catharine set in relation to that of her sister Susanna. The text is complemented with maps of Suffolk and of the Canadian backcountry, as well as miniatures of Thomas Traill, Catharine and Susanna, and a photograph of Catharine's lifelong friend Frances Stewart.
- Traill, Catharine Parr. *The Backwoods of Canada*. Edited by Michael Peterman. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997. This is the work for which Traill is best known, and it is often compared to her sister Susanna's *Roughing It in the Bush*. In his new edition, Peterman includes a nineteenth century map of Upper Canada and the title page from the second issue of the book's first edition. Three letters written by Catharine appear as appendixes. Electronic texts of the original edition of *The Backwoods of Canada* and several other books by Traill are freely available on Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org.
- SEE ALSO:** Anna Jameson; Susanna Moodie; Thomas Talbot; David Thompson; William Wordsworth.
- RELATED ARTICLE** in *Great Events from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*: February 10, 1841: Upper and Lower Canada Unite.