



Mapping the Female Self through the Canadian Landscape: Short Stories by Canadian Women Writing in English

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Abstract

This essay offers a chronological analysis of the progress of the short story in Canada as narrated by women writers who specifically examined the problematic relationship of the individual with the Canadian landscape. It demonstrates that whilst early narratives portrayed settler women as colonizers and tamers of the wilderness, narratives of the first half of the twentieth century chart the complexities – ethnic, political, historical and cultural – of establishing a cartography of the self. The chosen stories cover the range of recorded female experiences from 1845 to 1945.

‘The vast sweep of the Arctic Zone,
and those forlorn regions of dreary space –
that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice,
the accumulation of centuries of winters,
glazed in Alpine heights above heights,
surround the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold.’
Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own.

– Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 2–3

The passage quoted above from Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847) encapsulates a specific relationship between the female sense of self and the landscape she imaginatively recreates through the act of reading. In the opening pages of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë delineates the key themes of her narrative as focussing on a process of female individuation and the struggles involved in forging a feminine identity within the alien space of patriarchy and social hierarchy. This direct correlation between sense of self and sense of space has now become a common trope in twenty-first-century writing by women. However, in the nineteenth century, a female character expressing her intention to ‘form an idea of [her] own’ or indeed to claim anything as her own, would have been considered subversive and transgressive. In nineteenth-century Canada, few women found the time or the resources to publish, and those who did, aimed their writing at a European audience. Most of the writing published by women during the

nineteenth century intended to familiarise their foreign audiences with the alien landscape they were attempting to 'conquer'. Bearing in mind that contemporary audiences' perception of the North American continent was partly drawn from reading descriptions in travel books similar to the one *Jane Eyre* is engaged in, English settlers in particular were keen to demonstrate their capacities for civilising both humans and the 'forlorn regions of dreary space' they encountered. At the dawn of the twentieth century, however, further colonisation of the Canadian North and a bolder and more sophisticated generation of females – including a significant number from indigenous tribes – contributed to the narratives depicting the relationship of the individual to the landscape. A rich and inspiring body of literature emerged depicting varied and at times contradictory relationships between self and space.

Women's lives on the Canadian prairies have not always been recorded and their contributions to the efforts of settling the wilderness and building homesteads have been sporadically recognised. As the numbers of immigrants from Europe to Canada increased dramatically at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the few female travellers who made the journey to Canada did so in order to offer support to their husbands or employers. It is believed that the first European woman known to have visited the prairies was Isabelle Gunn who came to Canada in pursuit of her lover in 1806. Gunn disguised herself as a man and took the alias 'John Fubbister' while working on a ship for the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). She became known as the 'Orkney Lad' and remained undetected for 18 months until one day when she walked into the Captain's cabin, asked if she could lie down because she was feeling ill and, after a few screams of pain, gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Once her identity was revealed, Isabel remained on board the ship where she was employed as a washer-woman and nurse. The news of Isabel Gunn's deceit spread and the Company felt embarrassed by it to the extent that they issued a number of laws and warnings governing the strict admission of workers on board all ships heading to Canada.¹ The story of Isabel Gunn is known to us thanks to a few obscure records in the annals of the HBC and some articles published in journals many years after Gunn's death. Because she never wrote her own narrative, either in the form of letters home or in a diary, Gunn's own story remains a mystery, her voice lost in history.

The immigration of female workers to the Canadian prairies was strongly encouraged by an intense advertising campaign masterminded by the headquarters of the various companies which employed young men, such as the Canadian Pacific Rail company (CPR) and the HBC. In the *Propaganda Booklet* published by CPR a particular message was sent 'To The Young Women of England, Ireland and Scotland' which read:

Canada . . . is a country where a young woman who possesses practical skill in domestic sciences – held to be the first of all accomplishments – is looked

upon with consideration and respect. While we require twenty to thirty thousand men to assist in reaping our bountiful harvest annually, there are but few young women come to the assistance of the ladies, whose duty it is to provide for their household and for the additional help. A great number of very worthy girls have come to this country from time to time, it is true, but on account of the excellent opportunities there are out here for them to settle in life in homes of their own, household help appears to be getting steadily scarcer as time goes on. (qtd. in Rasmussen et al. 18)

The message is clear enough. Working class women, willing to serve other women, are needed because domestic servants are increasingly becoming housewives themselves due to the 'excellent opportunities' on offer. In fact, women from various social classes were flooding to Canada, fulfilling various social roles. In their historical survey of the lives of women on the Canadian frontier and the Canadian prairies Rasmussen et al. inform us that 'officers of the Northwest Mounted police brought their wives out West', while 'Protestant missionaries on the prairies depended upon female lay workers and women in their own families to teach in the mission schools'. In addition, Rasmussen et al. assert that

the Roman Catholic nuns were in a class by themselves. The Sisters were among the most independent and self-reliant of the early women settlers . . . In 1844, they fulfilled the combined roles of catechist, social worker, pharmacist, nurse and doctor. (12)

The *Propaganda Booklet* also insisted that 'the status and social opportunities which are afforded to houseworkers in Canada are a great inducement to women of ambition' (20). It would seem then that

Women were welcome to come as wives, poor wives, hoping to be rich wives, servants working for wives, daughters certain to become wives. They were to bear and educate children, work on the homesteads, and make the men comfortable so that they would stay. (13)

The propaganda articles were clear in their invitation to female labourers to emigrate to the wilderness. Canada is presented as a land which 'offers many opportunities of employment and advancement to the right type of woman' (20). But what of the middle-class females who travelled to Canada with their husbands hoping to perpetuate their lifestyle in the newly founded colony? What about those female writers who were publishing in London and had made a name for themselves, but had moved to Canada due to financial problems? What could Canada offer them? Unlike Isabelle Gunn whose humble origins and low-class status would not have afforded her the luxury of an education, and in contrast to the female labourers who emigrated to avoid poverty and famine and who had neither the means nor the time to write, a number of female immigrants from Britain were highly literate and did record their personal narratives. Their letters, personal diaries, autobiographical essays and fictionalised biographical sketches provide a unique resource for the study

of the lives of women settlers in Canada and to trace their complex relationship to their adoptive land.

Criticism of early Canadian writing in English has been growing steadily since the 1960s. A number of groundbreaking works such as Carl F. Klinck's *A Literary History of Canada* (1965), George Woodcock's *The World of Canadian Writing* (1980), Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* (1989), Donna Bennett's *Canadian Literary Criticism in English* (1990), Robert Lecker's *Canadian Canons* (1992) and W. J. Keith's *Canadian Literature in English* (2006 [1985]), have contributed to establishing a Canadian critical tradition. In addition, there is a growing amount of critical writing examining issues and debates surrounding the emergence, development and flourishing of the short story genre and of the genre of nature-writing in Canada.² However, critical responses to early short stories written by women who examine the effects of the wilderness on their sense of self is relatively scarce; this is probably due to the fact that many of the early 'short' pieces of writing were not considered literary contributions as much as they were read as autobiographical reflections on personal issues. Another factor accounting for the critical neglect of this body of writing must be their limited availability to the reading public.³ Nonetheless, some excellent critical work has been written in the past decade, specifically foregrounding the cultural and political engagement of early Canadian writing by women. Of particular importance is Michael Peterman's 2007 edition of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* which includes a compilation of useful background material and key essays on the text. John Thurston (*Voyages; Work of Words*), Carole Gerson (*Canada's Early Women Writers; 'Locating Female Subjects'*),⁴ Veronica Strong-Boag ('Pulling in the Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load') and Misao Dean (*Early Canadian Short Stories*) have written extensively about the intricate and at times convoluted relationship between female identity and the natural, often hostile, landscape of Canada. Helen M. Buss's essay 'Women and the Garrison Mentality: Pioneer Women Autobiographers and Their Relation to the Land' (1990) and Susan Glickman's *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (1998) are essential reading in this category.

In light of the current trends in criticism towards eco-critical and landscape literature, a reconsideration of these early tales of hardship and triumph engages with discourses of colonial hegemony, gender and racial appropriation of space, and political debates surrounding land rights. A survey of the variety of responses to the Canadian landscape (1845–1945) will foreground issues and debates still relevant to Anglophone writing in Canada.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, most writing by women took the form of short sketches, diary entries, letters home and some short fiction. Literary critic and historian Fred Cogswell remarks that it was not until 1810 that professional novelists emerged in the Maritime Provinces (123). In those early years, fiction writers such as the Herbert sisters, Sarah

and Mary, and New Brunswick author of juvenile literature Sarah French published works 'to popularize moralistic doctrines' (Cogswell 123). In 1824 Julia Catherine Beckwith Hart (1796–1867) published *St. Ursula's Convent; or, the Nun of Canada*, a book, according to Cogswell, whose 'sole claim to attention is that it was the first work of fiction to be written by a native-born-English-speaking Canadian and the first to be published in what is now Canada' (124).

One of the earliest short fiction writers whose tales made a considerable impact on the reading public is British feminist travel writer, artist and wife of the then attorney-general of Upper Canada,⁵ Anna Jameson (1794–1860). In 1837, Jameson began writing a series of short pieces which she published one year later under the title *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*. This collection of short tales recounting the author's journey through the Canadian landscape while on a two-month trip to visit her estranged husband, was later published under the title *Sketches in Canada* (1858).⁶ Jameson was a notorious public figure whose personal life was rife with scandal. Her writing career was equally controversial; her first major work, *The Diary of an Ennuyée* (1825), which was advertised as an autobiographical account of her travels in Italy, was soon revealed to be fictitious. Hence, the publication of *Sketches in Canada* (two decades after the actual journey) was probably aimed at restoring her reputation as a serious travel writer as well as earning her much needed income, following her separation from her husband. Jameson's stories are written in the form of diary entries in which the first person narrative records sights, sounds as well as personal impressions and reflections on the people and the cities she visits. The first entry is dated, 'December 20, Toronto in 1837'. A brief excerpt from the beginning of this sketch illustrates the author's attitude towards the city:

TORONTO – such is now the sonorous name of this our sublime capital – was, thirty years ago, a wilderness, the haunt of the bear and deer, with a little, ugly, inefficient fort, which however, could not be more ugly or inefficient than the present one . . . What Toronto may be in the summer, I cannot tell; they say it is a pretty place. At present its appearance to me, a stranger, is most strangely mean and melancholy. A little ill-built town, on low land, at the bottom of a frozen bay, with one very ugly church, without tower or steeple; some government offices, built of staring red brick, in the most tasteless, vulgar style imaginable. (*Winter* 15)

Jameson goes on to describe Toronto as an 'unknown wilderness' (20), 'a mere swamp, a tangled wilderness' (22); her impression of the rest of the country does not change throughout her lengthy manuscript. Jameson's tone is often critical, depicting the people she meets in a negative light and criticising almost every decision made by the government regarding the distribution of land and the choice of settlements. She often contrasts the natural beauty of the unspoiled landscape with the unsightly architecture of the developed cities. Many of her sketches involve an element of

self-praise, showing her as the heroine of her own stories, overcoming physically challenging journeys and conquering the harsh wilderness of Upper Canada. Although highly subjective and emotionally charged, yet these sketches show an aspect of Canadian history which is seldom recorded by European writers. For in spite of Jameson's peculiar lack of engagement with the 'patriot war' which began in December 1837 in Niagara town, where she started her journey, her narrative does show a particular interest in the changing political landscape of the country.

In many sketches, Jameson demonstrates a keen awareness of the ongoing political controversy surrounding aboriginal land rights. In her version of the 'War of Pontiac' she provocatively takes the Ottawa Chief's side, explaining that he fought for 'revenge and existence' (336) and arguing that 'as they have called Tecumseh the Indian Napoleon, they might style Pontiac the Indian Alexander' (337). Jameson's sympathy for the native tribes' loss of land and erosion of lifestyle is obvious throughout her various narratives. She equates the loss of land with the loss of indigenous identity and repeatedly questions the value of the 'civilisation' which white invaders bring to Canada's wilderness.⁷

While describing a shooting excursion to Lake Couchiching, for example, Jameson's narrative adopts an empathetic tone, giving voice to the 'Indian chief, the Yellowhead' who is quoted pleading for the right to keep possession of his land:

Many of our young men, . . . , fear that the time will arrive when our white brethren will possess themselves of our farms; whereas, if our Father the governor would be pleased to grant us titles, we should work with more confidence. (*Winter* 541)

Jameson labels these chiefs, 'the original lords of the soil' who are entreating the governor to secure their right to the land and to 'their children for ever' (541). Although she does not engage further with this issue, the reader is left to ponder the extent to which Jameson understood the irony implied in that story; Yellowhead was pleading to men in positions of power such as *her* own husband, and *she* too was, to some extent, guilty of invading and appropriating aboriginal land. Paradoxically, the encounter with the Yellowhead chief which occurs near the end of the collection, is immediately followed by a final, rags-to-riches tale about an Irish emigrant who came to Canada 'houseless and penniless' and who, in seven years, 'was the proprietor of a farm of two hundred acres of cleared and cropped land, on which he could proudly set his foot, and say, "It is mine, and my children's after me"' (541).

Jameson's sketches might seem contradictory, subjective, biased and incoherent. But they do illustrate many of the serious problems encountered by the aboriginal tribes, by the settlers/invaders of the wilderness, and by the growing number of immigrants from the neighbouring United States. The reader is left with an intricate representation of the national

status of Canada, one which is complicated by its inhabitants' inability to agree on a particular language, religion or form of government. The cultural mosaic of this colony is shown in detail through the author's interaction with people from various ethnic backgrounds.

In 1845, Emily Beavan (1818–97) published a collection of tales in which she attempted to capture the various facets of life in the North American colony, entitled, *Sketches and Tales Illustrative of Life in the Backwoods of New Brunswick, North America: Gleaned from Actual Observation of Experience during a Residence of Seven Years in that Interesting Country*. Beavan's insistence that her information was gathered first-hand echoes Jameson's remarks that there is 'no better way of coming at the truth than by observing and recording faithfully the impressions made by objects and characters on my own mind' (1–2). Unlike Jameson's collection which mapped the landscape as it unfolded and associated the author's moods and emotions with the changing scenery, Beavan adopted the tone of a scientific explorer, naturalist, anthropologist and social historian. She remained at all times, clear about her national identity. She was a British woman intent on recording the 'national characteristics of the settlers, as displayed in the living pictures and legendary tales of the country' (1). She described New Brunswick as 'an appendage of the British empire', 'a colony' where settlers tame the land so that it 'bears the might of England's fame to earth and sea's remotest bounds' (2).⁸

Unlike Jameson who felt sympathy with the plight of the aboriginal tribes, Beavan expressed disdain at the 'original possessors of the soil' (2). She writes, 'of these last [Indians] there now remains but a fast-fading remnant – objects of more pity or laughter than of dread' (2). Her rhetoric is defiant, forecasting perhaps later representations of the vanishing Indian which characterised Anglophone writing in the US and Canada. Beavan's language is unwavering in its dichotomous reading of human nature, ridiculing any person or practice which is not typically 'British' and arguing that the true national identity of this colony is characterised by the 'staunch firmness of the "Britisher"' (3). Her narrative emphasises repeatedly the colonial status of New Brunswick, explaining that 'thanks to the parental care of Britain, schools and churches are rising fast throughout the country' and this trend should improve the 'state of morals and religion' (4).

Jameson and Beavan represent two oppositional attitudes. The former attempts to understand her state of mind by reflecting upon the landscape around her. Her narrative is imbued with a particular sensibility of her status of colonist and empowered member of the ruling middle class. Conversely, Beavan embarks on a pseudo-scientific project, obviously aimed at a British audience, with the purpose of translating the experience of settling the land and 'civilising' its inhabitants. While Jameson concludes her narrative with a touching statement of homecoming, 'At three O'clock in the morning, just as the moon was setting in Lake

Ontario, I arrived at the door of my own house in Toronto' (*Sketches* 314), Beavan concludes with a series of summative remarks about the state of the colony and its inhabitants, remaining always a commentator on, and never a participant in, the landscape. When she describes typically Canadian settings and natural phenomena⁹ she is careful to preface each chapter with a statement which reinforces her status of outsider, observer and recorder; she occupies the superior status of the curious Other investigating marginal exotic practices for the benefit and entertainment of those living in the Centre of civilisation. Jameson and Beavan's dichotomous attitudes towards the Canadian landscape set the scene for and illustrate the dominant attitudes of female writers for the next few decades. They appear in the writing of the Strickland sisters.

Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill were sisters, born to the Strickland household, a middle-class English family. Both sisters had married and emigrated to Canada to become settlers' wives and eventually renowned literary figures. Traill's publications included *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) and *The Canadian Settlers Guide* (1860) which contained sketches of life in the wilderness. In *The Backwoods*, Traill published eighteen letters she wrote to her mother in England between 1832 and 1835. In the introduction to the collection, which she wrote in 1836, Traill describes the Canadian space as 'the loneliest part of our Western Wilderness' (12). She urges her readers – presumably females who are planning to emigrate to Canada – to appreciate the metamorphosis she has undergone in order to survive, and confesses that she has discarded 'all irrational and artificial wants and mere useless pursuits' in order to take part in the English quest to found 'peaceful villages and pleasant homesteads in the trackless wilds' (11). Traill's understanding of the environment around her changes as she settles the wilderness and comes to terms with her role of settler and pioneer. Her initial apprehension at the primitiveness of the harsh wilderness turns to appreciation of the possibilities that the lack of industrialisation and social restrictions afford her. As a naturalist, Traill revels in recording – by naming and drawing – the various species of birds, animals and wildlife she encounters. In an 1835 letter to her mother, Traill reveals her attachment to the land by claiming 'Canada is the land of Hope; here every thing is new; every thing going forward' (*Backwoods* 210).

Two revelations occur in *The Backwoods*. Traill discovers a new meaning to the role of settler's wife which she struggles to define but which empowers her by affording her an opportunity to test her physical and mental prowess. In this collection of sketches, as well as in her other publications in popular journals, Traill actively engages in the process of redefining femininity taking into account the 'hope' and novelty which the Canadian landscape offers.

However, in her attempts to capture the landscape around her, Traill struggles with the inadequacies of the language which could not translate

the sights and smells she experienced. In the much anthologised, 'The Bereavement', published in the *Literary Garland* (1846), Traill tells the story of a 'young Scotchwoman' who requests her assistance in saving a dying infant. The tragic story is set against 'one of those soft warm mornings' (1) during the harsh winter of Upper Canada which Traill describes in minute detail, taking care to name each plant and animal she chooses as part of her scenery. This insistence on naming is symptomatic of a colonial and imperialistic impetus to conquer the land by ascribing titles and definitions to its components. In this short story, the narrator's emphasis on deciphering the paradoxes of the landscape – 'bright and blue as was the sky, warm and genial as was the air around' yet there were 'mudholes', 'wide pools of water and honey-combed ice' (1) – reflects her struggle to come to terms with her inability to halt the inevitable death of the young infant. She describes the hamlet outside the infant's home as a 'scene of quiet and of freshness, save the rapid restless river rushing over its ledge of limestone rock' (4). This combination of calm and restlessness is then transferred onto the narrator's 'humbled heart' as she confesses: 'without all was beauty and magnificence, for I gazed upon the works of God. Within was sorrow and death – the consequence of man's sin' (4). By the end of the story Traill reaches a peaceful resolution which reconciles her with the landscape and with her role of saviour.

Both Traill and Moodie found the wilderness a problematic subject. The historian Carl Klinck argues that 'their traditional idiom of ideas and words did not fit daily marginal living in the bush near Cobourg and Peterborough' (157). But while Traill eventually negotiated her relationship with the wilderness, re-invented herself as one of the '*bush-settlers*', proudly announcing: 'we are more independent: we do what we like; we dress as we find most suitable and most convenient; we laugh at the absurdity of those who voluntarily forge afresh and hug their chains' (*Backwoods* 218), her sister Susanna Moodie seemed eternally wedded to her British identity. Moodie wrote poems and short stories as well as a series of 'English' novels which advocated the English way of life. Her experience of the Canadian wilderness culminates in *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853).

Roughing it in the Bush is a collection of sketches written during a seven-year stay in the bush where Moodie and her husband tried to settle. Unlike her sister who 'always saw the best in people and was rarely censorious' (Gray 98), Moodie was 'unsettled both by her failure to understand the strangers she met and by her inability to position them in relation to herself' (99). Her relationship to her Yankee neighbours is quickly soured by her sense of superiority while her utter disgust at the 'borrowing system' practiced by various immigrants alienated her from all neighbours she came in contact with. Susanna's strong spirituality is challenged as she encounters neighbours who refuse to teach their children any form of religion; her sense of morality and propriety is continuously

put to the test as she refuses to negotiate her British values; and her understanding of social hierarchies becomes obsolete once she realises that she has no control over the domestic servants she employs. Yet Moodie finds consolation in the wilderness and, in spite of the harshness of the landscape, expresses delight upon seeing the 'bush' for the first time. Her growing attachment to the new country is born out of a developing appreciation for the landscape (though not its inhabitants). Moodie's collection of sketches ends at the time she and her husband decide to sell their farm and move to the city, but her literary career flourishes as she continues publishing short fiction and poetry in Canadian magazines.

Of the many short stories she published in *The Literary Garland*, 'Old Woodruff and His Three Wives' (1847) reveals an interesting relationship between the author-narrator and the landscape. This story recounts Moodie's adventure in relocating from the backwoods to the city during the winter season of 1840. Unlike Traill who adopts Canada as her country, Moodie remains an outsider observing and recording but never becoming part of the scenery. She describes her children who were born in the 'forest home' in the 'backwoods' (44) as 'British children' (43) and adopts an air of superiority when writing about their 'dark Indian friends' (46). In Moodie's understanding, the bush is the place of 'hardship', 'the school of high resolve and energetic action, in which we had learned to meet calmly and battle successfully the ills of life' (44), but this is not a civilised space. The bush is a place of 'exile from civilized life' (46). It is a lonely space which alienates individuals from social life and places them in a state of primitivism as is witnessed by the scene where Moodie's son expresses utter astonishment upon seeing a town for the first time:

My eldest boy, a child of four years old, who, enchanted by all he saw, continued to stand up and gaze around him. Born in the forest which he had never quitted before, the sight of a town was such a novelty that he could find no words wherewith to express his astonishment. 'Are the houses come to see one another?' he asked. 'How did they all meet here?' (47)

Moodie exaggerates the young boy's reaction to the town in order to illustrate the roughness of the wilderness. In fact, Klinck endorses this viewpoint and suggests that 'the settlers themselves resented her stubborn superiority, and thought that she exaggerated and distorted the truth for gullible outsiders' (158). The settlers' sentiments were reflected in the mixed critical reception that *Roughing it in the Bush* had received. For although it was highly acclaimed in Britain and in the US, Canadian critics found its depiction of the state morals and society controversial.¹⁰

After seven years spent in the wilderness, Moodie and her husband decided to move back to a city. When, in 1871 she was invited to revise *Roughing it in the Bush* for the first Canadian edition, Moodie made some revealing revisions to her manuscript which attest to a possible change of her perception in life in the backwoods.¹¹ Nonetheless, she remained

dissatisfied until the end of her days with the way the public treated her work. Thurston lucidly comments that

any claim that she came to love her adopted country must face the persistence of her thoughts of leaving it. For thirty-five years after their arrival in the colony the Moodies discussed plans to emigrate again . . . The romantic figure of a founding pioneer, so often put forward in the commentary on *Roughing It*, did not exist. (*Work of Words* 172)

Trill and Moodie's accounts of early life in the Canadian wilderness belong to a first wave¹² of Canadian writing in which wives of settlers perceived themselves as outsiders to the landscape and either escaped it (Jameson) or coped with it (Trill) or felt alienated by it (Beavan and Moodie).

In spite of these early attempts at mapping the Canadian wilderness and translating the settlers' experiences, publication of short fiction remained sporadic and unoriginal for most of the century. In 1884, J. E. Collins famously expressed his dissatisfaction at the state of Canadian writing, lamenting the fact that 'in fiction, Canada makes a wretched showing' (qtd. in Roper 274). In fact up to 1880 a relatively small number of Canadian writers had published the country's entire body of fiction. Gordon Roper argues that five writers – James De Mille, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Agnes Fleming, Susanna Moodie and Mary Anne Sadlier – dominated the literary scene (275).

Critic Michelle Gadpaille traces the emergence of the short story in Canada by claiming that

the earliest antecedents of the Canadian short story rest in the writings of Thomas McCulloch and Thomas Chandler Haliburton, two Nova Scotians who were born in the 18thc., twenty years apart. (1)

She further explains that these early texts represent 'the first literary expressions of Canadian humour and irony rather than early examples of the short story' (2). Gadpaille argues that the last decade of the nineteenth century represents a definitive turning point for writers of fiction. For, it is at this point that we witness less dependency on imitations of the '18thc British models of the sketch and the extended satirical or humorous anecdote' and a conscious effort to adopt and adapt 'a form that had become more particularly American than any other: the short story' (3).

If, as Gadpaille maintains, the origins of the Canadian short story lie in the early sketches of the nineteenth century, then Anna Jameson, Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Trill could be considered the foremothers of the genre. A key moment in the development of Canadian short fiction writing occurs in 1890. Gordon Roper quotes Thomas G. Marquis's essay on 'Canadian Literature' in which the latter explains:

A new movement took place in Canadian poetical literature about the year 1880; some ten years after this date Canadian fiction entered upon a new stage

of its development. It would be quite within the mark to take the definite year 1890 as the dividing line between the earlier writers, more or less provincial in their art, and the modern school, influenced by world standards. (274)¹³

Significant historical and political factors explicate the rise of the 'modern school' of authors. The year 1885 witnessed two events which helped shape Canada's understanding of its people's relationship with the land: the failure of Louis Riel's second rebellion on the one hand and the completion of the steel on the Canadian Pacific Railway's transcontinental line, on the other.

Louis Riel was one-eighth Amerindian and believed that the Métis of Red River should be granted a separate territory and be recognised as a 'New Nation'. He rebelled against the Canadian government's plans to annex the Northwestern territories and succeeded in negotiating the Manitoba Act which created the province of Manitoba. Riel's rebellions divided Canadian opinion.¹⁴ English-speaking Ontario regarded him as a rebel and demanded that he be brought to justice while French-speaking Quebec defended his quest for an independent geographical space. However, whilst the debate regarding land ownership was raging between tribes and government and numerous land treaties were being signed, The Canadian Pacific Railway was being built, and its completion would usher in a new sense of pride and a desire for land unity in the Canadian psyche. Since Canada became a separate Dominion through the Confederation of Canada (Quebec and Ontario), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia in 1867, no other symbol of geographical unity was more tangible than a railway welding these seemingly disparate parts of the land. Arguably, it is from this point onwards that we witness a surge in the publication of stories which examine the thorny relationship between the individual and the landscape.

The year 1890 is also a crucial year for publications of short fiction. It is from this date onwards that we can see a second wave of women writers emerging, whose experience of the Canadian landscape was more varied than their foremothers' and reflected the authors' ethnic, political and literary concerns. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Mazo de La Roche (1885–1961) and Marjorie Pickthall (1883–1922), wrote engaging stories about the diverse experiences of living in Canada.

Mazo de la Roche was best known as a writer of fiction especially a series of novels which chronicled the life of the Whiteoaks family. She published numerous short stories which imaginatively re-created the lives of animals. De la Roche found inspiration in nature and used it metaphorically to examine human behaviours. In 'Come Fly with Me' she presents a solid and penetrating analysis of life in the Dominion of Canada. This story, which is divided into three sections, depicts a series of complex relationships: birds competing for mating rites, people's futile attempts to impose order on the natural world, and the conflicting allegiances of love and parenthood. Crucially, however, it interrogates women's ascribed gender roles with particular emphasis on the social construction of motherhood. This is done by juxtaposing two models of mothering practices,

one of the sacrificing human mother who is devoted to caring for a weak bird which fell into her chimney; the other of the bird's own mother, an oriole, who abandons the weakling to look after its other siblings. While the human mother feels responsible for the safety of the fledgling and is deeply traumatised by its death, the oriole will only feed its young until they are capable of looking after themselves. The story ends on a touching note when the oriole decides to fly away and her partner has to choose between following her or staying in the nest. De la Roche's metaphorical representation of alternate models of mothering is given poignancy through the careful choice of setting and narrative style. For while the orioles' ultimate choice is to abandon their young, yet in the process of nurturing them, both mother and father defy 'storms' and 'torrents of rain' (175). In spite of the harshness of the landscape, and in spite of the fledglings' inexperience, they are left to fend for themselves. De La Roche's story, like most of her writing engages with the issue of imperial domination and can be read as a comment on the problematic relationship between mother-country and the Dominion; a hint at Canada's need to be weaned from England's control.

In 1894 Mary Hartwell Catherwood published *The Chase of Saint-Castin: and other Stories of the French in the New World*. Arguably this collection contains the most original account of the relationship between settlers and the landscape they inhabit. Catherwood is a meticulous writer whose stories display a profound understanding of aboriginal cultures' harmonious existence within the landscape as opposed to European invasion and desecration of the wilderness. In the title story for example, a chance meeting between a bold and audacious French Baron and the 'spiritually superior' daughter of an indigenous chief is carefully narrated using metaphors of geographical domination. Catherwood begins her narrative by contrasting European homesteads to indigenous abodes, remarking that

wherever a human dwelling is set in the wilderness, it becomes, by the very humility of its proportions, a prominent and aggressive point. But this lodge of bark and poles was the colour of the woods, and nearly escaped intruding as man's work. (1)

This 'Indian household' is soon invaded by the curious and culturally ignorant Baron who insists on lodging in the forbidden accommodation of the chief's daughter. Needless to say, the ensuing events juxtapose the invasion of the effeminated aboriginal habitation with the settling of the land and the loss of native identity. But Catherwood's most powerful tale is the one recounting the aboriginal legend of the Windigo.¹⁵

'Windigo' is the story of a married couple, Louizon Cadotte, a 'half-breed' of Chippewa and French origins, and Archange Cadotte, his 'bewitchingly' beautiful Chippewa wife. At the onset of the story, Louizon is depicted as a character who is torn between his indigenous identity, characterised by superstition and aggression, and his European identity,

tame and restrained. Following an argument with his wife, Louizon goes missing during the night and the villagers worry that he might have been kidnapped by a Windigo. The men in the village, French soldiers and Chippewa hunters, embark on a search and rescue mission which leads them to a waterfall where they encounter a wild woman whom they believe to be the Windigo who has cast a spell on the missing Louizon. The hunters insist on killing her but the French soldier, Jacques Repentigny, sceptical of indigenous superstition decides to save her. The story ends when Louizon is found, the wild woman dies and is buried by Jacques and Louizon – without the assistance of the superstitious hunters. The ending is carefully and precisely written, implying that the wild creature was indeed an outsider but she was neither monstrous nor threatening:

Jacques Repentigny and Louizon Cadotte took up the woman who, perhaps had never been what they considered woman; who had missed the good, and got for her portion the ignorance and degradation of the world; yet who must be something to the Almighty, for he had sent youth and love to pity and take care of her in her death. They carried her into the woods between them. (189)

Catherwood's re-telling of this aboriginal legend is imbued with a pertinent political and social message, for the ending shows Louizon choosing to adopt European scepticism, ignoring the native part of his identity and asserting his alliance with Jacques. More significantly, the ending can be read as a dire critique of colonial practice, its invasion of the wilderness, its privileging of Western beliefs and its infectious scepticism of aboriginal values. Louizon is representative of those hybrid individuals who, torn between two competing cultures, choose to perform the dominant culture's version of masculinity. Louizon and Jacques share the Christian Western impetus to save and tame the wild, to contain the 'ignorance and degradation' of native cultures through 'love and pity'.¹⁶

Catherwood's sensitivity to the aboriginal cultures' loss of control over their beliefs is echoed in the writing of another controversial author who influenced the development of the short story genre in Canada. Marjorie Pickthall, who was born in England and emigrated to Canada in 1889, published poems and short stories which won her some praise during her lifetime although her reputation waned after her death.¹⁷ Recently however, there seems to have been renewed interest in her short stories as critics appreciate her political and social commitments. Pickthall demonstrates a keen sense of social awareness of the injustices enacted on first nations in the debate over land claims in her story 'The Third Generation'.

The critic Misao Dean reads the latter as a Conradian tale which raises 'questions about the legitimacy of the imperial project and about the way literature cites indigenization and inheritance to legitimize the "white literary land claim"' (36). The *fabula* of 'The Third Generation' revolves around two male characters who set out to claim a plot of land which was discovered by one of their ancestors many years ago. Their plan to

own this land is predicated upon their belief that they are the true inheritors of the grandfather's legacy. Dean argues that it is 'by means of the tropes of inheritance and indigenization' that the protagonists 'create themselves as both native to and legitimate inheritors of the land'. In the process, they will need to negotiate their identities of explorers and settlers as well as their relationship with a land which formerly belonged to the Montagnais people who were *all* exterminated by a smallpox epidemic. All, that is, except for one aged, 'ragged, dirty, old imbecile' who survived and stalks the explorers, forcing them to face up to the consequences of their ancestor's invasion of his territory. While Pickthall's story provides a powerful reflection on the role of white Canadians as imperialists engaged with the tradition of nation-building, it also delves into the process of individuation which necessitates a spatial locus. Both protagonists in 'The Third Generation' are engaged in an unconscious exercise of re-defining their precarious sense of self through the act of reconfiguring their existence *vis-à-vis* a stable and eternal landscape.¹⁸

Numerous aboriginal Canadian writers echoed Pickthall's concerns with the situation of indigenous land claims. While white female writers reflected upon personal and social issues, indigenous female writers, doubly marginalised as a result of their gender and race, were fighting a more politicised battle to assert their right to a colonised landscape. E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) (1861–1913) and more recently Beth Brant (Degonwadonti) (1941–) stand out as exceptional voices of resistance. Johnson was born on the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, of an English father and a Mohawk mother. She chose to identify as a Mohawk performance artist, and celebrated her hybridity by performing her poems while alternating her dress between a traditional 'Indian' outfit and a European evening gown. As a poet, she is best known for a collection of poems published in 1969 which dealt with ethnic tensions and issues of hybridity. Perhaps the most powerful of these is 'The Cattle Thief' in which the indigenous protagonist exclaims:

What have you left us of land, what have you left of game,
 What have you brought but evil, and curses since you came? . . .
 Go back with your new religion, we never have understood
 Your robbing an Indian's *body*, and mocking his soul with food . . .
 Give back our land and our country, give back our herds of game;
 Give back the furs and the forests that were ours before you came . . . (*Flint* 12)

In one of her short stories, 'A Red Girl's Reasoning' Johnson examines the challenges to and consequences of interracial marriages, exposing European – white – prejudice against the mores of first nations. The narrative, which adopts free indirect discourse, and progresses by shifting perspectives from English, to native to the omniscient narrator's, describes the landscape in which it is set as a 'country [which] was all backwoods . . . , miles and miles away from even the semblance of civilization' (8–9).

However, through careful use of irony and dialogue, Johnson succeeds in deconstructing readers' assumptions about the 'backwoods' and 'civilisation', inviting a reconfiguration of our definitions of the cultural and political meanings of various landscapes. The plot tells the story of a young English researcher who settles in Canada to conduct a census for the department of Agriculture. He falls in love and marries the daughter of an old English Hudson Bay worker and his indigenous wife. The young couple, who leave Christie's territory and move to the city where they mix with high-powered European immigrants, are soon faced with the challenges of reconciling their opposing views on legal and social issues. The 'civilised' landscape of the city is depicted as a space where white people's religion and political affiliations are the only acceptable discourses. Christie, who in a social gathering is challenged about the legality of her parents' union which was conducted along Indian rites, realises the irreconcilable tensions between her and Charlie and abandons him. In a desperate attempt to reunite with his estranged wife, Charlie asks her to explain her resistance to acknowledge his set of values. The 'Red Girl' provocatively questions the legal and social practices which are being imposed on her people when she asks 'how do I know when another nation will come and conquer you as you white men conquered us?' (16). The story ends on a note of sour triumph for Christie and desperation for Charlie who returns to his 'bare, hotelish room', ponders his 'whole life, desolate as a desert' and questions his religious beliefs.

Aboriginal Canadians' concern with the colonisation of their land and with white people's attempts at re-writing their history are delineated in Beth Brant's 'A Long Story' which is set against the backdrop of two significant periods: 1890s and 1970s. In the history of Canada's first nations, the years between 1880 and 1890 witnessed the rapid expansion of church-run residential schools for aboriginal children. This expansion continued until 1970 when Blue Quills, in Alberta became the first Canadian school controlled by an Amerindian band (Dickason 299). Church-run residential schools were established in order to accelerate the process of assimilation, 'removing the children as they did from their homes and in some cases from their communities for extended periods of time' (315).

The *fabula* of 'A Long Story' contains two stories, told in parallel and set in 1890 and 1978 respectively. In the first story, two aboriginal children are torn away from their mother, whose English name is Annie, and taken to an industrial school – a type of residential school – where they would be taught agriculture and the Christian religion. The narrative is conveyed from the perspective of the mother who cannot comprehend this separation and who expresses her pain using images drawn from the natural landscape. Brant's powerful narrative strategy captures the mother's grief as well as the unnaturalness of the act of separation. The second story, set in 1978 disrupts, Annie's tale at various crucial moments and recounts the plight of Mary, a mother who has lost her daughter as a result of her divorce

and her sexuality. In contrast to Annie, who conjures up natural images to express her grief, Mary finds no release from her pain which manifests itself in recurring nightmares and psychosomatic episodes of trauma. Mary is a victim of society's marginalisation of lesbian mothers as much as Annie is a victim of society's discrimination towards indigenous mothers. Annie who confesses 'I do not know civilized' speaks of her desperate attempts to bury oppression in the 'dirt', 'look to the sky and find nothing but endless blue' then 'begin the howling' (320). Mary's inability to access the land and her forced incarceration in her house thwart her efforts at communicating with her daughter. She too confesses to becoming 'like a wolf, caught in a trap, gnawing at her own leg to set herself free'; she too begins 'a scream that turns into howling'. It is not until Mary achieves a moment of anagnorisis that she can express '*I am one . . . I will not cease to be*' and assert her Lesbian identity.¹⁹

Canada's landscape and its rich natural resources fascinated explorers as far back as the year 1000 AD when the Norse reached it. This land, which has been inhabited since at least 9,200 BC offers a rich resource of oral traditions belonging to indigenous tribes, consisting of myths and legends depicting the individual's negotiation of the harsh wilderness. When European settlers began to arrive with their families, they laid claims to lands which they turned into homesteads and attempted to re-create the life they had left behind. One of the obstacles all settlers faced is the geographical location of Canada with its harsh Northern climate and inhospitable wilderness. While a number of books were written detailing the military battles fought among Europeans and against the natives, and while political treaties and legal decisions were assiduously recorded, yet very little is known of the personal and individual responses to the New World. In spite of a substantial number of manuscripts written in English since the early 1800s, only a few texts remain in print. This overview focussed on a selection of short stories written by women writers which depicted the problematic relationship between the individual and the landscape, and showed that the conquest of Canada posed questions of national and individual identity and challenged women writers to engage with social and political issues which later critics examine in depth. These texts stand as historical evidence of women's engagement with the effort of Empire building but they also show these authors' discomfort at providing a straightforward account of colonisation. During the first half of the twentieth century, aboriginal authors joined the written debate initiated almost a century before and contributed to enriching and clarifying women's experience of the Canadian landscape.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ See Bolus.

² See for example, Scott; Atwood, *Survival; Strange Things*; Butala; Jones.

³ Some of the stories discussed in this article have not been available in print for a number of years. I strongly recommend the excellent Web site <<http://www.Canadiana.org>> for out of print material.

⁴ Carole Gerson's thoughtful article 'Locating Female Subjects in the Archives' describes some of the problems faced by researchers attempting to sift through archival materials of female writers in 19th-century Canada. Gerson explains that most of the material held in university libraries is poorly organised and often incomplete; she laments the seeming indifference with which these writers' works have been treated and examines some of its consequences.

⁵ Following the end of the American War of Independence, the map of Canada was reconfigured in order to accommodate the large numbers of 'refugees' who were loyalists to the British crown and feared persecution in the US. As a result, Nova Scotia was divided into two colonies: Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and Quebec was divided into Upper Canada (Western part where British law was applied and freehold land tenure was introduced) and Lower Canada (Eastern part, where French law and seigneurial tenure were retained).

⁶ I shall be quoting from Anna Brownell Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* currently available from the New Canadian Library series, which is a reprint of the first edition of the text from 1838.

⁷ Chief Pontiac's life and his military character have haunted the Canadian imagination for many years. A number of historiographic accounts of this notorious chief have been written and are worth examining through comparative critical analysis in order to appreciate the daring and original approach that Jameson takes in her story. In particular, I recommend a reading of Francis Parkman's *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest*, Reverend William H. Withrow's *A Popular History of the Dominion of Canada* (Chapter XIX, 'The Conspiracy of Pontiac') as typical examples of early 'historical' narratives which read the Indian Wars from a monologic and culturally biased perspective.

⁸ A number of texts have been published with similar aims to Beavan's *Sketches and Tales*. One interesting comparison would be with Canuck's *Pen Pictures of Early Pioneer Life in Upper Canada* (1905) which provides details of 'The First Settlements', 'Early experiences of the Settlers' including 'How the emigrants from the States reached Canada, the appearance of the country, the Indians, the Wild Animals' etc. Canuck's text is presented to us as an anthropological study, although its tone and biased interpretations betray its scientific pretence.

⁹ For example, Beavan writes about: 'Cranberries', 'Breaking up the Ice', 'Log Huts', 'Mosquitoes', 'The Woods', 'The Indian Summer', 'Sleigh Riding', 'Aurora Borealis'.

¹⁰ The reviewer for *The British Colonist* (9 July 1852) for example, 'observed that she conveyed an unfavourable impression of Canada which was "to be much regretted"'; while an article by a British reviewer for the London-based *Observer*, reprinted in the *Montreal Pilot* (27 March 1852) 'castigated her for her unjust and contradictory treatment of Irish character, charging her with describing Irish emigrants "in terms which a reflective writer would scarcely apply to a pack of hounds"' (qtd in Ballstadt et al., *Letters* 108).

¹¹ For more details about Moodie's revision to *Roughing it in the Bush*, see John Thurston's excellent chapter 'Roughing it in the Bush: A Case Study in Colonial Contradiction' in *Work of Words* 133–66.

¹² In referring to the first and second wave of women writers, I am adapting Margaret Atwood's argument in 'Linoleum Caves', *Strange Things*.

¹³ For a detailed description of the social, political and intellectual conditions which shaped the writing of fiction from 1880 to 1920, see Gordon Roper's informative essay 'New Forces: New Fiction 1880–1920'.

¹⁴ In 1845, the Métis signed a petition asking for definition of their status; 1847, Métis petition London for recognition of rights, declaration of colony free of HBC control; 1869 An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians defines 'Indian' as at least one-quarter Indian blood and introduces three-year elective system for band leadership; 1869–1870 First Riel Rebellion, led by Louis Riel; 1870 Manitoba Act creates a new province, Manitoba; Riel flees to the US; 1871–1921 Eleven Treaties were signed between the Canadian government and indigenous tribes. These treaties considered Indian title to be 'usufructuary', giving them 'the right to use the land for such purposes as hunting and fishing; it was not considered to include either sovereignty or ownership'.

¹⁵ A number of stories, legends, myths and poems have been written about the Windigo. Descriptions about the characteristics of this monster vary but most accounts agree that it is a cannibal and spirit thief. Margaret Atwood's essay, 'Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice: The Wendigo' in *Strange Things*, provides a useful survey of the various literary interpretations of this creature.

¹⁶ I offer this reading of Catherwood's tale whilst acknowledging that this 'story is susceptible of a rather different reading which in fact re-inscribes rather than critiquing, colonial practice' as one of the reviewers of this article has pointed out. I also agree with their assertion that 'the ambiguity of the story . . . would be the best reason for studying it'.

¹⁷ Abby Langdon Alger is another writer who observed and critiqued the invasion and appropriation of aboriginal territory. In *Indian Tents* (1897) is an anthology of tales which she collected first hand and transcribed over seven years. It records the rich cultural, moral and social beliefs of a selection of aboriginal tribes and remains to this day a significant contribution to aboriginal studies.

¹⁸ Pickthall utilises the supernatural to great effect in this story and in another, 'The Worker in Sandalwood' which relates a tale of social oppression resulting from class hierarchies.

¹⁹ The aboriginal fight for land rights is ongoing; as recently as 2000 a land governance deal was signed by Natives of Kanesatake and the federal government whereas the Chippewa claim for 1,030 hectares of land in Sarnia, Ontario was rejected by the Ontario Court of Appeal (Dickason 322). This was the year when a deal was reached to allow the Innu to have the final say concerning their children (412).

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