

Catharine Parr Traill: The Backwoods of Canada (1836)

Introduction

Among the numerous works on Canada that have been published within the last ten years, with emigration for their leading theme, there are few, if any, that give information regarding the domestic economy of a settler's life, sufficiently minute to prove a faithful guide to the person on whose responsibility the whole comfort of a family depends—the mistress, whose department it is “to haud the house in order.”

Dr. Dunlop, it is true, has published a witty and spirited pamphlet, “The Backwoodsman,” but it does not enter into the routine of feminine duties and employment, in a state of emigration. Indeed, a woman's pen alone can describe half that is requisite to be told of the internal management of a domicile in the backwoods, in order to enable the outcoming female emigrant to form a proper judgment of the trials and arduous duties she has to encounter.

“Forewarned, forearmed,” is a maxim of our forefathers, containing much matter in its pithy brevity; and, following its spirit, the writer of the following pages has endeavoured to afford every possible information to the wives and daughters of emigrants of the higher class who contemplate seeking a home amid our Canadian wilds. Truth has been conscientiously her object in the work, for it were cruel to write in flattering terms calculated to deceive emigrants into the belief that the land to which they are transferring their families, their capital, and their hopes, is a land flowing with milk and honey, where comforts and affluence may be obtained with little exertion. She prefers honestly representing facts in their real and true light, that the female part of the emigrant's family may be enabled to look them firmly in the face; to find a remedy in female ingenuity and expediency for some difficulties; and, by being properly prepared, encounter the rest with that high-spirited cheerfulness of which well-educated females often give extraordinary proofs. She likewise wishes to teach them to discard

every thing exclusively pertaining to the artificial refinement of fashionable life in England; and to point out that, by devoting the money consumed in these incumbrances to articles of real use, which cannot be readily obtained in Canada, they may enjoy the pleasure of superintending a pleasant, well-ordered home. She is desirous of giving them the advantage of her three years' experience, that they may properly apply every part of their time, and learn to consider that every pound or pound's worth belonging to any member of an outcoming emigrant's family, ought to be sacredly considered as *capital*, which must make proper returns either as the means of bringing increase in the shape of income, or, what is still better, in healthful domestic comfort.

These exhalations in behalf of utility in preference to artificial personal refinement, are not so needless as the English public may consider. The emigrants to British America are no longer of the rank of life that formerly left the shores of the British Isles. It is not only the poor husbandmen and artisans, that move in vast bodies to the west, but it is the enterprising English capitalist, and the once affluent landholder, alarmed at the difficulties of establishing numerous families in independence, in a country where every profession is overstocked, that join the bands that Great Britain is pouring forth into these colonies! Of what vital importance is it that the female members of these most valuable colonists should obtain proper information regarding the important duties they are undertaking; that they should learn beforehand to brace their minds to the task, and thus avoid the repinings and discontent that is apt to follow unfounded expectations and fallacious hopes!

It is a fact not universally known to the public, that British officers and their families are usually denizens of the backwoods; and as great numbers of unattached officers of every rank have accepted grants of land in Canada, they are the pioneers of civilization in the wilderness, and their families, often of delicate nurture and honourable descent, are at once plunged into all the hardships attendant on the rough life of a bush-settler. The laws that regulate the grants of lands, which enforce a certain time of residence, and certain settlement duties to be performed, allow no claims to absentees when once the land is drawn. These laws wisely force a superiorly-educated man with resources of

both property and intellect, to devote all his energies to a certain spot of uncleared land. It may easily be supposed that no persons would encounter these hardships who have not a young family to establish in the healthful ways of independence. This family renders the residence of such a head still more valuable to the colony; and the half-pay officer, by thus leading the advanced guard of civilization, and bringing into these rough districts gentle and well-educated females, who soften and improve all around them by *mental* refinements, is serving his country as much by founding peaceful villages and pleasant homesteads in the trackless wilds, as ever he did by personal courage, or military stratagem, in times of war.

It will be seen, in the course of this work, that the writer is as earnest in recommending ladies who belong to the higher class of settlers to cultivate all the mental resources of a superior education, as she is to induce them to discard all irrational and artificial wants and mere useless pursuits. She would willingly direct their attention to the natural history and botany of this new country, in which they will find a never-failing source of amusement and instruction, at once enlightening and elevating the mind, and serving to fill up the void left by the absence of those lighter feminine accomplishments, the practice of which are necessarily superseded by imperative domestic duties. To the person who is capable of looking abroad into the beauties of nature, and adoring the Creator through his glorious works, are opened stores of un-mixed pleasure, which will not permit her to be dull or unhappy in the loneliest part of our Western Wilderness. The writer of these pages speaks from experience, and would be pleased to find that the simple sources from which she has herself drawn pleasure, have cheered the solitude of future female sojourners in the backwoods of Canada.

As a general remark to all sorts and conditions of settlers, she would observe, that the struggle up the hill of Independence is often a severe one, and it ought not to be made alone. It must be aided and encouraged by the example and assistance of an active and cheerful partner. Children should be taught to appreciate the devoted love that has induced their parents to overcome the natural reluctance felt by all persons to quit for ever the land of their forefathers, the scenes of their earliest and happiest days, and to become aliens and wanderers in a distant country,—to form new ties and new friends, and begin, as it

were, life's toilsome march anew, that their children may be placed in a situation in which, by industry and activity, the substantial comforts of life may be permanently obtained, and a landed property handed down to them, and their children after them.

Young men soon become reconciled to this country, which offers to them that chief attraction to youth,—great personal liberty. Their employments are of a cheerful and healthy nature; and their amusements, such as hunting, shooting, fishing, and boating, are peculiarly fascinating. But in none of these can their sisters share. The hardships and difficulties of the settler's life, therefore, are felt peculiarly by the female part of the family. It is with a view of ameliorating these privations that the following pages have been written, to show how some difficulties may be best borne and others avoided. The simple truth, founded entirely on personal knowledge of the facts related, is the basis of the work; to have had recourse to fiction might have rendered it more acceptable to many readers, but would have made it less useful to that class for whom it is especially intended. For those who, without intending to share in the privations and dangers of an emigrant's life, have a rational curiosity to become acquainted with scenes and manners so different from those of a long-civilized country, it is hoped that this little work will afford some amusement, and inculcate some lessons not devoid of moral instruction.

Letter 15

September the 20th, 1834.

I promised when I parted from you before I left England to write as soon as I could give you any satisfactory account of our settlement in this country. I shall do my best to redeem that promise, and forward you a slight sketch of our proceedings, with such remarks on the natural features of the place in which we have fixed our abode, as I think likely to afford you interest or amusement. [...]

You will have heard, through my letters to my dear mother, of our safe arrival at Quebec, of my illness at Montreal, of all our adventures and misadventures during our journey up the country, till after much weary wandering we finally found a home and resting-place with a

kind relative, whom it was our happiness to meet after a separation of many years.

As my husband was anxious to settle in the neighbourhood of one so nearly connected with me, thinking it would rob the woods of some of the loneliness that most women complain so bitterly of, he purchased a lot of land on the shores of a beautiful lake, one of a chain of small lakes belonging to the Otanabee river.

Here, then, we are established, having now some five-and-twenty acres cleared, and a nice house built. Our situation is very agreeable, and each day increases its value. When we first came up to live in the bush, with the exception of S——, here were but two or three settlers near us, and no roads cut out. The only road that was available for bringing up goods from the nearest town was on the opposite side of the water, which was obliged to be crossed in a log, (known by the expressive name of a dug-out), or birch-bark canoe; the former is nothing better than a large pine-log hollowed with the axe, so as to contain three or four persons; it is flat-bottomed, and very narrow, on which account it is much used on these shallow waters. The birch canoe is made of sheets of birch bark, ingeniously fashioned and sewn together by the Indians with the tough roots of the cedar, young pine, or larch (tamarack, as it is termed by the Indians); it is exceedingly light, so that it can be carried by two persons easily, or even by one. These then, were our ferry-boats, and very frail they are, and require great nicety in their management, they are worked in the water with paddles, either kneeling or standing. The squaws are very expert in the management of the canoes, and preserve their balance with admirable skill, standing up while they impel the little bark with great velocity through the water.

Very great is the change that a few years have effected in our situation. A number of highly respectable settlers have purchased land along the shores of these lakes, so that we no longer want society. The roads are now cut several miles above us, and though far from good can be travelled by waggons and sleighs, and are, at all events, better than none.

A village has started up where formerly a thick pine-wood covered the ground, we have now within a short distance of us an excellent saw-mill, a grist-mill, and store, with a large tavern and many good

dwellings. A fine timber bridge, on stone piers, was erected last year to connect the opposite townships and lessen the distance to and from Peterborough; and though it was unfortunately swept away early last spring by the unusual rising of the Otanabee lakes, a new and more substantial one has risen upon the ruins of the former, through the activity of an enterprising young Scotchman, the founder of the village. [...]

Canada is the land of hope; here every thing is new; every thing going forward; it is scarcely possible for arts, sciences, agriculture, manufactures, to retrograde; they must keep advancing; though in some situations the progress may seem slow, in others they are proportionably rapid.

There is a constant excitement on the minds of emigrants, particularly in the partially settled townships, that greatly assists in keeping them from desponding. The arrival of some enterprising person gives a stimulus to those about him: a profitable speculation is started, and lo, the value of the land in the vicinity rises to double and treble what it was thought worth before; so that, without any design of befriending his neighbours, the schemes of one settler being carried into effect shall benefit a great number. We have already felt the beneficial effect of the access of respectable emigrants locating themselves in this township, as it has already increased the value of our own land in a three-fold degree.

All this, my dear friend, you will say is very well, and might afford subject for a wise discussion between grave men, but will hardly amuse us women; so pray turn to some other theme, and just tell me how you contrive to pass your time among the bears and wolves of Canada.

One lovely day last June I went by water to visit the bride of a young naval officer, who had purchased a very pretty lot of land some two miles higher up the lake; our party consisted of my husband, baby, and myself; we met a few pleasant friends, and enjoyed our excursion much. Dinner was laid out in the *stoup*, which, as you may not know what is meant by the word, I must tell you that it means a sort of wide verandah, supported on pillars, often of unbarked logs; the floor is either of earth, beaten hard, or plank; the roof covered with sheets of bark, or else shingled. These stoups are of Dutch origin, and were

introduced, I have been told, by the first Dutch settlers in the states, since which they have found their way all over the colonies.

Wreathed with the scarlet creeper, a native plant of our woods and wilds, the wild vine, and also with the hop, which here grows luxuriantly, with no labour or attention to its culture, these stoups have a very rural appearance; in summer serving the purpose of an open ante-room, in which you can take your meals and enjoy the fanning breeze without being inconvenienced by the extreme heat of the noon-day sun.

The situation of the house was remarkably well chosen, just on the summit of a little elevated plain, the ground sloping with a steep descent to a little valley, at the bottom of which a bright rill of water divided the garden from the opposite corn-fields, which clothed a corresponding bank. In front of the stoup, where we dined, the garden was laid out with a smooth plot of grass, surrounded with borders of flowers, and separated from a ripening field of wheat by a light railed fence, over which the luxuriant hop-vine flung its tendrils and graceful blossoms. Now I must tell you the hop is cultivated for the purpose of making a barm for raising bread. As you take great interest in housewifery concerns, I shall send you a recipe for what we call hop-rising.

The Yankees use a fermentation of salt, flour, and warm water or milk; but though the *salt-rising* makes beautiful bread to look at, being far whiter and firmer than the hop-yeast bread, there is a peculiar flavour imparted to the flour that does not please every one's taste, and it is very difficult to get your salt-rising to work in very cold weather.

And now, having digressed while I gave you my recipes, I shall step back to my party within the stoup, which, I can assure you, was very pleasant, and most cordially disposed to enjoy the meeting. We had books and drawings, and good store of pretty Indian toys, the collection of many long voyages to distant shores, to look at and admire. Soon after sun-set we walked down through the woods to the landing at the lake shore, where we found our bark canoe ready to convey us home.

During our voyage, just at the head of the rapids, our attention was drawn to some small object in the water, moving very swiftly along; there were various opinions as to the swimmer, some thinking it to be a water-snake, others a squirrel, or a musk-rat; a few swift strokes of

the paddles brought us up so as to intercept the passage of the little voyager; it proved to be a fine red squirrel, bound on a voyage of discovery from a neighbouring island. The little animal, with a courage and address that astonished his pursuers, instead of seeking safety in a different direction, sprung lightly on the point of the uplifted paddle, and from thence with a bound to the head of my astonished baby, and having gained my shoulder, leaped again into the water, and made direct for the shore, never having deviated a single point from the line he was swimming in when he first came in sight of our canoe. I was surprised and amused by the agility and courage displayed by this innocent creature; I could hardly have given credence to the circumstance, had I not been an eye-witness of its conduct, and moreover been wetted plentifully on my shoulder by the sprinkling of water from his coat. [...]

How my little friend Emily would delight in such a pet! Tell her if ever I should return to dear old England, I will try to procure one for her; but at present she must be contented with the stuffed specimens of the black, red, and striped squirrels which I enclose in my parcel. I wish I could offer you any present more valuable, but our arts and manufactures being entirely British, with the exception of the Indians' toys, I should find it a difficult matter to send you any thing worth your attention; therefore I am obliged to have recourse to the natural productions of our woods as tokens of remembrance to our friends at *home*, for it is ever thus we speak of the land of our birth.

You wish to know if I am happy and contented in my situation, or if my heart pines after my native land. I will answer you candidly, and say that, as far as regards matters of taste, early association, and all those holy ties of kindred, and old affections that make "home" in all countries, and among all nations in the world, a hallowed spot, I must ever give the preference to Britain.

On the other hand, a sense of the duties I have chosen, and a feeling of conformity to one's situation, lessen the regret I might be inclined to indulge in. Besides, there are new and delightful ties that bind me to Canada: I have enjoyed much domestic happiness since I came hither,—and is it not the birthplace of my dear child? Have I not here first tasted the rapturous delight arising from maternal feelings? When my eye rests on my smiling darling, or I feel his warm breath

upon my cheek, I would not exchange the joy that fills my breast for any pleasure the world could offer me. "But this feeling is not confined to the solitude of your Canadian forests, my dear friend," you will say. I know it; but here there is nothing to interfere with your little nursing. You are not tempted by the pleasures of a gay world to forget your duties as a mother; there is nothing to supplant him in your heart; his presence endears every place; and you learn to love the spot that gave him birth, and to think with complacency upon the country, because it is *his* country; and in looking forward to his future welfare you naturally become doubly interested in the place that is one day to be his.

Perhaps I rather estimate the country by my own feelings; and when I find, by impartial survey of my present life, that I am to the full as happy, if not really happier, than I was in the old country, I cannot but value it.

Possibly, if I were to enter into a detail of the advantages I possess, they would appear of a very negative character in the eyes of persons revelling in all the splendour and luxury that wealth could procure, in a country in which nature and art are so eminently favourable towards what is usually termed the pleasures of life; but I never was a votary at the shrine of luxury or fashion. A round of company, a routine of pleasure, were to me sources of weariness, if not of disgust. "There's nothing in all this to satisfy the heart," says Schiller; and I admit the force of the sentiment.

I was too much inclined to spurn with impatience the fetters that etiquette and fashion are wont to impose on society, till they rob its followers of all freedom and independence of will; and they soon are obliged to live for a world that in secret they despise and loathe, for a world, too, that usually regards them with contempt, because they dare not act with an independence, which would be crushed directly it was displayed.

And I must freely confess to you that I do prize and enjoy my present liberty in this country exceedingly: in this we possess an advantage over you, and over those that inhabit the towns and villages in *this* country, where I see a ridiculous attempt to keep up an appearance that is quite foreign to the situation of those that practise it. Few, very few, are the emigrants that come to the colonies, unless it is with the

view of realizing an independence for themselves or their children. Those that could afford to live in ease at home, believe me, would never expose themselves to the privations and disagreeable consequences of a settler's life in Canada: therefore, this is the natural inference we draw, that the emigrant has come hither under the desire and natural hope of bettering his condition, and benefiting a family that he had not the means of settling in life in the home country. It is foolish, then, to launch out in a style of life that everyone knows cannot be maintained; rather ought such persons to rejoice in the consciousness that they can, if they please, live according to their circumstances, without being the less regarded for the practice of prudence, economy, and industry.

Now, we *bush-settlers* are more independent: we do what we like; we dress as we find most suitable and most convenient, we are totally without the fear of any Mr. or Mrs. Grundy; and having shaken off the trammels of Grundyism, we laugh at the absurdity of those who voluntarily forge afresh and hug their chains.

If our friends come to visit us unexpectedly we make them welcome to our humble homes, and give them the best we have; but if our fare be indifferent, we offer it with good will, and no apologies are made or expected: they would be out of place; as every one is aware of the disadvantages of a new settlement; and any excuses for want of variety, or the delicacies of the table, would be considered rather in the light of a tacit reproach to your guest for having unseasonably put your hospitality to the test.

Our society is mostly military or naval; so that we meet on equal grounds, and are, of course, well acquainted with the rules of good breeding and polite life; too much so to allow any deviation from those laws that good taste, good sense, and good feeling have established among persons of our class.

Yet here it is considered by no means derogatory to the wife of an officer or gentleman to assist in the work of the house, or to perform its entire duties, if occasion requires it; to understand the mystery of soap, candle, and sugar-making; to make bread, butter, and cheese, or even to milk her own cows; to knit and spin, and prepare the wool for the loom. In these matters we bush-ladies have a wholesome disregard of what Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so thinks or says. We pride ourselves on

conforming to circumstances, and as a British officer must needs be a gentleman and his wife a lady, perhaps we repose quietly on that incontestable proof of our gentility, and can afford to be useful without injuring it.

Our husbands adopt a similar line of conduct: the officer turns his sword into a ploughshare, and his lance into a sickle; and if he be seen ploughing among the stumps in his own field, or chopping trees on his own land, no one thinks less of his dignity, or considers him less of a gentleman, than when he appeared upon parade in all the pride of military etiquette, with sash, sword and epaulette. Surely this is as it should be in a country where independence is inseparable from industry; and for this I prize it.

Among many advantages we in this township possess, it is certainly no inconsiderable one that the lower or working class of settlers are well disposed, and quite free from the annoying Yankee manners that distinguish many of the earlier-settled townships. Our servants are as respectful, or nearly so, as those at home; nor are they admitted to our tables, or placed on an equality with us, excepting at "bees," and such kinds of public meetings; when they usually conduct themselves with a propriety that would afford an example to some that call themselves gentlemen, viz., young men who voluntarily throw aside those restraints that society expects from persons filling a respectable situation. [...]

I am rather interested in a young lad that has come out from England to learn Canadian farming. The poor boy had conceived the most romantic notions of a settler's life, partly from the favourable accounts he had read, and partly through the medium of a lively imagination, which had aided in the deception, and led him to suppose that his time would be chiefly spent in the fascinating amusements and adventures arising from hunting the forest in search of deer and other game, pigeon and duck-shooting, spearing fish by torchlight, and voyaging on the lakes in a birch-bark canoe in summer, skating in winter, or gliding over the frozen snow like a Laplander in his sledge, wrapped up to the eyes in furs, and travelling at the rate of twelve miles an hour to the sound of the harmonious peal of bells. What a felicitous life to captivate the mind of a boy of fourteen, just let loose from the irksome restraint of boarding-school!

How little did he dream of the drudgery inseparable from the duties of a lad of his age, in a country where the old and young, the master and the servant, are alike obliged to labour for a livelihood, without respect to former situation or rank!

Here the son of the gentleman becomes a hewer of wood and drawer of water; he learns to chop down trees, to pile brush-heaps, split rails for fences, attend the fires during the burning season, dressed in a coarse over-garment of hempen cloth, called a logging-shirt, with trousers to correspond, and a Yankee straw hat flapped over his eyes, and a handspike to assist him in rolling over the burning brands. To tend and drive oxen, plough, sow, plant Indian corn and pumpkins, and raise potatoe-hills, are among some of the young emigrant's accomplishments. His relaxations are but comparatively few, but they are seized with a relish and avidity that give them the greater charm.

You may imagine the disappointment felt by the poor lad on seeing his fair visions of amusement fade before the dull realities and distasteful details of a young settler's occupation in the backwoods.

Youth, however, is the best season for coming to this country; the mind soon bends itself to its situation, and becomes not only reconciled, but in time pleased with the change of life. There is a consolation, too, in seeing that he does no more than others of equal pretensions as to rank and education are obliged to submit to, if they would prosper, and perhaps he lives to bless the country which has robbed him of a portion of that absurd pride that made him look with contempt on those whose occupations were of humble nature. It were a thousand pities wilfully to deceive persons desirous of emigrating with false and flattering picture of the advantages to be met with in this country. Let the *pro* and *con*, be fairly stated, and let the reader use his best judgment unbiassed by prejudice or interest in a matter of such vital importance not only as regards himself, but the happiness and welfare of those over whose destinies Nature has made him the guardian. It is, however, far more difficult to write on the subject of emigration than most persons think: it embraces so wide a field that what would be perfectly correct as regards one part of the province would by no means prove so as regarded another. One district differs from another, and one township from another, according to its natural ad-

vantages; whether it be long settled or unsettled, possessing water privileges or not; the soil and even the climate will be different, according to situation and circumstances.

Much depends on the tempers, habits, and dispositions of the emigrants themselves. What suits one will not another; one family will flourish, and accumulate every comfort about their homesteads, while others languish in poverty and discontent. It would take volumes to discuss every argument for and against, and to point out exactly who are and who are not fit subjects for emigration.

Have you read Dr. Dunlop's spirited and witty "Backwoodsman?" If you have not, get it as soon as you can; it will amuse you. I think a Backwoodswoman might be written in the same spirit, setting forth a few pages, in the history of bush-ladies, as examples for our sex. Indeed, we need some wholesome admonitions on our duties and the folly of repining at following and sharing the fortunes of our spouses, whom we have vowed in happier hours to love "in riches and in poverty, in sickness and in health." Too many pronounce these words without heeding their importance, and without calculating the chances that may put their faithfulness to the severe test of quitting home, kindred, and country, to share the hard lot of a settler's life; for even this sacrifice renders it hard to be borne; but the truly attached wife will do this, and more also, if required by the husband of her choice.

But now it is time I say farewell: my dull letter, grown to a formidable packet, will tire you, and make you wish it at the bottom of the Atlantic.