Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill: The Sister’s Relationship with the Women of the Chippewa Tribe in Peterborough, Ontario

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Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, sisters from Suffolk England, emigrated to Upper Canada in 1832.[[1]](#footnote-1) The sisters were both established writers in England, but when thinking about the future, they struggled to imagine a prosperous life ahead for their families, as their husbands were struggling to climb the economic ladder.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thomas Traill, and John Moodie, Catharine and Susanna’s husbands, became captivated on the idea of starting a “prosperous” life in the New World since, as half-pay officers, they were both promised their own land; something that wasn’t in the foreseeable future for the Moodie’s or Traill’s in England.[[3]](#footnote-3) After a three month voyage from England to Upper Canada, the two families emigrated to Lake Katchewanooka, Peterborough, Ontario.[[4]](#footnote-4) Lake Katchewanooka was home to the Chippewa Indigenous peoples, whom Moodie and Traill became well acquainted with as they were close neighbors.[[5]](#footnote-5) Among their association with the Chippewa tribe, Susanna and Catharine prolifically write about their relationship and interactions with the Chippewa women. In regard to the Chippewa women’s knowledge on natural resources, raising children in the forest, and their cultural ways of demonstrating female companionship, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill give insight into how their relationship with the Chippewa women positively shaped their emigration experience as women in Upper Canada.

Susanna and Catharine were inspired by how in tune the Indigenous women were with nature. She writes that they possessed an “intense admiration for the beauties of nature”, and although Catharine had always been interested in “the mysteries of plant and wildlife”, she was able to pursue her knowledge in botany through the teachings of the Chippewa women.[[6]](#footnote-6) Charlotte Gray writes that Catharine “embraced” her friendship with her female Chippewa neighbours, and took initiative to adapt natural remedies the Indigenous women would use, such as the plant *arum alropurpureum*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Susanna recalls a story she heard from an Indigenous woman about a woman who accompanied her husband on a hunting expedition, and killed a bear with only knife upon being attacked.[[8]](#footnote-8) “What iron nerves a woman could dare and do a deed like this!”; Susanna is in awe of the bravery and knowledge that this Chippewa woman possessed in the realms of nature.[[9]](#footnote-9) “Recalling their encounters actually offered Traill the possibility of dwelling on topics that were viewed as masculine, such as her interest in technology”; Corinne Bigot argues that the Chippewa women inspired Catharine to pursue her knowledge and interest in natural resources as technology.[[10]](#footnote-10) Both Susanna and Catharine experienced an insightful relationship among the Chippewa women regarding nature, and were greatly influenced to live resourcefully, and fearlessly among nature themselves.

Susanna and Catharine had children of their own, (sixteen children between both of them), so it is understandable why they would turn to the Indigenous women for advice on raising children.[[11]](#footnote-11) The sisters found comfort in relating to mothers who were similarly either pregnant, nursing, or disciplining their children. Gray notes that “Catharine was fascinated by the Chippewa habit of carrying children” because of the functionality and ability to continue with chores while still caring for her infant.[[12]](#footnote-12) Susanna recalls an interaction with a Chippewa mother whose child was dying, and came to Susanna for help: “looking down upon the suffering lad with the most heartfelt expression of maternal love”.[[13]](#footnote-13) This encounter portrays how Susanna could relate to the heartbreak in losing a child since she had children of her own; however, this passage is also significant because of the demonstration of the two-way relationship between Susanna and the Chippewa women. In *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America*, Catharine observes their Chippewa friend, Peter’s “squaw”, and appreciates her “simple piety” as she places her child on the ground.[[14]](#footnote-14) Catharine admires the Chippewa mother’s gentleness and attentiveness towards her child. In the same passage, Catharine gives us insight towards the playfulness of the Chippewa mother and her child, and is even concerned for the child until she realizes it enjoys this type of play.[[15]](#footnote-15) As Susanna and Catharine raise children in an unfamiliar, and vast wilderness, the Chippewa women assist them by integrating their Indigenous knowledge and maternal support.

Susanna and Catharine were often left behind by their husbands in in the backwoods, which left them desiring companionship in the lonely setting of the backwoods of Upper Canada. Susanna and her family were leaving the backwoods to dwell in their new home of Belleville, and during her departure she writes “while the squaws kissed me”, which gives us insight into the intimate female companionship she shared with the Chippewa women.[[16]](#footnote-16) Touching once again on the sister’s experience in relating to motherhood with the Chippewa women, Gray writes, “these shared female experiences forged a bond between English and Indian women much stronger than any rapport established between an Indian hunter and a newly arrived Englishman”; this portrays how this bond was created. Catharine recalls an experience of entering a Chippewa wigwam, and her Chippewa friend motioning for her to share her corner of the blanket with her.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although it was a simple gesture, Catharine was invited to share a traditional practice with the Chippewa tribe as one of the women, which portrays the intimacy and closeness among the two of them. Bigot argues that this type of woman-to-woman affection among the sisters and the Chippewa women was a way “for the women to overcome language barriers”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Because the women relied on each other for maternal support, and knowledge, it was important for them to be able to express their gratitude towards each other, even while they may not have been able to understand each other’s languages.[[19]](#footnote-19) Historical documents often refer to Indigenous peoples as “Indians” or “squaws”, which removes any form of personal identification and intimacy. In *Roughing it in the Bush* Susanna writes about her friend Emilia, a Chippewa woman whom she befriended during her time in the backwoods.[[20]](#footnote-20) This is a significant example of how the sisters addressed their Chippewa friends by the first names; therefore, demonstrating the closeness of their friendship, and the equality they viewed upon each other.

By emigrating to Upper Canada, Susanna and Catharine were required to become knowledgeable of their natural surroundings to properly care for their children, and survive in the backwoods. Upon doing so, they built lasting relationships with their neighbors, the Chippewa women. Carole Gerson writes about how the sister’s acquired skills and resourceful attitudes were influenced by their interactions with the Chippewa women: “we can see that its protagonist's often painful acquisition of self-confidence, knowledge and survival skills develops within the context of abilities and attitudes already possessed by the women native to the land”.[[21]](#footnote-21) Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill demonstrate through their writing that their experiences and interactions with the Chippewa women were necessary for their backwoods successes, and to fulfill their desire for female companionship.

Bibliography

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1. Charlotte Gray, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill.* (Toronto: Viking, 1999), 5, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* 39, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.,* 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.,* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush, or, Life in Canada.* Edited by Elizabeth Thompson. (Ottawa: Tecumseh University Press Ltd., 1997), 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gray, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.,* 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush,* 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.,* 213-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Corinne Bigot, “Did They Go Native? Representations of First Encounters and Personal Interrelations with First Nations Canadians in the Writings of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49, no. 1 (March 2014): 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gray, 353-354. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush,* 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 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), 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.,* 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gray, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Traill, *Backwoods*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bigot, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Gray, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush,* 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Carole Gerson, “Nobler Savages: Representations of Native Women in the Writings of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1997): unknown. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)