

Susanna Moodie's Record of Settlement in Canadian America

Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush*, ed. Michael Peterman (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2007).

While Susanna Moodie has not been a major figure in traditional survey courses for U.S. literature, she has drawn increasing attention in curriculum defining “American literature” more broadly (i.e., literatures of the Americas), and she’s been a key influence on a number of Canadian women writers (including, as noted in our Norton edition and referenced in more detail below, Margaret Atwood). Linked to a productive literary family in England, Susanna Strickland Moodie also merits attention, as we found earlier in the semester, for being the original editor (and mediator) of *The History of Mary Prince: a West Indian Slave*. Thus, what we might term Moodie’s personal geographic reach embraces the British Isles, North America, and the Caribbean, making her one of the most useful figures for transatlantic cultural mapping in nineteenth century studies.

Like Susanna Rowson, whom we read earlier in the term, and like Fanny Kemble, Moodie is transatlantic in a literal sense by virtue of immigration to North America. Several features of her life story and writings set her apart from Rowson and Kemble, however, including her settlement in Canada rather than the United States and her focus on the difficulties of life “in the bush.” The U.S. writer with whom she’s most often compared is Caroline Kirkland, author of *A New Home, Who’ll Follow?* Like Moodie, Kirkland originally published a number of her book’s chapters in periodicals; like Moodie, Kirkland drew angry responses from some of her neighbors for her biting, satirical portraits of their class-based behaviors; like Moodie, Kirkland rose to increased prominence in studies of American women writers as part of the canonical intervention and recovery work that began in the 1970s. However, Moodie had always held a more secure place in Canadian literary history than Kirkland had in the U.S., and Moodie is now attracting increased attention as a transatlantic figure, whereas scholarship on Kirkland tends to position her either as a “woman writer” or a “writer focused on the American West” (when the “West” was Michigan!). If you’d like to pursue connections between Kirkland and Moodie, see Michael Peterman’s essay, “Roughing It in Michigan and Upper Canada: Caroline Kirkland and Susanna Moodie,” in our Norton Critical Edition, pages 512-21.)

We’ve found it painful, we confess, to pare down our reading of Moodie’s own sketches, but we’re aware that your revisions of the editing project are due on October 23 as well. Therefore, for our current class engagement with Moodie’s narrative, we’ve selected chapters to discuss that most clearly situate her as a transatlantic author writing on a transatlantic experience. We hope you’ll return to Moodie in the future, especially since she’s such an accessible topic for undergraduate teaching—for instance, by pairing some of Atwood’s poems with some of the sketches; further, partly with Moodie’s prominence in studies of Canadian women writers in mind, and in a year when the Nobel prize has just been claimed by another Canadian woman author, we’ll be reading an essay by Kate Flint for Teaching Transatlanticism later this term—one that puts Moodie’s authorial identity in conversation with that of Native writer Pauline Johnson.

For now, in what will likely be a first encounter with Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* sketches for most of you, here are some questions to consider as you read:

- How does Moodie position herself in relation to her homeland? Her new home? In what ways is that self-positioning shifting at times throughout the text?
- In particular, what role do social class differences play in Moodie's text? How and why?
- How does Moodie interact with and depict others that she encounters in "the bush," and why? (One point to consider, of course, is the various potential audiences Moodie is imagining for her work.)
- What questions and observations come to mind for you in the places where Moodie depicts Indians? How would you position these encounters in relation to those of Jameson in *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*?
- Among other tools, Moodie uses a rhetoric of affiliation and one of distancing. Look for various points in the text when she uses these differing stances and consider why.
- Who are the memorable individual "characters" we meet in Moodie's writing, and what makes them memorable? In this regard, keep in mind that a number of the chapters were originally published as magazine sketches, and ask yourself how such a venue might have shaped her writing.
- How is "Canada" depicted in Moodie's text?
- What contributions (if any) do Moodie's poems make to the book? (Note that some U.S. editions excised the poetry.)

Besides discussing the book itself, with emphasis on the questions above, we'll want to consider the varying forms Moodie's text has taken in different editions, the varying responses it has evoked from different readers in different places and historical moments, and the potential for future transatlantic scholarship on Moodie.



Contexts and Text Preparation:

- 1) Prefaces--Please read the advertisements and prefaces from the various editions as laid out in the Norton:
pages 343-51

- 2) Editorial decision-making—The editor of our Norton edition outlines his decision-making process on pages 333-336.
- 3) Illustrations—337-42 –What do these add to the edition, and how?

Chapters from *Roughing It in the Bush*:

Advertisement and Introduction: 8-12

A Visit to Grosse Isle—14-23

Our First Settlement, and the Borrowing System: 58-76 (top)

The Wilderness, and Our Indian Friends: 182-203

The Fire 261-273

A Change in Our Prospects 314-322

Adieu to the Woods 322-330

Recommended additional chapters for the heartiest readers:

Tom Wilson's Immigration: 42 ff

John Monaghan 96 ff

Brian, the Still-Hunter: 115-128 [one of the most frequently anthologized Moodie texts]

The Charivari: 128-143

Our Logging Bee 209 ff

Disappointed Hopes 236-45

The Outbreak 273-89

Responses to Susanna Moodie:

A) *Everyone should read these reviews of Moodie's book from the Norton critical edition:*

- 1) Hardmann, "Forest Life in Canada West," 401-04.
- 2) Anonymous, "The Backwoods of Canada," 404.
- 3) Lyndsay, "Misrepresentation," 405-07.
- 4) Anonymous, "Roughing It in the Bush," 407-413. [two reviews, each attributed to anonymous authors]

Note: As you read through the reviews above, select several specific phrases that "mark" the reviewers' assessments not just of Moodie's text but also of Canada and of the relationship between that still-emerging literary culture and its British ancestor. Were you to prepare a paper on the British reception of Moodie's book, what would be some potential themes to address?

B) Poems from Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie: Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). [Representative poems from the collection are included in the Norton critical edition of Moodie's text. Read those and Atwood's "Afterword," 417-19.]

Query: What fascinated Atwood about Moodie? What role does Atwood seem to be assigning to Moodie in Canadian literary history, and why?

Secondary criticism on Moodie from our Norton edition:

While we'd love to have all of you read every one of the essays included in our edition, we want to be time-efficient, given your other work for this week. Thus, we've set up three groups whose members will read one essay apiece, and we'll take some time in class to, first synthesize your responses and then share them with other class members in a "jigsaw" exercise.

Group One: Jay Jay, Matt, Ariel, and Kaleigh

Read Gerson, 522-38

Group Two: Adam, Heidi, and Meta

Read Bentley--Read the introduction plus section III—i.e., pages 442-52 and 459-72.

Group Three: Chris, Amanda, and Samantha

Read Buss, 571-582 (Given Buss's highlighting of the "Brian" chapter in Moodie's text, you might want to skim that sketch, if you have time; see above for page numbers).

Recommended Supplemental Reading

For a helpful article on the complex challenge of interpreting Moodie's role in the creation of Prince's biographical narrative, see A. M. Rauwerda, "Naming, Agency, and 'A Tissue of Falsehoods' in *The History of Mary Prince*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29.2 (2001), pp. 397-411.

For a highly appreciative reading of Margaret Atwood's poetry collection that was inspired by study of Moodie's writing, see this online essay, which dubs Atwood's salute to Moodie "possibly Margaret Atwood's finest collection of poetry," due in part to "its cumulative effect, from the close inter-connection and inter-weaving of poems as Atwood presents her modernized version of Susanna Moodie's experience."

<http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrn/vol102/bilan.htm>

A related essay by Susan Johnston focuses on Moodie's own aesthetics as they connect with Atwood's poetry: <http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrn/vol31/johnston.htm>

See also this interesting essay by a Polish scholar addressing the same topic:

<http://www.ptbk.org.pl/userfiles/file/laskowska04.pdf>

And here, on YouTube, Atwood and the original illustrator of the poetry collection comment on their collaboration: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVuXzHXZYdQ>