

ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH: A SENTIMENTAL NOVEL

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Part way through *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), Susanna Moodie interrupts her narrative of life in the backwoods to show herself bidding farewell to her English home just before emigrating:

I went to take a last look at the old Hall, the beloved home of my childhood and youth; to wander once more beneath the shade of its venerable oaks — to rest once more upon the velvet sward that carpeted their roots. It was while reposing beneath those noble trees that I had first indulged in those delicious dreams which are a foretaste of the enjoyments of the spirit-land. In them the soul breathes forth its aspirations in a language unknown to common minds; and that language is *Poetry*. . . In these beloved solitudes all the holy emotions which stir the human heart in its depths had been freely poured forth, and found a response in the harmonious voice of Nature, bearing aloft the choral song of earth to the throne of the Creator.¹

A solitary and sentimental young lady indulging in romantic reveries in the presence of Nature! Now compare this passage from Moodie's novel *Flora Lyndsay*, first published in London, in 1854, in which Flora is about to leave her English home for the backwoods of Canada:

It was beneath the shade of these trees and reposing upon the velvet-like sward at their feet, that Flora had first indulged in those delicious reveries — those lovely, ideal visions of beauty and perfection — which cover with a tissue of morning beams all the rugged highways of life. Silent bosom friends were those dear old trees! Every noble sentiment of her soul, every fault that threw its baneful shadow on the sunlight of her mind — had been fostered, or grown upon her, in those pastoral shades. Those trees had witnessed a thousand bursts of passionate eloquence — a thousand gushes of bitter, heart-humbling tears. To them had been revealed all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, which she could not confide to the sneering and unsympathising of her own sex.²

The style of these two passages is identical: the sentimental

tone, the complex sentences, the prolixity (every noun must have its adjective), the periphrasis (grass becomes the "velvet sward"). This is the style of English sentimental fiction inherited from Samuel Richardson and perpetuated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the similarities between *Flora Lyndsay* and *Roughing it in the Bush* go beyond mere style: both works share similar plots, similar structures and similar heroines.

Flora Lyndsay is raised in a rambling old English mansion. Both she and her husband John are "the younger children of large families, whose wealth and consequence is now a thing of the past" (p. 6). Since they can't make ends meet in England, they decide to emigrate to Canada with their little daughter. They sail on the brig *Anne*, whose captain has a Scotch terrier called Oscar. They spend six weeks at sea, three of them becalmed off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. While they are becalmed, Flora is seriously ill. They arrive at Grosse Isle on August 30th to find a cholera epidemic raging. Here the book ends, but with a postscript referring to the "great sorrows and trials" which the Lyndsays experienced in the Canadian wilderness, and to the fact that ultimately John Lyndsay "obtained an official appointment which enabled him to remove his wife and family to one of the fast-rising and flourishing towns of the Upper Province" (p. 342).

In *Roughing it in the Bush*, the heroine, Susanna, is raised in an old English mansion and forced to emigrate for the same reasons as the Lyndsays. The Moodies have one daughter, and sail on the brig *Anne*, whose captain has a Scotch terrier called Oscar. They spend nine weeks at sea, three of them becalmed off the Grand Banks, during which time Susanna is ill. They arrive at Grosse Isle on August 30th in the midst of a cholera epidemic. After severe trials in the backwoods of Upper Canada, John Moodie receives the appointment of Sheriff of the new Victoria district and they move to Belleville.

Both *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Flora Lyndsay*, of course, are based on Mrs. Moodie's real-life experiences as an early Canadian settler. But these are not works from two different genres: the first belonging to the "statistical" accounts and travelogues which appeared in a flood in Canada in the mid-nineteenth century, and the second to the mainstream of English sentimental fiction, grounded, as the novel was from its inception, in what Ian Watt calls in *The Rise of the Novel* "formal realism." Carl