

LEISURE



First flower: Trillium, now Ontario's floral emblem is illustrated on the first plate of Canadian Wild Flowers.



PHOTO: RARE BOOK LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Agnes Moodie Fitzgibbon: To make her book an all-Canadian production, she had to engrave the plates herself.

Determined artist produced all-Canadian 'coffee table book'

In the 1860s, a young widow living on the old Dundas Road printed sketches of flowers that grew along the Humber Valley and colored each by hand, producing what must be the most extravagant book ever printed in Canada.

Over the past 100 years, countless historians have written about the family of this extraordinary woman, Agnes Moodie.

Her mother, Susanna Moodie, has become one of the most quoted writers of 19th century Canada and, at the age of 17, Agnes married the son of one of the great heroic figures of Upper Canada, Col. Fitzgibbon, who led the troops up Yonge St. to defeat William Lyon Mackenzie at the battle of Montgomery's Tavern.

But rarely do any of the dozens of books about the Moodies and the Fitzgibbons ever mention the name of Agnes Moodie Fitzgibbon, later Chamberlin. It is time her story was told, and appropriately at Christmas, when more books are bought than at any other time of year.

Mrs. Fitzgibbon's landmark book was the first of its kind to be published in Canada, and it has been called "Canada's First Coffee Table Book." Today you will pay more than \$1,000 if you can find a fine copy of that rare first edition of 1868.

Printing plates

Mrs. Fitzgibbon was told that such a book could only be printed abroad, but she had vowed that it would be an entirely Canadian work. When every publisher in Toronto rejected it, she borrowed a lithographic stone and began making her own printing plates. Her first plate was, rather prophetically, a drawing of a trillium which, over 60 years later, in 1937, was the flower that was adopted by the Ontario government as Ontario's provincial floral emblem.

Mrs. Fitzgibbon grouped a selection of other flowers around the trillium and drew another nine large drawings. Five hundred copies were printed of each of the 10 plates and she colored all 5,000 pages by hand. When her book, Canadian Wild Flowers, was pub-



DONALD JONES

Historical Toronto

lished the demand was so great that three additional editions were printed during her lifetime.

Coles has recently reprinted it as part of its Coles Canadiana Collection (Hardbound \$14.98 and Softcover \$9.95). The book is famous; but not its author. She died in relative obscurity in Toronto in 1913.

She was born on a farm on the outskirts of Cobourg on June 9, 1833. Her parents, Susanna and John Moodie, had emigrated from England the year before and few settlers ever arrived in Upper Canada so unprepared. Her father was a retired military officer and her mother had fought against leaving the polite world of English society that she had known when she was a child.

Barely managed

They barely managed to survive on their farm in the backwoods and, to help support her growing family, Susanna Moodie began writing short stories and novels. One of her books *Roughing It in the Bush*, became a best seller in both England and the United States. One of the characters in the book was called Little Addie and Mrs. Moodie based it on her daughter Agnes.

When Agnes was 17, she married a Toronto barrister, Charles Fitzgibbon, who was the son of the famed Col. James Fitzgibbon, who had outfoxed the Americans at the battle of Beaver Dam in the War of 1812, and who commanded the troops during the Rebellion of 1837, who defeated Mackenzie and his rebels at Montgomery's Tavern.

Col. Fitzgibbon died in England, leaving little money to his family who had remained in Canada. When his son, Charles, died in 1865, his widow Agnes had only his life insurance to support herself and her 6 children.

At about that time, her mother's sister, Mrs. Catherine Parr Traill, had arrived in Toronto in the hope of finding a publisher for her book about Canadian flowers. But no one was interested. The book lacked the illustrations that might make it a popular success.

But, to Agnes, the book offered a temporary solution to her financial worries. She had sketched flowers ever since she was a child and she would provide the illustrations for her aunt's book.

Through her husband's family, she knew most of the old families of Toronto and the newly rich and when she asked for subscriptions to guarantee publication of this first important book on Canadian flowers the subscription list was quickly filled with names such as the Cawthras, the Goodhams, the McMasters and the Gzowskis.

Prized possession

In 1885, she illustrated another of Mrs. Traill's books, *Studies in Plant Life in Canada*. In later years, she painted hundreds of still lives of Canadian flowers that were exhibited in the United States and England.

In 1934, in the year of Toronto's 100th anniversary, her family presented all these original paintings to the University of Toronto. Today, they are one of the prized possessions of the University's Rare Book Library where you will also find the most complete collection of all her works. In 1870, two years after the publication of her first book, Mrs. Fitzgibbon married Lieut. Colonel Brown Chamberlin, who became Queen's Printer and the couple moved to Ottawa.

After the death of her second husband in 1897, she spent her summers in Lakefield, near the countryside she had known as a child and her winters were spent at the home of one of her daughters at 52 St. Alban's St., at what is now the northwest corner of Wellesley and Bay Sts.

On May 1, 1913, she died there at the age of 80. She left specific instructions for a quiet funeral and was buried beside her first husband, Charles Fitzgibbon, in an unmarked grave in St. James Cemetery.

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