

Preface

When thinking of Canada, images of a sublime nature, large forests as well as beautiful lakes and mountains probably come up your mind. Those images are, besides the country's great educational and health facilities as well as job offerings, the reason why people decide to immigrate to Canada nowadays. But what if the circumstances do not give you a choice and you rather *have to* leave your country? Not in the 21st century, where infrastructures and mobility offerings are at the peak of development, but during the 19th century, where most of the Canadian land was still undiscovered and uncleared, bearing largely uncivilised areas.

During the early 19th century, it was very common for Europeans and especially British people to leave their busy and overcrowded home and emigrate to colonised countries such as Canada or South Africa. Reason for that was the bad economic situation due to the Great Depression in 1930. Values of the British exports halved, taxes raised and the unemployment rate more than doubled to 20 percent, leading to high poverty. Prices dropped and farmers, for example, were not able to maintain their farms and went bankrupt. Many British citizens therefore were alarmed and took steps to escape the risk of poverty and dependence, seeking a secure and independent life by purchasing a piece of land in the wide outback of Canada, for instance. It led to a big increase of the Canadian population. About 30,000 new emigrants, mainly from England, Ireland and Scotland, landed in Quebec each year. They took a path to a completely unknown, widely undiscovered and uncivilised land, often purchasing a piece of land while bearing hope of an economically successful and independent future.

One of them was Susanna Moodie (born Strickland), who recorded her personal settler experience in this autobiographical novel, a collection of all her sketches that she started writing right after she left Britain as the beginning of her emigration experience.

Susanna Moodie was born on December 6th, 1803 in Bungay, Suffolk, England as the youngest daughter of Elizabeth Homer and Thomas Strick-

land. While growing up in the rural and seaside region of Suffolk, Susanna's great fascination for nature was manifested and influenced her literary works, which can be observed in *Canada From the Wild Side*, as well. Thomas and his wife were very eager to teach their elder children history, literature, languages and mathematics, as well as practical skills, while the elder children had the responsibility to teach those subjects their younger siblings in return. Education and learning were therefore seen as highly important, which might also explain why most of the Strickland children were later involved in literary careers. Susanna and her sister Catherine began their literary careers shortly after the death of their father, who did not leave much money. Therefore, the Strickland sisters were urged to produce and sell literature for the market, as for example children's books, poems and stories for gift books¹ or magazines for women, such as *The Lady's Magazine*. During that time, Susanna also published her first biographical sketch of the Suffolk life in *La Belle Assemblée* (1827–1828), inspired by Mary Russel Mitford, whom she will be good friends with later.

Living in London, her friendship with Thomas Pringle, a Scottish writer, poet and editor of the annual *Friendship's offering*, engaged her in a circle of literary and artistic persons, which made her to contribute to annuals frequently and to pursue a literary career. By 1831 she published her first collection of poems, called *Enthusiasm; and other poems*. Most of her works deal with Christian values and the love of God as well as freedom and transience. Thomas Pringle was the secretary to the so-called Anti-Slavery Society and a convinced abolitionist, who lived in South Africa for several years. Through their friendship, Susanna's awareness of the issue was increased, and she was able to meet former slaves, motivating her to give them a voice through her literature. She therefore wrote two anti-slavery novels: *The history of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave...* (1831) and *Negro slavery described by a negro: being the narrative of Ashton Warner...* (1831), as well as several poems concerning this particular topic. Considering the widely spread prejudices towards black people during the 19th century, her critical social views and sense for injustice are even more remarkable. In this book you will find some passages that deal with those prejudices and that reflect the problematic worldview of many people during that time, from

1 In the 19th century gift books and annuals were often lavishly decorated books that contained essays, short stories and poems, that were intended to be gifted and therefore very popular in holiday seasons.

which Susanna distances herself. Nevertheless, her distancing seems quite careful and might not directly reveal her position towards those statements. Therefore we as publishers see the responsibility to point out her stance and that we are aware of it.

Her open-minded and kind character gets further revealed in her encounters with Native Americans, which are always very friendly and even though stuck in their cultural differences very unbiased and based on mutual interest. What is not mentioned in the book, which is probably because Susanna and many other settlers were not even aware of those issues, are the affected indigenous tribes by the colonisation and settlement. Even though it is a common belief that the Canadian colonisation would have been less violent than the American, European settlers had to pursue laws as a response to the high population growth and indigenous people were nevertheless displaced, for example by treaties, some willingly, some forced, to receive their land, displacing them in reserves, forcing them out of their territories and creating land for the new settlers. Since the book only reviews the perspective of the European settler it was also important for us as publishers not to whitewash the colonisation process in order to remember those, who had to face severe consequences of it. Nevertheless, it is beautiful to see how peaceful and kind the encounters between Susanna and Native Americans are in this book.

The friendship between Susanna and Pringle did not only bring her closer to the abolitionist movement and rose awareness for racial problems, but also introduced her to the mutual friend John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie, whom she met at Pringle's house. They fell in love and even though their engagement had to pause for some time, since Susanna was primarily focused on her literary career, they married on April 4th, 1831.

A year after their marriage, they realised the bad economic situation of England and decided to leave the country to establish security and independence outside of the overpopulated England. Her two siblings, Samuel Strickland and Catherine Parr Trail², had emigrated to Canada before Susanna and her husband decided to follow their footsteps and to create a

2 Her pioneer experience is recounted in her best-known book *The backwoods of Canada: being letters from the wife of an emigrant officer, illustrative of the domestic economy of British America* (1836) and is very similar to Susanna's book, depicting her emigration story and personal experiences within eighteen letters to her mother. The book will be published in German by SEVERUS publisher, as well, with the German title *Ansiedlungen in den Urwäldern*.

new home in the New World, as well. Decisive for that were especially Samuel's letters that were filled with rather positive descriptions of the country and its scenery. Even though her husband preferred South Africa, since he had lived there for about ten years before he returned to England, he agreed to move to Canada for the love of his wife. With a queasy feeling Susanna left her home, knowing that it was necessary to find a new mainstay. It is a feeling that she and her husband might have never gotten completely rid of.

In her book, Susanna depicts how ambiguous the establishment of a new life can be. Starting at a farm near Cobourg, a very civilised area, and due to financial issues going further to the uncleared land in the Peterborough area, they experienced both, the populated and unpopulated areas of Canada. Most of the British immigrants settled in Upper Canada, which was not prepared for such a population increase. Therefore, settlers often had to face forests and wilderness of the uncleared land. In order to establish a life there, British settlers were often forced to give up their privileges and to adapt to the new wild environment, which is also a main topic of Susanna's book. Her autobiographical novel deals with the rather difficult experience of being a stranger in a new land, whose residents encountered them with preconceptions and judgement. But it is not only about adapting to a new country and their culture, but also about becoming familiar with a whole new environment that is packed with farm and household duties one has never done before. Her story describes her rollercoaster ride consisting of happy, harmonic moments, but also of homesickness, despair and tiredness that were especially fuelled by some disappointing encounters with certain „Yankee“³ neighbours, harsh weather conditions and diseases as cholera; nonetheless, Susanna always tries to do her best maintaining a decent life and putting some sense of humour into her stories. Although Susanna is used to the middle-class life of London, she still manages the balancing act between being a lady and a hard-working woman, not considering herself too good for rough work, always trying to adapt to her environments and growing over herself, no matter how hard it can be.

In her overall role as a loving wife, mother and mindful author, she appears to be a very harmony-seeking and gentle character. This might also be associated with her Christian faith and thankfulness to God, that she points

3 According to the Oxford English Dictionary it is "a nickname for a native or inhabitant of New England, or, more widely, of the northern States generally."

out in her sketches several times. But her faith seems to not only support her morality but also her sense of aesthetics and beauty that appears in her descriptions of the sublime and diverse Canadian nature, worshipping the beauty as godly creations.

The balance between subjectivity and objectivity, her own personal perception and the general descriptions of the settler experience, give her book a good mixture of a novel and a guidance, which also includes the negative aspects and critical views on the experience. Even though she outgrew herself by the obstacles as near-disasters, bad health and growing poverty, they increased the feeling of discomfiture, which she fought hardly but never quite succeeded. Susanna's heart never really stopped beating for England throughout the rest of her life that she spent in Canada until her death in 1885.

What served as a (critical) guidance through the settler experience after publishing it in 1852, can today be seen as a highly historical novel, whose content gives us as today's readers a first-hand insight into the settler life of the early eighteen hundreds, which otherwise would be rather hard to imagine.

"This, although a long digression, will not, I hope, be without its use; and if this book is regarded not as a work of amusement but one of practical experience, written for the benefit of others, it will not fail to convey some useful hints to those who have contemplated emigration to Canada; the best country in the world for the industrious and well principled man, who really comes out to work and to better his condition by the labour of his hands; but a gulf of ruin to the vain and idle, who only set foot upon these shores to accelerate their ruin."

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