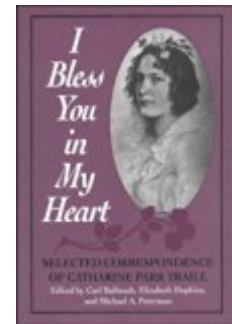


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins, Michael A. Peterman, eds. *I Bless You in My Heart: Selected Correspondence of Catharine Parr Traill*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. xxi + 437 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-0837-4.

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## Coping in the Backwoods

“Now I must lay aside my pen for I am tired” (p. 400). So ends a letter Catharine Parr Traill wrote to her daughter-in-law in July 1899 only a little more than a month before her death. It is not surprising that Traill was tired. Over her long and remarkable life, she had published better than two dozen books; she had also emigrated to Upper Canada, worked as a pioneer-farming wife and mother, raised a family (many of whom she had outlived) and in the 1890s continued to be at the centre of an extensive network of family and friends which spanned the country and the empire. And although now well into her 90s, Traill continued to juggle her duties to family with her compulsion to write and publish. Only a few days before her death, Catharine Parr Traill was trying to find a publisher for “Mrs. Margery Pie’s History of the Birds of Canada.”

Catharine Parr Traill is perhaps one of the best known Canadian authors of the nineteenth century. Students in high school and university dip into her *The Backwoods of Upper Canada* and, if ambitious, track down her *Canadian Crusoes* or articles in the *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* to gain a glimpse of the life and times of an English immigrant woman’s experiences in the backwoods. And for scholars of the period, *The Backwoods* together with Catharine Traill’s sister Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* remain mainstays for unravelling the social, political and domestic lives of early Upper Canadians. But despite the biographies of this remarkable woman, and scholars’ apparent familiarity with at least some of her work, I suspect that there are many of us who never

fully appreciated the woman behind the pen.

In *I Bless You in My Heart*, Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins and Michael Peterman offer a window into the life and times of this strong and fascinating woman. The correspondence with family, friends, admirers and publishers captures a little of Catharine Parr Traill’s concerns and delights, as Traill experienced and understood them. And in so doing, we begin to have an understanding of both Traill’s world and of that other women of her rank and times. *I Bless You in My Heart* is a welcome addition to our library. It is particularly illuminating when considered as a companion piece to two earlier collections of letters compiled by these editors, *Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* and *Letters of Love and Duty: The Correspondence of Susanna and John Moodie*.

As the editors note in their preface, the Traill correspondence is far too extensive to permit the publication of all letters and fragments. The 136 letters presented here, for the most part in their entirety, were carefully selected to provide insights into the variety of the Traill correspondence—in tone, purpose and relationships—while “ensuring reasonable coverage of the many personal and professional aspects of her long life” (p. x). In this regard, the editors have been most successful.

The letters are divided into three sections or chapters, each of which is introduced by a short (about thirty pages) essay which “sets the stage,” helps to identify people and events mentioned in the subsequent letters, and

puts the correspondence into an overall context. The first section covers Traill's adult life as sister, wife and mother, the period from 1830 to 1859. Starting with a letter to her sister, Susanna, wishing her blessings in her new marriage, the thirty-seven letters chronicle Catharine's own marriage to Thomas Traill, her subsequent emigration to Upper Canada and the precarious existence of their growing family. What these letters reveal is the strength of Catharine Parr Traill's personal religious beliefs and her enduring emotional attachment to her husband, her children and members of her extended family. What is also very evident is Traill's preoccupation with her writing and her ongoing problems with publishers. And woven throughout the correspondence is Traill's rich personal relationships with friends-like Frances Stewart and Ellen (Dunlop) Stewart.

Chapter Two of the collection begins in 1860, shortly after Thomas Traill's death. The letters, which span the next twenty-four years, recount both her literary triumph, after the publication of *Studies of Plant Life* (1885), and the grief which accompanied the loss of family and friends. Traill obviously continued to be in straitened financial circumstances for most of this period, and was obliged to take in boarders, sew and write to support herself and her family. But increasingly, as her children were launched, their periodic contributions to the family coffers meant that by the time Catharine was in her 80s, she had attained some degree of financial security.

However, it was not the problem of money that most preoccupied Traill in her letters. Rather, the letters indicate a growing desire to maintain those all important ties with her children, many of whom had not only left home, but left the province to seek their fortunes in the West. Some of Traill's most loving letters, which also clearly illustrate her concern for her family were to her son Willie, who had joined the Hudson's Bay Company and lived with his wife and family, in the Slave Lake region. It was also during this period that Catharine grieved for her son James, who died in 1867, and for Harry, who was murdered by two inmates at Kingston Penitentiary. These deaths were obviously devastating for Catharine; yet her faith and "love of life" did not permit her to despair.

The last chapter of *I Bless You in My Heart* covers the period of Catharine Parr Traill's growing national and international recognition as an author. Between 1885 and 1899, Catharine Parr Traill was also very much the family matriarch. With the assistance of her daughter Kate, the Lakefield home became a focal point for widowed daughters-in-law, for children and grandchildren

and for grand nieces and nephews. Much of her correspondence includes reports to her children about their children's progress or state of health. But, it is evident that Catharine Parr Traill never lost her own sense of "home." She maintained an active correspondence with her surviving sister in Britain and attended Susanna Moodie during her last illness. Traill also continued to write, and despite her growing reputation as a woman of letters, to have "misgivings as to the merits of [her] composition" (p. 401).

Readers who hope to mine *I Bless You in My Heart* for political or social commentary on national or provincial events will be disappointed. Despite our contemporary image of Traill as an author and social commentator, her letters are those of a woman whose primary concerns centred on family and friends and their health and happiness. The letters spanning 1866 to 1868, for example, written to her daughter Kate, to her sister Susanna and to lifelong friend, Frances Stewart, deal exclusively with family events (for example, the birth of a new granddaughter or the ill health of nephew Walter Strickland) or the difficulties of finding a publisher for a new article or concerns about household expenses. Confederation, Fenian Raids, or the Pacific Scandal were obviously not a preoccupation—or at least, were not worthy of comment. The one event which did merit comment was the Riel Rebellion in 1885. And this was obviously of concern to Catharine because her son Willie and his family were "out west" and Catharine feared for their safety.

The one disappointment with *I Bless You in My Heart* is that the editors did not go beyond presenting the letters. The essays introducing each section and the annotation of individual letters certainly provide explanations of persons and events alluded to by Traill. What is missing is discussion of what these letters and, indeed, Catharine Parr Traill's life illustrate about other women in her position, or other Canadians at the time. Certainly, Traill's lack of commentary on national or even provincial political, economic and social circumstances and the richness of domestic and familial detail reflects the writing of other women of the nineteenth century. And the often copious detail of her health and physical complaints of family and friends mirrors the concerns and preoccupations of many Canadians in the nineteenth century. However, the editors can quite rightly assert that historiographical context and analysis are outside the bounds of this project. Like their earlier volumes of Moodie letters, this selected correspondence of Catharine Parr Traill is intended to speak for itself. And it does and, in doing so, provides an invaluable resource for all students of

nineteenth-century British North America.

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