

Susanna Moodie: Pioneer Author By Anne Cimon
Mazo de la Roche: Rich and Famous Writer By Heather Kirk

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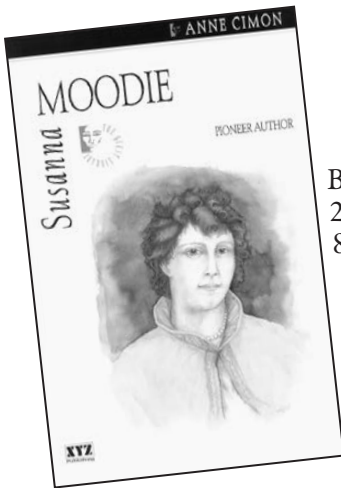
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Susanna Moodie *Pioneer Author*

By Anne Cimon. Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2006. xi + 156 pp. \$17.95 softcover. ISBN 1-894852-19-2.

Mazo de la Roche *Rich and Famous Writer*

By Heather Kirk. Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2006. xii + 196 pp. \$17.95 softcover. ISBN 1-894852-20-6.



XYZ's 'Quest Library Series' publishes creative nonfiction biographies for young adult readers. In 2006, Ontario writers Susanna Moodie (1803-1885) and Mazo de la Roche (1879-1961) were the subjects of two of these biographies. Photographs of elaborate English country houses are featured in both texts: Reydon Hall in Suffolk, which Moodie left in order to become a Canadian writer, and Vale House near Windsor Castle, which de la Roche easily purchased with the proceeds of her Canadian books. Both Moodie and de la Roche achieved fame as highly successful Canadian writers; in the process, the poverty-stricken Moodie relinquished her status as an English gentlewoman, whereas de la Roche actually acquired and performed that role for a short period of time.

Anne Cimon worked with the extensive autobiographical, epistolary, and critical works that document the life of Canadian literary icon, Susanna Moodie, and part of Cimon's challenge was deciding what could be excluded from the vast amount of material already available. Heather Kirk's task of providing a simple and straightforward record of the life of Mazo de la Roche was complicated by the fascination and

controversy that have always surrounded this writer's mysterious life. Cimon had too many facts; Kirk faced too many secrets. Moodie's two books, *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*, and her edited letters, along with biographies by Charlotte Gray and Michael Peterman, provided Cimon with the basis for her study. Kirk's access to sources was more difficult because Caroline Clement (de la Roche's cousin and lifelong companion) apparently burned de la Roche's diaries, destroying what could have been valuable primary documents. In addition, de la Roche's tendency to lie about her life renders her 1957 autobiography, *Ringing the Changes*, unreliable, and has resulted in challenges for Kirk and previous biographers.

In her study of Moodie, Cimon manages to include the major events in a judicious manner, including life both before and after the sojourn in the bush. In particular, Cimon captures the close relationships Susanna enjoyed with her husband, John Dunbar Moodie, and her sister, Catherine Parr Traill, as well as the pain and betrayal suffered by Susanna when she was rejected and scorned by her older sister, Agnes Strickland. The narrative, however, tends to be choppy, and the text is often

interrupted by white space meant to signal a gap or a chronological jump. Instead of explaining or justifying the leap, however, the design of the page exacerbates the shift. Eight of these distracting textual spaces occur in the eleven pages that make up Chapter 6, "Letter to the Governor." Curiously, the list of sources consulted by Cimon includes only the first of two edited collections of Moodie's letters. Although there is already relevant material on Moodie accessible to the young adult reader, Cimon's study is both entertaining and organized. Hopefully her biography will inspire young adults to read *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings* in order to hear the original voice.

Readers of Kirk's biography learn less about the actual literary texts than do Cimon's readers. Because Moodie's writing *is* her life, the literary and biographical material intersects and converses in an easy manner. In the case of de la Roche, readers can become preoccupied with the nature of the relationship between de la Roche and Clement, and with the women's strange refusal to answer questions about the background and circumstances of their two adopted children, René and Esmée. Kirk's refusal to acknowledge the controversy about the nature of de la Roche's and Clement's potentially lesbian partnership, which was broached by Joan Givner in her 1989 biography, omits what young adult readers will ask anyway when faced with the intimacy of the personal and artistic relationship. The failure to pose the question does not eliminate the questioning. In her epilogue, Kirk argues that the popularity of de la Roche's writing is reason enough to pay attention to her work, even if academics continue to disparage its literary value. As well, Kirk refers to Givner's perceptive argument that de la Roche should be viewed as an important link between nineteenth-century "foremothers," Moodie

and Traill, and celebrated twentieth-century writers such as Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood.

Finally, Kirk complains that de la Roche has received inadequate recognition on the land. She notes that Lucy Maud Montgomery and Stephen Leacock, contemporary writers who enjoyed comparable popularity and success, are honoured by national heritage sites in Prince Edward Island and Orillia. (She might have added that Montgomery is also nationally acknowledged through the Leaskdale manse in Uxbridge Township, Ontario.) Kirk's quibble is that the de la Roche sites of Benares Historic House in Mississauga and Sovereign House in Bronte, administered by local bodies, should be designated nationally. She has a point, but even national sites are often maintained and run by local groups. Plaques placed by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario honour de la Roche in Newmarket, as well as Moodie in Lakefield and Belleville, but there is no question that we need more national recognition and celebration of Canadian writers.

Susanna Moodie's work will continue to attract the serious treatment it has already received in abundance. Historic markers encourage and reflect this interest. The local plaque at the corner of Stenor Road and Moodie Drive is a memorial to Moodie's Lake Katchewanook log cabin north of Lakefield. The actual log cabin to the east is not marked or accessible, but the spot is known and from the writing we can imagine Moodie's life in that place. Opportunities to remember and honour the homes of our writers are now arising, and perhaps current interest in popular culture and literary celebrity will draw more attention to the life and home of Mazo de la Roche. We must continue to make concerted and determined efforts to connect with

those domestic and natural spaces that have influenced and inspired Canadian writers.

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I've Got a Home in Glory Land *A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*

By Karolyn Smardz Frost. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007. xxv + 450 pp. Hardcover \$36.95. ISBN 0-88762-250-X.

There are so many reasons to read this very good book. *Glory Land* tells a simple, engaging, and profound human story. Thornton and Lucie Blackburn were idealistic young adult slaves – chattels – living in the United States about 1830. They craved personal freedom with a persistence that drove them to take risks that seem, to an outsider like me, unimaginably foolhardy. Heart-stopping experiences crossing the Ohio River and escaping custody in Detroit brought them finally to settle into relative anonymity in Toronto where Thornton established a cab service in 1837. For decades Lucie and Thornton freely shared their time and talents assisting fellow refugees. Childless, illiterate and (to our knowledge) never photographed, this accomplished couple died in the 1890s. They are buried in the Toronto Necropolis next to the distinguished anti-slavery crusader, George Brown, publisher of *The Globe*.

Karolyn Smardz Frost has given us a superbly-crafted blend of scholarship and

story-telling. *Glory Land* exudes optimism, as human spirit repeatedly trumps desperation. Here is a model of careful primary research, including archeological, placed squarely within the reach of the thoughtful reading public who are easily put off by academics talking only to each other. *Glory Land* invites a universal readership.

Black history is biographical, fascinating because few black people left direct trace. The concept of person as commodity places the Blackburns alongside horses, wagons, bales of cotton, and fashionable clothing in household inventories. But in those lists repose the lives that Smardz Frost has teased out. Slave auction accounts, court proceedings to recover escaped slaves, the testimony of abolitionists, the fugitive press, transcribed memoirs: all contribute still more. Thornton was a recognized member of the Louisville mercantile community in 1830, and his personal network provided a persistent Smardz Frost with a long list of people with whom he intersected and who left their own records. She covered historical