

*Sisters in Two Worlds: a Visual Biography of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill* By Michael Peterman

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Volume 101, numéro 1, spring 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065681ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065681ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

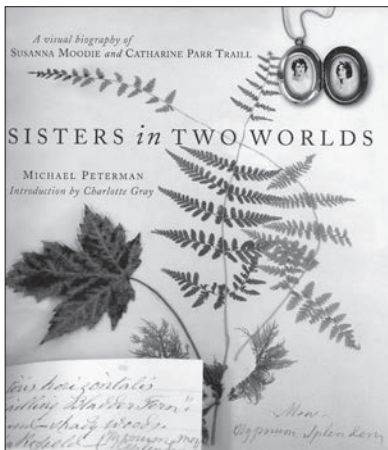
0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Grazley, R. (2009). Compte rendu de [*Sisters in Two Worlds: a Visual Biography of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill* By Michael Peterman]. *Ontario History*, 101(1), 108–109. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065681ar>



## *Sisters in Two Worlds: a Visual Biography of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*

By Michael Peterman

Doubleday Canada, 2007. 176 pages. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-385-66288-8 ([www.randomhouse.ca](http://www.randomhouse.ca))

*Sisters in Two Worlds* is an absorbing visual biography of pioneering writers Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, whose tales of the people and plants of Upper Canada's backwoods have entertained and instructed readers for a century and a half. Michael Peterman, perhaps the foremost scholar of Moodie's and Traill's writings, has previously edited a number of collections of the sisters' writings and published several articles about them, as well as a critical biography of Susanna Moodie. In *Sisters in Two Worlds*, he has created with the assistance of Hugh and Ian Brewster a beautifully laid out volume which follows Moodie and Traill from their childhood in Suffolk through the upheavals of emigration to the end of their lives as professional writers and "national treasures" in the new Dominion of Canada. As Charlotte Gray observes in her introduction, Canadians' "timeless fascination" with Moodie and Traill stems from the sisters' ability to vividly recount the delights and the disasters of an unfamiliar landscape and way of life. Their readers often find themselves wondering, "what was it like?" (p. 8) By pairing Peterman's biographical narrative with documents in the sisters' handwriting, images and quotations from their works, drawings and sketches of their homes, and present-day photographs of places which were significant to them, in England and in Canada, *Sisters in Two Worlds* provides a window into what life was like for Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie.

Peterman's intimacy with Moodie and Traill is evident. He narrates their lives with warmth and compassion, mixing scholarly expertise with good storytelling. The text deftly interweaves an explanation of the shifting historical conditions and events that shaped the sisters' world with their divergent reactions to their changing circumstances. He presents a sympathetic portrait of the sometimes-testy Susanna in particular. Traill and Moodie occupied two worlds throughout their adult lives; their familial affections and professional obligations criss-crossed the Atlantic, and their lives' work yoked writing and the domestic duties of colonial wives and mothers. Peterman's narrative devotes considerable space to these two worlds as expressed in the affections and tensions of sisterly bonds, exacerbated by distance, motherhood, and the demands of professional writing careers. The Stricklands retained family ties on both sides of the Atlantic, but the emigration to Upper Canada of Moodie and Traill sometimes complicated their interactions with one another and with their sisters who remained in England. Moodie's troubled relationship with sister Agnes Strickland, the most successful writer of the family during their lifetime, is particularly well conveyed.

The pairing of visual and textual material is the volume's greatest strength. Maps and period paintings, as well as recent photographs, accompany accounts of the sisters' various homes, a dominant motif in their writing and a fundamental concern throughout their lives. Of particular note here is the section that deals with the sisters' sojourns in

London as young, unmarried women, and the development of their careers as writers. Peterman's text, accompanied by Ian Brewster's photographs of Bedford Square, where Susanna and Catharine often stayed with their cousin Rebecca Leverton, renders a fascinating snapshot of the interplay of family connections with the political and intellectual currents of literary London in the late 1820s and early 1830s. The courtship of Susanna and J.W.D. Moodie is engaging without being overly sentimental, and both here and in the description of Catharine's decision to marry Thomas Traill, the balance between romantic love and necessity, which so often affected marriage in this period, is sensitively addressed. The chapters that deal with "The Voyage Out" and the sisters' arrival in the Canadas are augmented with contemporary sketches and paintings that help to illustrate Catharine's delight and Susanna's dismay at the cities and settlements they encountered.

Sidebars in each chapter provide visual and verbal portraits of significant places and figures in their lives. Some are relatively well-known: the way-station for immigrants at Grosse Ile, for instance, or the Fox sisters, known as the "Rochester Rappers," whom the Moodies encountered in their flirtation with Spiritualism. Others are perhaps less familiar: Dr. John Hutchison, the blunt Scotsman who delivered a number of both sisters' children during their residence in the backwoods, or Traill's eccentric friend

the Rev. George W. Bridges, who built and later loaned the Traills the octagonal Wolf Tower, on the shores of Rice Lake. Most of the photograph and art credits are collated at the end of the volume, which will please readers who like a less cluttered text, but may frustrate others who would like the information closer to hand.

*Sisters in Two Worlds* provides an intriguing introduction to the life and works of Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie for those who are unfamiliar, and a good way to rethink and revisit for those to whom Moodie and Traill are familiar companions. In telling their stories through images and text, Peterman's volume gives a rich sense of Traill's and Moodie's two worlds in a way that will continue to captivate readers' interest.

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- Moodie, Susanna. *Letters of a Lifetime*. Ed. Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins and Michael Peterman. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 1993. (Electronic version: Amsterdam: Elsevier Science and Technology, 2007, accessible to most university library users)
- Peterman, Michael. *Susanna Moodie: A Life*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1999.

## *Tenants in Time: Family Strategies, Land, and Liberalism in Upper Canada, 1799-1871*

By Catharine Anne Wilson

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xviii + 375 pages. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-7735-3425-4 (www.mqup.ca)

Those of us with an interest in Ontario, and more widely in North America, have reason to celebrate because of the publication of Catharine Wilson's latest book.

Tenancy, as the author correctly notes, is an important part of the settlement process, but one that has not attracted adequate attention even in the American literature which,