



The
Journals
of
Susanna
Moodie

Poems by

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CONTENTS

JOURNAL I

- Disembarking at Quebec 11
Further Arrivals 12
First Neighbours 14
The Planters 16
The Wereman 19
Paths and Thingscape 20
The Two Fires 22
Looking in a Mirror 24
Departure from the Bush 26

JOURNAL II

- Death of a Young Son by Drowning 30
The Immigrants 32
Dream 1: The Bush Garden 34
1837 War in Retrospect 35
Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter 36
Charivari 37
Dream 3: Night Bear Which Frightened Cattle 38
The Deaths of the Other Children 41
The Double Voice 42

JOURNAL III

- Later in Belleville: Career 47
Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age 48
Wish: Metamorphosis to Heraldic Emblem 49
Visit to Toronto, with Companions 50
Solipsism While Dying 52
Thoughts from Underground 54
Alternate Thoughts from Underground 57
Resurrection 58
A Bus Along St Clair: December 60

AFTERWORD 62

A BUS ALONG ST CLAIR: DECEMBER

It would take more than that to banish
me: this is my kingdom still.

Turn, look up
through the gritty window: an unexplored
wilderness of wires

Though they buried me in monuments
of concrete slabs, of cables
though they mounded a pyramid
of cold light over my head
though they said, We will build
silver paradise with a bulldozer

it shows how little they know
about vanishing: I have
my ways of getting through.

Right now, the snow
is no more familiar
to you than it was to me:
this is my doing.

The grey air, the roar
going on behind it
are no more familiar.

I am the old woman
sitting across from you on the bus,
her shoulders drawn up like a shawl;
out of her eyes come secret
hatpins, destroying
the walls, the ceiling

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the centre of a forest
your place is empty

AFTERWORD

These poems were generated by a dream. I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie. I was alone in the theatre; on the empty white stage, a single figure was singing.

Although I had heard of Susanna Moodie I had never read her two books about Canada, *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*. When I did read them I was disappointed. The prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape: they were collections of disconnected anecdotes. The only thing that held them together was the personality of Mrs Moodie, and what struck me most about this personality was the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us.

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia. Mrs Moodie is divided down the middle: she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her; she dislikes the people already in Canada but finds in people her only refuge from the land itself; she preaches progress and the march of civilization while brooding elegiacally upon the destruction of the wilderness; she delivers optimistic sermons while showing herself to be fascinated with deaths, murders, the criminals in Kingston Penitentiary and the incurably insane in the Toronto lunatic asylum. She claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot while all the time she is stranding back from the country and criticizing it as though she were a detached observer, a stranger. Perhaps that is the way we still live. We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen—it is so easy to leave—and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality.

This is a modified version of a radio-broadcast introduction.

Once I had read the books I forgot about them. The poems occurred later, over a period of a year and a half. I suppose many of them were suggested by Mrs Moodie's books, though it was not her conscious voice but the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work that made the most impression on me. Although the poems can be read in connection with Mrs Moodie's books, they don't have to be: they have detached themselves from the books in the same way that other poems detach themselves from the events that give rise to them.

The arrangement of the poems follows, more or less, the course of Mrs Moodie's life. Journal I begins with her arrival in Canada and her voyage up the St Lawrence, past Quebec and Montreal where a cholera epidemic is raging. In Upper Canada she encounters earlier settlers who despise the Moodies as greenhorns and cheat them whenever possible. Later, on a remote bush farm, she can neither hold on to her English past nor renounce it for a belief in her Canadian future. After seven years of struggle and near starvation, and just as she is beginning to come to terms with her environment, the family moves away.

After 1840 the Moodies lived in Belleville, where Susanna's husband had been made sheriff as a result of his helping to suppress the rebellion of 1837. (Ironically, Susanna later admitted that the rebellion was probably a good thing for Canada.) Journal II contains reflections about the society Mrs Moodie finds herself in, as well as memories of the years spent in the bush. At the beginning of this section Mrs Moodie finally accepts the reality of the country she is in, and at its end she accepts also the inescapable doubleness of her own vision.

Most of Journal III was written after I had come across a little-known photograph of Susanna Moodie as a mad-looking and very elderly lady. The poems take her through an estranged old age, into death and beyond. After her death she can hear the twentieth century above

AFTERWORD

her, bulldozing away her past, but she refuses to be ploughed under completely. She makes her final appearance in the present, as an old woman on a Toronto bus who reveals the city as an unexplored, threatening wilderness. Susanna Moodie has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated.