

Roughing It in the Bush: Patterns of Emigration and Settlement in Susanna Moodie's Poetry

by Elizabeth Thompson

Although some preliminary studies¹ have been made of the poetry included in the early editions² of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), much is left to be said. The poetry is an interesting addition to the text, and an examination of *Roughing It* or of any single sketch ought to consider both the topic and the placement of the poems. The poetry, especially that written by Moodie herself,³ echoes contradictions apparent in the prose—as for example, the ambivalent responses to Canada. Many poems in *Roughing It* discuss the difficulties of emigration (the poet looks back to a lost English Eden), while others express an enjoyment of pioneer Canada. As a result, joy alternates with dejection, elegy contrasts with song. The placement of the poetry serves as textual commentary as well. At the head of a chapter, a poem or verse fragment may set a mood and/or introduce a topic to be developed at greater length in the subsequent prose. Concluding poems tend to be more problematic; generally longer (full poems as compared to excerpts), they may reiterate the thoughts of the lead-in prose; or they may change the focus, thereby redirecting the sketch. While the poetry in *Roughing It* is admittedly diverse in style, topic, and authorship,⁴ given Moodie's feelings about Canada and emigration, it is useful to supplement a study of the text's central dialectic with an examination of some of the poems most closely connected with that dialectic.

Chapter 1, "A Visit to Grosse Isle," describes the Moodies' exploration of Grosse Isle—a disappointing visit clearly anticipated by the two lines of verse which begin the chapter: "Alas! that man's stern spirit e'er should mar / A scene so pure—so exquisite as this"(21). By the end of the sketch, Moodie has landed on Grosse Isle and has had a close look at some of her fellow emigrants, the "fresh cargo of lively savages from the Emerald Isle"(32) which mars the exquisite natural setting. Moodie ends the chapter with her ballad "Oh! Can You Leave Your Native Land?"(33). The subtitle, "A Canadian Song," is misleading; written from a pre-emigration point of view, the poem focuses on the English Eden. The soon-to-be "exile"⁵ and "wanderer" is about to abandon his "cheerful hearth."

Looking ahead, the male speaker dreads the "wide and stormy sea," "chilly blast" of "wintry storms" and the "drear" solitude of "forests dark." Memories of England (the lost Eden) will only serve to make "the wild more drear." In an attempted resolution, the second half of the last stanza turns from dark forebodings to decide, somewhat weakly, that the strength of love will outweigh all adversity: "Our hearts are one, and we will dare / All perils thus to love!" Ultimately the positive turn and the use of the exclamation do not balance the list of negatives. Moreover, the tentatively expressed hope is at odds with the tone of the preceding prose.

Although similar to the prose in its expression of revulsion, the concluding poem notes the emigrant's fear of natural perils; it does not mention possible revulsion towards one's fellow emigrants. Another difference is that the last line of the prose sets up an irony by juxtaposing the reality of Grosse Isle with Moodie's expectations: "Thus ended my first day's experience of the land of all our hopes"(33). The irony is not picked up by the poem. Then too, the prose sketch moves from expectation to dashed hopes, from joy to dejection; to a certain extent, and feebly, the ballad reverses that process. Still, in this early chapter, the sketch and its accompanying poems of emigration work together to produce a climate of unease and regret. The emigrant is fearful and reluctant; doubts outweigh expectations.

The untitled fragment "The strains we hear in foreign lands" (48) which ends Chapter 2 of *Roughing It* builds on "Oh! Can You Leave..." by progressing to a later stage of emigration. From the perspective of a new home in Canada, the emigrant looks back to the "native shore" and to an untroubled time replete with youth, hope, vision, beauty, flowers, and happiness. The poet recalls the "dear forms," "bright sunny eyes," and "warm hearts" of far away loved ones. As is typical of Moodie's poetry of emigration, though, memory does not bring comfort. Instead, parting is absolute: dear forms are "mute"; eyes are "closed in night"; hearts are "silent." Memory leads to dejection, indicatively described in terms of dissolution and loss: "And melt in tears." The verb expresses the emigrant's fear of irrevocable change; a solid, previously understood self is at best reshaped, at worst lost forever. Here the poem mirrors the lead-in prose; at the end of Chapter 2 Moodie is thinking of "home."⁶ As her fellow emigrants look ahead, dance, and rejoice, she looks back and mourns: "I left the scene with eyes brimful of tears, and my mind agitated by sorrowful recollections and vain regrets"(48).

While closely connected in mood and focus to the immediately preceding prose, however, "The strains..." seems to reverse the warm sentiments of the chapter's opening poem "Quebec"(35) where Moodie speaks of Quebec in glowing terms and looks to the future greatness of its inhabitants. Yet the sense of opposition created by the bracketing poems emphasizes the sketch's prose structure—a general movement from praise to dejection, as the tears of joy

elicited by the sublime beauty of Quebec, "a second Eden"(36), become tears of regret occasioned by memories of the lost Eden. Moreover, upon closer examination, it seems that even in "Quebec" the voice of the emigrant predominates. Quebec, or Paradise Regained, is evoked as a standard, unsurprising sublime scene featuring height (mountains), power (storms), speed (rushing water), strength (rocks). The awe-inspiring situation is far from unique, and could call forth any European mountain setting. Thus, while positive in tone, this is not a ringing endorsement of Canada. The praise of Canada is further made tentative by future conditional verbs in the final two stanzas where the poet has moved from a depiction of the sublime setting to a contemplation of the city's inhabitants: if Quebec flies the British flag, it "should be, / The mountain home of heaven-born liberty!"; its "children may defy" the malice of others; the residents "may rest securely in their mountain hold." In this manner Moodie injects a note of caution, not to say warning, and withholds absolute approbation. Not overtly looking back at England, she nevertheless covertly holds to preconceived ideas in this picture of Canada. The beauty of the Canadian setting is acknowledged, and the future greatness of Canadian people is hypothesized—but only as these connect with standards set in the English Eden.

In many ways, "There's Rest" (61) which ends Chapter 3 is at odds with the lead-in prose as well as the chapter's introductory verse. All dwell on death in the New World, but whereas "There's Rest" features a non-specific and contemplative death/slumber, the opening verse and the following prose sketch depict death as it is connected with the here-and-now immediacy of emigration. The "dreadful cholera" (21) in Montreal is announced by the poetic admonition, "Fly this plague-stricken spot!" (50). The chapter—in poetry and prose—begins with death and pestilence and goes on to describe the Moodies' journey to Upper Canada. The prose sketch ends with Moodie passing a sleepless night, kept awake by a drunken Irishman. In "There's Rest," however, the poet meditates on death, neither drawing on an emigrant's sense of loss or exile nor referring to a specific time and place. The poem's parenthetical subtitle proclaims it to have been "*written at midnight on the River St. Lawrence*"(61). But despite the disclaimer, information about time, place, and situation is generalized, so that the poem becomes a standard meditation on death rather than a pointed indictment of emigration. It begins with the poet's tranquillity at day's end and concludes with an extended metaphor comparing a peaceful night's sleep to death. In the real world, Moodie is kept awake by storms on Lake Ontario and drunken Irishmen. In her poetry, she seeks the peaceful oblivion of death; it would seem that death is preferable to life in Canada.

Still, location and topic of the poem remain generic, and diction and imagery are banal: the evening's "dewy fingers" and "holy calm"; the moon's "mellow light"; the Christian's "eternal peace" under the "quiet sod." "There's Rest" (like other poems in *Roughing It*) has an even, unexceptional rhyme and rhythm,⁷ and the serenity of the evening is reinforced by the soporific effect of the regular

repetition of "There's rest."⁸ Because the poem is set at night, darkness shrouds the landscape; we have only Moodie's subtitle to assure us that this is indeed "Canadian" verse. In its redirection of the main thrust of the sketch's argument, then, the poem may serve as a resolution, creating a movement from action to thought, from fear of the unknown to peaceful acceptance of fate, from the jealous God who sends pestilence to the loving God who promises peace. Or the poem may not fit at all, becoming a poetic exercise and included here for lack of any better position. Or again it may reveal feelings more commonly withheld from the prose for artistic reasons—a contentment with things as they are is seldom revealed in the prose, arguably so that Moodie may maintain her emigrant's stance as a female Job.

One of the longest laments in *Roughing It*, "The Lament of a Canadian Emigrant" (85) has an interesting textual placement. Chapter Four starts with a two-line commentary on oddity, pointing to the comic sketch of Tom Wilson which follows. The sketch, and others like it, display the strength of Moodie's prose; her comic/ironic/critical observer's eye is at work as she delineates the people around her. Yet in the centre of the chapter, the focus shifts as Moodie muses on her enforced departure from England, typically mixing together Nature, England, the Creator, and May flowers (72-3). The ending of the prose sketch reverts to laughter with the return of Tom Wilson to the foreground. Then, coming as it does at the end of "Tom Wilson's Emigration," "The Lament..." echoes back to the chapter's melancholy centre. At first glance, the poem summons up a limited amount of, if not praise, then at least grim, teeth-clenched acceptance of pioneer life. The unhappy female speaker fondly remembers "distant" England and then mounts a weak defense for emigration, chiefly the over-riding needs of the family—the husband and the child. She may have obeyed the "stern voice of duty," but the "deep pang of sorrow" is only "repress'd," and the tears and "useless repining" are merely "check'd." Stanza three drops all pretext of defense, as the poet juxtaposes a Canadian hell⁹ to an English Eden. Exiled from the "Bless'd Isle of the Free" the emigrant is "cast," Crusoe-like on a "far distant shore." The emigrant poet (the English songbird) complains: "In the depths of dark forests my soul droops her wings." The final stanza turns from the present hell of Canada to a dream of "lovely England," the lost paradise, and of "dearest Nature."¹⁰ In a somewhat confusing conclusion, the poet asserts that her love for Mother England will last as long as her love for Mother Nature,¹¹ and she abandons the poem's closed couplets to demonstrate through expansion the strength of her devotion. The poetic gaze is once again turned back to the lost Eden. Without the poem, the chapter ends as comedy and as prose of settlement; with the poem, the chapter finishes on a despairing note as elegy of emigration.

Serving as companion-piece to "The Lament" is the ballad "Oh Canada! Thy Gloomy Woods"(111) at the end of "Our First Settlement, and the Borrowing System." Even with the topic of Canada and the subtitle "A Song," we are

forewarned by the adjective "gloomy" that this is a poem of emigration—of looking back. The Canada in "Oh Canada!" is uniformly dark and dismal, and the poet speaks for all emigrants who shed tears for lost homes, and who feel the "chilling blight" of forest shadows. Nevertheless, the poem reverses the movement of "The Lament..." and may indicate a progression towards acceptance and settlement with the speaker's claim, "No more I weep to cross the wave,/ My native land to see." If the speaker is to be trusted, memories now serve to "cheer" rather than to depress; a dream of home has become "a thought most bless'd"; the emigrant is "resign'd"; her children play, and her "husband's smiles approve." More importantly, in this poem God is not only the creator of the English Eden but is linked to Canada, as the poet gives thanks for present blessings. Although joy has not yet replaced dejection, the stern voice of duty heard elsewhere has softened.

If the poem's placement in relation to earlier poems of emigration seems to argue for the steady progression towards acceptance of Canada by the emigrant, the immediately preceding prose causes us to pause. "Oh Canada!" appears at the end of a chapter which documents the horrors of the Canadian borrowing system. Throughout the prose Moodie depicts herself as lost and confused; she closes by looking ahead to the disasters which await her in the bush—her husband's absence, her child's sickness, her dependence on the kindness of others. The last lines of prose leave Moodie (and the reader) in darkness: her borrowed candle is lost; she does not tell us whether the husband returns or the child recovers. When placed within the context of the prose, the poet's attempt to "dash away tears" seems unlikely to succeed.

"The Back-Woodsman"(122-3) which ends Chapter 6, "Old Satan and Tom Wilson's Nose," represents a clear advancement of the emigrant poet towards the settler's point of view. Again the poet considers that a better life has been left behind, "comforts gone and pleasures fled" (122), and she juxtaposes the "rude concession lot" in Canada to the "stately tower and fancy cot" (123) of England. She comments on the "fallen state" and "distress" of the emigrant who finds him or herself in the "thorny maze" of forests "dark and wild." While none of this is new, the poet now speaks from the vantage point of settlement (as Moodie herself does by this point in the first-person narration of *Roughing It*), looking back on the trials of emigration. She mocks the misconceptions of the emigrant and is openly scornful of the "Son of the isles" who prefers England: "rave not to me / Of the old world's pride and luxury" (122). Past glories are associated with artificial constructs—social class and buildings—and life in Canada is connected with freedom, independence, and pride. The poet assigns to herself the attributes of contentment, bold determination, and happiness, claiming that an already noble mind is further elevated by pioneer life.

In its placement relative to other poems of emigration, then, "The Back-Woodsman" seems to represent a movement forward. Lest we read this as proof that *Roughing It* is a *bildungsroman*, though, we must again consider textual

placement—the poem's relationship to the prose about Tom Wilson with which it is connected. Quite simply, Moodie has had a problem with Tom Wilson throughout the narrative. She consistently describes her compatriot and fellow pioneer as a comic character, even a clown, but Tom's life has been intertwined with her own. In an earlier chapter, she has laughed at Tom's foolish plan to emigrate, only to discover her husband's decision to do so. Tom also has warned the Moodies about the backwoods, a warning which is discounted until too late.¹² In Chapter 6 Tom poses an even greater threat to Moodie's assumed superiority when the first letters from home arrive. Tom reads his letters and promptly returns to England. Moodie reads hers and falls into a fit of melancholy; with the knowledge accumulated through an extended stay, she gloomily defines herself even now, at the time of writing, as an "exile":

After seven years' exile, the hope of return grows feeble, the means are still less in our power, and our friends give up all hope of our return; their letters grow fewer and colder, their expressions of attachment are less vivid; the heart has formed new ties, and the poor emigrant is nearly forgotten. Double those years, and it is as if the grave had closed over you, and the hearts that once knew and loved you know you no more.

(122)

Thus the narrative point of view in the prose (after-the-fact) and the poem conspire to create an ambivalent tone; on the one hand, Moodie heightens her emigrant isolation by expanding the term of exile to include the entire time spent in Canada; on the other hand, she first criticizes Tom's decision in her prose and then mocks malcontents in her poem.

In Chapter 7's "The Sleigh-Bells"(142-3), the poet's tone has more definitely moved from dejection towards joy. Linked with Moodie's experiences and focusing on the immediate pioneer experience of Canada, it concerns itself neither with the future glory of Canada nor with the past wonders of England. Rather, it expresses a contentment with the reality of pioneer life (hitherto unseen in the poetry). Moodie tells her reader that she has written the poem "whilst leaning on the open door of my shanty, and watching for the return of my husband" (142).

There is, of course, some backsliding in the poem, as is consistent with Moodie's life-long preoccupation with her decline in social standing: "Our hut is small, and rude our cheer." In addition, five out of ten lines in the last stanza feature Moodie's fears of the wilderness: she mentions wolves, a "felon owl," the wintry "blast"; she contrasts the frightening noises of the woods with the merry sound of her husband's sleigh bells. Even so, some unspecified danger seems to be averted by her husband's arrival, and the poem ends joyously. The emigrant's complaints are subdued, over-ridden in this case by the settler's joy. There is no

backward glance at England, nor is there an extended look at the emigrant's fears.

In its textual placement, the poem issues a defiant challenge to the depredations of Uncle Joe's family, to Moodie's own loneliness, to her inability to handle even the simplest tasks, and most especially to the curse uttered by Uncle Joe's mother:

...the longer you remain in Canada the less you will like it; and when your money is all spent, you will be like a bird in a cage; you may beat your wings against the bars, but you can't get out.

(141)

The old woman may have spoken truly: subsequent prose and poetry both return at intervals to lamentation.¹³ The placement of the poetry, though, sets up a general movement towards happy settlement expressed through songs of praise, the strongest of which closes the text. Although dire warnings continue to appear, the poems of settlement are longer than the dirge-like fragments which open chapters, and their situation as "last word" gives added strength to their message of hope.

"The Otonabee"(271-2) ends "A Journey to the Woods" and is the first in a series of chapter-ending poems of settlement. "I love thee, lonely river!" says the poet of the Otonabee River. Ever the minor poet, Moodie cannot rid her work of the poetic commonplace, addressing the river as "thee" and employing such lines as the following: "No longer shall rejoice / The woods where erst it rung!" But Moodie chooses a Canadian subject and includes one native Canadian word, the river's Indian name "Katchawanook."¹⁴ As in "Quebec" the poet appreciates present beauty and anticipates future greatness. The Otonabee's "furious headlong" motion will be tamed into a "glide" when certain "improvements" are made to the Trent River system (see Moodie's footnote to the poem). At some point the Otonabee will be part of a direct water route to England:

And many a bark shall ride
Securely on thy breast,
To waft across the main
Rich stores of golden grain
From the valleys of the West.

The envisioned link reverses the emigrant's desire to return to England; here something of value will be sent by the settler to England. Also of interest in the above passage is the imagery connecting Mother Nature to Canadian nature.

This poem of settlement is positioned at the end of Chapter 14 which opens with an extremely pessimistic six-line fragment. If we could see into the future,

...Hope, the blessed watcher on Life's tower,

Would fold her wings, and on the dreary waste
Close the bright eye that through the murky clouds
Of blank Despair still sees the glorious sun.

(258)

Indeed, says Moodie, if the future were known, "Blank Despair" would conquer "Hope." The fragment leads directly into the Moodies' move to the backwoods "prison-house" (489). The prose sketch and the journey begin in darkness and despair; the family leaves before sunrise, and at this point Moodie quixotically expresses regret at departing a place she has hated. During the sketch which recounts the mishaps of the move, relief is afforded only by the sight and sound of the nearby Otonabee River (265-6). The sketch ends as it begins—in darkness and uncertainty, a tone mitigated somewhat by the warm welcome extended to the travellers by the Traill family (270). "The Otonabee" expands upon this cautious warmth and also returns the sketch to its centre by echoing the mid-section praise of a Canadian river. Thus the poem strengthens a tentative movement to joy in the prose; more importantly, it looks forward to the emigrant's attainment of settlement.

The following chapter, "The Wilderness and Our Indian Friends," begins with a short verse introducing the main topic: "Man of strange race! stern dweller of the wild! / Nature's free-born, untamed, and daring child!" (273). While the prose goes on to discuss the Moodies' encounters with native Canadians, it is actually a continuation of the previous chapter, taking up where the prose in Chapter 14 leaves off. Since the two prose sketches could operate as a single unit, the use of the poetry as shaping device moves into the foreground. As we have seen, the poem at the conclusion of Chapter 14 has engineered a turn towards the positive; but the prose which begins Chapter Fifteen reverts to the bleak voice of the emigrant. Moodie turns "disgusted"(274) from the wilderness before her and concludes "there was very little beauty to be found in the backwoods" (274). The tone changes, fortunately, greatly aided by Catharine Traill's sensible advice and overwhelming optimism, and Moodie begins the "halcyon days" (278) of her backwoods life.

As predicted by the opening stanza, Moodie examines her Indian neighbours with interest. In order to survive, she and her husband learn to live in harmony with their environment—the happiness and harmony last only until their attempts at farming begin. (Whatever lessons they learn are evidently neither lasting nor transferrable.) This is one of the longest sketches in *Roughing It* and is a disconcerting mix of condescension and admiration, at times a clear, strong, accurate description of the new neighbours, and at others, outrageously biased cliché: "The half-caste is generally a lying, vicious rogue, possessing the worst qualities of both parents in an eminent degree"(302).

The chapter which leads off in despair finishes with "The Indian Fisherman's Light" (303-4), another of Moodie's poems praising life in Canada. The warm

sentiments of the poem are weakened by such hackneyed expressions as "finny prey" and "fisher's bark"—like the majority of Moodie's poems in *Roughing It*, "The Indian Fisherman's Light" is unexceptional in structure or style, but once again a minor poem becomes textually significant. The lights on the boats are associated with joy and cheer; "cheerily" is repeated at the end of each stanza as a refrain: "Shines red and cheerily!"; "Its red light gleaming cheerily!"; "Through darkness shining cheerily!" While the forest may assume an ominous stance, the night, the black rock, and the tall woods are held at bay by the lights in the fishermen's boats. Significantly, the Indians (often seen by emigrants as part and parcel of the threatening landscape) become forces of light and hope, their boat lights shining "cheerily" in the backwoods darkness.

In Chapter 18, "A Trip to Stony Lake," poetry and prose work together to create an idyllic interlude. The opening poem restates the poet's love of Nature and of Nature's "Mighty Maker" (327). Then the prose sketch describes a carefree canoe trip. At one point Moodie sees "a tuft of harebells"(337) and bursts into tears at the sight of this "favourite flower"(337) which reminds her of home. Moodie's tearful breakdown is short-lived, since the chapter refuses to dwell on the past. Instead, Moodie delights in the "exquisite panorama"(338) of the landscape, "savage and grand in its primeval beauty"(338), and at the end of the prose she even claims that through "the love of Nature, my heart forgot for the time the love of home"(340). Despite the ominous use of "home" as synonymous with England, for once she is happy in the present experience of Canada. To complete the interlude, the chapter concludes with "A Canadian Song"(341), a hymn of praise to Canadian nature and expressive of the happy day in the canoe.

In "Disappointed Hopes" Moodie reverts to her more common chapter formula of flux and contrast. Ambivalence reappears: "Stern Disappointment"(351) sets the tone at the start; "The Canadian Hunter's Song"(363-4) redirects attention at the close. The opening verse echoes back to and is strongly reminiscent of "'Tis well"(258) of Chapter 14 in tone, form, and imagery, weakening any attempt to read "A Trip to Stony Lake" as proof that Moodie has left behind her emigrant's woes.¹⁵ In direct contrast to the song of praise which ends Chapter 18, Moodie's verse re-establishes a foreboding note: "Stern Disappointment, in thy iron grasp / The soul lies stricken" (351). The poet bolsters her complaint with imagery of a "timid deer" caught in the "foul fangs of the felon wolf." Appropriately, the prose develops the theme of disaster, as Moodie lists a series of disappointments: her manual labour in the fields, the failure of the steam-boat stock, the family's poverty and indebtedness, the loss of a bull and several pigs, the departure of the faithful servant Jacob. Strangely enough, despite the introductory poem and the list of woes, this is not the unmitigated despair of the emigrant. Rather, Moodie sets up an alternating pattern of good and bad. On the positive side she cites her enjoyment of field work, the many mercies of God, her recipe for dandelion coffee, the abundance of squirrels and fish (for food), the help of neighbours, and the comic courtship of Jacob and Mary, which last ends the prose sketch. Not

least among the positive is the poem "The Canadian Hunter's Song"(363-4), the welcoming home of the successful hunter. Definitely Canadian in its setting, it includes references to the Northern lights and birch canoes. It insists on merriment and joy: "merry hunters," "merry shout," "merry band," "blithesome horn," "joyous steps." A sense of balance should be created, then, since joy and despair are meted out in equal parts. Yet the balance is tipped towards settlement with the chapter's strong ending—the prose sketch concludes with laughter (Jacob's wooing of Mary) and is followed by a song of happiness.

The last poem in *Roughing It*, "The Maple-Tree"(489-91), praises Canada and Canadian nature. While there has been a general movement in the poetry towards settlement and leading up to this final poem, the prose is less consistent. In fact, "The Maple-Tree" follows hard upon Moodie's stern prose warning:

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property, and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain.

(489)

The chapter "Adieu to the Woods" begins with "the bitter pangs of parting" expressed in the sorrowful verse "Adieu!—adieu!" (478) and the following prose gives vent to Moodie's conflicting emotions upon her departure from the bush (her escape from the prison-house), ending with her warning to emigrants. Juxtaposed to this and changing the direction of the text's ending¹⁶ is Moodie's celebration of the maple tree, the "pride of the forest."

The forest here remains dark but is less foreboding than in many of the poems placed earlier in the text. For one thing, the setting sun is able to penetrate the "bosky forest shades" and can "brighten the gloom below." Moreover, the forest lights up from within during maple sugar season with the "ruddy glow" of the sugaring-off fires. The winds have lost their power to terrify as well; now the "sad winds" merely utter "a tender plaint of woe." While Moodie mentions loss, she looks to the future (rather than to the lost English home) to regret the imminent disappearance of native Canadians: "But soon not a trace / Of the red man's race / Shall be found in the landscape fair." For the most part, the poem emphasizes the here and now of settlement: "The busy rout...talk of the cheer / Of the coming year." Although some "brave tales of old / Round the fire are told," these appear to be Canadian in origin rather than stories of brave deeds from an heroic English past. Finally, in the last stanza the poet counts herself as Canadian; may the maple tree "grace our soil, / And reward our toil," she says. (In "Quebec" Canadians are "them.")

The chapter and, more importantly, the text as a whole are irrevocably changed by the addition of this poem. Without it, the ominous warning from the unhappy emigrant rings in our ears; with it, the joys of settlement conclude the text. The strength of the overall movement to settlement glimpsed in the placement of the poetry can be measured by comparing "The Maple-Tree" to the text's opening poem "Canada"(17-20). The former expresses happiness in the present state; the latter introduces the ambivalence so prevalent in the prose.

In "Canada" Moodie asserts that Canada is a great country, "the blest—the free!" (17). But the poet's positive comments are commonly set in the future: "With prophetic glance, I see / Visions of thy future glory." The poet traces the "future course sublime" of Canada and Canadians; she looks to freedom, justice, Christian brotherhood, commerce—all of which will appear at some later time: "may'st...perform," "shall arise," "shall plead," "shall show," "shall hail," "shall form," "shall build." As is typical of Moodie's poetry of emigration, homage is paid to the Mother country; if Canada is great, thanks is due in large part to a British heritage: "Even now thy sons inherit / All thy British mother's spirit." Even so, some praise is meted out to Canada as it is now, specifically to the "scenery sublime" with its "stainless snow," "starry heavens," "glorious summers," "fair salubrious clime," "mountains, streams, and woods." This list of praiseworthy attributes found in stanza three is undercut by the hesitancy manifested in the final two lines of the stanza: "If greatness dwells beneath the skies, / Thou to greatness shall arise!" In addition, the following stanza cites "the desert solitude / Of trackless waters, forests rude" populated only by "the bear and wild-cat." Settlement alone will help to improve the wasteland; "frowning woods" must yield to "town and field," and the "truly grand" mission of the pioneers is to "win a portion" of the wilderness. In this first poem, Moodie sets the tone for *Roughing It in the Bush*: the perfection of sublime nature is juxtaposed to the perils of the "sullen wilderness"; the emigrant's fears are set beside the settler's joys.

Susanna Moodie is not an especially talented poet. Nevertheless, her poetry is an essential part of *Roughing It in the Bush*. For one thing, the poems echo the polarized views of emigrant and settler so evident in the prose. For another, regardless of when they were written,¹⁷ their placement within the text helps to shape individual chapters—and *Roughing It* as a whole. The opening and closing poems, "Canada" and "The Maple-Tree," are indicative of both functions. "Canada" leads into the ambivalence of the emigrant; "The Maple-Tree" ends with the happiness of the settler. In her use of the poetry (whether intentional or not), Moodie puts into play a general progression towards joy, as in the main, dejection yields to elation. *Roughing It in the Bush* is indeed demonstrative of an "aesthetic of variety,"¹⁸ but through the poetry, especially the longer poems which end the chapters, a rough structure is superimposed onto the text.

Notes

1. Of particular interest here is Ballstadt's work: his "Proficient in the Gentle Craft" looks at water imagery in Moodie's prose and poetry; his "Secure in Conscious Worth" examines the poetry inspired by the 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada; and his introduction to the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts' *Roughing It* gives some of the publishing history of her poems. See also Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman's Introduction to *Letters*, Glickman's "The Waxing and Waning," Moir's "Four Poems." More recently, John Thurston deals with Moodie's poetry in *The Work of Words*. His list of Moodie's publications is extensive. [\[back\]](#)
2. The two Bentley editions of 1852 as well as that of 1854 have the poetry, but many other editions remove all or most of it: Putnam's 1852 edition, Bentley's 1857 edition, the first Canadian edition (edited by Moodie herself) of 1871. [\[back\]](#)
3. The text includes poetry by J.W.D. Moodie, Samuel Strickland, and the comic verse by Malachi Chroak and John Monaghan. And as Thurston points out in *Words*, few of Moodie's own poems included in *Roughing It* were written specifically for that text. [\[back\]](#)
4. The poetry encompasses such diverse styles as comic verse, ballads, meditations, and so on. Topics include death, Nature (English and Canadian), emigration and settlement, the Rebellion of 1837. In *Words*, Thurston identifies three types of Canadian verse penned by Moodie: nature, political, and dramatic poetry. As to authorship of poetry in *Roughing It*, see note 2, above. See Bentley for a discussion of the aesthetic of variety in early Canadian writing. [\[back\]](#)
5. Thurston notes that the figure of the exile appears in Moodie's pre-Canadian work (*Words* 57). [\[back\]](#)
6. Thurston comments, "A backward glance to the idealized homeland she had been forced to leave, conditioned Susanna Moodie's writing in Upper Canada....England haunts her writing as the lost ideal, the desired object, only because she has left it" (*Words* 83). [\[back\]](#)
7. Although the prose is regularly disrupted by the bringing together of various modes of writing, the poetry is less adventurous. [\[back\]](#)
8. The mannered (generic) serenity is broken only by the awkward closing lines of stanza one:

When twinkling stars steal one by one,
So softly on the gazer's view
As if they sought his glance to shun. [\[back\]](#)
9. In *Words*, Thurston defines this poem and "Oh Canada! The Gloomy Woods!" as early attempts to "assimilate creatively the reality of the backwoods" (86) and as "poetry of cultural deprivation" (86). [\[back\]](#)
10. Notably, beloved Nature is connected with English rather than Canadian scenery. [\[back\]](#)

11. See Friewald for an analysis of the "mothering" in *Roughing It*. [\[back\]](#)
12. Remember that Moodie is publishing her text long after the period about which she is writing; both at the time of writing and at the time of publishing she knows the truth of Tom's dire predictions. [\[back\]](#)
13. The prose ends with a reference to "the prison-house" of the backwoods (489). [\[back\]](#)
14. She adds a footnote of explanation for the word. [\[back\]](#)
15. The intervening chapter "The 'Ould Dragoon'," written by J.W.D. Moodie, helps to deflect attention from the differences between Chapter Eighteen, "A Trip to Stony Lake" and this one. [\[back\]](#)
16. The first edition of 1852 did not include J.W.D. Moodie's concluding chapter "Canadian Sketches." The chapter is an addition to the second edition of 1852. [\[back\]](#)
17. See Thurston's *Words*. [\[back\]](#)
18. See Bentley, *passim*. [\[back\]](#)

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