

Susanna Moodie and Sir George Arthur

by Michael Peterman

As Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins and I prepared the two collections of Susanna Moodie's letters—*Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* (1985) and *Letters of Love and Duty: The Correspondence of Susanna and John Moodie* (1993)—it was our greatest frustration as editors that in both cases one particularly important document eluded us. That letter is described in *Roughing It in the Bush*; there Susanna Moodie (1803-1885) reports that in the late spring of 1838 she sent a petition to the newly-appointed lieutenant-governor, Sir George Arthur (1784-1854), asking him "to continue my husband in the militia service, in the same regiment in which he now held the rank of captain, which, by enabling him to pay our debts, would rescue us from our present misery."¹ Later in the book she indicated that Arthur had looked with favour on her personal request.

As editors we tried to track that letter down in the incoming correspondence of the Civil Secretary of Upper Canada in 1837-38. These extensive files, called "Upper Canada Sundries" (R.G. 5, A1), are a part of the holdings of the National Archives of Canada. There was no sign of it. However, from the early stages of our research we knew that a letter from Susanna Moodie to Arthur, dated 18 December 1838, was listed (Finding Aid 881, Vol. 14) as part of that collection. Though the date of the letter clearly disqualified it as the missing petition, we nevertheless were very eager to find it; at the very least it would serve as an indication of how Moodie addressed herself to a figure of political prominence. To our frustration the document could not be located by the archivists. We checked on several different occasions and were always told that it had been either stolen or misplaced. Given the size of the "Upper Canada Sundries" collection, no one at the Archives could offer us any hope that it might be found.

Let me reconstruct the situation involving the petition as Moodie described it in *Roughing It in the Bush*. In the sketch called "The Outbreak," she recalled that, with her husband's six-month appointment (January-June 1838) in the Queen's Own Regiment (based in Toronto)

about to be terminated and their debts still measuring in the "several hundreds of pounds," she gave considerable thought to what she herself might do to help their situation (447). Alone on the Douro farm but for her servant Jenny Buchanan and her four children (she was also pregnant at the time), she seized upon the idea of writing directly to the lieutenant-governor, telling him "candidly" of "our present misery" and "trust[ing] to God for the rest" (448). Resisting for a time the presumptuousness of this urge,² she finally "determined to act upon it." Keeping her plan a secret from her husband who was still on duty in the Niagara District, she wrote to Arthur as "a man and a Christian," offering what she called "a simple statement of facts, [and] leaving it to his benevolence to pardon the liberty I had taken in addressing him." Reassured by Thomas Traill's approval of the wording of her petition, she sent it off by his hand the next morning (448).

She received no formal reply to her letter, but was delighted when, in October, her husband received official word of a new six-month military appointment (late fall 1838 to spring 1839), this time as paymaster to the militia regiments in the Victoria District. "This," she concluded in *Roughing It in the Bush*, "was Sir George Arthur's doing. He returned no answer to my application, but he did not forget us" (460). When a year later John Moodie was appointed sheriff of the same Victoria District, she again thanked God and Sir George Arthur, in that order, noting that, thereafter, the latter "was not forgotten in [our] prayers" (476).³

In fact, John Moodie's appointment as sheriff had as much to do with his own efforts and personal contacts as with his wife's appeal to Arthur. During his stint as pay-master in Belleville his commanding officer was Lt. Col. (also Baron) George de Rottenburg (1807-1894), who had been a private secretary to Arthur some years earlier and in 1838 had been appointed by Arthur to Belleville to oversee the upper province's defense of the vulnerable Lake Ontario border. Moodie worked closely with de Rottenburg in Belleville and evidently won his superior officer's respect.⁴ De Rottenburg was well positioned to place an influential word before the lieutenant-governor on Moodie's behalf and, as it became clear that many military positions (including Moodie's) were being eliminated, he did his part for his friend. On his advice, Moodie wrote to Arthur on 24 June expressing his hope of finding some civic position suited to his abilities and the needs of his family. In particular, de Rottenburg advised Moodie to "ask for the *Sheriffalty* of this place."⁵

The promise of help came quickly. In a letter to John Moodie, dated

26 June 1839, Arthur's private secretary J. B. Harrison conveyed the Governor's "earnest wish" to help the Moodies. John copied its contents to Susanna in his letter of 5 July. In it Harrison stated that Arthur was anxious to "render some service to your interesting family." He would thus "avail himself of the first possible opportunity of complying with your desire for employment," "not only on your own account, but from the esteem and respect he entertains for Mrs. Moodie." John added that de Rottenburg was "quite pleased with it and assures me I may rely with entire confidence on his Exc^y keeping his word."⁶

In *Roughing It in the Bush* the story of the means by which the Moodies were able to escape "the green prison of the woods"⁷ is clothed in religious language that may puzzle and even alienate contemporary readers. That language, however, is consistent with Susanna Moodie's self-presentation in the book and the religious conviction she shared with her husband. The merit of that conviction had of course been validated by events subsequent to those she described in her narrative. On the level of faith, as Moodie recounts it, what really mattered was the capacity she shared with her husband to rest in the "sweet" and soothing "assurance" that "God would provide for us, as He had hitherto done—that a great deal of our distress arose from want of faith" (447-48). They were convinced that the better Christians they were, the better were their chances of achieving improved circumstances.

Such a faith, however, did not encourage passivity. The Moodies recognized that it was their duty as Christians to strive to be better, all the more so because of the dispiriting situation in which they found themselves. They firmly believed that God helped those who helped themselves. Even before the Rebellions broke out in the Canadas, Susanna, her British patriotism "fairly aroused" (436), had begun writing poems celebrating loyalty to the home country and expressing contempt for those who, for whatever reasons, threatened that sacred order. When her husband was able to place several of these poems in Charles Fothergill's new Toronto paper, the *Palladium of British America and Upper Canada Advertiser*, she found a forum by which her voice was heard throughout Upper and Lower Canada.⁸

Just as she seized the moment in writing her patriotic poems, so she did in sending her petition to Sir George Arthur. The case she made for her family's needs aroused in him a desire to provide the Moodies with effective assistance as soon as he was in a position to do so.

The secular Susanna Moodie had a clear sense of how the governmental system of preferments worked in Upper Canada and,

though she usually left the delicate business of formal petitioning to her husband, she was herself an effective manipulator of words and literary effects.⁹ What she did not realize (though she may well have entertained such a hope) was that her patriotic poems in the *Palladium* had already provided her with an important introduction to Arthur. Though he did not arrive in Canada until March 1838, it is likely that certain of them caught his eye and pleased him.¹⁰ Thus he may well have been "deeply interested" in her even before he received her petition.¹¹ Without replying to her he found his first occasion to provide help in the fall of that same year when, facing renewed threats of border raids, if not invasion, from the United States (the Battle of the Windmill would take place near Prescott in November 1838), he called up several new militia regiments (both incorporated and provisional) and set up the infrastructure to coordinate them.

Likely, Arthur treated Moodie's first letter—the petition of late spring 1838—as a personal document and decided not to have his Secretary answer it, for there is no record of it in his official papers and it appears not to have survived. However, her second letter, which is not mentioned in *Roughing It in the Bush*, does indeed exist. It was rediscovered through the work of historian Leo A. Johnson whose current work, "The Upper Canada Documentary History Project," includes the compilation of an electronic index of "Upper Canada Sundries."¹² Mr. Johnson kindly informed me that he came across the Moodie letter to Arthur of 18 December 1838, misfiled within the collection.

With the information he provided and the help of archivist Anne Goddard, I was able to retrieve the letter, but too late to have it included in *Letters of Love and Duty: The Correspondence of Susanna and John Moodie* which was at that time in its final stages of production. However, the letter's importance as a document and as a source of information about Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and the relationship between *The Backwoods of Canada* and *Roughing It in the Bush* require that it be readily available to readers and scholars.

The letter confirms above all Susanna Moodie's strong sense of personal agency. In this instance, having already succeeded in improving her own situation through Arthur's help, she sought to take action on behalf of her sister Catharine and her family. Using the occasion of a thank-you letter to Arthur, she pleaded that he give special consideration to the plight of the Traills. While the letter provides affectionate portraits of Catharine and Thomas, it also implies that, below the surface of Moodie's mind, what would become *Roughing It in the*

Bush was already percolating, slowly formulating itself in part as an answer—more rooted in "painful" experience and thus a more realistic representation of conditions—to her sister's "cheerful volume." The "evil days" and "the dark clouds" that, after 1835, had "overshadowed the land" and so drastically redefined the prospects of many backwoods settlers like the Traills and Moodies, were very much on Moodie's mind in December 1838, confirming for her the folly and "madness" of gentlemen attempting to farm in the bush."¹³ That recognition would lead her nearly a decade later to produce her own volume of backwoods memories.

It is a powerful irony of Moodie's appeal of behalf of her sister that, as *Letters of Love and Duty* shows, her own situation would within days become much grimmer. In late December she fell victim to life-threatening mastitis in the process of breast-feeding her new-born son.¹⁴ That illness was followed by a series of others affecting her children and herself; in fact, the winter and spring of 1839 nearly broke Susanna Moodie's strong resolve and resourcefulness. For their part the Traills were soon to make a change that seemed to offer better prospects for them. Early in the new year they succeeded in selling their Douro farm (it had been advertised for sale in the summer of 1835) and in February 1839 they moved to the town of Ashburnham (Peterborough East), where they hoped to enjoy improved conditions. Their departure only increased Susanna Moodie's loneliness and sense of "misfortune."¹⁵

SUSANNA MOODIE TO SIR GEORGE ARTHUR¹⁶

To His Excellency Sir George Arthur

May it please Your Excellency,

To allow me to express my grateful thanks to Your Excellency, for the appointment you have been so graciously pleased to bestow, upon my beloved husband, J. W. Dunbar Moodie, late Queen's Own. I hope Mr. Moodie will so conduct himself in the responsible situation he has been called to fill, that he will never give Your Excellency, cause to repent of your goodness, in thus benevolently snatching him from a life of unremitting toil, ceaseless anxiety, premature old age, and but too probably, a broken heart, and early grave— The heartfelt blessing of an affectionate wife and mother, are Your Excellency[']s and her little ones shall be taught to retain a lasting recollection of their generous and able benefactor.

Will Your excellency, pardon the presumption of one, who has just received at your hands so great a benefit, in venturing to address you, in behalf of my dear sister Catharine Traill, who (with her husband, Lieutenant Thos. Traill, of Her Majesty's 21st Fusiliers) resides on the next location; and whose circumstances so nearly resemble my own, that we may truly be called, sisters in misfortune. Mrs. Traill, is the author of a work, well known in England where it has obtained great popularity, entitled "The Backwoods of America."¹⁷ This book, has induced many respectable families, even in these evil days of the Colony, to emigrate thither. But the work, which has brought great emolument to the publishers, has done little towards administering to the wants of the poor Author;¹⁸ who is struggling in the Backwoods on a limited income, with four infant children and contending with difficulties which would scarcely be credited by Your Excellency. The dark clouds that for the last three years have over-shadowed the land, dispelling those pleasing anticipations of future independence, which pervade her cheerful volume [sic]. Mrs. Traill, would have written herself to Your Excellency, in behalf of her husband; but, she is lying on a sick bed, with a young infant a few hours old, by her side, to remind her more painfully of her depressed circumstances.¹⁹

Last summer, Lieutenant Traill, submitted to Your Excellency, a statement of his case: to which communication, Your Excellency, was pleased to return a gracious reply; and my poor brother, indulged a hope—that when so many Battalions were raising for the defence of the Colony; and, one in his own neighbourhood, (Peterboro') where he was well known; and highly respected, some appointment might fall to his share. But he has had the mortification of seeing all the places filled up—some by men half his age— and himself passed by. My brother-in-law, is a well educated and accomplished man;—having resided for years on the continent of Europe, he is a master of the French and German languages—A man of honorable feeling—and strict integrity—May it please Your Excellency, graciously to take his case under consideration, and if any vacancy should remain unfilled up in any of the provisional Battalions, it would be most thankfully filled by Lieutenant Traill; while Your Excellency, would confer a lasting benefit on his amiable wife and family. Hoping that Your Excellency, will forgive me for pleading in the behalf of friends so dear to me,

I remain,
with the deepest respect,
Your Excellency's,

Susanna Moodie

Dec. 18, 1838

Melsetter

Douro

Susanna Moodie's plea for help for her sister-in-misfortune was not successful. As in the instance of her first letter, Arthur made no reply to her. Neither did he offer Thomas Traill a militia position, at least in part, I speculate, because the threats of invasion from the United States died down as 1839 unfolded. Indeed, many of the provisional battalions were retired in the late spring. Arthur did however find a civil position for John Moodie, as de Rottenburg expected he would do. That the partisan politics of Belleville would create a number of difficult problems for the new sheriff was not something Arthur stayed in Canada long enough to see. However, in a letter to John Moodie, dated 26 February 1841, he commended the sheriff on his "loyalty and attachments to British Institutions." In a sentence that suggests the powerful impact that Susanna Moodie had had upon him, he concluded, "I took it for granted that you must possess both, or you would not have been the husband of Mrs Moodie, for whose situation I felt so deeply interested that I was quite mortified it was not earlier in my power to confer some appointment upon you."²⁰

Notes

1. Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush*, ed. Carl Ballstadt (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), 448. Sir George Arthur had arrived in Upper Canada in late March 1838, having spent much of the previous thirteen years as Lieutenant Governor of Van Dieman's Land (Australia). [\[back\]](#)
2. Always interested in intuitive forces at work within herself, Moodie reports that the idea of writing to Arthur came to her as in a dream, just as she was "sinking into a calm sleep." It came in the form of a friendly injunction, the words of which she quotes for the reader (448). [\[back\]](#)
3. The Moodies would name a son born in 1840 after the lieutenant-governor. However, George Arthur Moodie died in infancy later that same year. For his part Arthur stayed in Canada only three

- years. He was recalled to England in 1841, and in June 1842 he was appointed Governor of the Presidency of Bombay. [\[back\]](#)
4. Moodie described de Rottenburg to his wife as "a gentleman in every sense of the word" and a "delightful companion" (*Letters of Love and Duty*, 110). In a letter to Susanna dated 24 May 1839 he reported that, though his term of service was over, the Baron had promised to "do all in his power to get me employed" (150). [\[back\]](#)
 5. John Moodie to Susanna Moodie, 5 July 1839, *Letters of Love and Duty*, 155. [\[back\]](#)
 6. *Letters of Love and Duty*, 156. [\[back\]](#)
 7. Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings*, ed. Robert L. McDougall (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1959), xxxii. The phrase is taken from Moodie's Introduction to the book. [\[back\]](#)
 8. See Carl Ballstadt's analysis of Moodie's "On reading the Proclamation Delivered by William Lyon Mackenzie, on Navy Island," in "Secure in Conscious Worth: Susanna Moodie and the Rebellion of 1837" in *Canadian Poetry*, 18 (Spring/Summer 1986), 88-98. Her poem, "Canadians, Will You Join the Band— a Loyal Song," which appeared in the first issue of the *Palladium* (20 December 1837), was reprinted in at least eight newspapers in Upper and Lower Canada in subsequent months (see *Letters of Love and Duty*, 64-65). [\[back\]](#)
 9. See, for example, John Moodie's petition to Sir Francis Bond Head (1 January 1837) in *Letters of Love and Duty*, 57-58. [\[back\]](#)
 10. See Arthur's comment to Moodie in a later letter: "as to your loyalty and attachments to British Institutions, it was unnecessary for you to say one word—I took it for granted that you must possess both, or you would not have been the husband of Mrs. Moodie. . . ." Sir George Arthur to J.W.D. Moodie, 26 February 1841, The Arthur Papers. ed. Charles R. Sanderson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), Vol. 2: 437. [\[back\]](#)
 11. *Ibid*, Vol 2: 437. [\[back\]](#)
 12. For more information on the scope and nature of the project, contact Leo A. Johnson, Upper Canada Documentary History Association, P.O. Box 274, Norwood, Ontario, K0L 2V0. [\[back\]](#)
 13. *Letters of Love and Duty*, 147. [\[back\]](#)
 14. *Letters of Love and Duty*, 114-18, and the letters that follow that winter and spring. [\[back\]](#)
 15. Moodie lost not only Catharine as a neighbour but her close friend Emilia Shairp who had already moved to Peterborough to run a school while her husband sought to return to his naval career in England. [\[back\]](#)
 16. Civil Secretary's Correspondence, Upper Canada Sundries, December 16-31 1838, (R.G. 5, A 1, Volume 212), pp. 116681-82). [\[back\]](#)

17. Moodie's error in citing Traill's title may owe something to the fact that "Canada" and "British America" were considered synonyms at the time. [\[back\]](#)
 18. Traill received 110 pounds from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge for the copyright to the book. [\[back\]](#)
 19. Traill's daughter Anne Fotheringham was born 14 December 1838; her other children were James (1833), Katherine (1836), and Henry (1837). [\[back\]](#)
 20. In his "private" letter of 22 February 1841, John Moodie expressed the concern that Thomas Parker, an influential Belleville tory who was outraged that he had not got the shrievalty himself, had made a hostile representation to the Lieutenant Governor against him. In his reply Arthur assured Moodie that this was not the case and that his loyalty and ability were not in question. *The Arthur Papers*, Vol. 2, 437 (for more on Parker see *Letters of Love and Duty*, 198-99, 203-4, etc). Moodie's concern may have been increased by the fact that his appointment as sheriff had still not been formally announced. The government did not gazette the appointment until 10 March 1841 (see *The Arthur Papers*, Vol. 3: 378). [\[back\]](#)
-