

A New Biography of Isabella Valancy Crawford

Elizabeth McNeill Galvin. *Isabella Valancy Crawford: We Scarcely Knew Her*. Toronto: Natural Heritage/ Natural History Inc., 1994.

This biography of the nineteenth-century Canadian poet Isabella Valancy Crawford began as the result of a chance encounter. In 1971, Elizabeth McNeill Galvin's niece happened to share a table in an airport lounge with Dorothy Livesay at a time when Livesay was in the midst of research for her *Dictionary of Canadian* biography entry on Crawford. Learning that Galvin lived in Peterborough, Livesay wrote her with a request to search the Little Lake Cemetery records in Peterborough for any information about the Crawford burial plot. Next came a visit to Galvin at her home in Peterborough from Livesay and Penny Petrone, a doctoral student working with Livesay on Crawford. As Galvin recalls this visit: "I was to visit Ireland. Would I see what I could find while in Dublin? Yes, of course"(xiii). By the time she had made a pilgrimage to the Crawford family's Thornberry estate in Dublin, Galvin had herself become hooked on discovering Isabella Valancy Crawford. This book, obviously a labour of love, synthesizes what Galvin knows about the life of one of Canada's most enigmatic writers. She wrote it, she said, at the behest of her publisher who asked for a manuscript on Crawford: "nothing academic, as much biography as possible, photographs, a selection of her poetry—that sort of thing—a small book, something that would appeal to the general public, to the schools" (xiv).

The search for the biography of Crawford is tantalizing because so little remains of the usual sources of evidence. We have no interviews with the subject or with those who knew her; we have no letters, diaries, or journals. We must make do with the barest of bare bones, such as a few records of Crawford's father's education and professional career in Dublin, his application to practice medicine in the Province of Canada, an instrument of sale to Crawford's mother of one acre of Crown land in Paisley, census records, a record of Dr. Crawford's making purchases in fall 1862 in a general store in Lakefield, cemetery records, inscriptions on tombstones, casual references about the Crawford family in the letters and journals of Catharine Parr Traill, an advertisement for Dr. Crawford's professional services in the

Peterborough Examiner in 1870, Crawford's signature in the register of the Mechanics Institute in Toronto in 1876, records of six different boarding houses in Toronto where Crawford lived with her mother, an obituary, and a 160 word autobiographical statement from Crawford herself. Apart from this there are rumours ("They say Dr. Crawford drank"), second hand accounts, and reminiscences published years later by associates of the Crawford family.

Some of the most basic questions about her life are likely to remain unanswered, such as how many children were there in Crawford's family, what were their names and birthdates, and when did they die? Only four Crawford children in this story have identities: Isabella Valancy, the sixth child, born in 1850 in Dublin; Emma Naomi, born in 1854 in Wisconsin, USA; Stephen Walter born in 1856 in Ireland; and Sydney R. born in Paisley in 1859. The rest are shadowy presences—an unauthenticated account of seven children who died suddenly of scarlet fever in 1855 while Dr. Crawford was on his way to Australia to investigate opportunities for emigration; a newspaper recollection published years later about the little dying child [in Paisley] and sympathizing friends to bear the little casket up the long hill to the last resting place; the cemetery records for Rebecca Anne Crawford (the same child as Sydney R.), age five, buried in Lakefield Churchyard in 1864. Galvin assembles in one integrated account all the evidence that has been uncovered by other writers who have worked on the Crawford biography: Mary Martin, Dorothy Livesay, James Reaney, Eric Parker, Catherine Crawford Humphrey (grandniece of the poet), and Dorothy Familoe, the latter having written the only other book length study of Crawford's life. To this known territory, she adds some further details and some photographs. This biography, while not presenting many surprises, is a readable and accessible account of the known traces of Crawford's life.

What we know about Crawford's life is fragmentary and easily summarized. Stephen Crawford married Anne Dennis and had four sons: William (b. 1805), Stephen Dennis (b. 1807), Henry (b. 1809), and John Irwin (b. 1812). The family lived in Dublin in a fourteen-room residence, grand enough to be called Thornberry. The sons—all but Stephen Dennis, who became Crawford's father—seemed to have achieved professional success. William became a barrister and emigrated to Bombay, Henry went into partnership with his father as an agent for the British Commercial Insurance Company in Dublin, and John Irwin became a staff surgeon in the British Navy. Stephen Dennis, on the other hand, proved unable to establish himself successfully in Ireland, despite training in both medicine and law. Needing to provide for his wife, Sydney Scott, and a growing family, Dr. Crawford investigated the United States and Australia as a place to emigrate, but

decided upon Canada. By 1857, Dr. Crawford "of the Village of Paisley, County of Bruce & Province of Canada" had applied for a licence to practice medicine in the pioneer community. He became the township Treasurer as well as doctor. By 1861 he had left Paisley, leaving behind him a scandal of a missing \$500 in misappropriated Township funds and the subsequent suicide of one of his bondsmen.

A chance meeting with Robert Strickland (of the famous Strickland-Traill-Moodie connection) led to an invitation to the Crawfords to come to Lakefield, where there was no resident physician, and to stay initially at Reydon Hall, Robert Strickland's home. Robert Strickland's brother remembered, "They seemed to be very poorly off and we felt real sorry for them out here amidst such unsuitable surroundings." In Lakefield, Isabella became a friend of Catharine Parr Traill's daughter, Kate. Meanwhile, Dr. Crawford's Lakefield practice failed to thrive and the same rumours surfaced ("Mother . . . who only knew them from hearsay, thinks Dr. C. took too much milk punch"). A source of financial support ended when Dr. Crawford's unmarried youngest brother lost his eyesight and was superannuated from the Royal Navy. In 1869, the same year that John Irwin's quarterly stipend to Dr. Crawford was stopped, the Crawfords moved to Peterborough.

In Peterborough, then a town of 7,000 people, the Crawford family developed the reputation of being reclusive and unwilling to receive guests, most likely to conceal their poverty and the doctor's alcoholism. Dr. Crawford died of a heart attack in 1875, and twenty-year old Emma Naomi died of tuberculosis the following year, leaving Isabella and her mother alone (Stephen Walter had by this time gone north to the Algoma region). With nothing to hold them in Peterborough, Isabella and her mother moved in 1876 to Toronto, which was the centre of the publishing world in Canada. Although Isabella had been writing while still living in Lakefield (there are manuscripts in the Queen's library signed "Isabella Valancy Crawford, North Douro") and had published poems in Toronto newspapers and stories in American magazines while living in Peterborough, when she moved to Toronto she turned her attention in earnest to the business of writing. She sold short lyric poems to Toronto newspapers and short stories and serialized novels to American magazines such as *Frank Leslie's*. Crawford published only one book, *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcolm's Katie, and Other Poems* (1884), which was printed at author's expense in a run of 1,000 and sold only 50 copies, despite favourable reviews. On the evening of February 12, 1887, she felt acute chest pain, her mother called for help from the landlady Mrs. Stuart, and Crawford died, saying, "What a trouble I am, Mrs. Stuart."

Galvin presents this story in a straightforward, chronological manner,

dividing the eighty-page narrative into five chapters linked to place: Dublin, Paisley, Lakefield, Peterborough and Toronto. The problem arises, for Galvin as for other biographers, when gaps in the known biographical facts become so great that speculation is called upon to round out the story. The main gap in the biography is the love interest. Dorothy Livesay was the first biographer to suggest that Crawford could not have written such sexually explicit poetry as "The Lily Bed" without the benefit of a passionate love affair. Livesay's candidate for the role of initiator into sexual mysteries was Reverend Vincent Clementi ("a new vicar, youthful, vigorous"), chosen by Livesay, apparently for his musical talent. To her credit, Galvin points out that there isn't a shred of evidence linking Crawford with anyone, either with Clementi who was fifty-one when he arrived in Lakefield at a time when Isabella was thirteen, or with his son Theodore, who is Dorothy Farmiloe's candidate for the role of lover. Galvin restricts herself to saying yearningly, "It would be comforting to think that in Isabella's life there had been a romantic interest—some special person to whom she could turn for consolation and loving advice in those dark days" [after her father and sister Emma Naomi had died] (57). A similar problem in filling in gaps arises when Galvin tries to say something about the Toronto years and ends up in desperation focussing on place: "Isabella and her mother must have enjoyed showing off their city. Possibly they visited the Grand Opera House on Adelaide Street which had been rebuilt following damage by fire, attended a church service in one of Toronto's magnificent places of worship, saw the Crystal Palace at the Exhibition Grounds. . . ." (72). Possibly, and then again possibly not. The problem is that we just don't know.

Although readers are interested in Crawford's life because of her writing, Galvin says almost nothing about Crawford's writing. Instead she provides, in a forty-page concluding section, "a selected anthology" of Crawford's poetry. According to Galvin, the poetry has been chosen "to reflect what, to the author, represents Crawford's progression from simple romantic lyricism to a realism and an awareness of Canadian landscape, pioneer existence and Indian legend" (81). Presented in their entirety are some of Crawford's strongest poems such as "The Camp of Souls," "Said the Canoe," "The Lily Bed," and "The Dark Stag." On the other hand, it is hard to feel enthusiastic about the inclusion of the snippets and fragments, wrenched from their context, from the longer poems, "Gisli the Chieftain," "Malcolm's Katie," and "Old Spookses Pass." A more welcome use of space is the ten pages of black and white photographs, many of which are the result of Elizabeth Galvin's pilgrimage to Crawford landmarks. There are twenty pictures altogether—two different portraits of Crawford herself as well as images of Thornberry in Dublin, the Crawford home in Paisley, Reydon

Hall in Lakefield, 57 John Street in Toronto where Crawford died, the title page of *Old Spookses' Pass*, an embroidery sculpture executed by Crawford of a streetscene in India, complete with elephants and seated riders, and finally the Celtic cross that marks Crawford's grave at the Little Lake Cemetery in Peterborough.

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