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“The True History of My Brother Tom’s Dog”: A Lost Autobiographical Tale by Catharine Parr Traill

JENNIFER HARRIS

Although not as well known as her sister Susanna Moodie, author of *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), Catharine Parr Traill is nonetheless a mainstay of early Canadian writing. Readers praise her genuine attentiveness to and fondness for the world around her as well as the wit and perception that she brings to her depictions of that world. Her resourcefulness, energy, and faith when faced with adversity continue to captivate. *The Backwoods of Canada*, Traill’s 1836 account of settler life, remains a key resource for scholars of early Canadian experience. Traill’s other writings, ranging from *The Female Emigrant’s Guide* (1854) to novels, nature writing, and collections of stories, continue to be studied for their own merits. Her more personal writings appeal to scholars interested in women’s lives and careers in the era. Notably, that Traill and Moodie both penned such compelling first-person accounts of emigration has made their lives subjects of interest not only to scholars but also to contemporary readers, as evidenced by the bestselling status of Charlotte Gray’s book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill* (1999) and the accompanying documentary (2004; see *Sisters*). For these reasons, a newly discovered autobiographical tale by Traill, “The True History of My Brother Tom’s Dog,” merits consideration for what it might tell us about the sisters and their early life in England. Likewise, its publication history highlights the ways in which the sisters participated in female networks of publication in later years. Considering the tale for its own literary merits draws attention to the choices that Traill made in crafting her work for popular consumption, particularly when the story is compared with her other writing for children, including a second previously unknown Traill tale, “Rover’s Visit to the Fair,” which appeared in the 1830s *The Juvenile Keepsake*, credited only to the “Author of ‘Nursery Fables.’”

The plot of “The True History” is simple enough, concerning the youthful visit of Traill and an unnamed sister — possibly Susanna, to whom Traill was closest — to the home of Mr. and Mrs. B. for tea, an event complicated by the unwelcome attendance of their brother’s impertinent and energetic dog, Toby, which cheerfully wreaks havoc. The story’s action depends on the dog’s antics; the dramatic tension, pathos, and humour result from the sisters’ complete inability to master the situation. That it is the dog that is victorious, and the sisters who sneak out with their metaphorical tails between their legs, is not lost on us as readers — in fact, it is key to our enjoyment of the story.

Knowledge of the sisters’ biography and historical context enriches our appreciation of the social disaster of “The True History,” even as the story enhances our understanding of the sisters’ world pre-emigration. Susanna and Catharine were among Thomas and Elizabeth Strickland’s six daughters and two sons, all born between 1794 and 1807 in England. The family, initially at least, was upwardly mobile, purchasing several properties, including, in 1808, an attractive manor house known as Reydon Hall in Suffolk. However, a nation-wide financial collapse, combined with the death of Thomas Strickland, left the family in severely straitened circumstances just as the sisters were reaching a marriageable age.¹ In status-conscious late-Georgian society, in which propriety and respectability were crucial, even those middle-class young women with substantial financial resources were wary of any misstep for fear of impeding the marriage prospects for themselves and their younger siblings. The Strickland sisters, no doubt aware of their precarious circumstances and limited marital prospects, had every reason to adhere to the dictates of society. However, as Traill recounts, dogs do not observe the same social niceties.

Traill does not conceal the identities of the majority of the individuals in the story. Her brother Tom retains his own name, though his youth is emphasized, making the narrator and her sister seem younger as well. John Fenn, the local rat catcher who originally gives the dog to Tom as a puppy, was also a real person. Mr. and Mrs. B., in whose home the majority of the story’s action occurs, are clearly James and Emma Bird of nearby Yoxford: James was a published poet and a figure of great “cheerfulness and vivacity”; Emma, née Hardacre, was the daughter of a bookseller and printer from nearby Hadleigh, “possessing a mind well stored with the knowledge best calculated to render her, as a wife

— mother — friend — useful and estimable in her station” (Harral xi-xii). Together the Birds ran a stationers and booksellers business (which Emma continued after her husband’s death in 1839), suggesting that they had many interests in common with the Stricklands.² We can date the events of the story as occurring sometime after August 1826, when the Stricklands are believed to have first made the Birds’ acquaintance. The friendship progressed rapidly: in 1828, the Birds named their tenth child Walter Strickland Bird (1828-1912).³ In total, the Birds had sixteen children, twelve surviving, a suitable number to provide the boisterous Toby with an enthusiastic audience for his antics in “The True History.” They included Samuel (1822), whom Traill also describes, as well as Henry and Charles, born a year apart (1825 and 1826), but effectively reworked as twins by Traill in her narrative. The second son, James, who also features in this story, accompanied the Moodies to Canada.

The Bird parents have been mentioned in most contemporary biographical accounts of the Strickland sisters, since some of their correspondence has survived.⁴ In comparison, the Fenns, the Stricklands’ economic and social inferiors, have merited no attention. Yet, though the Stricklands appear to have drawn rarely on the Birds for subject matter (Susanna Moodie being the primary exception in her depiction of young James Bird), the Fenns proved to be more tempting.⁵ The Fenn men in particular seem to have held a certain imaginative resonance for the Strickland sisters. The eldest, Eliza, wrote a sketch of John Fenn at an early age (Gray 337). Born in 1786, he was probably the first Fenn whom the Strickland family encountered when they relocated to Suffolk in the early nineteenth century.⁶ John’s son, Peter, born in 1816, also appears to have made an impression, as Agnes, the second sister, “borrowed” the name Peter Fenn for a character in her short story “Dorcas and Peter Piper, the Village Valentines.”⁷ Including “The True History,” Traill invoked the Fenns three times in print, including in *Fables for the Nursery*, in which “Fen, the rat-catcher,” is summoned with his ferret to catch and kill the mice that have wreaked havoc in the pantry (83). In Traill’s *Little Downy: Or, The History of a Field Mouse* (1822), a farmer bids “Fen, the rat-catcher, come, and bring all his dogs with him” to clear the mice from his field (2). Traill further named John Fenn in her unpublished recollections. In all of the stories by Traill in which he is named, Fenn is never a character so much as a plot device, his supporting role mirroring the class position that he occupied in real

life. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Traill was inattentive to the Fenns. Although she appears to confuse the Fenn father (John) and son (Peter) in the story reprinted here, it is notable that, after thirty-five years abroad, she correctly recalls the names of John's children: Peter, John, Frederick, and Emma can all be positively identified.

The clarity with which John Fenn, rat catcher, remained in the Strickland sisters' minds can be related to the frequency with which he called at Reydon Hall, their Suffolk home. As one regular visitor and family friend recalled, "It must have been, now I come to think of it, a dismal old house, suggestive of rats and dampness and mould, that Reydon Hall, with its scantily furnished rooms and its unused attics and its empty barns and stables, with a general air of decay all over the place, inside and out" (Ritchie 43). Traill went further, describing "the noises made by rats or the wind" in the attic (*Pearls* 158). Any family so plagued would have had frequent recourse to the services that John provided. But relations between the Fenns and Stricklands, while probably never equitable given their class differences, appear to have extended beyond the merely professional, as evident in John's offer of a dog to young Tom. In turn, the Stricklands retained ties with the Fenns over several generations. Two daughters of Peter Fenn (1816-86), Emma and Amelia (Milly), worked for Elizabeth Strickland. After she died in 1864, Milly lived with Agnes Strickland, acting the part of servant and nurse, until she finally left her employer to marry. According to another Strickland sister, Agnes considered Milly's 1873 marriage "a trial" and possibly a betrayal, suggesting the expectation that their historical and familial ties should result in a feudal loyalty that would trump other opportunities (Jane Strickland 372).⁸ Although the Stricklands were never free from financial worry, it seems that their relations with the working-class Fenns, extending over three generations, allowed them to imagine themselves as the better-off benefactors of that family; depicting them in fiction as colourful locals was another way of asserting the Stricklands' cultural and class superiority. John Fenn, inviting the fatherless Tom Strickland to choose a puppy to keep him company in a household dominated by women, might have imagined things a little differently.

If the Birds and Fenns are easily identifiable in "The True History," this is not the case with the final character to enter the scene, Miss Felicia Bell. Traill provides us with little detail beyond the sketch of

a “young lady, very smartly dressed in a pink gauze frock trimmed with rouleaux of pink satin at the edge of the skirt,” who enjoys the gathering. No Felicia Bell can be found in Suffolk or the surrounding area in the era, suggesting that this name at least was an invention, the patronymic Bell, so close to the word *belle*, highlighting the girl’s youth and eligibility. Indeed, Miss Bell does not speak, indicates no awareness of events, and is characterized entirely through her clothing and name. As a young unmarried woman in the latest fashion, she is a foil for the sisters, and as such her individuality is not really important — it is her extravagant pink dress that matters.⁹ It is worth considering that, in defining a young woman of her acquaintance entirely through her wardrobe, Traill might be remembering her own youthful envy of those who could dress in the fashionable styles that the Stricklands must surely have coveted but could not afford. Although the young Catharine was clearly mortified by the events of the day, including the damage done to Miss Bell’s dress, the adult Traill could laugh at the ridiculous turn of events, rendering Miss Bell as unimportant and uninteresting.

Traill waited years to transform this family story into a published piece. “The True History of My Brother Tom’s Dog” finally appeared in the 14 September 1867 issue of the *Christian Register*. On first glance, the Boston-based Unitarian paper, edited by Reverend Solon Wanton Bush, was not an obvious publication venue for Traill.¹⁰ However, the paper’s Home Department — where a substantial portion of the paper’s original content appeared — was overseen by Bush’s wife, Theoda Davis Foster Bush (1811-88) (Bush 81). Almost immediately upon Bush’s assuming the editorial duties in 1864, TDFB, as she often signed her writings, enlisted her Canadian connections, soliciting original content. These connections included her paternal aunts Harriet Vaughan Cheney (1796-1889) and Eliza Lanesford Cushing (1794-1886). Both residents of Montreal, the women were active in the city’s literary publishing, as contributors to and editors of the *Literary Garland*, as well as proprietors of the *Snow Drop*, the first Canadian periodical for children. When TDFB relocated to Montreal in 1834, she joined her relatives in their literary enterprise, contributing to the *Literary Garland* and *Snow Drop* (MacDonald). If she was not already familiar with the name of Catharine Parr Traill, she would have encountered it in her aunts’ literary ventures, to which Traill contributed. It is therefore not surprising that, when the Bushes began their association with the *Christian*

Register, TDFB reached out to the women whom she knew professionally, requesting material.¹¹

TDFB's timing was impeccable. The Traills had been plagued by financial hardship from the beginning, with Catharine's writing crucial to maintaining their household. Her husband, Thomas, had been in debt at the time of their marriage; emigration to Canada was a chance to start anew. Instead, he proved to be unsuited to farming, failed to succeed in other endeavours, and sank further into depression and debt. His death in 1859 signalled the end of their hopes and left Traill even more reliant on her pen for income. As Michael Peterman observes, she was "never far removed from the strains of financial worries during most of her lifetime" ("Catharine"). The year 1867, in which the *Christian Register* published "The True History," was no exception. Surviving letters by Traill from 1866 and 1867 attest to both her financial difficulties and her desire to place a number of short pieces (Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, *I Bless You* 163-73). Specifically, Traill appears to have taken seriously the rumours that circulated in February 1867 that food and other stores would be "exorbitantly dear as the great influx of people to the Gold diggings will raise prices to a great height," and she began planning almost a year in advance (169). Perhaps it was this anxiety that led her to mine her youth for an episode that could be transformed easily into a lively and amusing composition. Indeed, "The True History" has the character of a story frequently told aloud to great effect that has been reworked and refined for publication.

It is not simply the insight into Traill's life or publishing networks that makes "The True History" noteworthy. If we situate this story vis-à-vis the majority of her shorter fiction for children, its differences become clear. "The True History" is decidedly lacking in didacticism, and its charm comes not from the anthropomorphizing of animals — as is common in Traill's other children's literature and to a lesser extent in *Pearls and Pebbles: Or, Notes of an Old Naturalist* (1894), a collection of essays on natural history for young readers — but from the appropriately doggish behaviour of its antagonist, the canine Toby.¹² This unusual status becomes more evident when "The True History" is placed alongside "Rover's Visit to the Fair," the other previously unidentified Traill tale, published in *The Juvenile Keepsake* in 1830. At first, Rover and Toby appear to be one and the same, as is evident in Traill's description of Rover as "an unsophisticated child of nature, bred in the

kennel of Fenn, the village rat-catcher, and received into the canine establishment at the Lodge, at the intercession of Master Samuel, who had taken a fancy to Rover, as he lay basking in the sun with the rest of his mongrel brethren and sisters, on a heap of straw by Fenn's pig-stye" (135).¹³ Rover's habits also mirror Toby's, from leaving black streaks with his tail to running ahead of his master to intercept him on potential adventures (133, 137). That said, there are significant differences between the two stories. The action of "The True History" depends on a first-person human narrator who recounts the canine behaviour of Toby. "Rover's Visit," like Traill's animal tales that preceded it in *Fables for the Nursery* (1821), depends on omniscient narration, with human motivations, thoughts, and feelings attributed to the dog: "'Oh, oh!' said Rover to himself, 'there will be rare doings at this same fair — fine sights, I fancy,' and wagging his tail with a joyful bow wow, — he laid his ears flat to his head, hung down his tail, and pointing his nose strait for the high road that led towards Norwich, he scampered off" (133). Repeatedly, his concerns with and responses to unfamiliar sights and sounds are invoked:

[H]e was astonished at the public buildings, and the size of the market place, and licked his lips at the idea of the precious morsels adventurous dogs might obtain on market days: he regarded the castle, with its lofty time-worn walls with as much awe as the celebrated Jack, (one of the family of the Giant Killers) did the giant's castle, which he discovered on the summit of his bean stalk. (136)

The reader is invited to experience vicariously the wonder of elephants and lions, even as they might be bemused by the little dog's view of the world. In creating Rover, Traill appears to have relied on the method that she deployed in penning her most successful children's tale, *Little Downy*, in which she would "sit under the great oak tree near where it lived and watch the pretty creature's frisky, frolicing [sic] ways, and write about it on my slate. When I had both sides covered, I ran into the house and transcribed what I had written into an old copy-book, then ran out again to watch the gentle dear and write some more" (*Pearls* xv). In observing animals, Traill imagined their emotions, motivations, and fears, never trivializing them but humanizing them to justify their actions and make them understandable to a juvenile reader. "Rover's Visit" is undeniably such a story for children, one in which Rover stands

in for the child, recounting the things that dog and child would find most interesting on such a journey, the dog rendered in such a way that children would recognize it as a kindred spirit.

Even “Rover’s Visit” departs from other examples of Traill’s animal tales for children. One can hardly miss the intended morals in the stories that comprise *Fables for the Nursery*. In the opening tale, a careless lizard loses her best friend to a hawk, then is befriended by and saves a boy who repeats her mistake; the story closes with the mantra “a good turn is never lost” (12). The peacock featured in “Vanity Punished: Or, The Peacock that Would Go to the Fair” loses his feathers to animals who despise his arrogance. Other stories in the collection have subtitles such as “Idleness and Industry,” “Punishment for Disobedience,” and “The Folly of Discontent.” The tale in which Fenn the rat catcher appears is titled “The Danger of Keeping Bad Company.” For the most part, the animals are oblivious to consequences in a way that reflects their childlike nature; through their experience or example, they learn or impart a valuable lesson that young readers are expected to internalize. Traill admitted her desire to inculcate “lessons of mental firmness, piety, and industry” via her writings for children (*Young Emigrants* iii). Yet this “didactic purpose,” which Ruth Bradley-St.-Cyr identifies as present in “all of Traill’s works for children,” is absent from “Rover’s Visit,” replaced by a story of a scampering, inquisitive dog out to see a bit of the world (15). In its absence of didacticism and its focus on the dog’s adventure — decidedly doggish even if Rover has some human attributes — “Rover’s Visit” provides a bridge from Traill’s writings for children in *Fables for the Nursery* to “The True History.”

The lack of a moral is not the only substantive difference between “The True History” and the vast majority of Traill’s writings for children. Although her animal protagonists in *Fables for the Nursery* might encounter mean-spirited counterparts — merciless geese (33) or snapping dogs (36) — there is a prelapsarian innocence about them all, something shared by Rover. In contrast, Toby in “The True History” has no human attributes. Even though Traill describes his “evil deeds,” suggesting intent or awareness, she characterizes him in a way that defies the same: he is not immoral but amoral, lacking remorse or reason or anything remotely resembling human conscience or understanding. Similarly, unlike the animals described in Traill’s nature essays, which comprise *Pearls and Pebbles*, there is nothing magical, pastoral, or pretty

about Toby. Whereas it is understandable that a hungry animal would try to eat another — an event that recurs in *Fables for the Nursery* and *Pearls and Pebbles* — his antics serve no purpose within the natural order; instead, they exemplify his animal nature. Toby is the opposite of every erring animal of *Fables for the Nursery*: he is a wilful dog intent on having fun, with no concern for the outcome, whose actions go unpunished.

If Toby's refusal to conform to moral strictures were not enough, in committing "The True History" to paper Traill made no effort to sanitize events; the story is rowdy, even farcical, something reflected in her stylistic choices. Things that polite people are not supposed to find funny, including drowned animals, presumably bloated and decomposing, appear in the text as a source of amusement. Just as her humour is more broad, so too is her language less formal than in her stories and novels for children. Traill includes colloquial phrases, describing how Toby's "behavior in genteel society was about as refined as that of a ploughboy in a drawing-room" and how Toby "peppered away at the beef." Confronted with the dog's behaviour, the family is forced "to make the best of a bad matter," the kind of economical phrase entirely absent from *Fables for the Nursery*, in which the desire to instruct readers leads to more extended — and moralizing — descriptions of reactions to unfortunate circumstances. Traill's sentence structure, which Bradley-St.-Cyr notes is at times inappropriate to the action in her children's fiction (20), or characterized by overly complicated or formal syntax, flows much more naturally in "The True History." Above all, what sets "The True History" apart from Traill's other writing for children is that it is decidedly intended not to teach and instruct but to entertain. Unfettered by any need to present a moral tale, secure in the knowledge that TDFB would publish and pay her for whatever she sent, Traill penned what is arguably one of her most readable tales for children.



“The True History of My Brother Tom’s Dog”

My brother Tom was a very droll boy, and one night he dreamed a very comical dream which I will now tell you. He dreamed one night that he went into his mother’s kitchen and there he saw a fine piece of beef roasting on the spit before the fire.

There were three dogs standing by the meat, — a black dog, and a brown and white one; they told him their names were Jowler, Spilo and Toby. Jowler and Spilo (a queer name, Spilo, for a dog) sat on their haunches eyeing the spit as it turned, with wistful looks; but Toby, who was an odd-looking dog, with one brown ear, a long nose and but one eye stood up on his hind legs with a pepper-box in his paw, and, with his head a little on one side, peppered away at the beef. He looked so cunning at the roast as he stood up with his pepper-box, that Tom burst out laughing, and he laughed so long and laughed so loud that he awoke. When he told us his dream in the morning, he declared that if he ever had a dog of his own he would name him Spilo or Toby.

Now, Tom happened to be a great favorite with Peter Fenn, the ratcatcher, who told him, one day, that if he came to his house he would give him his choice out of a litter of fine young puppies. So Tom, full of glee, set off, one fine summer’s day, to choose his dog.

Tom found the kennel occupied with six puppies and four children, Peter, John, Frederick and Emma, who were lying among the straw and hugging the little puppies. The boys were all dressed precisely like the old carrier, their grandfather, in smock frocks, leather breeches, blue worsted stockings, iron buckles in their shoes, and round, black felt hats, of very much the same shape as young men now, and call [sic] Wide-awake. These little boys looked very odd, dressed in this old-fashioned way. Fred, the youngest boy, was only just four years old.

The boys were very angry when my brother said he came to take away one of the little “doggies,” as Fred called the puppies, and began crying aloud in chorus till the ratcatcher came out with his ferrets under his arm, and told the children to be off and let master Thomas choose his dog.

Tom picked out a funny-looking little fellow, with a white curly coat, and a brown spot on his nose, and a brown ear, very much like the dog Toby that was peppering the beef. The ratcatcher was very anxious to snip off poor puppy’s ears and dock his tail; but Tom loudly protested against such cruelty and want of good taste. After a long dispute on the

subject, ears and tail versus no ears and docked tail, Tom bore off his prize untouched from the shears of the unconvinced ratcatcher, in all the pride of curly ears and a white worsted-looking tail. I hope all my young readers are of my brother Tom's opinion, that nature knows better than ratcatchers in those matters.

The ratcatcher said master Tom was an odd dog himself, and went away laughing at Tom's dream and wished him luck with his dog Toby.

Tom taught his dog a great many tricks. He would fetch and carry, dive into the water, salt or fresh, for anything he chose to throw in; a stick or stone, all one to Toby. He would "trust" and "paid for;" that is, if Tom put a bit of bread or meat on his nose and said "Trust," Toby would stand stock still and not attempt to eat it; but when his master said "Paid for," he sprung up in the air and caught the bread or meat in his mouth before it fell to the ground, and ate it up.

Tom taught Toby to sit up on his hind legs and cross his paws, stroke his right ear with one paw, wink his left eye, and make a bow with both hands.

Toby was very sagacious in many ways. He lived in an out-house, where the gardener kept sand and garden tools, and Tom kept a pair of white rabbits, a guinea pig, a black kitten and a white owl. Toby had the care of these creatures, and kept them in good order; he would not allow the owl to affront the kitten, or the guinea pig, or the kitten, to touch the rabbits; and when the rabbits burrowed under the door and then ran off to the clover-field, Toby brought them safely home unhurt. Then Tom called him a good old dog, and a fine fellow, and patted his head, and paid him with a choice bit of meat out of the owl's pantry.

Toby was a very honest dog in the house, but I am concerned to say he was a sad thief when he went abroad, and a great poacher in the game preserves, among the rabbits and hares, besides robbing the nests of partridges and pheasants. These malpractices Tom often deplored, but said it was owing to his low breeding, and associating at times with his ill-behaved brothers and sisters and the ratcatcher's.

Certain it is, that gentlemanly conduct was not one of Toby's merits. His behavior in genteel society was about as refined as that of a plough-boy in a drawing-room. I am going to tell you of one of his evil deeds, which subjected one of my sisters and myself to some mortification.

One fine summer day, very early in the morning, one of my sisters and myself set off in a little donkey-chaise to spend a long day with an

old friend, who resided in a pleasant country-town about ten miles off.¹⁴ As we were fully aware of Toby's want of discreet conduct when he went out visiting, we resolved to leave him at home; but this was no easy matter, as he was very cunning, and always contrived to find out when and where we were going; lying in wait for us at some distance on the road, or hiding himself that he might not be tied up or confined. However, we thought we had outwitted him this time, and had the satisfaction, before we set off, of seeing him safely shut-up in the sand-house, and had got about two miles on our journey, when we espied a white animal pacing at full speed on the other side of a hedge that bordered the road; in a few minutes it leaped the gate and sprung into the road ahead of the donkey; and, to our utter dismay, we discovered it to be no other than our dog Toby. It was to no avail that we scolded him, told him to go home, and threatened him with the stick. Toby had not come two miles at all speed to go back. He resolutely set his ears back and his tail up, and scampered on, without once looking back at us, till he was fairly tired.

There was no help for it but to make the best of a bad matter; so, when we reached the inn, we gave the hostler, who took charge of the donkey, sixpence to shut Toby up in the stable, and we bought a penny roll at the baker's, next door, to feed him with, hoping to secure him by these means; but the roll and sixpence were equally thrown away; for on our reaching our friend's house, on the newly-washed threshold there lay Toby. He had eaten his roll and made his way out of the stables, and there he was. How he came to know the house we were going to is more than ever I could find out; for he had never even been at the place before; but such was the fact. Perhaps he watched our eyes and saw us looking at the house.

The door opened and in rushed Toby, and now began our day of misfortunes. The lady of the house no sooner beheld the intruder than she began to scold him out, and then, seeing us, gave us a warm greeting, interrupted by various hints to her husband to expel the dusty dog that had forced himself into her clean house. We were now obliged to apologize for Toby's intrusion, and told the tale of his having been shut up, to exculpate ourselves for having brought him; at the same time scolding and bidding him to keep out. Toby eyed us with a mournful and humbled look, but there was a quiet air of determination about him which plainly declared his intention of abiding with us, in spite of all

remonstrances. Our good friend, Mr. B., always ready to make the best of every dilemma, praised the dog for his sagacity and admired his constancy, and told us various anecdotes about dogs, which made us laugh. Toby was enticed out into the street, but seeing himself in danger, for he was a great coward, from the attacks of several strange curs, he bolted into the house with a small cut on his hind leg; and taking possession of the sill of the parlor-door, lay across the entrance panting and puffing, and licking his leg. The house had all been scrubbed that morning, for it so chanced we had come on a holiday. A large party of country friends were expected to drink tea, and the house had been put in apple-pie order for the occasion. You may imagine the distress that Toby's conduct caused us, but this was only the beginning of evils. Mrs. B. now bade her son Samuel, a boy of ten years old, turn out Toby, but this was sooner said than done. Charles and Henry, a merry pair of twins, each a bit of bread in hand, tried to coax him from the parlor doorway, and Sam pushed on behind; but Toby was not to be bribed by bread and butter, and would neither lead nor drive, and at last turned and bit Sam's leg; a loud roar followed, Charles and Henry screamed, Toby growled, with pain, and the two maids scolded Toby, while Mr. B. came to the rescue with a diachylon plaster for the wound, and the whole house was in a hubbub; for our part, we would gladly have crept into a nut-shell to have hidden ourselves from the disgrace. As Toby remained resolute, and the children were afraid of turning him out, he was left in quiet, and in the course of an hour's time began to feel more at home; by-and-by, he followed the children to the back yard, and afforded them great diversion with fetching sticks and stones, handkerchiefs and gloves, and they fed him and forgot all his bad conduct. Now there was a dirty pond on a bit of green waste near the yard, and into this one of the boys cast a stick, and were delighted at Toby bringing it out. The pond was a muddy place, and Toby's white coat was in a sad plight, but for that neither he nor the children cared, and with shouts of joy and loud cheers they saw him dive for stones, and soon he had not only brought up what they threw in, but all sorts of hidden treasures from the bottom of the muddy pond; old tin pans, pots, hoops, old shoes and all sorts of trash that had been thrown there by the children that had access to it, to say nothing of various dead puppies, rats and kittens, all of which were ranged on the bank, greatly to the delight of the boys, and to the horror of the maids and Mrs. B. who had to put clean bibs and blouses

on the children, who had dirtied themselves with Toby's muddy coat. At last the little ones were shut up in the nursery, and Toby, tired of swimming, returned to his old post, the clean parlor, where he shrunk under one of the pine tables, and lay flapping his dirty tail on the floor, leaving a black mark like the stroke from a painting brush on the nice white boards and wainscot.

The company arrived in due time, and among them a young lady, very smartly dressed in a pink gauze frock trimmed with rouleaux of pink satin at the edge of the skirt. Tea was brought in, everything very nice, and every one seemed to enjoy themselves but me; I could think of nothing but Toby, eat I could not. The young lady in the pink gauze dress sat on the one side of me, and James B., a mischief-loving imp, my friend's second son, on a high-stool on the other; he evidently enjoyed my discomfiture, and casting a wicked eye at me, directed me by a glance to the position occupied by the dog Toby. It was getting dusk, but I could distinctly hear the flapping of his tail as it went brush, brush, brush; alas, at every movement it swept the pink satin roll of Miss Felicia Bell's gauze frock, leaving a brown fringe upon its delicate surface. James was in ecstasies. I was ready to cry with mortification; fortunately the young lady was in blissful ignorance of Toby's vicinity to her, and as the moon was now risen, we hastened our departure, and glad were we to leave the crowded parlor for the cool summer air, and the glare of the candles for the pale pure light of the harvest-moon. But if we were glad of the change of scene, how much more did the unhappy Toby appear at the signal of departure, out he flew from his hiding-place, pushing his way, regardless of the silks and satins with which he came in contact, and bounding forth into the clear moonlight, forgetting his lame leg, he skipped and jumped about his old friend Brayem, the donkey, as if to say, "you, at least, are not ashamed of the poor old dog[.]"¹⁵ Glad we were that our day of mishaps had come to an end, as all days whether spent in pleasure or pain must do.

Now my young friends, I will for the present bid you farewell, but I can give you another chapter on dogs. My next will be of Keeper, a capital fellow, a very wise and useful dog.¹⁶



Concluding Thoughts

Why there is no mention of “The True History of My Brother Tom’s Dog” in Traill’s letters or papers is unclear, though relevant commentary might simply have not survived. Obviously, the correspondence concerning its publication details in the *Christian Register* has been lost. Perhaps Traill thought that it was unsuitable for republication — maybe recalling her sister Agnes’s designation of sister Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* as uncouth (Gray 214-16). Agnes Strickland had laboured to elevate the family’s reputation in England, while with every act Toby draws attention to their precarious social status (Gray 177, 212; see Agnes’s letters). More probable is that Traill did not bother to think much about the narrative once it was committed to paper, sending it off quickly in the hope that it might earn much-needed cash. Regardless, that the tale does not belong in the subsequent collection of essays *Pearls and Pebbles* is evident. There Traill writes of her observations of the natural world that “There is nothing small in God’s sight. To us these things may appear insignificant, but all have been created with a purpose, and go to complete the wonderful work of the creation” (203). Her goal in *Pearls and Pebbles* is to awaken in children a sublime appreciation of nature. Toby’s exhibit of dead kittens has no place in a work in which animals serve as pastoral examples of God’s handiwork. Nor does “The True History” match the tone that Traill cultivates in *Pearls and Pebbles*, which opens with a romanticized account of her childhood “in an old Elizabethan mansion.” Absent is any hint of financial deprivation or family trouble. This is in keeping with her desire that her life be represented through “the flowers rather than the thorns that had strewn her path” (ii). Instead, in her recollections, she and her siblings occupy themselves in harmonious rustic activities, modelling appropriate behaviour for her readers (3-8). In reality, from their surviving family correspondence, we know that the Stricklands were far more rambunctious, fractious, wilful, and inventive. Perhaps it is because Traill did not attempt to gloss such matters in “The True History” that it still reads, almost 150 years after its original publication, as remarkably fresh and uncontrived.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ Biographical information on the Stricklands can be found in both Gray and Peterman.

² That Emma saw herself as a businesswoman is evident in the 1871 census for Yoxford, in which she identifies as a retired bookseller.

³ For the date of Agnes and Susanna Strickland's first meeting with the Birds, see Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman 10. Walter Strickland Bird can be traced through census records from 1841 to 1891. He was successful in photographic publishing and died quite wealthy. His full name is cited in both marriage and probate records. In a letter to James Bird of 27 April 1828, Moodie comments on "the joyful event of the birth of your son and his dear Mothers [sic] safety" (23-24).

⁴ Some are preserved in the archives in the Suffolk County Record Office, Ipswich. In Canada, Library and Archives Canada holds copies.

⁵ James Bird, Jr. appears as James Hawke in Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Rachel Wilde: Or, Trifles from the Burthen of a Life*.

⁶ This made him eight years older than the eldest Strickland, Elizabeth, born in 1794. It is unknown if he is the John mentioned in Moodie's letter of 9 November 1827, though it seems possible that he was a cottager at Reydon Hall (Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, *Susanna Moodie* 19-20). John Fenn appears in the 1841 census for Wangford, Suffolk, as a rat catcher. His household included his wife, Rebecca, and his children Frederick (ca. 1826-?) and John (ca. 1821-after 1881). Peter was already married by this time; John's daughters Elizabeth (1819-?) and Emma (1822-?) were presumably residing elsewhere.

⁷ In this story, the dairy maid Dorcas fears that her suitor, Peter Fenn, is betraying her. Peter, a practical ploughman in service to Farmer Drake, demonstrates an advanced sense of poetic language at perceived odds with his station. Agnes Strickland included this tale in *Old Friends and New Acquaintances* (1860). The same story was published in 1838 as "The Valentines" in Boston, but I have been unable to trace it to its original place of publication. Presumably, Strickland was correct on the matter of the longer title. Intriguingly, she names Peter "Piper" in the title and "Fenn" in the piece. She might have intended to amend the portrait and forgotten.

⁸ Amelia Fenn and Joseph Wigg were married by banns on 7 December 1873 in the borough of Tower Hamlets, London. Later census records indicate that Wigg was a carpenter; he might have been the carpenter named Wigg who occasionally worked for the Stricklands (Pope-Hennessey 280, 315).

⁹ Felicia was not a common name at the time. If Traill did preserve the first name of the individual, then it is possible that she was Miss Felicia Haxell of nearby Halesworth, who lived with her widowed brother, Ebenezer Bentfield Haxell, a gentleman of independent means. Miss Haxell was born in 1811, which made her a suitable age to be the Miss Bell of this story. They appear in the 1841 census and elsewhere.

¹⁰ For a brief discussion of Moodie, Traill, and American publishing, see Peterman, "In Search."

¹¹ Unfortunately, no letters between Traill and TDFB or the *Christian Register* office have been found. TDFB's diaries and papers, which might have given us more insight into any professional relationship between the women, were lost and probably destroyed in the mid-twentieth century, casualties of a family squabble. For more on the life and publishing career of TDFB, see Harris.

¹² In her nature writings in *Pearls and Pebbles*, Traill continues to attribute human thoughts and emotions to her animal subjects, but to a lesser extent, and does not endow them with human consciousness or the ability to narrate. Instead, she imagines what they *might* say. See, for instance, the brown wren in "Memories of a May Morning."

¹³ In *Sketches from Nature*, Traill writes of her brother Tom's "mongrel dog called Rover" (107).

¹⁴ The unnamed sister is probably Susanna, who maintained a close friendship with the Birds, as evident in their surviving letters.

¹⁵ In the section titled "Tom Wilson's Emigration" in *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie relays a story about a woman whose brother had a donkey named Braham. It appears that Moodie is referencing herself, her brother Tom, and the same donkey. This contradicts claims elsewhere that the Stricklands did not have a donkey; clearly, at times they did and on other occasions borrowed one (Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, *Susanna Moodie* 19).

¹⁶ This story, if it was ever completed, has not been located. If the dog Keeper was indeed real, then the Stricklands might have named it after the eponymous canine in Edward Augustus Kendall's popular 1798 novel *Keeper's Travels in Search of His Master*. Kendall's tale was deemed to be groundbreaking in its representation of animals in literature in naturalistic terms and in this way directly or indirectly influenced Traill's own representations of animals.

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