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Dead and Out Of Place? Revisiting Roughing It in the Bush

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**Dead and Out Of Place? Revisiting
*Roughing It in the Bush***

Roughing It in the Bush, by **SUSANNA MOODIE**, edited by Michael Peterman. Norton, 2007, \$30

Mark Hurdlestone: Or, the Two Brothers, by **SUSANNA MOODIE** De Witt & Davenport, 1853.

Reviewed by **ELISE J. MITCHELL**

Last fall, on the way to work, I noticed an enormous dead bird on the side of the road. Judging by its size and colour, I thought that it might be a bird of prey and decided to pull over. Instead, it was a Canada goose, its neck bent backwards at a terrible angle, its buff breast feathers ruffled up.

I had never seen a Canada goose close up before, knowing from an unfortunate childhood experience that it is better to interact with geese from a distance. So I took my time examining the animal, struck by the delicate patterns on the feathers. It wasn't as exciting as finding a flammulated owl or a northern Goshawk, perhaps, but it was a very different perspective on something that is often so familiar as to be unremarkable.

For the tenth anniversary issue of *The Goose*, I am proposing a re-reading of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, at least in part because Moodie and her work are a little like a Canada goose: Moodie's writing is beautiful, messy, mean, vigorous, and full of wonder.

Moodie's writing is also a little like roadkill: a tangible reminder of our intersection with and effect on the nonhuman, as well as a sharp reminder of our limited perspective. Moodie's

experience of the nonhuman—not only in the Canadian landscape, but in the English landscape as well—is consciously fragmentary. She attempts, through writing, to understand her environment, and regularly fails. And yet, this fragmented, untidy, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt at understanding may be a productive tool for exploring human-nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene. It is no longer possible to think we can know a place or an ecosystem completely, and the uncertainty in *Roughing It* touches on this instability.

Moodie's feelings about bears are fairly representative of her experience with the nonhuman. The idea of their existence terrifies her:

This foolish dread of encountering wild beasts in the woods I never could wholly shake off, even after becoming a constant resident in their gloomy depths. (276)

This absent yet threatening bear is balanced by the material existence of actual, wild bears. In this case her tone is one of pragmatism as well as the earthy familiarity of the everyday. She gives a detailed description of bear meat—"in flavour resembling beef, while the short grain and juicy nature of the flesh gave to it the tenderness of mutton" (270)—and describes a bear's raid on her own livestock as farcical:

It was a laughable scene . . . Moodie, in his night-shirt, taking aim at something in the darkness, surrounded by the terrified animals; old Jenny, with a large knife in her

hand, holding on to the white skirts of her master's garment, making outcry loud enough to frighten away all the wild beasts in the bush—herself almost in a state of nudity. . . . I, for my part, stood at the open door, laughing until the tears ran down my cheeks. (272)

Moodie experiences the bear in a range of human and anthropomorphized ways, and yet never discounts the unseen bear. It is as though, while she has observed one dead bear, she is aware that she does not know the others. She is willing to hold what she knows of bears (the flesh), what she has seen of bears (the chase), and what she does not know of bears (the wild beasts) in tension with each other.

To gain a new perspective on Moodie, I also suggest reading *Roughing It* in conjunction with Moodie's 1853 novel *Mark Hurdlestone, or, The Two Brothers*. This wordy, convoluted romance—which might be compared to a dodo—magnifies Moodie's concerns about home and the nonhuman, and, as Marion Fowler points out, the two texts are often reflections of one another.

Over and over again, *Mark Hurdlestone* shows a corruption and destruction of an ideal "Home" and "Nature"; characters are constantly faced with the dissolution of their safe spaces, both indoor and outdoor, and thrown out into the world with only the wrecks of their ideals for comfort. The perfect home and the absent home are juxtaposed, as with Juliet Whitmore's perfect ideal and Mary Mathews' dispossession:

"Dear home! why did I leave it?
There is something pure and holy in

the very air of home. See, papa! there is the church spire rising above the trees. The dear old elm trees! We shall have time to think here, to hope, to pray" "Home!" said [Mary] gloomily. "I have no home. The wide world is my home, and 'tis a bad place for the motherless and moneyless to live in. My father is dead; Mr. — seized our things yesterday for the rent, and turned us out into the streets; my brother is gone to Ashton to look for employment, and I thought this place was as good as another" (Ch. 22)

The characters' range of emotions, from despair to terror to resignation, mirror Moodie's fluctuating acceptance of her new circumstances, articulating both Moodie's desire for the English ideal home and her realization that it is unattainable. More so, even, Mary Mathews' position in the road puts her in a transitional space, everywhere and nowhere, like Moodie herself; the succession of temporary home spaces Moodie has experienced in Canada have shown her that to be human is to be permanently displaced.

Susanna Moodie's writing was imperfect, she was herself imperfect, and her vision of the nonhuman is anthropocentric and incomplete. And yet, she is compelling, both personally and ecocritically. She should not necessarily be given pride of place in the Canadian ecocritical conversation—after all, she's a Canada goose, not a flammulated owl. However, recent developments in ecocritical theory, notably the movement towards a more holistic ecological consciousness that includes the displaced, the dirty, and the ugly, are coherent with

her worldview and might serve to bring Moodie back into the ecocritical conversation.

Reviewer's Note: *Roughing It in the Bush* is available in several editions. The text for all of the major editions (New Canadian Library, Penguin, Norton Critical Edition) is that of the amended second edition of *Roughing It* from July of 1852. *Mark Hurdlestone* is available in its original

format on Project Gutenberg (gutenberg.org).

Works Cited

Fowler, Marian. *The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada*. Concord, ON: Anansi, 1982. Print.

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