

Catharine Parr Traill



*Pearls and
Pebbles; or,
Notes of an Old
Naturalist*

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

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Mrs. Traill's book was already in the press when I was requested by the publisher to write a short biographical sketch of the author's life as an introduction.

Both time and space were limited, and I undertook the task with much anxiety, knowing that with such and other limitations I could scarcely expect to do the subject justice.

I have endeavored to use Mrs. Traill's own notes and extracts from her letters, wherever available, hoping thus to draw a life-like picture rather than enumerate the incidents of her life or put the records of the past into "cold type."

I have dwelt particularly on the circumstances of Mrs. Traill's childhood and youth, which I believe went far to influence her later life and direct her literary labors, and because they are also likely to be of greater interest to the public and the readers of her books than a mere detailed record of her life.

When asked some years ago by the editor of the *Young Canadian* to write a sketch of Mrs. Traill's life for its columns, the rider to the request was added that she "wished the sketch to be written with a loving pen—one that would depict the flowers rather than the thorns that had strewn her path," and I have in these few lines kept that kindly wish in view.

If I have failed to satisfy myself or others with my work, it has not been from lack of love for the honored and valued authoress of "Pearls and Pebbles."

May we keep her long to bless us with her loving smile and happy, trustful spirit, and enrich our literature still further with the products of her graceful pen.

Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon.

Toronto, December 4th, 1894.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

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Although the family from which Catharine Parr Strickland (Mrs. Traill) is descended was one of considerable note and standing in the northern counties of England, her immediate ancestor was born and spent the greater part of his life in London.

The cause of the migration of this branch of the Strickland house was the unexpected return of Catharine's great-grandfather's elder and long-lost brother. He had been hidden at the Court of the exiled Stuarts, at St. Germain's, and returned, after an absence of upwards of twenty years, to claim the paternal estate of Finsthwaite Hall and its dependencies. He not only established his claim, but, with an ungenerous hand, grasped all the rents and revenues accruing to the property, and his nephew, then a student at Winchester College, disdaining to ask any favors of his uncle, left the now reduced comforts of Light Hall, his mother's jointure house, and went to seek his fortune in the metropolis. Being successful in the quest, he, after a time, married Elizabeth Cotterell, of the loyal Staffordshire family of that name, and maternally descended from one of the honest Penderel brothers, who protected Charles II. in the oak at Boscobel, and succeeded, through their intrepid loyalty to the house of Stuart, in effecting his escape.

Of this marriage there were eight children: Thomas, born in 1758; Samuel, in 1760, and two sisters. The remaining

four fell victims to the small-pox, at that date an almost inevitably fatal disease.

Thomas, who was Catharine's father, early obtained employment with the ship-owners, Messrs. Hallet & Wells, and through them became master and sole manager of the Greenland docks, a position which threw him in the way of meeting many of the great men and explorers of the last century. He was twice married, first to a grand-niece of Sir Isaac Newton, and through her he came into possession of a number of books and other treasures formerly belonging to that celebrated scientist. Mrs. Strickland died within a few years of her marriage, having had only one child, a daughter, who died in infancy; and in 1793 Mr. Strickland married, as his second wife, Elizabeth Homer, who was destined to be the mother of a family of nine, five of whom have made a name in the literary annals of the century. Elizabeth and Agnes, afterward joint authoresses of "The Lives of the Queens of England," and each the writer of other historical biographies, poetry and other works; Sara and Jane, the latter author of "Rome, Regal and Republican," and other historical works, were born in London, Kent. There, also, on January 9th, 1802, Catharine Parr was born, and though named after the last queen of Henry VIII., who was a Strickland, she has always spelt her first name with a "C," and was ever known in the home circle by the more endearing words "the Katie."

Mr. Strickland's health being affected by too close application to business, he was advised to retire and take up his residence in the more bracing climate of the eastern counties.

After living a few months at "The Laurels," in Thorpe, near Norwich, he rented "Stowe House," an old place in the valley of the Waveney, not far from the town of Bungay.

"The first and happiest days of my life were spent at 'Stowe House,' in that loveliest of lovely valleys the Waveney," she writes; and truly there is no spot in all England that can vie with it in pastoral beauty.

The highroad between Norwich and London passes behind the site of the old house, separated and hidden from it by the high, close-cropped hedge and noble, wide-spreading oaks. The house (pulled down only within the last few years) stood on the slope of the hill, and below, at the foot of the old world gardens and meadows, the lovely river winds its silvery way to the sea. The green hills, the projecting headlands, the tiny hamlets clustered about the ivy-covered church towers of fifteenth and sixteenth century architecture; the beauty of the velvety meadows and the hawthorn hedges; the red-tiled cottages with their rose-clad porches, and beyond, against the sky, the old grey towers and massive walls of that grand old stronghold, the Castle of Bungay, where the fierce Earl Marshal of England had defied the might and menace of the "King of all Cockayne and all his braverie," altogether form a scene it would be difficult to equal in any quarter of the globe.

Among other rooms in "Stowe House," there was a small brick-paved parlor, which was given up entirely to the children. Here they learned their lessons, waited in their white dresses for the footman to summon them to the dining-room for dessert, or played when debarred by

unpropitious weather from the "little lane," so prettily described by Mrs. Traill in "Pleasant Days of my Childhood."

Many anecdotes and stories have been told me by the elder sisters of the hours spent within the oak-panelled walls and by the great fire-place of the brick parlor, of the pranks and mischief hatched there against the arbitrary rule of a trusted servant who hated the "Lunnon children" in proportion as she loved the Suffolk-born daughters of the house. Here they learned and acted scenes from Shakespeare, pored over great leather-bound tomes of history, such as a folio edition of Rapin's "History of England," with Tyndall's notes, and printed in last century type. Here Agnes and Elizabeth repeated to the younger children Pope's "Homer's Iliad," learned out of Sir Isaac Newton's own copy, or told them stories from the old chronicles.

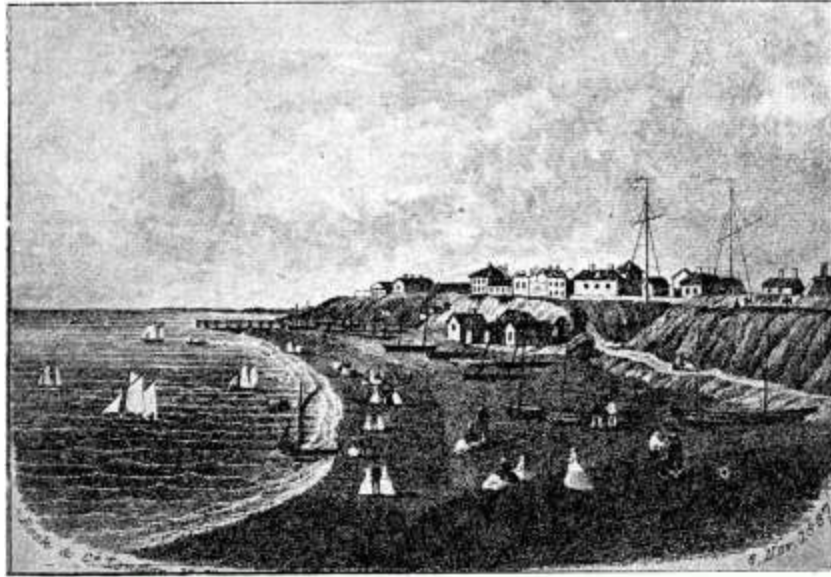
Mr. Strickland was a disciple of Isaak Walton and a devoted follower of the "gentle craft," but being a great sufferer from the gout, required close attendance. Katie generally accompanied him to the river, and though Lockwood, a man-servant who had been with him many years, was always at hand, Katie could do much to help her father, and became very expert in handling his fishing-tackle, while still a very small child. One of Mrs. Traill's most treasured possessions now is a copy of the first edition of "The Compleat Angler," which formerly belonged to her father.

When talking of her childhood, Sara (Mrs. Gwillym) always spoke of "the Katie" as the idolized pet of the household. "She was such a fair, soft blue-eyed little darling,

always so smiling and happy, that we all adored her. She never cried like other children—indeed we used to say that Katie never saw a sorrowful day—for if anything went wrong she just shut her eyes and the tears fell from under the long lashes and rolled down her cheeks like pearls into her lap. My father idolized her. From her earliest childhood she always sat at his right hand, and no matter how irritable or cross he might be with the others, or from the gout, to which he was a martyr, he never said a cross word to 'the Katie.'"

"Stowe House" was only a rented property, and when, in 1808, "Reydon Hall," near Wangford, fell into the market, Mr. Strickland bought it and removed his family to the new home at the end of the year.

"Well do I remember the move to Reydon that bitter Christmas Eve," said Mrs. Traill, when speaking of it on last Thanksgiving Day, her eyes shining as bright as a child's with the recollection. "The roads were deep in snow, and we children were sent over in an open tax-cart with the servants and carpenters. It was so cold they rolled me up in a velvet pelisse belonging to Eliza to keep me from freezing, but I was as merry as a cricket all the way, and kept them laughing over my childish sallies. We stopped at a place called 'Deadman's Grave' to have some straw put into the bottom of the cart to keep us warm. No, I shall never forget that journey to Reydon through the snow."



GUN HILL, SOUTHWOLD BEACH.

A fine old Elizabethan mansion, of which the title-deed dates back to the reign of Edward VI., "Reydon Hall" was a *beau ideal* residence for the bringing up of a family of such precious gifts as the Strickland sisters. It stands back from the road behind some of the finest oaks, chestnuts and ashes in the county. Built of dark brick, its ivy-covered wall, its gabled roof, tall chimneys, stone-paved kitchen, secret chambers and haunted garrets suited both their imaginative and fearless natures. A magnificent sycamore in the centre of the lawn, a dell at the end of "the plantation" (as a wide open semi-circular belt of oaks was called), and the beautiful Reydon Wood to the north, on the Earl of Stradbroke's property, formed a grand environment for the development of their several characteristics.

Mr. Strickland educated his elder daughters himself, and having a fine library, they were given an education far superior to that which generally fell to the lot of the daughters of that date. He had purchased a house in

Norwich, and always spent some months of the year in that beautiful old cathedral city, and as the attacks of gout increased in frequency, was obliged to reside there during the winter. He was generally accompanied by one or two of his daughters, his wife dividing her time as much as possible between the two houses. During her absence from Reydon, the care and education of the younger children devolved upon their eldest sister Elizabeth.

That the literary bent showed itself early will be seen by the following account, which I cannot refrain from giving as much in Mrs. Traill's own words as possible:

"We passed our days in the lonely old house in sewing, walking in the lanes, sometimes going to see the sick and carry food or little comforts to the cottagers; but reading was our chief resource. We ransacked the library for books, we dipped into old magazines of the last century, such as Christopher North styles 'bottled dulness in an ancient bin,' and dull enough much of their contents proved. We tried history, the drama, voyages and travels, of which latter there was a huge folio. We even tried 'Locke on the Human Understanding.' We wanted to be very learned just then, but as you may imagine, we made small progress in that direction, and less in the wonderfully embellished old tome, 'Descartes' Philosophy.' We read Sir Francis Knolles' 'History of the Turks,' with its curious wood-cuts and quaint old-style English. We dipped into old Anthony Horneck's book of 'Divine Morality,' but it was really *too* dry. We read Ward's 'History of the Reformation in Rhyme,' a book that had been condemned to be burnt by the common hangman. How this copy had escaped I never learned. I remember how it began:

"I sing the deeds of good King Harry,
And Ned his son and daughter Mary,
And of a short-lived inter-reign
Of one fair queen hight Lady Jane.'

"We turned to the *Astrologer's Magazine*, and so frightened the cook and housemaid by reading aloud its horrible tales of witchcraft and apparitions that they were afraid to go about after dark lest they should meet the ghost of old Martin, an eccentric old bachelor brother of a late proprietor of the Hall, who had lived the last twenty years of his life secluded in the old garret which still bore his name and was said to be haunted by his unlaidd spirit. This garret was a quaint old place, closeted round and papered with almanacs bearing dates in the middle of the past century. We children used to puzzle over the mystical signs of the Zodiac, and try to comprehend the wonderful and mysterious predictions printed on the old yellow paper. There was, too, a tiny iron grate with thin rusted bars, and the hooks that had held up the hangings of the forlorn recluse's bed. On one of the panes in the dormer windows there was a rhyme written with a diamond ring, and possibly of his own composition:

"In a cottage we will live,
Happy, though of low estate,
Every hour more bliss will bring,
We in goodness shall be great.—M. E.'

"We knew little of his history but what the old servants told us. He had never associated with the family when alive. His brother's wife made him live in the garret because she disliked him, and he seldom went

abroad. All the noises made by rats or the wind in that part of the house were attributed to the wanderings of poor Martin. There was also a little old woman in grey, who was said to 'walk' and to play such fantastic tricks as were sufficient to turn white the hair of those she visited in the small hours of the night.

"Had we lived in the days of 'spiritualism' we should have been firm believers in its mysteries. The old Hall with its desolate garrets, darkened windows, worm-eaten floors, closed-up staircase and secret recesses might have harbored a legion of ghosts—and as for rappings, we heard plenty of them. The maid-servants, who slept on the upper floor, where stood the huge mangle in its oaken frame (it took the strong arm of the gardener to turn the crank), declared that it worked by itself, the great linen rollers being turned without hands unless it were by those of ghosts. No doubt the restless little woman in grey had been a notable housewife in her time, and could not remain idle even after being in her grave for a century or more.

"To relieve the tedium of the dull winter days, Susan and I formed the brilliant notion of writing a novel and amusing ourselves by reading aloud at night what had been written during the day. But where should we find paper? We had no pocket-money, and even if we had been amply supplied there was no place within our reach where we could purchase the means of carrying out our literary ambitions. Enthusiastic genius is not easily daunted, and fortune favored us. In the best room there was a great Indian *papier-mache* chest with massive brass hinges and locks. It had contained the wardrobe of a young Indian prince who had been sent to England with an embassy to the Court of one

of the Georges. This chest was large enough to fill the space between the two windows, and hold the large rosewood and bamboo cot with its hangings of stiff cream-white brocaded silk embroidered with bunches of roses, the colors still brilliant and unfaded, alternating with strips worked in gold and silver thread. The four curtains of this luxuriant tented cot were looped with thick green ribbons. There were ancient damasks, silks, old court dresses that had belonged to some *grande dame* of Queen Anne's reign, and turbans of the finest India muslin of great length and breadth, yet of so fine a texture that the whole width of one could be drawn through a lady's finger-ring. My mother had also made the old chest a receptacle for extra stores of house-linen, and underneath all she had deposited many reams of paper, blotting-paper, and dozens of ready-cut quill pens which had been sent to our father on the death of his brother, who had been a clerk in the Bank of England. Here was treasure trove. We pounced on the paper and pens—their being cut adding much to their value—and from some cakes of Indian ink we contrived to manufacture respectable writing fluid. Among the old books in the library there was a fine atlas in two quarto volumes, full of maps and abounding in the most interesting geographical histories of the European countries, legends, the truth of which we never questioned, and flourishing descriptions that just suited our romantic ideas of places we had never seen but had no difficulty in picturing to ourselves. I chose the period of my hero William Tell, intending to write an interesting love tale; but I soon got my hero and heroine into an inextricable muddle, so fell out of love adventures altogether, and altering my plan ended by writing a juvenile tale, which I brought to a more satisfactory

conclusion. Every day we wrote a portion, and at night read it aloud to Sara. She took a lively interest in our stories and gave us her opinion and advice, of which we took advantage to improve them the following day. Not feeling quite sure of our mother's approval, we kept our manuscripts carefully concealed after her return, but we were in even greater dread of our eldest sister, knowing that she would lecture us on the waste of time.

"One morning I was sitting on the step inside our dressing-room door, reading the last pages of my story to Sara, when the door behind me opened and a small white hand was quietly placed on mine and the papers extracted. I looked at Sara in dismay. Not a word had been spoken, but I knew my mother's hand, and the dread of Eliza's criticism became an instant reality; and her 'I think you had been better employed in improving your grammar and spelling than in scribbling such trash,' sounded cruelly sarcastic to my sensitive ears. I, however, begged the restoration of the despised manuscript, and obtained it under promise to curl my hair with it.

"I did in truth tear up the first part, but a lingering affection for that portion of it containing the story of the 'Swiss Herd-boy and his Alpine Marmot,' induced me to preserve it, and I have the rough copy of that story now in my possession."

Early in the spring of the following year, May 18th, 1818, Mr. Strickland died at Norwich. The sudden tidings of the failure of a firm in which he had allowed his name to remain as a sleeping partner or guarantor, and the consequent loss of the principal part of his private income, brought on an

aggravated attack of the gout, which terminated fatally. Katie had spent the winter with him and her sisters Eliza and Agnes in the town house. Mrs. Strickland was at Reydon, but was to return the following day to prepare for the usual move to the old Hall for the summer.

Mr. Strickland's sudden death was a great shock to his family, and Katie grieved much for him. He had always been indulgent to her, and his loss was her first sorrow, the first cloud on her young life. Here I may quote again from her own notes:

"We had often heard our father express a wish to be buried in some quiet churchyard beyond the walls of the city, in the event of his death taking place before his return to Reydon, and in accordance with that wish he was laid to rest at Lakenham, a lovely rural spot about two miles from Norwich. There we three sisters, true mourners, often resorted during the summer evenings to visit the dear father's resting-place, and bring a loving tribute of fresh flowers to strew upon the grave."

The house in Norwich was retained, and as the two brothers were attending Dr. Valpy's school, the two elder sisters and Katie remained there. Elizabeth, having been her father's amanuensis and confidante, had much to do in connection with business matters. Agnes was not strong, and requiring frequent change of air, was much away visiting friends. Katie was thus left very much to herself.

"I had access to the city library, so that I had no lack of reading matter, and my needle, varied by a daily walk to the garden below the city wall, occupied a

good deal of my time. The garden was shut in by a high paling and was quite private. I spent many hours in this retreat with my books, and it was at this time that I ventured once more to indulge the scribbling fever which had been nipped in the bud by adverse criticism the preceding year. I was a great lover of the picturesque, and used to watch with intense interest the Highland drovers as they passed to the great Norwich market. I admired their blue bonnets' and the shepherd's plaids they wore so gracefully across breast and shoulder, and the rough coats of the collie dogs that always accompanied them, and often listened to the wild notes of the bagpipes. Scotland was the dream of my youth. Its history and poetry had taken a strong hold on my fancy, and I called the first story I wrote at this time, 'The Blind Highland Piper.' The next was inspired by a pretty little lad with an earnest face and bright golden curls peeping from under a ragged cap. He carried a wooden yoke on his shoulders, from which were suspended two water-pails. He passed the window so often to and fro that I grew to watch for him, and give him a little nod and smile to cheer his labors day by day. I never knew his history, so I just made one for him myself, and called my story after him, 'The Little Water-Carrier.' Thus I amused myself until my collection comprised some half-dozen tales. One day I was longer than usual absent at the city wall garden gathering red currants, and had unwittingly left my manuscript on the writing-table. On my return, to my confusion and dismay, I found it had been removed. I could not summon courage to question my sister about it, so said nothing of my loss. A few days passed, and I began to fear it had been burned, but on the next visit of our guardian, Mr. Morgan, on business connected with my father's estate, he said to my eldest sister, 'Eliza, I did

not know that you had time for story-writing.'

"My sister looked up in surprise and asked him what he meant. Taking my lost property out of his pocket he replied, 'I found this manuscript open on the table, and, looking over its pages, became at once interested and surprised at your work.'

"Eliza looked inquiringly at me, and though confused and half frightened, I was obliged to claim the papers as mine.

"Our kind friend then added as he rolled up the manuscript and replaced it in his pocket, 'Well, Katie, I am going to correct this for you,' and I, glad to escape without a rebuke for waste of time or indulging in such idle fancies, thought no more of my stories. A month afterwards Mr. Morgan, with a smiling face, put into my hands five golden guineas, the price paid for my story by Harris the Publisher, in St. Paul's Churchyard, London."

Thus was Mrs. Traill the first of the Strickland sisters to enter the ranks of literature, as she is now the last survivor of that talented *coterie*. The unexpected success of Katie's first venture no doubt induced her sisters to send their MSS. to the publishers. How their work has been recognized is matter of history.

"The Blind Highland Piper, and Other Tales" was so well received by the public that Katie was employed by Harris to write another for his House. "Nursery Tales" proved a greater success, although the remuneration she received was not increased. She next wrote for the Quaker House of Messrs. Darton & Harvey, "Prejudice Reproved," "The Young

Emigrants," "Sketches from Nature," "Sketch Book of a Young Naturalist," and "The Stepbrothers." This firm paid her more liberally than Harris, and it was with the utmost delight and pleasure that she sent the proceeds of her pen to her mother at Reydon, grateful that she was able to help even in so small a way to eke out the now reduced income of the home.

Messrs. Dean & Mundy published "Little Downy, the Field-mouse," and "Keepsake Guinea, and Other Stories," in 1822. Many other short stories were written and published in the various Annuals issued between that year and Katie's marriage in 1832. "Little Downy, the Field-mouse" was the most popular, and is, I believe, still in print. None of the early works of the sisters were written over their own names, and a late edition of this story was issued by the publishers over Susanna's (Mrs. Moodie) name, and though both the sisters wrote protesting against the blunder and requesting a correction, no notice was taken of their letters.

"Little Downy was a real mouse," said Mrs. Traill recently, when speaking of her early works, "and I well remember how I wrote its story. I used to sit under the great oak tree near where it lived, and watch the pretty creature's frisky, frolicing 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 in an old copy-book, then ran out again to watch the gentle dear and write some more."

During the years which intervened between the death of her father and her marriage, nothing of very great moment occurred in Katie's life, save the falling in of a small legacy

as her share of a deceased uncle's property. She made occasional visits to London, where she stayed with a cousin of her father's or with other friends—visits full of interest from the people she met, the glimpses obtained of fashionable life, and the often amusing adventures which ever fall to the lot of those who go about the world with their eyes open. Katie's brilliant complexion, soft beauty and sunny smile won her the love and admiration of all with whom she came in contact, and she was always a welcome guest with old and young alike.

The means at Reydon were narrow, and in those days poverty was regarded almost as a crime, so they lived quietly in the old Hall, sufficient society for each other, and each pursuing the line of study in accordance with the particular bent of her individual genius.

Susanna had married in 1831, and come with her husband^[1] to live at Southwold, and it was at their house that Katie met her future husband. Mr. Thomas Traill belonged to one of the oldest families in Orkney. He was also a friend and brother officer of Mr. Moodie's in the 21st Royal Scotch Fusiliers, and the two families of Moodie and Traill had been connected by marriage in more than one generation. Educated at Baliol College, Oxford, in the same year with Lockhart, who was an intimate friend, Mr. Traill could number many of the great writers and men of the day among his acquaintances, and knew many anecdotes of Scott, Giffard, Jeffreys and Wilson. He had married first an Orkney lady, and her health requiring a warmer climate, he had lived abroad for several years and enjoyed the opportunity of meeting some of the great men of literature