

THE 19TH-CENTURY CANADIAN SETTLERS' EXPERIENCE AS MYTH OF THE PROMISED LAND

Monica Stellan*

Recent studies on cultural memory acknowledge the influence the past holds on the present. One text that lends itself to discussing both Canadian and Italian cultural memories is *Emigranti: Quattro anni al Canada*. It combines representations of myths present both in Canadian and Italian culture in the 19th century, especially that of the Promised Land.

L'esperienza dei coloni canadesi nel XIX secolo quale mito della terra promessa.

Studi recenti sulla memoria culturale riconoscono l'influsso che il passato ha sul presente. Un testo che si offre a una discussione della memoria culturale sia canadese che italiana è *Emigranti: Quattro anni al Canada*. Sono presenti alcuni miti distinguibili sia nella cultura canadese che italiana, come quello della terra promessa.

Canadian, British and Italian cultural memories

Recent studies on Canadian literature have focused on cultural memory, acknowledging the ongoing influence the past holds on the present, both consciously and unconsciously (Sugars). According to Assman, Western societies are immersed in a "culture of memory" (Erll 33). «The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images and rituals specific to each society in each epoch whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image» (132). Written texts in particular are of great significance in comprehending how the cultural past informs the present.

A written text that offers itself to a study in cultural memory is *Emigranti: Quattro Anni al Canada*. It is a personal memoir that was first serialized in an Italian journal for young readers in 1896. That same year the *Rivista per le Signorine* published it again as a single volume, which was updated in a new edition in 1907. The author of the memoir, Anna Maria Moroni Parken, was a British native who, after spending her youth in England, moved to Mi-

* Wilfrid Laurier University.

lan, Italy, in the 1870s. She lived there for the rest of her life with her Italian family, except for a few years spent in Canada in the 1880s. Her account presented her experience as a settler in the Muskoka region to a readership not well acquainted with Canada's colonization or immigrant experience. *Emigranti* could be considered a transcultural text, written in Italian for an Italian readership but Anglo-Canadian in content. The account conveys a description of the Canadian past, adding another piece to the mosaic of its cultural memory.

Many were the journals, quarterlies, monthlies, bi-weeklies and weeklies, published in Italy at the time, especially those for women and children. After the creation of the nation-state in 1861, politicians, intellectuals and activists felt the responsibility of assisting novel Italians in becoming active participants in the life of their new homeland, while aiding in the creation of a school system to reduce high levels of illiteracy and promoting the participation of women in society. In this cultural context Moroni Parken's memoir was presented as the example of a woman, daughter, wife and mother who, thanks to her strength and determination, fought against circumstances she was totally unprepared for (Stellin).

As a text that presented a first-hand account of life experiences and adventures in a far-away country, in Italy its appreciation was influenced by the literary trends and taste of the readers of the time. Although based on real-life events, they saw a brave and resolute woman fighting for her family, a heroine who faced battles for survival which reminded the readers of those in adventure and youth literature, where a hero would face great ordeals. Adventure novels had become quite popular in Italy after the 18th century. Usually, the plot presented a situation of relative stability being disrupted by unexpected events. The protagonist would be put to the test and overcome a series of ordeals, most importantly within himself/herself; the happy ending would confirm both the success of the endeavour as well as the moral and spiritual growth of the main character¹.

Moroni Parken's text can be considered also in the context of the Italian literature of migration to Canada, which is for the most part autobiographical; it is based on the memory of the authors' migratory experience and conveys an inner change and transformation, the impact that experience brought about in their authors' lives and ways of being. These works show how multifaceted but

¹ Although shunned by the critics, at the time one of the most popular Italian authors of the genre was Emilio Salgari, who wrote adventure novels depicting both heroes and heroines in remote and exotic lands, including the American Far West. His works remained widely popular also during Fascism, even though they conveyed an anti-colonialist stance.

always intense the psychological or emotional consequences of their encounter with the unknown could be (Stellin).

Emigranti

Emigranti is an account which the author wrote a few years after going back to Italy, basing her narration on her memories of the journey and experiences in the wilderness. It was published in Italy, with the intent of making her adventures known in the Italian language to an Italian readership. She presented herself as a member of an Italian family, with Italian children and friends and states it clearly: «Benché inglese di nascita, sono moglie e madre di italiani ...» (76)².

Nonetheless, her account reflects in its content, ways and cultural traits the experience of British immigrants (in particular English and Irish) to Canada in the second half of the 19th century, rather than being representative of the Italian immigrant experience of that time. If there were other Italian immigrants in the area at the time of her stay, she does not say. The majority of Italian immigrants in that period were single men, coming to this land mainly as sojourners; women were very few, as were the families accompanying them. Italian men came mainly to work as labourers in construction projects such as the Canadian Pacific Railway. Italian navvies were employed in a local project, the Northern and Pacific Junction Railway line around 1885-1886³. However, her account narrates the experiences of an Anglo-Italian immigrant family (and Canadian settlers) in a period particularly significant in Canadian history. It also contributes to the enrichment of that collective imagery and cultural memory relevant for today's Canadians in representing their past.

Her stay in the Muskoka region took place approximately between 1881 and 1885⁴. According to her account, their decision to emigrate was determined by her

² As was customary at the time, she published her memoir under a more Italianized version of her name (Moroni Parken).

³ «A great many of the navvies are Italians. Although not as strong as Canadians they are steady and do good work. They lived exclusively on bread. Every month regularly they send their earnings home to Italy, a New York banker of their own nationality acting as their agent. They do this because, like the Chinese, they intend to return to their sunny clime as soon as they become rich enough to purchase a few acres of land upon which to live there» (*American Contract Journal*).

⁴ In the final paragraph of the last chapter entitled "Alcuni anni dopo," which seems to have been added to the second edition to inform the reader on what happened to some members of her family over the years, she asserts that her son Warwick was twenty-two years old (at the time of the preparation of the second edition in 1907). According to her story, her son was still an infant when they finally returned to Italy.

husband's poor health together with an unfortunate financial setback; also, her own family, father, mother and brother, had already moved to Muskoka from England. She would live in the wilderness for four years, adapting to the settlers' life with remarkable strength. However, after some time the situation became arduous to manage, because of her husband's continuing illness, the separation from her brother and parents who moved to Florida and a large family to take care of. Thanks to the solidarity of other settlers they were able to survive and returned to Italy⁵.

The preoccupation and awareness of the risks involved were inevitable emotions in her immigrant experience which never subdued her will to succeed in starting a new and challenging life. Especially when describing her first stay in Muskoka, her hopeful attitude reaches moments of sincere enthusiasm for that new life:

Quando arrivammo finalmente alla capanna, lasciammo cadere le braccia indolenzite e alzammo la testa ad ammirare il paesaggio intorno. Non eravamo scoraggiati: sembrava che le difficoltà accrescessero in noi il desiderio di lavorare per vincerle e che l'aria stessa fosse esilarante. La vita che ci aspettava era così nuova, così diversa da tutte le nostre abitudini, che il lavoro stesso ci pareva un divertimento (33).

For her, Canada is not a hostile land. Thanks also to the presence of her parents and brother she can live the gradual process of adaptation to a life radically different from her Italian one as *a return home*: «Ci allontanavamo sempre più dalla civiltà, ma ci avvicinavamo ai nostri cari che ci aspettavano. Era un conforto per me il pensare: 'Anch'essi hanno superato queste difficoltà, anch'essi sono passati di qui» (13).

Overall her life in the Canadian wilderness is depicted as a positive experience, which even in moments of despair has something to teach her and her family. Later, at the end of her sojourn, just before leaving Canada, she writes:

Io mi preparavo col pensiero all'ardua lotta che mi aspettava nell'avvenire; agli altri, quegli anni di Canada sembravano perduti, ma io sentivo in me che avevano fruttato: l'avversità e il duro lavoro ci avevano temprato l'animo e Iddio ci aveva dato numerose prove della sua bontà onnipotente là ove non pareva possibile sperare aiuto (135).

In her representation of how she began a rural life based on manual work in the woods, without the commodities or services of an urban setting, she is to be admired for her pragmatism and realism, and for her strong personality.

⁵ The fact that Moroni Parken had to abandon her farm was undeniably caused by her personal situation of not being able to cope with such an environment. But, due to its poor farming conditions, Muskoka overall had a high percentage of abandoned farms over the years (Wodlinger 6).

Moroni Parken's story effectively portrays the combination of elements deriving from different cultures, periods and places, from her childhood in England, her married life in Italy and her settler life in Muskoka. Canada, in effect, becomes the utopian place, a promised land where all the different cultural characteristics of her identity could coexist without fearing any loss; rather they merge into a challenging but rewarding experience.

Many parts in her narration seem to want to demonstrate how early colonists in Muskoka did, in fact, show those qualities of remarkable resilience and spirit of adaptation to the most primitive and harsh conditions of life in the still unexplored forests. She herself gives the impression of being a very determined woman who practically leads her family in this amazing adventure. The other pioneers are always presented in a positive light, strong men and women who brought not only their hard work to this uncouth land, but also a sense of dignity and civilization. In narrating her arrival in Bracebridge, she gives her first description of the sturdy colonists:

Eravamo a Bracebridge, città fabbricata sulla collina, colle case di legno tutte eguali, messe in fila alla medesima distanza l'una dall'altra, lungo una strada, come giocattoli di bambini. Qualche pino qua e là non ancora atterrato faceva capire che anche lì qualche anno prima non c'erano che foreste. Uomini alti e tarchiati, con lunghe barbe, in camicie di flanella e capelloni di paglia, stavano sugli usci fumando, e riposando evidentemente dalle dure fatiche della giornata. Bambini ce n'era dappertutto, sulle soglie, nel mezzo della strada; tutti con un'aria dignitosa e di *self-reliance*, ovvero di fiducia in sé, effetto della loro educazione libera e forte (12).

Here we can appreciate not only her ability to describe pleasantly the scene in an effective visual manner, but also her admiration and esteem for these pioneers, feelings that constantly permeate her recounting. Similarly, describing English immigrants, she writes:

Nelle isolate radure ogni famiglia eleva la sua casa, taglia la legna, fa ogni lavoro manuale; giovinetti e fanciulle che hanno compiti sull'antico continente i loro studi superiori, si sentono felici di esplicitare così nuove facoltà che ignoravano; e nessuno di essi pensa che la coltura intellettuale sia sciupata, perché sentono che devono ad essa l'intimo piacere che dà loro quella nuova vita, il poter trovare in essa tanta poesia, tanta grandiosità, tanta pace (19).

A rewarding experience in the Canadian wilderness

According to Moroni Parken, not only are these immigrant families able to make good use of their formal education in the backwoods; they are also able to appreciate this new experience as a deeply enriching one, marrying their formal knowledge to the more practical one acquired in the wilderness. Several

times she points out how these settlers were educated and always took care of their cultural interests even in those primitive lands. They always tried to have something to read or study, either a book or verses by Latin poets or English authors such as Scott or Tennyson (31). When they had a chance, concerts were organized where the author herself sang. They tried to make a socializing event out of any occasion of collaboration and solidarity among them, organizing bees and work-parties, but also house-warming balls and surprise parties⁶.

Verso le cinque di uno splendido mattino arrivarono dal lago parecchie barche cariche di giovani armati di falci, allegri come se andassero a una festa e non a un lavoro faticoso. Dopo i saluti gentili e cordiali, lo scambio gradito di qualche libro e di notizie dei vicini, si misero all'opera, e non vi so dire che spettacolo allegro e confortante fosse quello per me! Tutti in fila nel prato, colle braccia che si muovevano in tempo regolare, colle falci che luccicavano al sole... l'erba pareva cadere per incanto, quasi fosse opera di un mago. Alle otto scesero dalla collina per la colazione, che si può immaginare quanto riuscisse gaia. In Europa non si può farsi un'idea di queste riunioni di lavoranti che maneggiano la falce col volto intelligente e gli occhi aperti, pieni di luce: di queste colazioni di giovani robusti che non bevono vino né liquori di sorta: di questi agricoltori che citano versi latini e conoscono tutti i poeti. E appunto la loro coltura e la loro educazione che fa loro sembrare un passatempo il lavoro, e non dà a un lavoro manuale idea di avvilimento. Questa giornata di falciatura pareva per essi un divertimento come fosse una partita a *lawn-tennis*. Qui sta la superiorità dell'inglese sopra tutti i coloni delle altre nazioni (104-105).

In remembering this particular episode, Moroni Parken conveys her gratitude for the help she received from these young colonists, but what surprises her modern reader the most are the style and images she adopts in describing this scene. Overall in her narration one can appreciate her narrative skills, her ability to depict simply and effectively the character of landscapes and people according to the literary taste of her time. She wrote an account that presents her life in Muskoka with clarity and adherence both to facts and feelings. But in describing the settlers, the wilderness becomes more and more a bucolic countryside, a promised land where the harshness of the rural world is mitigated by the positive and civilized spirit of these young English immigrants, who thus show their superiority. They represent in her opinion the quintessence of the good colonist, physically and psychologically strong, well-educated and capable in agriculture, morally sound, civilized and amiable.

Apart from the moments in her story when serious situations caused by the harsh weather conditions (such as lack of food supplies and wood for heating) are described, the realism of her recounting is too often lessened by an ideal-

⁶ Moroni Parken, 31, 65, 66-68, 74-77, 124, 134.

istic tone that, even if well expressed and somewhat acceptable, nevertheless makes her representation become almost a mythologization of the immigrant experience. However, Muskoka does not always turn into an Eden: in order for that idealization to become complete, the wilderness would have had to be represented as a world where hardships and adversities did not exist, or could all be overcome by those courageous pioneers.

Instead, her experience shows us how difficult it was to find a way of surviving even in that idyllic, and yet rough, world. The softened realism with which she describes those hardships is nevertheless successful in conveying the brutality of the environment, the rudeness of a pioneering life in those immense forests:

Dopo il nostro ritorno a casa cadde la neve per più di una settimana, con tale insistenza da coprire il ghiaccio all'altezza di un metro e bloccarci in casa separandoci da tutti per più di un mese. Io pensavo a mia madre, a mio padre, a mio fratello come se un oceano fosse tra noi: sapevo che malgrado la pena di saperci così chiusi nel nostro guscio, mezzo seppelliti nella neve, malgrado il desiderio ardente di venire a noi, non l'avrebbero potuto, e il mio spirito andava a loro e mi pareva in certi momenti che si scontrasse nell'aria gelida con quelli di loro, al di sopra di tutto quel candore, nel silenzio solenne della natura addormentata... Non ci mancava il nutrimento, ma si avvicinava il momento che non avremmo più avuto fuoco. Mio marito si era di nuovo ammalato e io vedevo con spavento diminuire la provvista della legna. Tentai più volte di andar nel bosco a tagliarne, ma la neve era così alta che dopo mezz'ora di faticoso lavoro per farmi una strada m'accorgevo di essere ancora lontana dal bosco (77-78).

This was the reality of the immigrant experience in the Canadian wilderness, an environment that could turn from being peaceful and idyllic into a threatening and frightening one.

However, Moroni Parken never describes nature as an evil force, but always as the edifying expression of God. Whatever the situation or weather, that beautiful natural environment has the effect of invigorating her both physically and psychologically, purifying her from any kind of contemptible feelings:

La vita faticosa in mezzo alla natura, in quell'aria sottile ed esilarante mi faceva l'effetto che non lasciasse stagnare le idee, e in certi momenti mi sembrava d'essere sotto l'influenza di uno stimolante.

Tutte le piccolezze, i rancori, i bassi sentimenti dell'uomo non avevano occasione di manifestarsi. Ove tutti sono uguali non c'è ragione di invidie, né di ambizioni; ove tutti hanno bisogno l'uno dell'altro non esiste che benevolenza e affezione, come tra membri di una sola famiglia. Le nostre più forti commozioni erano prodotte da fenomeni naturali, guidati dalla mano misteriosa di Dio, e ci tenevano come l'anima continuamente in alto; tutto intorno a noi, dal maestoso pino che contava secoli di vita, fino all'umile gramigna che nasceva spontaneamente dalle ceneri delle foreste arse, tutto ci parlava di lui. Non avevamo chiesa, ma tutto era tempio; non c'erano sermoni, ma ogni cosa intorno a noi ci insegnava ad amar Dio (30).

To illustrate how this immigrant experience in the wilderness was enriching and fulfilling, she impressively portrays the natural landscape that surrounded her as a creation of the Lord, where life regains its true fundamental meaning and human beings return to a form of pure communal existence, free from the corruptions of the more developed European society. The Canadian wilderness has a revitalizing effect on her and nature is as uplifting as it is powerful in creating a sense of intimacy with God in such silence and solitude.

A strong sense of solidarity and mutual assistance permeates her description of these settlers' life, but her egalitarianism is embedded in religious beliefs, besides immediate necessity. When it comes to foreseeing the evolution of that simple society, her awareness of social and economic distinctions again finds expression:

Ognuno lavora la propria terra e perciò non vi sono invidie né ambizioni, almeno nel presente. Verrà un giorno in cui i più laboriosi ed economi emergeranno e le differenze di condizione si accentueranno anche laggiù. Anche là forse spunteranno quegli odi contro i fortunati che turbano la società del vecchio continente. Ma sono essi giusti? Chi ha conquistato una fortuna deve forse rinunciarvi a pro di sconosciuti? Il trasmettere le proprie sostanze ai discendenti non è forse un dovere? Noi che ereditiamo dai nostri avi i loro difetti fisici e morali, non avremmo il diritto di ereditare anche la loro fortuna, che è quasi sempre il frutto di fatiche, di privazioni, o di virtù? Salvo casi eccezionali, la fortuna dunque è un diritto, e il chiamare ingiustizia che uno possieda più di un altro è un'assurdità (19-20).

These comments seem to pertain more to her social experience in Europe rather than in the New World and indicate how the recollection of her immigrant experience in Canada is influenced, with the passing of time, by a re-acquired Old World perspective upon re-emigrating, questioning contradictorily those same values she intends to praise. Her egalitarian vision is dissolved by her defence of what she considers necessary class distinctions and privileges, but she still appreciates that moment of utopia for the time it could last and the good it could provide.

If Moroni Parken envisions nature as a creation of God, her life in the wilderness also generates a sense of solitude and isolation: «Per molto tempo non potei vincere una certa paurosa sensazione d'isolamento che mi prendeva di notte. Se la Baby piangeva mi pareva che la sua voce dovesse risvegliare e attirare intorno a noi le bestie feroci della foresta...» (35). This motif of fearful isolation and survival is quite common in Canadian literature, influenced as it is by the peculiarities of the natural environment, but it also finds deeper meaning in the immigrant experience itself, with the feelings of estrangement and alienation that the migration process entails. About the first time Moroni Parken ventures outside with her husband during the night, she writes: «La no-

stra capanna era là nicchiata sotto l'ombra di un immenso faggio e gli alberi neri della foresta formavano intorno al nostro clearing una specie di muraglia» (36). This feeling of enclosure and barrier surrounding them reminds us of Susanna Moodie's accounts.

Conclusion

What renders Moroni Parken's account valuable and vital is that her story of migration to Canada and return to Italy is not flattened and homogenized by the perspective of her looking back at those moments, but rather she is able to recreate those years showing the evolving sequence of anxiety, excitement and gradual disappointment which the Canadian experience created in her. All these phases are effectively presented in the structure of the memoir, reflecting the transformation that life had produced in her, in an adventure that even in the circularity of a return journey, is still presented as an enlightening experience, a journey to the promised land and return. Moroni Parken's memoir confirms its character as a transcultural text, conveying traits of what are commonly referred to as the Canadian, British and Italian pasts. This transcultural memory informs the representation of a captivating human experience.

Works cited

- Assmann, Jan, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", transl. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique*, 65 (Spring - Summer, 1995): 125-133.
- Erl, Astrid, *Memory in Culture*, transl. by Sara B. Young, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan (Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies), 2011.
- Moodie, Susanna, *Roughing it in the Bush*, London, Richard Bentley, 1852.
- , *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, London, Richard Bentley, 1853.
- Moroni Parken, Anna, "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 3: 93-98.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 4: 130-134.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 5: 172-176.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 6: 213-218.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 7: 248-254.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 8: 293-296.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 9: 336-342.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 11: 418-422.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 14: 560-563.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 15: 609-14.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 16: 622-628.
- , "Emigranti", ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 17: 684-688.

- , “Emigranti”, ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 21: 861-869.
- , “Emigranti”, ed. Sofia Bisi Albini, *Rivista per le signorine*, 3 (1896), 23: 938-941.
- , *Emigranti*, Milano, Biblioteca Azzurra della Rivista per le Signorine, 1896.
- , *Emigranti. Quattro anni al Canada*, Milano, Solmi, 1907.
- Stellin, Monica, “Spazi vissuti e rappresentati nei memoriali della migrazione in Canada: Anna Moroni Parken”, in Silvana Serafin, Alessandra Ferraro, Anna Pia De Luca, Daniela Ciani Forza (eds.), *Geografie e letterature: luoghi dell’emigrazione, Oltreoceano*, 15 (2019): 67-81.
- Sugars, Cynthia and Ty, Eleanor (eds.), *Canadian Literature and Cultural Memory*, Don Mills, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Wodlinger, Michael, “Muskoka’s Pioneers”, in *Pioneer Muskoka. Notes on the History of the Muskoka District as Presented by Guest Speakers on behalf of Georgian College (Barrie) in Bracebridge. Gravenhurst, Huntsville*, October and November 1974, Parry Sound, ON, Algonquin Regional Library System, 1975: 1-8.

Online Source

American Contract Journal, (28 February 1885), Engineering News-Record, 13:143. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=SNg2AQAAAJ&pg=PA143&lpg=PA143&dq=%22Northern+Pacific+Junction+Railway%22+%2B+Italian&source=bl&ots=4XE-cxOtyz&sig=AC-fU3U1a4xMzxsVab5EV2iOmN8WBVmh4iQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjFytfKn-bmAhWQQc0KHblKBloQ6AEwAnoECAoQAq#v=onepage&q=%22Northern%20Pacific%20Junction%20Railway%22&f=false>. (Accessed 10/8/2020).