

ANNA MORONI PARKEN: A TRANSCULTURAL LIFE WRITING OF EARLY CANADA

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Abstract

Emigranti by Anna Moroni Parken was published in Milan in its 1st edition in 1896, followed by a 2nd edition in 1907, with the additional subtitle *QUATTRO ANNI AL CANADÀ*. This memoir adds a compelling voice to the partially unknown narrative of nineteenth century migrant women, as well as an example of life writing outside some established categories. And yet, it remains for the most part overlooked or ignored.

Anna Moroni Parken: un'autobiografia transculturale del Canada dei pionieri

Emigranti di Anna Moroni Parken fu pubblicato a Milano in prima edizione nel 1896, seguita da una seconda edizione nel 1907, col sottotitolo *QUATTRO ANNI AL CANADÀ*. Questo memoriale aggiunge una voce attraente alla poco conosciuta narrativa dell'immigrazione femminile, nonché un esempio di autobiografia fuori da alcune categorie prestabilite. Ciononostante, rimane per lo più trascurato o ignorato.

Transatlantic migrations at the end of the 19th century

At the end of the nineteenth-century an autobiographical account was written on the experience of an Anglo-Italian woman in the Canadian wilderness. *Emigranti* by Anna Moroni Parken was published in Milan in its first edition in 1896, in the *Biblioteca Azzurra* of the *Rivista per le Signorine*. In 1907 a second edition was issued as a small volume by the publisher Angelo Solmi, again in Milan, with the additional subtitle *QUATTRO ANNI AL CANADÀ*¹. This memoir, written by a rather uncommon participant in the transatlantic movement and settlement of

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¹ Quotations are taken from the 1907². In it the author's name was no longer hyphenated. The two editions present no substantial changes to the text, with the exception of an additional last brief chapter entitled "Alcuni anni dopo" that narrates – apparently following the suggestions of a few reviewers – some family events that took place after the publication of the first edition.

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millions, adds a compelling voice to the partially unknown narrative of nineteenth century migrant women, as well as a human poignancy to their experience. And yet, it remains for the most part overlooked or ignored.

Emigranti raised some interest among scholars of the Italian experience in Canada and, more specifically, the literature of migration (Stellin. *Bridging the Ocean*: 39-54) where it is considered an unusual case, being the only published Italian text, written by a woman, produced between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and describing a first-hand experience in the Canadian wilderness towards the end of the nineteenth century. If Italians ever participated in the settlement of Muskoka at that time, no relevant record remains. Nevertheless, the Italian language created a barrier for Moroni Parken's work to become known by scholars not proficient in it, as a particular example of life writing. Although she states clearly that: «Benché inglese di nascita, sono moglie e madre di italiani» (76), in neither edition did she use her Italian last name only. For the most part, her written work presents a different experience from that of the Italian immigrants of that time. Scholars in Italian-Canadian history well illustrated how the first major wave of migrants from the Italian peninsula coming to this land at the turn of the 19th century was composed of young men, for the most part from the southern regions, illiterate, who, once in Canada, lived either in urban community neighborhoods or districts where hiring by the CPR, or other industries – such as mining – made them reach several areas across Canada. This first wave was characterized by temporary migration; most migrants did not come to settle: either they came and went back home once they reached their financial goal, or, they would migrate multiple times for the same reason. Their goals were always to help family members improve their status and life conditions back at home. In doing so, they would aid chain migration among kinship and township members (Sturino). For this reason, Moroni Parken's account can be associated more in its content, tone and cultural traits with the settlement of Canada in the second half of the nineteenth-century, mostly with immigrants from the British Isles (Hamilton 2).

Moroni Parken's life writing

Her stay in the Muskoka region took place between 1881 and 1885-1886². This information is consistent with the passenger register dated August 16, 1881 of the ship *Teutonia*, listing all five members of the Moroni family arriving at Quebec

² Most biographical information is derived from the text. Archival research is ongoing.

City. She was 31 at the time (Libraries and Archives Canada)³. Two more children would be born in Muskoka. An unfortunate financial setback had forced them to leave Italy and join her British parents and brother in Canada, where they had immigrated earlier. She lived in the wilderness for four years, adapting to the environment, primitive conditions, and the lifestyle with remarkable strength and determination. However, circumstances changed for the worse, due to her husband's illness, her brother's and parents' move to the southern United States and a large family to take care of. They survived thanks to the help of other settlers and returned to Italy thanks to an unexpected endowment. Moroni Parken was one of many settlers who left: the Muskoka region overall had a high percentage of abandoned farms over the years⁴ (Woodlinger 6).

If we, the reader, consider Moroni Parken's text as life writing, then we must come to terms with critical issues that have limited the interpretation of her text for quite some time. Autobiographical life writing is a genre that allows range and more flexibility by including various kinds of writings, such as memoirs; an autobiographical author does not continuously write about others, is present in the text as himself/herself, and can choose evolving levels of fictive narration. Life writing is, in fact, a way of seeing and anticipating the reader (Kadar 10). *Emigranti* is life writing as autobiographical literature that combines traits of life testimony and anthropological life history, in its description of mostly British settlers in the Muskoka region.

In interpreting life writing as a genre, we are aware of the difficulties it poses. As Linda Hutcheon underlines, «to write of anyone's history is to order, to give form to disparate facts; in short, to fictionalize» (82). Life writing is adopted here also as a critical practice, letting us «reread the canon while inserting the prejudices of women and women's 'styles'» (Kadar 11). Should we embark then in the rather daunting task of finding 'reality', or focus instead on the text, the page and our presence as readers? As life writing, non-traditional literature and literary non-fiction, *Emigranti* defies means often adopted in positioning a written text, especially in Italian-Canadian literature. Also, present-day national literatures are under pressure to denationalize, to find new arrangements of

³ The family name was misspelt Maroni and all five members' names were listed: Richd [sic], Annie, Eresta, Amy, Sophia.

⁴ In 1868 the provincial Free Land Grant and Homestead Act gave 200 acres of land in Muskoka to families willing to settle there. Each settler had to clear fifteen acres of land, build a house, live on the property for five years. If the requirements were met, he could become the owner. The majority of immigrants to Muskoka were farmers and merchants, bringing with them the knowledge and skills needed in such wilderness, such as the Parkens, the author's parents and brother. However, around 1900 the federal government offered free land in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and whole communities left Muskoka (Woodlinger 6).

form and content, to adapt to a changed cultural and social world (Dagnino Transcultural Literature). Should *Emigranti* be considered only as an example of a work of: «Writers... [who] were visitors to Canada», as briefly mentioned in *A History of Italian Canadian Writing*? Is such literary history to be structured on the authors' place of birth and residence? (Pivato) Or, instead, should a literary history be based on the texts, their inner significance and transcultural and universal meaning? First produced in the 1970s, this history of Italian Canadian writing still forms an important chronological bibliography of this body of work, making this literature and its contribution to the Canadian literary scene known to a larger readership.

However: «In Italy the Italian writing produced in Canada is not part of the national institution of writing in that country. Rather it is part of an expatriate literature of writers outside Italy, or writers in the world. In many ways it does not fit into the 600-year old tradition of Italian letters» (Pivato). There are signs that this may be no longer true, and the Italian literary canon may be changing: one example is the attention received by Nino Famà's novels in Italy, as well as Canada (see Aliberti, Amoroso, Stellin. "Per una letteratura", just to name a few). Today, the relevance given to such categorizations, and the separation between Canadian and Italian Studies, only presents the risk of creating unnecessary rifts, rather than links, but also raises some methodological questions.

Transcultural narratives are becoming a significant part of the literatures in both countries and on both continents, and recent world events give life writing on migration even more relevance and significance. Recent studies have brought forward theories on 'transcultural writers' (Dagnino Transcultural Writers): the definition refers to contemporary «culturally mobile writers [...] who, by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities» (Dagnino *Transcultural Writers*). If Dagnino's definition refers to recent cases, nevertheless Moroni Parken can be seen as a «historic literary example» of transcultural writer: someone «who underwent a 'creative transplantation'» (Dagnino *Transcultural Writers*, *World Literature*).

In the context of feminist criticism a re-consideration of these exclusions is now due, in order to understand their effects on the text and the reader. Thus, we see how works such as *Emigranti* get misinterpreted. Moroni Parken's text shows how inadequate and misleading the above-mentioned categorizations are, and transcends them. As an example, when Moroni Parken's fourth daughter is born in Muskoka, one of her older daughters comments: «La *baby* non è italiana come noi: è canadese; però siamo sorelle ugualmente» (59).

Her Italian language narrative is infused with the Canadian *topos* of survival (Atwood). The motif of isolation and survival is quite common in Canadian literature, but it finds deeper resonance in the immigrant experience itself, with the feelings of estrangement and alienation that the migration process entailed. As a metafiction written after her return to Italy, more positive than negative experiences of herself in the Canadian woods are poignantly conveyed. She seems to remain true to her 'self'. She entitles her work *Migrants: Four Years in Canada*, and not 'The Diary of a Lady Travelling with her Family'. She mentions «la nostra vita di coloni canadesi» (15), and how they became settlers on a 200-acre lot (18, 20):

Cominciavamo a far conoscenza della vita di coloni e v'assicuro che le occupazioni non mancavano; persone di servizio non ce n'è nei Back-Woods, bisognava quindi far tutto da sé [sic]: vacche e polli da curare, frutta e verdure da raccogliere, conserve da preparare per l'inverno, pane e torte da cuocere, il bucato da fare, gli squisiti pesci del lago da pescare. Donne e bambini avevano tutti il loro compito, mentre gli uomini attendevano ai campi (29).

She had not come to Canada to pay a visit, she had come to build a home and settle, to change from a lady of the city to one of the wilderness. For some time, she had a place she could call home, until elements and events made it impossible to live there any longer. Even if in the very end she had to face the dangerous forces of nature, there is still a sense of nostalgia: for her the hut in the woods did become her home, and it was in the wilderness that her more resilient and free 'self' came to be. Her narrative, especially when rewriting past events, could have presented her Canadian experience as a temporary incident from the very start; it does not.

Moroni Parken is well aware of her Italian readership, and its inability to fathom the wilderness, something that she had to come to face herself. However, this did not stop her from expressing opinions that might not be agreeable to all, especially some Italian readers⁵. As British-born, she does appreciate many aspects of the community life in Muskoka, structured around customs and traditions familiar to her. Her narrative is mostly embedded in an Anglo-Canadian context, and what little is expressed of her own Italian culture has to do with her love for her family, her friends and her great ability to sing opera. She gives an accurate description of communal life in rural Canada, but does not

⁵ «Gli emigranti inglesi non sono però, come generalmente gli italiani, la parte più miserabile, più debole, della popolazione che nel nuovo mondo va a cercar fortuna, o scampo a castighi meritati. Sono invece i più coraggiosi, i più forti, quelli che non temono il lavoro e le privazioni, che amano lottare contro le difficoltà e sfidare l'ignoto» (18).

show the same knowledge or understanding of the contemporary Italian immigration (18-19). Therefore, it is true that her life writing cannot be categorized as Italian-Canadian, as presently understood, and nobody would expect it to be. It cannot be 'hyphenated', although it is in the Italian language and it narrates a Canadian experience, and its writer resided in Muskoka as a settler for four years. It is true also that she shares her mostly English culture and is an educated woman who writes about her life. Although 'technically' not Italian-Canadian, her life writing still remains meaningful and interesting for all those who wish to know about immigrant women's life writing in pioneer Canada.

Writing in Italy about the Canadian wilderness

Slight changes between editions can give us a sense of how the publication had already evolved with the publishing movements of those times. The first edition was included in a special series of a magazine for young ladies. Journals and magazines for boys and girls, young ladies and men (as the one cited above) were becoming more common at the turn of the twentieth century, although mostly among the upper and middle classes living in cities such as Rome, Milan, Turin and Florence. Their creation and distribution had been delayed, compared to other European countries, by the late Italian unification, and the high levels of illiteracy present across the peninsula, especially among lower-class women. Legislation and a nascent school system limited the opportunities of Italian women to fully participate as citizens in the life of the new nation. The second edition, although almost identical in content to the first, as a booklet could reach a larger audience.

It can be estimated that between the time of her return to Italy and the publication of the first edition about ten years went by (1885/1886-1896), that seem to indicate how the writing of this memoir was not an easy task. Nevertheless, her meta-narrative aptly reflects moments and experiences in the wilderness: Moroni Parken's life writing is not flattened and homogenized by memory, but rather she is able to recreate those years showing the evolving sequence of anxiety, attraction and gradual disappointment which the Canadian experience induced in her. At the beginning of her account she conveys her initial apprehension for what awaits her with a nocturnal scene at the port of Quebec City; before disembarking, with the darkness surrounding her, the waters make the ship unsteady and distant fires suddenly illuminate the sky (7-8). Towards the end of her story, just before her departure from New York, she remembers the fires at her arrival and compares them, as to reassure herself, to the rain that safely accompanies them on the journey back home

(137). All these phases are effectively narrated and structured in the memoir, reflecting the transformations that Canadian life had produced in her, in an adventure that, despite the circularity of a return journey, is still presented as an enlightening experience.

The progressive role of women

Moroni Parken, the writer, narrates her 'self' as a woman who, for the sake of her family, had to change her life, but also face unexpected hardships and difficulties. Her recollections create a metafiction that allows her to transpose her individual experiences into a recognition of the progressive role women played in the New World:

In America, là dov'è una donna è la civiltà: intorno alla figura femminile s'aggira sempre l'educazione e il vero progresso; essa è rispettata, quasi direi venerata e la libertà non degenera mai in licenza. Ispiratrice d'ogni nobile opera, d'ogni impresa ardita, la donna obbliga l'uomo a innalzarsi al suo livello, ingentilisce ogni costume e purifica ogni sentimento. Forte contrasto con quei paesi ove la donna ha l'umiliazione di dover confessare che non le è possibile di compiere liberamente tutte le nobili opere alle quali si sente portata, perché non è sufficientemente rispettata dagli uomini (87).

In her advocacy for women's equality, she covertly levies some criticism against societies such as the Italian one where, at the time, women could not see their contributions recognized and were still far from enjoying equality and respect. Here lies another most interesting aspect of this woman writer's life narrative. In fact, previously this memoir was approached for its contribution to the Italian literature of migration to Canada, viewed especially in the context of migration and pioneer literature, however at a closer look:

Non crediate, o fanciulle, che un lavoro materiale abbrutisca; esso con l'abitudine diventa puramente meccanico e lascia liberamente divagare nei regni dell'immaginazione, di sollevarsi in un mondo ideale. 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 di essere sotto l'influenza di uno stimolante (30).

What makes this account particularly interesting is also its defence of women's role in the advancement of progress, both by direct example through the life experience it portrays, and through the open support her author/writer/protagonist gives voice to. The fact that her work was dedicated in both editions to women such as Sofia Bisi Albini and Celestina Griseri shows how the author

frequented a circle of educated women writers, journalists, educators and activists who were particularly involved in bringing about more progressive ideas at the turn of the twentieth century⁶. Therefore, the Canadian wilderness offered this Anglo-Italian female and feminist writer *ante-litteram* the opportunity to present to an Italian readership a powerful metaphor of what a woman could achieve, even in the wilderness.

Noi trovavamo continuamente l'occasione di pensare e di discorrere di cose elevate. La sera sulla nostra tavola non mancavano mai libri: coi sacchi di farina e pacchi di the e di zucchero, da una fattoria all'altra ci scambiavamo sempre i romanzi più interessanti e i giornali di Londra, di Nuova-York e di Quebec. La lettura è laggiù, per uomini e donne, una abitudine di prima necessità come è [...] a Napoli il giocare al lotto (31).

In describing the urban/urbane customs of an Anglo-Italian woman in rural Canada, she writes an exemplary life narrative of will and adaptation for any woman, but particularly for young Italian women of her time.

Years after her return to Italy Moroni Parker could look back at her life in the wilderness as an adventure and a learning experience, enhancing in her memory the most enjoyable moments and lessening the difficult ones, without however concealing the hazardous situation she had to face. It can be assumed that a certain awareness on her part of the interest and taste of the coeval Italian readership affected her approach to the matter. Her narration gives an attractive, adventurous and detailed description of the pioneer experience in the wilderness, expressing a sense of diversion and moral enrichment, but without hiding the risks of that life. Even when describing the harshest moments of her life in Canada, her tone is always one of dignified hope, and never of humiliating defeat.

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⁶ Her Canadian cabin in the forest was named *Cordisofia*, to remain close to Sofia Bisi Albini.

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