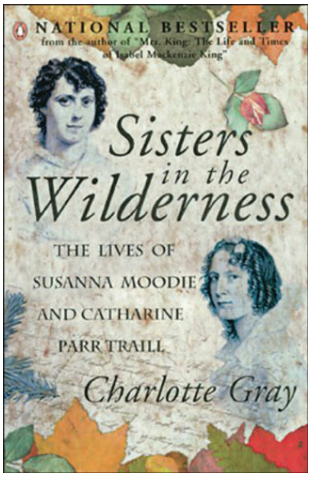
WOMEN BOTANISTS AND BOTANICAL ARTISTS

By Brian R. Thompson

This is the fourth article in a series about women botanists and botanical artists. The previous three can be found in the Winter 2019, 2020 and 2021 issues of the "Bulletin."



Sisters in the Wilderness Catharine Parr Traill (1802–1899) and Susanna Moodie (1803–1885) were sisters who emigrated to Canada from England in 1832. Both newly married, they were part of a movement of settlers from Britain seeking to escape poverty by moving to Upper Canada (now the province of Ontario), where they hoped to establish a prosperous new home.

The reality was quite different. Although they settled within 50 miles of each other, the harshness of travel and limited communications prevented them from visiting each other for two years. "Sisters in the Wilderness" is a biography by Charlotte Gray about the two sisters, both of whom eventually thrived as authors in their new home, despite a bleak beginning.

The sisters had a relatively good start in life. Gray describes their household of six sisters and two brothers—who all lived long lives—as rich in books and creativity. The family was related to Sir Isaac Newton and inherited much of his library. But the father died young, and the family was left with limited resources. Out of this experience, six of the siblings became published authors—a very unusual success rate, spurred by necessity.

The two Canadian sisters were especially prolific. Susanna Moodie is best known for "Roughing It in the Bush," her 1852 book about her early years in North America. Her work was the inspiration for modern Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, in her 1970 book of poetry, "The Journals of Susanna Moodie."

However, the focus of this review is on Catharine Parr Traill. Named after the surviving, last wife of King Henry VIII of England (and a distant relation), she was a survivor herself—living to 97 and achieving a great deal of fame in her later life, primarily for her books about the wildflowers of Canada. She was an avid field botanist and, according to Gray, "took a serious interest in every aspect of a plant: its appearance, its life cycle, its medicinal and food value, its relation to other plants." She also recognized that the wild country in which she struggled to survive was beginning to disappear—and along with it, many of the native plants.

To help with her research, she acquired a small library of books intended for professional botanists. However, her goal was to publish a book for a more general audience. She began by writing articles for both Canadian and American popular magazines.

Traill was an excellent observer and writer, but she lacked the artistic skills to illustrate the

book she hoped to publish. By the 1860s, her sister's children had grown up, and one of them, Agnes Moodie Fitzgibbon (1833–1913), had become an accomplished painter. Fitzgibbon also became a tireless promoter of her aunt's book, signing up many buyers before the book was even printed. A young widow, she drew ten illustrations for the book (with an average of three flowers per plate) and printed 500 copies of each. She then engaged her three daughters (ages 16, 13, and 10), at their dining room table, to hand color every one—a total of 5000 illustrations!

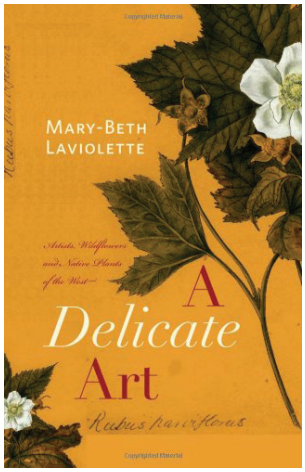
"Canadian Wild Flowers" was published in 1868. The timing was excellent because it was just a year after Canadian independence. Traill writes in the preface: "With a patriotic pride in her native land, Mrs. F. [Agnes Moodie Fitzgibbon] was desirous that the book should be entirely of Canadian production, without any foreign aid, and thus far her design has been carried out; whether successfully or not, remains for the public to decide." This gamble was very successful, as the book was indeed a popular expression of national pride. The Miller Library has a facsimile of this book.

Traill's contribution to this first book was in the form of narrative descriptions of the plants in the illustrations. As this only totaled 30 species, the botanical information is limited, but the sumptuous illustrations ensured the book's popularity.

Traill's second wildflower book, "Studies of Plant Life in Canada," was published in 1885. It was filled with rich details from her significant knowledge of the native plants in her adopted homeland, where she had now lived for more than 50 years, roughly 100 miles northeast of Toronto. Once again, her niece (remarried and credited as Mrs. Chamberlain) provided the illustrations, but these are smaller and were printed using chromolithography, a relatively new process that eliminated the need for hand coloring. The primary focus of this later book (also in the Miller Library collection) is on the text descriptions of over 400 species, including trees, shrubs and ferns.

Plant Hunting in the Canadian Rockies

Farther west in Canada, and somewhat later, there were two women who, while not sisters, had a lot in common. Their stories can be found in Mary-Beth Laviolette's "A Delicate Art: Artists, Wildflowers and Native Plants of the West," which highlights the paintings and photographs of six pioneering botanical artists who explored the province of Alberta.



Mary Schäffer Warren (1861–1939) and Mary Vaux Walcott (1860–1940) were both of Quaker families living in Philadelphia, arguably the center for science and culture in America at the time. They both developed strong interests in the natural world and the skills they needed to paint in watercolors the native plants they found.

They joined a trip of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences to the Rockies and Selkirk Mountains of eastern British Columbia and western Alberta in 1889, traveling together part of the way on the top of a boxcar! They brought this same adventuresome passion to hiking and exploring the peaks, returning every summer for many years.

This was rugged country. My grandmother, Muriel Mason, wrote about driving through this area 50 years later (in 1941), when it was still very dangerous. "Hairpin turns and just room for a car to squeeze by you; if he was a road hog, you would be hurled down thousands of feet into the canyon

below; and there were miles and miles of it." Like Warren and Walcott, however, my grandmother thought it was worth the risk.

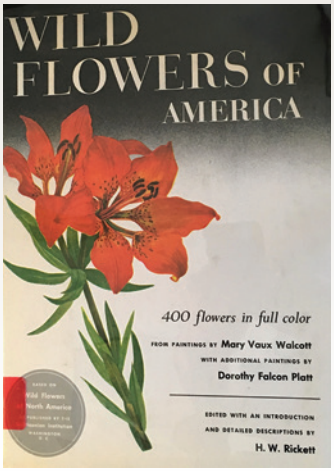
"How I wish the folks back home [in Toronto] could see it. I will never be able to describe it. Lovely waterfalls, winding roads with millions of tall spruce cedar balsam trees [probably Engelmann spruce, *Picea engelmannii*] lined all along, hundreds of feet tall, and they are so straight too. Emerald lakes, each a different green. One never tires of it, there is always something new and unexpected each mile of the way."

The pathways of the two Marys eventually diverged. Warren married her first husband, Charles Schäffer, whom she met during one of these summer trips. He was an avid amateur botanist, and together they continued their study of the local flora with the intent of publishing a field guide, using his text and her illustrations, both color paintings and black-and-white photographs.

Sadly, Charles Schäffer died before the book was completed, but his friend and fellow member of the Academy, botanist Stewardson Brown, completed the text. "Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rocky Mountains" was published in 1907. It profiles 163 plant species, including trees, shrubs and ferns, but the main focus is on herbaceous wildflowers. The illustrations are lovely, but the book suffered by comparison to other popular field guides of the time by not quite satisfying either a professional or a general audience. The text is brief in its description of the flowers and foliage, and lacks the lyrical treatment of the guide published one year earlier by Julia Henshaw (see box below).

Aquilegia brevistyla Hook. (¾ Nat.)
Small Blue Columbine.

After that accomplishment, Warren became more of an explorer. Quoting author Laviolette, this "meant getting used to riding a horse, camping in all kinds of weather and travelling in the company of men who were neither family nor spouse." She eventually moved to Banff, Alberta, married her second husband, guide Billy Warren, and is best known today for her mapping and discoveries in what are now Jasper and Banff National Parks.



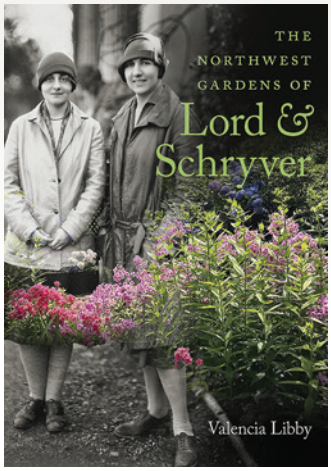
Like Warren, Mary Vaux Walcott continued visiting the region every summer, but typically in the company of her two brothers, who were interested in studying the glaciers. As her family's only daughter, she was expected at age 20 to look after her father and brothers following the death of her mother. As Laviolette writes, the three siblings had "many summers spent in the western alpine, and for Mary in particular a lifelong commitment of over forty years in the area. To come were the pleasures of mountain rambling and backcountry camping in addition to the study of wildflowers and, on an entirely different scale, glaciers."

Walcott finally broke this pattern in 1914, at age 54, by marrying Charles Doolittle Walcott, the head of the Smithsonian Institution, whom she met in the mountains. Together, they intensified their study of native plants, resulting in the publication of the five-volume "North American Wild Flowers" (1925–1929). The Miller Library has only volume five of this set, with 76 of the 400 original prints, but all are reproduced in Walcott's 1953 publication "Wild Flowers of America," in the library's general collection.

While the title suggests a comprehensive collection of the native flowering plants of the United States and Canada, the book's emphasis is on the places where the Walcotts' explored. The Canadian mountains and foothills fill in for much of western America, including our state, while the book's other emphasis is on the Atlantic seaboard. The Southwest species are mostly missing, but this is still an impressive work.

Landscape Architects in Oregon

I'll briefly mention a new book, also about a partnership between two women. "The Northwest Gardens of Lord & Schryver," by Valencia Libby, profiles Elizabeth Lord (1887–1976) and Edith Schryver (1901–1984). Together, they owned and operated one of the earliest landscape architecture firms in the region, based in Salem, Oregon, from 1929 to 1969.



In addition to this excellent book, extensive articles in the Spring 2009 and Summer 2013 issues of the "Bulletin," capture the design styles and regional influence of these two women and celebrate the garden they shared and designed together in Salem.

Julia Henshaw: A Graphic Biography

In the Winter 2020 issue of the "Bulletin," I profiled Julia Henshaw, a Vancouver, B.C.–based author and photographer who published two books about wildflowers of the Canadian Rockies. Since that time, the Miller Library has acquired a 2018 biography of Henshaw, in the rare format of graphic non-fiction, titled simply "Julia" and written and illustrated by Michael Kluckner. This new book also augments the stories of Mary Schäffer Warren and Mary Vaux Walcott.

Henshaw had a passion for the mountains, seeded on a visit to Switzerland from her native England as a young woman. She met both Warren and Walcott on a visit to the Rockies for her journalism work in 1898. Kluckner concludes that this visit helped focus her interest in native plants. It is certain that Henshaw learned much about the native flora from the two American women, as well as the techniques of photography used to illustrate her book, "Mountain Wild Flowers of Canada," published in 1906. (The Miller Library has the American edition, which is the same except for the title.)

Biographers disagree on the possibility of plagiarism in Henshaw's book. Letters from Warren much later in life do confirm that she was bitter about her protégé publishing her book first. Nonetheless, the two women stayed in contact, as both were founding members of the Alpine Club of Canada, and they participated together in some of that organization's functions. One can only hope that their love of plants helped to mellow their professional rivalry.

Brian R. Thompson is the manager and curator of the Elisabeth C. Miller Library of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens. He is also a member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.

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