# LOUISA MURRAY, WRITING WOMAN

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*Louise Murray est une des auteures oubliées du Canada au 19e siècle. Bien que rédacteurs et critiques de son époque aient loué ses écrits, son oeuvre a été perdue de vue – surtout parce qu'elle fut publiée dans des revues de l'époque plutôt que dans une forme plus permanente, les livres. Malgré que Murray ait entrepris sa carrière en écrivant des romans, elle expérimenta plus tard avec une variété de genres y compris la biographie, la poésie, les essais et les critiques de livres. Une grande partie de son oeuvre traite du rôle des femmes, soulignant en particulier les "femmes littéraires". Tout en écrivant avant la période de grande activité pour les féministes en Ontario, elle était très consciente des problèmes confrontant les femmes, aussi bien comme femmes que comme artistes, à cause des attentes familiales et des limitations sociales.*

Among the forgotten Canadian women writers of the nineteenth century is Louisa Murray, an author who did most of her writing during the last twenty years of her life when she was living in Stamford, Ontario. Her important link to Canadian literary history is indicated in her personal letters. As a young author, she was offered advice by Susanna Moodie, one of the pioneers among Canadian literary women.[1] Later in her career, Murray corresponded with Seranus, Fidelis, and Ethelwyn Wetherald of the post-Confederation group of women writers.[2] Murray's writing, public and private, centres on her interest in literature and its creators, and more often than not, a woman plays the leading role in her fiction, articles and critical sketches. In this paper, the focus is on Murray's early work, two novellas set in Canada. These stories introduce themes to which Murray was to return repeatedly during her career as a 'writing woman.'[3]

While editors, publishers and critics of her time praised Murray's work highly, only one piece of her writing was published in permanent form. This was the section which she wrote on the Niagara District in *Picturesque Canada*, a book edited by George Grant.[4] The rest of Murray's work, including six novellas, was published in the periodicals of the day, most in Canadian publications, although at least one novella appeared in serial form in a British literary journal. While there is no indication that she used a pseudonym, she did use her initials, L.M., for several articles in the *Week* and for two short poems.

Louisa Murray was the first of nine children born to Edward Murray and Louisa Rose Lyons.[5] Her father, an Irishman, was a lieutenant in the 100th Regiment of the British army. He was distinguished for his service in the Niagara area during the War of 1812. Wounded at the Battle of Chippewa, he was detained on parole until peace was proclaimed. Her mother was born in Canada during the time that her father, Major Charles Lyons, held the post of Town Major of Halifax. After his marriage to Louisa Rose, Edward Murray was stationed on the Isle of Wight where their first daughter, Louisa, was born in Carisbrooke on the 23rd of May, 1818. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to County Wicklow, Ireland.

It was in Ireland that Louisa spent her girlhood. While no precise information is available about her education during this period, her personal friend, the writer Agnes Maule Machar, claimed that Louisa was "largely self-educated."[6] In an 1888 article on Louisa Murray, based on information provided by Murray herself,[7] Ethelwyn Wetherald described her early life in Ireland as somewhat idyllic: "she enjoyed a gay and untroubled existence among intimate friends and many relations, with whom she made frequent trips to Dublin."[8] Later, as an author, she was to draw on her memories of the picturesque Irish countryside with its local colour, as well as on the strong military tradition in her family.

As his family increased in size, Lieutenant Murray found that his income as a half-pay officer was not providing him with adequate means of support. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to get a command position in his regiment, so he left the army. In 1841, the Murray family emigrated to Canada where they settled on a farm on Wolfe Island, near Kingston, Ontario. Mary Louisa Murray, Miss Murray's niece, described the family's new home:

> *This island . . . was inhabited by a rough class of settlers; sailors and lumbermen chiefly. The only means of communication with Kingston was . . . a scow . . . . At the ferry landing there were two small taverns and a general store and Post Office where the mail was kept in a tin milk pan for everyone . . . to help himself. These were the only signs of civilization . . . . Here Miss Murray encountered most of the hardships and privations which the early settlers in the backwoods of Canada had to endure . . . . The absence of all congenial society and still more the absence of all access to books were sometimes felt as a privation.*[9]

Ethelwyn Wetherald observed that although for some people such an atmosphere might be depressing, for Louisa Murray, "it seemed to act as a stimulus to the imagination."[10] Mary Louisa Murray attributed her aunt's happiness, despite her hardships, to the fact that "Miss Murray was a passionate lover of nature in all its aspects. The magic beauty of winter with all its wondrous creations of frost and snow was a new world to her and the fields and woods were realms of enchantment. New emotions stirred within her."[11] These "new emotions" signalled the genesis of the literary career which was to keep Louisa Murray occupied for the next half century.

In her first published writing, the novella "Fauna or the Red Flower of Leafy Hollow," Murray used the Canadian backwoods as her setting. Such a setting serves two distinct purposes for the author: it offers ample opportunity to describe the primitive natural beauty of the countryside which she loved so well, and it allows her heroines considerable freedom of choice as well as freedom of movement against the romantic backdrop of the forest. With variation in location and circumstances, this pattern is repeated in the author's five succeeding novellas. Whether set in Canada, Italy or Ireland, much detail is given of the natural setting and in such settings, the heroines are more adventuresome than many of their Victorian counterparts.

Fauna, a convoluted love story, opens in London England, but the protagonists, a family named Blachford, soon find it necessary because of financial reverses to

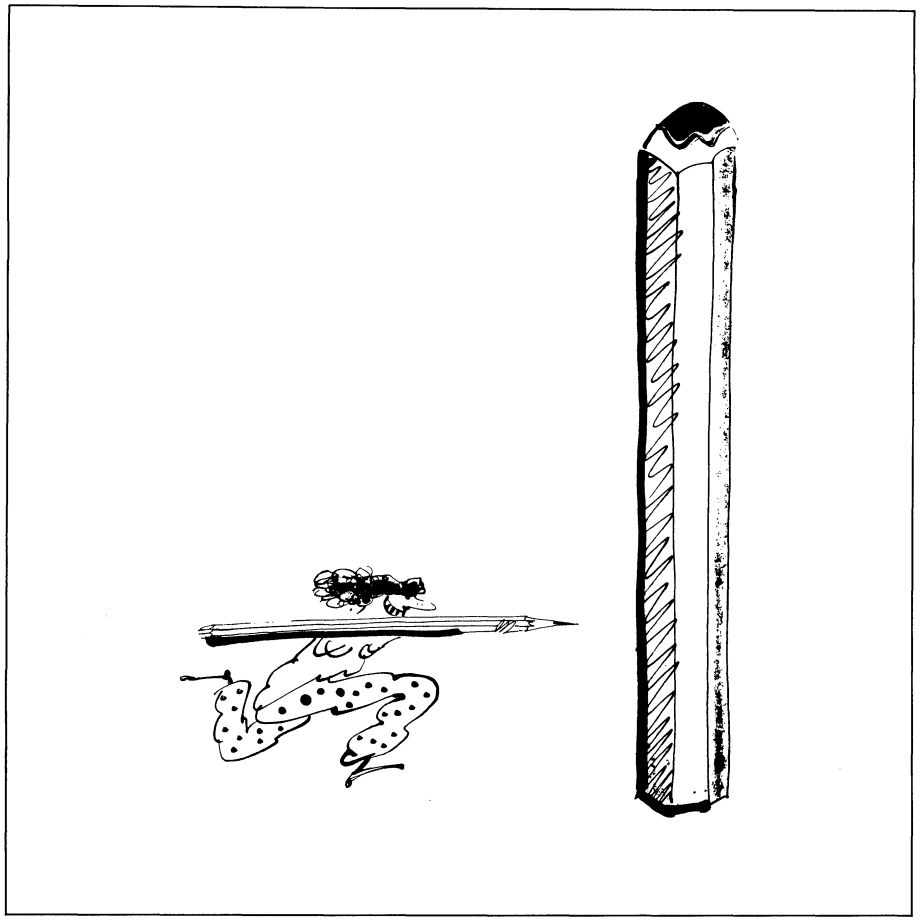

*Illustration: Christine Roche*

emigrate to Lower Canada.[12] Here they meet a German family, the Von Werfensteins, who have two children, one of whom, Max, is an artist. As well, they have an adopted Indian daughter, Fauna, who reads the poetry of Keats. Although Fauna loves her adoptive brother, Max, she realizes that he loves Helen Blachford and she makes it her mission to see Max and Helen united. In the Canadian forest, Helen Blachford emulates the free movement of her native friend Fauna. When her father is injured by a fallen tree, she sets off across the lake in bitter winter weather to get help from a surgeon. In the process, she is marooned on an ice flow, then rescued by Fauna who goes on by canoe to get the doctor.

While one aspect of Louisa Murray's feminism is depicted in the roles allowed Helen and Fauna, it is through the minor character Madame Von Werfenstein that the author introduces the theme which was to dominate her writing: the problem of 'learning and genius' in a woman. Madame Von Werfenstein tells her story in this way:

> *Perceiving in me an early love of knowledge, an inquiring and reflecting mind and a distaste for what they [her parents] conceived the only sphere of woman's duties, all their efforts were directed to eradicate or smother this erratic propensity, which they looked upon in a more heinous light than even crime . . . . All books, save a few tiresome and childish lessons on the minor morals of life, were debarred me, pens and paper removed from my reach, and my time incessantly occupied in needle-work, household affairs and as much music, dancing and flower-drawing as would serve (in my mother's words) to set off my charms and get me a husband . . . . Learning and genius in a woman! Oh! acme of iniquity – the horror of one sex, the dread of the other and the never failing sign of a predestined old maid! . . .* [13]

Thus, in succinct form, Murray offers her critique of the narrow stereotypical role to which women were assigned by both their families and society. In addition to her discussion of women's roles, she indicates her support for education for women, she advocates the careful nurturing of artistic talent, and she advances the idea that marriage is not the only alternative available to young women. These issues, which Murray introduced in this novella written in the mid-1840's and reiterated throughout her career, were the very ones which were addressed by Canadian feminist writers at the turn of the century.

While it is not known what sort of role Louisa Murray's family expected her to fulfill, she was encouraged in her writing by the family of the Reverend J. Antisel Allen, who moved to Wolfe Island in the mid 1840's.[14] Reverend Allen was a clergyman, poet, controversialist and father of the writer Grant Allen.[15] While he is not identified by name, it is likely that Mr. Allen was the "reverend gentleman" who supplied the biographical information about Louisa Murray for Henry Morgan's 1862 edition of *Biographies of Celebrated Canadians*. Allen's response to Morgan's question, "Is a true Canadian literary celebrity standing at the head of the list of our female writers?" is reproduced in full in the book. Reverend Allen is lavish in his praise of Murray, referring to her as

> *. . . . a person of real genius, . . . a poetess of a high order, . . . a good romance writer, and one of the most discriminating of critics and essay writers, taking bold, large, original views on almost every subject of human thought, and capable of shewing, with vivid distinctness and cleverness of unmixed outlines, the idiosyncrasies of each writer . . . .*[16]

In 1849, with encouragement from the Allens, Murray sent "Fauna, or the Red Flower of Leafy Hollow" to the *Victoria Magazine*, a literary journal edited and published in Belleville by writer Susanna Moodie and her husband. Unfortunately, publication of the *Victoria Magazine* had ceased by the time Murray's manuscript was received. However, because of her high opinion of the story, Moodie sent it on to the *Literary Garland* in Montreal where she published much of her own work. In informing Murray of this, Susanna had advice for the younger writer:

> *If remuneration is any object to you, I have named the sum I receive, [five pounds per sheet] thinking it might afford you a clue to fix your own terms with Mr. Lovell . . . . In disposing of MS by the sheet, I always reserve the right of copy, as at some future time I may wish to publish such articles in a collective form.*[17]

Thus it came about that "Fauna" appeared in serial form in the *Literary Garland* in 1851.

Ethelwyn Wetherald notes that "Fauna" was "a good deal noticed when it

appeared . . . . It was reprinted in several newspapers, in a New York paper, and in a Belfast journal."[18] Nevertheless, while editor John Lovell was pleased to accept Murray's "excellent story," his letter brought bad news to her:

> *. . . it would give me pleasure to be able to say that I would accept of your contributions in future at a fair remuneration for I am convinced that they would add much to the merits of the Garland, but, I regret to say, the miserable support which the Garland receives from the Canadian public will compel me to discontinue its publication at the close of this year.*[19]

It may well be that finding a Canadian publisher was a problem for Miss Murray, for her next story, "The Settlers of Long Arrow," was not published until 1861. Mary Louisa Murray notes that "a friend in England disposed of [it] to the publishers of *Once a Week* for the sum of thirty pounds."[20]

There are definite correspondences between "Settlers" and "Fauna." Both are set in the Canadian backwoods – "Settlers" in Canada West, "Fauna" in Canada East. Again, the key romance in the story involves a triangle; in "Settlers", a Metis girl, Coral, is in love with Keefe, who in turn loves her "as a brother would." When a shipwreck occurs close to Long Arrow, Keefe aids in the rescue of Helen Lennox and her father. Mr. Lennox does not recover after the disaster, and as he lies dying, he asks Keefe to take care of his daughter. Keefe falls in love with her.

Left an orphan, the resourceful Helen immediately begins to make plans for her future. "I have thought of setting up a school . . . . I must manage to support myself some way or other . . . . I shall have duties to perform which will prevent me from feeling my life useless."[21] She rejects male offers to rescue her from what they consider to be "her plight." When school trustee Trafalgar Hubbs fails to understand why Helen would refuse his proposal, she explains that she would not choose to marry "for money, for rank, for a more comfortable or higher position. That I can be a school teacher you know, but I would starve before I could marry anyone that I did not love with my whole heart" (p. 618). She responds in a similar fashion when Francis Coryton, the son of her guardian, arrives to rescue her from "this slavery" of teaching. "I have not felt it slavery for I worked with a willing mind, and there is no degradation in doing whatever work Heaven sends" (p. 622). Her choice is fulfilled when Keefe expresses his love for her.

In this story, as in "Fauna," some of Murray's ideas about feminism are advanced through a minor character, Nell Brady. Here the author's sense of humour comes into evidence. When Keefe comes to visit one evening,

> *Mrs. Brady was sitting outside, smoking her pipe, for she believed in the 'rights of women' to make use of tobacco as firmly as any Boston lady lecturer, or 'fast belle' of New York or Charleston can believe in their right to any other masculine privilege they may take it into their heads to desire* (p. 477).

While Nell Brady may believe in the rights of women, she does not seem to understand Coral's free spirit and considers her to be a "thorough little savage." As the girl explains, "in no other way could she account for my love of the free woods, my hatred of what she calls 'women's work' of dressing and feasting, and gossipping" (p. 452). When Coral is sent off to Quebec to join her true father, the French Count de Vallette, Keefe shows greater insight into her character than does Mrs. Brady. He tells Helen that:

> *She is a strange being, half sprite, half bird, partly child and angel; a life of rule and restraint, forms and conventionalities would be more hateful to her than death, and I fear she may be pining for the free woods, where she used to roam at will, for her canoe, which she paddled so skilfully over the lake, for all the wild joys of the forest life, which she loved with a natural love* (p. 568).

While it is clear in Murray's detailed descriptions of the Indian girls Fauna and Coral that she is advocating the same sort of freedom for women in general, she further underlines her point in "Settlers of Long Arrow" by repeated use of bird imagery, one of the privileged images of women's writing. Coral, living in sumptuous surroundings in the city compares herself to a pair of pet canaries which the Count had bought in the hope that they would amuse the girl. "Like her, they were lodged in a gilt and ornamented dwelling, fed with delicate food, and attended with sedulous care; but, like her, they were denied liberty, free will, and the scenes and enjoyment of nature." Coral tells them that "the little brown birds that hop about the woods of Long Arrow are happier than you" (p. 594). There is some paradox in the fact that in these stories the freedom of the Indian women does not lead them to happiness: both Fauna and Coral die of a broken heart.

Murray also seems to be using these stories to make a comment on the restrictions placed upon women by a rigid class system. After Coral has left the primitive, rural, classless society of Long Arrow, she feels suffocated by the restrictions imposed upon her by the urban, aristocratic society to which her father belongs. Moving in the opposite direction, Helen Lennox, when stranded in Long Arrow, has the opportunity to make choices that would not likely have been available to her in the city. Her experience may be compared with that of Helen Blachford, whose move from Britain to Lower Canada in "Fauna" offers her the opportunity for unusual adventures.

Although Louisa Murray began writing in the 1840's, it was not until the founding of the *Canadian Monthly and National Review* in 1872 that her work was published on a regular basis. For the next two decades she experimented in different genres including biography, poetry, critical essays and book reviews. Her interest in women, particularly 'writing women,' continued to be a predominant theme in her work.

While she was writing well before the period of great activity for women writers in Canada, it is evident that Murray was clearly aware of the problems that women faced, both as women and as artists because of family expectations and societal limitations on the role of women. As evidenced in her first two novellas, her fictional stories were plotted so as to transcend stereotype, offering alternatives to traditional roles. In a later novella, she extended her vision of women's roles to explore, in her conclusion, the possibility of both marriage and a career for the heroine.[22] She frequently focussed on literary women in her non-fictional writing, thus drawing the attention of readers to writing women and their work. In Canadian literary history, she is an important link because of her friendship and correspondence with others in her field. For these reasons Louisa Murray, writing woman, should not be forgotten but read and enjoyed by contemporary

Canadians, especially those interested in nineteenth-century feminism.

[1]Letters referred to in this paper are in the possession of Louisa Murray King, North Andover, Massachusetts. Louisa Murray was Mrs. King's great aunt.

[2]These authors were prominent among the group of women writing in Ontario in the latter part of the nineteenth century. "Seranus," Susie Francis Harrison, a poet, novelist and musician, served for a period as editor of the *Week*. "Fidelis," Agnes Maule Machar, wrote poetry, historical sketches, and novels which dealt with socio-economic issues of the day. Her friendship with Murray seems to date from the period when the Murray family lived in the Kingston area Ethelwyn Wetherald, best known for her poetry, featured Louisa Murray in one of a series of four articles on Canadian literary women which she wrote for the *Week*.

[3]"Scraps about 'Writing Women'" is the title of an article by Louisa Murray published in *Nation*, 1875.

[4]"Section on the Niagara District," in *Picturesque Canada*, ed. George Grant, (Toronto: Belden, 1882), Vol. 1, p. 343-398.

[5]Much of the biographical information for this paper came from two sketches written in 1923 by Mary Louisa Murray, Louisa Murray's niece. Notes have been added by Mrs. King. These unpublished papers are entitled "Sketch of the Life of Edward Murray, 1780-1860," and "Life of Louisa Murray."

[6]Fidelis, "A Loss to Canadian Literature," *The Week*, XI, No. 45, p. 1063.

[7]Letter from Ethelwyn Wetherald, n.d., probably 1888.

[8]Ethelwyn Wetherald, "Some Canadian Literary Women," *The Week*, V, No. 21, p. 335.

[9]Mary Louisa Murray, "Life of Louisa Murray," p. 2.

[10]Wetherald, *The Week*, V, No. 21, p. 335.

[11]Mary Louisa Murray, "Life of Loüisa Murray," p. 2.

[12]"Fauna, or the Red Flower of Leafy Hollow," *Literary Garland*, Vol. 1X (April-October 1851), p. 386.

[13]"Fauna," p. 294.

[14]This is corroborated in the writing of Mary Louisa Murray and Ethelwyn Wetherald.

[15]*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 1875-1933, Vol. 1, p. 8.

[16]Henry Morgan, *Biographies of Celebrated Canadians* (Quebec: Hunter, Rose & Co., 1862), p. 745.

[17]Letter from Susanna Moodie, Jan. 13, 1851.

[18]Wetherald, *The Week*, V, No. 21, p. 335.

[19]Letter from John Lovell, March 20, 1851.

[20]Mary Louisa Murray, "Life of Louisa Murray."

[21]"Settlers of Long Arrow", *Once a Week*, Vol. 5 (October12-December 21, 1861), p. 562-566. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[22]"Marguerite Kneller: Artist and Woman," *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, 1 (January-June, 1872).

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