In Upper Canada there was a large influx of immigrants during the early nineteenth century. Many immigrants who arrived in Upper Canada were in search of a new life in a new country that they hoped would bring new opportunities. What many might not have known was that settlement was not an easy endeavour in the new country. It was assisted, though, by women. Women made significant contributions to the development of Upper Canada, and this was particularly true of bush-settlers, the women who settled in rural areas. These pioneering, or farming women, demonstrated their suitability for living in the new world, took on an extensive role within the home, managed the family farm and faced many challenges.

Those who were best suited for immigration to Upper Canada were individuals or families who were willing to put in hard work to establish their home. Catharine Parr Traill does not paint a picture of an effortless life in Upper Canada, instead she acknowledges that bush-settlement is for “the poor hardworking labourers, who have industrious habits, a large family to provide for, and a laudable horror of the workhouse and parish-overseers.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Parr Traill’s sister, Susanna Moodie, as quoted in an article by Le Jeune, agrees with this notion of emigration noting “emigrants she deems ‘worthy’ of this New (Christian) World among the ‘honest sons of poverty’… who were forced to emigrate because of social and financial contingencies.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Moodie and Parr Trail believed bush-settlement was very difficult and signaled the danger of failure to those immigrating to Upper Canada unwilling to put in the work. Put simply, they suggested that they were likely to fail at establishing settlement. Parr Traill goes on to further explain that life in the backwoods came with hardship and could be very lonely, but provided an opportunity to find independence for those who gave bush-settlement a chance. Women often “regret the friends and relations they left in the old country; and they cannot endure the loneliness of the backwoods.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Families who had a reasonable amount of income or capital were also suited for bush-settlement as long as they used their resources carefully and put their money into purchasing land.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was believed if a new immigrant could purchase a large quantity of land they would increase their wealth. Also noted, those who were less suitable for immigration were people unwilling to work and people of wealth. As one can imagine bush-settlement was not an easy task as Parr Trail explains “even the man of small income, unless he can condescend to take in hand the axe or the chopper, will find even with prudent and economical habits, much difficulty in keeping free from debt for the first two or even three years.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Even though some poor families succeeded in rooting in Upper Canada, a greater number of families did not due to their unwillingness to put in the necessary hard work that was needed for bush-settlement. Also not suited for bush-settlement were people of wealth. A family of wealth would not have appreciated “the unpleasant changes in their mode of life” as well the lack of luxury items available.[[6]](#footnote-6) Families of wealth, who were accustomed to fancy gatherings and elegant dress, were less likely to emigrate to Upper Canada for bush-settlement because Upper Canada during this period was far less advanced than their home country. An exception to this would be the younger sons, of a wealthy family, who would be likely to immigrate due to primogeniture. It is evident that work and life for bush-settlement in Upper Canada was far from easy. It is important to note those who were best suited for bush-settlement in Upper Canada were those individuals or families who were willing to put in continual hard work.

The settler’s wife took on an extensive role within the home to ensure that the basic needs of her family were met. It was thought “without a wife, a new settler had a difficult, if not impossible, task establishing himself in Upper Canada.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The settler’s wife had a significant function within the family home to ensure bush-settlement was successful, which included caring for the children as well as taking care of the household. Parr Traill notes:

[A] settler’s wife should be active, industrious, ingenious, cheerful, not above putting her hand to whatever is necessary to be done in her household, nor too proud to profit by the advice and experience of older portions of the community, from whom she may learn many excellent lessons of practical wisdom…[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was expected that the wife ensured “the basic needs of her family were met.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This encompassed a wide range of tasks and expectations including “producing or procuring most of the food and clothing that the family needed to survive”[[10]](#footnote-10) which included “cooking, washing, serving, milking, spinning, cleaning, [and] gardening.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Often wives relied on their children, if old enough, to help out with various tasks within the home due to the overwhelming list of things that always needed to be done. Girls were often relied on “to assist in cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks”[[12]](#footnote-12) whereas, boys would likely have had day jobs, if old enough, they would have been hired as ‘choppers’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Families that lived in rural areas often relied on their own independence due to “an environment where goods were in short supply and social contacts were limited.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This was due to the pre-industrial era, as well as, the rural area in which they lived. There were three modes of transportation in the early 1800’s which included, water, by horse drawn vehicle, or on foot.[[15]](#footnote-15) Often those who lived in rural areas were far away from stores so the transportation of goods often led to items being broken or spilt which is why women of bush-settlement needed to be self-sufficient.[[16]](#footnote-16) Due to the transportation, short supply and the cost of goods, women learned “how to manufacture hop-rising or salt-rising for leavening her bread; salting meat and fish, knitting stocking and mittens and comforters, spinning yarn in the big wheel…, and dyeing the yarn when spun to have manufactured into cloth and coloured flannels, to clothe her husband and children, making clothes for herself, her husband and children.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This process of spinning yarn, knitting and dyeing the yarn, as one can imagine, took a great deal of time for the settler’s wife which is why settlement was not successful without everyone in the family assisting. Even when all members of the family assisted in settlement the daily tasks that would have been performed by the settler’s wife would have been tiresome. When there was an insufficient amount of family income women, such as Parr Traill “turned her hand to teaching, nursing midwifery, selling eggs, and raising geese for their down.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Parr Traill and Moodie also relied on their writings to supplement income. It is unmistakable that the settler’s wife had a dynamic role within the home, however she also played an active role in managing the farm.

Pioneer women were active agents in managing the family farm. Bush-settlement was not sudden. The family was required to clear and fence their new land before they were able to produce crops or have cattle.[[19]](#footnote-19) Farming in Upper Canada relied on “a corporate family economy, a domestic system of production that bound family members together, like a single body, in a common enterprise of subsistence.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Due to the amount of work needed to be done, for bush-settlement to be successful, the whole family participated in different farming functions. Settler’s wives were in charge of the “poultry and barnyards and the growing of vegetables and fruit in addition to their household tasks.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Often the husband would not be around as they were usually lumbering to provide income for the family which would put more responsibility on the wife.[[22]](#footnote-22) Due to the absence of the husband this placed a large role on the settler’s wife to ensure the management of the farm was successful. Food the settlers grew in the summer months would have to last them throughout the cold and unstable winter months. The women would preserve their meat and produce by salting and drying the food in hopes that the supply would last their family throughout the winter.[[23]](#footnote-23) Women also managed the dairy and the churning of milk.[[24]](#footnote-24) As Parr Traill described “most persons adopt the Irish and Scotch method, that of churning the milk, a practice that in our part of England was not known.”[[25]](#footnote-25) New settlers were required to learn new life skills, such as with the churning of the milk, to ensure their families had the necessities to survive. There are a lot of things that can go askew on the farm as well. Due to freezing winter temperatures bush-settlers had to ensure they provided necessary cover for the cattle such as a warm shed and a fenced yard. Another option was to sell the cattle in the fall and buy new cattle in the spring.[[26]](#footnote-26) This was usually the case for new settler’s due to the lack of feed available for the cattle because of being newly established. A settler’s wife also helped cultivate the garden on the farm which yielded food, such as corn, pumpkin and potato, among other items.[[27]](#footnote-27) The tasks that were required of the settler’s wife, when managing the farm, were difficult but came with the reward of a sustainable way of life.

Women of bush-settlement also faced numerous challenges with in the home and farm, aside from the endless work and loneliness. Bush-settlers were subject to diseases and disorders that are present even today. Such as Parr Traill who “suffered from rheumatism, gout, sciatica and neuralgia.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Women also went through pregnancy and childbirth with little assistance except when help was available from a neighbour. This was the case of Mary O’Brien “a pioneer wife and mother [who] was able to help a neighbour give birth in her isolated Upper Canadian community in the 1830’s.”[[29]](#footnote-29) During this time if a complication arose during pregnancy or childbirth it often resulted in the death of the mother, the infant or, in some cases, both. Another challenge of settlement was the viruses and influenzas families could get. Two of Moodie’s children were hit with influenza, the same influenza that had taken the lives of numerous youngsters.[[30]](#footnote-30) Due to the lack of available medical treatment during this time period there was a higher number of influenza related deaths. Bush-settlers were also challenged with the potential loss of cattle due to hollow horn. Hollow horn “originates in the spine, or extends to it, and is cured or palliated by boring the horn and inserting turpentine, pepper, or other heating substances.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The diseased could result in death of the infected cattle, which would leave the family short on food. The challenges of bush-settlement were exceptionally challenging in many aspects within the home and on the farm.

Immigrating in the rural area of Upper Canada, to establish a new beginning, brought on many challenges and complexities. Women’s lives and the work they performed, within the home and on the farm, included a wide range of activities that varied often. Those who worked hard in order to establish themselves in their new colony would have had greater success settling in Upper Canada. Bush-settlement would not be successful without all able-bodied members of the household being active players in settlement. The settler’s wife held a great deal of responsibility to ensure the family was provided for and taken care of. The complexity of daily tasks a settler’s wife had to do, in order to ensure clothing, food and basic necessities were provided for the family, were exorbitant. The extreme complexities bush-settlers faced were undeniable during this time in rural Upper Canada.

Bibliography

Cuthbert Brandt, Gail, Naomi Black, Paula Bourne, and Magda Fahrni. *Canadian Women: A History*. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2011.

Errington, E.J. *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada 1790-1840*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014.

Guillet, C. Edwin. *Pioneer Settlement in Upper Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.

Hoffman, Frances, and Ryan Taylor. *Across the Waters: Ontario Immigrants’ Experiences 1820-1850*. Ontario: Global Heritage Press, 1999.

Le Jeune, Francoise. “Representations of Canada’s Social Prospects to British Middle-Class Emigrants in Susanna Moodie’s Roughing it in the Bush (1852)”. *British Journal of Canadian Studies 18*, no.1. 2005 : 137-206.

Peterman, Michael. *Sisters in Two Worlds: A Visual Biography of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2007.

Traill, Catherine Parr. *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America*. London: C. Knight, 1998.

1. Catherine Parr Traill. *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America*. (London: C. Knight, 1998), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Francoise Le Jeune. “Representations of Canada’s Social Prospects to British Middle-Class Emigrants in Susanna Moodie’s Roughing it in the Bush (1852),” *British Journal of Canadian Studies 18*, no.1 (2005):137. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*.,126. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*., 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.J. Errington, *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada 1790-1840*. Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Parr Traill. *The Backwoods of Canada,* 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E.J. Errington, *Wives and Mothers,* 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gail Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian women: a history*. (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2011). 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Frances Hoffman and Taylor Ryan. *Across the Waters: Ontario Immigrants’ Experiences 1820-1850*. (Global Heritage Press, 1999). 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Michael Peterman. *Sisters in Two Worlds*. (Doubleday Canada, 2007). 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Frances Hoffman and Taylor Ryan, *Across the Waters,* 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. E.J. Errington. *Wives and Mothers,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Parr Trail. *The Backwoods of Canada,* 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian women,* 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Michael Peterman. *Sisters in Two Worlds*. (Doubleday Canada, 2007). 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. E.J. Errington. *Wives and Mothers,* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian women.* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Settlement in Upper Canada*. (University of Toronto Press, 1969). 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian women: a history*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Parr Trail. *The Backwoods of Canada,* 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*., 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid*., 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Michael Peterman. *Sisters in Two Worlds*. (Doubleday Canada, 2007). 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian women,* 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Michael Peterman. *Sisters in Two Worlds*. (Doubleday Canada, 2007). 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Parr Trail. *The Backwoods of Canada,* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)