

Mary F. Martin

THE SHORT LIFE OF ISABELLA VALANCY CRAWFORD

The chief authority for the life of Isabella Valancy Crawford has been John W. Garvin, in 1902 appointed literary executor of her estate by her brother Walter Stephen Crawford; in 1905 Mr. Garvin compiled and edited the *Collected Poems*, with a brief introduction about her life and works by Miss Ethelwyn Wetherald, a well-known writer of the time;¹ in 1923 his wife, writing as Katherine Hale, issued a little book of biography and criticism, containing also a small anthology, in the *Makers of Canadian Literature* series;² much of Miss Hale's material is derived from an article by Mrs. Maud Miller Wilson in *The Globe Magazine*, April 15 and 22, 1905, also extant in MS in the Lorne Pierce Collection of the Douglas Library, Queen's University. In these works Valancy Crawford's birthdate is given as December 25, 1850.

In 1938, however, Mr. Garvin wrote an article for *Who Was Who in Canada 1875-1937* in which he made several alterations to the data in the Hale book and the introduction to *Collected Poems*. Originally, he had declared that her father Dr. Stephen Dennis Crawford arrived in Canada in 1858 with twelve children, of whom only three remained when the family moved to Lakefield; in *Who Was Who* he states: "While she was in her seventh year her father went to Australia to ascertain by personal observation and enquiry the prospects there for a medical practice, and for his family of eleven children, nine girls and two boys." While he was in Australia, Garvin declares, a deadly fever attacked the children, and six daughters and one son died. The wretched man rushed home, but could no longer endure the thought of going to Australia, and in 1858 brought his wife and four remaining children to Canada, to settle in Paisley, a new settlement near Lake Huron, on the River Saugeen, in Upper Canada. There another daughter, Sydney, died. There are no records extant of her death and burial; all such records were preserved in Knox Church, which burned down in 1962, and the present writer was unable to find a tombstone in the Paisley graveyard.

Garvin goes on to say that the family remained in Paisley for six years, then moved to Lakefield, and about 1871 to Peterborough, where in 1875 the father died, and was buried in Little Lake Cemetery. A few months later another daughter, Emily Naomi, died; the son, Walter, was working near the head of the Lakes in Algoma. Valancy, as Garvin says she was called, and her mother moved to Toronto, to live there for the rest of their lives.

It seems now, however, that some of Garvin's statements are incorrect; usually without naming his sources, he states that they were derived from "personal knowledge and private information". He appears to have ignored the records of the Little Lake Cemetery and other official sources.

It is now certain that Doctor Crawford was in Paisley in the spring of 1857, not 1858, for on April 1st of that year he applied for and was granted a licence to practise medicine in Canada, and made oath before Judge Harrison, in Toronto, that he was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of London.³ In the same year, on October 27th, he was one of four Paisley men to sign a petition for permission to acquire lots G and H on Goldie Street, on which to build a Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁴ It is, of course, quite possible that Mrs. Crawford and the children followed him the next year, but there is no evidence one way or the other for this. At any rate, the statement that Doctor Crawford went to Australia in Valancy's seventh year, 1857, is clearly incorrect. If he went at all, he must have gone in 1855 or early 1856.

Where Doctor Crawford took his medical training is not yet known. His brother, Doctor John Crawford, a surgeon in the Royal Navy, at times stationed in Cork, graduated from Glasgow, and it might be supposed that the elder brother had studied there previously. There is, however, no record in the medical schools of Scotland, Ireland, or London of Stephen Dennis Crawford. In 1836, when he applied for membership of the Royal College of Surgeons, he declared himself to be in the service of the East India Company, and was assumed by the College to have continued in that service till 1840, when he failed to reply to a general enquiry made by the authorities.⁵ As a servant of the great Company he may have been a surgeon on one of its ships, or in one of the stations in India, or elsewhere in the Far East; so far, no record of him has turned up in the files of the medical officers in the service of the Company at that time. It has been assumed that he was in practice in or near Dublin, as his family lived and some of them died there, and his advertisement in the Peterborough Advertiser states that he had formerly been on the staff of the Coombes Lying-in Hospital, Dublin.⁶ But there is no record of him in the Irish medical directory for the appropriate years. All that can be

stated with confidence is that he became an F.R.C.S. (Eng'and) on January 22nd, 1836, that he applied for and received a licence to practise in Upper Canada on April 1st, 1837, and that he was the first doctor to practise in Paisley, and afterwards in Lakefield. Later, he was in Peterborough. In a letter to Mrs. Harrison ("Seranus" of *The Week*), Valancy states that he was M.D., F.R.C.S., and L.M.B.A. (Canada).⁷ But the records of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario begin only in 1866, and the name of Doctor Crawford is not included in them.

In Lakefield, Doctor Crawford was active in the Anglican Church of St. John the Baptist. Mr. John Twist, Historian of the church, has written to me as follows:

Dr. Crawford's name does not appear [in the list of those present at Vestry meetings] until March, 1864, and was last recorded on October 9, 1866. It had been proposed that a new church be built, and at the Vestry meeting of 1864, Doctor Crawford was among those elected to the building committee. During the period of planning and construction and until the completion of the church, five Vestry and seven meetings of the building committee were held. According to the records, Doctor Crawford missed only one Vestry and one committee meeting. The last meeting to record his name was held 'to arrange about the sittings in the new church'. This meeting was also attended by a Mrs. Crawford, I presume his wife.

Valancy is said to have been confirmed in Lakefield, but the records are apparently not now extant.

In Lakefield, the Crawfords at first lived in a house belonging to the Robert Stricklands, while the latter were visiting England. Mr. Strickland was at one time a magistrate; I believe he was a son of Colonel Strickland, brother of Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, the famous writing sisters. Kate Traill, a daughter of Mrs. C. P. Traill, is said to have been a friend of Valancy's; a note from the scrapbook of Miss Florence Attwood, niece of Kate and great-niece of Catherine Parr Traill, sent to me by Miss Mary Traill of Lakefield, runs as follows:

They [the Crawfords] afterwards lived in a little house where Mother remembers going with Aunt Kate and Grandmother to take tea with them. . . . Isabella was the oldest child—at that time about seventeen years old (Mother can't remember the date) very pretty, medium complexion, very pretty hair, which she did in the same style as Empress Eugenie of France—rolled back from the face. Mother doesn't think she [had] written anything up to that time but spoke of writing a book which she was going to call "Lavender and Old Lace". There

was to be an old lady in it dressed in velvet with lavender trimmings and old lace and ribbons in cap etc.

They were very proud and not at all friendly and although poor resented any kindness—suspecting patronage where people meant to be kind and friendly as was the way in those early days.

There was a boy Steven [sic] and two other girls. They lost these two girls, either while living here (Lakefield) or in Peterborough where they lived after they left Lakefield.

It was when they were living in Peterborough that Doctor Crawford died. They became so poor that they almost starved but so painfully proud that their nearest neighbours did not realise the extent of their poverty.

This bears out the assertions of Katherine Hale and all other writers about the Crawfords that they were very poor.

Miss Attwood's notes also suggest that Doctor Crawford was not a very skilful surgeon; she illustrates by the story of a Mr. Squire who shot himself in the leg; Doctor Crawford amputated the leg, but was unable to save the life of the patient. However that may be, it is said in Faisiey that the doctor, like many of his profession at that time, was an alcoholic, and ruined himself professionally. Miss Janet Scott, former teacher and librarian in Faisiey, told me that a Mrs. Joseph Macdonald often said to her, "It was not very nice to have your baby when you didn't know if the doctor knew what he was about." In some notes from Miss Attwood's scrap-book I find the following comment: "Motner, who only met them on a visit to Lakefield, and so only knew them from hearsay, thinks Dr. C. took too much milk punch". If this is true, it helps to explain why the doctor, an educated and cultured man, moved about so much, why he emigrated to the raw colony of Upper Canada, and why he was so poor. It is possible that his experience with the East India Company may have started him on his disastrous course, for life in the tropics or in the narrow bounds of a sailing-ship has never been very easy for such men.

In 1871, the family moved to Peterborough, where they lived in a house on the market place, its back overlooking the Otonabee River.

Sister Patricia, in an article first published in the Centennial Number of the Peterborough Examiner, 1950, and reprinted in *Peterborough, Land of Shining Waters*,⁸ writes (p. 379):

[Isabella Valancy Crawford] was refined and educated, having been taught at home by her father . . . and by her mother who was a cultured lady. But this was in the Victorian days when a very rigid line divided working girls and 'Ladies', and so Miss Crawford remained at home, and endured poverty, and

thought and suffered. Dr. Crawford had never been successful in his practice, and when he died in 1875 he left his wife and two daughters penniless. Local tradition tells of how they suffered and did not make known their wants.

Sister Patricia writes of Valancy's appearance:

Dr. Crawford moved to Peterborough with his family in 1864 [sic]. Isabel was then about twenty, tall, fair, beautiful with blue eyes remarkable for an expression that has been described as 'wondering, thoughtful and affectionate'. She never was quite at home in town. . . .

Mrs Smith had a distinct recollection from her childhood of Miss Crawford's appearance; she was tall, very frail, and had a wealth of fair beautiful hair. (p. 380).

Incidentally, Mrs. Harrison is reported by Katherine Hale to have said that Valancy's hair was dark: "A tall, dark young woman" says Mrs. Harrison; 'one whom [sic] most people would feel was difficult, almost repellent [sic] in her manner'."

Here again is the reference to her pride. It is interesting that in some of her earlier poems, dramatic monologues on Vashti and Esther, the chief characteristic of the speaker is pride—not arrogance or even vanity, but proud self-respect, and it is very possible that in these poems Crawford is writing out of her own heart, through the lips of her *personae*.

On July 3rd, 1875, Doctor Crawford died, and was buried in the Little Lake Cemetery on July 5th by the Reverend Mr. Beck; when Emma Naomi was buried six months later, his remains were moved to the same lot, where some years later Valancy and eventually Mrs. Crawford were also to lie.

After her father's death, the support of her mother and sister seems to have devolved on Valancy. Katherine Hale tells a sad story, derived from M. M. Wilson's article, of disappointment to Valancy and Emma Naomi.

The delicate Emma Naomi, the younger sister, was always busy with beautiful and intricate designs in embroidery. On one piece she had worked for a year, and sent it, in hopes of a sale or a prize, to the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia. It was lost in the mails. At the same time it was announced that Isabella had won a six-hundred dollar prize in a short story competition. This meant financial salvation. But on the heels of the first cheque for a hundred dollars came the news that the prize giving corporation had failed and nothing more was to be expected from them. It is not improbable that this double blow, so tragic for the two sisters, should have hastened the heart disease which afflicted Emma Naomi, as it had the other ill-fated children, for she died, leaving Isabella and her mother alone. (p. 8)

A certain mystery attaches to Emma Naomi. According to Garvin's accounts, she was one of the children who came to Paisley in 1858. But the Little Lake Cemetery record of her burial runs as follows:

Emma Naomi Crawford, Sister of S. Crawford, age 21 years 6 months, born in Wisconsin, U.S. Died in Peterborough of consumption, January 20, 1876. Interred January 22, 1876, by Rev. Roger.

According to this entry, Emma Naomi must have been born in or about July, 1854, but there is nowhere else any suggestion that her family had at any time been in the U.S.A.; Doctor Crawford is not listed as practising in the State of Wisconsin in 1854 in L. F. Frank's *History of Milwaukee*, 1834-1914, in the lists of new arrivals in the field of medicine in the *City Directory* for 1851-1855, or in the early *Transactions of the Wisconsin State Medical Society*.¹⁰ The entry above, in giving cause of death as "Consumption", conflicts with the commonly held opinion that she died of heart disease.

After the death of Naomi, Valancy and her mother moved, as has been said, to Toronto. There they lived, we are told, in rooms "over a grocery shop at the corner of King and John Streets, kept by Mrs. Charles J. Stuart, who was a sincere friend to the young poet and her mother." (Ha'e, p. 8) It is, however, unlikely that they were with Mrs. Stuart when they first went to Toronto, as scribbled notes in a memorandum book seem to indicate that in the first half of 1885 they were paying rent to a Miss Harrison, and the *Globe* obituary states that they had been in Mrs. Stuart's house, 57 John Street, "for the last 16 months".

Life must have been very hard for them; Valancy's uncle, Doctor John Crawford, sent them a quarterly allowance, but it could not have been enough to keep them comfortably.¹¹ To eke it out, Valancy continued writing short stories, serial novels for American magazines and Canadian newspapers, and poems. Her chief market for poems was the Toronto *Evening Telegram*, which paid, it is said, one to three dollars for each poem. Judging by the number of poems found by Garvin in his search of the *Telegram*, *Globe*, and *Mail*, in some years she published a poem every two weeks or so. Granted that the cost of living was very much lower than it is now, she still could not have made much more than enough to keep herself in clothes—if she was content with very few and very cheap ones. What she received for her stories it is impossible to estimate. It does seem evident, from an examination of loose papers found among her MSS. that at times she was deeply in debt to her landlady.

Among the papers is a child's copy-book, belonging to Walter; the backs of the pages are covered with scrawled notes, including lists of magazines with their addresses—among them the *Montreal Weekly Star*; on other pages are columns of figures, her record of the number of words in the chapters of her current stories; one imagines she was paid by the word or the line; such notes are to be found also at the end of some of the manuscripts which remain. On the last page of the copy-book is a note of the payment of rent in 1885, January to December, together with the numbers of the bank notes used to pay it. The rent is paid to Miss Harrison. The figures are scrawled and it cannot be satisfactorily calculated what the total rent was.

In 1884 Va'ancy Crawford's book *Old Spookses' Pass* appeared, published in Toronto at her own expense by James Bain. It was poorly printed on cheap paper in a paper cover. This is not the place to discuss the merit of the work, but it must be noted that reviews of it in Canadian and English journals were on the whole generous, recognizing that in spite of faults the poetry had considerable merit.

Nonetheless, the book did not sell, possibly because of its rather unattractive title and its cheap appearance. There are extant copies in three different bindings. The first, dated 1884, is bound in salmon-coloured paper boards; on the back is an advertisement for James Bain. The second is in a blue-grey wrapper over salmon. Inside the copy in the Douglas Library, Queen's University, is the following note in Lorne Pierce's autograph, but unsigned:

Published at her own expense. Some 50 copies were bound in salmon-colored wrappers, and sent out to the reviewers. The balance of the small edition was bound in slate-colored wrappers, with title-page changed and clippings from the reviews printed on back cover. My copy had the new wrapper pasted over the old and by a mere accident I discovered it, having them steamed apart.

One of the rarest of all Canadiana; can't be duplicated.

Pierce's note that this issue cannot be duplicated is not quite accurate, as the copy in the British Museum is like it.

It seems that when the first issue failed to sell, Crawford had the remaining stock provided with a new title page, omitting the name of James Bain, and adding under her own name the words, "Author of *A Little Bacchante*, or *Some Black Sheep*, etc., etc., etc.," and replacing the advertisement on the back cover by extracts from favourable reviews.

According to the bibliographical note in Katherine Ha'e's little book, in 1898 a considerable number of unsold copies of this issue was found, and

reissued in blue boards with silver lettering and floral design on the face. Copies still occasionally turn up in secondhand book stores.

The uncertainty about almost any aspect of Valancy Crawford's life continues with her death. The *Globe* obituary, Tuesday, February 15, 1887, disagrees in several aspects with the account given by the Landlady of the lodgings, Mrs. Stuart. The obituary runs in part as follows:

Miss Crawford had been suffering from a cold for a fortnight past, but had not been confined to bed. She was retiring for the night, her mother being in the room when she suddenly fell to the floor lifeless. . . . Miss Crawford . . . was born . . . near Dublin. When about five years of age, she was brought to this country by her parents and afterwards lived for some time in France. . . . For the past ten or twelve years Miss Crawford has lived in Toronto with her mother, the last sixteen months of her life being spent at No. 57 John Street. . . . A story of hers, "Married with an Opal", is now being published.

But Mrs. Maud Miller Wilson quotes from a letter from Mrs. Stuart:

Miss Crawford had no severe illness and was only slightly indisposed for about a week, but neither her mother nor I had any idea of her dying. She went up to her room in quite an animated way, and was partially undressed when she called to Mrs. Crawford, who immediately called for me. I caught Miss Crawford in my arms, and she looked up and said, "What a trouble I am, Mrs. Stuart." Just after that she gave one gasp and expired. This was on the 12th of February, 1887.¹²

After the funeral in Toronto, the body of Isabella Valancy Crawford was taken to Peterborough, where it was interred near the graves of her father and sister; some time later, a group of friends erected over it a Celtic cross. It is said that among the few flowers at the funeral there was one great white rose with a card on which was written, "The rose of a nation's thanks", a line from one of her most popular poems, reprinted shortly before her death. It is pleasant to think that in an environment which cared a'most nothing for her work there was someone who recognized that even in Toronto it had been possible to write poetry that appealed to a nation's heart.

The *Globe* statement that she spent some years of her life in France is untrue. A brief summary of her life history, prepared for Mrs. Harrison by Miss Crawford, and later in the possession of Miss E. M. Pomeroy of Toronto, follows: "I am of mingled Scotch, French, and English descent, born in Dublin, Ireland. My father was Stephen Dennis Crawford, M.D., M.R.C.S. Eng'land, and L.M.B.A. Canada. I am his sixth child and only surviving daughter. I was brought to Canada by my parents in my earliest childhood,

and have never left the country since that period. I was educated at home, and have never left my home but for a month, that amount of absence being scattered over all my life. My father settled finally in Peterborough, Ontario, where he passed on. My mother and I then came to Toronto where we have since resided. I have written largely for the American Press, but only published one volume of my own account, 'Old Spookses' Pass: Malcolm's Katie and Other Poems', which appeared in 1884, in Toronto, and is decorated with press errors as a Zulu chief is laden with beads. *Vcili tout!*¹³

There is even uncertainty about the date of her birth. Garvin (*Canadian Who Was Who*) gives it as "Christmas Day, 1850, seventh daughter of Stephen Dennis Crawford, M.D., and his wife Sydney Scott." This date has been generally accepted. But under the photograph of Valancy Crawford in Henry J. Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women*, vol. 1, (Toronto, Wm. Briggs, 1903) the date is given as December, 1851. Most odd'y, in the records of Little Lake Cemetery, Peterborough, the relevant entry reads as follows:

"Isabella V. Crawford, age 34, Sister of S. Crawford, born in Ireland, died in Toronto, Heart Disease, February 12, 1887, interred March 4, 1887 in Grave 2, Lot 13, Range 19 North, Section 'D', by Rev. Beck."

This would mean that she was born in 1852. Varying accounts of the arrival of the Crawfords in Paisley give her age then as five, six, or seven.

Another error is to be found in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* (Toronto, O.U.P., 1967) where we find, "In 1875, on the death of her father, she came with her mother and an invalid sister to Toronto, where they lived in great poverty till her death." But Doctor Crawford died on July 3, 1875, and Emma Naomi, in Peterborough, on January 20, 1876.

Some time after Miss Crawford's death, Canadians woke to the realization that a poet had lived among them. In the Public Library of Hamilton, Ontario, there is a collection of scrapbooks made by Ferbairn Gardiner. In volume 88, p. 80, is an article by "R.V.", from some un-named newspaper, undated, but probably published in October or November, 1879, on families of French origin to whom Canada is indebted. One is General Valancy, "well-known in Ireland, . . . distinguished for his works on Irish archeology". The article continues with a lament over the discouragement that Isabella Valancy had felt when her Canadian countrymen had not appreciated her work and an invitation to the ladies and gentlemen of "this city" to contribute to a fund being raised by the distinguished journalist, Kit of the *Mail and Empire*, to erect a monument to the poet. Several other clippings from 1879 to 1900 recount ef-

forts made by Kit, M.M.W., and the historical Society of Peterborough to increase the fund. *Who Was Who* states that eventually a Celtic Cross was erected over her grave.

But inaccuracy creeps in even here, for the inscription drawn up by the secretary of the Historical Society reads as follows:

Isabella Va'anccy [sic] Crawford, Born at Dublin, Dec. 25th, 1850, Died at Toronto, Feb. 13th, 1887."

A note to me from Mrs. E. M. Haurmes reads as follows:

It was my mother, (Maud Miller Wilson) who did a good deal to stimulate interest in the poems of Isabel'a Va'anccy Crawford in Peterborough.

Mother tried to do th's through the *Examiner* and the "Fortnightly Club", a literary club in which she was very active. . . . After Miss Crawford's death Mother tried to collect money for a monument, as there was none, and I remember this incident. The Committee asked Mother what she thought should be inscribed on it, and Mother said, "Isabel'a Va'anccy Crawford, Poet by the Grace of God." One of the Committee said, "Mrs. Wilson, do you not mean *Poetess*?" and Mother said, "No; I mean *Poet*. Anything else would detract from her greatness."¹⁴

The monument stands proudly above the grave of Canada's first considerable woman poet; above it the great trees whisper in the same music that Valancy Crawford loved so long ago. The inscription on the monument reads:

ISABELLA VALANCY CRAWFORD
POET BY THE GIFT OF GOD.

In 1905, J. W. Garvin, who had been appointed her Literary Executor by her brother, Stephen Wa'ter, gathered most of the poems from the newspapers in which they had appeared, along with those in *Old Spookses' Pass*, into what he called *The Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford*, published by William Briggs, Toronto. It should more precisely be titled *Selected Poems*, as he omitted a good number. Although we owe a great debt of gratitude to Garvin for his hard work in making the collection, one could wish that he had not believed that editorial duties included re-writing some lines that he considered faulty—sometimes with dire results.

Misfortune dogged Valancy Crawford, but although in her work she shows a familiarity with hardship and sorrow, she never whimpers or cries out against the Fates. Again and again she proclaims an unyielding faith in the power of love and the necessity of courage, but nowhere more clearly than in her own life.

NOTES

This article grew out of research for a book on the life and work of Isabella Valancy Crawford, to be published by Twayne Publishers.

1. John W Garvin (comp. & ed.), *The Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1905).
2. Katherine Hale, *Isabella Valancy Crawford*, *Makers of Canadian Literature*, (Toronto: Ryerson, 1905).
3. Canada, Public Archives, Manuscript Documents, "Application of Stephen Dennis Crawford of Paisley", RG5, C1, vol. 507, No. 561.
4. Canada, Public Archives, "Application for Grants for Sites for Churches in Township of Paisley Land Petition", RG1, L3, vol. 416a, and RG1, L3, vol. 417.
5. Letter from R. S. Gilbert, Secretary, Royal College of Surgeons of England, April 26, 1965.
6. Information kindly provided by Miss Penny Petrone, of Head of the Lakes University, Thunder Bay, Ontario.
7. E. M. Pomeroy, "Isabella Valancy Crawford", *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, VII, (June 1944), 36-38. Original letter now in Library of Mount Allison University, Sackville, N.B.
8. *Peterborough, Land of Shining Waters*, published by the City and County of Peterborough, Ontario, 1967, at the University of Toronto Press.
9. Hale, 10.
10. Letter from Miss Virginia Haltz, Medical School Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Dec. 8, 1967.
11. Maud Miller Wilson, MS article in Douglas Library, ca. 1905; J. W. Garvin, "Isabella Valancy Crawford", *Who Was Who in Canada, 1875-1937*.
12. Wilson, *op. cit.*
13. Pomeroy, *op. cit.*
14. Mrs. E. M. Haurmes was daughter of Mrs. Wilson; at the time of writing to me, July, 1966, she was living in St. Paul, Minn., U.S.A.