

## OPEN LETTER TO COBOURG TOWN COUNCIL

Re: Naming of West (Langevin) Pier.

By Wally Keeler, Unit D4 – 135 Chapel Street, Cobourg, Ontario, K9A 1J5

September 28, 2017

Last May 31, I submitted a package of proposals to the Waterfront User Assessment and Detailed Design Plan organizers, and to some councilors and local news media. One of those proposals was to rename the West (Langevin) Pier to Susanna Moodie Pier.

I was aware of Sir Hector-Louis Langevin's record, however I chose not to play that card. My issue is that he was a bureaucrat, a cabinet minister, a politico unworthy of tribute. Too many roads, streets, buildings, bridges, schools, throughout Canada bear the names of politicians and bureaucrats. It smells of mediocrity. The naming of things appeals to vanity, power, prestige, the playthings of politicians and their minions. We have to get away from the naming of things for political reasons and begin to name things for poetical reasons, for artistic reasons, to celebrate creative culture.

I had proposed that the pier be renamed Susanna Moodie Pier and that the pier be themed after her internationally renown book, *Roughing It In the Bush*. The foliage of the pier should replicate as best possible the foliage that flourished at the time of her arrival. Cobourg harbour is designated as *Heritage Harbour*. Susanna Moodie stepped off the boat onto Cobourg pier in 1832. Now that is specific, local, and physical heritage.

*The Canadian Encyclopedia* describes her “struggles as a settler, progressive ideas, attachment to the ‘best’ of contemporary British values, suspicion of ‘yankee’ influence in Canada and her increasingly highly regarded book, *Roughing It In the Bush*, have made her a legendary figure in Canada.”

*The Canadian Encyclopedia* continues, “*Roughing It In the Bush* ... combines her steadfast moral vision, her fascination with differences in character, a willingness to reveal personal weakness and inexperience, considerable psychological insight and a generous measure of wit and playfulness.”

Wikipedia describes her impact on Canadian literature: “Moodie's books and poetry inspired Margaret Atwood's collection of poetry, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, published in 1970. It was also an important influence on one of Atwood's later novels, *Alias Grace*, based on an account of murder convict Grace Marks which appeared in *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*. She has also been a source of inspiration for Carol

Shields, who published a critical analysis of Susanna Moodie's work, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision*. Additionally, the central character of Shield's novel, *Small Ceremonies*, is working on a biography of Moodie.

On 8 September 2003, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the National Library of Canada, Canada Post released a special commemorative series, *The Writers of Canada*, with a design by Katalina Kovats, Three million stamps were issued. Moodie and her sister Catherine Parr Traill were featured on one of the English-Canadian stamps.

### **Social Justice Activist of her Day**

Excerpt from the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*:

“Another facet of Susanna’s early career that deserves mention is her work for the Anti-Slavery Society. The secretary to the society in the late 1820s was a minor poet, Thomas Pringle, who had resided for a number of years in South Africa. Susanna wrote to Pringle in connection with items she submitted to *Friendship’s offering*, a gift-book which he edited. Correspondence and friendship followed; indeed, it seems that Pringle became a surrogate father to Susanna. She visited his home in Hampstead (now part of London) in 1830 and in early 1831, and it was there that she met John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie, whom she was to marry on 4 April 1831. It was also at Pringle’s that Susanna met former black slaves from the West Indies. The result of such meetings was her two anti-slavery tracts, *The history of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave . . .* (1831) and *Negro slavery described by a negro: being the narrative of [Ashton Warner] . . .* (1831). The two pieces, especially the introduction to *Negro slavery*, relate Susanna’s humanitarian awakening and indicate the source of the Dickensian attention to social injustice to which she gives expression in poems as well as in longer prose works.”

### **Susanna Moodie and First Nations**

Excerpts from the *National Library & Archives Canada*:

“But neither Susanna nor Catharine accepted the usual stereotypes, preferring to base their accounts on their own experiences with their new

neighbours. *The Backwoods of Canada* and *Roughing It in the Bush* both contain lengthy descriptions of the Chippewa people who lived in the area of Stony Lake, the Otonabee and Trent Rivers and the Rice Lake Plains.”

“We may also be surprised by Traill's genuine concern, expressed many times throughout her work, for the dangers to the Native way of life posed by assimilation: "The race is slowly passing away from the face of the earth, or mingling by degrees with the colonists, till, a few centuries hence, even the names of their tribes will scarcely remain to tell that they once existed" (*The Backwoods of Canada*, letter 13).”

“There follows a string of anecdotes about the reactions of the Native people to the Moodies' European possessions, their generosity towards the struggling white family in their midst, their capability and honesty (in contrast with that of the "Yankees") in barter and borrowing, and their strength, skill and courage in the wilderness. Moodie justifies the inclusion of so many anecdotes by reminding the reader that, "the real character of a people can be more truly gathered from such seemingly trifling incidents than from any ideas we may form of them from the great facts in their history.”

“Moodie's portrayal of the Native people she knows is sympathetic. She exposes the greed and cruelty of those settlers who deal unfairly with Native people: "The Indians are often made a prey of and cheated by the unprincipled settlers, who think it no crime to overreach a red-skin." She recognizes and marvels at their generosity and sensitivity to the Moodies' pride when the latter are close to starving. She even attempts to understand and appreciate Native customs, rituals and spirituality at a time when most European observers took these simply as examples of paganism.”

“Near the end of "*The Wilderness, and Our Indian Friends*," Susanna seems to sense the painful irony of her own position in relation to the inevitable disappearance of the Native way of life: "Often I have grieved that people with such generous impulses should be degraded and corrupted by civilised men; that a mysterious destiny involves and hangs over them, pressing them back into the wilderness, and slowly and surely sweeping them from the earth.”

What better individual could exemplify and personify reconciliation between peoples? It took powerful women writers, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, to lift another woman's

(Susanna Moodie) writings out of the darkness of obscurity. Canada's literary heritage became better for that.

Nicole Beatty, co-chair of the Cobourg 150 Committee, suggested that the renaming of the pier "is an excellent opportunity for some education about local history and its impacts. This is a chance to learn from the past and to do better moving forward"

Susanna Moodie provides exemplary local history that has resonated for generations and reached international readers. She certainly made a profound impact on Margaret Atwood who amplified that impact on Canadian culture. Learn from the past? Susanna Moodie is our past; a mid-1800s woman in the backwoods with progressive ideas. And she was here, amongst us locals.

Susanna Moodie belongs with the creative class. A writer. A novelist. A memoirist. A poet. Cobourg would be naming the pier after her for poetical reasons. The taint of craven politics does not cling to her. Her story is our story, and it is a good story of authentic merit. What name could be more appropoetic? Susanna Moodie Pier.

Wally Keeler  
Unit D4 – 135 Chapel Street,  
Cobourg, ON. K9A 1J5  
905-372-8379  
[poetician1@gmail.com](mailto:poetician1@gmail.com)