

A Critical Appraisal of Mari Sandoz' *Miss Morissa*: Modern Woman on the Western Frontier

by
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Set in 1876 in the Nebraska Sandhill country, Mari Sandoz' *Miss Morissa* evokes for its readers a sense of time and place as the young woman doctor experiences the revolutionary changes of the settling of the frontier. But despite the excellence of this evocation, the novel fails as a novel, in part, perhaps, because of a possible identification of the author with her heroine. Even in its failure, though, it has a strength. This strength is in the theme of the modern woman confronting frontier society. It is the thesis of this paper that the essence of the novel lies in this theme and that the theme and the depiction of time and place make *Miss Morissa* a novel worthy of the critical consideration which has eluded it since its publication in 1955, for the only critical reference to the novel since its original reception is quite negative.¹

From the opening sentence, Sandoz gives her reader a sense of actually being on the Western frontier, of participating in the historical happenings of a hundred years ago, and of experiencing the West before its identity dissolved in freeways, supermarkets, television, and MacDonald's. The novel begins: "The wheels of the stagecoach stirred up a long trail of dust, to sift away eastward like a plume of smoke sprouting from the wide spring prairie."² The setting is the crossing of the North Platte at what are now Bridgeport and Northport, Nebraska. Sandoz' descriptions let one feel and smell the damp and decay in the walls of a new soddy, see the sand bars of the river as they "pushed their impatient backs up through the tepid waters." (p. 100) Her metaphoric language is appropriate to the place. She speaks, for example, of the loneliness, "sharp as the howl of the coyotes, but continuous, and pushing in like the shadows of the lantern in the dirt floor and the rooty sod walls," (p. 39) or says "When the visitors

spurred away, they usually left a hazy sense of unfriendliness behind, like the thin smoking of dust raised by their dog-loping horses in the summer heat." (p. 84)

No critic has found fault with Sandoz' striking imagery and sensory filled, precise descriptions, for she knew her region and its history. Some critics, however, consider her a better historian than novelist.³ In *Miss Morissa* she chinked the fictional gaps between the logs of her novel with the mortar of historical events and persons. We meet such noted and notorious people as Dr. Walter Reed, who stops briefly en route to his post at Fort Robinson, local outlaws like Doc Middleton and Fly Speck Billy whom Old Jules had told her about, and Calamity Jane, who is tied to the story of Morissa's childhood on a poor farm before we and Morissa meet her in Deadwood, and we learn of the exploits of Sam Bass, the deaths of Wild Bill Hickock, of General Custer, and of Crazy Horse.

Many of the incidents in the novel, too, are accounts of events that did take place or that could reasonably have occurred. We meet Morissa, age 24, as she has just left her year old medical practice in Omaha, following her fiance's discovery of her bastard birth, to join her step-father in Nebraska. During the four years that the novel spans, she experiences an almost incredible series of crises. For example, moments after her arrival she swims the flooded Platte on a borrowed horse to save a nearly drowned man on the north bank. She spends a night alone on the prairie with a severe concussion after having been thrown by her horse, helps to fight a prairie fire, is caught in a blizzard, and is shot at by horse thieves. Her exploits as a doctor, too, encompass everything from treating victims of spotted fever and typhoid to hammering a silver plate from a half dollar to cover the open head wound of a man she had helped to rescue from a fall into his deep well. But although melodrama tinges some of these experiences and others seem forced in their coincidence, Sandoz' obvious love for her Nebraska plains and all of its history may assuage any annoyance a reader might have.

The plethora of crises that Dr. Morissa Kirk faces, however, is not so serious a defect in the novel as is the failure of Morissa to emerge as a fully developed character. Through all of the conflicts, all of the experiences, all of the touchings with people who have become part of history, Morissa remains an onlooker, static and wooden, lacking the depth of dimension that would have made her a pulsating, soul-wrenched being. This may have resulted largely from Sandoz' limitations as an artist, for in none of her works does she get inside of her characters. There is no psychological probing, for as Greenwell says, she "was concerned with external rather than in-

ternal human conflicts."⁴ The biographical evidence would indicate that this was true of herself as well, that she was a very private person and one not given to introspection. Such a person would find difficulty in opening up the self of any character, but especially so if the character resembled her. And I believe that there are intriguing parallels between Morissa and Mari that have not yet been explored in the small body of criticism that exists on the novel.

Like Mari, Morissa passed the teachers' examination at fifteen. A few years later, with the help of her step-father, Morissa received her medical degree—fulfilling her creator's desire to have been a doctor. After receiving the *Atlantic Monthly* \$5,000 prize for *Old Jules*, Sandoz said it would have meant much more if she had had it at age 20. "If it had been at 20, I would have been a doctor. That is what I have always wanted to be."⁵ In addition to the vicarious fulfillment of this longing, Morissa also provided Sandoz with the opportunity to experience the frontier fully. Her own birth, coming just 20 years after the arrival of her heroine in Nebraska, allowed her to grow up at the tail end of the frontier period. During the 24 years she lived in the Sandhills she experienced many of the hardships of the pioneers, knew early settlers and Indians, and could well have fantasized living as a woman—and a doctor as well—at the end of this romantic era.

Another point of similarity lies in the strong feelings both women have for the West. They love the land and hate the exploitation of nature by man, as they both, too, hate greed and the destruction of human values that greed causes—especially seen in the callous treatment of the Indians. As Morissa watches the long line of Cheyennes being driven from their homes to the Indian Territory, she reacts as Sandoz could have done: "Suddenly the young doctor's face was scalded with tears and such a fury rose in her that she had to whip her horses, holding them close until they reared and plunged, froth flying from the bits." (p. 124)

A most intriguing similarity to me, however, is between the unsuccessful marriages of both women. Morissa's marriage to the young and weak boy, Eddie Ellis, made impulsively when the doctor discovers that Tris Polk, the rancher to whom she was engaged, supports the cattlemen's harrassment of the homesteaders, seems incredible to the critic who has commented on it.⁶ But it is not so incredible if one accepts the characterization of Morissa as one who hated the injustices of frontier society and especially not if one sees the marriage as a fictional expression of Sandoz' own marriage to Wray Macumber. This marriage was apparently disastrous, for she would never talk about it even to her close friends. She even went so far as to block out

the five years of her marriage and move her birthdate up five years to accommodate for the discrepancy.' Her birthdate is given in *Who's Who*, in *Contemporary Authors*, and in several obituary notices, as 1901 although it was really 1896. *Who's Who* also lists her marital status as unmarried rather than as divorced.⁸ When she was asked why she used the name Macumber—and Mari was spelled at that time with an "e" added—during her early years in Lincoln, she said that it was a pen name, used because Old Jules hated writers. She did not, in fact, use her maiden name until 1929, on the advice of her agent.⁹

Whether Macumber and Eddie Ellis were at all alike is a moot question, but it seems likely that, 35 years after her divorce, she needed to express the experience of her marriage in a fictional account. This interpretation makes the otherwise strange ambiguities in Morissa's relation to Eddie much more credible. For although she felt ashamed immediately after the marriage, and felt contempt for the youth even before their brief time together ended with her refusal to pay for a new buggy and team, we find, months later, that "for once she went to sleep without thinking about Eddie or wondering who was looking after him tonight." (p. 196) And later, "Morissa felt she must get in touch with him, fretting about like him like a mother over a weakling son." (p. 201) Perhaps the closest tie between the real and fictional marriages is suggested in a quotation from Morissa's Scottish grandmother: "A woman who makes a quick and bad marriage she gang to the de'il with a dishclout on her head. Aye, the dishclout of sorrow and humiliation." (p. 175)

Although these similarities may not have adversely affected the development of Sandoz' principle character, her novel is, unquestionably, flawed. But in addition to the strengths indicated earlier in the paper, the novel carries a strong and significant theme. Sandoz herself didn't think so, for she reportedly said "I don't think it [*Miss Morissa*] means a lot. Most of my other books have a larger meaning."¹⁰ Perhaps she, like Dr. Walton in her dissertation, denigrated the novel because the impetus for the writing was a request to Sandoz from a Hollywood studio for a novel that could serve as a vehicle for Greer Garson.¹¹ But it will may be that, whatever the impetus, Sandoz put more of herself into the book than she realized, and thereby said more than she thought she had said. For Morissa Kirk, again like her creator, is a modern woman. And her story is essentially that of a modern woman confronting the raw brutality of the Western frontier.

By modern woman I mean simply the woman, whether married or single, who is independent, assertive, and self-fulfilled outside of the home, usually in a profession. She is, like Morissa, not the doc-

tor's wife, but the doctor. Her identity is not proscribed by a man. But she is still a woman, possessing the feminine principles of nurturing, tenderness, mercy, compassion, care, and concern for human relationships. The conflict between these principles and her independence and need for self-fulfillment are the root of the problems faced by today's woman.

Throughout *Miss Morissa* we see the heroine caught in the conflict. Soon after her arrival, for example, she buys material to curtain her section of her step-father's small sod house. But she wavers ". . . between the two sides of her nature, the feminine and the practical" (p. 23) whether to start with the curtain for her finery or with her doctor's sign announcing her presence. And after telling an outlaw, who has taken her blindfolded to his hideout to treat his wife, that she might die because of a self-induced abortion, ". . . she saw a look of deep apprehension and misery come into the shadowed eyes, of fear and of sorrow that made the woman in the doctor feel rejected and depressed." (p. 121)

As Morissa thinks of the children she and Tris Polk may have, after their decision to marry, she looks at him, "And now, with a woman's eye, Morissa Kirk appraised the man who was to be their father, and smiled within herself, a woman fulfilled." (p. 151) Yet just a short time before, when Tris asks her to marry him at the dance following the summer horse show, she replies, "I can't. . . . The man that's waiting at the tent came for me. Typhoid's hit the trail north. . . . A doctor would be no wife for you." (p. 136)

And she suffers self-doubts. After she has survived a blizzard only to find the sick man past saving and, the fourth night, waited in the cabin for the possible attack again by the horse thieves, she even doubts her choice of profession.

The waiting depressed the weary doctor, with the poor man lying frozen beside the sod wall outside. The drive to self-preservation had carried her to a willingness to shoot, even to kill this afternoon, but now that was gone and the doubt of all her presence and premise here settled down like some dark and sooty cloud. It brought mistrust of every action, not only her stubborn decision to remain, a lone woman in the wilderness, but the impulse to come West at all. . . . Even doubts of her decision to become a doctor gathered like dark buzzards to brood in the snowbound soddy. (pp. 106-7)

From the beginning of the novel, with her impulsive, fully feminine reaction to her fiance's discovery of her lineage—rushing without forethought to the rough frontier—to the indecisive end, Morissa experiences the basic conflicts of modern woman. The novel ends with the unresolved conflict between the feminine longing for a relationship

with a man and the fulfillment of herself as a doctor, a distinct individual in society. Eddie is dead, the small log hospital burned, and the men of the Platte have come to offer help in the rebuilding. Tris has sent a letter implying that he is still waiting to marry her.

Husband, Morissa thought, all the things around her here suddenly like a shimmering beat dance of the midsummer prairies. Husband. Not a father oversolicitous of his good name, or a warped and pitiful son seeking a mother, but a husband to stand beside her, a wife. For a moment it seemed to Morissa that she must cry right there before them all, cry out of the flooding of all her being. (p. 248)

But she doesn't cry, not yet. Nor is there a suggestion that she will ever marry Tris, for a few moments later she tells the men that she is going to rebuild the hospital. The novel ends with her saying to them, "You can't know how proud I am, how very proud that you—you—" Then her voice broke and she turned her face away, for it was not fitting that all these people see their doctor cry." (p. 249)

It is rather fitting, though, that the novel ends on that note, for crying is attributed to women, not men, and this holding back of the emotions is not only indicative of the conflict between the feminine and the masculine in woman, but is symbolic, too, of the conflict between woman and the frontier. And the frontier was definitely a man's society. Morissa is the only woman living on the North Platte who is not a prostitute except for the trader's wife and, later, the occasional wife of a homesteader. As Sandoz has a cowboy say, "This here country ain't no place fer a woman. . . . This country's fer cactus, rattlers, 'n' mebbly cows, when it don't get too cold." (p. 185)

Countering the feminine principle of mercy is the masculine one of justice, and it is frontier justice that brings Morissa first into conflict with her new home. After saving the nearly drowned man shortly after her arrival at the North Platte, Tris Polk, the man whose horse she took to ride across the river, tells her that

"In these parts taking the poorest crowbait without the owner's permission's a hanging matter "

"Oh, really?" Morissa inquired, her anger back. "I am sure in these parts, as in all others, letting a man die without attempting succor would be a matter of murder to an enlightened conscience, Mr. Polk." (p. 7)

On her second morning, she sees a man hanging from a span of the newly opened bridge, which roadagents had tried unsuccessfully to dynamite. After Tris has told her that the man hung was probably not even the one who had tried to dynamite the bridge, but only the one standing guard, Morissa is outraged. He tells her that where there is

no law, a man is hung if he runs with outlaws. Morissa replies, "I think it's savagery, and you're siding with the savages!" (p. 29)

Not only was the Western frontier branded with the masculine principle of justice, but also with the hot irons of adventure, of escape from the restraints of society, as well as with those of courage, endurance, and perseverance which the frontier demanded of its women as well as of its men. Morissa's marriage to Eddie, for example, fails in part because of his wanting to play the adventurous role of a road-agent rather than to file on and break sod for a homestead. And her marriage occurred because of her reaction to knowing that Tris has participated, even though not personally, in the frontier battle between rancher and settler. For the men who came to the frontier to live by their own sweat did so in part, at least, for the adventure and especially the freedom that came with being a part of the gold rush to the Black Hills or of running cattle on unfenced land. The feminine in Morissa clashes with this masculine world. Morissa is the first person to file on land north of the Platte, the first to fence in her land, the first to plant trees and flowers. When the station master advises her not to move across the river but to stay in town awhile because "You're the only white woman for two hundred miles along the Platte," Morissa replies, "No . . . I'm the only doctor for those two hundred miles." (p. 67) Because she *is* the only doctor, her attack on the masculine society by moving north is tolerated. Having Tris as friend and suitor helps. 100.

The emotion aroused by the conflict may best be seen when Morissa hears a story of a man who collected a bounty for an Indian scalp. The man who tells the story, and the other men who hear it, accept it as a natural part of frontier life. Not Morissa.

Some day she would do something desperate in one of these dark and terrible moods- something destructive, like a wild mustang that could not accept the rope. Morissa ran with her lantern, over the dark bridge and to her lonely place. She didn't even look into her bundle of new medical books and her magazines, or even the letters. She sat with her hands clutched tightly in her lap, more alone than she had ever felt in her life. (p. 92)

Despite such feelings, despite the difficulties of being "Doctor of the Gold Trail," as the novel is subtitled, and despite the courage and perseverance that it took to build home and hospital on the open range of the north bank, Morissa endures. She endures, too, such taunts as that of the man who says "Them women docs got no business hornin' in on what's a man's job!" (p. 204) or the put-down by a male doctor who takes over as she is starting to help a man injured by a horse. "This here is Dr. Kirk, one of the awkward cowhands

managed to say. The goateed man looked up. "Ah, Dr. Kirk—a mid-wife, no doubt," he said and fell to straightening out the leg, feeling the bone." (p. 132)

Such taunts, however, are infrequent so that although Sandoz makes the reader aware of the negative attitudes of some of the men toward Morissa as a doctor, this is not her primary concern. Rather, I believe, it is to evoke a sense of life on the frontier a hundred years ago, of the revolutionary changes that took place as the feminine principles of mercy, compassion, and concern for others clashed with the masculine principles of justice, adventure, and freedom. For the changes were not only the fencing in of the homesteaders' claims, the replacement of lynching with legal trials, the healing of the sick and injured, but also the beginning of schools, for Morissa opens a part of her hospital as the first classroom. Even more than the meliorating changes, though, the novel presents a picture of modern woman as she meets frontier society, a thoroughly modern woman who might be a thinly veiled self-portrait of the author.

In spite of the flaws, especially the weak characterization, the too numerous exploits of the heroine, and the inclusion of many historical tid-bits that at times disrupt the narrative flow, *Miss Morissa* remains significant in the canon of Western literature as an excellent evocation of time and place and as the first fictional portrait of a modern woman meeting the frontier.

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NOTES

1. The only critical reference (with the exception of book reviews) to *Miss Morissa*, as well as one of the few dissertations to date on Sandoz, is: Kathleen O'Donnell Walton, "Mari Sandoz: an Initial Critical Appraisal," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delaware, 1970. Of the 348 pages, only three deal with *Miss Morissa*. Walton categorizes it as "commercially oriented" (p. 98) and says of the many events in the novel, "It is just too much to believe." (p. 151) Citations from this work will be listed under "Walton."

2. Mari Sandoz, *Miss Morissa: Doctor of the Gold Trail* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1955), p. 1. All citations are from this edition. The novel, together with eight other works by Sandoz, was republished in 1975 by Hastings House, New York, credited erroneously by Walton with the original publication. (p. 149)

3. Walton, p. 306 and W. R. Burnett, review in *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1955, p. 49.

4. Scott L. Greenwell, "The Literary Apprenticeship of Mari Sandoz," *Nebraska History*, 57, 2 (Summer 1976), p. 268.

5. "Mari Sandoz: 1935," *Prairie Schooner*, XL1 (Summer 1967) p. 175. The article appears with no author, but a footnote states that it was taken from an interview with Sandoz by Virginia Irwin which had appeared in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Nov. 27, 1935 under the title, "From Nebraska Plains to Success as Author."

6. Walton, p. 151.

7. Greenwell, p. 252.

8. There are numerous discrepancies in the limited material available on Sandoz. For example, *Contemporary Authors* says (p. 829) "When the manuscript [Old Jules] won the *Atlantic Monthly* prize in 1935, her father wrote: 'You know I consider artists and writers the maggots of society.'" But Greenwell indicates, in his well documented article, that her father's statement came after her winning honorable mention in *Harper's* intercollegiate contest in 1926. This is supported by the statement in the article listed under note no. 5, in which the author says she started writing *Old Jules* after the death of her father.

9. Greenwell, p. 255.

10. Walton, p. 149.

11. Walton, pp. 97-98.