

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Caroline Kirkland (1801-1864)

From A New Home-Who'll Follow?

Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home-Who'll Follow?* (1839) is a work which straddles the fence between novel and autobiography. Though the book was written in the character of "Mary Clavers," the pseudonym that appeared on the title page, and though it was long recognized as a pioneer work in American realism (and so written about in histories of the American novel), most early readers soon knew that Caroline Kirkland was the real author and that the book was based on her and her husband's experience building the frontier town of Pinckney, Michigan (about fifty miles west of Detroit). Thus the book also is accepted as an autobiography and appears in Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies*.

Such a mixed status derives from the fact that in the early nineteenth century the line between autobiography and the novel was not as clear as some readers would like to make it today. Both were praised if they were faithful to real life, and Edgar Allan Poe, who knew Kirkland was the author, praised the book highly, saying that "to Mrs. Kirkland alone we were indebted for our acquaintance with the home and home-life of the backwoodsman."¹ The disadvantage to autobiography as such was that it was thought to be vain; while the advantage to a little fictionalizing, as of names and places, was that the writer would not be held exactly accountable and might keep her identity unknown. So the fence *A New Home* straddled was a kind of pioneer split-rail fence, not straight, not high, and not very rigid. Indeed, after publication, the residents of Pinckney recognized themselves in the "Montacute" of the book, and their displeasure was one of the reasons Kirkland returned to New York.

And New Yorker she was, eldest child of Samuel Stansbury, a cultivated book-seller, and granddaughter of Joseph Stansbury, who during the Revolution had been a Loyalist poet and satirist. She received an excellent education and then taught in her aunt's school. In 1828, she married William Kirkland, an instructor at Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York, and for a time they ran a girls school in Geneva, New York. But in 1835 William became principal of the Detroit Female Seminary, and he began buying Michigan land until he and his father owned 1300 acres. He then took his wife and children to settle it and build the town, hoping to grow up (and grow rich) with the expanding West.

A New Home thus invites comparison with Boone's autobiography and other explorers' and settlers' narratives, with the difference that it is written by a very bright and critical woman, one who is often much more realistic than the men. She also has both a sense of humor and a standard of taste, two qualities that complement each other beautifully in her case. So she wants by turns to refine the frontier and to make the new settlers adapt to it. She warns them of the "mud-holes" and the crude cabins, where a fine cabinet is likely to end up as a corn-crib. She urges them to be tolerant of frontier customs, understanding their purpose, and she mostly approves of frontier democracy. In all this she uses her own mistakes and successes as lessons to others, making her book an "Emigrant's Guide" to easterners going west. Seeing herself as an "emigrant," she thus identifies with this aspect of the nation's experience, as others had identified with the Revolution.

Perhaps the greatest irony in Kirkland's experience, however, is that the frontier did not in the end provide as much freedom and opportunity as the city. It was also not a good place to write, even though it was good material for a writer. So in 1842 she and her husband returned to New York, where she wrote more sketches about the West, as well as writing and editing travel letters, advice books, and literary anthologies.

The text below is from *A New Home-Who'll Follow* (1839), chapters 1 and 18. A recent edition is *A New Home-Who'll Follow?* ed. William S. Osborne (New Haven: College & Univ. Press, 1965). William Osborne is also the author of the brief biography, *Caroline M. Kirkland* (New York: Twayne, 1972). For critical study and comparison of Kirkland to other women's writing about the frontier, see Annette Kolodny, *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 131-58
"The Literati of New York City," in Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1181

Reading

A New Home, or, Life in the Clearings

<http://archive.org/stream/newhomeorlifeint013464mbp#page/n5/mode/2up>