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

by
Beatrice K. Morton

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.

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." 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. 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 on 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 meet Morissa 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 fiancé'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 tinged 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-wrenching 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-
sense of unfriendliness behind, their dog-loping horses in the distant field, 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.” 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 her bastard birth. To join the flooded Platte on some man on the north bank. With a severe concussion after to fight a prairie fire, is caught up in his deeds. Her exploits as a doctor, with victims of spotted fever and on a half dollar to cover the blood to rescue from a fall into a tinge of some of these experiences. Sandoz’ obvious that his history may assuage any

Morissa Kirk faces, however, is the failure of Morissa to succeed. Through all of the conflicts, things with people who have been an onlooker, static and in that would have made her a may have resulted largely from none of her works does she psychological probing, for as with external rather than personal human conflicts.” 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.” 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, so 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 harassment of the homesteaders, seems incredible to the critic who has commented on it. 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. 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.

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.” 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. 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-
her birthdate up five years to her birthdate is given in Who's in several obituary notices, as Who's Who also lists her marital divorced.' When she was asked and Mari was spelled at that early years in Lincoln, she said: Old Jules hated writers. She until 1929, on the advice of her

Ilia were at all alike is a moot after her divorce, she needed age in a fictional account. This range ambiguities in Morissa's. For although she felt ashamed it contempt for the youth even with her refusal to pay for a later, that "for once she went to wondering who was looking," "Morissa felt she must get in like a mother over a weakening between the real and fictional from Morissa's Scottish grand- and bad marriage she gang to . Aye, the dishcloth of sorrow

not have adversely affected the other, her novel is, unquestionable indicated earlier in the significant theme. Sandoz her- she said: "I don't think it. [After her books have a larger mean- in her dissertation, denigrated writing was a request to Sandoz had to serve as a vehicle for , whatever the impetus, Sandoz she realized, and thereby said Morissa Kirk, again like her story is essentially that of a quality of the Western frontier. for the woman, whether married age, and self-fulfilled outside of 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 con- olict. 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 desire 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 promise here settled down like some dark and nasty 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 breed in the snowbound soddy. (pp. 106-7)

From the beginning of the novel, with her impulsive, fully femi- nine reaction to her fiancé'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.

Morissa thought, all the things around her here suddenly like a shimmering heat haze of the midsummer prairies. Husband. Not a father over-solicitous 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’ mebby 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 crow when 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 road agents 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
as a doctor. a distinct in­

Imalliog hospital burned, and

belp in the rebuilding. Tris

waiting to marry her.

lulli her hell: 3uddenly lite a shim­

a. HIISband. NO! a falher

pitiful §on sc"mg. a mother. but

moment it !iCCmcd to Marissa thaI

JUI orllle no<)nding of all

her

Letu a suggestion that she will

er she tells the men that she is

ends with her saying to them, v very proud that you—you—

her face away. for it was not

or cry." (p. 249)

e novel ends on that note, for,

and this holding back of the

conflict between the feminine

symbolic, too, of the conflict

the frontier was definitely a

man living on the North Plate

- trader’s wife and, later, the

ndaz has a cowboy say, ""This

man. . . . This country’s fer

i don’t get too cold.”" (p. 185)

of mercy is the masculine one

brings Morissa first into

ing the nearly drowned man

ite. Tris Polk, the man whose

lls her that

without the owner’s permission’s

back. "I am sure in these parts,

mng success would be a matter

of. (p. 71)

hanging from a span of the

had tried unsuccessfully to

e man hung was probably not

i the bridge, but only the one

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, endu­

rance, 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 be­

tween 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, too.

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 clasped 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 busi­

ness born’n 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 midwife, 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.

Bowling Green State University
Ah, Dr. Kirk—a mid-sentence a mid tightening out the leg, feeling distant so that although Sandoz's attitudes of some of the men were not her primary concern. Rather, in the frontier a hundred years that took place as the feminine concern for others clashed with adventure, and freedom. For the homesteaders' claims, the healing of the sick and souls, for Morissa opens a part even more than the melodramatic picture of modern woman as a modern woman who might be

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.”


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.”


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 1923, 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.


10. Walton, p. 149.