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### Rereading Duncan's *Imperialist* in the Light of Free-trade

With its insistence upon the British/Canadian connection—its out-moded loyalties—Duncan's novel, *The Imperialist*, may seem as irrelevant today as did Thomas Chandler Haliburton's rear guard defence of British North America and his opposition to responsible government in the 1840s and 50s. Now that Canada and the United States have negotiated a free trade pact, Britain enters not at all into these anticipations of the future. Indeed it is almost 20 years since George Grant—himself the grandson of one of the most ardent of 19th century Canadian/British imperialists—caricatured the British imperialist ideal as a mere appetite for greed and power which led to a Hobbesian scramble “for more possessions and greater imperial control to counter the growing strength of its European rivals,” a “wild scramble” that culminated in “the war of 1914.”<sup>1</sup> Since World War II and the Vietnam War, the idealism of the white man's burden—missionaryism, imperialism and nationalism—has been largely debunked and replaced by the realism of tough minded pragmatism—in the vernacular of the technocrat, “playing hardball.”

Does Duncan's novel, then, still speak to the present-day Canadian reader, the contemporary Brian Mulroneys, who pay little attention to British ties and who typically characterize Canada now as an independent nation emerging at long last from its protected childhood? One might also ask whether Duncan still speaks to the sceptical conservative who suspects that such a contemporary view is itself symptomatic of the Americanization of Canada. I submit that both sets of my imagined readers could still benefit from reading or re-reading *The Imperialist*.

In her own time Duncan well knew and well imagined what she was up against: she characterizes her fictional people of Elgin, Ontario, and London, England, and perhaps also her intended readers, as for

the most part unimaginative, crassly self-interested in their "thinking"—a people too busy making a living to think what life is about. Moreover Duncan answers what she is up against: in the Murchisons and in Dr. Drummond she presents a vital spirit, an earnest and imaginative force for the good, which may yet bear fruit. And in her own free imaginative play, her undoctinaire and sympathetic play of intelligence, she makes her writing itself a complex and complete embodiment of that lively spirit. If, however, a down-to-earth reader (of Elgin persuasion) were still to demand more immediate political/economic returns from this novel of ideas, Duncan's writing answers that demand: it not only recalls the debate upon imperial federation of Britain and her colonies: it also anticipates the still unresolved issue of Canada's economic union with the United States and touches upon the related moral issue of whether individual freedom or the common weal comes first.

By the way, Duncan's response to these issues also anticipates Stephen Leacock's imperialist lectures, his "Greater Canada: an appeal" (1907) where he denigrates the narrowness and paltriness of a dependent colonial connection, celebrates the vast riches of Canada's natural resources and technology, and contends that the primary way to a greater Canada is through "the wider [and fuller] citizenship" of a renewed British Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Duncan places less hope than Leacock in the political and cultural matrix of Britain. Yet many readers of *The Imperialist* have found her novel to be enacted on a remote plane of ideas and sentiment—remote from the natural or physical backdrop of Canada. I contend, however, that Duncan's hopes for a greater Canada are more immediately rooted than Leacock's in the Canadian earth, in the vital spirit fostered by this place. At first glance, however, Duncan's nature may seem far removed from the kind of literary "nature" that Desmond Pacey, and many after him, have declared to be typically Canadian. Pacey writes:

...Canadian art as a whole, and more particularly Canadian literature, has a distinctive conception of man's lot on earth, a conception engendered by the peculiar features of the Canadian terrain. There is a family resemblance between the paintings of Tom Thomson, and Emily Carr, the poems of Duncan Campbell Scott and E.J. Pratt and Earl Birney, and the novels of Grove and de la Roche and Callaghan: in all of them man is dwarfed by an immensely powerful physical environment which is at once forbidding and fascinating.<sup>3</sup>

Duncan, however, does work thoughtfully from and against this typical background, this powerful and belittling nature. In *The Imperialist*, nature not only creates what Lorne Murchison and Sara Jeanette

Duncan are up against, the narrow opportunity of the Ontario countryside which apparently makes practical self-interest imperative; nature also seems to provide a way out of this narrow place, the way of the alert and vital spirit.

At the opening of the book, Duncan emphasizes that Lorne Murchison, his family and Dr. Drummond live apart from mainstreet and marketplace Elgin. While the alert, restless and shrewd Drummond has before him a "little outpost of Empire" whose main street offers "a prospect of moderate commercial activity...a street of mellow shop-fronts on both sides...wearing that air of marking a period, a definite stop in growth,"<sup>4</sup> Lorne Murchison, with his quick sympathies and imagination and his standing first in the provincial law examinations, presents the youthful prospect of a larger and different limit—and the town congratulates Lorne and congratulates itself for having supposedly produced him and this wider prospect. But as Lorne looks fondly over the town marketplace, the narrator implies how unrepresentative Lorne's angle of vision is: "Life on an Elgin market day was a serious presentiment, even when the sun shone, and at times when it rained or snowed the aesthetic seemed a wholly unjustifiable point of view." Here it matters too much how much potatoes cost; here the "margin was [too] small" for them to afford any kind of extravagance. Here is "no fresh broken ground of dramatic promise, but a narrow inheritance of the opportunity to live which generations had grasped before" (73). While Duncan hardly touches upon the difficult climate or terrain itself, she does emphasize the "sharp" or angular human result: "there were bones in the village graveyards of Fox County to father all these sharp features" (73); and the "enduring heart of the new country was already old in acquiescence. It was the deep root of the race in the land, twisted and unlovely, but holding the promise of all" (74).

What countervailing "promise," then, does Duncan offer? It is more than the mere hopeful glimmer in Lorne Murchison's eye. Promise is fostered by the Murchisons' home, a commodious house built on the edge of town—"in" Elgin but not "of it"—an extravagant house built by a British remittance man on a plan and scale not to be used again in this place. It is a house based on "large ideas," a house on too large a scale for the complaining and stereotyped housewife Mrs. Murchison. Yet, says the narrator, "one felt stepping into it under influences of less expediency, and more dignity, wider scope and more leisured intention" (29-30). To the children it is a house with a mysterious romantic past and mysterious corners, a place fostering "demoniac ecstasies."

To their clergyman, Dr. Drummond, it offers an appealing atmosphere: "he expanded in its humour, its irregularity" (39).

This expansive house is set against the dour visage of the Elgin market, against the slow caution of the farmers, and the narrowness of the small town manufacturer, Mr. Milburne, whose first and last concern is: "Is it going to be worth my while?" (212). While Duncan sets the civilized attitude of disinterested sympathy against the "natural" necessity of self-interested caution, she herself shows an understanding of both sides, of both the idealists and utilitarians. Obviously, she favors the side of Dr. Drummond, Advena and Lorne Murchison, but she emphasizes that in the marketplace, disinterested ideas are a luxury affordable only by the few—and in the battleground of love, perhaps not affordable or "possible" at all. Thus in the imperialist debate on whether Canada should be joined more closely to Britain and the other colonies, Duncan dryly observes: "The lawyer and doctors, the odd surveyors and engineers, were inclined, by their greater detachment, to theories and prejudices, delightful luxuries where a certain rigidity of opinion is dictated by the considerations of bread and butter" (207).

But she does more than simply understand the countryfolk and their pressing need of "bread and butter." In her portrait of Mrs. Crow, she celebrates their "strenuousness" and "service" and transfigures the rural Mrs. Crow into a regal and "imperial" type:

She sat on the sofa in her best black dress with the bead trimming on the neck and sleeves, a good deal pushed up and wrinkled across the bosom, which had done all that would ever be required of it when it gave Elmore and Abe their start in life. Her wiry hands were crossed in her lap in the moment of waiting; you could tell by the look of them that they were not often crossed there. They were strenuous hands; the whole worn figure was strenuous, and the narrow set mouth, and the eyes which had looked after so many matters for so long, and even the way that the hair was drawn back into a knot in a fashion that would have given a phrenologist his opportunity. It was a different Mrs. Crow from the one that sat in the midst of her poultry and garden stuff in the Elgin market square; but it was even more the same Mrs. Crow, the sum of a certain measure of opportunity and service, an imperial figure in her bead trimming, if the truth were known. (188)

In this emblematic portrait, this celebration of "strenuous" "service," one is made to appreciate how the "deep root of the race in the land, twisted and unlovely" could nevertheless hold "the promise of all" (74). In the sharp alertness of Mrs. Crow, in her hard work and service, in



her endurance and strength, Duncan suggests that the pioneer "root" is at bottom noble if not pretty.

Moreover in Mrs. Crow's tart reply to her son and Lorne (that one best steer clear of lawyers) and in the laconic wit of the farmers who ask Hesketh, the representative Englishman speaking the cause of imperialism for Lorne, whether he knows any commoners—in all this, Duncan approvingly shows a down-to-earth people alert to what confronts them.

Indeed despite her many jibes at the slow caution of the Canadian, Duncan repeatedly implies that the slowness and complacency of the British are much more to be pitied and feared.<sup>5</sup> Thus though Lorne Murchison thinks London the "heart," the vital centre, of the Empire, Duncan portrays the British as slow and sluggish: the "heart" of the Empire "beats through [the] impediment of accumulated tissue" (114); London becomes in Duncan's play of metaphor "one great stomach" bent on self satisfaction" (123); the British ruling class become "mandarins" who "cling to the abstract and to precedent" (124). Consequently the Canadian trade delegates are depressed by the atmosphere of luxury which "thickened...and hung heavily" and by the docile summer crowds picnicking in the midst of the noisy London parks (125). Not only does there seem to be a want of "elbow room" here (a phrase used later by Advena's young Scotsman, Hugh Finlay, as he praises the inviting vistas of Canada), the British are so caught up in their narrow "parish affairs" and their "cumbrous social machinery" that the visiting Canadians see "a dull anachronism in a marching world" (125).

Thus Lorne and his fellow trade commissioners quickly note the difference in scale between London and home and "maintain their point of view," and while Duncan notes that there is "a family resemblance," she emphasizes that the colonists have been shaped from "a different mould of the spirit" (113): for the British North Americans (like Haliburton's Yankee clock maker, Sam Slick) have an opportunistic eye, "a quick eye for things as they are, which seems to come of looking at things as they will be" (113).

Lorne Murchison, himself, then "stand[s] for the youth and energy of the old blood" (228) of both England and Canada, but when in his own impetuous enthusiasm, he breaks loose from the reins of his political elders and betrays the real basis of his hopeful imperialism, Lorne is not so much faithful to the "old blood"—"England has outlived her own body"—as he is prophetic of the New World having been chosen to be the invigorating centre, the heart of a renewed

Empire of the Anglo-Saxon peoples: "the centre of the Empire must shift—and where, if not to Canada?" (229).

What then does Lorne's grandiloquent conviction have to do with the physical fact of Canada? Certainly, Desmond Pacey's picture of a vast landscape "dwarfing" man offers little hope, and Desmond Morton's argument that Canadians were a cautious northern people even before they arrived here offers little hope. Duncan, however, emphasizes the quickening of time in the new world, the sudden extremes of the seasons, and thereby the quick, vital and opportunistic spirit of the new-world settlers. It is this quickened (and perhaps impetuous) spirit, especially in Drummond, in Lorne Murchison and Advena Murchison, which provides the basis of Canada's future—the regeneration of the old blood.

Consider then the place of the seasons and weather in Duncan's story. At times the climate may seem no more than a convenient device for reflecting, drawing out and coloring Duncan's fictional characters. For example, young Alexander Murchison, seven years old, crying behind the woodpile because his father won't provide the money for him to take part in the 24th of May festivities, the Queen's Birthday, has his tears suddenly dried up because they fall all too appropriately on the mossy, lichened wood:

Only the woodpile, friendly mossy logs unsplit, stood inconscient and irresponsible for any share in his black circumstances; and his tears fell among the lichens of the stump he was bowed on till, observing them, he began to wonder, whether he could cry enough to make a pond there, and was presently disappointed to find the source exhausted. The Murchisons were all imaginative. (18)

Here the place or meaning of natural objects depends entirely on the pathetic or comic fallacy of the child's active imagination. Again, years later as Lorne Murchison leaves for his first venture into the Milburne household in his courting of Dora, the extravagant warmth of his ardor is amplified by the blaring colors of the Ontario autumn, the phenomenon of the Indian or false summer before the setting in of winter: "the horse chestnuts dropped crashing among the fallen leaves, the roadside maples blazed, the quiet streets ran into smoky purple, and one belated robin hopped about the lawn" (49). Through much of the book, however, the new and sudden warmth of springtime (even the false springtime, or return of warmth in October) not only amplifies but actively draws out the ardent spirit of the Murchisons. Walking home from church Advena is lifted by Hugh Finlay's sermon, by her ardor for the man in the sermon, and lifted by the very wind itself.

Whatever the doctrine or the man, springtime itself becomes the exhalation of a new beginning:

It was toward the end of an afternoon in early April; the discoloured snow still lay huddled in the bleaker fence corners. Wide puddles stood along the roadsides, reflecting the twigs and branches of the naked maples; last years leaves were thick and wet underfoot, and a soft damp wind was blowing. (70)

Finlay overtakes Advena, and in the awkward silence that follows, Advena interprets their silence to be “pregnant, auspicious; it drew something from the low grey lights of the wet spring afternoon and the unbound heart lifting wind; she had a passionate prevision that the steps they took together would lead somehow to freedom” (70). And indeed their lovers’ debate over London chimney pots and Western sunsets, over whether Britain or Canada fosters true freedom, does lead them toward a larger freedom, but by no means a freedom running a smooth and simple course. Because of Finlay’s prior engagement to Christie Cameron, the Scottish girl back home, his and Advena’s love must be lifted to a platonic or disinterested plane, to what proves to be for Advena a plane not “possible,” a plane which—to the practical Mrs. Murchison—seems merely mad.

Thus the story proceeds, and the seasons stay in tune—now with the mother and father of Advena walking through a winter night to church, through an atmosphere crackling with nervous pain. The vividness of the wintry scene has as much to do with Mrs. Murchison’s irritable and worried state of mind and her daughter’s silent agony as with the physical reality of the Southern Ontario climate:

They slipped out into a crisp white winter night. The snow was banked on both sides of the street. Spreading garden fir trees huddled together weighted down with it; ragged icicles hung from the eaves or lay in long broken fingers on the trodden paths. The snow snapped and tore under their feet; there was a glorious moon that observed every tattered weed sticking up through the whiteness, and etched it with its shadow. The town lay under the moon almost dramatic, almost mysterious, so withdrawn it was out of the cold, so turned in upon its own soul of the fireplace. It might have stood, in the snow and silence, for a shell and a symbol of the humanity within....(202)

This symbol of a withdrawn humanity, turned in upon itself in the wintry cold, suggests an absolute locking or freezing of hope. But a larger logic is at work: in reply to Finlay’s remark “that the heat for May was extraordinary,” Advena has replied that “he was in a country where everything was accomplished quickly, even summer” (108). The

suddenness of the seasons, then, ironically foretells the suddenness by which their love and Duncan's story will be resolved, and indicates the difference between the two lovers: Advena of the new world, quick, warm and impetuous and gypsy-like in her feelings; Hugh Finlay of the old, stiffly correct in his "engagement" to Christie Cameron. Finlay himself feels this difference:

Where he saw a lack of dignity, of consideration, or of restraint, he did not insensibly become less dignified or considerate or restrained to smooth out the perceptible differences; nor was he constituted to absorb the qualities of those defects, and enrich his nature by the geniality, the shrewdness, the quick mental movement that stood on the other side of the account. He cherished in secret an admiration for the young men of Elgin, with their unappeasable energy and their indomitable optimism, but he could not translate it into a language of sympathy.... (107-108)

But after all, Finlay, unlike Henry James's Winterborne, is to be melted and overcome by the sudden combined forces of the Ontario springtime wind, the genial warmth of Advena and Dr. Drummond and perhaps even of God himself. Though Finlay believes that if his life story were to be written, it would be an old story of pain and heroism (109), he sees the advantage of "elbow room" or freedom in the new world and feels "under [his] feet the forces that are working to [an] the immense amelioration" (110), and indeed the forceful human spirit set free here he believes to be "pure and sensitive, more sincerely curious about what is good and beautiful." Advena's sudden warm blush leads Finlay toward seeing "his idea incarnate" (111).

In Duncan's melodrama, this warm idea is again realized or incarnated in the climactic tempest scene. In the springtime wind Finlay feels "the appeal of nature, vague yet poignant" (247), and indeed the storm (taking his part and hers) blows Advena into his arms, encloses them, cuts them off from public view and compels Advena to declare that their earlier ideal of disinterested love is not now or not here "possible."

Yet one might say it is not really nature (accident, good fortune or God) but the active intervention of Dr. Drummond that brings the two lovers together—Drummond who has quickly gauged the greater suitability of Finlay's fiancée to himself in her age, practicality and modesty. His sudden revelation to Finlay, his colloquial and triumphant declaration, "she has jilted you" (252) and "I've cut you out" (255), is plausible because Duncan has presented a youthful, springtime world where things can happen quickly and because throughout she has made the good Doctor himself the vessel or medium of this

quick and nervous force: Duncan introduces him "hopping from foot to foot" in the doorway of Mr. Murchison's store; she shrewdly notes the cheery warmth, the statue of Cupid and Psyche in the minister's study; notes Drummond's impetuous meddlings in his sermons with the great political issues of the day; makes the Doctor the first to clap when Lorne breaks loose in his election speech and gives himself up to the great inspiration of the imperial ideal; notes ironically the paradox of the Doctor being a believer in predestination and yet himself a "man of great determination" (255), one who believes that God's determinations and his own are one. Duncan implies surely that Drummond, the Calvinist and Scottish Presbyterian, unlike his younger colleague, Finlay, has been reborn or made over by the quickening power of the new-world God and Nature.

While I argue that Duncan's depiction of nature provides a plausible basis for her story, her lively imagination is the real source of her story's meaning. At the close, she is still exploring and playing with the meaning of her story: Lorne Murchison, though he will not continue as Liberal candidate and though he has lost Dora Milburne, is not cast in a tragic role; very much the new-world and modern hero (a young man who has survived a mere setback and who retains his integrity and ideal) he now looks ahead with a more practical wisdom, hoping yet to seize the means to his great end of the Empire and to overcome what he is "still up against," the narrowness of complacency and cynicism:

Another time he would find more strength and show more cunning; he would not disdain the tools of diplomacy and desirability; he would dream no more of short cuts in great political departures. His heart bowed to its sorry education and took counsel with him, bidding him to be of good courage and push on. He was up against it, but he would get around it and there on the other side lay the wide prospect with the Idea shining high. (263)

While today such language may seem timeworn and outmoded, Duncan's terse, colloquial phrase, "up against it," balances and resonates toughly against the high Victorian phrase, "Idea shining high." Moreover Duncan lends new tones to her earlier notes: Lorne's "wide prospect" may recall the commodious rooms of the Plummer house and the western sunsets, of Advena and Finlay; but the verb "push on" toward the "Idea shining high" diverges tellingly from the "wave of history" that Lorne earlier had felt himself to be "riding" (178). Deliberate willing or labor now replaces naive faith as Lorne now knows too well that everyone does not believe and act like himself.

Duncan too has stood back from Lorne's ardent belief. Though she has consistently shown the imaginative Murchisons to be different and special—perhaps even of her Elect?—she has repeatedly warned against the treachery of an overactive imagination: on the opening page, Mrs. Beggarlegs, herself an oddity—dwarfish, mysterious, reputed to be an old respectable family, and never to be seen again in Duncan's novel—provides an early warning as she angrily rejects Lorne's gallant but childish attempt at small talk. Later Duncan warns that just as "idiosyncrasy susceptible to no common translation is regarded with the hostility earned by the white crow," the Murchisons may yet "produce an eccentric or genius, emancipated from the common interests, inimical to the general good" (44). Thus while to Lorne, Empire "is the whole case" as the Canadian trade delegation leaves for England, the story proves otherwise, and even the ardent Drummond asks ironically whether tickets for this voyage are free to missionaries and ministers.

Indeed much of Duncan's ironic realism, like that of Henry James or William Dean Howells, depends upon a knowing and playful overview bringing narrower "underviews" into collision. Certainly, in celebrating the imperial view, Lorne's wider view, Duncan has editorialized against the narrowness of the municipal and provincial mind: "the single mind is the most fervid" and it "had something of the ferocious, of the inflexible, of the unintelligent" (60). Yet the singleness of Lorne's ardent faith also verges upon the "unintelligent." Just as the British mandarins "cling to the abstract and to precedent," so Lorne himself clings blindly to a "heart" of Empire, a "Mecca," no longer there. Indeed his hope clings to and creates what is not there. Thus Mr. Milburne's opening of the gate to Lorne does not mean that Milburne has approved Lorne's courtship of Dora. Indeed Duncan laconically observes that "Octavius Milburne had held the gate open because it was more convenient to hold it open than to leave it open" (95); and she makes clear that the Dora that Lorne clings to is of his own making:

But Lorne loved with all his imagination. This way dares the imitation of the Gods, by which it improves the quality of the passion, so that such a love stands by itself to be considered, apart from the object, one may say. A strong and beautiful wave, lifted Lorne Murchison along to his destiny, since it was the pulse to his own life, though Dora Milburne played moon to it. (147)

This notion that the quality of Lorne's love is to be judged by its own intensity (or "pulse") is not taken seriously by Duncan herself, for on the previous page Duncan has consciously shed a "lesser" comic light upon Lorne:

One feels a certain sorrow for the lover on his homeward way, squaring his shoulders against the foolish perversity of the female mind, resolutely guarding his heart from any hint of real reprobation....And in one's regret there is perhaps some alloy of pity, that less respectful thing. We know him elsewhere capable of essaying heights, yet we seem to look down upon the drama of his heart. (146)

This uplifting "wave" of love, then, which proves to be mainly the "pulse" of Lorne's own imagination, parallels the uplifting wave of history, the realization of the imperial ideal, a "wave" again perhaps "strong and beautiful" only so far as it is of Lorne's own making. Whatever, in London *only* Lorne looked "higher"; "only he was alive to the inrush of the essential, he only lifted up his heart" (117).

Thus while Duncan seems to weigh the balance on the side of ardent idealism and imagination, she herself maintains an intelligent ironic distance, a distance not experienced by the warring participants in the imperial debate. In her scientific metaphor, the participants are "atomic creatures building the reef of the future, but conscious, and wanting to know what they were about" (149). Yet their "wanting to know" is quickly reduced to mindless polemics, the debaters' slogans of "annexationism"—the Liberal caricature of the Conservative's attachment to American trade—on the one side; and on the other, "serving Wallingham"—the Conservative caricature of the Liberal's attachment to the British Empire. Meanwhile the comic collisions of Hesketh and the Elgin people, the mutual incomprehension of Englishmen and Canadians, indicates not a single Anglo-Saxon culture, but two different languages and cultures, two different species of "atomic creatures" building two separate reefs in the old world and the new. Hesketh tries to ingratiate himself with his rural Ontario audience and (surely) does not mean to condescend: but how else can his homespun listeners understand Hesketh's praise that "under a rough unpolished exterior may beat virtues which are the brightest ornament of civilisation" (193)? Or again as Hesketh drops names, as he unconsciously and habitually appeals to the hierarchy of the British aristocracy, how can he answer the jibes of the new-world democrats who ask whether he has no friends among the commoners? How respond to the little boy who asks, "How's the dook?" (196).

Duncan, then, does not simply take the Canadian side against the British. Nor does she simply ridicule the side of narrow self-interest (Hesketh, the Milburnes, Chafe and Winter). She coolly exposes (especially for our time) the unconscious and naked underside, the hypocrisy of the Canadian nationalist who loves things British and hates things American:



"I suppose you had a lovely time, Mr. Murchison?" said Mrs. Williams, gently tilting herself to and fro in a rocking-chair with her pretty feet in their American shoes well in evidence. It is a fact, or perhaps a parable, that should be interesting, to political economists, the adaptability of Canadian feet to American shoes; but fortunately it is not our present business. Though I must add that the 'rocker' was also American; and the hammock in which Stella reposed came from New York; and upon John Murchison's knee, with the local journal, lay a pink evening paper published in Buffalo. (128)

Duncan's detail shows how thoroughly and unconsciously "America" has been woven into the tissue of Canadian daily life and casts doubt upon the "English" Canadian's assumption that honor and loyalty repose in the British past and dishonor and disloyalty impend in the American future. Thus Duncan aptly plays with the possibility of Lorne, the stalled and resentful imperialist, going off to practise law in Milwaukee: but Lorne's impulse to get himself to America is nicely mangled when Duncan declares that she cannot "leave him" "in queer inverted analogy to the refuging of weak women in a convent" (267). Instead, in the final close, Lorne's ideal is reconsecrated; he "goes forth" to take on his large role in an unknown future. Though Cruikshank offers Lorne a partnership in law, perhaps as an antidote to "the approach of that cynicism which...is the real hoar of age," Duncan wryly notes that while there may be a larger political point to be made here—perhaps the necessity of Old England turning to Young Canada for regeneration?—it is now "too soon" to say or even "perhaps...too late" (268).

The same skeptical intelligence plays over the highly charged love story of Advena Murchison and Hugh Finlay. Finlay, unable to take on the ease and genial spirits of the North American, tells Advena that his life story would be a classical one of pain and heroism (109); and indeed he takes on a fatalistic and helpless role, a "tragic" role in his dilemma of being at once engaged to Christie Cameron (of the Old Country) and in love with Advena (of the New). While Finlay believes his tragedy to be one of "honorable dealing" and while he believes that if he were not to abide by his old-world code then he "should...stick at nothing" (162), the tough-minded Drummond sees a mere "Scotch entanglement," a "cardboard farce": one or the other of the two women must be hurt; and since Finlay and Advena love one another (and since God has supposedly dictated that they belong to each other [160]), Christie Cameron must be the one hurt. Thus as Drummond prays for the helpless hero and heroine, Duncan wryly observes that this wilful believer in predestination "did little less than order Divine interference" (163). Drummond then as virtual *deus ex machina* trans-



forms a cardboard tragedy into a triumphant comedy: Drummond quickly sees the practical and solid spirit of the Scottish woman, sees her closer in spirit to himself than to Finlay and sees her heart set on marriage, not on Finlay. Thus it is not only the quickened spirit of the new world, it is the practical logic of Drummond and Duncan that makes plausible the sudden marriage of Cameron and Drummond, and thereby the marriage of Advena and Finlay.

But even though Duncan's setting, characterization and plotting and point of view may seem to fit together well enough, the reader may still feel that the novel fails because of its overblown prose. Does Duncan's elevated style work? While those of an Elgin persuasion may dismiss Duncan's high-flown prose in the same way that the country folk wonderingly dismiss Lorne's high mission as an adult fairy tale or a strange disease, what matters surely is whether Duncan's prose provides a suitable shading and highlighting to the novel as a whole, a suitable emphasis.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross in "Calling back the Ghost of the Old Time Heroine" points to the suitability of Duncan's parodying of outmoded forms of the romance. Duncan, the modern realist, regrets the passing away of "the old romantic heroine," the passive centre or (in Duncan's own words in *The Week*, October 28, 1886) the "painted pivot of the merry-go-round," the breathless "round of auspicious beginning, through harrowing vicissitudes, to a blissful close."<sup>6</sup> But by means of parody, so Ross argues, Sara Jeanette Duncan salvages old literary forms to define the new realities:

"In presenting Dora, Duncan parodies what she considers an outmoded literary convention to criticize the dying Colonial tradition—the 'Filkin tradition' that Dora represents. Lorne's misperception of Dora, moreover parallels his misjudgement of the Imperial question, which misjudgement itself results from the same misplaced idealism" (45).

But what then is one to make of the impossible "idealism" and language of the Advena and Finlay love story? Duncan again parodies their extravagant language and coolly explains that their language approaches the inane because they are still young enough to enjoy "cleverness for its specious self" (108). Thus just as she looks down upon Lorne Murchison in his imaginative travails of love, Duncan looks down upon Advena and Finlay as a "comedy of the better sort" (180). Finlay himself is made to groan about their "sham" appearance (182-85), the "impossibl[ity]" of himself and Advena as man and wife—a sentiment that Mrs. Murchison would share had she been eavesdropping. This "sham" is recreated in the bookish language of the

helpless lover: " 'Now that I have found you it is as if you and I had been rocked together on the tide of that inconceivable ocean that casts us half-awake upon life,' he said dreamily. 'It isn't a friendship of ideas, it's a friendship of spirit. Indeed, I hope and pray never wholly to lose that' " (183). This is a language suitable to an ineffectual man of words, principles and sentiment, a romantic dreamer who cannot face what is "possible" and really necessary.

But is the extravagant language and perspective of the narrator in the storm scene also suitable? Does Duncan herself, like Lorne in his campaign speech, lose control over the form and force of her story? Is her emphasis what it should be? Earlier I argued that in *The Imperialist* nature dictates narrow limits to human survival, dictates practical self-interest but also fosters a quick sense of opportunity or hopefulness. Now in the storm scene, the doubleness of Duncan's vision (her ironic outlook) is central: she presents a world that promises much for those who can hear, and she uses the storm at once to magnify and to diminish the plight of her lovers. Chapter XXXII begins at "the close of one of those wide, wet, uncertain February days when the call of spring is on the wind." It is an evening "full of soft bluster; the air...conscious with an appeal of nature, vague yet poignant"—an appeal that "the young man caught at the strange sympathy that seemed to be abroad for his spirit" even as he strides into and against the force of the wind. The increasing force of the wind becomes a "portent everywhere, and a hint of tumult at the end of the street" (247), a tumult that condenses into "the figure of a woman waver[ing] before the wind" and into a "skirt whipp[ing] against" Finlay (248). Finally the pitiful wind "taking her part and his...blew [Advena] into his arms, a tossed and straying thing that could not speak for sobs; pitifully and with a rough, incoherent sound he gathered her and held her in that refuge" (247). The force of the wind, the absoluteness of their once-in-a-lifetime closeness, the scattered and incoherent force of their passions, ironically contrasts with their earlier drawing-room dialogue and shows how facile and bookish their sentiments had been. But this romantic apotheosis already implies that their ongoing love can continue only on a lower, mundane plane:

He had been prepared to meet her in the lighted decorum of her father's house, and he knew what he should say. He was not prepared to take her out of the tempest, helpless and weeping, and lost for the harbour of his heart, and nothing he could say. He locked his lips against all that came murmuring to them. But his arms tightened about her and drew her into the shelter of a wall that jutted out into the irregular street; and there they stood and clung together in a long, close, broken silence that

covered the downfall of her spirit. It was the moment of their great experience of one another; never again, in whatever crisis, could either know so deep, so wonderful a fathoming of the other soul. (248)

This silent moment of closeness is not only set apart from the "lighted decorum" of the father's house but also from the rest of the novel. Shortly, the inanity of the lovers' dialogue returns with the wry asides of the narrator:

[Advena] "I was on my way to you."

[Finlay] "I know. I thought perhaps you might come. If you had not—I think I was on my way to you."

[Duncan] It seemed not unnatural. "Did you find—any message from me when you came?" [Advena] asked presently, in a quieted, almost a contented tone. It shot—the message—before his eyes, though he had seen it no message, in the preoccupation of his arrival. "I found a rose on my dressing-table," he told her; and the rose stood for him in a wonder of tenderness, looking back. (249)

But the wry understatement of "It seemed not unnatural" does not altogether undercut or contradict, does not make Advena herself in her triumph of feeling (her "wonder of tenderness," her fallibility, her failure to keep up the platonic pretense) seem implausible or ludicrous; for even as they are "outlawed there in the wild, wet wind," Advena's declaration is finally a practical one. She must admit that they cannot "care" as they did before. She cannot continue to "tempt[ ] him to such heights" of ideal love:

He loved her, and she him: before she would not, now she would [love him]. Before she had preferred an ideal to the desire of her heart; now it [the ideal] lay about her; her strenuous heart had pulled it down to foolish ruin, and how should she lie abased with it [the ideal] and see him still erect and full of the deed that they had to do? (250)

The obscure pronouns that I have tried to point in the right direction are appropriate: Advena's inarticulateness, is also appropriate to her extremity of passion. Certainly Duncan draws attention again to the failure of language as Hesketh attempts to comfort Advena, saying little more than "don't cry" as one speaks to "children in their extremity" (251). Even Finlay's declaration that he will leave Elgin for the White Water Mission Station in Alberta is a confession that they cannot keep up their pretense of altruistic love. Thus as the defeated pair return to their respective homes, the stoical Finlay still looks for

resources within himself, "the forces of his soul," without really hearing or intending the "prayer on the wind":

So, I do stretch my hands  
 To Thee my help alone;  
 Thou only understands  
 all my complaint and moan. (251)

The unheard prayer, however, is answered almost immediately in Drummond's curt declaration that he has "cut out" Lorne.

I cannot pretend that Duncan's language is always clear and apt, but the overblown intensity and obscurity of language in the storm scene heighten by contrast Drummond's clarity and practicality in overcoming the destructive pretensions of the romantic lovers. The storm shows their helplessness, shows how much they are losing, presages and fosters the melting of their cerebral spirits, and thus traces the old pattern of the romance, as Duncan herself summarized it, "from auspicious beginning, through harrowing vicissitudes, to blissful close."

But note: Advena presents the advent of a "new" romantic heroine who is neither passive nor selfless while Finlay presents the "old" chivalric hero helplessly attached to dubious principles—and saved only because of Drummond's opportunistic collaboration with the suddenness of the new-world spirit. While I recall Mrs. Murchison in her housewifely realism declaring that she would not wish her useless daughter on any man, I speculate that even she would approve this transformation of romantic tragedy into realistic comedy, approve the suitability of this "great gawk" marrying her bookish daughter; and I suspect that (with Sara Jeanette Duncan smiling behind her) she would approve of the couple leaving the narrow limits of Elgin for the distant and broad sunsets and missions of Alberta. And yet all of us who live on a lower register might well wonder what use the Albertans could make of this eccentric gift from the East.

In the balance of Duncan's ironic scales, the two stories of Advena and of Lorne come to a complementary close. Just as we are attending the still uncompleted birth of a nation in the background, the brother and sister in the foreground have yet to complete their beginnings. Yet the prognosis is hopeful, despite the obscurity of the future: Lorne—however unhappy he may be in love and politics—will eventually take his large part in the political if not imperial realm: "he goes forth to his share in the task among those by whose hand and direction the pattern and colours will be made" (268). (But what pattern and under what

colors?) Meanwhile Advena, goes forth happily as wife and missionary. Here surely Duncan and Drummond, those practical weavers of destiny, have left us with a small or limited consolation: no resolution has been achieved in the political realm, but at least in the domestic and religious realms, the best of the old and the new worlds have already been joined together into something yet better.

Surely then in our post-imperialist age (or perhaps even in the neo-imperialist age of "America"), Sarah Jeanette Duncan's novel remains relevant as it offers a subtle and not altogether despairing criticism of Canada's future.

#### NOTES

1. Grant, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism," *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 68-69. See also *Lament for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965) where Grant argues that the traditional values of Britain had been eroded by her imperial expansion even before the founding of Canada. What then, he asks, were Canadians to attach themselves to?
2. Stephen Leacock, "Greater Canada: an appeal," *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, ed. and intr. Alan Bowker (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973), 4.
3. Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967), 2.
4. Sara Jeanette Duncan, *The Imperialist* (1904; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), 25. Further references, incorporated into the text.
5. Lorne claims that the party of the imperialists, his liberal party, is "the party of the soil," and that the national and imperial "idea" has chosen to arise from the "unhurried, natural healthy growth, labour sweating his vices out of him form[ing] the character of the commonwealth, the foundation of the state" (229). But this "unhurried" work is characteristic neither of Lorne himself nor of his sister Advena—nor is it characteristic of the quick energy that charges Sara Jeanette Duncan's fictional world.
6. Catharine Sheldrick Ross, "Calling Back the Ghost of the Old-time Heroine: Duncan, Montgomery, Atwood, Laurence, and Munro," *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Winter, 1979), 43.