

THE COLONIAL HEROINE

*The Novels of Sara Jeannette Duncan
& Mrs. Campbell Praed*

Diana Brydon

ALTHOUGH THE AMERICAN GIRL in James and Howells has attracted extensive critical attention, the portrayal of the colonial heroine in the fiction of Australia and Canada has been relatively neglected. This neglect is understandable — most of the writing at the turn of the century in which Australian and Canadian heroines play prominent roles is of little inherent literary merit — yet the fiction of this period is of great interest to the literary historian. It reveals a society in transition, cautiously seeking self-definition and a distinctive mode of expression, and it provides an oblique commentary on colonial-imperial relations through the romantic interplay between the native-born heroine and the British gentleman. Because the colonial heroine embodies all the complexities of the new nation's developing point of view, her type continues beyond the colonial period into the national period which follows Confederation in Canada and Federation in Australia. The colonial equivalent of the American "heiress of all the ages" is the "cousin Cinderella" of Duncan or the "disguised princess" of Praed.¹ An examination of the novels of Duncan and Praed, two fairly popular writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggests that the colonial habit of mind is less a "cringe" than a habit of high expectations and stern judgment. In *Cousin Cinderella*, Duncan's Canadians come to England to worship and stay to judge. Praed's colonials, dissatisfied with themselves and their Australian environment, find to their surprise that the mother country itself is less than ideal. They are compelled to learn that aspirations toward a higher good must be realised through a spiritual and not a geographical questing. In the work of each novelist, colonial values as well as ambiguities of allegiance are embodied in the figure of the colonial heroine; and the values are always affirmed.

Claude Bissell, R. E. Watters, and R. T. Robertson have made a good case for the comparative study of Canadian and Australian literatures, arguing that although their solutions to the colonial dilemma were often "startlingly different," Canada and Australia share "a common ancestry."² Watters suggests that the all-embracing frame of reference of the English class structure, so essential to the form of the English novel,

simply did not exist [in the colonies], and its absence posed insuperable obstacles to our early novelists who themselves had been culturally conditioned to observe and interpret social environments through the same frame of reference.

It is this absence, and the freedom it allows as well as the disadvantages it causes, with which Duncan and Praed concern themselves.

They were both expatriate writers who published all their books abroad and who wrote for an international audience. Each seems to have felt the need to escape the confines of a provincial society, each married an Englishman and left her native land, yet each returned to that land in at least some of her fiction. In the course of her long career, Praed (1851-1935) wrote almost forty novels, about twenty of them Anglo-Australian romances. Duncan (1861-1922), ten years younger than Praed, wrote several international comedies centring on the many distinctions she perceived among Canadians, Americans, and the English, but only two of her novels focus on Canadian issues, *The Imperialist* (1904) and *Cousin Cinderella* (1908).

DUNCAN AND PRAED RESPONDED to the deficiencies of their own societies by describing and analysing them from the perspective of distance. Praed, the earlier novelist, met the difficulties of setting a novel in a country devoid of English class structures (although Australia was certainly developing its own class system, in which Praed's family represented landed gentry), by adapting the Anglo-Australian romances of Henry Kingsley to suit her own needs. Praed converted Kingsley's legacy of an Anglo-Australian romance which demonstrated the disappointed immigrant's capacity for wish-fulfillment in its reinforcement of British complacency and self-congratulation, into a type of romance which showed British values in conflict with the developing values of the new nation of Australia, and the ideal in opposition to the actual. Within the context of the romance form, she created a distinctively Australian heroine who came to embody the strengths and weaknesses of Australian society on the newly-settled continent.

Duncan's response to the absence in Canadian life of the all-embracing frame of reference of the English class structure was to compose social comedy which depends for its effect on the meetings and misunderstandings of representatives from these two different worlds. Although Praed has written in this vein — *Miss Jacobsen's Chance* is an excellent example of her ability to evoke the humour in such a situation — her characteristic tone is intense and passionate. The humour becomes painful, self-lacerating. Praed's central subject is the provincial heroine who longs for the release and stimulation of the wider life promised by the centres of cosmopolitan culture: she is blind to the value of her native land. The omniscient narrator sympathetically records and judges the moral dilemmas of her

heroines as they are initiated into self-knowledge and an awareness of the vanities of the social world beyond Australia's shores. The action is psychological and much emphasis is placed on the value of dream and the supernatural. Praed's natural inclinations and possibly her experience led her toward the portrayal of pathos, tragedy, and an inner life of fantasy and dream, whereas Duncan's very different temperament favoured the development of irony and a comedy of manners.

Duncan's early work is often superficial and loosely organized, but in her two Canadian novels her characteristic qualities of witty observation and ironic detachment are no longer indulged for their own sakes but utilized as part of a larger design and a deeper purpose. She moves beyond derivative social comedy to explore the psychological roots of Canadian social and political life. Although her stories are usually related in the voice of her heroine, the tone is always coolly dispassionate and amused. Her heroines are observers, even of themselves. Duncan seems to be the polar opposite of Praed. Together they present a composite portrait of the colonial heroine in Australian and Canadian fiction at the turn of the century.

DESPITE THEIR OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES in narrative technique, style and form, the Anglo-Australian romances of Praed and the social comedies of Duncan share certain important themes. Both writers are acutely conscious of the distinctions between their own land and the motherland, and they are anxious to give their nationality a literary definition, by "placing" it against an Old World background and perspective. Each employs the romantic involvement of her New World heroine with an English gentleman to comment, not only on differences in manners, custom and sincerity between Old World and New, but also (perhaps more importantly) on the colonial relationship itself and its psychological effects on both colonial and imperial participants. Duncan and Praed comment obliquely, through the presentation of character and incident, on this relationship, and their stories leave little doubt as to where their sympathies lie. Finally, for each novelist, the question of moral values underlies all social commentary. Praed and Duncan portray their colonial characters as representing most strongly the claims of the spiritual life, while the English function as slaves to material necessity. This contrast is not simply the juxtaposition of Old World corruption and New World innocence or of Europe in decline and the younger nations on the rise: it is also an affirmation of colonial independence of mind.

Praed makes her literary objectives explicit in her introductory note to *Policy and Passion* (1881), undoubtedly her best novel. After deploring the "onesidedness of the intellectual intercourse which at present connects Great Britain with the Antipodes," she goes on to predict a brilliant future for Australian society and

culture but notes as well that "the time for this is hardly yet ripe." In the meantime, the Australian experience must not pass undocumented and the British public must be brought gently to the realization that Australia might have something to say to them. She concludes: "it is to the British public that I, an Australian, address myself, with the hope that I may in some slight degree aid in bridging over the gulf which divides the Old World from the Young."

The heroine of *Policy and Passion* is a strong-willed impetuous young woman. Honoria Longleat is the daughter of the Premier of Leichardt's Land, a thinly disguised Queensland, in the government of which Praed's own father had held a Cabinet post. (It is fascinating to observe how accurate social observation and romantic fantasy intertwine in Praed's books.) Honoria never learns that her father was sent from England as a convict, a victim of the unjust English social system. She has been brought up a lady and is ashamed of her father's crude ways, which she associates with the limited scope of colonial existence. She expresses her dissatisfaction to her English visitor and suitor, Barrington, in a much quoted passage:

'Do not call me a *colonial*. . . When you have lived longer in Australia you will know you could not pay a lady a worse compliment. . . To be *colonial* is to talk Australian slang; to be badly dressed, vulgar, everything that is abominable . . . at least that is the general opinion. . . You will see that it is the fashion out here to be as British as possible.'

She is conscious of the falsity of her position in mimicking the fashions of a country thousands of miles away and controlled by interests different from her own, but she realizes too that the vacuum in Australian life must be filled from somewhere. Just as she believes that novels are "false and unnatural" even as she relies on them to supply the deficiencies of her emotional life, so it is in desperation that she turns to an emulation of English ways to satisfy her own indefinable longings for a wider sphere of experience.

She continues her complaint:

'I am always fancying that we Australians are like children playing at being grown-up. It is in Europe that people live . . . But, do you not see? — everything with us is borrowed. We cannot be original — we cannot even set up an independent government. We must copy old-world forms, and we have nothing of what makes the charm of the old world. Our range of view is so limited. We are so ignorant of life, and ignorant people cannot put out feelers, either deeply or widely.'

The Englishman Barrington makes the mistake of assuming that the malaise Honoria expresses can be satisfied by a simple change in material circumstances. He tells her: "You were not meant to lead a cramped existence in Australia. . . . Your gifts are wasted here. . . . You should live in England.'" She herself is wiser. She understands intuitively that her longings are partly the result of her sheltered life as a woman and partly an expression of a deeper spiritual need which cannot

be satisfied by the things of this world. She senses, too, that despite her impatience with Australia it is her homeland and she could never be truly happy abandoning it.

Honoria's discontent is placed in its proper perspective by her father's unbounded faith in the future of the new country he has adopted for his own. Praed clearly endorses Longleat's vision of a "young land where the forest is free to all, and the rich and poor are equal in the sight of God and man" and she intends her readers to feel the full strength of his dream of "founding a new order of things, of being the ancestor of great men — patriots — soldiers — legislators." The reader is told that Honoria's children will fulfil his ambition and that she herself comes to a greater appreciation of Australian values.

After Barrington has betrayed her trust and her honour has been saved by her faithful Australian suitor, Dyson Maddox, Honoria explains to Maddox:

'I trusted him to be loyal as you — as Australian men are loyal — it is the English who are false, who have bad thoughts . . . I did not think that there was any more harm in meeting him in the Gardens at night, than in walking with him by the lake at Kooralbyn.'

Just as Henry James's Winterbourne does not know what to make of the behaviour of the young American Daisy Miller, so Barrington is puzzled by the behaviour of Honoria. Praed comments:

Her frank *abandon* bewildered Barrington's judgment, while it intoxicated his senses. He could not determine whether the absence of that maidenly reserve which he had been accustomed to associate with young ladies of the higher classes was the result of boldness or ignorance.

Barrington's error in misjudging Honoria reflects a failure of sensitivity on his part. He has relied so long on convention and social norms that he is incapable of assessing spontaneity. He cannot see that, in the words of an Australian observer, Honoria is "essentially a New-World product. No European young woman could combine so much boldness with an innocence which one is obliged to take for granted." She herself has come to recognize the truth of this remark by the story's end. When she meets Barrington years later at a London dinner party she is able to assure him that she has "never regretted having married an Australian; and [she wishes] for no better fate than to cast in [her] lot with that of Leichardt's Land."

PRAED'S COLONIAL HEROINE rejects her false British suitor, and chooses the simple but trustworthy values of life in a new land, as embodied in Dyson Maddox. She has been shaken by her encounter with Old World deceit, but she is strong enough to survive. In *Cousin Cinderella*, Duncan's emphasis is

less on virtue in distress than on the element of disguise and, as Clara Thomas has pointed out, on gamesmanship.⁴ Like Honoria, Mary Trent is heiress to an immense New World fortune, but Mary's vulnerable appearance conceals a more formidable reality. She writes of Mrs. Jerome Jarvis's attempts to pair her off with her foolish son Billy Milliken:

I felt like a mouse in the paws of Mrs. Jarvis, her own small Colonial trophy, which she would presently drop at the feet of Society, like rather a fraudulent mouse, perhaps, that really felt no great alarm, and listened with fascination to the purrings of conquest.

In this novel, Mary and her brother Graham have been sent from Canada to England as samples of what the colonies can produce. They are more than willing to fall in love with London — they are fully prepared to be carried away — yet throughout their adventure they stubbornly affirm that they have their own point of view, which emphatically defies the insular prejudices of the English.

Duncan shares Praed's dual awareness of the appalling absences in colonial life and their immense possibilities. Like Praed, she is fascinated by the paradox of the colonial, "free" of social restrictions yet bound by ties of loyalty to an ungrateful mother country, and of the British, "bound" yet somehow made free of the world through the close inter-relationships of their social circles. In *Policy and Passion*, Honoria is a prisoner of her own whims; Barrington of social expectations. Honoria's freedom makes her far too trusting, but she remains a lovely woman; Barrington's social rigidity makes him a monster. In *Cousin Cinderella*, Mary observes the advantages of the British social frame of reference:

Then I began to wonder whether, for all its appearance of whirl and scramble and superficiality, the whole great organism wasn't very much knit together indeed, by ties of mutual loyalty and obligation — wasn't one fabric, down below, that was thoroughly warranted to wear.

In contrast, she and her brother are single individuals, with nothing behind them but their father's money and their own sense of themselves as Canadians. Sometimes they feel this freedom to be a drawback, but more often they are aware of it as a strength. They may admire the English, but they value their independence, and pity the English who are so hemmed in by restrictions that their personal lives are sacrificed or distorted. Mary remarks of the man she loves, Lord Doleford:

His case seemed another illustration, amazing and a little absurd, of that curious authority by which the simple social structure and scheme of things in England could interfere with a person born in it. . . .

She agrees with Lord Doleford when he says: "I call it great luck to belong to a place like Canada . . . no bother in seeing your way, out there. No impediments.'" "

Mary is at once impressed by the elaborate social structures of London society and disdainful of them. When she discovers that the English see her only in terms

of her father's money and the social potential it ensures her, she is delighted to feel herself "realized," but contemptuous of such a "low" way of looking at life. She explains:

what I drew from it immediately, besides the joy itself, was a point of view. It was a point of view from which one could feel, looking out at the endless luxurious whirl of it, a kind of divine disdain of London, as if one had suddenly got behind the scenes with her, and no longer felt so prodigiously impressed.

Her brother Graham carries this point of view one step further, to argue that only Canadians can perceive the true value of the British moral inheritance, because as involved outsiders they can view it from the necessary sympathetic distance. He says, " 'Now we with our empty country and our simple record, we've got a point of view, if you like. It's inestimable.' "

These two Canadians in London refuse to become totally involved in the social whirl of London society or the ostentation of their American friend Evelyn Dicey. They choose, instead, to install themselves in a modest, unassuming flat, which Mary says "meant the identity we clung to. . . . This is just the size and importance we choose to connect ourselves with, at all events, for the present." This sense of untapped reserves of strength behind a modest exterior is a central aspect of this Canadian heroine's consciousness. Mary stands quietly back from events, allowing the English to think they are successfully manipulating her, but all the while she is secretly judging, quietly laughing at the follies of others, puncturing their pretensions with an irony so subtle it often goes unnoticed by its victims, and finally obtaining her desired end — marriage with the English Lord Doleford.

When Evelyn complains to Mary that she is "dead sick of the American myths they keep over here [in England] to take the place of wit and humour," Mary replies:

'Let them laugh at us as much as they can. We can laugh at them a great deal more, because we're made that way, and they aren't, are they?'

"I used 'we' continentally," she adds. The English are too insular, too self-important, too set in their ways, to see the humour in incongruities. But displacement and disparities are the essence of life in a new land and the most effective way of dealing with them is through humour. Canada and the United States share this heritage of exile from the centre to the periphery of their civilization in the nineteenth century, but the points of view they assume from their respective distances are, of course, quite different. In *Cousin Cinderella*, Evelyn is already beginning to exhibit those traits which later in the century will make the United States the new centre of English civilization.

Canada chose to remain a colony, working its way gradually to the full stature of a nation, while the United States chose rebellion and the immediate assertion of its independence from outside interference. Duncan's *Cousin Cinderella* shows

the effects of those decisions. In this novel, Canadians feel they belong to Britain in a way that Americans do not, yet Americans are treated with more respect, precisely because they are foreign and not colonial cousins.

Duncan treats this situation with self-aware irony. Her Canadians are more conscious of and conscientious about the Empire than her Britons. They are idealistic, self-effacing and tenacious. She presents Canada's colonial status as a virtue — she sees it as a symbol of Canadian generosity — but she is also aware that others see this idealism as foolishness. This double awareness constitutes the central irony of her work.

I agree with Thomas Tausky that “there is a feeling of melancholy about *Cousin Cinderella* despite the happy ending.” He says: “Its root seems to be the eagerness with which the Trents are willing to sacrifice themselves for England, and the coldness and crudity with which their sacrifices are received.”⁵ A similar feeling emerges from a number of Praed's novels, particularly *An Australian Heroine* (1880), her first. This undertone of melancholy seems an unavoidable accompaniment to literary explorations of the colonial situation. Yet I would argue that this underlying sadness has its positive counterpart in that colonial independence of mind which is part of the complex characterization of the colonial heroine in all her roles. The heroines of Praed and Duncan reserve to themselves the right to judge; they triumph morally, though at a cost.

NOTES

- ¹ Mrs. Everard Cotes (Sara Jeannette Duncan), *Cousin Cinderella* (New York: Macmillan, 1908; rpt. Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973); Mrs. Campbell Praed, *An Australian Heroine* (1880; rpt. London: Chapman & Hall, 1883), p. 25.
- ² A. A. Phillips, “The Cultural Cringe,” *The Australian Tradition* (1958; 2nd rev. ed., Melbourne: Cheshire-Lansdowne, 1966), p. 113.
- ³ Claude Bissell, “A Common Ancestry: Literature in Australia and Canada,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 25, no. 2 (January 1956), p. 142. See also R. E. Watters, “English Social Patterns in Early Australian and Canadian Fiction,” in *National Identity*, ed. K. L. Goodwin (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 66-75, and R. T. Robertson, “Another Preface to an Uncollected Anthology: Canadian Criticism in a Commonwealth Context,” *Ariel*, 4, No. 3 (July 1973), pp. 70-81.
- ⁴ Clara Thomas, “Cousin Cinderella and the Empire Game,” *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1, no. 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 183-93.
- ⁵ “The American Girls of William Dean Howells and Sara Jeanette Duncan,” *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, no. 1 (1975), p. 156.