

The Novels of H. G. DeLisser

F. M. BIRBALSINGH, York University

Herbert George DeLisser was born in Jamaica on December 9, 1878, and except for brief visits abroad, lived there until his death on May 18, 1944. His combined efforts as journalist, public-spirited citizen, and novelist suggest that he was a remarkably active man, of enormous energy and resourcefulness, who achieved a life's work as impressive in quantity as in diversity.

From 1904 to 1942 DeLisser was editor of the *Daily Gleaner*, Jamaica's leading newspaper; for twenty-two years, he was on the Board of Governors of the Institute of Jamaica established "for the Encouragement of Literature, Science, and Art," and most of the time he sat as chairman of the Board; he also served for twenty-seven years as secretary of the Jamaica Imperial Association which, along the broad principles of the defunct Imperial Federation League,¹ sought at least to preserve the British Empire if not to federate it. In addition he gave what was acknowledged as outstanding service to Jamaica's sugar and banana industries. Besides, he wrote ten novels and three works of travel and history, contributing substantially through his manifold activities to the development of Jamaican social, political, and economic life.

Most of the novels first came out in a periodical called *Planter's Punch*, which ran in Jamaica from 1921 to 1945; four did not appear in book form until the 1950's, a decade after the author's death. Comments on his work by DeLisser's local contemporaries are indiscriminating and unreliable: certainly they are exaggerated when they suggest that his work was highly regarded in England. What seems more likely is that he had some following among those who enjoyed the Imperialist-paternalistic brand of colonial fiction made popular in Victorian times by such idolaters of Empire as Sir Henry Rider Haggard, John Buchan, G. A. Henty, and the acknowledged high priest of Imperial worship Rudyard Kipling. W. Adolphe Roberts, a fellow Jamaican novelist and historian, states in *Six Great Jamaicans* that DeLisser was warmly praised by Kipling and Somerset Maugham, the latter congratulating him for giving, in his first two novels, a picture of the Jamaican native which impresses one very strongly as true. Maugham no doubt bases his judgment on stereotyped colonial natives found in Kipling-esque fiction—loyal Gunga Dins who acknowledged their burden to the white man, and by servility, strove to lighten it. Maugham's Malayan stories themselves generally exclude native interests, and depict Malaya predominantly as an exotic and impersonal background for considering the social and moral peculiarities of English people.

A Jamaican critic writes as follows about the reputation DeLisser had supposedly gained in England: "When DeLisser's first novel *Jane's Career* appeared the 'London Spectator' observed that it should serve as a model to writers

¹The Imperial Federation League was founded in 1884 by men in England and the oversea dominions and colonies who believed that the already self-governing dominions should assume Imperial responsibilities and work towards federation of the Empire. The League reflects the widespread feelings of Imperial destiny which prevailed in England in the 1880s and '90s and dominated the thought of men such as Rudyard Kipling and Cecil Rhodes.

throughout the Empire in portraying the habits, modes of thought and life of the variegated masses who owe allegiance to the Sovereign. This novel has been adversely criticised by certain persons who allege that it ridicules the natives. One can only sympathise with the mentality of people who can entertain such infantile ideas."² Local reaction to the novels published posthumously was perhaps less fawning if not more discriminating, because attitudes were changing and the notion of non-European natives in wild, colonial lands untouched by civilization was being questioned. The notion remained, however, and as recently as 24 years ago a Jamaican reviewer could still write of *The Cup and the Lip*, the ninth novel: "It is still a very West Indian novel, however, or, at least as the world outside thinks a West Indian novel should be. Our warm climate makes passions run riot. Races associated in a pattern that makes grandmother's patchwork quilt seem pallid."³ Today, more than a quarter of a century after DeLisser's death, and more than half a century after his first novel, the British Empire is all but gone, and the ex-colonial native closer to home in Brixton, is perceived more as a threat than a burden. In these circumstances, some reassessment of DeLisser's ideas seems desirable: a reevaluation of his achievement as a novelist will shed light on his thinking as a whole.

DeLisser's novels may be conveniently discussed in two groups labeled "historical" and "regional." *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1929), *Psyche* (1952), *Morgan's Daughter* (1953), *Revenge* (1919), and *The Arawak Girl* (1958), are classified as "historical" because their main action occurs either during the nineteenth century or long before. The action in *The Arawak Girl*, goes back to the period of the fourth voyage of Columbus which left him marooned in Jamaica between June 1503 and June 1504; the other four novels are set mainly in the nineteenth century. The literary technique in each "historical" novel is to graft dramatic love affairs and daring feats of adventure on to facts of recorded history. For example, the main events in *The Arawak Girl*, including Columbus's enforced stop in Jamaica, the subsequent mutiny, and eclipse of the sun on February 29, 1504, are wholly factual. But on them are superimposed an imagined love affair involving Diego Mendez, Columbus's loyal friend, and the cacique princess Anacanoa.⁴

Similarly, *The White Witch of Rosehall* outlines the biography of Annie Palmer, a planter's wife notorious as a necromancer and parricide; but actual facts are spiced with fresh liaisons and invented intrigue. And although the fascinating exploits of John Huntley Seymour in *Morgan's Daughter* are based on the true story of a slave turned highwayman, Seymour's disguise as a negro and his amorous encounter with the demirep heroine, Elizabeth Morgan, appear to be invented. Again, the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 which forms the background of *Revenge* is overlaid by the complicated love affairs of English expatriates who are the author's own creations. *Psyche* too uses an authentic canvas of slavery in Jamaica on which to paint an original story of a slave who takes advantage of her master's love.

The function of these additions is to infuse excitement that the historical events themselves lack, and so ultimately to heighten history with romance. The Jamaica of DeLisser's "historical" novels is a land of colorful natives, ardent

²Reginald W. Thompson, "In Memoriam," *Sunday Gleaner*, 28 May, 1944, p. 9.

³George Panton, "A Very West Indian Novel," *The Daily Gleaner*, 16 May, 1956, p. 8.

⁴DeLisser's Anacanoa may not be an entirely original creation. There are records of a cacique noblewoman of that name who was reputed for her beauty but was liquidated along with many of her people during a purge by Nicolas de Ovando, the tyrannical Spanish governor of Hispaniola (today the Dominican Republic).

4

lovers, and swashbuckling heroes. Demireps become queens of romance, and slavery, for all its moral repugnance, is a source of adventure and entertainment. Historical authenticity is not so much distorted as obscured by the author's preoccupation with romantic melodrama.

The heroine of *Psyche* is not an ambitious person, but an idealization of ambition: every plan, every strategy she devises in the novel is unerringly successful. As a slave she first prevails upon her master to make her his "house-keeper"; next she browbeats him into making her butler; then she poisons his prospective bride with impunity; and finally, becoming pregnant, she persuades him to manumit her so that her child would be born out of bondage. Psyche's exceptional behavior must be taken as eccentric or mysterious, rather than as the product of strength of will or high intelligence; for no inner motives except ambition are disclosed, and her extraordinary actions appear dictated largely by mechanical demands of plot.

Some of the lack of conviction which attaches to characters reacting puppet-like to mechanical stimuli, also rubs off on episodes which seem tailored to fit a preconceived design, rather than to reflect a logical course of development. In *Morgan's Daughter*, for example, Elizabeth Morgan impulsively gives refuge to Seymour after one of his robberies, then just as instinctively, she puts her entire wealth at his disposal. He accepts all, "falls deeply in love" with her, and promptly transfers his "love" to another woman; whereupon Elizabeth blackmails him; whereupon he quickly transfers his affections back to her. These contrivances are not psychologically plausible, because they are not connected by moral or psychological links that could make them more true to life and thereby aesthetically meaningful.

The quaintness of the author's style is also noticeable. In the following example from *The White Witch of Rosehall*, Annie Palmer expresses jealousy for a rival in love and threatens to destroy her by occult means:

She half-leaned out, staring fixedly in that direction: her teeth bit into her lower lip, sobs of wild anger half choked her. She loved him. She cried aloud that she loved him, that he was the only man she had ever loved, and that he cared but little for her after all; was only taken with her as a child might be with a toy, but was ready to desert her—she felt that in her heart. "But I won't let him!" she gasped, "I won't let him! He's mine, and that wretch shall not take him from me, nor Ashman prevent me from doing what I please. Ashman! I don't trust him; he is working for himself. Let him be careful! That woman will die in a week, and no one will ever dare to say that I had a hand in it."⁵

Mrs. Palmer's cries, sobs, and gasps, as indications of deep emotion, are archaic: they originate either in pre-Victorian writers such as Horace Walpole and Fanny Burney, or in those "sensation" novelists of the Victorian age, among the most eminent of whom were Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade. These writers relied too heavily on complicated plots and violent incidents rather than on studies of human nature; and their influence on DeLisser is strong. DeLisser's language itself, his emotional scenes, and dramatic incidents are devalued by futile straining after sensation. Sensation is futile where, as in the last quotation, the danger to Annie Palmer's rival is threatened for so long, that by the time it materializes, its capacity to shock or horrify has been weakened, and it scarcely even surprises the reader.

⁵H. G. DeLisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, (London: E. Benn, 1929), p. 131.

DeLisser's "historical" fiction should be set against that of other Jamaican novelists using virtually the same material. Vic Reid's *New Day* (1949), traces the process by which Jamaica achieved self-government, and his *Sixty-Five* (1960) describes the same rebellion that forms the background of DeLisser's *Revenge* (1919). But Reid's poetic language and good technical control give his work a fluency that is absent from DeLisser's writing. S.A.G. Taylor also has published two novels, *Capture of Jamaica* (1951) and *Buccaneer Bay* (1952), which deal with seventeenth-century Jamaican history. Although Taylor's characters are cast in the same heroic mould as DeLisser's, they possess common failings which balance their exaggerated heroism and make them more credible as human portraits. Taylor's language is stilted too, but less so; and where, as in *Capture of Jamaica*, he praises the Spanish-Jamaican governor for his valiant but vain defence of the island against the English, the prose is not without some old fashioned felicity.⁶

In his five "regional" novels, sensation remains a paramount aim, but DeLisser balances it with an accurate reproduction of Jamaican social manners as they existed in the early years of this century. A coherent theme even emerges, political in outlook: it states simply that Jamaica would be better off within the British Empire than without. In *Triumphant Squalitone* (1977), the Imperial government suddenly decides that its colony of Jamaica should become a republic: presidential elections are held forthwith. Then, after all the controversy of an election campaign, the folly of republican status is recognized and the island reverts to colonial status: "And now they [Jamaicans] listened seriously while the Governor informed them that the old order which had never changed for an instant was to be restored to its entirety, that the Home Government had finally decided that the establishment of West Indian Republics was not considered desirable, and that the President-elect of Jamaica had agreed with hearty readiness."⁷ The reactionary tone of this conclusion shows how far DeLisser has been left behind by his compatriots nowadays.

For all that, DeLisser's "regional" novels reveal a thorough understanding of the prevailing social, economic, and political issues of his time. Greatest understanding is evinced in those novels which illustrate the social stratification of Jamaica in which Europeans form the highest class, and mulattoes and negroes, the lower ones. Because of this color conditioning, a rector, in *Under the Sun* (1937), openly exhibits color prejudice despite his religious vocation. *Under the Sun* deals principally with a group of English expatriates one of whom marries a well-to-do Jamaican, Christopher Brown. Brown is later ostracized from his wife's social circle because of his color. The marriage eventually breaks up and Brown marries a local woman. But his contact with the English group exposes their snobbery and social exclusiveness. There are cliques even among the English themselves, and *The Cup and the Lip* (1956) describes the process by which a newly arrived English girl of low social origin has to worm her way into the most select clique by marrying a wealthy plantation owner.

The two remaining novels give an authentic view of the middle and lower classes. The middle-class heroine of *Susan Proudleigh* (1915) is revealed in a series of romantic encounters with at least three men. The peasant heroine of *Jane's Career* (1914), tempted for economic reasons to become mistress of a married man, is finally able to evade this predicament by finding true love. Despite his comprehensive knowledge of Jamaican society however, and the conspicuous authenticity of some scenes in *Jane's Career* especially, DeLisser still cannot be said to provide plots that are wholly convincing, nor characters about whose fate we are genuinely concerned.

⁶See S.A.G. Taylor, *The Capture of Jamaica*, (Jamaica: Pioneer Press, 1951), pp. 108-09.

⁷H. G. DeLisser, *Triumphant Squalitone*, (Jamaica: The Gleaner Co. Ltd., 1916), p. 128.

Jane's Career contains a skilled journalist's observations of Jamaican lower-class poverty, as well as of middle-class hypocrisy at the turn of the century, when DeLisser's long editorship of the *Daily Gleaner*—38 years—had evidently endowed him with an authoritative grasp of topical issues and living conditions in his native land. We perceive his authority in abundant examples of assorted local manners including Jamaican speech of both the educated and uneducated variety. But this impressive knowledge of actual Jamaica one feels is not successfully transformed or integrated into a coherent, fictional world of balanced human relationships, and fully credible characters.

Just as Psyche's ambition is idealized and Annie Palmer's malice built up to almost superhuman proportions, the characters of the "regional" novels, for the most part, reveal exaggerations of a single personality trait as the substance of their entire make up. Thus Jane of *Jane's Career* is an embodiment of rustic simplicity and a prey to the worldly-wise saved from seduction at the very end by sheer luck. Her quiet innocence is as exaggerated as the outlandish duplicity of her fellow housemaid Sarah, or the prudish, middle-class snobbery of their employer Mrs. Mason. Another heroine, Gladys Ludford, (in *The Cup and the Lip*) personifies social climbing; and all her actions are manipulated, to illustrate this one trait. When Arthur Norris is about to marry Gladys, his aging uncle, Alfred Pemberton, advises him against the match because of her low social origin and lack of money. Yet Pemberton immediately afterwards marries the girl himself. Once Gladys gets to the top of the social ladder, her aging husband conveniently dies, and she marries his nephew. The main point of these manipulations is that Gladys achieves social acceptance and a suitable husband not through her own efforts, but by a series of unlikely coincidences which always favor her. Frequent reliance on coincidence inevitably affects credibility in both the characters and the plot of *The Cup and the Lip*.

DeLisser's "regional" novels nevertheless achieve greater artistic success than the "historical" ones, not because of superior technique, but through their vivid record of authentic local color, and an occasional hint of humor. The "historical" novels contain an atmosphere of Gothic gloom and foreboding, in which preliminary action frequently foreshadows darker consequences, and characters are often given to "unconscious premonition of coming events."⁸ In the "regional" novels, gloom and foreboding are relieved by lighter touches. For example, in *Triumphant Squalitone* a policeman threatens to arrest a politician because he mistakes a Latin quotation for indecent language. Such admittedly coarse comic effects provide some amusement while they expose Jamaican social pretensions.

This combination of local color and humor in *The Cup and the Lip* produces one of the finest episodes in the author's fiction. The scene, before Gladys Ludford's first marriage, is her art shop which Mrs. Smith-Parsley, a local busybody enters solely because she sees old Pemberton's car parked outside. Mrs. Smith-Parsley is no more interested in art than Pemberton: she hopes to pick up gossip or possibly scandal, and the resulting confrontation in which she and Pemberton exhibit fabricated interest in art inevitably evokes laughter.⁹ We laugh not just at the bare-faced hypocrisy of these characters, but at their entirely false and pretentious system of social values.

None of these values receives as much attention from DeLisser as color snobbery. His novels reveal competitive social climbing among people of all

⁸See H. G. DeLisser, *Under the Sun*, (London: E. Benn, 1937), p. 25.

⁹See H. G. DeLisser, *The Cup and the Lip*, (London: E. Benn, 1956), pp. 29-30.

classes and shades of skin; and although he does not conceal the unfairness of white privilege, he recognizes that white, privileged status is sanctioned by popular acceptance. It is not often in West-Indian fiction before 1950 that such frankness is forthcoming on matters of race and color.

But however accurate he may be as a journalist or social historian, DeLisser is less successful in translating his observations and insights into fiction. His work is scarcely read today, and although a film version of *The White Witch of Rosehall* was contemplated, it has not come to anything as yet. DeLisser's fiction seems adversely and perhaps unavoidably affected by the literary models which were available to him in colonial Jamaica at the end of the last century. These models were British—eighteenth-century Gothic, and the Victorian "sensation" writing referred to earlier. DeLisser's style recaptures and amplifies some of the sentimentality, repetition, indulgent explanations, and florid descriptions of British writers who are nowadays considered of less than first rank. It is through their example that his narrator is an unflinching presence throughout each story, acting as omniscient guide and mentor, and making doubly, trebly sure that the reader does not miss the author's exact intentions.

So far as DeLisser's thought goes, the key again is Great Britain, and his fervent loyalty to British Imperial culture, institutions and standards: his long service to the Jamaica Imperial Association speaks for itself; and *Triumphant Squalitone* expresses political views which were certainly influenced by Imperialist-paternalistic British individuals of whom Kipling is perhaps the most notorious representative. Lord Olivier, for example, governor of Jamaica from 1907 to 1913, and a Fabian associate of Bernard Shaw, made a strong impression on DeLisser and encouraged his writing: "One of the good deeds I may claim to have done in my lifetime was to instigate Mr. H. G. DeLisser, the most talented of West Indian authors, to write some stories out of his knowledge of the everyday life of the common Jamaica people."¹⁰

However liberal or socialist such influences may have been, they all evolved within the context of an Empire which took a Eurocentric world order for granted. This helps to explain why DeLisser contradicts himself, to some extent, by advocating greater social justice in Jamaica, while believing that the island should remain a colony within the British Empire. He was writing, after all, in the first half of this century, before the formal political dismantling of European Imperial relationships all over the world, and he did not foresee that genuine Jamaican democracy required the total (economic and cultural, as well as political) dismantling of Empire, to allow the emergence of truly independent, non-European nationalism out of former colonies and dominions.

¹⁰Sydney Olivier, *Jamaica The Blessed Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), pp. 204-05.