
Destiny into Chance: S. J. Duncan's *The Imperialist* and the Perils of Nation Building

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SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN'S novel *The Imperialist* illustrates the perils of nation building as conducted in early twentieth-century Canadian fiction. The phrase "nation building" commonly refers to an ideological project devised after the Napoleonic wars by European politicians and educators who sought to unite ethnic nations within political states by interweaving the discourses of national identity and social freedom. The result of this union was not just that pervasive modern hybrid, the nation-state, but a new sense of citizenship and destiny. Nation building provides one of the clearest examples of how an ideology can successfully impose its special categories of social understanding by making them appear both natural and historically inevitable. Nature (things as they simply are) and destiny (things as they must eventually be) are the traditional sanctions of nation building, the former assuring a stable identity, the latter motivating its development. Together they secure a nation's rightful place in a changing world, which is just the position that Canadians seek unsuccessfully in *The Imperialist*. For Duncan, nation building is perilous because nature and destiny, at least as they are displayed in rural Ontario at the turn of the twentieth century, prove to be rivals rather than allies, as if Canada and its fate cannot quite be reconciled.

Critics have been puzzled by the way *The Imperialist* begins with a strong sense of promise yet ends with the failure of "the Imperial Idea" and of its chief proponent, Lorne Murchison, who is defeated in politics and humiliated in love. They interpret this failure — which, of course, is not necessarily a failure of the novel — both structurally and thematically as a rebuke to Lorne for his over-zealousness; as a reflection of historical uncertainties; as a mistrust of social upheaval; as inconsistency in narrative treatment; as a shift in genre; as calculated ambiguity.¹ From my point of view the inconsistency is useful, because it allows us to observe

how the strategies of nation building are deployed when that deployment is ungainly or troublesome. I do not mean that *The Imperialist* is itself ungainly. On the contrary, its style is often so trenchant that it tests the rhetorical strategies through which Canada is built by showing that they do not operate effortlessly; that national identity and political freedom are not always mutually supportive; that historical chance is not easily transformed into national destiny. I wish to examine four major rhetorical figures — heroic, mnemonic, domestic, and racial — in order to study how they jostle for position within a national imaginary that they can never fully articulate.

Heroic history

The Imperialist appeared after a century of political turmoil, during which nation building stimulated revolt across Europe, because the nation-state was revered as the natural guarantor of political power, social cohesion, and personal identity. The authority of the state, the harmony of civil society, and the privacy of selfhood (or, in Canadian terms, peace, order, and good government) were supposed to reinforce each other provided that all three sprang from the same fertile, national soil. Cornelia Navari reports that at the Congress of Vienna (1815) “some bourgeois Middle Europeans first put forward the (then) novel claim that ethnicity ought to determine the shape of states. ... [However] it was only in 1918 that any government made being a nation-state the basic criterion of political legitimacy and the basic condition of its treating with other governments” (14). National loyalties, which earlier had been a source of factional squabbling within larger empires or alliances, were now regarded as the basis of statehood.² If we compress Navari’s dates to extend from 1839 (the year of Lord Durham’s report that led to Canadian Confederation in 1867) to 1904, when *The Imperialist* was published, then we cover roughly the period surveyed in the novel, which glances back to the hardy “backwoods settlers and small traders” (*Imperialist* 48) who founded Ontario, and ahead, to the twentieth century when Canada will claim political legitimacy as an equal partner with Britain in “a union of the Anglo-Saxon nations of the world” (267):

years went by in decades. ... Trade flourished, education improved, politics changed. Her Majesty removed her troops. ... The original dignified group broke, dissolved, scattered. ... It was a sorry tale of disintegration with a cheerful sequel of rebuilding, leading to a little unavoidable confusion as the edifice went up. Any process of blend-

ing implies confusion to begin with; we are here at the making of a nation. (48-49)

The Imperialist proposes a “sequel” that will quell the commotion of colonial history — here minimized as “a little unavoidable confusion” — by raising the “edifice” of modern Canada. How secure is the emerging nation? Unfortunately, the “blending” of cultural forces required to build the new country does not raise a sturdy Canadian house, and one way of expressing my own interest is by asking: Why is the Canadian sequel less cheerful and more confusing than is promised in passages like this one?

John Plamenetz notes that nationalism is often a restless doctrine because it expresses “the desire to preserve or enhance a people’s national or cultural identity when that identity is threatened, or the desire to transform or even create it when it is felt to be inadequate or lacking” (23-24). Duncan presents Canada as lacking in self-confidence, unsure of its youthful powers and threatened by seductive Yankees and patronizing Englishmen. She suggests more subtly that national identity always feels threatened, despite ideological reassurances that nations are naturally self-generating. The romantic historicism of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had taught that nations cannot be built solely through an act of political will; instead, they must grow spontaneously from their native soil in accordance with a national spirit fulfilling its appointed destiny.³ Lorne echoes this romantic tradition in an impassioned speech that displays his heroic imagination but ruins his political career, when he exhorts his townsfolk:

“We stand for the principles that make for nation-building by the slow sweet processes of the earth, cultivating the individual rooted man who draws his essence and his tissues from the soil, and so, by unhurried, natural healthy growth, labour sweating his vices out of him, forms the character of the commonwealth, the foundation of the State.” (*Imperialist* 262)

This sweet fusion of nature and nation was actually the product of careful ideological tinkering, as critics nowadays delight in revealing. In fact, so many of them have insisted that spontaneous national growth is really a carefully cultivated fiction (Mosse, “Mass Politics” 46), that it must be the worst-kept secret in political history.⁴ According to Eugene Kamenka, who takes an expansive view:

the concept of the nation and the nation-state as the *ideal, natural* or *normal* form of international political organisation, as the focus of

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men's loyalties and the indispensable framework for all social, cultural and economic activities became widespread only at a specific historical period. It emerged — slowly — in Europe, out of the ruins of the Roman Empire. ... Since kings were to cease governing and “people” were to take their place, people had to be moulded into some sort of unity, defined and limited in some sort of way. The concept of “nation” thus came to the fore as a *fundamental political category*. (6, 10)

The visionary power of literature was enlisted by nineteenth-century nationalists in their campaign to mould a heterogeneous “people” into a unified nation-state, even though unity was supposed to be the inner core of a culture rather than its ideological reward. Accordingly, the nation also emerged as a fundamental literary category whose explanatory power could be summoned to assess all aspects of artistic accomplishment. Duncan agreed that literature is both a cause and an effect of nationhood:

The state of a nation's literature is the surest test of its advancement, but literature is not only the measure of a people's progress, it is also the means of their further advancement. Nothing, therefore, can be of more value to a people — nothing of more importance to a nation — than its literary products. Whatever promotes literary activity and elevates its sphere is a means of public benefit. ... A national literature cannot be looked for as an outcome of anything less than a complete national existence. (*Selected Journalism* 102, 109)

To be complete, each nation must have its own literature, its own eloquence, so that literary theme, style, and genre are all manifestations of the national voice, all participating in a history leading far back to the nation's legendary origin and ahead to the fulfillment of its destiny. As Benedict Anderson observes, the temporality of national history easily evaporates into timelessness: “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny” (19).

Since the enchantment of romance is the best way to turn chance into destiny, it is obvious why the historical romance was the favourite genre of nation builders. This was the age of the Great National Novel, which was to be the modern equivalent of a national epic: every country was expected to have its Scott, Tolstoy, or Balzac. Duncan declined to play this role: “We are conscious of not having been born in time to produce an epic poet or a dramatist; but still in vain do we scan the west for the lyricist, the east for the novelist whose appearing we may not unreason-

ably expect" (*Selected Journalism* 106). But when her idealistic lovers, Advena Murchison and Hugh Finlay, flirt philosophically by musing about "life" —

"I wonder," said Advena, "where it goes?"

"Into the void behind time?" he suggested, smiling straight at her.

"Into the texture of the future," she answered, smiling back. ... "The world is wrapped in destiny, and but revolves to roll it out." (77)

— then they set their lives within a romanticized (and modestly eroticized) history in which their "young" country will weave its destiny by finding its own voice. Who will speak for Canada? Advena's own brother is cast in the unlikely role of national hero when he embraces the Imperial Idea so fervently that he transcends economic profit and even political good sense to ally himself with fate: "He believed himself, you see, at the bar for the life of a nation" (*Imperialist* 267).

My title, "Destiny into Chance," reverses Benedict Anderson's formula to suggest that the magic of nationalism fizzles in *The Imperialist*. Lorne is noble but not heroic, not because he fails to achieve his goals, but because his failure is not sufficiently heroic. In epics, nations are founded by heroes like Aeneas or Brute, the legendary ancestor of Britain, whose familiarity with the gods exalts their exploits. Modern nation-states also legitimize themselves by celebrating valiant founders whose quasi-divine powers are bequeathed to their descendents. Tradition gives coherence to the national life, yet the moral and psychological continuity imposed in this way frequently derives from an initial rupture. It is remarkable how often nations begin with a tragic death that anoints the soil with blood, thereby establishing a sacrificial origin for the nation, which can only prosper after its patriarch is ceremonially dispatched. Through sacrificial legends, nations invoke the magic that turns historical chance into national destiny by offering a link — now attenuated rather than familiar — to the divine. John Richardson depicts scenes of patriotic gore in his historical romance, *Wacousta*; and Alan McNairn traces the public campaign whereby General Wolfe was turned into a martyr "from a smattering of facts overlaid with large dollops of fiction" (27), so that a "nasty affair" was transformed into a "glorious catastrophe" (34). Norman Knowles quotes an article from the *Toronto Globe* of 1856, which advised: "No people ... has made a figure in the life of nations, without its heroes" (26), but the real triumph of this rhetorical figure is to turn the nation itself into a hero. This is most easily accomplished by subsuming the nation's diverse history within a popular character such as Uncle Sam (*Im-*

perialist 194), John Bull, Britannia, or Marianne (France). When it is condensed into a single personality, the nation can be analysed as if it were a person. Thus a common figure of speech (Canada loyally took up arms in the First World War to defend her Mother) permits political strains and social contradictions to be recast in psychological terms, thereby making them susceptible to psychological resolution. History may present a panorama of irreconcilable conflicts, but when they are framed by a psychological model — the nation as person — they can be resolved as if they were merely personal problems. If nationalism is “primarily a quest for unity” as Gordon Smith claims (199), then personification is an effective way of securing a conceptual unity that is not excessively troubled by inconsistencies, which will merely testify to the nation’s robust personality. The nation may be confused, alienated, or neurotic, but eventually it will be “healed” by history, which becomes a form of therapy. If Lorne is to be a national hero, then his failure must be redemptive, or at least therapeutic.

Nationalism turns history into romance, chance into destiny, and destiny into therapy. Canada is often personified according to a “lexicon of maturation” (Weir 24), by which it has emerged from adolescence and is entering the awkward age of young manhood — just the time for an adventurous test of character. Since Duncan portrays Canada as having about the same age and disposition as Lorne (earnest, polite, principled, modestly ambitious, a dutiful son), what happens to him in effect happens to his nation. She immediately casts the Murchisons in a heroic mould: they are “too good for their environment ... It was a matter of quality, of spiritual and mental fabric” (45). Lorne is taller, broader, squarer, smarter, franker than all the rest (34), and “there was something too large about him for the town’s essential stamp” (83). This “something” proves to be a flaw, however, since his infatuation with the Imperial Idea divorces him from the cautious, pragmatic community that he hopes to lead to glory. True, classical heroes are supposed to be flawed, but the novel’s ironic narrative perspective, which I will examine below, ensures that even Lorne is diminished in the readers’ eyes. He is a hero, but only of “little old Ontario” (82). He is sacrificed, but only by being jilted by Dora Milburn, a shallow flirt who prefers to marry “a useless twit” (Gerson, “Duncan’s Web” 79), and by losing an election that was rigged in the first place. He is exceptional, but also exceptionally typical in the sense that he modestly (another Canadian virtue) sums up essential Canadian qualities. He is as Canadian as possible under the circumstances,⁵ but circumstances are not favourable. Just as intelligence and hard work earn him a respected place in Elgin society, so Canada should take its place in the family of nations

according to an Imperial plan that will turn subservient colonies into equal partners in a global British confederacy that would be more like a commonwealth than an empire.⁶ If Lorne fails in love and politics, then so in some sense does Canada, its grand destiny dwindling into the impersonal chance of the marketplace. His excellence goes unrewarded, his triumph is short-lived, and he narrowly avoids leaving for a more lucrative career in Milwaukee (*Imperialist* 306).

Amnesia / nostalgia

Eric Hobsbawm quotes the Italian nationalist Massimo d'Azeglio (1798-1866) who said during the Italian *risorgimento*, "We have made Italy: now we must make Italians" (267). Once the state has been won by political and military means, its people must be instructed how to be Italians, rather than Romans, Sicilians, Lombards, and so on. Paradoxically, they must be taught how to be who they already are. The same lesson was learned in France, according to Ernest Renan, where citizens were obliged to forget ethnic loyalties in order to redefine themselves as French men and women. National identity required a new sense of the past.

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation ... the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholemew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century. (11)

The paradox of nation building is that citizens constantly have to be reminded to forget: amnesia is as powerful an ideological tool as historical memory.⁷ Because nations are built but never quite completed, their legitimacy must continually be reinforced through all the ceremonies, flags, anthems, and holidays that Hobsbawm calls "invented traditions." The traditions may actually be new, but they are usually dressed up as antiquity in order to forge "bonds of loyalty" with a heroic past whose heroism is really a product of this performance. Such rituals are calculated historical errors through which "nationalism [becomes] a substitute for social cohesion through a national church, a royal family or other cohesive traditions, or collective group self-presentations" (Hobsbawm 5, 263, 303).

The Imperialist balances its readers between cherishing British loyalty and overcoming colonial subservience by invoking a special kind of amnesia, which requires an appropriate form of nostalgia. Readers get their first

lesson in remembering to forget in the opening scene where Victoria Day is presented as a peculiarly Canadian holiday. Overseen by a legendary ancestor, Old Mother Beggarlegs, it is a local celebration honouring a British monarch with a lacrosse match. From these mixed signals emerges a nation composed of English, Scots, Irish, French, and Americans; of more shadowy immigrants from “the Lord knows where” (49); and of Natives, who linger in the background. All these groups are acknowledged but subtly assigned their proper place through suggestive details or just through a shift in tone, as in the dismissive phrase “the Lord knows where,” which announces the unwelcome invasion of new immigrants, who were arriving from southern and eastern Europe in growing numbers. In passing we note that the “young Flannigans and Finnigans” (12) are too poor to buy tickets for the match; that lacrosse is a Native game, although Natives are not allowed to participate; and that “Johnny Francois” (256) — the personified Quebec nation — is kept at an ironic distance, since any homage to British royalty must recall the battle of the Plains of Abraham, which is our version of the Saint Bartholemew massacre. “Any process of [cultural] blending implies confusion” (49), Duncan warns, but she is careful to moderate the confusion so that old battles will not ruin the celebration. She observes these ethnic groups with such tolerant amusement that readers are persuaded to forget embarrassing rivalries that might disrupt the national holiday. We are reminded of their presence in order to be reassured that they are hardly worth noticing.

Duncan might have revised d’Azeglio’s words to suit her own civic celebration: We made Confederation in 1867; now we must make Canadians through that addictive blend of memory and forgetting known as nostalgia. At first glance, however, *The Imperialist* seems to be prospective rather than retrospective. It was published during the “Wheat Boom” years when Canadians were building a second transcontinental railway and foreign investment grew quickly; when the gold rush opened up the Yukon (1896) and Alberta and Saskatchewan were about to become provinces (1905); when Wilfrid Laurier’s Liberals shifted allegiance from American free trade (reciprocity) to a “British preference” tariff, but vacillated when economic advantage lay to the south; and when a “strident Canadian nativism” (McNaught 192) opposed the waves of non-British immigrants spreading westward over the country. All these circumstances appear in *The Imperialist* where they are refracted through the narrow lens of small town life in Elgin, Ontario. Its patriotic citizens might have applauded the rousing style of Donald Creighton’s popular history, *The Story of Canada*, which evokes the national temper at the turn of the century:

In a single generation the horizons of this [the Canadian] landscape had been enormously expanded. In a single generation the very achievement of national success had created a greater awareness of the young country's depth of experience in time. ... Beyond the opportunities and rewards and relatively easy conditions of the first decade of the twentieth century, lay a past, three hundred years in length, of effort, struggle, and endurance, most of which had already passed from recollection into history. ... This awakening sense of nationhood, complacent and truculent in character, yet tentative and diffident as well, was the transcendent feature of the period. (202-03)

Amid so much bustle one would hardly expect to indulge in reminiscence, yet *The Imperialist* is suffused with, and amused by, nostalgia. It focuses on the complacent/diffident moment when recollection passes into history, which Lorne then aspires to shape according to his vision of the future. Recollection corresponds to what Maurice Halbwachs calls "collective memory." He maintains that all memories, even the most personal, are socially based, and that collective memories form "a living history" (64) whose vibrancy is lost when it is superseded by written history. The latter begins when the former ceases, as the past fades from living consciousness and is codified in books: "the need to write the history of a period, a society, or even a person is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it" (78-79). Formal history is not recollection but reconstruction: "General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up" (78).⁸ This transitional moment is evoked early in *The Imperialist* when Dr. Drummond and Mr. Murchison contemplate their growing town: "We've seen changes, Mr. Murchison. Aye. We've seen changes" (19). They reminisce about the settler years that will be consigned to history books through a process that begins as soon as they have stopped speaking, when the narrator comments: "So the two came, contemporaries, to add their labour and lives to the building of this little outpost of Empire" (20). The physical act of building the nation turns into the discursive act of nation building. Duncan's nostalgia enchants small town life as it exists at the moment, but just as it is about to be transformed. She is nostalgic for a present that is destined to disappear even as we observe its tenacious conservatism.

Social historians stress that while nostalgia usually gazes backward through misty eyes, its temporal orientation is actually more complicated. Whether it laments a lost past, cherishes a precious present, or — more rarely — forecasts a sentimental future,⁹ ultimately it is oriented toward

the present in the sense that it invokes past and future to serve immediate needs. Especially at times of crisis, nostalgia bridges the gap between what has been lost and what lies ahead, so that even as it decries the current situation, it makes the present tolerable. It is soothing: “If nostalgia is a symptom of malaise, it also has compensating virtues. Attachment to familiar places may buffer social upheaval, attachment to familiar faces may be necessary for enduring associations. Nostalgia reaffirms identities bruised by recent turmoil” (Lowenthal 13).¹⁰ Since nation building is always disruptive, it uses nostalgia to negotiate between a national past (real or imagined) and a future whose course is uncertain yet mysteriously predestined. The urgent sense of national purpose requires a reassessment of history, which must be recalled but also selectively forgotten through an “exercise of retrospective imagination” (Connerton 11) that subtly reconstructs the past so as to sustain communal identity, to assert social worth, and to encourage patriotic duty. Nostalgia is fundamentally conservative because, even as it expresses discontent with a corrupt or unworthy present, it encourages equanimity.¹¹ It calms fears of historical discontinuity by seeming to exacerbate them, insisting on the loss of a beloved past when life was simpler, purer, nobler, but with which a sentimental link is maintained. Nostalgia preserves the past by keeping it at hand, though just out of reach:

Hence in what perhaps qualifies as a marvel of rational condensation, nostalgia manages at one and the same time to celebrate the past, to diminish it, and to transmute it into a means of engaging the present. ... [I]t defuses what could be a powerful, panic-prone reactivity to jarring change and uncertainty by turning it into tender musing and mutually appreciative self-regard over a shared past. (Davis 45, 110)

When Paul Knowles studies the commemorative amnesia of the Ontario Loyalist tradition — the same tradition that Duncan celebrates but also mocks — he finds Halbwachs’s dichotomy of historical and popular discourses to be too strict. He detects a more complex interweaving of official, academic, and popular modes of recollection, all of which are driven by a mixture of political and personal motives, and none of which can claim sole custody of truth. A distinction between official and vernacular histories is useful, but not because historians compile a truthful record while popular reminiscence is nostalgically deceptive. For Loyalists, these roles were sometimes reversed, with historians devising a grand national narrative full of heroic ancestors and sacrifices, while popular memory was disenchanting. Historians such as William Canniff and

Egerton Ryerson were actually forced to ignore evidence that they had collected in order to idealize the growth of their nation:

The desire to create a heroic and forward-looking official history of progress and achievement confronted, in the reminiscences of surviving Loyalists, figures who were ambivalent and ambiguous rather than heroic, a nostalgic idealization of pioneer society, and a deep disenchantment with present conditions. Ignoring the reminiscences, the agents of official history recast the Loyalist pioneers of memory into a persecuted elite who heroically sacrificed their homes and comfort for the sake of principle. ... The imperative to create a history that was heroic, celebratory, and forward looking dictated that the vernacular past of the reminiscences would be largely ignored and forgotten in a deliberate act of historical amnesia. (Knowles 27, 41)

I am arguing in a comparable way that through its ironic nostalgia, *The Imperialist* tempts us to remember the social complications that Canniff and Ryerson teach us to forget. It depicts the glamour of nation building, but also discloses disenchantment within national and imperial projects, which for Duncan are two sides of the same coin.¹² Nostalgia is both indulged and chastised by a narrative voice and gaze so tinged with irony as to keep the reader just off balance.

To return to the opening scene, Old Mother Beggarlegs, who sells gingerbread to children and arrives “it was understood, with the dawn” only to vanish at night “on a not improbable broomstick” (7), is a character from fairy tales. Her timeless presence will launch the temporality of Canadian history. But as soon as she is invoked as the nation’s fairy godmother, she is exorcised by the matter-of-fact tone of the narrator, who intrudes boldly into her story to reveal that it is nothing but a story: “It is hard to invest Mother Beggarlegs with importance, but the date helps me — the date, I mean of this chapter about Elgin” (8). *The Imperialist* is continually unsettled by narrative interruptions like this one, which force readers to readjust their view of what is, or is not, improbable.¹³ The narrator presents herself sometimes as a storyteller, often as a curious onlooker, sometimes as omniscient, and occasionally as just another citizen of Elgin. We feel her presence most strongly when we catch her shifting roles: “I seem to have embarked, by way of getting to the Milburns’ party — there is a party at the Milburns and some of use are going — upon an analysis of the social principles in Elgin” (48). Later she pictures Lorne talking to his old friend, Elmore Crow, “as they walk together in my mind along the Elgin market square” (84). And when Lorne abruptly abandons his cau-

tious political speech, she again lapses from omniscience into uncertainty: “Dr. Drummond declares that he expected it from the beginning, but is totally unable to say why. I can get nothing more out of them, though they were all there, though they all saw him” (261). Her tone usually sets her above the Canadian scene, which she scrutinizes with an insider’s loving attention to detail, but which she diminishes through her superior vantage, for example, in this commentary on how Canadians are woefully provincial in their admirable affection for the British monarchy:

A sentiment of affection for the reigning house certainly prevailed. It was arbitrary, rococo, unrelated to current conditions as a tradition sung down in a ballad, an anachronism of the heart, cherished through long rude lifetimes for the beauty and poetry of it — if you consider, beauty and poetry can be thought of in this. Here was ... no pageantry, no blazonry of the past, nothing to lift the heart but an occasional telegram from the monarch expressing, upon an event of public importance, a suitable emotion. (62)

The word “rococo” is a nice touch since it is so foreign to Elgin, which is “rude” and located at the far-end of a cultural dispersal tenuously linked to metropolitan grandeur only through the occasional, “suitable” telegram. The amused but tender bathos traced here recalls the mischief of Stephen Leacock, whose *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* appeared in 1912, just a few years after *The Imperialist*, and which probably stands as English-Canada’s finest exercise in nostalgia. Leacock, too, plays with the opposition between naïve insider and sophisticated outsider, although he usually indulges the former whereas Duncan prefers the latter position. She loves long or multiple sentences that build momentum only to descend from the noble to the bathetic, for example in this portrait of Stella Murchison, who sinks quickly from the heroic to the humdrum:

Stella, without doubt, was well equipped for society; she had exactly those qualities which appealed to it in Elgin, among which I will mention two — the quality of being able to suggest that she was quite as good as anybody without saying so, and the even more important quality of not being any better. (45)

In the final clause, Duncan erases the distinction that she has just conferred on Stella, and so implicitly criticizes small-town conformity. Similarly, here is her description of religion in Elgin:

It was the normal thing, the thing which formed the backbone of life, sustaining to the serious, impressive to the light, indispensable to the

rest, and the thing that was more than any of these, which you can only know when you stand in the churches among the congregations. Within its prescribed limitations it was for many the intellectual exercise, for more the emotional lift, and for all the unfailing distraction of the week. The repressed magnetic excitement in gatherings of familiar faces, fellow beings bound by the same conventions to the same kind of behaviour, is precious in communities where the human interest is still thin and sparse. (65)

The narrator has stood in churches among these congregations and shared their sentiments, but not for long. By the end of the passage, she removes herself from a “thin and sparse” community where religion begins as backbone but ends as distraction.

The “prescribed limitations” staked out in the last passage define a cultural homogeneity (“fellow beings bound by the same conventions to the same kind of behaviour”) expressed at this early point in the story as a cozy, communal warmth whose glow toasts the reader nostalgically. Later, however, the “repressed magnetic excitement” will become more commanding and much more repressive when the borders of the nation are under attack. How readers today interpret *The Imperialist* depends on how they define this excitement, how successfully they think Duncan prescribes its limits, and how far it escapes authorial control. I turn to the problems of limitation and repression in my next two sections.

Domesticity

The church is one magnetic site for the people of Elgin; the family is another. If nation-states are made, not born, then their making partly depends on writers who can envision a hospitable social imaginary in which people will feel at home. Feeling at home is vital to *The Imperialist*, which portrays Canada in domestic terms as a tightly knit community threatened by temptations from within and without. It is commonplace to treat the nation as an extended family, but this commonplace (topos) has a history that nineteenth-century nation builders found particularly handy. Viviana Comensoli traces the typology back to the Middle Ages, but finds it more pronounced in the early modern period, when a new ideological articulation of family life distinguished between private and public spheres in order to endow each dialectically with the strengths of the other. The family is seen as a little commonwealth, the nation as a big family (18). The nation displays domestic virtues; the well-ordered household (patriarchal, hierarchical, mutually supportive) ensures the well-being of the nation.

Family life teaches civility, a term which now combines social order with good manners (66-68) — hence the manuals on governance, domestic economy, and manners, which Comensoli studies. For example, she quotes from *Domesticall Duties* (1622) by William Gouge: “who knoweth not that the preservation of families tendeth to the good of Church and common-wealth? so as a conscionable performance of household duties, in regard of the end and fruit thereof, may be accounted a publike worke” (23). Advancing his inquiry into the eighteenth century, Jürgen Habermas shows how western European society was increasingly envisioned in domestic terms in the sense that social bonds and obligations derived from family relationships. In the new liberal view, the family was “humanity’s genuine site” (52) where identity was most fully realized, and out of this safe haven individuals emerged to mingle in civil society and to debate the politics of their state. A sociable, public world lay neatly between the private sphere and the state, or in effect, between love and politics, as they frequently appear in political novels like *The Imperialist*. Ideally, the bourgeois public sphere was sustained by its alliance with domesticity, on the one hand, and protected from the intrusions of the state, on the other (142), but in practice the three estates became interwoven:

Only this dialectic of a progressive “societalization” of the state simultaneously with an increasing “state-ification” of society gradually destroyed the basis of the bourgeois public sphere — the separation of state and society. Between the two and out of the two, as it were, a repoliticized social sphere emerged to which the distinction between “public” and “private” could not be usefully applied. It also led to the disintegration of the specific portion of the private realm within which private people assembled to constitute a public and to regulate those aspects of their commerce with each other that were of general concern, namely, the public sphere in its liberal form. (142)

The politicization of personal life can be illustrated in a scene from *The Imperialist*. Just before the election in which he stands as a Liberal candidate, Lorne visits his fiancée, Dora, in order to assure himself of her affection and support:

“Well, you’ll win it for them if anybody could,” she assured him.
 “Say ‘win it for us,’ dear.”
 She shook her head. “I’m not a Liberal — yet,” she said laughing.
 “It’s only a question of time.”
 “I’ll never be converted to Grit [Liberal] politics.”

“No, but you’ll be converted to me,” he told her, and drew her nearer. (271)

In this coy interplay of romantic and political loyalties, Lorne assumes that Dora will adopt his political sympathies after they are married. Politics should follow love, because the family is one’s primary loyalty and the husband is head of the household. He is unaware, however, that his English friend, Alfred Hesketh, who is a Conservative and will prove to be a better catch for Dora, is already at breakfast in her home. Hesketh has slyly invaded the “house of his beloved, the house he was being entreated to leave with all speed” (272), forcing the ardent lover/politician to slink away and leave the field to his rival. I do not want to over-interpret a brief comic scene, but the comedy arises from the way Lorne so naively misjudges both love and politics. For Hesketh and Dora, love follows politics. She will marry for social position, not affection, while politics will be shaped by economic advantage, not by family (British) loyalties. In this respect Lorne is not progressive, as he imagines, but quaintly old-fashioned. He embodies the liberal, and increasingly nostalgic view that publicity is an extension of privacy, so that the nation exhibits the character of one great family.

Note that his attitude is just the reverse of current cultural theory, which subsumes privacy within publicity. It argues that even the most intimate areas of our lives (family relations, desire, the erotic) are actually manifestations of ideological forces: the private is “always already” public. For Lorne (and presumably for Duncan as well), the public is fundamentally personal in the sense that it grows out of family values, which it must apply more widely. Her description of the local debate over Canada’s Imperial connection captures exactly Habermas’s point that a public world was supposed to grow out of individualistic and domestic values:

Whatever it was in England, here it was a family affair; I mean in the town of Elgin, in the shops and the offices, up and down the tree-bordered streets as men went to and from their business, atomic creatures building the reef of the future, but conscious, and wanting to know what they were about. ... The subject even trickled about the apple-barrels and potato-bags of the market square. (169-70)

The citizens of Elgin are social atoms who congregate in public places to discuss political issues and to do their business, most notably in the market square, which is the town’s symbolic centre. Duncan describes market day with amused irony; for example, proper ladies may do their own

“pricing and comparing and acquiring,” but “it did not consort with elegance to ‘trapse’ home with anything that looked inconvenient or had legs sticking out of it” (80). But she is careful not to scorn anything as serious as commerce, especially in a subsistence economy where life is still a struggle:

It was a scene of activity but not of excitement, or in any sense of joy. The matter was of too hard an importance; it made too much difference on both sides whether potatoes were twelve or fifteen cents a peck. ... Elgin market square, indeed, was the biography of Fox County, and, in little, the history of the whole Province. The heart of it was there, the enduring heart of the new country already old in acquiescence. It was the deep root of the race in the land, twisted and unlovely, but holding the promise of all. (80-81)

Elgin square presents no rowdy hubbub as in traditional English depictions of the marketplace (Stallybrass 27-30), but a grim exercise in negotiating the necessities of life amid, at best, “a difficult kind of prosperity” in which “the margin was small and the struggle plain” (81). Since this public space is an extension of the domestic one, the same character applies to the Murchison household, which is loving and kind, but also strict, dutiful, and frugal. Mrs. Murchison peels her own potatoes and boils her own soap. Country, province, and county radiate from the town square, which radiates from the family with the mother at its hearth.

The disintegration of the private realm, to which Habermas alludes, is already underway in *The Imperialist*, where it appears as a threat to domesticity that occurs when society grows so large and complex that it loses its moral underpinning in the family. As Mr. Murchison and Dr. Drummond observe in a passage quoted earlier (19), the familiar/familial world of Elgin is changing beyond recognition and control. Lorne’s Imperial Idea is an attempt to mollify this change by enabling Canada to enter the harsh world of modern capitalism without betraying its family base. It is also an attempt to feminize an oppressively masculine society, since threats to domesticity are often presented as threats to a female order. A further implication of the domestic-national topos is the centrality of women, a fact that Comensoli notes as far back as the sixteenth century when the domestic play expressed a heightened concern not only with marriage, civility, and the household, but “with the category *woman*” (24). The category becomes problematic in the sense that it has to be defined and protected, since women are fragile, but also restrained, since women are dangerous. Even in the patriarchal families of Elgin, where

father represents the law and mother represents the spirit of the law, women occupy an emotional and symbolic centre. Duncan observes how commerce in Elgin market is conducted mostly by women in accordance with “female judgment” (80) — a judgment that the novel summons to counsel Canada as it enters an unscrupulous, masculine, mercantile world. Female judgment is scrupulous, and *The Imperialist* begins with three women who preside over nation, town, and family: Queen Victoria, Old Mother Beggarlegs, and Mrs. Murchison. The last is introduced, with due apology, as humbly peeling potatoes in her kitchen, where she is “the central figure, nevertheless, with her family radiating from her” (12). Lorne’s political scheme is, so to speak, an attempt to keep his mother at the centre of things.

The feminization of culture in nineteenth-century England and America has been well documented, for example by Ann Douglas, who analyses the domestic manuals written for women in the north-eastern United States.¹⁴ Mrs. Murchison’s generation corresponds to what Douglas calls the “Age of Homespun,” when wives did their own housework and contributed to a thrifty family economy. As America grew affluent at mid-century, female practicality gave way to elegance, so that middle-class women were instructed how to be gracefully impractical but also, by way of compensation, more spiritual. They preserved the virtues of the home, by extending their ennobling influence into the public world of commerce:

Male dollars must be ignored by female decorum; women should forget or at least appear to forget the sordid laws of acquisition and accumulation. . . . Etiquette books of the day make it amply clear that women were to cultivate domestic piety behind closed doors while their male counterparts were to face, and if possible conquer, the competitive world of commerce. . . . The lady’s preoccupation is to be with herself: her clothes, her manners, her feelings, her family. (Douglas 66)

There is an ironic but profitable payoff to this separation of male commerce and female piety: women become more spiritual by looking more elegant, which they accomplish by becoming better consumers of the commodities produced by their hard-working husbands. Women in Canada lag behind their American sisters. Although Elgin is a “manufacturing town” whose “factory chimneys had . . . begun to point the way to enterprise” (*Imperialist* 87, 239), Mrs. Murchison is still devoted to thrift and suspicious of books, which her husband collects prudently (30).¹⁵

Her sturdy, shabby house (29) has an orchard, garden, and barn, but also “a drawing-room in which she might have received the Lieutenant Governor, with French windows and a cut-glass chandelier, and a library with an Italian marble mantelpiece” (28). Her daughters are developing more elegant habits, however, and Advena is so bookish, spirited, and spiritual that she scares off most suitors (115). Naturally, ladies in Elgin cannot vote and do not participate directly in politics, which is “a purely masculine interest” (217); their role is to safeguard the ethical foundation of political conduct by reminding politicians that their true goal is social and moral prosperity, rather than material wealth. Similarly, the practical affairs of Empire are a man’s job, but the Empire itself as “the conscience of the world” (140) depends on “feminine connections,” emotional bonds and loyalty to the Crown (Dean 102-03). Advena insists that political, economic and material understanding is barren unless enhanced by the “flowers” of idealism (*Imperialist* 123). When Lorne stoutly proclaims that he puts morality ahead of business, he displays a feminine temperament that makes him no match for “the boys” (279) — the conniving bosses who control local elections and patronage, and who easily nullify his election as Member of Parliament. Evidently the ladies are not successful in their civilizing mission, since Elgin politics are corrupt. “Our politics are a game of grab,” Duncan lamented in 1886 (*Selected Journalism* 109), but in Elgin the game is still a neighbourly “racket” (*Imperialist* 241) in keeping with the town’s family atmosphere. One vote is paid for under the pretense of buying a cat (281).

A Canadian woman’s job is to restrain male rambunctiousness, whether in business, love, or politics. Rugged male energy is necessary to build a new nation, but it must be checked by female judgment, which is the steadying counterforce of moral scruple and social decorum:

Elgin society, shaping itself, I suppose, to ultimate increase and prosperity, had this peculiarity, that the females of a family, in general acceptance, were apt to lag far behind the males. ... The young men were more desirable than the young women; they forged ahead, carrying the family fortunes... (*Imperialist* 47)

“Increase” is a word usually associated with fertility and childbirth. If it sounds odd to treat men as agents of “increase,” this should remind us that the language of gender is figurative and subject to rhetorical pressure. Anne McClintock claims that nationalisms are always invented, gendered, and dangerous; that their representations of history, memory, identity, and social position depend on the prior construction of gender differences

(352-3); and that the symbolic limits of the nation — its territoriality and cultural range — are typically marked as female: “women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (354).¹⁶ The nation is maternal (a motherland), but only as an enfolding presence that sustains the social and economic activities within its bounds, which are marked as masculine:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. Nationalism’s anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender. ... Britain’s emerging national narrative gendered time by figuring women (like the colonized and the working class) as inherently atavistic — the conservative repository of the national archaic. ... White, middle-class men, by contrast, were seen to embody the forward-thrusting agency of national progress. (McClintock 359-60)

In so far as he is feminized, Lorne is a conservative character, as is Advena, despite her tomboyish behaviour. Their evocations of national destiny are timeless (“archaic”) rather than historical, because they gaze on an “empty horizon” (122) far removed from daily affairs. Advena’s high spirits make her an attractive but potentially dangerous character. With her “queer satisfactions and enthusiasms” (46) she is undomesticated, barely able to make her own bed, and utterly unfit “for the management of a house” (32). To control these unruly energies, the novel exerts its own restraint, or “female judgment,” in the form of its sceptical narrative voice, which ensures that Advena’s verve testifies to her idealism but never leads to serious transgressions. She may indulge “the degenerate modern habit of preferring the evening service” at church (37), but she never considers deserting the church entirely, and degenerates only enough to fall in love with a clergyman whose parish is in a less fashionable part of town.

Like the personified nation (Britannia, “Miss Canada”¹⁷), the domesticated nation is a pacifying figure, because it treats complex social problems as if they were merely family disputes to be resolved within the home, where bonds of kinship assuage any violent disagreements. If there are any anarchic energies in *The Imperialist*, they arise, not in precocious Advena, not in the town’s boisterous market or its corrupt politics, but in the United States as represented by Miss Florence Belton, the wicked seductress from

New York. More specifically, Duncan associates America with assassination and seduction — that is, with political and sexual transgression. The former is mentioned ironically when Dr. Drummond generously prays for the President of the United States “only on the occurrence of assassinations” (20-21), but they occur regularly: Lincoln is 1865, Garfield in 1881, McKinley in 1901. Sexuality is embodied in Miss Belton, “one of those ambiguous ladies who sometimes drift out from the metropolitan vortex” (92) and who bamboozles the town’s naïve bank cashier, a hapless schlemiel who would be right at home in Leacock’s *Mariposa*. The portrait of Miss Belton resembles a parody of the inspiring but pampered American lady described by Ann Douglas, a lady who now has lapsed from housemaker to homewrecker, as her inspirational power over men becomes overtly erotic.

Like Miss Belton, American values are enticing but debasing: a Yankee dime is worth only nine cents (85). Later in the story, her sins of seduction and gambling are identified explicitly with the United States, which Lorne condemns as “the light woman among nations, welcoming all comers, mingling her pure blood, polluting her lofty ideals” (267) for profit. It is appropriate that women should represent both civility and licentiousness, since both are limits that men yearn for in their hectic pursuit of “increase and prosperity.” Women are both fragile and dangerous. In Canada, Miss Belton’s eroticism must be tamed by the demure conventions of romance, according to which Lorne can only beg for a chaste kiss from his beloved, and Finlay will sacrifice his love for Advena to honour a promise made to a woman he hardly knows. Similarly, American political anarchy must be constrained by British justice which, Lorne trusts, will hold back the army of American enterprise amassed at the border (266). In fact, American goods already are seducing Canadians, as D.J. Dooley discovers (31) in the scene where Lorne, just returned from his mission to England, is visited by the Williams family. He is so ardent for the Empire that he fails to notice details that the narrator tactfully observes: the Murchisons’ rocking chair, hammock, and newspaper are all American-made, as are Mrs. Williams’s shoes: “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” (144). The final phrase is another example of Duncan’s ironic dismissal of complications that might disrupt her social comedy, although readers are free to interpret her parable further, as I will in a moment. Usually she encourages us to laugh at American excesses, as if they pose no real threat to family or nation because Canadians are too

prudent to succumb to them. The farmers of Fox county are so stolid that when they hear Miss Belton's brisk testimony in court, they remark "in chapfallen appreciation that she was about as level-headed as they make them" (93). They are hardly likely to chase after light women, to go on a shopping spree, or to foment a revolution.

It appears, then, that the rebellious energies released in the novel are kept under narrative control, until we consider the final nationalist topic.

Race

Lorne's contempt for a nation with polluted blood expresses the novel's pervasive fear of promiscuity, understood broadly as any illicit cultural mingling that might corrupt the safe haven of Anglo-Saxon Canada. Despite its immense size, Canada is just a larger Elgin, a "little world" (83) of "small circumference" (64) within which resides (according to Dr. Drummond's favourite hymn) an assembly of the just (73). Such an assembly enforces uniformity, because "a difference is the one thing a small community, accustomed comfortably to scan its own intelligible averages, will not tolerate" (45). Since Canada is a maturing settler colony, new immigrants must be accepted, but only cautiously, so that even a certified Englishman like Hesketh must earn his way into the nation through proper business and marriage alliances. Fear of encroaching dangers means that Elginites instinctively mistrust Lorne's Imperial Idea, because it would draw Canada into a global union, and even he is careful to domesticate the Empire by calling it a "family council" (265). However, *The Imperialist* presents an even more insidious danger in the form of an outsider who lurks within the Canadian imaginary as one of its most potent symbols. This is the Aboriginal population, against which the novel wages a campaign of rhetorical exclusion in order to build a nation that is native but not Native.

Natives present a curious dilemma since they not only are "insiders" to Canada, but assert a prior claim to the country. All the forms of authenticity, originality, and destiny conventionally ratified by the nation apply all the more strongly to Natives: close association with nature, mythological origins, antiquity, heroic sacrifice, organic community, tribal cohesion. Because Natives cannot be sent packing like Miss Belton, they must be excluded in more subtle ways. "You can never trust an Indian," warns Mrs. Murchison after Lorne's election victory is contested, "But I thought they were all gone long ago" (278). Where could they go, and what does their absence signify? She alludes to the popular myth of the disappearing American¹⁸ according to which Natives were admired as

noble but doomed precursors to European immigrants, whose own claim to the land was legitimized through imaginative kinship with picturesquely doomed Natives. They were granted a heroic fate only to the extent that they were fated to extinction. By being banished figuratively, they apparently open a free space for the settler community, who inherits their right to the land. This fantasy is untroubled by the glaring fact that Natives have not disappeared and continue to live nearby. Even as a rhetorical flourish, Mrs. Murchison's statement is amazing. Readers learn that as a mark of the Murchisons' distinction, their house lies at the edge of town — "It was in Elgin but not of it; it represented a different tradition" (29) — yet just beyond their house lies an older tradition in the Moneida reservation. Mrs. Murchison sees Natives every day at the market, and admits that she used to rely on them for raspberries: "But it was on the squaws we depended in those days, or go without raspberry preserves" (278). She never explains why she could not collect the berries herself, but more important, her dependence on people she despises reveals an abiding, antagonistic inter-reliance that fractures the national imaginary.

The very gestures by which Natives are excluded implicitly declares their ongoing value, for instance in an episode from Advena's childhood: "Once as a little girl she had taken a papoose from a drunken squaw and brought it home for her mother to adopt" (46). Her charitable deed wins the reader's approval by showing that her instincts are already maternal, just as it implicitly condemns Native mothers for neglecting their children. Betrayal of domesticity is the worst sin a woman can commit, since it undermines not only her family but the moral underpinning of the nation. But Advena's womanly act also symbolically maintains a Native presence within Elgin and deep inside her own household. In a sense, it remains there as a textual secret that cannot be declared openly yet can never be suppressed. It re-emerges years later when, at a social gathering, Advena innocently shocks the company through her girlish disregard for decorum: "She sat handsome and upheld and not altogether penetrable, a kind of gipsy to their understanding, though indeed the Romany strain in her was beyond any divining of theirs" (252). The strain of racial difference, which here expresses vivacity rather than impurity, must be kept invisible through metaphors that only the narrator can divine. Similarly, the encoded national secret appears when Canadians proclaim their loyalty to the Crown by celebrating Victoria Day with a lacrosse game in which one of the teams is called the "Cayugas" (17). It appears when the Murchisons scoff at Native names during the contested election:

“Chief Joseph Fry!” exclaimed Alec. “They make me tired with their Chief Josephs and Chief Henrys! White Clam Shell — that was the name he got when he wasn’t christened.”

“That’s the name,” remarked Advena, “that he probably votes under.” (283)

Compare these jibes with an anti-immigration tract from the same period quoted by Kenneth McNaught: “if we do not Canadianize and Christianize the newcomer, he will make us foreigners on our own soil and under our own flag” (193). Natives pose a deep threat to Canadian legitimacy because, as insiders, they expose the Murchisons as foreigners (Mr. Murchison immigrated from Scotland); while as outsiders, they will never be fully Christianized and, Advena implies, never worthy of casting votes in the assembly of the just. “Indian evidence” (282) is untrustworthy, because it is sworn under false names concealing an essentially alien nature that pollutes the national family. Nevertheless, the novel’s readers, who do their own divining, may recall an earlier passage extolling the Murchisons’ pride in family names:

We must take this matter of names seriously; the Murchisons always did. Indeed, from the arrival of a new baby until the important Sunday of the christening, nothing was discussed with such eager zest and such sustained interest as the name he should get — there was a fascinating list at the back of the dictionary — and to the last minute it was problematical. In Stella’s case, Mrs. Murchison actually changed her name on the way to the church. (14)

Murchisons are named after Liberal politicians (Alexander Mackenzie, Oliver Mowat) or in accordance with their mother’s intuition, whereas Native names are mocked as ludicrous. Baptism is a holy rite sealed by “the drops that defined” one’s identity (15), but for Natives the same drops only mask their primitive essence. Beyond the obvious hypocrisy here, christening and naming are problematical because they are rituals of cultural hybridity that have successfully, if uneasily, drawn Natives into the European family. Natives *are* Christians; they have familiar names; they own land; they are citizens and can vote. They have not vanished, and their centrality to the nation is proclaimed at precisely those moments when Canadians declare their distinctiveness, for example in place names and national ceremonies.

Testimony to the ambiguous presence of Natives is the fact that Elgin is based on Brantford, Ontario, a town named for one of Canada’s most famous Native leaders, Joseph Brant (1742-1807). Strictly speak-

ing, of course, Elgin cannot be Brantford since it is a fictional place in its own imaginary space, but we might apply to the process of reading *The Imperialist* a lesson learned in Elgin's market square:

A marketplace is the epitome of local identity ... and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere. At the market centre of the polis we discover a commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. (Stallybrass 27)

Reading, too, is a promiscuous business that links writer, reader, and text with ever-expanding biographical and historical contexts. "Elgin is Brantford" declares one well-informed reader (Tausky 168), because of the way Duncan drew on memories of her youth, because of direct correspondences between historical and fictional towns (Dr. Drummond corresponds to Rev. William Cochrane, etc.), and because, as a historical novel, *The Imperialist* is already a mixed genre commingling fact and fiction. Elgin is an imaginary town in a real nation, but the Canadian nation is an imagined community whose emerging sense of identity comes, in part at least, from reading about Elgin and Mariposa and Avonlea. To the attentive reader, then, if not to the Murchisons, it is significant that they should use naming to proclaim their social worth, when their own town bears the name, *mutatis mutandis*, of a Mowhawk Chief whose "real" name was Thayendanegea. Many details from Brant's life cast an ironic light on *The Imperialist*: his Loyalist sympathies and success as a soldier, for which he was commissioned a Captain by the British; his opposition to American expansion; his visit to England; his missionary work that included translating the Bible into Mohawk; and even his association with the Cayuga — not the lacrosse team but the nation who joined the Six Nations Confederacy near Brantford.¹⁹ The Confederacy for which he worked, and which his sister Mary (or Konwatsi'tsiaiénni, meaning "someone lends her a flower") helped to complete, could serve as a model for the Imperial union that Lorne fails to achieve. Lorne fails to be the father of his nation, but Brant succeeded, and his name lives on.

Destiny and nature

I have reached a crux in my interpretation, since I seem to be reproaching Duncan for failing to recognize the ingenious postcolonial drift of her own novel. I began this essay by proposing that *The Imperialist* illustrates the perils of nation building, but for all her ironic wit, surely Duncan

never meant to imply that the model for a true commonwealth lies, not in Lorne's racist empire, but outside Elgin among the very people who are treated with such contempt. All the evidence supplied by commentators like Alfred Bailey, Thomas Tausky, Joseph M. Zezulka, and Ajay Heble suggests that Duncan admired the Imperial plan, that she could not know in 1903-04 how quickly it would be abandoned, that she welcomed imperialism as both an asset to Canadian nationalism and a remedy to colonialism, and that:

Like many of her contemporaries, she saw the Empire as a bulwark against the destructive social effects of materialist capitalism; an effective check on US militarism; and a preserve for the ideals of justice, disinterested debate, altruism, and community which were threatened by the conditions of modern life. (Dean 4-5)

Clearly, it is pointless to complain that a writer of the 1890s does not share our attitudes in the 1990s, or to condemn her racism with retrospective self-righteousness. Duncan wrote when race was considered a stable, scientific category, because it seemed self-evident that identity is essentially racial: people are divided by ancestry, which distinguishes nations by conferring common physical, psychological, and moral attributes. Robert Young contends that a "racialization of knowledge" was pervasive in the new sciences of anthropology, sociology, ethnology, linguistics, and physiology, all of which relied on a hierarchy of races for their commanding structure:

The blunt fact that has even now not been faced is that modern racism was an academic creation. What we are dealing with here is the dominance of racial theory so widespread that it worked as an ideology, permeating both consciously and implicitly the fabric of almost all areas of thinking of its time. (64)

For Duncan, it was only logical that nations should be defined according to racial classifications that seemed natural — Caucasian, Aryan, Semitic, Anglo-Saxon — but now strike us as arbitrary or bizarre. What look like inconsistencies in her attitudes were then overruled by stronger convictions. For example, she could speak confidently about the moral superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, even though her own family was Celtic, and one influential racial theorist of the time, Robert Knox, insisted "no minds are more distinct than the Saxon and the Celtic" (quoted in Young 68). She could appeal to "the British race" (*Imperialist* 223), even though the British were just as likely to take pride in their diversity:

“In fact, it became increasingly common in the later nineteenth century for the English to invoke Defoe’s account of ‘that Het’rogeous Thing, An Englishman,’ and to define themselves as a hybrid or ‘Mongrel half-bred Race,’ often, after the unification of Germany in 1871, in a spirit of oppositional rivalry to the Germans, who regarded themselves as pure Teutons” (Young 17).²⁰ She could also, according to Marian Fowler, maintain a warm friendship with Pauline Johnson (38), yet treat Natives contemptuously in *The Imperialist*. She could, according to Misao Dean (142-45), expose racial and ethnic injustices in India, yet fail to apply the same lesson to her Canadian Indians.

These inconsistencies force the present-day reader to make some interpretive decisions about the relation between ideology, theme, author, and text. One of the delights of the novel is its mischievous tone, for instance in the “parable” of American shoes on Canadian feet (122), which I noted in the last section. How are we to interpret this parable, in which Lorne overlooks his feet because his head is in the clouds? If Duncan means to bring us down to earth by implying that economic pressures drawing Canada southward are stronger than Lorne’s Imperial dream — in effect, that material nature is stronger than idealized destiny — then she offers no more than a brief, ironic hint. How far should we follow her suggestion?

Zeulka shows that neat contrasts between head and foot, idealism (Murchisons) and practicality (Milburns), old and new world values, are undercut by the author’s “bemused and frequently astringent intrusions” into her story (147). Her teasing interjections upset readers’ expectations by producing a “mixture of styles and genres,” which is probably “intentional, even if it is not wholly satisfactory” (149). This is a balanced judgment. The narrative uncertainty may be judged a flaw in the novel’s design, but it may also be an effective ambiguity expressing — and here the critical reader must decide — the author’s sympathetic doubts about her characters; or her mixed judgment about the morality of political decisions; or her intermingling of realism and romance (150); or her “mature understanding of Canadian nationalism and its relationship to imperialism” (156). In each case, Zeulka respects Duncan’s opinions, but suggests that she fails to convey them adequately, so that her text reveals more than it intends. How far should we pursue this revelation? Dean widens the gap between intention (text) and revelation (subtext) by asserting that, because Duncan was a colonial Canadian woman in the male world of English letters, she was ambiguously caught up in her culture’s ideological norms, which she accepted uneasily:

In the overt political content and in the narrative strategies of her novels, Duncan presents a view from the margin of Anglo-American ideology, writing against the developing aesthetic and ideological traditions of imperialist patriarchy while fully implicated in them. ... [She was] non-hegemonic by virtue of her opposition to the dominant culture, but only ambiguously so, because by definition no one can be outside hegemony. Duncan could not be a whole-hearted nationalist because she was an imperialist, could not be an unqualified feminist because she finally accepted patriarchally imposed definitions of the female. (6)

In this radical revision of *The Imperialist*, the narrative ambiguities that amuse but disconcert readers are, paradoxically, all the more accurate in exposing contradictions within imperialism, capitalism, bourgeois democracy, and patriarchy (Dean 17). Duncan may not have fully intended so extensive a critique, but her discursive position as a colonial woman exerts its own torsion within the text to reveal the truth. The novel speaks the truth — that is, the truth as understood by certain interpretive communities in the 1990s — behind its author's back. But since this revelation must be untwisted from the text's rhetorical fabric, it is the heretical critic who now assumes the role of hero and establishes the shaky terms of the nation's founding.

My own position falls somewhere between Dean's and Zezulka's. I believe that *The Imperialist* does indeed expose inconsistencies in the ideology of romantic nationalism, inconsistencies of which Duncan was only partly aware, but which her writing displays because the rhetoric available to her (heroic, mnemonic, domestic, racial) was ill-suited to the practical realities of early twentieth-century Canada. Contradictions arise both within nationalist ideology, and as a result of its incompatibility with Canadian life. Everything in Canadian society, as faithfully depicted in the novel, undercuts the nationalist call for unity, racial homogeneity, domestic security, family resemblance, heroic tradition — in short, all of the topics examined in this paper. In as much as Duncan portrays Elgin society faithfully, she reveals more than she intended, not because her writing has any magical truth-telling power, but because it does justice to a specific period in Canadian history as registered in the material affairs of small-town life.

For instance, Duncan may use ceremonial naming to bless the national family, but because she faithfully records the speech pattern of her home town, her style reveals a polyglot country divided by class, generation, education, and national origin. The narrator's cultivated diction (rococo,

mandarinate, jehad) contrasts the local dialect (trapse, “store” instead of “shop,” “duke” pronounced “Dook”) in a clash of idioms that is sometimes satirical and sometimes condescending, but that also puts the narrator oddly out of touch with the authentic expression of local concerns. The local, after all, is supposed to be the well-spring of the nation. Lorne encounters the same problem when he gets so carried away by his political speech that he forgets his audience: the townsfolk politely applaud his eloquence but mistrust his ideas. Elsewhere, however, Duncan takes pleasure in tossing a verbal salad that includes Mr. Murchison’s quaint Scottish expressions, American slang (“You’re looking ‘xtremely dinky-dink” [115]), Lorne’s pompous “Briticisms” (“‘We don’t say ‘rather’ in this country, mister,’ observed Stella” [145]); Mrs. Crow’s no-nonsense working-class accent, and the unavoidable Native names, which give her less pleasure but which may intrigue the reader. In such a setting, there can be no single voice speaking for Canada or expressing the thoughts of a “national mind” (168). Duncan may assume that imperialism and Canadian nationalism are natural allies, in keeping with the wisdom of the day (Zezulka 146-47, Heble 219-20). Nevertheless, she depicts Elgin as an “outpost of Empire” (*Imperialist* 20) that is the centre only of its own intense preoccupations. In a society where “the margin was small and the struggle plain” (81), local needs are bound to displace national hopes and imperial ambitions, whose very grandeur makes them suspect. In their daily work, the citizens of Elgin, and by extension, of Canada

were all hard-working folk together ... Anything “wholesale” or manufacturing stood, of course, on its own feet; there was nothing ridiculous in molasses, nothing objectionable in a tannery, nothing amusing in soap. Such airs and graces were far from Elgin, too fundamentally occupied with the amount of capital invested, and too profoundly aware how hard it was to come by. (49)

Tausky argues, “If Lorne is equated with Canada, it must follow that imperialism is good for Canada” (159-60), but I am not convinced by his syllogism. Lorne may be a sympathetic character whose career is linked to his nation, but this does not make him right, only self-important. Through the precision of her observations, Duncan reveals that Canadians trust in nature — soap and molasses, apple-barrels and potato-bags (170) — and in the chances that it affords, rather than in the airs and graces of destiny. While the narrator may mock their crudity, she cannot prove that they are wrong, just as Lorne cannot convince his neighbours, by sheer force of eloquence, that their best interests lie in the Empire. What I am calling “na-

ture" is, of course, really another cultural form, an ideological preference rather than a natural condition; but it is a form that has little patience for the abstract splendours of destiny. At times Lorne promises to be "a prophet for a new Canada at the centre of a revitalized Empire" (Morton 102), and it is often the fate of prophets to go unheeded, but ultimately he is a small-town lawyer who narrowly avoids leaving for Milwaukee.

One final example will illustrate how, under the pressure of material need and narrative irony, national destiny dwindles into chance. The English apostle of Empire is the Right Hon. Fawcett Wallingham, an ex-Minister "courting political excommunication" (254) like his historical counterpart, Joseph Chamberlain, who was Secretary of State for the Colonies until he resigned from Cabinet when his Imperial crusade faltered (Tausky 160-61). Does Duncan favour his heresy? If so, Lorne could be seen as a man ahead of his time, sacrificed for the national good in preparation for a better future. This reading seems unlikely, not just because we know in hindsight that the Imperial Idea will fail, but because, as Tausky admits (161), there is "nary a sentence of authorial opinion about imperialism" in the novel. Duncan is as cautious as the citizens of Elgin when it comes to making political commitments. She conveys Lorne's respect for Wallingham (112), but not her own. In an extended, teasing passage, Wallingham's visionary role is first inflated, then deflated, and finally left in doubt:

Willingham appeared to think that by teaching and explaining he could help his fellow islanders to see further than the length of their fists, and exorcise from them the spirit, only a century and a quarter older and a trifle more sophisticated, that lost them the American colonies. (255)

Duncan apparently defends a prophet against the short-sighted, craven population who fail to appreciate his heroic vision; but in the next sentence, her irony shifts its compass:

But so far little had transpired to show that Willingham was stronger than nature and destiny. There had been Willingham meetings of remarkable enthusiasm; his supporters called them epoch-making, as if epochs were made of cheers. But the working man of Great Britain was declaring stolidly in the bye-elections against any favour to colonial produce at his expense, thereby showing himself one of those humble instruments that Providence uses for the downfall of arrogant empires. (255)

Duncan mistrusted the democratic masses, which she considered selfish, partisan, materialistic, and vengeful (Dean 81-82), but here she uses them to humble the high and mighty, just as earlier she punctured Hesketh's pomposity by showing him heckled by the people of Elgin (222-23). However, her tone now suggests disdain for both the electors and the elected, who are caught up in a political process that corrupts them all:

It will be thus, no doubt, that the working man will explain in the future his eminent usefulness to the government of his country, and it will be in these terms that the cost of educating him by means of the ballot will be demonstrated. (255)

Finally, the irony leaves the whole question — and the reader — oddly unsettled:

Meanwhile we may look on and cultivate philosophy; or we may make war upon the gods with Mr. Wallingham, which is, perhaps, the better part. (255)

It is impossible to take the final statement at face value. Wallingham is no longer an emissary of fate but an enemy of the gods whose ways are inscrutable, as the novel reminds us in its final sentence. Nations traditionally sanctify their history by seeking a link with divinity, but here the connection is reported so obliquely, and the narrator's philosophical detachment is so remote, that it is impossible to know where she stands. I tend to agree with Allen (43) and Zezulka (149) that Duncan probably had not worked out a firm position of her own, or was not concerned to do so. Nevertheless, her novel makes it clear that the sober citizens of Elgin will not storm heaven, because their feet are so firmly on the earth.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Heble, Peterman, Slonim, and Thomas. My interpretation is particularly indebted to Dean, Gerson, Tausky, and Zezulka.

² For example, Lord Acton denounced the nation as "an ideal [rather than natural] unit founded on the race, in defiance of the modifying action of external causes, of tradition, and of existing rights. It overrules the rights and wishes of the inhabitants, absorbing their divergent interests in a fictitious unity; sacrifices their several inclinations and duties to the higher claim of nationality, and crushes all natural rights and all established liberties for the purpose of vindicating itself" (124).

³ "The general principle which manifests itself and becomes an object of consciousness in the State — the form under which all that the State includes is brought — is the whole of that cycle of phenomena which constitutes the *culture* of a nation. But the definite *substance* that receives the form of universality, and exists in that concrete reality which is the State —

is the Spirit of the People itself. The actual State is animated by this spirit in all its particular affairs — its Wars, Institutions, etc. ... In history this principle is idiosyncrasy of Spirit — peculiar National Genius. It is within the limitations of this idiosyncrasy that the spirit of the nation, concretely manifested, expresses every aspect of its consciousness and will — the whole cycle of its realization. Its religion, its polity, its ethics, its legislation, and even its science, art, and mechanical skill, all bear its stamp. These special peculiarities find their key in that common peculiarity — the particular principle that characterizes a people” (Hegel, *Philosophy* 50, 63-64). For an account of Herder’s philosophy, see Manuel.

⁴ On the artifice of nation building, see Bhabha, Hohendahl, Iggers, Kamenka, Mosse (“Mass Politics”), and Navari.

⁵ Apologies for this threadbare joke, which I borrow from Linda Hutcheon (1).

⁶ “The Imperial Federation movement, whose greatest spokesman was the Canadian George Parkin, was a response to the desire of colonialists and some Britons to allow colonies to remain within the Empire and yet exercise some control over their own foreign policy; the reorganization of the Empire along federal lines, including some kind of imperial representative parliament, seemed to guarantee the strength of the British connection to ward off the influence of the US, as well as allowing Canada a voice in her own affairs. Canadians envisioned the Empire evolving into a federation of independent states, with a common foreign and trade policy made by a council with elected representatives from all the member states” (Dean 111-12). Lorne imagines himself being elected to an Imperial Council in Westminster (*Imperialist* 144).

⁷ On remembering to forget as an ideological ploy, see also Hunter (16, 21).

⁸ “The collective memory is not the same as formal history, and ‘historical memory’ is a rather unfortunate expression because it connects two terms opposed in more than one aspect. Our preceding analysis suggests these conclusions. Undoubtedly, history is a collection of the most notable facts in the memory of man. But past events read about in books and taught and learned in schools are selected, combined, and evaluated in accord with necessities and rules not imposed on the groups that had through time guarded them as a living trust. General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory. Likewise the need to write the history of a period, a society, or even a person is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it. ... If a memory exists only when the remembering subject, individual or group, feels that it goes back to its remembrances in a continuous movement, how could history ever be a memory, since there is a break in continuity between the society reading this history and the group in the past who acted in or witnessed the events?” (Halbwachs 78-79).

⁹ Both Davis (12) and Lowenthal (12) speak of nostalgia for the future: from our present vantage point, we imagine how we will look back on an event that has not yet occurred.

¹⁰ Davis traces the history of nostalgia to a Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, who coined the term to describe the pathological home-sickness of Swiss soldiers in the seventeenth century. Later in the nineteenth century it gradually lost its “connotations of aberrance or mental malfunction” (5).

¹¹ “In fact, in all of its manifestations, nostalgia is, in its praxis, conservative (in at least two senses — its political alignment and its motive to keep things intact and unchanged): it leans on the imagined and imaginary past which is more and better than the present and for which the carrier of the nostalgia, in a defective and diminished present, in some way or other longs. ... [M]emory and nostalgia can couple to enforce a particularly potent regulatory practice, that of tradition” (Bennett 5, 10).

¹² "Laurier's boast that the twentieth century belonged to Canada simply underscored the tacit identification that most Canadians had made of imperialism with nationalism. Of the most salient features of the imperial-national ideology — conservatism, an attachment to the monarchical system, the desire for a basically agrarian economy, and a degree of hostility to capitalism, especially of the American variety — none is as important to this discussion as the overriding sentiment that Canada would be at the centre of any imperial scheme" (Zezulka 147).

¹³ Peter Allen finds "a curious mixture of aesthetic control and the apparent lack of it" in Duncan's narrative style, by which "she moves unpredictably and abruptly from one topic to another, sometimes with the explicit suggestion that her novel-writing is a spontaneous affair, a little uncertain and not entirely under her control" (43). In contrast, Heble sees her calculated mixing of first and third-person narration as a way of simultaneously maintaining authority and omniscience: "Duncan wants the best of both perspectives" (224).

¹⁴ Other books on domestic literature and the feminization of American culture include Armstrong and Sklar. For Canada, see Gerson (*A Purer Taste*). I am indebted to an assessor of this essay for recommending a comparable study of Australian culture: Summers's *Damned Whores*.

¹⁵ For the economic and political situation of "Brantford-cum-Elgin," see Bailey 132-34.

¹⁶ For further discussion of nationalism and gender, see Mosse (*Nationalism*) and Parker.

¹⁷ Misao Dean points out that in this period, Canada was usually characterized as feminine — "Miss Canada" (5).

¹⁸ See Fiedler on the "disappearing American," and for comparable studies in Canada, see Monkman and Fee.

¹⁹ For biographies of Joseph Brant, see Chalmers, Petrie, and Kelsay.

²⁰ Duncan was influenced by George Parkin (Dean 123-25, Heble 219), the leader of the Imperial Federation movement, who had urged the need for a "homogeneous Race" in Canada (McKillop 13). For an account of nineteenth-century fascination with Anglo-Saxons, see MacDougall.

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