COUSIN CINDERELLA AND THE EMPIRE GAME

by
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> One aspect of Edwardian life missed by that otherwise acute series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (but instantly apparent in a contemporary social observer such as Saki) is what can only be described as an all-pervasive element of formal and mannered frivolity, as though life were one long houseparty at which everybody had to play complicated indoor games. The framework could accommodate both innocents and sophisticates.[1]

The gamesmanship of the British was not only an aspect of Edwardian life; it was an aspect, and a powerful one, of the imperial idea itself. Gamesmanship among the British was also deeply rooted in their sense of drama — in the natural scenic drama of the English countryside, and in the rituals of the Anglican Church, of royalty and of the armed services. During the age of Victoria, as the empire grew, peaked and spilled over its power and glory into the reign of Edward, the drama of its rule and responsibility steadily heightened. Its rhetoric came to its finest flower in the inflated orations of Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), the most bombastic orator among "The New Imperialists" who became influential after 1870. Its literary manifestations are discussed by A. P. Thornton, the historian of British Imperialism, as "the books which embalm forever the atmosphere that so kindled the imaginations of the age that has gone."[2]

The Games of Empire are both implicit and explicit in the works of Henty, Kipling, Haggard and Buchan — in Kim's "Great Game," in the exciting but predictable, mannered and, ultimately, always successful adventures of Richard Hannay, Alan Quartermayne and ninety-odd Henty heroes. The society whose aims were imperial and whose

[1]Peter Green, "Enchanted Castles," *TLS* (April 4, 1975).

[2]In Robin Winks ed., *British Imperialism: Gold, God, Glory* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 56.

confidence seemed impregnable has been hilariously burlesqued again and again by P. G. Wodehouse and affectionately derided again and again by Noel Coward. Even today George Macdonald Fraser's *Flashman* nostalgically recalls and simultaneously burlesques the imperial mystique with huge success. And a good measure of the appeal of Donald Jack's Bartholomew Bandy derives from Bandy's predictable but entertaining and sometimes illuminating confrontations with a large gallery of the Imperial British.

Sara Jeannette Duncan was an astute observer of Edwardian society and of the manifestations of British Imperialism. She was well aware of its glamour and its power. Emotionally, however, she remained engaged with Canada and, as a writer, she was particularly aware of the irony inherent in the peculiarly Canadian Imperialist ideology, at its peak of power when she left Canada in 1889. Her *Cousin Cinderella,* also printed as *A Canadian Girl in London,* was published in London and New York in 1908. Like *The Imperialist* (1904), the novel's base is the theme of Canada and Empire played out in the lives of individuals. She deals with the everlastingly ambivalent attitudes of Canadians towards Britain and the British, and the thin, almost imaginary, line between colonialism and budding autonomy on which Canadians walked. Sara Duncan herself was an empire- careerist, a well-trained and extensively travelled journalist whose career as a fiction writer and playwright had begun after leaving Canada. She is a social novelist and her basic mode is the ironic, well-grounded on the trained reporter's powers of observation and recall. She matches Henry James in her preoccupation with the impact of one culture on a person or persons of another. Superficially and geographically she ranges even more widely than James, so that a great variety of international relationships — Canadian-American, Canadian-American-British, British-Oriental, British-Indian, American-French — all of these were examined in her novels. Like James, she is concerned with the moral core of her characters. However, to press further comparisons between Duncan's fiction and that of James arouses false expectations about the depth of her works, the keys in which they are written, the moods which they evoke, and the human dilemmas which they illuminate. In *Cousin Cinderella,* for instance, Sara Duncan is sharply and amusingly observant of confrontations between cultures and individuals within cultures. But she works largely with social types as characters; mostly with surfaces and very little in depth. This and her other novels are preeminently studies of society and social politics rather than studies of individual growth, or self-recognition, corruption or despair. Within her own boundary-limits Sara Duncan is an accomplished and a successful artist in fiction — *Cousin Cinderella* is a comedy of manners, given point and body by a social framework sharply observed and by social comment both covertly and overtly demonstrated through irony, sometimes through pure humour, and occasionally through broad farce.

All of her fiction is written from the peculiar inside-outside view of the colonial observer and participator in empire, one who is fully aware of the magnitude of the enterprise and yet, at the same time, colonially defensive and aloof from it. Her novels can be enjoyed and appreciated now more than at any time since their writing because of the literature of the last ten years which provides both commentary and afterlight to the phenomenon of empire and its disintegration — or evaporation. The work of the popular historians, Colin Cross' *The Fall of the British Empire* (1968), James Morris' *Pax Britannia* (1968) and *Heaven's Command* (1973), and George Woodcock's *Who Killed the British Empire?* (1975), provide an expansive backdrop against which to read both *The Imperialist* and *Cousin Cinderella.*

Of these works Morris' *Pax Britannia* and Woodcock's *Who Killed the British Empire?* are the best complements to Duncan's novels. Morris' work is a perfect historical source-book for them, and the one work to which *Cousin Cinderella* entire might be cited as a fictional footnote. Morris captures the high-spirited gamesmanship of empire superbly. His framework is the imperial idea in all its glamour. Like Duncan he deals with surfaces. He has synthesized the work of scores of biographers and historians and his overall tone is close to hers — he is fully aware of the glamour and even of the dignity of the achievement, but he is equally aware of the ironic failures, or lapses, or blind-spots of the British. In 1908, and previously, as she wrote *The Imperialist* and *Cousin Cinderella,* Sara Duncan had been keenly aware of them too. George Woodcock's *Who Killed the British Empire?* is a particularly apt source book and explanation for Duncan's *The Imperialist,* showing as it does the built-in, determined drive toward autonomy and self-expression of Canada, the first dominion.

Both of Duncan's novels have large elements of "Cautionary tales for Canadians" about them. In both the overall viewpoint is insistently Canadian. At one time Sara Duncan had been a journalist for Goldwin Smith's *The Week,* and though her works show no sympathy with his more extreme statements about Canada's continentalist destiny, they do show American ties as both strong and abrasive. Ideologically both novels are rooted in Canadian Imperialism — the attitudes of mind examined by Carl Berger in *Sense of Power* (1969) are Lorne Murchison's in *The Imperialist* and Graham Trent's in *Cousin Cinderella.* To these idealistic young men Canada is both focal point and coming leader of the empire. They feel a kind of mission to bring the morality of the "true north strong and free," which they feel is somehow superior, as well as its practical benefits, in terms of natural and financial resources, to the preservation of Britain. England itself is an historical shrine to which they bring a great emotional humility and allegiance, but they are always Canadians first. Other parts of the empire are not considered seriously at all in either book. In *Cousin Cinderella,* for instance, the Australians, Sir Thomas and Lady Tanner, look and sound like vulgarians beside the Canadians.

> You are going on somewhere, I suppose, said our hostess with the slightest perceptible glance at the tiara, as Lady Tanner said goodnight; and Lady Tanner, with just an instant's hesitation said; "Yes."
> "Where?" asked Sir Thomas; and the question did not seem impertinent, but his wife took no notice of it.
> "And you?" asked Lady Lippington. "Only to bed," I replied, at which dear Lord Lippington laughed so heartily that I felt I had made quite a consummate jest *(Cousin Cinderella,* 114-5).

Sara Duncan shows repeatedly that the viewpoint of the Canadian, while humble and loyal on the one hand is, on the other, unconsciously as egocentric and even arrogant as was the concept of Britain's "New Imperialists" — each sees the centre, the mission and the salvation of the empire reflected in itself. The root of ironic conflict on which *Cousin Cinderella* is built lies in the Canadians' rejection of the assumptions of the British, who have no way of sensing the rejection since they are blandly unconscious of any concerns or standards but their own.

> Lady Lippington received us with the grace and charm that had a curious general quality, suggesting being part of a large reserve which she kept to meet just such cases as ours. It was as impersonal as light or heat, and she poured it over us in smiles, though with a somewhat wandering eye, until Evelyn mentioned that we came from Canada. Then it was exactly as Evelyn said — she did show an interest. . . .
> "Canada," she said, "has the greatest fascination for me. Its history thrill-lls me; its loyalty touches me to the heart." It seemed a good deal to say, in public like that; still, I didn't see why it should have irritated Graham. But it did, always, any reference to Canadian loyalty upon the lips of the aristocratic classes. He got so, at last, that he preferred to hear them charge us with selfishness and sedition. "That would greatly gratify Canada," he replied, "if she knew." It sounded polite, though it was really temper; and I was thankful to see that Lady Lippington perceived only the sound. That was the worst of Graham in England; you never could depend upon his taking things as he was meant to take them. Luckily it was not often noticed that he didn't *(Cousin Cinderella,* 91-2).

When Sara Duncan wrote *The Imperialist* in early 1900's she was in Simla, India, looking back some twelve years after she had left Canada, with a combination of sharp wit and affectionate nostalgia, at the fabric of life in a small town in Ontario as she remembered it. The third person narrative technique which she used for that novel is a distancing technique in itself; both historically and novelistically *The Imperialist* reads as a tale

told from the past, though from a recent past. In contrast the voice of Mary Trent recording the events of *Cousin Cinderella* seems immediate to the time of the action she describes. *Cousin Cinderella* is like a Journal-novel, though without the conventional paraphernalia of dated entries, and one has the illusion of being an immediate spectator of the events. Mary Trent seems to be reporting both the action and her perceptions of the action immediately after its happening and not recalling it all after a long period of reflection. She uses the past tense, but it seems a very immediate past, recorded just after the events have happened. Particularly after the introductory chapter the book has a strong quality of dramatic immediacy. It could, in fact, be dramatized very readily — it is already strongly marked into diversified, sharply differentiated settings and scenes.

"I will first introduce our father, as seems suitable" — very economically Mary Trent's voice describes her father, The Honourable John Trent of Minnebiac, Ontario, emigrant to Canada from Yorkshire some forty years before, Canadian Senator and proprietor of the Minnebiac Planing Mills. He has been so successful in Canada, "that none of us liked, except quite privately, to mention money" *(Cousin Cinderella,* 7). Mary's mother is of Loyalist stock and is "delicate" — "none of us would think of asking her to undertake anything more than just to keep as well as she can" *(Cousin Cinderella,* 1). With that, Mary Trent gently but effectively places her mother within the story's frame of reference, but erases her from its effective force-field. Mary's brother, Graham, is the centre of dynamic action in her story and a paragon in her eyes. He is both clever and handsome, a Member of Parliament and a partner in her father's business; he had also earned a D.S.O. from the South African war.

As Sara Duncan draws him, in Mary's voice and through her eyes, Graham Trent is, in fact, yet another version of the Henty-Buchan-Haggard hero, but this time emphatically Canadian-style. Like the stereotypes Graham is all that is brave, honourable and dedicated to a mission; but his Canadianism means a stubborn pride in his own country first, and then towards Britain a mingled sense of loyalty and responsibility, and a protectiveness that borders on condescension. The peculiarly Canadian qualities that go to make up the character of Graham are like the qualities of a Ralph Connor hero, Ranald Macdonald in *The Man From Glengarry,* for instance, or even Charles Gordon (Ralph Connor) himself, as he portrays himself in *Postscript to Adventure.* Like Gordon and his heroes, Graham Trent's sense of himself is completely fused with his sense of Canada as a land of boundless resource, opportunity and high moral destiny. Again, like the Connor heroes, he combines lofty moral idealism with the moral innocence of Tennyson's Galahad or Queen Victoria's conception of her beloved Albert. His strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure — but, as Duncan shows, he is also very vulnerable among the machinations of a sophisticated society.

Their father, Senator Trent, cannot be tempted to go back to England himself, though he is alternately frustrated by England's misunderstanding, or ignoring, or underrating of Canada. He also is complacently confident about Canada's high destiny: "His idea being, I think, that Canada should simply roll on to greatness until she rolls into sight, without making any demand upon imagination, or any tax upon faith" *(Cousin Cinderella,* 10). Senator Trent is finally tantalized into sending Graham and Mary to England: "He wanted to send us as samples. He would remain in proud reserve in the Minnebiac woods; but his offspring should go and show forth his country for him." Graham and Mary were also given a more specific charge by their father.

> "If you come across anybody who seems curious," father said, "you can explain that this continent grows something besides Americans." That was as near as he got to definite instructions, but we felt as if he had handed us a banner, and I was glad that Graham, who would have to carry it most of the time, was better qualified than I *(Cousin Cinderella,* 11).

The introductory chapter establishes Mary Trent as a perceptive observer, and also as a quick and curious analyst of her father's and brother's meanings and motives. It also sets up the Canadian Imperialist attitudes which Mary Trent finds amusing and baffling in her father, but which develop with progressive strength in both her brother and herself. Repeatedly throughout the novel Sara Duncan's own ironic voice is indistinguishable from the voice of Mary Trent, and through Mary's voice she insistently suggests that Canadians would do well to mature in their attitudes towards, and understandings of, both Canada and Britain. She shows the Trents poised between strength and vulnerability. Because they are so emotionally tied to Britain, particularly to Britain's history, they are, at first, open to all the blandishments of its society; and, at the same time, they are so deeply rooted in Canada that they are innocently complacent about their Canadian identity and inadvertently careless as to its value.

> It is a shady road along the river between the town and our place; the afternoon woods were full of the sound of saws devouring the timber. It is a delicious sound; they sing their way through it with a kind of mounting cry, that wanes and waxes and wanes again with the perpetual call and a perpetual lullaby; I like it better than any other note that you hear out of doors, it is always there of course; but sometimes you listen to it. Graham listened for a minute then.
> "There is a lot of Canada in that," he said, "and Canada, sis, is a pretty good alternative" *(Cousin Cinderella,* 5).

It would seem likely that Sara Duncan is making ironic comment on the Trent's complete confidence that the resources of Canada will go on forever.

Once in London the Trents immediately decide to take a flat. Their interview with Miss Henrietta Game, who grudgingly agrees to let her flat to them, is indeed a game, an innocent, introductory cultural game of conversational advances and withdrawals, written in quick and funny dialogue. The Trents, of course, find in England what they come prepared to find and Miss Game is the first fulfillment of their expectations. She is an eccentric and her flat with its motley furnishings, including thirty odd china dogs and cats as mantle ornaments, is a curiosity. Towse, Miss Game's "daily" who comes with the flat is, in their eyes, the perfect British servant, combining efficiency with loyalty, independence, and her own brand of remarkable eccentricity.

> Above all things you had that feeling with Towse, that when she was in the kitchen you were perfectly safe. I would defy any undesirable person to get past her if she answered the door. She was a solid wall of defense, impregnable, immovable; the only chance would have been to blow her up. Errand boys she held in aversion, with stray cats and organ-grinders and other irregularities of life; she would be curtly just to them, but she looked at them with a suspicious eye, especially if they delivered newspapers, and always had some advice ready for them beginning with "Mind." Telegraph messengers, or anything in uniform, stood a better chance with her; but she was very brief with them all, and I was thankful sometimes that Graham was grown up *(Cousin Cinderella,* 42).

Sara Duncan is extremely good at communicating the thrill of discovery of London — the phenomenon of its being so like, and in a myriad of small ways beyond, one's expectations. The Trents' delighted exploration is still recoverable today.

> We went out into the general streets to take our share of the common supply of the wonderful city, to establish ourselves among the fundamentals of life in the very citadel of the imagination, to buy butter in Mecca. There is a housekeeping relish in life anywhere, but when you add to it the joys of the faithful who approach from Minnebiac — ! *(Cousin Cinderella,* 33).

In the first flush of the innocent game of setting up housekeeping and discovering London, the niggling of the young man about Miss Game's inventory and Towse's Sunday feeding of her husband at the Trents' expense, are put aside as simply laughable and to be overlooked — a part of the price of admission to a fabulous entertainment. But once the Trents are settled in their flat and, with their letters of introduction, move out into the world of London society, the game becomes more exciting, more

taxing, and infinitely more dangerous. Mary and Graham Trent are swiftly recognized by the English society women whom they meet as valuable properties, potential trump cards, in fact, to be played off in the interests of various social, political and economic exigencies. There is Margot, Lady Lippington, who is determined to "get" Canada, meaning the governor-Generalship, for her pleasant, innocuous and ineffectual husband; there is Mrs. Jerome Jarvis, who sets out to "get" Mary Trent for her foolish but likeable son, Billy Milliken; and highest and hardest of all the matrimonial game-players are the Duchess of Dulwich and Lady Doleford. The stakes of this last game are very high, for Pavis Court, the Tudor family seat of the Dolefords, is falling into ruin for want of money. There is also a ducal coronet in the offing, since Lord Peter Doleford is likely to be heir to the Dukedom of Dulwich.

Lady Doleford is playing the game for the salvation and restoration of Pavis Court — therefore she hopes to make a match between her daughter, Lady Barbara Pavisay, and Graham Trent. The Duchess of Dulwich has the succession of the title most clearly in her sights — she maneuvers towards Mary Trent as a wife for her nephew, Lord Peter.

> "And I think, candidly," said the Duchess, "he [Graham Trent] would be wiser to marry in his own part of the world. We are not intended to know everything, and for some inscrutable reason it does not seem desirable that the men of younger countries should look for wives to England. Providence does not appear to approve of such unions. Look at the Billingers — Lady Marjorie married Australian mutton. They have no family. Nature is against it," pronounced the Duchess.
> "Dear me!" I said.
> "It is different with women. I am no traitor to my own sex, but with women the case is different. It is my opinion now, as you know, that American marriages have been grossly overdone; but a certain number of the daughters of our own kith and kin beyond the seas" — the Duchess smiled at me benevolently — "might very well help to replen — might very well make good English wives. I should not object to be quoted as thinking so if it would do any good. And if such ideas seem in any way sordid or grasping, it should be remembered that the colonies pay nothing, or almost nothing, for the protection afforded them by the British navy" *(Cousin Cinderella,* 348).

There *is* a rich American girl, Evelyn Dicey, in this particular game. Unlike Mary and Graham, who begin as passive onlookers and then are drawn into the game, Evelyn is dynamically in its centre, playing ruthlessly and fearlessly for her own purposes. The Trents had known Evelyn at home; when they first meet her in London she is in the midst of eating a

lavish tea at Stewart's in Bond Street. The meeting is a clever visual symbol: Graham and Mary are cautiously skirmishing around the outskirts of society — Evelyn is "eating it up," just as she is first seen by the Trents' "adoring her tea . . . as her order, consisting mostly of coffee-icing, was placed before her."

Evelyn is far ahead of the Trents in her adventure of Britain and unlike them, she is neither affected nor inhibited by a special built-in reverence for the country and its history. What she likes she goes after. What she does not like, Wales for instance, she relinquishes without thought or regret. With the Trents she is half-teasing, half-serious. She names Mary, "Cousin Cinderella," and Graham, "The Maple Prince." Still the Trents are far from any resentment of Evelyn. They, particularly Graham, can be roused to quick indignation by British attitudes to Canada and Canadians, but for Evelyn they feel only a pleasantly shocked amusement. Mary is also both constantly informed and somewhat protected by her. With Evelyn always close at hand, dispensing information and both shocking and charming the Trents with her *lesé majesté,* they embark on a series of society occasions, moving up the scale from lunching with Mrs. Jerome Jarvis, to a dinner party at Lord and Lady Lippington's, then a country weekend with the Lippingtons, a hunt, and a visit to Pavis Court. In progress Graham becomes engaged to Lady Barbara, not because he has fallen in love with her, but because he has fallen in love with England, particularly the beauty of its historical monuments.

> Graham was so desperately serious about everything that I could not help thinking of his growing attachment to England with a little anxiety lest something should come of it. . . . There was a part of him that longed for dedication and a share in the common wealth of aesthetics that is so much richer and more rewarding where the empire began *(Cousin Cinderella,* 148).

Graham is saved, however, by the good heart of Barbara who breaks the engagement because she knows they do not really love each other. Thus the field is free for Mary Trent and Lord Peter, who have been attracted to each other from the start. The Duchess of Dulwich engineers their engagement on the very eve of Trents leaving for Canada — and of course, Mary as an heiress is a very good second-best to Graham in matters of future family finance and in the fate of Pavis Court.

Finally, however, Evelyn Dicey has the last laugh — and the Ducal Coronet. Just as the Trents and Lord Peter Doleford are saying a temporary goodbye at Liverpool, a telegram arrives announcing her engagement to Christopher Scansby, a fifty-three-year-old bachelor whose son, if he has one, will become Duke of Dulwich. By a combination of British goodheartedness and American determination, Graham Trent is

saved for Canada. The fate of Mary, as Lord Peter Doleford's wife is ambiguous: is she to fulfil the Duchess' formula and become a good — and a rich — English wife, or is Lord Peter to be Canada's gain? In either case, we have had the repeated assurance that Mary, unlike Graham, knows a great deal about the empire game, and that she also knows her own heart.

On the surface this is a lighthearted comedy, but is nevertheless, emphatically, a "Way of the World," and it has many telling moments as Mary comes more and more to realize that she and Graham are simply like natural resources to the nobility of England. They are certainly regarded as diamonds, rough diamonds, but they are just as certainly regarded for their market value first and then, if at all, for their individuality.

> It was himself, the actual self of him, that I couldn't bear to see left out of consideration the way, it seemed to me, that Barbara and Lady Doleford left it out. I need not try to put what they did seem to consider in its proper order of importance; but they clearly weighed his manners and his appearance, his education and his morals, his future and his fortune — everything that you put in a list and nothing that could not be catalogued *(Cousin Cinderella,* 176).

Evelyn Dicey in her usual role of information-dispenser and Mary Trent's confidante, explains the situation with brilliant and unblinking clarity.

> "When it comes to the gold attraction I am not taking any. . . . and this is the place," she went on with conviction, "to make you thankful to be able to say so. It's simply disgusting, the importance of money over here — just the dead importance of it. They don't like talking about it any more than we do — or have as much as we do — about the food they are digesting; but it's just as necessary to keep them morally healthy and socially alive. They've never had to earn it; it's always been there, like the air, to exist by, and they've got to have it — it's a matter of self-preservation. When they absolutely haven't got it and finally can't get it, there's no sort of way for them to live — they become extinguished *(Cousin Cinderella,* 182).

Sara Duncan's talent for pointed, ironic and witty observation of trans-Atlantic gamesmanship is well-documented in *Cousin Cinderella.* In the voice of Mary Trent, she has fashioned a very satisfactory correlation for her own ironic voice, and one that is apt to its speaker. Using the technique of the omniscient narrator in *The Imperialist,* Duncan's self-conscious irony of tone can, and often does, become "too clever by half." But in Mary Trent's voice we hear the words and the tone of a believable young woman of her time: what she actually knows, perceives

and apprehends folds constantly into what she is supposed, by the conventions of polite society, to know, perceive and apprehend. The impact of the two levels, constantly in collision, spins off an entirely charming and believable irony of observation and tone. It is easy to become Mary Trent's partisan and to be involved in a close, amused and admiring bond with her.[3]

The Gamesmanship of Empire, celebrated, parodied and perserved by a long line of writers and actors is just now having a new vogue as public entertainment. For this reason *Cousin Cinderella* is probably more readily enjoyable than at any time since its publication in 1908. Our views of Britain and the British have no longer to be dealt with seriously, either in resentment or defensive ambivalence. We can finally afford to accommodate them, in affectionate, nostalgic and ironic memories and observations.

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[3]See also Thomas Tausky's analysis of Mary Trent in 'The American Girls of William Dean Howells and Sara Jeanette Duncan," *Journal of Canadian Fiction,* 13 (1975), 146-158.