

Duncan's Folly

The Murchison House as Mock Ruin

As a novel that is, in Thomas Tausky's description, "fundamentally about the evolution of a national culture" (*Novelist* 75-76), Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904) is an important text for discussing Canada's cultural, colonial, and political history during a period of notable transition. Signs of this transition are exemplified by the Plummer Place (or Murchison house) as the novel's central dwelling space. Duncan's expansive descriptions of the house reveal it to be a place of some distinction, despite its dilapidation. As a site that embodies the "process of blending" that Duncan deems to be necessary for "the making of a nation," the house that shelters her protagonists stands as an allegorical representation of the "edifice" that is Canada itself (49). Although critics have long been interested in the role of the Plummer Place within the novel (see D.M.R. Bentley, Michael Peterman, Thomas Tausky, and Clara Thomas, among others), the status of the house as a ruin has yet to be explored, despite Duncan's careful attention to both its picturesque qualities and its evident state of disrepair.¹ Susan Glickman observes in *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (1998) that the picturesque ideals of the eighteenth century were grounded in "principles of variety and contrast," which meant that "ruins were favoured for their brokenness and irregularity" (11). Duncan herself employs the language of contrast and irregularity, or what William Gilpin famously identifies as "*roughness*" (*Essays* 6, italics in original),² at various points in the novel, particularly in relation to the Murchisons' home. That their house is modelled after Duncan's own childhood home in Brantford, Ontario lends it a degree of historical authenticity (Bentley, *Architexts* 103-04; Tausky, *Imperialist* 288), and yet, the author's decision to transform this space

into a site of architectural idiosyncrasy verging on ruination suggests that she may have envisioned it as a kind of folly—that is, as a purpose-built “mock” ruin of the sort that came to be a distinguishing feature of eighteenth-century landscape design.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *folly* as “[a] popular name for any costly structure considered to have shown folly in the builder,” making it an appropriate term for the Plummer Place and the failures of its original residents; however, the French root of the word—*folie*—denotes not only foolishness or madness but also a sense of “delight,” particularly in a “favourite abode,” which nicely applies to the Murchison children and their general affection for this eccentric family home.³ In his assessment of the Plummer Place, D.M.R. Bentley hints at its status as “folly” without exploring this line of inquiry in any detail (*Mnemographia* 361). Elsewhere in *Mnemographia Canadensis* (1999), he notes that “the aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque” were “standard components of the mental outfit that emigrants as well as tourists brought to Canada throughout the Colonial and Confederation periods” (78). By extending Bentley’s brief mention of the Plummer Place as folly, I propose that Duncan’s fictional depiction of the Murchison house as a new-world ruin can be read as a playful attempt to transplant the British tradition of picturesque aesthetics into a Canadian setting.⁴ Adapting this British cultural inheritance to the Canadian environment provides Duncan with yet another means of engaging with the imperial sentiment that her novel ultimately appears to endorse. For his part, Bentley argues that, as an “anomalous relic of an earlier and alien mentality, the Plummer Place evidently needs to be naturalized, adapted to its time and place in a manner that respects both its character and its surroundings” (360–61)—after all, “part of the charm of old houses resides in their naturalization” (360). Mock ruins likewise depend for their “charm” on having a naturalized appearance. In characterizing the folly as an object of picturesque beauty, Gilpin declares that a constructed ruin can be considered complete only once it is covered over by sufficient natural decoration, such as “mosses,” “ivy,” and “weather-stains”; without them, “[t]he characters of age” that are so important to a ruin’s veneer of authenticity are sorely “wanting” (*Observations* 74). Perhaps Duncan’s creation of the Murchison house as a Canadian version of the mock ruin, subtly adorned with all the requisite vegetation, was her way of “naturalizing” both the space itself and the imaginative potential of its inhabitants.

At the same time, Duncan’s inclusion of a ruin image in a post-Confederation novel about the future of the Canadian nation suggests a level of uncertainty

about the country's cultural identity and the nature of its changing relationship to Britain. As an aesthetic object, material artefact, or literary trope, the ruin carries with it a range of conflicting connotations: it can represent a picturesque balance between art and nature just as it can unsettle that balance by highlighting the vulnerability of human life and art at the hands of time. Ruins can be taken as signs of progress, where one mode of existence makes way for another in the name of advancement and innovation, but they can also serve as grave reminders of past failures and defeats.

The image and idea of the ruin has a long and complex history, not only within the larger tradition of English literature but also in relation to the nation and expressions of national sentiment. In *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (1990), Anne Janowitz explores the association between the ruin image and British nationalism as it existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by examining literary works in which "ruin sentiment conspir[es] with national aspiration" (5). She contends that, in this period, literary representations of architectural ruin served to establish the kind of "authority of antiquity" that nationalist discourse so often tends to espouse (3). This apparent association between the ruin image and British nationalism was particularly effective, says Janowitz, because it helped to secure Britain's developing cultural identity in terms of both time (history) and space (landscape). As she describes it: "[t]he ruin provides an historical provenance for the conception of the British nation as immemorially ancient, and through its naturalization subsumes cultural and class difference into a conflated representation of Britain as nature's inevitable product" (4). Ruins can thus lend credence to the romantic-nationalist view of nationhood as an organic development wherein the inevitable "violence of nation-making" to which ruined spaces implicitly attest is effectively effaced in favour of a broader nationalist vision that situates the ruin within a narrative of historical and cultural progress (4). Yet in presenting these claims, Janowitz readily acknowledges the ruin as a symbol of transience as well, making it as much an image of "historical and imperial impermanence" as it is a marker of authority or advancement (4). Read in these terms, the ruin image is an inherently paradoxical one: it provides evidence of a longstanding historical presence within a given environment while revealing the obvious fragility of that presence at the same time.

In *The Unfinished Matter: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (1994), Elizabeth Wanning Harries also investigates patterns of ruin imagery in eighteenth-century literature, noting that "[s]ome writers

consistently use metaphors of ruin to suggest their sense of civilization in decay, of the wreck of human hopes or the vanity of human wishes" (57). "But others," she continues, "use ruin metaphors to elicit a sense of continuing vitality, of energy in the midst of wreckage" (57). In this respect, Duncan's transplanted ruin image can be read as a positive sign, representing both a culturally viable tradition and a tangible sense of history, symbolically tied to Britain yet grounded in the new world; however, the presence of the Murchison house as a site of decay also seems to highlight the impossibility of establishing a new order in Canada without first attempting to understand this place as a unique entity, separate from, but related to, the historical, literary, and social traditions of the British empire. British inheritance, in its various cultural and political forms, had to be reconciled with post-Confederation Canada's rapidly changing national landscape, which often proved a difficult task for the country's cultural producers in their efforts to understand the Canadian environment and its inhabitants on their own terms.

As Canadian writers struggled to define themselves and their newly formed country in the first few decades after Confederation, the tension between looking forward to the future of an independent Canada while also acknowledging and, in many cases, celebrating the nation's ancestral ties to Britain became one of the foremost topics of discussion on the issue of cultural nationalism amongst politicians, writers, and critics alike. For Carl Berger in *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914* (1970), this attachment to Britain was a crucial component in the development of Canadian thought in a volatile post-Confederation environment. While imperialist and nationalist sentiments in Canada have often been regarded as opposing forces in the fight for the nation's future (with takeover by the United States as a third and generally undesirable possibility), Berger contends that, in fact, "Canadian imperialism was one variety of Canadian nationalism" (9). Ajay Heble reads *The Imperialist* as a fictional enactment of Duncan's own imperial commitments, noting that "[p]art of what imperialism meant" in post-Confederation Canada "was a deeply felt devotion to the British heritage" (220). Tausky, too, offers an analysis of *The Imperialist* as a political novel, arguing that the character of Lorne Murchison (as Duncan's idealistic imperial spokesperson) "puts forward imperialism as a means of preserving the British heritage, rejecting the United States and asserting Canada's future greatness" all in one fell swoop (155). Tausky goes on to observe that, within *The Imperialist*, "the line dividing the proponents from the opponents of imperialism also divides the

imaginative characters from the unimaginative" (*Novelist* 161-62), resulting in what Heble describes in positive terms as the novel's "explicit connection between the imagination and imperialism" (224). Duncan's most imaginative characters are able to see the value in retaining a sense of history whereas her less imaginative characters are content to discard the past altogether. In the world of the novel, history itself thus "depends on and is determined by the imagination" (224). Such comments reinforce the notion that Duncan's imperialism was as much a cultural pursuit as it was a political one (226).

Placing her writing in the "artistic and literary context" of the 1890s, Misao Dean highlights Duncan's interest in "the unique ways that British culture developed and changed in North America" (Introduction 12). This concern with cultural transplantation and adaptation in the new world is manifested not only in Duncan's fiction (to which I will turn momentarily) but in her journalism as well. Writing for the *Washington Post* in 1886, Duncan emphasizes the reality that national literary production cannot occur in isolation: even as she affirms the notion that "[a] literature should have its roots in the national character and within national limits," she knows that, "to give it growth, variety and comprehensive character, it has to be fed from without" (*Selected* 102).⁵ Although she was influenced by both American and British literature, Duncan's political views and expatriate life in England and India ultimately connected her more securely to Britain and British culture. Faye Hammill's examination of "English Canada's literary climate" (154) in the 1880s and 1890s makes clear that Duncan "placed a high value on British literature" and remained "committed to the need of maintaining close ties with Britain," despite her vocal rejection of "colonialist deference to foreign literary models" (155). Hammill further maintains that, while Duncan certainly believed in "the creative potential of her own country" (164), she nonetheless "valued the stimulus and support of British culture" (166). Negotiating the cultural and political implications of imperialism in relation to both British heritage and Canadian national expression would surely have been a formidable balancing act; yet, as the following discussion will show, Duncan seems to have found in the ruin image—and the picturesque tradition from which it springs—a creative means of successfully embedding her imperial theme within a decidedly Canadian setting.

The Imperialist helpfully engages with Canada's waning imperial sentiment during the first few pivotal years of the twentieth century as the country continued to search for a sense of national definition. Set in the fictional town of Elgin, Ontario, the novel presents a detailed portrait of small-town

Canada during a period of immense social and political change. Elgin is based on Duncan's hometown of Brantford, appropriately named in George Monro Grant's *Picturesque Canada: The Country as It Was and Is* (1882) as one of the "picturesque seats of industry" located along Ontario's Grand River Valley (461, emphasis added). As the characters of Dr. Drummond and John Murchison survey the streetscape that lies before them near the beginning of the text, they see less a picturesque seat of industry than a modest town that still bears the weight of its "thirty years of varying commercial fortune" (19). Both men are personally invested in Elgin's gradual march toward prosperity because both emigrated from Britain to "add their labour and their lives to the building of this little outpost of Empire" (20). When they first arrived in this foreign land, presumably just after Confederation, "[t]he new country filled their eyes; the new town was their opportunity, its destiny their fate" (20). "They were altogether occupied with its affairs, and the affairs of the growing Dominion," explains the narrator, "yet obscure in the heart of each of them ran the undercurrent of the old allegiance. They had gone the length of their tether, but the tether was always there" (20). Even though "their bones and their memories" will eventually "enter into the fabric" of their new home, these characters remain obscurely yoked to the past (20).

Duncan makes an admirable effort to articulate the nature of this ambivalent yet persistent connection to Britain. For Elgin's average citizen, "[p]olitics wore a complexion strictly local, provincial, or Dominion" (62), in part because England's affairs were perceived as being too far removed from daily life in small-town Canada to have any real impact. "A sentiment of affection for the reigning house certainly prevailed," writes Duncan, but "[i]t 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" (62). The Canadian landscape contains no "picturesque contacts" between "Royalty and the people" (62); instead, Elgin is a place where "the common love for the throne amounted to a half-ashamed enthusiasm," in part "because of the shyness that attaches to all feeling that cannot be justified in plain terms" (63). The people of Elgin are slightly embarrassed of their lingering attachment to a place that has little influence over the course of their everyday lives and that many of them know only in the vaguest of terms. Having built, with "their labour and their lives," communities of their own in Canada, the "reigning house" remains only as a dim presence for many of Duncan's characters, and has ceased to function, in Yi-Fu Tuan's terms, as a "repository of memories and dreams" (164).

Duncan includes small snapshots of Ontario's settlement history in order to demonstrate how things have changed since the early days of British emigration to Canada. With reference to the "shadowy Plummers,"⁶ the family who first built the Murchison home, Duncan traces the common stages of experience for settlers in the new world:

Such persons would bring their lines of demarcation with them, and in their new *milieu* of backwoods settlers and small traders would find no difficulty in drawing them again. But it was a very long time ago. The little knot of gentry-folk soon found the limitations of their new conditions; years went by in decades, aggrandizing none of them. They took, perforce, to the ways of the country. . . . Trade flourished, education improved, politics changed. (48, italics in original)

Expectation does not match the reality of creating a new life in the wilds of Upper Canada, and this initial group of emigrants had to adapt to their environment out of simple necessity, with neither accolades nor a dramatic increase in material wealth to encourage them along the way. The hope instead seems to lie with their children and grandchildren—the future generations of what would become, in due course, the Dominion of Canada. For the most part, *The Imperialist* focuses on the lives of Elgin's younger residents, who can now benefit from the forward strides of their predecessors; however, Duncan also acknowledges the generational tension that continues to inform the town's social makeup. She points to the "great gulf" that exists "between the older and the younger generation" wherein "[t]he sons and daughters, born to different circumstances, evolved their own conventions, [and] the old people used the ways and manners of narrower days" to the extent that the two groups end up "paralys[ing]" one another (54-55). Although Duncan is here delineating the social character of Elgin rather than the national character of Canada itself, this reference to a state of paralysis suggests a deeper level of anxiety over the potential for social, political, and cultural stagnation if the old-world traditions of the past and the changing needs of the present cannot be successfully unified.

Duncan configures these tensions between age and youth, the old world and the new, Britain and Canada, as a confrontation between the real and the ideal. Several critics have commented on the pairing of idealism and pragmatism as the novel's opposing forces, or what Peter Allen describes as a "perpetual conflict between a romantic world of imagination and controlling world of hard fact" (48).⁷ Dean understands this conflict as an uneven ideological struggle in which idealism (art, culture, imagination) is constantly under threat of extinction at the hands of the real (economics,

politics, materialism). In outlining Duncan's championing of the ideal, she argues that "preserving the ideal against the incursions of the real . . . is a prominent theme in all of Duncan's work" (*Different* 53). Like Tausky and Heble, Dean aligns imperialism with the imagination as idealism's primary agents, noting that, in much of Duncan's writing, "[t]he Empire is a repository of ideal values that must be preserved against the materialist self-interest of individuals and nations" (53) just as "imagination is the ability to see beyond the material surface, to find a way to preserve important ideals and to apply them in the modern context" (84). Taken together, the critical commentary surrounding Duncan's attention to the old and the new, the past and the present, the real and the ideal, creates a picture of *The Imperialist* as a novel that pits local interests, material realities, and practical concerns against imperial loyalty, national ambition, and imaginative potential; missing from this commentary is an extended discussion of the pivotal role that the Murchison house plays in conveying these dualities through its position as an invented ruin.

Jon Kertzer envisions the novel's thematic split as a contest between nature and destiny, both of which are often invoked in discussions of nation building. Nature, in this context, supposedly "assur[es] a stable identity" for the nation, whereas fostering a sense of destiny "motiv[at]es its development" (1). While stability and achievement are by no means absent from Duncan's novel, she does expend a good deal of narrative energy on the instabilities and limited prospects of both people and place. According to Kertzer's analysis, *The Imperialist* presents nation building as a "perilous" activity, "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" (1). As Allen describes it, Duncan's Canada is paradoxically "new but old, crippled but flourishing, dominated by the past but the country of the future" (59). Duncan herself employs the rhetoric of nation building in what is arguably the novel's best-known passage, where she summarizes the struggles of settling in Canada as a colony-*cum*-nation in the decades leading up to and following Confederation. She writes: "[i]t 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 blending implies confusion to begin with; we are here at the making of a nation" (49). This tale is one of both collapse and reconstruction, indicating that perhaps both elements are required in the "making of a nation." At first glance, *The Imperialist*

appears to be a text that is as much concerned with the “cheerful sequel of rebuilding” as it is cognizant of the failures that have come before, but its author also implicitly questions the path that Canada seems to have chosen.

In his reading of Duncan’s novel, Kertzer maintains that, “[i]f 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” (13). At the same time, he concludes that, within the social imaginary of *The Imperialist*, “the ‘blending’ of cultural forces required to build the new country does not raise a sturdy Canadian house” (3). The apparent fragility of Canada as house comes through in two of the novel’s central settings: Elgin’s town centre and, more importantly for my purposes, the Murchison family home. Despite the obvious markers of success along Main Street and the ongoing economic activity of the market square, for instance, these sites also seem to incorporate the possibility of stasis or decline in the years to come. Additionally, Duncan’s careful depiction of the Murchison home (better known as the Plummer Place, in deference to its former owner) overtly situates it as a kind of ruin, albeit an inhabited one.⁸ Both the town and the house thus speak to the larger issue of what Kertzer refers to as “the perils of nation building”—those seemingly irreconcilable tensions between nature and destiny (1)—or what other critics view in general terms as an overarching tension between the real and the ideal. Such perils, as Duncan portrays them, are both subtle and complex. Yet while each of these two spaces is implicated in the risky project of nation building, they seem to predict markedly different outcomes for the nation’s future; indeed, the town and the Murchison house are often at odds with one another in terms of the values they represent. Before examining the Murchison house as ruin in further detail, it is useful to first take a closer look at Duncan’s construction of Elgin as a whole.

Duncan’s often ironic narrative stance makes it difficult to discern her feelings about Elgin with absolute certainty. She has a way of viewing the town through the eyes of her various characters to the point where it becomes tricky to gauge the narrator’s own perspective. Janice Fiamengo aptly remarks that “Duncan’s irony both acknowledges, and protects against, the inevitability of failure” (122). This cryptic narrative lens (or free indirect style) notwithstanding, there are a number of clues throughout the text indicating that things on the streets of Elgin are not always as they appear. The town’s Main Street, for example, is “a prospect of moderate commercial activity,” with its “mellow shop-fronts, on both sides, of varying height

and importance, wearing that air of marking a period, a definite stop in growth, that so often co-exists with quite a reasonable degree of activity and independence in colonial towns” (23-24). So, although this thoroughfare is characterized as an active place of business, its economic vision remains “moderate” because it has reached the climax of its own capabilities. Unlike Canada’s rapidly expanding urban centres, Elgin is a town where “a certain number of people went up and down about their affairs, but they were never in a hurry” and where “a street car jogged by every ten minutes or so, but nobody ran after it” (24). Still, the narrator is disinclined to let the reader be deceived by these first rather staid impressions, quickly adding that the “appearance and demeanour” of Elgin’s Main Street “would never have suggested that it was now the chief artery of a thriving manufacturing town” (24). Main Street, it seems, is “not a fair index” of Elgin’s success (24), but while the town might very well be “thriving” in some respects, it also contains remnants of its past sacrifices along with an undercurrent of impending change. In Tausky’s description, “Elgin is a community whose present life is energetic but not always wisely directed, and whose future development is uncertain” (*Novelist* 166). For Fiamengo, the town’s uncertain status serves to demonstrate that “prosperity, though important, is not everything” because “it alone does not make a country great” (125).

Even in its present state of indeterminacy, however, Elgin remains a place with a past. Clara Thomas rightly points out that “Elgin is no frontier town perched in a new continent at the beginning of its history” (39). In the eyes of Lorne Murchison, the town has a meaningful story to tell—one that signifies “the enduring heart of the new country already old in acquiescence” (81). That there are “bones in the village graveyards” testifies to “a narrow inheritance of the opportunity to live which generations had grasped before” (81). The challenge for Duncan’s characters (and ultimately, her readers) is to make use of the town’s historical narrative in productive and imaginative ways as they face whatever the future might have in store. But finding the right path for Elgin—and for Canada—in the twentieth century proves to be easier said than done. The intricacies of this search are embodied, in part, by Duncan’s construction of the Murchisons’ house as a rare example of the “picturesque contacts” that link Canada to the “reigning house” of Mother England (62). In his evaluation of the novel’s historical setting, Alfred Bailey asserts that *The Imperialist* appeared at a time when Duncan’s hometown of Brantford (as the inspiration for Elgin) was a place that had “few historic associations” (205). Coupled with the fact that Duncan composed the novel

from her adopted home in India where, according to Thomas, “the sense of layer upon layer of history could hardly have failed to touch and modify her imagination” (39), Canada’s relative lack of historical resonances must have seemed especially glaring. As Thomas remarks in her analysis of the novel’s social mythologies, *The Imperialist* generates an impression of its author as someone who was aware of the “difficulties in writing the romance of a new land where the monuments of the past, its glamorous ruins, were not readily visible and available to the writer” (39).

Thomas goes on to suggest that, in her attention to Canada’s dearth of historical monuments and ruins (as expressed on the opening pages of chapter 7), Duncan may have been influenced by Henry James’ well-known comments on the state of early American writing in which he catalogues the country’s numerous absences (39; see also Tausky, *Imperialist* 290).⁹ Yet Thomas stops short of unpacking the rich interpretive potential of this allusion by mentioning it only in passing and without explicit reference to the Plummer Place. According to James, American civilization lacks everything from “palaces” and “country gentleman” to “thatched cottages” and “ivied ruins” (43).¹⁰ Although James is discussing the cultural and aesthetic makeup of life in nineteenth-century America, his observations might be fruitfully applied to Canada as well. He writes: “Americans have as a general thing a hungry passion for the picturesque, and they are so fond of local colour that they contrive to perceive it in localities in which the amateurs of other countries would detect only the most neutral tints. History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature” (12). Faced with little more than the “crude and immature” elements of the natural world (12), it is no wonder that early American (and Canadian) writers sometimes turned to European models in order to establish a semblance of cultural and historical legitimacy in their works.¹¹ Duncan’s creation of the Murchison house as a storied space and her shaping of Elgin as a town with a store of colourful local history can thus be read as a deliberate attempt to produce a work of Canadian literature that is anything but lacking in historical interest. Given her awareness of Canada’s need for the kind of historical overtones evoked by old-world monuments and ruins (such as those that abound in Britain), I argue that Duncan invented a ruin of her own in the form of the Plummer Place.

The possibility of the Plummer Place as an artificial ruin or folly is an intriguing one, especially in light of the novel’s focus on the status of Canada’s relationship to Britain and British heritage. In *Romanticism and*

Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle (2008), Sophie Thomas traces the eighteenth-century connection between ruins and the picturesque tradition that initiated a practice of erecting “artificial or sham ruins,” otherwise known as “follies” (50). The inclusion of these artificial ruins in gardens and parks provided a means of enhancing the natural landscape with a pleasing visual contrast from the surrounding topography. Yet, as Thomas makes clear, “[t]he very idea of building a ruin is, of course, contradictory. Normally, buildings are designed with permanence in mind, and to resist the forces of nature, whereas a successful built ruin does its best to render artifice natural, indeed to efface the line between artifice and nature” (51-52). Harries points to a related contradiction by highlighting the way in which artificial ruins “deliberately blur the distinction between the man-made and the natural” to the point where they “both imitate and reflect on the way buildings can be transformed over time by natural processes” (62). In his wide-ranging discussion of antiquity and decay that sits at the heart of *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), David Lowenthal wisely remarks that, “[w]hatever their historical connections, objects that are weathered, decayed, or bear the marks of long-continued use *look* aged and thus seem to stem from the past” (125, italics in original). In this way, mock ruins perform the kind of historicization via naturalization that so many writers in post-Confederation Canada earnestly sought to portray in their works.¹²

Because mock ruins are designed to enact a pleasing balance of nature and art, they function as a useful means of bringing together the actual and the imagined, the real and the ideal. As a rendition of the ruin as relic, the folly is, by its very definition, a kind of fiction. Yet in its capacity as a fictional construct, the folly is also supposed to mimic—as accurately as possible—the weathering of architectural space that typically occurs over extended periods (as demonstrated by Harries and Sophie Thomas above). Duncan’s creation of the Plummer Place as a *fictional* space that exhibits signs of age and architectural decay is thus akin to the practice of erecting follies as sites of simulated ruination.¹³ Despite the folly’s inherently contradictory nature, Thomas goes on to explain that “[t]he paradoxical idea of building a ruin was taken seriously” in the eighteenth century “and fooling the viewer was an important measure of success” (23).¹⁴ While she concedes that “sham ruins can be the product of idleness, decadence, and frivolity” given their decorative appeal to primarily wealthy patrons, Thomas also maintains that “they can nevertheless make powerful symbolic statements,” in part because “they reveal aspects of the ruin’s necessarily *constructed* relationship to

questions of history, and its importance in the creation of the present” (51, italics in original). She argues that “[m]ock and reconstructed ruins suggest a playful attitude to the materials of history, and to the irretrievability of its past forms, while making a visible statement about their impact on the cultural forms of the present” (39). Although Duncan understands the impossibility of seamlessly replicating European traditions and historical legacies in a Canadian context, she also recognizes that these imported traditions and histories continue to inform the development of Canadian cultural practices and modes of creative expression. As a literary iteration of the kind of “mock ruin” that Thomas describes, the Plummer Place not only provides a pleasing visual *contrast* to the town of Elgin and its surrounding environment (in line with the picturesque ideals of eighteenth-century landscape design), but it also demonstrates Duncan’s sophisticated approach to the complexities of maintaining (or rejecting) a sense of cultural, historical, and/or political continuity between the old world and the new.¹⁵

As the inspiration for the Plummer Place, Duncan’s family home in Brantford (which still stands today at 96 West Street) provides a useful point of contrast for her fictional creation. Bentley observes that the architectural features of the Duncan house, from its “Italianate form” to its “substantial dimensions,” mark it as a site of “Old World tradition, solidity, formality, and elegance” (*Architexts* 104). The Plummer Place certainly echoes some of the architectural elements of its real-life counterpart, but where the latter is made of brick, the former is “built of wood” (Duncan, *Imperialist* 27), making it more susceptible to decay and accelerated ruination. By merging old-world style with new-world construction materials in her rendering of the Plummer Place, Duncan fabricates a convincing ruin that acts as a meaningful illustration of her sustained efforts throughout the novel to strategically combine the real and the imagined. She reproduces a measure of the old-world “elegance” that Bentley attributes to the original Duncan property by supplying the Murchison residence with a variety of domestic furnishings imported from Europe, including “French windows,” “an Italian marble mantelpiece,” and a library “filled with English classics” (28, 30), and yet the house as a whole has clearly seen better days.

A strange blend of ostentation and deterioration, the Plummer Place is full of contradictions; it stands “in an unfashionable outskirts” of Elgin proper but is a “respectable place to settle in” all the same (19). Yet Duncan makes it clear that the Murchisons “could never have afforded, in the beginning, to possess it, had it not been sold, under mortgage, at a dramatic sacrifice” (27).

Not only are they potentially living beyond their means, but the Murchisons have also chosen to inhabit an anachronistic space that carries the suggestion of a previous failure, given that the Plummers let go of the property at such a “dramatic sacrifice.” The presumed inability on the part of the Plummers to integrate themselves into the Canadian landscape invests the house with a propensity for ruination. Indeed, it is still a place that requires a “tremendous amount of ‘looking after’” (27). In its role as representative of a “different tradition,” the Plummer Place is judged by the townspeople of Elgin (excluding the Murchisons and, arguably, Duncan’s narrator as well) “to be outside the general need, misjudged, adventitious” (29). In this respect, the house becomes a kind of burdensome inheritance, rather than a nostalgic gesture to the past. Although the house is a “dignified old affair” (27) with a variety of lavish features, readers soon learn of the “negligible misfortune” that things are rarely in working order (28). The house is, quite literally, falling apart: “if the ceiling was not dropping in the drawing-room, the cornice was cracked in the library, or the gas was leaking in the dining-room, or the verandah wanted re-flooring if any one [sic] coming to the house was not to put his foot through it” (28). The barn is in even worse shape than the house, and is in fact “outside the radius of possible amelioration—it passed gradually, visibly, into decrepitude, and Mrs. Murchison often wished she could afford to pull it down” (28). This description of the barn as ruin is particularly interesting in light of Elgin’s shifting economic base and the house’s position on the borderlands between town and country. While the Plummer Place stands on “the very edge of the town” surrounded by “wheatfields” and “cornstacks” (27), the barn has become a relic of bygone days because John Murchison is a retailer, not a farmer. Elgin still relies on agricultural production to a certain extent, as indicated by the weekly farmers’ market in the town square, but its future lies instead with the manufacturing sector, making the need for barns increasingly redundant.

In addition to its signs of physical decay, the Plummer Place exhibits characteristics that align it with conceptions of the picturesque ruin as an aesthetic object. The narrator explains that the house is situated in “ornamental grounds” filled with “winding gravel walks” that have become a prime habitat for weeds (27), and the lawn in front of the house is home to a defunct fountain with a “frayed air of exile” that looks as though it would be much more comfortable in “some garden of Italy sloping to the sea” (28). This overgrown yard is especially tiresome for Mrs. Murchison, who is exasperated by these “out-of-door circumstances which she simply could not

control” (28). Much to her chagrin, the property has succumbed to a mass of “untidy shrubberies” and flowering “horse-chestnuts,” and yet the house remains an attractive place of residence, in spite of its obvious idiosyncrasies (30). For most members of the Murchison family, the Plummer Place is actually more appealing because of its unconventional status. Duncan’s narrator admits that the house “wore its superiority in the popular view like a folly,” yet she simultaneously implies that its folly is also its grace (29). The “architectural expression of the town” is clearly “on a different scale” from the Murchison house, and yet the reader soon recognizes that the latter “gained by force of *contrast*” (29, emphasis added). As Duncan’s central example of the picturesque tradition at work in a Canadian context, the “shabby spaces” of the house and its unruly natural surroundings make it far more interesting than the “numerous close-set examples of contemporary taste” within the ordered confines of the town itself (29). With Duncan as its architect, the Plummer Place can be read as a deliberately incongruous structure. By virtue of its position as a fictional space that (at least partially) resembles the traditional picturesque ruin, the Murchison house acts as a literary incarnation of the ruin-folly.

There is “an attractiveness about the dwelling of the Murchisons” that stems from “the large ideas upon which it had been built and designed” (28-29). John Murchison “had felt in it these satisfactions, [and] had been definitely penetrated and soothed by them,” unlike the original owner of the property, who was most likely “one of those gentlefolk of reduced income who wander out to the colonies with a nebulous view to economy and occupation” only to “perish of the readjustment” (29). Just as this imagined settler might have built the house on a foundation of “large ideas,” John Murchison initially “seized the place with a sense of opportunity,” but in his case, “its personality sustained him . . . through the worry and expense of it for years” (29). As noted by John Dixon Hunt, one of the foremost modern thinkers on garden history and landscape architecture, “what attracts one to ruins is their incompleteness, their instant declaration of a loss which we can complete in our imaginations” (179). Inger Sigrun Brodey offers a similar perspective in *Ruined by Design: Shaping Novels and Gardens in the Culture of Sensibility* (2008): “[i]n avoiding the appearance of order, completion, or authority,” writes Brodey, “ruins give the imagination more room to play” (68-69). Despite the town’s smug reception of the house, and his wife’s frustration with it, John Murchison’s imaginative “capacity for feeling the worthier things of life” is fuelled and rewarded by his curious choice of residence (29).

Duncan's insistence that the house is "in Elgin, but not of it" (29) highlights the problem of cultural transplantation from one side of the Atlantic to the other. She explains that, when families like the Plummers first arrived in Canada as "gentlefolk of reduced income," they were met with "a tacit local understanding that they have made a mistake," leaving them to contend in "isolation" with their own grave "misapprehension" (29). The Plummers dealt with this uncomfortable situation by selling their property to the Murchisons, who are willing to inhabit the house despite its misfit status. The Murchisons thus occupy a ruin-like space where things seem to fall into disrepair precisely because of a disjunction with the local landscape, and yet, this space does not end up defeating them in the same way it did the previous occupants. On the contrary, the house "was pure joy to the young Murchisons" in particular, because to them "[i]t offered a margin and a mystery to life" (31). While their home is no ruined abbey or haunted castle, "[t]hey saw it far larger than it was; they invested it, arguing purely by its difference from other habitations, with a romantic past" (31). Whatever the house's failings might have meant for people of the Plummers' generation, the Murchison children are far enough removed from the source of these failings that they simply become part of a larger historical narrative rather than a cause for personal distress. That they are clearly of a different socio-economic background than the upper-class Plummers further helps to explain why the Murchisons have prevailed where the Plummers foundered. In Lowenthal's view, "once-sumptuous mansions decaying into humble abodes" often signal the welcome dissolution of outdated social or political hierarchies (175), which means that the ruination of the Plummer Place can, to some extent, be construed as an indicator of positive change. The Murchison children (especially Lorne and Advena) are also prone to indulging in imaginative pursuits—a fact that makes it possible for them to embrace their house as a site of picturesque beauty and intrigue rather than reject it as an unwanted marker of otherness.

The house may very well be a ruin of sorts, but in its role as an imaginative centre for Duncan's main characters, it is less a sign of previous failure than a vehicle for the lingering sense of idealism that Fiamengo profiles in her discussion of the novel's "elegiac tone" (132). The ruin image provides Duncan with an alternative means of articulating the real-ideal divide that so many critics identify as the novel's central quandary. Recall the dual meaning of the term *folly* as a site of both foolish impracticality and self-indulgent delight. The Murchison house clearly embodies both sides of this definition: it is a material

space, but not a very practical one; the “large ideas” (28) that occasioned its design alienate the house and its occupants from the rest of the community and yet the Murchison children owe much of their cultural and intellectual development to the imaginative freedom supplied by the house and its echoes of a “romantic past” (31). For Bentley, the Murchison house stands as “Duncan’s architectural microcosm of the edifice of British North America/Canada” during a time of profound transition (*Architexts* 106), making it a vexed site of heightened nationalist expression as per Janowitz’s definition of the ruin image. Clara Thomas makes a similar claim by arguing that the house is “a very real symbol of John Murchison’s place in his own concept of Canada, and even more so, of his idea of the future progress of his family in Canada. The house is a fitting shelter for his family, a setting for their growth and a launching-point for their future” (41-42). Although both Lorne and Advena Murchison are rather too imaginative for their own good, they, along with the rest of the Murchison children, have “grown up sturdily, emerging into sobriety and decorum by much the same degrees as the old house” (31). The house has in fact enabled them “to push ideas and envisage life with an attraction that made it worthwhile to grow up” (31).

It is no coincidence that Canada, too, is coming of age alongside the Murchison children and their unusual house; Duncan encourages her readers to consider just what might be at stake if the country should reject Lorne’s idealism altogether, for instance, or ignore the historical and cultural resonances contained within the Plummer Place as a symbolic ruin. In the same way that the young Murchisons have tried to adapt their extraordinary “spiritual and mental fabric” (45) to the larger community of Elgin without entirely relinquishing their imaginative tendencies, the nation had also begun to achieve a new level of political independence and cultural definition by the time *The Imperialist* was published in the early years of the twentieth century. But Duncan does not conclude her novel with a wholly positive vision for Canada, as evidenced by her attribution of misjudgment and failure to the characters she seems to admire the most. By the time Lorne delivers his impassioned speech at the end of the novel on the necessity of forming an Imperial Federation with Britain, his listeners have already strayed well beyond convincing—a sign of change that both secures and troubles Canada’s developing cultural and political identity.

Sara Jeannette Duncan’s depiction of the Murchison house as an artificial ruin nicely captures what Janice Fiamengo labels as the “multiple ironies” of a novel that is at once “a defence of idealism” and an “elegiac admission

of its vulnerability” (138). The ruin is an optimal image for Canada as an up-and-coming nation whose foundational narrative includes, in the words of Duncan’s narrator, both a “sorry tale of disintegration” and a “cheerful sequel of rebuilding” (49). As Sophie Thomas maintains, ruins form “an obvious site for mourning lost cultures” while also allowing for “a certain reflective distance from the past that can inform the construction of new ones—that speak for a certain freedom from the past and the constraints that its traditions impose on the present” (52-53). “In their present state of decay,” writes Thomas,

ruins signify loss and absence; they are, moreover, a visible evocation of the invisible, the appearance of disappearance. And yet, to the extent that they are themselves preserved, they suggest perseverance: the possibility, at least, of endurance against the odds of time and history. Notions of hope, memorialization, and restoration all thus adhere to the ruin as an object of contemplation, however framed or constructed that object might be. (42)

The Murchison house as a ruin—folly clearly represents this duality: on the one hand, it signals Canada’s tenuous attachment to Britain in the form of an imported aesthetic lens that is decidedly incongruous in the eyes of Elgin’s townspeople; on the other hand, it provides the Murchison family—namely Lorne and Advena—with an imaginative setting conducive to their idealistic dreams in a place where “[n]o one could dream with impunity . . . except in bed” (46). For Elizabeth Wanning Harries, “[t]o confront a ruin is to confront the inevitability of dissolution, personal and cultural, but it is also to see oneself as the inheritor of a long and enduring tradition” (56). To create a ruin image in fiction is to infuse this complex blend of discontinuity and historical connection with symbolic import. While ruins often invoke feelings of “conservative nostalgia,” Harries suggests that they can also act as an important “quarry” or “resource” for the future (57). As a purposefully built ruin of Duncan’s own design, the Murchison house not only highlights her clever integration of British cultural tradition into her only novel actually set in Canada but also speaks to her hope that the nation will not entirely forget its past in its haste to find progress and prosperity in the years ahead.

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- 1 Duncan's interest in and (sometimes ironic or satiric) attention to the picturesque tradition materializes in several of her other works as well. In *A Social Departure* (1890), for instance, she records her surprise at encountering a renovated pioneer dwelling on the Canadian prairies whose "rustic fence" and array of English garden flowers strike her as being positively "picturesque" (22). Picturesque images also appear in *A Voyage of Consolation* (1898) in the form of ruins that dot the Tuscan countryside. While Senator Wick loudly dismisses Italy's abundant ruins in favour of buildings that show evidence of "progress," Duncan makes it clear that an appreciation for the ruin as a picturesque artefact is only ever accorded to those with an "artistic temperament" (130). For a slightly different version of the ruin image in Duncan's fiction, see her portrayal of Pavis Court in *Cousin Cinderella* (1908), the rundown ancestral home of the Doleford family that Anna Snaith convincingly reads as a symbolic site of England's decay—a space, in her words, that bears "the weight of tradition neglected" (71).
- 2 In one of his seminal essays on the defining characteristics of picturesque beauty, Gilpin claims that a "smooth building" must be converted into a "rough ruin" if it is to become a suitable subject for art (*Essays* 7, italics in original). In order to provide a work of "Palladian architecture" with "picturesque beauty," its symmetry must be partially destroyed, even if only in the mind's eye: "we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel," writes Gilpin, "we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps" (7). That such destruction is a central part of what Gilpin classifies as picturesque beauty lends credence to my reading of the Murchison house and its various failings in positive terms. See also Bentley's comments on the Plummer Place as a site of "creative destruction" (*Architexts* 106).
- 3 The *OED* entry on the term *folly* further explains that "[m]any houses in France still bear the name *La Folie*," indicating a kind of self-aware extravagance on behalf of the original builder or owner with respect to the house as a source of personal contentment. The title of the present article, "Duncan's Folly," should be read in this context—that is, as a place name in line with the practice of designating ownership of (and affection for) a house or country estate by assigning it a formal title—and not as a suggestion of foolishness or error on Duncan's part.
- 4 Duncan's efforts to rework the picturesque tradition in a Canadian context provide an example of the "importation and adaptation" model that Bentley applies to Archibald Lampman in *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry, 1690-1900* (1992). See Section VIII: "The Poem in its Niche: Lampman's 'The City of the End of Things' and its Origins" 187-200.
- 5 Of course, Duncan was not alone in voicing her concerns as a writer over the fate of Canadian literature in the post-Confederation period. See, for example, Archibald Lampman's "Two Canadian Poets" (1891) or Charles G.D. Roberts' "The Beginnings of a Canadian Literature" (1883) and "Literature and Politics" (1891) for contemporary perspectives on the direction of Canada's cultural development in the late nineteenth century.
- 6 As one of the founding families of Fox County, the "shadowy Plummers" (48) are about as relevant to the daily lives of Elgin's townspeople as the far-flung "affairs of Great Britain" (62): for the residents of Elgin, the details of both local history and contemporary British politics "lay outside the facts of life, far beyond the actual horizon, like the affairs of a distant relation from whom one has nothing to hope, not even personal contact" (63).
- 7 Joseph M. Zezulka, for instance, discusses the novel's dualities as a clash of "old and

new world values, of idealism versus political expedience, of imaginative vision versus pragmatism" (148). W.J. Keith similarly conceives of the issue as a choice between "traditional sentiment and contemporary practicality" (153), as does Faye Hammill, who laments that Elgin's "basic attitude of dogged practicality" allows little room for "realms of the spiritual and artistic" (157). Janice Fiamengo presents this tension in related terms as a lack of harmony between "spirit," the "ineffable," and the "ideal" on the one hand and "matter," the "tangible," and the "material" on the other (122).

- 8 Although the folly is traditionally an ornamental structure of little practical use, not all artificial ruins are necessarily uninhabitable. The Column House at the Désert de Retz in Paris stands as a case in point. Built by the French aristocrat François Nicolas Henri Racine de Monville in 1781 as the "centerpiece of his picturesque garden" (Brodey 123), this mock ruin soon became his "principal residence" (125). As Inger Sigrun Brodey explains, Monville "carefully disguised its artificial origin, its utility, and its internal luxury" to create a remarkable structure that was visibly "ruined on the outside" but "entirely orderly and inhabitable on the inside" (125).
- 9 Duncan's admiration for American writers such as Henry James and W.D. Howells is well documented (see Bailey 206; Dean, *Different* 10-11; Carole Gerson 322; and Hammill 156).
- 10 See also Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860)—the probable source for James' comments—in which he professes that "[n]o author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong. . . . Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow" (4).
- 11 Canada's enduring relationship to Britain arguably made this kind of borrowing more acceptable than it was in the United States; indeed, the American Studies scholar Nick Yablun contends that, in the nineteenth century, "American appropriations of the ruin-fully remained rare, its foreign and aristocratic associations at odds with the patriotic and democratic fervor of the Jacksonian period" (45).
- 12 Charles G.D. Roberts stands as a ready example of this search for naturalization among Canadian writers of the post-Confederation period. Bentley identifies Roberts' "The Tantramar Revisited" as the text that ushered in what he deems to be a "*topos* of cultural agedness" in Canadian literature through its "combination of built and planted elements that signify the picturesque and vital presence of a past in which the human and the natural seem to have existed in a state of balance and harmony" (*Mnemographia* 359, italics in original). This "vital presence of a past" was an important step for Canada as a relatively young nation, and its inclusion in a work of literature suggests a new level of security or comfort on the part of the country's writers as cultural nation builders. Other early Canadian writers with an interest in "cultural agedness" include Archibald Lampman, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Stephen Leacock. It is worth adding that, when read in terms of "cultural agedness," even architectural decay takes on an expressly positive connotation. Lowenthal demonstrates that, under optimal circumstances, decay "signifies companionability with our surroundings" (181), thereby suggesting, on some level, "the accretion of experience" (179).
- 13 Brodey explicitly likens the ruin-builder to the writer, arguing that, in order to master the delicate "art of dissembling and disassembling the past" (76), "[t]he best architects of follies" must also be "storytellers or authors of evocative fiction" (110).
- 14 Gilpin claims that "[t]here is great art and difficulty" in constructing an artificial ruin, in part because "[i]t is time alone, which meliorates the ruin; which gives it perfect beauty; and brings it . . . to a state of nature" (*Observations* 73-74). Harries likewise notes that

- an artificial ruin's believability "depends on maintaining the artifice of the natural and unplanned" (66). Not surprisingly, this balance between art and nature is easier to achieve in painted or written depictions of ruined structures (whether real or invented) than it is in actual built follies themselves because a painter or writer can speed up the pace of overgrowth and the erosive effects of time with the mere stroke of a brush or pen.
- 15 Take by way of brief example Advena Murchison's conversation with Hugh Finlay in which she concedes, with a degree of optimism for Canada's future, that there is something to be said for the chance at a "fresh start" in a country where there are no "picturesque old prescribed lanes to travel" (123). My reading of the Murchison house as a reinvention of the picturesque tradition on Canadian soil turns this scene into a calculated moment of dramatic irony that serves to underscore (to borrow Sophie Thomas' phrase) Duncan's "playful attitude to the materials of history" (39).

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