

STRANGE TO STRANGERS ONLY

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JAMES DE MILLE's intriguing romance of a strange and macabre civilization near the South Pole, *A Strange Manuscript found in a Copper Cylinder*, is at last becoming recognized as a minor classic of Canadian fiction. For a long time it was a forgotten book, known and admired by only a few bibliophiles and literary men who bothered to explore what was commonly regarded as the prehistoric era of Canadian letters. During the last few years, however, it has shared in the general expansion of interest in Canadian literature. An extended notice of the novel in the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), its reprinting in 1969, and the efforts of a few writers to demonstrate its considerable stature have all helped the novel to its proper place in our literary canon.

While *A Strange Manuscript* is now becoming appreciated and understood as it never was before, the short history of critical rather than merely appreciative comment on the novel has been marked by some unfortunate errors as well as by perceptive insights. As the novel appeared posthumously in 1888, the errors have primarily been over the date of composition and have led to some dubious and even misleading assumptions about De Mille's sources, purpose, and meaning. A brief sketch of De Mille criticism will explain this rather ungracious assertion.

Fred Cogswell set in motion the first misconception in, of all places, the prestigious *Literary History of Canada* by citing Rider Haggard as an influence on De Mille, somehow forgetting that the death of De Mille in 1880 made such influence impossible. This was a rare slip of which that astute critic of Maritime literature must by now be thoroughly tired of hearing. The next in chronological order, R. E. Watters, in 1969 corrected Cogswell's error and dragged in no fresh red herring, although, having no evidence to establish when the novel was written, he assumed that Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) was probably one of De Mille's sources.¹ Then in 1972 the third critic, Crawford Kilian, in the course of drawing heavily upon D. E. MacLeod's unpublished M.A. thesis of 1968, brought into print much-needed evidence for a date of composition no later than the 1860's and consequently helped to clarify the hitherto confused matter of De Mille's indebtedness to writers of the 1870's.² At this point, with the novel

placed at least in its proper decade, it seemed that criticism could proceed more confidently. But that was not to be. Again, as in 1965, one of our best critics brought confusion into the picture. Apparently unimpressed by Kilian's article and its important evidence, George Woodcock wrote just a year later an article which conjectures a composition date of 1879 and then proceeds to trace the influences upon De Mille's novel of three British novels of the 1870's.³ In spite of its perceptive analysis of other aspects of *A Strange Manuscript*, this article of 1973 can only be confusing in its resumption of what is pretty clearly a false scent. At the moment, therefore, a reader following the chronological order of critical comment is more than likely to wonder what is fact and what is fiction.

Much of the confusion is resolved if Kilian's report on MacLeod's thesis is taken seriously. At the risk of some repetition of what already appears in Kilian's article, one can outline the matter as follows. The crucial evidence is contained in a letter of March 6, 1880, written by James De Mille's brother, Alfred Henry De Mill, to the Reverend Dr. John Pryor, James's father-in-law. The relevant paragraph of this letter runs as follows:

The "Copper Cylinder" MS is one of the first stories ever written by James, and he was never able to make a satisfactory *denouement* to the plot in it, and consequently I do not think he ever offered it for sale. I read it over some years ago and told him that the concluding chapter could be re-written with advantage, and he entirely agreed with me. I do not know whether he has ever touched it since, or not. . . . I think that a purchaser might be found for it among the publishers of the great monthlies and when I heard from Willie [James's son] that you intended offering it to Lea and Shepard I thought that possibly you were not alive to the fact of its being a work of considerable merit. It might be changed a little at the end with advantage and offered either to Houghton[?] or in England.⁴

Here is evidence from the very person who knew something about James De Mille's life as a writer. There is absolutely no reason to doubt Alfred De Mill's knowledge or veracity. "Some years ago", though frustratingly indefinite, establishes the existence of the completed manuscript of the novel — without, of course, the "satisfactory *denouement*" De Mille never achieved — no later than several years before 1880. Even more revealing, of course, is the testimony that the novel was "one of the first stories ever written by James". The remark eliminates the 1870's completely and places the time of composition somewhere in the 1860's, when De Mille began his short but prolific career as a published author of fiction. A brief survey of James De Mille's activities in the decade will serve to place A. H. De Mill's statement in context and make it less vague than it appears to be.

By 1860 De Mille was dashing off serial fiction of the Sunday School variety for the *Christian Watchman*, a Saint John magazine edited by his elder brother, Elisha Budd De Mill.⁵ It is probable that he also wrote *The Dodge Club* in 1861,

although the work was not published until 1866 (or 1868?) as a serial in *Harper's Magazine* and not until 1869 as a book.⁶ These very early endeavours, however, are almost certainly not what A. H. De Mill means by his brother's "first stories". That he is thinking of book publication as a definition of authorship is made clear by another sentence in the same letter. In the course of remarking on the gross inaccuracy of a recent newspaper report on James's life, especially "the assertion that all the profits of his books went to pay his father's debts and that his father was a bankrupt", A. H. De Mill remarks that James's only contribution to the settlement of their father's estate was his payment of \$1100 to release a bank note "in 1865 or 1866 long before he began to write".⁷ As De Mille's first published book,⁸ *Helena's Household* (1867), was what A. H. De Mill must therefore have considered, like *A Strange Manuscript*, "one of the first stories" written by his brother, his testimony places the composition of *A Strange Manuscript* in the latter half of the 1860's—more specifically, in 1867 or 1868.

The known facts of De Mille's life in the decade support a date of composition no later than 1867 or 1868. After the flurry of serial writing in 1860-61, De Mille produced nothing more for several years. From September 1861, until the summer of 1865 he held the post of Professor of Classics at Acadia College. While his work as an energetic and popular teacher would have kept him busy in this period, it is quite possible that he also continued to write, and he may indeed have spent some time in these four years on *A Strange Manuscript*. His resignation from Acadia was followed by his appointment as Professor of History and Rhetoric at Dalhousie College, but, according to the testimony of his earliest biographers, he did not step directly from one set of duties to another but spent the next academic year (1865-66) preparing for his new post. It is likely that he also wrote (or completed) *Cord and Creese* and *Helena's Household* during this interval, as both were published in 1867, the first as a serial.

From the fall of 1866 to the end of the decade his teaching at Dalhousie would have at first curtailed his writing, especially because the new post required preparation of material he had not taught at Acadia. Nevertheless he found time to prepare two manuscripts in 1867 and 1868—*The Cryptogram*, published in serial form in 1869, and *The B O W C*, published as a book in the same year. Around the end of the decade his tempo increased, for in 1870 five titles appeared—*The American Baron* (as a serial), *The Boys of Grand Pré School*, *The Lady of the Ice*, *The Minnehaha Mines* (as a serial), and *Lost in the Fog*. Thereafter, his brother's testimony makes speculation unnecessary, and at any rate De Mille's steady grinding out of pot-boilers and juvenile fiction at the rate of two to four per year until the middle of the decade and his work on *The Elements of Rhetoric* would have left little room for *A Strange Manuscript*. It appears, then, that there were two periods in the 1860's when De Mille would

have had the opportunity to write his masterpiece — during the years at Acadia (late 1861 to mid-1865) and in 1867 before he began *The B O W C* and *The Cryptogram*. Therefore A. H. De Mill's testimony makes good sense in terms of De Mille's activity as a writer in the decade, and 1867 appears to be a highly probable *terminus ad quem* for *A Strange Manuscript*. Certainly, as MacLeod notes and Kilian agrees, De Mille may well have conceived the idea for the novel as early as the 1850's,⁹ and quite possibly he worked on it intermittently for years before 1867. Such careful and prolonged attention would account for the professional polish of the novel and its manifest superiority to every other work of fiction he produced — qualities of the novel which have led critics to assume mistakenly that it must therefore be a late work belonging to the 1870's. De Mille's usual practice was to write rapidly, even in a slapdash manner, a habit which he cultivated after *Helena's Household* in a deliberate attempt to turn out manuscripts for a quick cash return. But even in the 1860's he was capable of writing the kind of prose one finds in his best novel, as passages of his early serials and *Helena's Household* prove. There is no foundation here for doubting A. H. De Mill's evidence.¹⁰

This relatively early date of composition — or, more accurately, line of demarcation — naturally affects current conjectures about De Mille's indebtedness to other novelists of his time. Obviously, the novel could not have been influenced by Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), or even Lord Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1870).¹¹ As Crawford Kilian observes, "A careful examination of *Strange Ms*, and of the facts of De Mille's life, will show that the author's influences are far earlier than Haggard or Butler" — and he rightly singles out More and Swift as two of the general influences upon De Mille's novel. Both *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* depict imaginary societies which reflect back upon the actual societies in which they were written; both are anti-Utopias in which the good elements of the imagined societies are counterbalanced by the bad and in which utopianism as an ideal is implicitly repudiated; both are presented by narrator-characters, Hythloday and Gulliver, who are more or less naive and imperceptive of the implications of what they see and experience. Similarly, De Mille's imaginary society is a distorted reflection of his own, his Kosekin have evolved a society that is at first glance better but ultimately as bad as actual Western society, or even worse, and his narrator, Adam More, like Hythloday and Gulliver, brings an ordinary and relatively imperceptive mind to the task of understanding and judging his strange hosts. *A Strange Manuscript* is therefore squarely in the "classic" line of English anti-Utopias, and its general conception need not be sought for in minor fantasies of the nineteenth century.

Various more restricted influences have been pointed out by George Woodcock, all of which — except, of course, the three novels of the 1870's — are certainly

possible. Among these are the novels of Peacock (or imitations of their form) as models for De Mille's frame discussion by the yachtsmen, Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* (1843) for the idea of sacrificial rites performed atop pyramids, Melville's *Typee* (1846) for the notion of gentle and seemingly benevolent cannibals.¹² The suggestion that Jules Verne's earlier novels in their original French would have been known to De Mille is plausible, but their bearing on *A Strange Manuscript* is less likely. By the 1860's, Verne had not produced much that is relevant. The only possibility would seem to be *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, which first appeared (in French) in 1864. As will be argued below, however, De Mille did not need Verne's help to envisage a subterranean entrance to an unknown land.

All of these writers may have contributed to De Mille's novel in such very minor ways. Others equally deserving of passing notice have not been mentioned by Watters and Woodcock.

One peculiar notion picked up by De Mille was the brainchild of an eccentric army captain, John Cleves Symmes, who in 1818 issued and distributed a circular propounding the thesis that the earth is hollow and open at the poles. In 1823 he went so far as to petition the American Congress to support a polar expedition to test his theory, and actually received twenty-five supporting votes. Three years later, in 1826, Symmes and his collaborator, one James McBride, published *Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres*, a full explanation of his thesis that there are enormous openings at both poles through which the sea flows into a series of hollow, concentric spheres. Circles of ice and volcanic peaks surround the openings, but within these barriers the climate is tropical. Not surprisingly, the notion first publicized in 1818 was picked up very quickly by a writer of fiction. In 1820 appeared *Symzonia*, by Captain Adam Seaborn — possibly a pseudonym for Symmes himself. This fantasy tells the story of a voyage of discovery to the South Pole undertaken under the guise of sealing. The ship follows ocean currents through a ring of ice and is borne imperceptibly over the ocean rim into the interior of the earth, where Seaborn and his men come upon the continent of Symzonia. They land at a city, where they are welcomed by a friendly white race. This new civilization turns out to be Utopian in both the admirable nature of the people and their institutions. Fearing to be contaminated by their visitors, the Symzonians subsequently ask them to depart, and Seaborn and his crew retrace their course, eventually returning to New York.¹³

One cannot be sure that De Mille had read *Symzonia*, although it fits one of Adam More's remarks: "As a boy I had read wild works of fiction about lands in the interior of the earth, with a sun at the centre, which gave them the light of a perpetual day". A few other possible echoes come to mind: Adam's seal hunt which leads to his separation from the ship, the strong current, the approach through a subterranean passage, the friendly strangers. Obviously, if De Mille

had read this fantasy, it did not govern his imagination to the point of suggesting the core of his novel. What is certain, however, is that De Mille knew about Symme's eccentric theory. Adam More is made to refer to the possibility of "an opening at the South Pole" and his companion Agnew is made to deny the theory by expostulating "Do not imagine that the surface of the earth is different at the poles from what it is anywhere else", and by advising More that "Theories about openings at the poles, or whirlpools, must be given up." A little later More refers directly to Symmes' theory:

I recalled that old theory which had been in my mind before this, and which I had mentioned to Agnew. This was the notion that at each pole there is a vast opening; that into one of them all the waters of the ocean pour themselves, and, after passing through the earth, come out at the other pole, to pass about its surface in innumerable streams. It was a wild fancy, which I had laughed at under other circumstances, but which now occurred to me once more . . ."

Symmes' theory was in fact widely known. Among writers who made use of it was Edgar Allan Poe, who in turn supplied De Mille with a few ideas for *A Strange Manuscript*. Poe's fragmentary story, "MS Found in a Bottle" (1883), probably suggested the copper cylinder. Incidentally, the story tells how an unsinkable ship is drawn irresistibly toward the South Pole and goes down into a whirlpool, presumably through Symmes' opening into the interior of the earth. The same author's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" (1838) has a closer bearing on De Mille's novel. In this tale of another voyage to the South Pole, various points look ahead to De Mille: details of the approach to Antarctica, the Arabic carvings of a strange race discovered by Pym, the distortion of latitude near the Pole (a detail which Poe had borrowed from *Symzonia*), the separation of the narrator from his ship when he goes ashore (Poe has the collection of *bêche-de-mer* as the purpose, but Adam More intends to shoot seals, precisely the same motive given to Adam Seaborn in *Symzonia*), the southward-flowing current, the semi-tropical climate of the polar region. It is noteworthy that J. O. Bailey, whose *Pilgrims Through Time and Space* unexpectedly includes *A Strange Manuscript* in its survey of "scientific" and "utopian" fiction, has no doubts at all that De Mille borrowed such details from Poe.¹⁴

THESE BORROWINGS, however, are not significantly germane to an interpretation of *A Strange Manuscript*. They attest to De Mille's wide reading, but the more of them one finds the more it becomes clear that the vital aspects of the novel, particularly his ingenious creation of the Kosekin, are very much his own. Where, then, are we to look for some insight into the cast of mind which produced the Kosekin and for some external aid in understanding the

relation of De Mille's strange civilization to the real world of the 1860's? The general Victorian context of the novel naturally suggests various relationships, as Watters and Woodcock have observed, but there remains at least one unexplored means of getting closer to De Mille's mind and consequently understanding more about his meaning and purpose. What remains is what can be learned of De Mille's life and thought, especially what can be established about his moral and religious convictions and interests from the scattered evidence available. That evidence is not abundant, but there is enough of it to save interpretation from mere conjecture.

De Mille's family background, and what is clearly his significant reaction against one element of it, are the first relevant clues to pursue. His father, Nathan Smith De Mill, was a prominent shipowner and merchant of Saint John — a man of integrity and strong social conscience who seems to have been highly respected by his sons, James De Mille included. Certain other aspects of his character, however, have more negative connotations. Archibald MacMechan, who worked hard to piece together an accurate biography of James De Mille, judged Nathan De Mill to be a man of "unbending Puritanism".¹⁵ Certainly he was a pillar of the total abstinence movement in Saint John, being president of the local society from 1832 to 1845 and a dedicated member thereafter. According to MacMechan, he was known, presumably among the more "liberal" citizens of Saint John, as "Cold Water De Mill", a name supported by the story that, having found a barrel of rum in one of his ships, he set it rolling to oblivion in the waters of Saint John harbour. MacMechan also deduced that he was inclined to anti-intellectualism. He is said to have burned a package of novels he discovered in a cargo, and "seems rather to have disparaged book-learning." His support of Acadia College in Wolfville was not, MacMechan thinks, based on any admiration for secular learning but rather on approval of its dominant atmosphere of evangelical Christianity and strict morality. The picture emerges of Nathan De Mill as a sternly upright and unbending puritan, a man to be respected but not necessarily emulated. One other fact about him is important: although the De Mills were all Anglicans, in 1842 Nathan De Mill, at the age of thirty-eight, joined the Baptist church. The reasons for his break with the family religious affiliation are not on record, but it seems obvious that at least one motive lay in his militant crusade against the demon rum. Long before 1842 he must have found the Anglican position on temperance a weak and ultimately immoral compromise. He may, of course, have been moving towards a more pietistical form of Christianity in other ways as well before he made his decision to turn his back on the *via media* of the Anglicans.

The father's influence on James De Mille can be only glimpsed here and there in the records of the early years. From the age of nine, when his father changed the religious affiliation of the family, James was a Baptist; he was sent to Baptist

institutions — to Horton Academy in 1848 and to Acadia College in 1849, and was baptized while at Horton. After a year-long tour of Europe with his elder brother, he was sent in 1852 to Brown University, another Baptist institution, graduating in 1854. He seems to have been marked by no particular religious zeal during these years. At least he did not follow his elder brother, Elisha Budd De Mill, into the Baptist ministry,¹⁶ and he was very active at Brown in the secular pursuits of public-speaking and debating, and in the production of comic verse, being elected class poet in 1854. There is no question of any departure from normal Christian devotion in all of this, but merely no indication of him following his father's austere bent or of revealing the evangelical zeal common to many of his fellow Baptists.

There is also no evidence of a change in the picture in the next few years. James De Mille remained within the Baptist fold, and by 1860, when "Horton Sketches" was written, was even expressing approval of religious revivals. During his Acadia period (1862-1865), however, a change in his attitude may have been gathering force. He approved publicly of non-sectarian education (Inaugural Discourse, 1861), which Acadia upheld in theory but hardly in practice — a choice of emphasis that may have carried deliberate ironic implications but may, of course, have been seriously made in the belief that the institution he was about to join exemplified his own ideal. Much more significant, indeed markedly so, is the well-known remark of one of his students at Acadia, which gives us the first glimpse of another side of De Mille. Herbert C. Creed, in a letter to Mac-Mechan, recalled that although De Mille was "doubtless a sincere Christian", he "took delight in ridiculing everything like cant, and even the ordinary words and actions of the 'pious' sort of people often brought to his keen eye and thin curling lip that peculiar sarcastic smile of his."¹⁷ It is hardly necessary to observe that such a marked disdain for evangelical piety strikes an alien note in the Acadia of the early 1860's, which contemporary accounts depict as intensely conscious of its duty to oversee the spiritual and moral condition of its students. Certainly it is not what one would expect of an ardent or even a moderately committed Baptist.

Then, in 1865, De Mille made two surprising moves: he resigned from Acadia in August, and not long afterwards left the Baptist Church and became an Anglican. His resignation was not engendered by dissatisfied students or administration; in fact, he was much admired by students and was earnestly requested by the college to reconsider his decision.¹⁸ The most reasonable assumption is that he had become uncomfortable within the confines of the Baptist faith and its academic centre at Wolfville. His move to Dalhousie College in Halifax was not a step upward in the academic world, for at the time Acadia had emerged from its earlier struggle for survival and Dalhousie was just getting on its feet financially and academically. One other fact supports the inference

that for some time he had been approaching a spiritual crossroads and at last in 1865 felt free to take another direction: his father had died on December 26, 1864, removing a serious obstacle to his change of religious affiliation. One assumes that De Mille had no desire to wound his father by an act which, however blameless, would probably have been taken as a tragic betrayal.

One can find few signs, besides Herbert Creed's evidence, of the cast of mind that led De Mille to his decision. His first published novel, *Helena's Household: A Tale of Rome in the First Century* (1867), would seem to be a likely source of evidence, but in fact it does not reveal the "sarcastic smile" at overt piety of which Creed writes. This interesting but uneven novel, in which De Mille is generally strong in description and historical imagination and weak in the craft of the novelist, has much to say about the Christian doctrine of love and the supreme example of Christ in the context of a pagan world desperately requiring spiritual sustenance. Yet the evangelicalism, insofar as it is coloured by authorial bias, is broadly Protestant in its emphasis on the Word of God in the New Testament and in its interpretation of the Eucharist as a symbolic sacrament. De Mille's depiction of conversion and the converted, though sometimes rather sentimental, would agree well with Anglicanism. There is one odd omission in his account of early Christianity. Historians are generally agreed that two sacred ceremonies or sacraments of the early Christians, baptism by immersion and the Eucharist, were firmly established by the time of Paul. Yet De Mille never mentions or depicts baptism in the novel. As a former Baptist, he would have been keenly aware of this sacrament and of the running battle in his time between Baptist defenders of total immersion and their less literalist Protestant opponents. The omission is therefore surely deliberate and perhaps is a sign of his special sensitivity on an issue so much a matter of contention between his old and his new church.

Although *Helena's Household* furnishes no plain evidence of its author's opposition to sectarian Protestantism, it does demonstrate his keen interest in the religious and philosophical currents of the ancient world in the infancy of Christianity. As we shall see, this aspect of the novel has a bearing on *A Strange Manuscript*. De Mille's interest in church history — MacMechan says that he specialized in the subject — appears clearly in *Helena's Household*. He is bent on bringing together and comparing various strains of thought in the Rome of Nero — the Platonism of Socrates, Roman moral philosophy, militant Judaism, and Christianity. Indeed his tendency to examine at length the interplay of these forces slows down the action of the novel. His method is to invent characters to express, in intellectual terms and in their lives, the beliefs they uphold: Cineas, the Greek rationalist and Platonist, whose conversion to Christianity is a gradual and soul-searching process; Helena, who embraces the new religion with the quick ardour of intuition; Isaac, the honourable but fanatical Jew whose zeal

for his nation and faith aligns him against Christians as well as against the Roman overlords of his homeland. De Mille's understanding of what Matthew Arnold calls Hebraism and Hellenism is displayed fully,¹⁹ though simplified in the interest of the fictional context. Cineas' resistance to accepting the Christian doctrine of sin suggests both the tendency of beleaguered early Christianity to over-emphasize human depravity and the Greek genius for appreciation of the palpable glory of nature and man: "It is a good and a pleasant world that we see around us", Cineas affirms, "and to apply the name sinners to the 'kindly race of men' seems like saying that the world is all dark, even in its bright day-time."²⁰ Though Cineas eventually develops a sense of sin, throughout the novel De Mille's emphasis is not in fact on the depravity of man but on the boon of divine love. Furthermore, his admiration for Greek thought and culture is reflected in the sympathetic portrayal of Cineas, in the presentations of Platonism as the highest reach of unaided human wisdom, and in viewing Socrates as in some measure a precursor of Christian truth. In short, while *Helena's Household* leaves one with no doubts about De Mille's Christian point of view and dedication to Christian belief, it reveals as well his knowledge of the historical context and his understanding of basic principles of the Hebraic, Hellenic, and Christian positions.

De Mille's conversion to Anglicanism, as has been suggested above, fits what is known of his interests and attitudes—his love of classical learning, his scholarly interest in the early history of Christianity, his distaste for outward shows of evangelical piety, the moderate tone and philosophical emphasis in *Helena's Household*.²¹ One might also mention his unswerving support of a humanistic education based on a study of the classical world and his opposition to denominational education, convictions which are expressed unequivocally in his Inaugural Address at Dalhousie in 1873. One other related point remains to be noted—that of his acceptance of the official Anglican position on the apostolic succession and the relation of the Roman and English churches. Although there are no signs in De Mille's works, early or late, of the fierce antipathy to Roman Catholicism expressed by many Baptists of the day, he seems to have found in Anglicanism a satisfactory compromise between Rome and sectarian Protestantism. His faith in tradition and his sense of history were both satisfied by Canterbury. This is what one assumes would have influenced him, and the assumption is supported by his only known statement on the subject, "The Early English Church: A Paper read before the Church of England Institute" (Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Co., 1877). This address is an historical sketch of Christianity in Britain from the second century to the time of the Venerable Bede (672-735). De Mille's treatment of the subject is flatly matter-of-fact and not at all polemical, but his conception of a distinct British church adhering to primitive Christianity and resisting as best it could the dominance

of highly organized Roman authoritarianism indicates that he saw his church as an indigenous entity as venerable as the Roman and Greek establishments, not as a Protestant schism from Catholicism dating from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In other words, De Mille agrees on this point with that earlier staunch Anglican, T. C. Haliburton, who had seen the Reformation in England as reactionary rather than revolutionary, the English church as regaining the purity of doctrine which had long been sullied by Roman domination, and the Anglicanism which emerged from the purging away of long-established Roman heresy and corruption as the best and truest form of Christianity. What is more to the point, De Mille had by 1865 aligned himself with the theological and ethical climate of the Anglican *via media*, with the tradition of Hooker, and had formally repudiated the more uncompromising temper of sectarianism. It is noteworthy that, when he settled in Halifax and became an Anglican, he chose High-Church St. Luke's rather than Low-Church St. Paul's as his place of worship. Moreover, he took his new allegiance seriously, becoming an active member of the Church of England Institute.

THE BEARING of all of this upon *A Strange Manuscript* is of course one's prime concern. The following paragraphs attempt to suggest some ways in which De Mille's biography, mundane and spiritual, comes to our aid in understanding his novel.

First it should be noted that De Mille calls on his knowledge of ancient and biblical history for his conception of the Kosekin. His general intention is to depict what has happened to an Eastern Mediterranean people who have been utterly isolated from their original milieu for a very long time, and have developed their religious and moral beliefs in ways contrary to those of the civilization from which they have been separated. It does not much matter whether the original Kosekin were the Troglodytes (Red Sea cave-dwellers described by Agatharchides of Cnidus) or one of the lost ten tribes of Israel, as Melick facetiously suggests. The important point is that they were Hebrews (or at least a Semitic people speaking the Hebrew tongue) who left the Mediterranean world long before Greek civilization had affected them. According to the Old Testament, the lost tribes were transported to Assyria when Israel was conquered in 734 B.C., and it was of course nearly 300 B.C. before the Jews as a nation came into contact with Greek culture. The Kosekin, then, are a people from what one might call an Old Testament background who have never been touched by the later developments which took place in the world they had left — in particular, they have lived completely unaware of Greek rationalism and humanism, and of the Christian tradition centred on the New Testament and

enriched by Greek and Roman philosophy. In one way the development has been directly opposite to that of Western civilization, for the Kosekin adhere to a pervasive other-worldliness and denial of life, while Western civilization, as De Mille knew well, has tended to develop an equally pervasive worldliness despite the transcendental idealism of its philosophical and Christian heritage. At any rate, the Kosekin have driven the spiritualism, fatalism, and *contemptus mundi* of the ancient Hebrews to gross extremes that are believable within their isolated confines, untempered as they have been by Hellenism or Christianity. Indeed, they have even reached the utter absurdity of upholding other-worldly fanaticism without any *raison d'être*, any ultimate religious belief, for as Crawford Kilian has rightly pointed out, the Kosekin are a godless race. Their departure from their Hebraic origins is consequently degenerate to an alarming degree.

While the Kosekin, seen in this light, have developed in a direction opposite to that of Western civilization,²² in another way they may be seen as pushing to logical conclusions extreme religious and moral tendencies in Western religion, tendencies that may be traced either to Old Testament times or to qualities inherent in Christianity. Previous commentators on the novel have noted this in passing, but it would seem reasonable that it should be given much more weight in view of De Mille's experience of sectarian extremism, his rejection of it, and his embracing of the *via media* of Anglicanism.

In effect, the Kosekin embody in extreme ways what De Mille would consider as pernicious tendencies in the history of Christianity. Thus what Adam calls "their strange and unnatural love of death" is an intensification of the pietism which looks upon life solely as a preparation for death, in effect prefers darkness to light, exalts poverty, and regards love of the beautiful, indeed all the pleasant elements of life, as sinful and degrading. De Mille did not need to look back to the most dour exemplars of New England Calvinism for models. The tradition of Alline in Nova Scotia, though softened in many Baptists by the middle of the nineteenth century, still persisted among the more rigorous and uncompromising members of this particular holy community, and was vigorously supplemented by similar "unworldliness" in the most fanatical wings of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

The Kosekin drive to literal extremes positions which such religionists, and perhaps De Mille's own father, held as articles of faith. It looks very much as though De Mille reveals the absurdity and even the depravity of such attitudes by pushing them to their logical conclusions. The central Christian tradition to which De Mille adhered has never regarded what is *natural* as sinful or vile; it has never made such a sharp division between body and soul, between the natural and the divine. Adam is given a moment of insight, although he is unaware of the implications, when he declares that the Kosekin "lived in opposition to nature itself". According to the Kohen, it is "unnatural" or against

human nature to fear death, to detest and avoid poverty, to seek the requital of love. These are all animal rather than human instincts, says the Kohen. In effect, the Kosekin deny that man shares any instincts with the animal; their totally uncompromising position is to segregate man from animals, man from nature. They have built up a body of ideas which denies any connection except the common need of animals and man for nutrition in order to remain alive. Even more than the most extreme Calvinist, the Kosekin have cut man off from nature, and have defined nature as evil. Then, to rationalize their own denial, they name the artificial the "natural". For De Mille, as for Hooker, the great apologist for his church, nature is part of the divinely-ordained and ordered universe, and what is natural in humanity is not by definition unclean or evil but morally neutral, capable of being used for good or evil purposes. But for Christian extremists and the Kosekin, much of life is indeed in opposition to nature itself. Both devalue life as something to be released from as quickly as possible so long as the release is honourable (suicide is a sin for both). Moreover, the whole symbolism of light and darkness in the novel applies to Christian extremists as well as to the Kosekin—both are blind to the glories of the natural life and try to live in the darkness and gloom associated with death, with a denial of life. Both are so suspicious of pleasure and enjoyment as occasions of sin that the most envied people are those destitute of worldly goods and worldly pleasures. The only difference between the Kosekin "aristocracy" and the self-styled aristocrats of Christian grace is that most Christian extremists hold such ideas as convictions without putting them into indiscriminate practice. The Kosekin, by carrying their convictions into uncompromising action, reveal just how abominable, De Mille seems to be saying, the convictions are. The leading paupers of the land are filled with blood lust and are actually the worst of murderers. Such is the logical outcome, De Mille implies, of an utter denial of the goodness of life. He may even be implying too that the distorted conception of God held by life-denying Christians is actually akin to the godlessness of the Kosekin, that a caricature of God amounting to blasphemy is not far removed from utter unawareness of God.

Another aspect of Kosekin life is closely related and equally an ironic comment on Christian extremism. In their system of ethics the Kosekin are completely ignorant of the Aristotelian principle of the golden mean that has been so influential in establishing the *via media* of liberal Christian ethics. The Kosekin drive the virtue of temperance to its deficiency of abstinence in denying the beauty and pleasure of life rather than simply avoiding its harmful attractions. They drive the virtue of courage to its excess of foolhardiness when they seek death in battle with fanatical persistence. They drive the virtue of liberality to the excess of prodigality when they strive to give away all possessions in the attempt to attain the poverty and worldly misery that they deem necessary to

their "salvation". Their perverted extremism is well summed up by their first citizen when the Chief Pauper tells Adam of his almost ideal condition: "I have poverty, squalor, cold, perpetual darkness, the privilege of killing others, the near prospect of death, and the certainty of the *Mista Kosek*."

The subject of love in the novel is a perfectly integral part of the Kosekin philosophy. The Kosekin notion of love is forced to the point where lovers remain apart because it would be "selfish" for them to act otherwise. They deny love as they deny life itself. They reject any compromise between the flesh and the spirit. Selflessness is not for them a relative force in a fallen and imperfect world but rather utter self-denial. Kosekin "love" is not really love at all, but rejection of love. No one can *receive* love any more than any other "commodity". The love which the Kosekin say is so strongly felt has nowhere to go, no object upon which to act or fulfill itself. It is entirely abstract, never real or realized — in fact, inhuman. One can hardly fail to notice how closely the Kosekin resemble Swift's Houyhnhnms on this point. Both are distinguished from human beings by their impervious rationalism, the main difference being that the Houyhnhnms, being horses, simply have no human emotions, while the Kosekin, being men, have smothered their human instincts in the name of an absurd ideal which seeks to deny their humanity.

To interpret the Kosekin ideal of love and Adam's total opposition to it as basically an amusing satire on romantic love in Western society, as R. E. Watters does, would seem to be a distortion of De Mille's intention. Certainly Adam More echoes the sentimentalities of romantic love in Western culture, and in this as in most ways is an impercipient extremist in his own right and so an unconscious satirist of the values he holds. But De Mille's emphasis is surely on the absurdity of the Kosekin position on love, as it is on their uncompromising extremism generally. Adam's shocked incomprehension is no more and no less marked or significant on the subject of love than on any other Kosekin article of belief. What is involved here as elsewhere is a more complex meaning derived from De Mille's basic principle of moderation. Satire there is, but it works in two directions simultaneously, and depends just as much upon the inadequacy and extremism of Adam as upon those qualities in the Kosekin.

The novel makes better sense if De Mille is seen as opposing *two* sets of extremes rather than one — extreme self-denial and consequent life-denial as in Kosekin society, and extreme self-indulgence and consequent denial of transcendence and moral idealism as in Western society. Adam is not really De Mille's spokesman but a simple-minded and naive representative of Western culture, propounding values as they are commonly practised in his corrupt society. His resemblance to Gulliver is close enough to put us on the alert. Like Gulliver, Adam is not utterly depraved, not really extreme, for example, in his espousal of self-indulgence, but he is at best no more than a unreflective humanist of the

shallow sort and at worst, perhaps, "a prig, a ninny, and a hypocrite", as Crawford Kilian declares him to be. He is primarily, however, an impercipient representative of a materialistic and essentially godless society — so impercipient that he does not even realize that the selflessness and self-denial of the Kosekin are in fact self-indulgence. There is little in him of the idealism of De Mille, of De Mille's declared disapproval of self-indulgence in his own society. Consequently the arguments he opposes to the Kosekin ideals are not the ideals of his culture but the imperfect realities all too common in its practice. His attitudes are the counterparts not of Kosekin "high-minded" ideals but of the ordinary Kosekin citizen's imperfect realization of those ideals. The idealism of Western culture, De Mille's idealism, is far below the surface of the novel, implied rather than stated. The outward conflict is between two extremes, irreconcilable because they are seemingly poles apart and because their chief spokesman, the Kohen and Adam, are only vaguely touched by the principles of moderation that would move them closer to the golden mean — the Kohen by the touch of humanity which has made him a failure by Kosekin standards, Adam by the basic decency which partly belies and relieves his materialistic and pragmatic outlook. The ultimate of Kosekin idealism is of course represented by the Chief Pauper, and the ultimate of Western materialism, ironically enough, not only by Adam but by the Kohen Gadol²³ and especially Layelah, whose daring iconoclasm makes her "a new Semiramis — one who might revolutionize an empire and introduce a new order of things" (p. 168). Layelah's statement of her principles, which amount merely to the substitution of extremes opposite to those of the Kosekin, places Adam's extremism in clear perspective: "The rich shall be esteemed, the poor shall be down-trodden; to rule over others shall be glorious, to serve shall be base; victory shall be an honor, defeat a shame; selfishness, self-seeking, luxury, and indulgence shall be virtues; poverty, want, and squalor shall be things of abhorrence and contempt" (p. 167). Here is the imperfect and of course depraved *practice* of Western society, as extreme and as far from the mean as the Kosekin values Layelah rejects. Similarly, Adam's view of love in his own society is as limited as his other conceptions. His philosophy of love is tritely romantic, even sentimental, and no doubt unconsciously satiric of love as practised in our culture. The missing element is of course the highest ideals of his civilization. The opposition of two defective extremes defines the mean only by implication. Moreover, the two extremes, ironically enough, are "ideals" in another way: just as very few of the Kosekin are able to live up to their ideals and become paupers, so few people in our civilization are able to become self-indulgent and wealthy despots. Most of the Kosekin and most of us are back-sliders, incapable and even sceptical of the single-minded zeal necessary for attainment of either imagined *summum bonum*. From De Mille's point of view, the extremes are equally heinous, and Adam's judgment is as inept as the Chief Pauper's. Like Swift in Book IV of *Gulliver's*

Travels, De Mille makes his narrator impercipient of the ironies involved. The main difference is that De Mille did not follow Swift to the point of converting Adam to an acceptance of Kosekin life-denial in a movement analogous to Gulliver's total acceptance of the Houyhnhnms' inhuman rationalism.

The satire of the novel therefore is double-edged, an assault upon extremes of opposite kinds. It is as crucial to see Adam as the impercipient and unwitting apostle of Western materialism as to recognize the painfully obvious imperfection of the Chief Pauper. Both put forth recipes for the death of the spirit. De Mille's position in the midst of this ingeniously confusing welter of ironies and cross-purposes is far from obvious. Like Swift in his creation of Houyhnhmland, De Mille has kept his own point of view so completely behind the scenes that he runs the risk of mystifying the reader or leading the critic into irresponsible interpretation. In both cases an appeal outside the literary work to the nature of the creator is the likeliest means of keeping one's feet in the slippery mazes of ironies and counter-ironies. The self-effacing irony of both satirists can easily be a trap for the unwary. While the personality, convictions, and ideals of De Mille can be only partially understood at our present stage of knowledge, what is known or can reasonably be deduced is of the utmost importance for a judicial interpretation of *A Strange Manuscript*.

NOTES

- ¹ "Introduction", *A Strange Manuscript* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), vii-xviii.
- ² "The Cheerful Inferno of James De Mille", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I, #3 (1972), 61-67.
- ³ "De Mille and the Utopian Vision", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, II, #2 (1973), 174-179.
- ⁴ The manuscript letter is in the De Mille Manuscript Collection, Dalhousie University. The credit for unearthing this uncatalogued letter and realizing its importance must go to Douglas E. MacLeod, who quoted part of it in his M.A. thesis, "A Critical Biography of James De Mille" (Dalhousie University, 1968). As Crawford Kilian's article reveals, Mr. MacLeod's thesis contains much information on De Mille's life that will not be found in existing published accounts.
A. H. De Mill (only James's branch of the family adds an "e" to the name) was a younger brother of James. He had graduated from Acadia with B.A. and M.A. degrees, had studied law, and at the time of James's death in 1880 was practicing law in Saint John, New Brunswick. As James's sudden death had left his wife and children in serious financial difficulties, A. H. De Mill was working with other members of the family to raise money by publication of several works still in manuscript. Lea and Shepard of Boston had published many of De Mille's books for boys, but were rightly regarded by A. H. De Mill as not suitable publishers for *A Strange Manuscript*.
- ⁵ These fictional pieces were "The Missionary's Son" (1860-61) and "Andy O'Hara" (1860-61). At the same time his sketches, "Recollections of Rome" (1861),

- "Recollections of Naples" (1861) and "Horton Sketches" (1861), were also appearing serially in the *Christian Watchman*. See MacLeod, p. 141.
- ⁶ Archibald MacMechan testifies to the early composition of *The Dodge Club*, saying that it "was written before going to Acadia" ("De Mille, the Man and the Writer", *Canadian Magazine*, 27 [1906], p. 413.)
- ⁷ The italics are mine.
- ⁸ The bibliography of De Mille's fiction is still somewhat uncertain. According to some bibliographies, his first novel was *The Martyr of the Catacombs* (a "Sunday School Book", according to MacMechan), which is said to have first appeared in 1858 (perhaps in serial form) and again as a book in 1865. Although R. E. Watters was unable to locate a copy for his *Check List of Canadian Literature*, this rare item has surprisingly turned up in an undated, modern paperback edition published by the Moody Press of Chicago. The paperback edition clears up none of the bibliographical problems (it does not even bear the author's name), but at least it proves that the book exists.
- ⁹ See D. E. MacLeod's description and reproduction of the drawings in De Mille's notebook of 1853 (thesis, pp. 104-107), and Kilian's remarks ("Cheerful Inferno", pp. 66-67).
- ¹⁰ The "arguments for a late composition date" mentioned by Crawford Kilian — that *A Strange Manuscript* "shows a skilled writer in complete control of his material" and that De Mille's ironic reference to authors lacking prestige in Kosekin society (*SM*, p. 141) reads like the remark of a seasoned professional writer — seem of little account, and indeed are given merely passing notice in the article (See "Cheerful Inferno", p. 67).
- ¹¹ These are the three works discussed by George Woodcock as influences upon De Mille. See "De Mille and the Utopian Vision", *JCF*, II (1973), 174-179. It must be added that the "significant echoes" cited in the article strike this reader as much more tenuous and unconvincing than the confident tone of their presentation makes them appear — even if one examines them with A. H. De Mill's evidence dismissed from the mind. Is there really much resemblance between the conversation of Mallock's sophisticated characters in *The New Republic* and that of De Mille's yachtsmen? Then the fact that Butler, like De Mille, "begins with a criticism of moral and philosophical attitudes" rather than focussing on political and social institutions seems to be a weak indication of De Mille's indebtedness to *Erewhon*, simply because De Mille's basic interest in men rather than institutions needed no encouragement from Butler. More and Swift would have confirmed his inclination just as well. As for Lytton's *The Coming Race*, the very minor resemblances between it and *A Strange Manuscript* are easily accounted for by the two authors' common knowledge of earlier works recounting the discovery of strange and contemporary civilizations.
- ¹² It should be noted, however, that the idea of having the Kosekin perform cannibalistic rites comes from De Mille's knowledge of ancient history — the superstitious belief current among the first-century Romans that the Christians in their midst practised cannibalism at their religious services. The following passage from *Helena's Household* suggests the connection: "They [the Christians] met in secret assemblies, where it was reported that they indulged in the worst vices among themselves. The mysterious repast which they celebrated in memory of their dying Lord was particularly suspected. A report prevailed that at this repast they fed on human flesh and drank human blood — a strange perversion of that symbolical rite which represented by bread and wine the body and blood of the Saviour" (p. 271).

- ¹³ For notice of Symmes' theory and a summary of *Symzonia*, see J. O. Bailey, *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (New York: Argus Books, 1947), pp. 40-42.
- ¹⁴ See Bailey, pp. 64-65, for his summary of De Mille's novel. Unfortunately, Bailey is not as perceptive in interpreting the meaning as he is in noticing some of De Mille's sources. He concludes that "no satiric purpose is clear in the book" and reads it merely as "a yarn of strange adventure."
- ¹⁵ This and subsequent references to MacMechan on De Mille are drawn from MacMechan's article, "De Mille, the Man and the Writer", *Canadian Magazine*, 27 (1906), 404-416.
- ¹⁶ Elisha Budd De Mill was unquestionably a Baptist minister — not, as Crawford Kilian says ("The Cheerful Inferno", p. 61), an Anglican.
- ¹⁷ The letter is in the MacMechan Collection, Dalhousie University. The remark is quoted by Allan Bevan in "James De Mille and Archibald MacMechan", *DR*, 35 (1955), p. 205, and is picked up by later commentators.
- ¹⁸ See MacLeod, p. 41.
- ¹⁹ No influence of Arnold on De Mille is implied, for Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* was first published in 1869, two years after *Helena's Household*.
- ²⁰ *Helena's Household*, p. 233.
- ²¹ It is possible, in fact probable, that the doctrinal and theological flavour of this novel was originally even less evangelical than it is in the published version. D. E. MacLeod ("A Critical Biography of James De Mille", p. 42) quotes the following tantalizingly suggestive passage from H. L. Koopman's "Literary Men of Brown, III: James De Mille", *The Brown Alumni Monthly*, VIII (July 1907):
- He [De Mille] had difficulty in finding a publisher for *Helena's Household*, and, to his chagrin, the one that he had at last secured insisted on important changes in the treatment to conform to the theological taste of the day. It was not a question of truth, but of trimming. De Mille resisted stoutly; but he needed both the money and the recognition which the book would bring; so at last he yielded, and rewrote the obnoxious chapters.
- One assumes that "the theological taste of the day" refers to the predominant evangelicalism of the popular audience the publisher had in mind — in particular, the tastes of Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists who would have formed the greater part of the potential readership for such a novel in the United States of 1867. As for "trimming", the mere cutting down of long theological discourses *may* have been meant. It is much more likely, however, that the word means the modifying of opinion according to expediency — in this context, presumably the simplification and evangelization of theological doctrine. Mere cutting could hardly be described as "important changes in the treatment."
- ²² One could also say that their godlessness is a satiric analogue of Western godlessness, and that in this, as in so many ways, the Kosekin are caricatures of Western man rather than his opposite.
- ²³ It is worth noting that the Kohen Gadol is seen to be much more contemptible, much less "virtuous", than the Kohen. The latter knows what is "right" and tries to live up to his ideals, but fails because he is genuinely human. The Kohen Gadol lacks Kosekin "virtue" almost entirely, being greedy and selfish, embracing riches by deliberate choice. The Kohen tries to be a "good" Kosekin, but is victimized by less scrupulous people who take advantage of him. In a sense the Kohen is not unvirtuous, even by Kosekin standards, because *generosity* causes him to accept what others offer. He is self-sacrificing, by Kosekin standards, in accepting wealth at his own spiritual expense.