

# DUNCAN'S WEB

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WHILE THE OVERT subject of *The Imperialist* is indeed imperialism, the novel's deeper structural unity derives from its focus on idealism and its internal patterning of perceptions and points of view. Sara Jeannette Duncan uses Canada not only to provide the history of the imperialist movement, but also to supply a foil for the old world, so that in the interaction between old world and new world experiences and personalities she can scrutinize subtleties of idealism and levels of vision. Hence her concern is not narrative for the sake of narrative but the effect of event on the formation of vision; as she herself says of Lorne Murchison's trip to England, "what he absorbed and took back with him is, after all, what we have to do with; his actual adventures are of no great importance." In the context of turn-of-the-century Canadian fiction, marked as it was by a strong emphasis on "actual adventures", Duncan's ability to work into the fabric of her narrative the abstract problem of the levels, limitations and horizons of vision distinguishes *The Imperialist* from the story-telling of Gilbert Parker, Norman Duncan and Ralph Connor. Much of her distinction may be due to her long absence from Canada, which may have helped to expand her artistic vision and give her greater detachment and a more universal frame of reference than her Canadian contemporaries. This detached perspective, combined with her personal knowledge of Canada and her dexterous manipulation of characters and ideas, renders *The Imperialist* one of the most carefully structured and unduly neglected Canadian novels.

The skill of Duncan's structural technique lies in her meticulous interweaving of narrative threads so that all events and characters implicitly comment upon one another, and through the various attitudes manifested by various characters the "figure in the carpet" slowly and surely emerges. Within this scheme of levels of vision the highest focal point — the horizon — is idealism, political in the case of Lorne Murchison, moral in the case of Hugh Finlay. Just outside central focus sit the two characters who function on the lesser plane of self-interest,

Alfred Hesketh and Dora Milburn. And the substantial background to the whole is provided by Elgin, Ontario, recognized by John Murchison to be "a fair sample of our rising manufacturing towns," and by his son Lorne to be a microcosm of eastern Canadian society: "Elgin market square . . . was the biography of Fox County, and, in little, the history of the whole province."

Elgin's vision focuses on "the immediate, the vital, the municipal." Anchored in common-sense pragmatism, the town distrusts imaginative eccentricity. In Elgin religious fervour "was not beautiful, or dramatic, or self-immolating; it was reasonable;" and young daydreaming Advena Murchison learns that "No one could dream with impunity in Elgin, except in bed." As the microcosmic example of the level-headed, business-minded Canadian community, Elgin supplies the formal testing-ground for Lorne's idealism and judges less by principle than by economic practicability. When Lorne accepts the Liberal nomination in a federal by-election and makes imperialism the keynote of his platform, the whole country looks to Elgin to indicate the national reaction to the Idea and sees in Elgin a mirror of itself.

The town's solid, practical personality manifests itself in Mrs. Murchison and, on a more sophisticated level, in Dr. Drummond. "The central figure . . . with her family radiating from her," Mrs. Murchison contains the stability of everyday reality: she knows that the crises of ordinary living are whether Abby's baby has the whooping cough and what to serve the minister for tea. On her own level of apprehension she sees through the ideal of England when Lorne returns with his clothes "ingrained with London smut," and she implicitly understands the emotional realities that Advena and Finlay try so hard to idealize away because, in her common-sense world, no young man and young woman can see so much of one another without falling in love. Dr. Drummond, the Scottish Presbyterian minister, exemplifies a similar intuitive grasp of ordinary life. While his limitations are those of any man who moves "with precision along formal and implicit lines" and whose study is lined "with standard religious philosophy, standard poets, standard fiction, all that was standard and nothing that was not," his fundamental knowledge of human behaviour enables him to confront Finlay's misguided idealism and to inform him that he and Advena are "a pair of born lunatics" for their determination to sacrifice love to principle.

While Elgin, Mrs. Murchison and Dr. Drummond represent the primary level of vision — namely common sense and practical conduct — there runs in them a deep vein of old loyalties and half-hidden emotional ties waiting to be tapped by Lorne's more penetrating imagination. For all its spirit of North American

enterprise, Elgin, "this little outpost of Empire," maintains its umbilical ties in its annual lively celebration of the Queen's Birthday; the importance of this event to the Murchison children fills Duncan's opening chapter. Dr. Drummond and John Murchison emigrated from Scotland together and transferred their concerns entirely to the new world, yet "obscure in the heart of each of them ran the undercurrent of the old allegiance." Allegiance to tradition inspired Mrs. Murchison to name her first two daughters after their grandmothers, Lorne after the Marquis de Lorne (Governor-general of Canada from 1878 to 1883) whose mother-in-law was Queen Victoria, and two sons after Canadian Liberal party leaders. In addition, Lorne Murchison grows up in the old Plummer place, a home distinguished by the "attractiveness of the large ideas upon which it had been built and designed." This atmosphere of "large ideas," Elgin's lingering "sentiment of affection for the reigning house," and Lorne's early manifestation of "that active sympathy with the disabilities of his fellow-beings which stamped him later so intelligent a meliorist" are all absorbed into his earnest personality and into the making of his idealistic imperialism. In her careful plotting of Lorne's background Duncan weaves an intricate fabric of colonial affections which requires only Lorne's personality to tailor it into the imperialist banner.

**B**UT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT than the content of Lorne's idealism is his idealism itself, as *The Imperialist* focuses squarely upon the personality of the idealist. For Duncan, idealism results more from temperament than from philosophy. Hence her two principal idealists, Lorne Murchison and Hugh Finlay, are described in remarkably similar terms although the actual forms of their idealism differ greatly.

Hugh Finlay, the young Presbyterian minister from Dumfriesshire, and Lorne Murchison, the young Canadian lawyer, are two examples of the same "type": sincere, open, at times almost simple, and noticeably different from everyone else in intensity and visionary focus. Both inhabit a dimension beyond the ordinary, both appeal to others by their strength of personality, and Duncan describes both in terms of expanded horizons. Lorne's face is "lighted by a certain simplicity of soul that pleased even when it was not understood;" he is "frank and open, with horizons and intentions; you could see them in his face." Similarly Finlay is "a passionate romantic . . . with a shock of black hair and deep dreams in his eyes . . . a type . . . of the simple motive and the noble intention, the detached point of view and the somewhat indifferent attitude to material

things." Like Lorne, he has "horizons, lifted lines beyond the common vision, and an eye rapt and a heart intrepid." Circumstance and place of birth rather than temperament direct Lorne's idealism towards political theory, and Finlay's towards personal sacrifice and the upholding of old moral allegiances. While the story of Lorne's political career has nothing to do with the story of Finlay's romantic involvements, the parallel plots complement one another as the new world idealist finds his moral inspiration in the old world, and the old world idealist looks to the new world for "elbow-room" yet cannot shake off his old world ties.

Lorne's incipient idealism finds its focus when he is invited to be secretary to a deputation from the United Chambers of Commerce of Canada shortly to wait upon the British government "to press for the encouragement of improved communications within the Empire." For Lorne the Empire immediately becomes "the whole case;" Canada has stuck with and must continue to stick with England for "the moral advantage." Once in England, Lorne alone is not disillusioned by "the unready conception of things, the political concentration on parish affairs, the cumbrous social machinery . . . the problems of sluggish overpopulation" which depress the other members of his delegation. Instead he colours all with his idealism, and sees "England down the future the heart of the Empire, the conscience of the world, and the Mecca of the race" if only the colonies will come to her economic aid.

Once Lorne's idealistic temperament attaches itself to imperialism, enthusiasm rather than reason determines the course of his career. On his return to Canada his gift for transmitting his earnestness becomes the source of his political attractiveness: "at the late fall fairs and in the lonely country schoolhouses his talk had been so trenchant, so vivid and pictorial, that the gathered farmers listened with open mouths, like children, pathetically used with life, to a "grown-up fairy tale." That imperialism is little more than a "grown-up fairy tale" is implied by the outcome of Lorne's career. His growing feeling that he rides "upon the crest of a wave of history," and that he is the instrument of "an intention, a great purpose in the endless construction and re-construction of the world" severs him from the pragmatic reality of Elgin. Once the Idea takes possession of him he proves incapable of following the advice of the Liberals to subdue his imperialism which is becoming increasingly suspect in the business community. As a result he barely wins the election, and when irregularities are charged by both sides and the seat is to be re-contested, the Liberals ask him to withdraw. Lorne's idealistic vision — his overly expanded horizons which cause

him to lose touch with the primary, common-sense vision of his community — makes him a unique figure in the canon of Canadian hero-victims: he wins the election, but he loses the seat.

Into her pattern of levels of vision Duncan works an Elgin-level idealist who, by juxtaposition, accentuates Lorne's loftier idealism. Elmore Crow, Lorne's former schoolmate, goes out west only to discover that from a common-sense point of view normality is best: "you've got to get up just as early in the mornings out there as y'do anywhere, far's I've noticed. An' it's a lonesome life. Now I *am* back, I don't know but little old Ontario's good enough for me." Having "wore out his Winnipeg clothes and his big ideas," Crow returns to the family farm and makes himself useful.

But like Lorne, Finlay and Advena live far above the plane of useful reality. The lovers are saved from the adverse consequences of their idealism only by the *deus ex machina* intervention of Dr. Drummond. The two meet after Advena has already loved Finlay from afar, and much of Finlay's bungling stems from his inexperience with women and his inability to perceive Advena's love until things have already progressed to a point of deep emotional commitment. Artistically, perhaps the finest passage of the book is the scene of their first real encounter which sets the subsequent direction of their relationship.

Late on an April afternoon — the time of year is the transition into spring, and the time of day the transition into evening — Finlay overtakes Advena on his way home. They walk in silence together, and Advena feels that the event is "pregnant, auspicious" — like the time of day and the time of year, the brink of something. When they turn a corner and the sunset suddenly bursts upon them, Finlay, the recent emigrant from the old world, marvels that "it's something to be in a country where the sun still goes down with a thought of the *primaeval*." Advena, born and raised in Canada, prefers "the sophistication of chimney-pots" and longs "to see a sunset in London, with the fog breaking over Westminster." After some witty exchange they go their separate ways. Finlay's road lies "to the north, which was still snowbound," while Advena's is into the "yellow west, with the odd sweet illusion that a summer day was dawning."

In the paradoxes worked into this scene Duncan maps the lovers' course. For all his admiration of the "*primaeval*," Finlay remains morally and intellectually "snowbound" by convention. By birth a northern man (from Dumfriesshire), his northern route to his home in the new world concretely expresses his old world vision, which is embodied in his intractable resolve to honour an engagement of convenience to a distant cousin made before his departure for Canada.

In contrast, Advena's new world vision and western direction signify her greater consciousness of passion and emotional freedom, and her capacity to see that Finlay's "dim perception of his own case was grotesque." While she glances intellectually towards chimney-pots and Westminster, and does try to support Finlay's conventionalism and his marriage to Christie Cameron, it is her passion that finally shatters their idealistic self-renunciation. So long as they maintain their idealism — their intellectual refinement which allows them the illusion that theirs is a "friendship of spirit" — the course of their relationship runs northerly, towards frozen passion and ice-bound convention. But when Advena meets Finlay in a thunderstorm and passionately declares "We aren't to bear it", and Dr. Drummond conveniently decides to marry Christie himself, the lovers turn abruptly towards the yellow west and the frontier of emotional freedom.

In Duncan's pattern of levels of vision Lorne and Finlay are two versions of the same thing: two sides of the woven carpet, to return to Henry James's metaphor. While Lorne's idealism is directed outward, towards an impossible "union of the Anglo-Saxon nations of the world," Finlay's is entirely personal, designed to avoid "the sacrifice of all that I hold most valuable in myself." Just as Lorne expatiates on the moral advantages of imperialism without working out the concrete economic details, so Finlay expatiates on the freedom of the new world without perceiving his imprisonment by the conventions of the old world. As idealists, they are removed from the primary, common-sense vision of Elgin; but because they are idealists, their motivation is well-intentioned: Lorne wishes to save the Empire, Finlay to save his principles.

**D**UNCAN ADDS another dimension to her pattern of levels of vision with the self-centredness of Alfred Hesketh and Dora Milburn. As with everything else, Lorne's apprehension of Hesketh, an independently wealthy, apparently benevolent young Englishman whom he meets in London, is coloured by his idealism: "Hesketh stood, to him, a product of that best which he was so occupied in admiring and pursuing. . . . There is no doubt that his manners were good, and his ideas unimpeachable in the letter; the young Canadian read the rest into him and loved him for what he might have been." Hesketh is sufficiently inspired by Lorne's infectious idealism to come to Elgin, but once he arrives Lorne realizes that Hesketh is a useless twit. "I certainly liked him better, over there," he confesses to Advena, "but then he was a part of it. . . . Over here you seem to see round him somehow." Lorne's doubts about Hesketh's place in

Canada are borne out when Hesketh, campaigning for Lorne, succeeds only in alienating his audience by his condescension and snobbery. Like Finlay, Hesketh carries all his old world attitudes to the new world; he fails even to perceive the gap between his class-conscious Englishness and middle-class Elgin's egalitarianism and pragmatism. Hence he admires the affectedly English Milburns as "the most typically Canadian family" for "Miss Milburn will compare with any English girl." But unlike Finlay, Hesketh lacks principles. While his ostensible purpose in coming to Elgin is to help Lorne spread the gospel of imperialism under the aegis of the Liberal party, he finds it easily convenient to swing his allegiance to the Conservatives — Mr. Milburn's party — when he becomes involved with Dora, and to develop a consuming interest in Milburn's traction engines. Hesketh completes his betrayal of Lorne when he announces his engagement to Dora, to whom Lorne had already given a ring. But in Duncan's scheme Dora and Hesketh belong together, for by their self-importance they hold themselves aloof from Elgin society, and by their lack of principle and their selfish motivation they operate on a level far beneath the high-mindedness of the idealists.

Lorne's romanticized vision of Dora prevents him from perceiving the selfishness underlying her coyness and her continual evasion of a definite promise. Not at all the goddess of Lorne's conception, Dora presents "a dull surface to the more delicate vibration of things," and to her one of the most significant ramifications of Lorne's trip to England is that she will lose her escort to the regatta. She cannot stand to see propriety disturbed — "When she was five years old and her kitten broke its leg, she had given it to a servant to drown" — and Lorne's enthusiasm disturbs propriety. She also cannot stand to be ignored, and when she feels at times that "Between politics and boilers . . . the world held a second place for her," she graciously accepts the attentions of Alfred Hesketh. While Elgin views the world from the level of common sense, and Lorne and Finlay see things through their exalted idealism, Hesketh's and Dora's level of vision is limited to self-interest.

Even after her pattern became clear, Duncan's personal attitude toward her characters remains strangely vague. The first-person voice which frequently enters the narrative is probably Duncan herself, but even this voice remains so detached that apart from overt disapproval of the self-centred characters it refuses to commit itself to more than a distant, ironic sense of sympathy with both the common-sense community and the idealists. If there is a character who represents the author's point of view it would have to be Advena, who straddles

the common-sense and the idealistic worlds, and who views Elgin and her brother with detached sympathy. Advena appears to abandon the solid reality of her parents' world when she supports Finlay's marriage to Christie, but her common-sense roots finally assert themselves. When she passionately declares to Finlay that she can no longer maintain their ideal she feels that all is lost: "Before she had preferred an ideal to the desire of her heart; now it lay about her; her strenuous heart had pulled it down to foolish ruin." But the ruin of the ideal is "foolish" to Advena only initially; Duncan makes it clear that it is the ideal itself that is foolish — the fabrication of two people "too much encumbered with ideas to move simply, quickly on the impulse of passion." Lorne destroys his political career because his idealism is too passionate; Finlay and Advena nearly ruin their lives because their idealism is too intellectual. If Duncan intended any message beyond her exploration of the different levels of vision at which different people operate, it could be the Renaissance ideal of temperance — the balance of passion and reason which produces concrete human achievement.

*The Imperialist* has unfortunately suffered the neglect accorded to much literature based on a topical political situation. What in 1904 the *Canadian Magazine* found "opportune" the modern reader now finds obscure, since Duncan assumes her readers' familiarity with the imperialist movement. Like Marvell's *Painter* satires, *The Imperialist* requires some annotation and explanation. But once made accessible, the book reveals itself to be one of the most sophisticated and penetrating Canadian novels written before World War I. Sara Jeannette Duncan's scheme of levels of vision, her ability to work ideas into the structure of her narrative, and her detached sympathy for both her idealists and her common-sense characters raise *The Imperialist* above the local and the historical into the universal concerns of literature.