

COLONIALISM AND ART

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THE word "colonialism" is less frequently used within a colony, I should say, than outside, and never with quite the same meaning in each place. Europeans have kept it in circulation; and in later years, since they feel themselves to have outgrown the opprobrium, the United States. I wonder how many Canadians have had to go abroad to feel its full significance, to learn what timidity, what lack of initiative and the daring that goes with genius, can be packed into it; to be persuaded that the colonial spirit and the arts do not walk together.

Nothing is more exasperating to one who has never seen his homeland as a cringing little dependency, with no ambition beyond imitating the motherland in everything, than this rather superior attitude. The fact that there is some truth in it makes it no more endurable. But it would seem that there may be a tendency to confuse colonialism with the legitimately slow stages of spiritual and intellectual development that come to any new civilization. These differ little whether the country happens to be a colony or an independent political unit; first the barren period as far as the arts are concerned, since the pioneer has no time or strength left for them; then the beginnings of leisure, and the first gropings after refinement and necessities of the soul. After an ungainly interval of assimilating their crude and overstimulating backgrounds, the colonial and his contemporary, the proud citizen of the republic, strike out in creative work. But here the similarity is supposed to end. The poor colonial cannot keep up with the wide, audacious thoughts of the other. His heavy respect for the traditions and opinions of a mother country he may never have seen hinder his stride. He cannot shake off this national inferiority complex known as colonialism. No matter how valiantly he struggles, he remains a mediocrity.

That was why Olive Schreiner took the wind so completely out of Europe's literary sails when she burst on them, back in the eighties. "The only person of genius that any of the colonies has ever produced", Sir Charles Dilke said, at the time. He might have added "or ever will produce," for he and most of his contemporaries regarded the gifted South African as a freak of nature not likely to be repeated.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth." If England had been looking over her colonies for signs of literary genius beginning to sprout she would hardly have picked that little mud-floored home in the Wittenbergen Mission, in the wilds of Cape Colony, as favorable soil. It seems incredible even now, the story of that remarkable child, growing up on the veld with very little formal education, teaching Boer youngsters in little schools, beginning to write the books that were to stir the world in a room so primitive that she had to hold an umbrella over her when it rained, and dig a trench in the mud floor to let the water run off. Then, after she had managed to save the money for her passage, her starting off to England, at the age of twenty-six armed with her manuscript, *The Story of an African Farm!*

No one can account for Olive Schreiner. Some of us who grew up too late to come under the scope of her influence may have been puzzled at one time to understand it. We were told that she had a brilliant intellect, ideas far in advance of her time, and extraordinary personal magnetism; but did anyone ever build up such an extensive reputation on three slender little books soon to grow old-fashioned? Her life story published after her death by her husband only increased the mystery, but the two posthumous novels, or unfinished fragments, which have come out since, throw light on it. *Undine* could not, perhaps, add so much to her previous reputation, but no one can read more than the first chapter of *From Man to Man* without realizing that Olive Schreiner's contemporaries did not over-estimate her. The scope of her mind, the clarity of her thought, her sympathetic knowledge of men and women, give her work a richness that would have made her unusual in any period. She was not ahead of her time—any more than Jane Austen, Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson. A permanent artist belongs to every time. He penetrates beneath the superficial differences that belong to his generation, and interprets for us the core of life that is unchanging in every age. The great tragedy of Olive Schreiner's career is that ill-health, a passionate and tempestuous disposition, and a sensitiveness that made "encounters between her soul and the outer world" too much for her, prevented her from completing a large volume of work.

After Olive Schreiner's spectacular appearance, South African writers dropped into obscurity again. The Boer War, and the discovery of the diamond fields in Kimberley and gold in the Rand, changed the scene. The South Africa of Rebecca and Bertie and the African Farm was submerged in a swift tide of material development.

The next colonial writer to shake the complacency of established literary circles hailed as unexpectedly from New Zealand. The amount of Katherine Mansfield's published work is even more slender than Olive Schreiner's, and she had scarcely begun to enjoy recognition when she died at the age of thirty-five; but her fame in art continues to grow.

She was born as Kathleen Beauchamp in Wellington, New Zealand, just at the time when Olive Schreiner was fraternizing with such literary and political celebrities as Havelock Ellis and Cecil Rhodes. Her parents were well-to-do, and she was sent to London at the age of thirteen to school. She returned five years later, but was so discontented that her family were persuaded to let her go back. Her allowance was too small to live on, and she took parts in travelling opera companies to earn a little and, in the meantime, tried to write. Her health broke down early, and was her great handicap till she died. Some of her best work was done when she was very ill, or trying to find health in Italy, Switzerland or the south of France.

But no amount of pain or discouragement could dull her sensitiveness to beauty. No prose writer has captured and put into words more of the rapture and loveliness of life than Katherine Mansfield. Her short stories, particularly those set in New Zealand, *are* life. They move and breathe. You don't get a picture of the morning mist smothering the gum-trees, the fuchias and marigolds, even the sheep and the shepherd, in *At the Bay*; you are actually drenched, soaked in it, yourself. You don't imagine the wind in *The Wind Blows*. You feel yourself rocking in it. You hear the house shaking, the sea sobbing "A-ah", the trees straining. Surely no one ever extracted more of either joy or suffering from life than Katherine Mansfield!

Shortly after the news of her death had shocked the literary world, another book came out of South Africa, the new South Africa. People were discussing *God's Stepchildren*, and asking "Who is Sarah Gertrude Millin?" When this brilliant novel was followed by a slender but more perfect piece of work, *Mary Glenn*, critics in Europe and America had to say: "Well, a colonial has done it again!" A sentence I recall from one of the reviews shows the general attitude: "Let Australia and Canada take notice that even a colony may produce a first-rate artist." It was natural that the new writer should be compared with Olive Schreiner, but no kinship could be found except in intensity of feeling, and the fact that neither tried to make her own obscure little country anything more than it was. Their characters, whether ugly or beauti-

ful are real, not romantic puppets dancing in an Arcady that could never have admitted squabbling Kaffirs and sweating miners, brothels and the heart-breaking tragedy of being near-white.

Australia had in the meantime been growing up; but none of its novelists had become known. One of them, working quietly, was Henrietta Richardson, who wrote under the pen-name of Henry Handel Richardson. She had been educated in her home town of Melbourne, and then gone to Leipzig to study music. She gave that up after three years, settled down in London and began to write. Her first book, *Maurice Guest*, published in 1908, received high praise from a few distinguished critics, but had small sales. Its author went on writing, keeping to her own style, taking about four years to a novel and contriving to find publishers. She had enough faith in herself to begin a trilogy of books dealing with Richard Townshend Mahoney, an aristocratic, sensitive young Irish doctor who was the last person that could be expected to fit into a raw pioneer country. She paid visits to Australia and ransacked the country for material. She dug into files of old newspapers and out-of-print pamphlets, and listened to reminiscences of early settlers. The story begins in the 'fifties when the gold fever was at its height, and conveys an accurate picture of that picturesque time. It is even more a masterpiece of characterization. The friends Richard Mahoney makes, and his enemies, his wife and his wife's people play their parts in a vivid, highly coloured drama.

The first two volumes, brought out by different publishers, made very little stir, though the critics called them good. Then one of the surprises came that make the publishing business so thrilling. The third volume of a trilogy, everyone knows, is handicapped. It takes a genius to sustain the interest begun in the first chapters throughout three books. But it was the third volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* that became an instant success. People everywhere were reading and crying over Richard Mahoney's disintegration in *Ultima Thule*, before they had known him in his prime in *Australia Felix* and *The Way Home*. The unassuming Australian woman who wrote them had taken her place not only among best sellers but among the great names of literature.

Colonialism has come to mean more than insularity or provincialism. It implies a belittling of the place where one's roots are planted, if it does not happen to be an independent nation, and a tremendous respect for that headwater and source of all inspiration, the motherland. The artist reared in this atmosphere, find-

ing nothing of literary value in his natural environment, goes afield for material, and his work lacks character. If he does attempt to do anything with what is legitimately his own, his want of confidence in it makes the result the same. It is the person who feels that the land of his birth can hold up her head with any nation who knows how to value his heritage. He seizes on the material familiar to him because he prefers it to anything, anywhere, and handling it boldly, deftly, turns out a masterpiece.

It is an interesting theory, this one about colonialism being a hindrance to art, and undoubtedly partly true. But New England, though no longer a colony, had not shaken off the colonial spirit when she had her golden age of writers, some of them of the very first water. Possibly Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett and one or two others were able to free themselves of that paralyzing respect for English culture that is so evident in the work of some of their contemporaries. But in the case of the four writers we have been considering it appears that the one thing they have in common is not a satisfaction with their native lands as they are, but a hankering to get away from them. Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield and Henrietta Richardson made for England as soon as they could get there, and many of the characters they create reflect the same tendency to look toward the Old Country for everything worth while. Richard Mahoney's tirades against Australia might be partly excused by neurosis and homesickness; but Mary, his wife, who was perfectly content with what the colony had to offer, had, though she was a remarkable woman, a comfortable middle class mind. The conclusion is that to highly sensitized natures, like Richard's, with an appreciation of beauty and refinement, the new country is crude and unbearable.

Mrs. Millin's Mary Glenn, the superior girl in her town, made a bad mess of her life because of the same colonial complex. She refused one of the finest of her own countrymen, to marry a man decidedly his inferior because he came from the Old Country, with English manners and an aristocratic accent. The reverence of the little South African town for the very name of London permeates the book. And when Mrs. Millin portrays for us the artistic type in *An Artist in the Family*, she makes it appear that if Theo, "the authentic artist", had remained in the sympathetic atmosphere of the older countries to carry on his painting, he might have met with recognition and success instead of the negation and bitterness, that ended in tragedy, at home.

But this dissatisfaction with one's native land which may be interpreted as colonialism does not, strangely enough, interfere

with a passionate love of country. Katherine Mansfield could not endure the stodginess, the limitations, the provincialism of New Zealand, but her heart goes back to it wherever she may be. Her resolve to dedicate herself to recreating life as she had known it there was made to discharge a "sacred debt", to her own country as well as to the memory of her brother killed in the war. It is a question in some minds as to whether Katherine Mansfield's method, so exquisitely neat and sparkling and sure in shorter things, would have proved as suitable for the more sustained work she was never able to finish. Her own ideas on her novel of New Zealand, if we may judge from her *Journal*, are not always clear; but the fragments she left do make us vividly aware of those far away island provinces, of the charm of aloes and camellias, of karka trees "with their broad gleaming leaves and their clusters of yellow fruit", of the old coal hulks, green-lighted, in the harbor, and the Picton boat at night, "all hung with bright beads." That Picton boat, as we knew it in *The Voyage*, is almost as real as any ship we have actually travelled on. It is easy to see, when she dwells so lovingly on details, how precious the memory of every commonplace object must have been.

It may be that colonialism is compatible with love of country but not with belief in it. Yet, however she might regard living in New Zealand, Katherine Mansfield never underestimated its literary value. And Olive Schreiner, writing when her great ambition was to save enough out of her thin salary to take her to England, touches her background with the same tenderness and records impressions with the same passionate intensity. She considers the veld and the bush no less important than the heaths and downs of England or even the storied streets of London itself. She may be essentially colonial, but she sees no reason to apologize because the mimosa is not the hawthorne or the cock-a-veet the skylark or nightingale of the Old Country.

They will tell you in Australia that Henry Handel Richardson is out of sympathy with her native land, that Richard Mahoney's attitude toward it is to some degree her own. But she could never have gone into the months of painstaking research necessary to reconstructing a forgotten part of her country's past if she had considered it second in importance to any place on earth. Her keen insight into such commonplace and perhaps typically colonial characters as Tilly and Purdy, fat Mrs. Devine and Jake, could have grown only out of complete understanding and affection. She must have felt that they had quite as much right to be immortalized as Mr. Micawber, Lizzy Bennett's sisters or little

Ruth Huckaback. And you know that she has felt what she is talking about when she describes "a rank nostalgia for the scent of aromatic foliage; for the honey fragrance of the wattle; the perfume that rises hot and heavy as steam from vast paddocks of sweet flowering lucerne—even for the sting and tang of countless miles of bush ablaze."

Mrs. Millin's fellow-countrymen have a complaint about her. They find her stories not as typically South African as some by their lesser novelists, and say they might have been written anywhere. They do not impress outsiders in the same way, though they are less rich in local colour than Olive Schreiner's. Mrs. Millin's style is more concise and restrained than the earlier writer's. Her characterizations are done with sure, pitiless strokes, and her situations are poignant and dramatic. *God's Stepchildren* is surely part of its locality. Mary Glenn and Brand and Theo Bissaker might have been born somewhere else, but the drama of their lives would have been different. The problems they face grow naturally out of contacts with their peculiar background, even though you may not feel it and smell it and taste it continually as you do Doctor Mahoney's Ballarat or Linda Burnell's New Zealand.

If colonialism means leaning too heavily on the mother country, Canada might be said to have less of it than any of the scattered parts of the Empire. Canadian painters have made themselves a name by striking out into original paths and developing a truly native art. But, while we have many talented poets and novelists, I think we have yet to discover among us anyone who can be classed as a really first-rate literary artist. There is no need to apologize about it; nor anything to be gained by hunting around for reasons, because there is no accounting for genius. Certain general conditions may be described as favorable, some amount of leisure, some degree of culture; but the ground may be prepared a long time before the unusual appears. Yet it may pop up, unexpectedly, in apparently sterile soil.

One thing seems to be pretty conclusively proved. The artist must have his roots definitely planted in some locality. He cannot be a man without a country without its affecting his work. If his colonialism leads him, as it did Henry James, to cut himself off spiritually as well as physically from his homeland, to seek his material elsewhere, he is tremendously handicapped. If Katherine Mansfield and Henry Handel Richardson and Olive Schreiner had forgotten their own countries as soon as they had gratified their ambition to get away from them, what a difference it would have made in the quality of their work!

Perhaps there are two kinds of colonialism, one meaning spiritual estrangement, the other merely physical. The former may be fatal to art; but the latter, having nothing of contempt in it, only a deep, brooding pity, may be a spur. It even seems as if the more obscure and under-valued our own little corner of the world may be, the more intensely we long to give it an importance, to make up for the way the gods have neglected it by forcing people to recognize it and see it as we do.

The advice being broadcasted now about inferiority complexes, both personal and national, is sound. Perhaps we all might sift and examine our attitude to the country we call ours. Possibly our national slant of mind may not be conducive to the development of art. But in the meantime no one can say when and where genius may suddenly blossom out of this young and vigorous land. If an artist has the right stuff in him, it will take more than the fetters of colonialism of any sort, I think, to silence him completely.