

Sara Jeannette Duncan and Stephen Leacock: Two Master Satirists of Religion and Politics

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Article abstract

There is no hard evidence that when he wrote *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Stephen Leacock had read Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904). In addition to circumstantial factors, however, internal evidence in the form of a tonal resemblance and key plot parallels — a bank robbery and a dominion election — suggests that Leacock had read Duncan. A comparative discussion of the novels throws into sharp relief not only the modulations of Leacock's and Duncan's satire, but also how Duncan's liberal individualism contrasts suggestively with Leacock's pragmatic conservatism. The striking similarities and engaging differences between the works suggest that the two authors would have had much to say to each other about the forces shaping Canadian life.

Sara Jeannette Duncan and Stephen Leacock: Two Master Satirists of Religion and Politics

JANICE FIAMENGO

THERE IS NO HARD EVIDENCE that when he wrote *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Stephen Leacock had read Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904) or even knew of her work generally. He was fond of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, and did not believe in reading for patriotic reasons.¹ Yet the title alone of *The Imperialist* should have earned it a place in Leacock's personal library: he was an active supporter of an expanded role for Canada in the British Empire, having toured the Empire in 1907 to promote imperial unity,² and he would have found much to interest him, and likely to agree with, in Duncan's affectionately ironic portrait of imperial sentiment in small-town Ontario. His best-known short essay on imperialism, "Greater Canada: An Appeal" (1907), contains phrases that could have been drawn straight from Lorne Murchison's doomed election-eve rhapsody in *The Imperialist*.³ Moreover, D.M.R. Bentley has revealed that in 1905, Leacock reviewed three studies of imperialism published in the same year as Duncan's novel, making it likely that he would have come across her book in his research (6-7).

In addition to such circumstantial factors, internal evidence in the form of a tonal resemblance and key plot parallels — a bank robbery and a dominion election, to be discussed below — strengthens the suggestion that Leacock had read Duncan. Although the matter cannot be definitively settled, I have taken the possibility of direct literary influence as an occasion to compare the portraits of small-town life offered by these two major Canadian writers. The two works have not often been discussed comparatively.⁴ Such a discussion will throw into sharp relief not only the modulations of Leacock's and Duncan's satire, complex enough to have provoked critical disagreement for decades, but also the distinctive moral perspectives⁵ from which each author wrote, the latter aspect almost completely neglected in recent commentary.

Much modern literary criticism, reading texts such as these in light of our period's interests in gender, race, and class, tends to elide the differences between them. Their commitment to the British Empire and rejection of various forms of social radicalism might make Duncan and Leacock seem similarly conservative.⁶ Neither author wrote specifically to raise awareness about social injustice — even the feminism of Duncan's portrayal is moderate, wary of excess — and their works do not lend themselves well to interpretative strategies highlighting opposition. But if both are to some extent conservative in their desire to preserve Canada's British institutions and culture, they are not conservative in the same way, and when we read the texts on their own terms, we may be struck by how very differently the two authors understood the central issue of Canadian life then as now — the opportunities for human freedom and flourishing it offered. On the relation of the individual to the community and the nature of the collective good, Duncan's liberal individualism contrasts suggestively with Leacock's pragmatic conservatism.

Duncan had been living away from Canada, in India, for over a decade when she wrote *The Imperialist*, and distance may at least partially account for the overtone of nostalgia⁷ with which she leavened her satire of a self-satisfied manufacturing town from which “the arts conspired to be absent” (64). Duncan's attitude to Canada always involved a mixture of impatience and love, of mockery and pride. Having made her literary debut in the United States as editor of the *Washington Post* in the mid-1880s, she had been impressed by American energy and confidence as well as by the sheer variety and originality of the American social experiment. In contrast, she despaired over her Canadian compatriots' hidebound conventionality and indifference to culture, famously declaring Ontario “one great Camp of the Philistines” (“Saunterings,” 30 Sept. 1886, 707) and noting that “literary sensations [were] about as infrequent as earthquakes” (“Woman's World” 6). As a young journalist, she often mocked conventional opinion, presenting herself as an insouciant nonconformist who refused all orthodoxies. In her novels, independent young women or quirky visionaries attempt to pursue their dreams in communities ill-suited to nurture them.

Whether writing about the advancement of women, protective labour legislation, or the future of the arts in Canada, Duncan expressed her bedrock faith in the free individual's capacity for achievement when

the deadening imperatives of the approved and the expected could be overcome. Writing in *The Week* on the question of whether women's wages were fair, she opined that women should "think less of bewailing our injuries and more of repairing them" ("Saunterings," 2 Dec. 1886, 6) by acquiring marketable skills. Hers was a classically liberal position — at times buoyantly future-oriented, at times skeptical or hard-headed — and it is no accident that Lorne Murchison, the idealistic hero of *The Imperialist*, runs as a by-election candidate for the Liberal party. He is defeated, ultimately, because the cautious and pragmatic citizens of his town of Elgin cannot respond adequately to the splendid national vision he offers them.⁸

If Lorne is greater than his community, the opposite is the case in Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, in which the sun-dappled community of Mariposa takes centre stage and the only man who proves himself smarter than the town is the amoral outsider and tavern keeper, Josh Smith. The most thoroughly conventional characters, such as bank clerk Peter Pupkin and his feather-brained beloved, Zena Pepperleigh, are also the most lovable. Leacock's is emphatically not a vision of a heroic individual struggling to be free of social norms. The individual in *Sunshine Sketches* — whether that be Jefferson Thorpe with his dumb luck in financial speculation or Henry Mullins reading a telegram from himself to himself at the inaugural luncheon for the revenue-negative Whirlwind Campaign — invariably proves, despite good intentions, risibly inept, ignoble, and self-aggrandizing. The individual's only salvation, in Leacock's view, lies in the established cultural organizations, particularly the church, that channel self-love in socially beneficial ways.

By the time he published *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock was a confirmed Red Tory conservative who had for some years balanced a career as a political economist at McGill University with his writing life as a humourist and social critic. He wrote articles on the pressing social issues of his time, including the worrisome decline of religious belief, the hypocrisy of prohibition, and the sorry fact of social inequality. An expert on laissez-faire economics — the title of his University of Chicago doctoral dissertation, indeed, was "The Doctrine of Laissez-Faire," (Bowker x) — he saw a role for government in alleviating poverty and unemployment, but only within a robust capitalist framework, and he was always suspicious of socialist schemes and programs for widescale change. In his social criticism as well as his satirical sketches, Leacock's

commitment was to a slowly evolving, organic society in which all classes were linked by mutual concern and in which human fallibility and greed were held in check by communal organizations established over time.⁹ *Sunshine Sketches* is his ironic portrait of such a fragile and imperfect community.¹⁰

The authors' different emphases are evident in their distinctive handling of a shared plot element: a bank robbery that may be based, as Bentley suggests (6), on a real Ontario robbery case reported in the *Globe*. In each work, the public investigation and simultaneous mythologizing of the incident aids the fortunes of the heroes — dramatically in the case of Duncan's Lorne Murchison and comically in the case of Leacock's Peter Pupkin. The difference is that, in *The Imperialist*, it is Lorne who sees and creates, whose vision shapes the community's sympathies and desires; in *Sunshine Sketches*, Pupkin is saved by family and community from his ludicrously tragic impulse to self-slaughter. As junior attorney at law, Lorne defends a young bank teller, Walter Ormiston, who has been charged with theft. The narrator informs us that Lorne wins the court case because he tells a story of deceived innocence and misguided loyalty that is even more compelling than the tale of moral corruption mounted by the prosecutor. With very little hard evidence on either side, Lorne's defence is a splendid fiction, with "that superiority in the art of legerdemain, of mere calm, astonishing manipulation, so applauded in regions where romance has not yet been quite trampled down by reason" (96). The implication is that the townsfolk of Elgin, at least at such moments as these (their best moments), are responsive to this romancer, capable of being won over by a tale appealing to their higher sympathies. Lorne's victory is one of the happier scenes depicting his place in his community, showing him a powerful shaper of the town's imagined narrative; it is a prelude to the election, in which he strives — and fails — to be such a shaper again.

In *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock creates high comedy out of a similar incident, this time making the hapless bank teller the comic hero and unwitting subject of communal mythmaking. Determining late one night to take the revolver from his desk at the bank office in order to kill himself out of thwarted love for Zena Pepperleigh, Pupkin finds himself in the midst of what he believes to be a bank theft. Someone is in the vault, and his instinct is to protect his employer's funds even at the cost of his life. Firing a shot with his revolver just as another shot

is fired at him (by the night watchman, we learn later, in the absence of any real bank robber), he is instantly killed — mortally injured — gravely injured — slightly hurt — barely scratched, and becomes by the next afternoon the brave survivor, appropriately bandaged, of a romantic story of self-sacrifice, “talking of the midnight robbery with that peculiar false modesty that only heroes are entitled to use” (147). Here the evidence is even slimmer than in the Ormiston case, its magical effects even more transformative. The fiction of Pupkin’s heroism prompts the formerly suicidal suitor to propose to the woman he loves (and she to accept him) and brings all to a happy conclusion. As in Elgin before it, the melodrama-loving gossips of Mariposa craft a community-building narrative out of the bathetic materials of human foolishness; for both Duncan and Leacock, such romance is the source of much that is worthy in small communities. But quite unlike the story of Lorne’s victory in *The Imperialist*, in *Sunshine Sketches*, Pupkin does not create his story, and if he had, he would have bungled it. Instead, the story springs up around him, an example of the mythmaking machinery of a little town that produces the stories it requires to sustain itself. Whereas Duncan’s faith is in the individual’s imaginative vision, Leacock’s is in communal traditions.

If the bank robbery is employed by both authors in different ways to highlight the potential of small-town community spirit, another shared plot element — a close-fought election race¹¹ — reveals small-town corruption, again to distinctive ends. The issue in both elections is “the tariff question” (Leacock 161), which concerns, in the heated vernacular of Leacock’s Mariposa, “whether or not Mariposa should become part of the United States, and whether the flag that had waved over the school house at Tecumseh Township for ten centuries should be trampled under the hoof of an alien invader, and whether Britons should be slaves, and whether Canadians should be Britons . . .” (153). In Duncan’s Elgin, too, on the issue of imperial preference trade between Canada and England, “If you would not serve with Wallingham the greatness of Britain you were held to favour going over to the United States” (169), while Lorne’s final election speech refers dramatically to the “American republic effacing . . . the old queen’s head and the new King’s oath” (266). Touching Canada’s political and economic place in the British Empire, the election stokes partisan passions and much discussion of statistics in both towns; also in both, commitment to the

higher principle fails to win out as the electorate ponder whether “there is something in it for them” (Leacock 154). But, again, the controlling vision in each text is distinctive: in *The Imperialist*, the political arena draws visionaries to pursue their dreams; in *Sunshine Sketches*, it attracts only fools and charlatans.

Significant to my claim that *Sunshine Sketches* was likely influenced by *The Imperialist*, Leacock introduces the election plot with what seems an allusion to Duncan’s novel in a domestic scene describing Judge Pepperleigh’s reactions to the daily newspaper. These reactions range from the “perfect howl of suffering” (109) with which he greets bulletins on any Liberal advance to the “good-humoured laugh” (110) with which he acknowledges Conservative victories. In general, the newspaper brings more howls of pain than chuckles of pleasure, with its news of women’s suffrage and European bellicosity; reading the newspaper constitutes for him “a form of wild and stimulating torment” (111). Like so many of the residents of Mariposa (and indeed of Duncan’s Elgin), the judge is a lifelong Conservative, prepared to defend his party’s policies and denounce those of the Liberals without any further knowledge than that they are Conservative or Liberal. The example of the Liberal victory that so disturbs his reading peace is the galling revelation that “the Liberals have carried East Elgin” (109).

Here is a striking point of correspondence between the two works. As any reader of *The Imperialist* will know, support for the Liberals in East Elgin is precisely the kind of local colour detail central to the socio-political plot of Duncan’s novel. East Elgin is the working-class district of this manufacturing town, “all stacks of tall chimneys and rows of little houses” (Duncan 68). A region of recent immigrants and factory workers, it is home to a decent if somewhat soot-stained lot from “the north of Ireland” and “the east of Scotland” (49) who have made it “an unhealthy division for Conservatives” (190). Perhaps it is merely a coincidence, an intriguing one, that Leacock chose a reference to East Elgin as the source of Judge Pepperleigh’s irritation. Given the satirical attention paid by both writers to the devious machinations of small-town party politics, however, the election narrative is worth pursuing for what it reveals about the authors’ respective estimations of the gravity and potential grandeur of the political sphere in human affairs.

In both texts, the election makes possible the rise to new prominence of local personages Lorne Murchison and Josh Smith, whose talent has

previously been widely recognized but whose fortunes develop differently over the course of the election race. In Duncan's comico-tragic satire, the political idealism of the young Liberal candidate founders on the stolidity of his townspeople: committed to conserving Canada's British heritage, Lorne cannot recognize the extent to which practical self-interest dictates the political choices of his neighbours. In the words of Octavius Milburn, whom Lorne never learns to read, "The Empire looks nice on the map" (188) but cannot ever make a difference to everyday politics, where it is "Australia for the Australians, Canada for the Canadians, Africa for the Africans, every time" (242). Lorne, his faith fixed on the moral meaning of the imperial connection, finds it unthinkable that "the great imperial possibility . . . should fail to be perceived and acknowledged as the paramount issue" (259). He is also unable to fathom the extent of the vote rigging, bribery, and trickery that are a normal part of electioneering, and thus becomes innocently entangled in an election-day scandal. The political rot of Elgin all but destroys him.

In the more exuberantly comico-satirical *Sunshine Sketches*, the reverse is true of the political career of Smith, who succeeds as a candidate for the Conservative party precisely because he *does* recognize the centrality of self-interest and the irrelevance of principle in the decisions of the electorate, having realized "that the hotel business formed the natural and proper threshold of the national legislature" (34). Unlike Lorne, who, according to his advisor Horace Williams, "didn't get rid of that save-the-Empire-or-die scheme" (301) soon enough, Smith knows how to abandon an unpopular election platform at the first sign of trouble: he jettisons "Temperance and total prohibition" (164) when it leaves the voters thirsty. After the Smith men are enticed by the "Seventeen bottles of whiskey" said to be on offer from the Liberal candidate, Smith's team drops the "total prohibition plan" and substitutes a brilliantly equivocal "declaration in favour of such a form of restrictive license as should promote temperance while encouraging the manufacture of spirituous liquors" (173). Unlike Lorne, who mistakenly takes for granted "other folks being like himself" (171) — sincere and principled — Smith knows that they are like himself: fundamentally selfish. In *The Imperialist*, the fine candidate alienates the electorate precisely because of his passionate integrity and commitment; in *Sunshine*

Sketches, the winning candidate understands that elections are primarily about emotion and desire.

The difference between these similarly focused narratives is one of tone, and here we see a fundamental contrast between Leacock and Duncan. We are meant to laugh when Judge Pepperleigh pronounces judgement on his various newspaper enemies, for in the world of Leacock's *Mariposa*, the political sphere is so irredeemably corrupt as to be reserved solely for crooks or fools and to merit only dismissive laughter. When Dean Drone's brother, Edward Drone, runs for office as an independent candidate on a platform of "honesty and public morality" (161), his opponents rub their hands and exclaim with astonished delight. Eventually his election streamer, emblazoned with the words "Drone and Honesty" (167), floats away in the breeze into the lake, where it undoubtedly sinks without a trace; and we watch it go without a sigh. The account of Liberal fortunes in *The Imperialist*, on the other hand, is a serious subject for Duncan, as evidenced by the sheer number of words spent detailing campaign platforms, policies, and debates. In her view, politics does not always attract good men, as is proved by the campaign-weathered Walter Winter, whose practiced cynicism revolts his young rival; but if often corrupt in practice, politics is not essentially corrupt, and the novel's admiring accounts of Wallingham in the English House of Commons (really Joseph Chamberlain, Postmaster General and then Chancellor of the Exchequer) demonstrate Duncan's sense of the worthy men and lofty ambitions the political contest ought to involve.

In *Sunshine Sketches*, political actions are simply not very important as an index of character and moral worth, for all men are foolish and crooked in politics, and Judge Pepperleigh's howls and outraged pronouncements tell us nothing essential about the man, whose saving grace, as R.D. MacDonald has argued (101-02), is his love for his no-good dead son and his long-suffering wife. In the description of the *Mariposans* on election day "in their best clothes . . . walk[ing] up and down the street in a solemn way just as they do on the twelfth of July and on St. Patrick's Day, before the fun begins" (174), we have a picture of communal childishness too profound for serious examination. Leacock's vision opposes love and politics: politics tends inevitably to corruption, sharpening vice and error, while love softens and humanizes. In Duncan's *Elgin*, the opposite is true: rather than being opposed,

love and politics are linked, both of them working in the “shadow of the ideal” and having “a tendency to overwork the heart” (300). Politics might even be said to be the truer measure of human worth for Duncan. All of her admirable characters care appropriately about the election, recognizing it as a potentially uplifting contest of ideas.¹² As the great day looms, the entire Murchison family are “permeated with the question of the day” (169). Lorne’s restrained father, John, though “alive to the difficulties involved” in the Liberal platform of imperial federation, finds his “sentimental half . . . ready at any time to give out cautious sparks of sympathy with the splendour of Wallingham’s scheme” (290). Even the ethereal Hugh Finlay preaches a sermon about the imperial connection, afterwards stating his opinion that “political convictions are a man’s birthright” and that “any man or any minister is a poor creature without them” (155). In the sober and almost reverential judgement of the novel’s best characters, politics is the not unworthy means by which a community’s possibilities may be realized.

One might go so far as to say that political judgement and action in *The Imperialist* are a reflection, even a magnification, of the qualities of character that distinguish one human being from another. Lorne and Alfred Hesketh are not so different in their courtship behaviour — both fall in love with the same shallow, unworthy girl — but their political visions are in no sense alike: Hesketh’s “open mind” (136), a mind stuffed full of hollow truisms, stands in marked contrast to Lorne’s capacity “to see larger things” (83). Lorne’s mistake, in fact, is to believe that “gazing in the same direction . . . they saw the same thing” (136). And it is not until the election is called that Hesketh’s boorishness and insensibility are revealed, most fully in his Jordanville speech, when he cannot help but show his condescension to the farmers he addresses, despite assurances that he sees the virtues under their “rough unpolished exterior” (221). Until that point, he seems a likeable enough, if class-bound and conventional, young man, with good manners and “ideas unimpeachable in the letter” (137). In tracing Lorne’s refusal to betray the spirit of his political ideal, Duncan reveals the qualities of vision, conviction, and dedication that make him such an attractive person.

Duncan’s sense of the profound possibilities of politics leads to some of the most meticulously realized moments in the narrative as well as to the most exalted, as in Lorne’s election-eve speech. Her lengthy expositions of the advantages and disadvantages of imperial preference trade

reveal both her own fascination with such details and her conviction that they would rightfully absorb the attention of discerning readers. Leacock, in contrast, sketches only a few terse and hilarious vignettes:

“Mr. Smith,” said the chairman of a delegation of the manufacturers of Mariposa, “what do you propose to do in regard to the tariff if you’re elected?”

“Boys,” answered Mr. Smith, “I’ll put her up so darned high they won’t never get her down again.”

“Mr. Smith,” said the chairman of another delegation, “I’m an old free trader — ”

“Put it there,” said Mr. Smith, “so’m I. There ain’t nothing like it.” (167-68)

Leacock’s comic indictment of political corruption in Mariposa is thus set against Duncan’s ironically tender requiem for an ideal. Perhaps the political economist Leacock, who in 1911 campaigned for the Conservative Party against Wilfrid Laurier’s support of unrestricted reciprocity with the United States,¹³ could afford to laugh at fictional politics, while the disenfranchised Duncan, intensely aware of her political disabilities, could not summon such emotional distance.

When we turn to the texts’ treatment of religion, on the other hand, it is Duncan who adopts the sunny view while Leacock laughs only through bitter tears. In both works, clergymen and church doings offer rich fields for satirical humour about the contamination of the spiritual by worldly concerns. In *Sunshine Sketches*, religious corruption is presented as a profound evil — something far more serious than political corruption — striking at the heart of the community. The stories of Dean Drone’s self-absorbed ineffectuality are arguably the darkest in the cycle. In contrast, Duncan’s portrait of Dr. Drummond’s affectations is lighthearted and forgiving. No one is devout in Elgin — as the narrator tells us, religious fervour in Elgin is “reasonable” rather than “beautiful” or “self-immolating” (65) — and the novel would not have it otherwise, for religion counts for comparatively little in the world Duncan has created.

Both parish communities are led by vain and self-regarding clergymen. Dr. Drummond, who combs his hair in youthful style and likes to wear a “diamond . . . on his little finger” (40), is a shrewd man not averse to talking politics from the pulpit, “though he made a great show

of keeping it out” (15), and a successful manager of his parishioners and church council. In return for his care, members of the congregation respect the doctor for his evident learning, grumble over his strictures regarding church attendance, and look upon Sunday service as an opportunity for scrutiny of their peers and self-display. Drummond does what he can, drilling them in doctrinal orthodoxy and allowing their worldliness, like his own, to pass largely unremarked.

He certainly has his share of foibles, enjoying the opportunity for rhetorical flourishes at funerals and other solemn occasions (a tendency Hugh Finlay cannot abide). These satisfy “the poet and the tragedian in him” (226). When he hits on a phrase he likes, he often repeats it. He is not ashamed to highlight his own achievements — a large number of his sermons sit in leather-bound volumes in his rectory office — and he does not miss his yearly opportunity to compare the numbers of church members at present to those of the past year, rejoicing in increase and chiding when the numbers decline (67). On the one occasion when he loses an argument with his church council, the subject is whether a new minister should be hired to serve the locality of East Elgin, where a growing number of parishioners would like an ordained preacher. Dr. Drummond does not want to divide the congregation, and he can never accept Finlay as his intellectual equal. On the occasions when he is in his pew to hear the young man preach, the set of his mouth is humorous, his whole bearing one of indulgent, rather condescending, forbearance. In the world of Elgin, church politics are not so unlike electoral politics, with the different denominations vying with one another for members; the difference is that the stakes of the religious realm seem rather small.

Vanity is also the keynote of Leacock’s Dean Drone, an elderly Anglican divine who cherishes above all else his medal for excellence in Greek, which is kept on public display “in case of immediate need” (77), and who spends his time reading the pastoral elegies of Theocritus when he should be preparing his sermons. It is not clear whether he can, in fact, read Greek; his knowledge of the Bible is demonstrably faulty, as is, it seems, his commitment to the gospel message.¹⁴ As his name suggests, his sermons are dull and windy, full of personal anecdotes, bombastic phrasing (rather like Drummond, Drone has “a fine taste for words and effects” [101]), mistranslations of the Greek, and misunderstandings of the biblical record. The narrative suggests that he has used

church funds to send his daughters to an expensive private school, and his most exalted vision for the church — enthusiastically embraced by his congregation — is to build a larger and more lavish building to proclaim the congregation's grandiosity.

Ineffectual and self-deluded, Drone is the victim of a consuming self-love. When the church debt balloons to unmanageable proportions and his grudging parishioners drift to other churches, he sees the crisis as a plot against him, an injustice perpetrated by long-ago teachers who denied him training in logarithms, and he wastes hours recalculating the debt in the hope that manipulation of numbers might make it disappear. His musings on the meaning of a derisive epithet used against him (he has heard someone call him an "old mugwump," a term to be found in none of his theology books) increase our sense of his pitiable weakness but do not alleviate his culpability. As he lifts his pen to write his resignation speech, only to realize that pulpit bombast prevents him even from resigning his position in clear sentences, he sees the light from the flames engulfing the church on the skyline. With the "great seething of the flames that tore their way into the beams and rafters of the pointed church" (103), the demonic undertones of Leacock's portrait — of Drone and of the malaise affecting his congregation — emerge fully into the narrative.

Dean Drone is a more exaggerated target of satire than the interesting Dr. Drummond, who is presented by Duncan with a subtler and less stinging wit than Leacock employs. However, it is not only method and satiric purpose but also the entire narrative vision that distinguishes the two portraits. Duncan's Dr. Drummond is an essentially decent man, a caring pastor of his flock and a worthy manager of parish affairs despite his self-regard. But even if he were not a good pastor, that would be a matter of community regret only, an embarrassment that the Presbyterian parishioners would keep to themselves, waiting out his tenure until a better man could be found. *The Imperialist* cannot conceive of anything larger being at issue, for religion in Elgin is, as Elizabeth Morton has pointed out,¹⁵ a purely social affair: "The repressed magnetic excitement in gatherings of familiar faces, fellow beings bound by the same convention to the same kind of behaviour, is precious in communities where the human interest is still thin and spare" (65). The religious language that is to some extent unavoidable in discussions of parish affairs is presented by the text as rhetoric, as

a tool of a respectable trade, not as the signifier of an urgent spiritual reality. The narrator reports with equanimity that on his pastoral visits to the Murchisons, Drummond cannot “always be sure of leaving some spiritual benefit behind” because “the conversation would wonderfully soon slip round to some robust secular subject” (40), and we are meant to admire him and the Murchisons all the more because their lively minds do not dwell on doctrine.

Drummond and his congregation can be treated lightly and generously by Duncan largely because her novel presents religion as a harmless, perhaps socially beneficial, institution — not the cornerstone of community life. In contrast, the anger and pity directed at religious corruption in *Sunshine Sketches* have a very different charge. Not only embarrassment or waste of money or even hollow, divisive pride are at issue when the parishioners of Dean Drone’s Anglican church “devoutly” forget their little old place of worship and burn with zeal (and then with debt relief) for their grand new temple: the very spiritual essence of the community is in peril. In the scene in which Josh Smith, with a “voice that dominates the fire itself” (105), saves the town from the conflagration, the excitement and danger of the moment have a distinctly devilish cast, with the church lighting up “a testimony of flame” (105) such as has never before been witnessed. Gerald Lynch has provided a persuasive reading of the fire scene that casts Smith as a kind of parodic Christ figure ironically saving Mariposans from their debts (98).¹⁶ Furthermore, the “testimony of flame” might be read as a parodic Pentecost, with tongues of fire testifying to the worldly “faith” of the community. Later, the huddled group of church councillors chuckling over their insurance policy, telling one another jubilantly how “all that was needed was a little faith and effort” (107), look like men under the guidance of their basest passions. Here I differ from Glenn Willmott, who states that “nothing really happens in *Sunshine Sketches* that is a genuine conflict, because there is nothing genuinely evil to create opposition” (61). By evil, Willmott means such matters as the “immiseration of an underclass and inequality of opportunity” (54), while Leacock is arguably concerned with a moral evil at once more insubstantial and far more damaging.

The scriptural references that Drone mangles so hilariously — especially his muddled allusion to the Ark of Gideon containing the covenant between God and man — suggest the salvific import of the

Mariposans' decision to walk in their own way. They have broken their covenant with God, turning to the false gods of Mammon and social respectability. In one key moment, Dean Drone, coming down the street from his fancy new church and worrying about the debt, encounters a small group of Salvation Army adherents worshipping under a naphtha lamp (82). The Dean's heart (evidence that he still has one, at least) is smitten as he walks by, registering, one assumes, the contrast between the humble devotion of true believers and the hollow puffery he has fostered amongst his prideful congregation. Leacock's choice of the Salvation Army — a symbol of unworldliness and simple faith, with its mission to the poor and practice of street-corner worship — provides a serious standard of religious authenticity against which Mariposan folly is to be measured. Duncan never provides such a standard. Leacock scholars have emphasized Leacock's own lack of faith and even, according to Robertson Davies, his conviction that religion had ceased to matter as a social or spiritual force in modern life (16). Be that as it may, one need not prove Leacock himself a believer to find the text suggesting the crucial communal function of religious faith. In highlighting what faith might look like in contrast to the vanity and hardheartedness of Anglican pride, Leacock's religious satire makes a far-reaching criticism of the spiritual rot undermining Mariposan communal life.

What makes these worlds of hollow religious observance and political corruption livable is love, a subject that both Duncan and Leacock treat with some ridicule and an overriding affection. The primary love plot in each work centres on a couple who misunderstand each other according to an exalted conception of romantic honour; their ultimate happiness is brought about by circumstances beyond their control. Hugh Finlay and Advena Murchison are blinded by the delusion that their greatest gift to each other is one of renunciation. Living in the ethereal region of the heart "where pain sustains" (250), Advena has so convinced Hugh that they can kill ordinary desire that when she realizes she does not want such a love, Hugh cannot turn away from their noble conception. Brought together by the *deus ex machina* of the jaunty Dr. Drummond, who woos and wins Hugh's newly arrived Scottish fiancée during her first days in Ontario, Finlay and Advena are left to be happy despite their own best intentions. *Sunshine Sketches'* Zena Pepperleigh and Peter Pupkin also attempt to live various romantic fantasies, with Peter frequently plunged into suicidal despair by Zena's well-intentioned

profession that she has always wanted to marry a poor man (he has not told her of his family's wealth). After multiple aborted attempts to take his life by such measures as an overdose of soda water, Pupkin is finally saved by the phantom bank robber and the arrival of his wealthy father, who has been scheming all along with Judge Pepperleigh to arrange the match. Peter and Zena thus embark on their domestic venture to raise an "enchanted baby" in an "enchanted house" (151); they are two romantics whose foolish love will, we assume, become a mature domestic affection. In both works, family love (perilously) redeems small-town life.

Both writers choose to end their narratives proper (I except Leacock's Envoi chapter) not with such images of continuity and affection but with scenes emphasizing threats to communal life. Idealistic Lorne has lost his Liberal candidacy (and his girl) while manipulative Josh Smith has won the election; Lorne is preparing to leave Elgin for Toronto, Josh to take up a double residency in the capital as well as his new constituency. In either case, whether through the absence of the hero or the influence of the villain, the small town will be weakened. In the world of *The Imperialist*, the danger is that worthy aspirations and desires are doomed to suffocate in a stifling provincial atmosphere; in *Sunshine Sketches*, it is the opposite danger: that unworthy aspirations will take hold, destroying the institutions that ideally keep them in check. For Duncan, the singular hero with his remarkable vision embodies the best of what Canada may produce, but this best is not enough, perhaps, to galvanize a stodgy and materialistic citizenry. For Leacock, Mariposa's saving grace lies in what is unremarkable about it: the slumbering group at Thorpe's barbershop, the patience of Judge Pepperleigh's wife. Whether or not Leacock had read Duncan's novel, the striking similarities and engaging differences of the works suggest that the two authors who never met had much to say to each other about the forces, for good and ill, shaping Canadian life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am grateful to Gerald Lynch for his comments on various earlier versions of this essay, and to the anonymous readers at *Studies in Canadian Literature* for their constructive criticisms.

NOTES

¹ James Steele quotes Leacock expressing a certain skepticism about Canadian literature: "If a Canadian author writes a good book, I'll read it: if not I'll read one written in Kansas or Copenhagen. The conception of the republic of letters is a nobler idea than the willful attempt at national exclusiveness" (68).

² The ten-month Cecil Rhodes Trust tour to promote imperial co-operation took him to England, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (Staines 24-26). James Doyle reports that while his visit to South Africa made him unhappily aware of British atrocities during the Boer War, the tour as a whole served to increase his support for the Empire (40-44).

³ The essay reads, "This is our need, our supreme need of Empire — not for its ships and guns, but for the greatness of it, the soul of it, aye for the very danger of it" (*Social Criticism* 8).

⁴ In addition to the short article by Bentley mentioned above, only J.M. Zezulka has considered the two texts together, comparing and contrasting their respective attitudes to provincialism.

⁵ In referring to a moral perspective or moral vision, I am indebted to D.J. Dooley's book titled *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (1979) and his assertion that the fundamental criterion for all fiction is the creation of a powerful and believable "social and spiritual context" (ix). Dooley's well-known criticism of *Sunshine Sketches* is that "We are simply not sure what moral perspective we are being asked to adopt" (5).

⁶ See, for example, Teresa Hubel's rather dismissive reading of the "middle-classness" of *The Imperialist*, defined, according to Hubel, by the text's determination to marginalize the working classes from narrative representation.

⁷ In her afterword to the New Canadian Library edition, Janette Turner Hospital argues persuasively for the novel as "an expatriate's testament of desire" (316) conditioned by "distance and loss" (313).

⁸ My assumption is that the novel's implied author admires Lorne and his political vision, but it is worth noting that scholars have disagreed on this point. Writing for the Tecumseh edition of the novel, Terrence L. Craig asserts that Duncan "presents the British Empire, even with the weaknesses she exposes both of the centre and of the parts, as the pinnacle of human civilization" (418-19). Yet such persuasive critics as Frank Davey and Francis Zichy ("A Portrait of the Idealist as Politician") find evidence of serious criticism in Duncan's presentation of Lorne's imperial faith. Alfred G. Bailey concludes that Lorne's election speech suggests that "while [Duncan's] reason and experience led her to conclude that [imperialism] was the embodiment of an impossible ideal, it was one to which her own heart was not altogether a stranger" (140). Other scholars such as Elizabeth Morton have argued that the novel counsels moderation and common sense in both politics and love. Thomas Tausky sees Duncan as firmly committed to the imperial ideal, citing as a "consistent and vital clue" the fact that "the line dividing the proponents from the opponents of imperialism also divides the imaginative characters from the unimaginative" (162). As Marian Fowler points out, it is perhaps decisive that on a visit to Toronto in 1903, Duncan "read Lorne Murchison's impassioned speech on Imperialism" (264) at a reception given in her honour by the Canadian Society of Authors. Jon Kertzer reads the novel as exposing, only partly intentionally, the contradictions of nation-building; regarding her stance on imperialism, he concludes that "Duncan probably had not worked out a firm position of her own, or was not concerned to do so" (30).

⁹ For an excellent and informative overview of Leacock's "democratic" Toryism, see Gerald Lynch 3-23. Lynch's summation emphasizes the middle way of Leacock's conservatism: "Believing that society was a developing organic whole, Leacock was wary of any

capitalist scheme or any plan that ignored man's responsibility to mankind or was intolerant of human fallibility. In Leacock's view, the social organism should be neither radically altered nor left untended: the way of the extreme left would lead to the destruction of the social organism; the course of the extreme right would encourage a plutocratic law of the jungle, the sacrificing of social justice to individual liberty" (5).

¹⁰ Critics are deeply divided over the nature of Leacock's satire. For cogent defences of the relatively "sunny" view of the sketches, see R.D. MacDonald, who argues that Leacock's criticisms are softened by his poignant sympathy with human loneliness and vulnerability (102). More simply, William Magee argues that through his "genial humour," Leacock "sees [Mariposa's] littleness and its shame and they make him sad, but he offers [the town] as the best there is" (274). David Savage employs memories of Leacock's lectures to prove that *Sunshine Sketches* offers a fairly unironic account of "a peculiarly Canadian brand of survival, one short on the ethical and long on the practical, but which includes such intangibles as neighborliness, love, and memories" (67). Vincent Sharman uses satire theory to argue that the sketches are satiric rather than humorous or ironic. On the other hand, Francis Zichy argues in "The Narrator, the Reader, and Mariposa" that the story cycle is neither a straightforward satire of Mariposa nor an affectionate work of humour but rather an equivocal text of consolation in which, despite recognizing the limitations of Mariposa, the narrator tries with partial success to convince himself that it is better than the alternatives. The intense critical disagreements may seem to support Ed Jewinski's argument that the meaning of the sketches is ultimately undecideable, and that Derridean deferral of meaning is the point of the narrative ambiguity. For a full overview and analysis of conflicting interpretations of the novel, especially of Josh Smith's role, see Glenn Willmott 46-53. Willmott himself attempts to resolve readings of the novel opposed over whether it is a coherent political critique or an equivocal comedy of disillusionment.

¹¹ In *The Imperialist*, it is a by-election, seen by Liberal organizers as a test case for imperial federation.

¹² Admittedly, as Frank Davey has observed, the majority of Elgin voters are "as self-interested and limited as politicians like Farquharson and Bingham [sic] judge them to be" (428).

¹³ According to Leacock biographer David Legate, Leacock's tireless speech making in Montreal and around Orillia so impressed Conservative leader R.B. Bennett that Bennett "tried to persuade him to take a continuing interest in politics" (60).

¹⁴ J. Kushner and R.D. MacDonald suggest, rather contentiously, that Drone has too much faith rather than too little, seeing him as "the victim of a mangled apocalyptic rhetoric, an optimistic faith in New Jerusalem or Judaic Christian progress" (507).

¹⁵ Morton explains Advena's asceticism and impulse to self-sacrifice as a consequence of her readings in Plato and Eastern mysticism, seeming to forget that Christianity also emphasizes self-surrender and self-sacrifice. Regardless, Morton's point that Duncan counsels "reasonableness" in religion seems inarguable, and supports my contention that the social function of religion, to the exclusion of any spiritual content, is primary for the novelist.

¹⁶ In his cogent argument about Leacockian satire in *Sunshine Sketches*, Lynch reads Smith as the primary source of the moral disintegration that threatens the community, seeing him as a cynical manipulator who "dupes" (68) Mariposans and "brings out the worst" (72) in them. In a telling footnote, he takes issue with Robertson Davies's reading of Mariposans as "a self-important, gullible, only moderately honest collection of provincial folk; they cooked their election; they burned down a church" (qtd. in Lynch 186). Lynch responds, "But it is Josh Smith who cooks the election and burns down the church" (186). He argues, in contrast, that "What Mariposans do possess in opposition to Smith is a concern for their community, a concern which is second nature to them" (72). Agreeing with

Lynch that *Sunshine Sketches* is more than a “mean-spirited satire” (186), I nonetheless see Mariposans as more culpable than Lynch argues they are, especially in the church business, where Smith does not play a major role until the fire scene.

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