The Place of Bibliography in the Academy Today: Reassessing Sara Jeannette Duncan

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In an essay entitled "Rewriting George Orwell," Stephen Schwartz outlines what he calls "a scandal in English letters ... the wholesale misappropriation and even mutilation of George Orwell's works" by editor Peter Davison. His specific complaint is that Davison followed the instructions that Orwell left among his papers for a future edition of *Homage to Catalonia*, in which two chapters should be relocated to the end of the text as appendices. Schwartz makes a compelling argument against this arrangement, but for the purposes of the present discussion I am less interested in his argument than I am in his rhetoric. Schwartz characterizes Davison's editorial work as an act of "vandalism," complaining bitterly about the absurdity of Davison stumbling into the enormous responsibility of editing Orwell's complete works and dismissively characterizing Davison as a "professional bibliographer" and a "proofreader." Schwartz concludes by demanding that Penguin withdraw Davison's edition and re-issue the title in its original form, arguing that "[t]o do otherwise would be to posthumously betray Orwell and his Catalan comrades, to repeat and reinforce Stalin's treason."² I do not wish to weigh in on this editorial debate. I mention it in order to draw attention to the battle lines as they are imagined here, as representative of the *bibliographer* on one hand and the *literary scholar* on the other, battle lines which seem to me to be both artificial and counter-productive, but lines which seem to be deepening.

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1 Stephen Schwartz, "The Spanish Civil War: The Continuing Controversy," pt. 2, "Rewriting George Orwell," *New Criterion* 20, no. 1 (September 2001): 63.

2 *Ibid.*, 65.

I do not mean to suggest that bibliographic work, descriptive or analytical, is not central to particular literary paradigms and to literary criticism in particular periods. What I am suggesting is that, despite its importance in particular contexts, bibliography is currently out of fashion in the academy. Perhaps it never was entirely fashionable, but it seems that its rigours used to garner more respect and that published bibliographies used to be more valued as critical resources. Times have changed. It is clear that today's rapidly expanding digitized collections, which often provide access to numerous editions, serve textual critics in a way that published bibliographies never could. But it is less clear why scholars working in the rapidly expanding field of book history do not make more extensive use of bibliographical methodologies. I should point out that I am not talking about enumerative bibliography, which continues to serve a broad group of scholars, but about descriptive (or analytical) bibliography, which is a formal method of describing the physical features of a published text in a way that reveals evidence about its publishing history. Surely such bibliographic work is the foundation upon which book history ought to be built. Although this is so in theory, in practical terms it is unlikely for new scholars to employ bibliographic methods for a simple practical reason. With a couple of notable exceptions, it is clear that English departments in universities across Canada have withdrawn basic bibliographic training for graduate students. Today, few programs have even a single session on bibliography in a professional skills course. It is not only that very few graduate students can write bibliographic descriptions or employ bibliographic methodologies in their own research; we have reached a point at which very few young literary scholars are capable of reading or understanding the value of what one of my colleagues characterizes as the "hieroglyphic format" of published bibliographies.

As I contemplate the role of published bibliography in an academic world which has increasing difficulty interpreting it, I find an interesting parallel in an unexpected place. There is a small contingent within the legal community which seeks to normalize legal documents with what they call plain-English drafting. The idea is to make it at least theoretically possible for so-called ordinary people to read their own legal documents. This rather disparate group of somewhat idealistic lawyers has an interesting approach to a complex question, but many of them admit that their approach can only draw attention to the problem; it cannot solve it. Detractors argue that their approach is not a solution because the law is based on complex

interpretations of language and that the irony associated with this movement is that those who attempt to employ plain-English drafting may actually mislead their clients into imagining that they understand the implications of their documents *better* than they actually do.

I am not proposing that bibliographers adopt a form of plain-English drafting, but I would like to underscore the growing divide between bibliographic form and the ability of new scholars to interpret it. While lawyers serve so-called ordinary people and have little opportunity to increase the legal competence of the general population, as bibliographers we serve a relatively small group of scholars and bibliophiles who could, at least theoretically, be trained. If we had the will to do so, the Bibliographical Society of Canada could develop programs designed to initiate a new generation of scholars in the use of descriptive bibliography. The alternative is that we can do what lawyers have always done with legal documents: we can become, not only the producers of bibliography, but its sole interpreters. As I contemplate my own future work, I question the extent to which published bibliography will serve my colleagues and I am left with a feeling that it is up to me both to conduct and interpret my own bibliographic work if it is to make a meaningful contribution to scholarship.

My doctoral research focuses on the period 1880 to 1920, when female authors professionalized in Canada, extending their influence beyond traditionally female spheres into politics, history, and journalism. This was the first generation of female authors in Canada to be able to earn a living entirely by the pen. I have undertaken a systematic exploration of the strategies employed by early Canadian female professional authors as they carved out a place for themselves in a challenging literary landscape in order to propose a useful critical approach to their best writings. My primary challenge is a dearth of archival source material. While a portion of E. Pauline Johnson's (Tekahionwake's) papers survive in the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections at the McMaster University Library, and the papers of Sara Jeannette Duncan's literary agent, A. P. Watt, survive in the Manuscripts Department in the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, most of the authors of this generation are represented by a handful of letters and other documents which are scattered through various archival collections. Bibliography offers a method of extending and clarifying the historical record.

While my bibliographic work on E. Pauline Johnson has tended to support and, in minor ways, extend the excellent scholarship of Carole

Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag,³ my more recent work on Sara Jeannette Duncan has found much to challenge in the pioneering, but necessarily superficial, work of those who first attempted to grapple with Duncan's extensive publishing record. Furthermore, by approaching Duncan's large body of work from a bibliographic perspective, rather than focusing only on the growing body of literary criticism, it became clear to me that there was something very odd about the choice of Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904) for canonization.

The Imperialist has long been regarded as one of the most important pre-1920 Canadian novels; it has been singled out from among Duncan's many novels for special status in the Canadian canon because it is the only one to be set largely in Canada.⁴ This is the result of a nationalistic model of Canadian literature which emerged in the 1960s and continued to have significant influence for several decades. As a result, in 1982 Carole Gerson characterized Duncan as "an author without a country."⁵ Expressing a perspective common among scholars, Gerson argued that if Duncan had "written more extensively about her native land, she would be duly recognized as Canada's foremost pre-1920 novelist. Had she been born in England or the United States, critics of those countries would have accorded her a respectable (albeit secondary) niche in the turn-of-the-century tradition of realistic internationalist fiction."⁶ Today, the

3 Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

4 McClelland and Stewart's paperback reprint series, the New Canadian Library, has been an important vehicle in the formation of the canon of Canadian literature since 1958, and Duncan's *The Imperialist* was one of the early selections. In his introduction to the 1961 edition, Claude Bissell writes that by the time she published *A Social Departure* in 1890, Duncan was "in many ways the freshest and liveliest voice" on the "Canadian literary scene" (v), and he expresses the sentiment of his times when he argues that the international settings of most of her novels disqualifies them as Canadian literature. Bissell asserts that *The Imperialist* "is one novel that clearly belongs to Canadian literature, since it springs out of [Duncan's] early days in Brantford" (v), and he concludes his introduction by asserting its primacy in Canadian literature as "one of our best novels" (ix).

5 Carole Gerson, "That Delightful Canadian," *Canadian Literature* 92 (1982): 113.

6 Gerson, "That Delightful Canadian," 113. Here Gerson echoes the words of Michael Peterman: "Much of the instability of [Duncan's] reputation today grows out of the fact that, because of her flexibility and cosmopolitan ease, she

cosmopolitan nature of contemporary Canadian fiction and criticism invites us to reconsider the status, in Canadian literary history, of several of Duncan's novels.

The bibliographic evidence clearly demonstrates that, during her lifetime, Duncan was best known for her first novel, *A Social Departure* (1890). The novel is based on a series of high-profile sketches⁷ that Duncan wrote for the *Montreal Daily Star*, the newspaper with the highest circulation in the country,⁸ about her extended trip around the world with fellow journalist Lily Lewis between November 1888 and May 1889. The novel was serialized in *The Lady's Pictorial* (London)⁹ and published as a monograph in 1890 by Chatto and Windus of London, with a sub-edition by D. Appleton of New York.¹⁰ Both the British and American publishers reprinted the title numerous times,¹¹ and according to the publisher's advertisements the Appleton

seemed in her time a homeless writer, one who could write trenchantly of India's political difficulties, of life in Parisian garrets, of social comedy in London and New York, ... the 'delightful' manner in which she made use of the international theme, had the effect of de-nationalizing her." Michael Peterman, "Humour and Balance in *The Imperialist*: Sara Jeannette Duncan's 'Instinct of Presentation,'" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 11, no. 2 (1976): 57-8.

- 7 The sketches were well-placed, generally on the first or second page of the newspaper, and they were referenced in the social columns of various newspapers in Canada and abroad. In the weekly column "At the Mermaid Inn," published in the *Globe* (Toronto) (4 Mar. 1893, p. 6), Archibald Lampman observes, "We have all heard of Miss Sara Jeannette Duncan, now Mrs. Cotes, and have read more or less of her entertaining and popular work. Her success has been phenomenal, and her name meets the eye in almost every newspaper."
- 8 According to the newspaper's masthead, its circulation between 1888 and 1890 was at least thirty thousand.
- 9 The serialized version appeared in the *Lady's Pictorial*, under the title "A Social Departure: A Lady's Tour Round the World," between 20 July 1889-12 April 1890.
- 10 Typographical evidence demonstrates that the Appleton sub-edition was printed from the same plates as the Chatto and Windus edition. The Williamson Book Company of Toronto advertised this title for sale at a price of \$1.70 (along with *An American Girl in London* for \$1.50, and *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* for \$1.60) in the *Globe* (10 June 1893, p. 8). This might imply that Williamson had produced a sub-edition of this title as they did for *An American Girl in London*, but it is unlikely as no copy has been found and Williamson editions of other titles are readily available.
- 11 I have completed formal bibliographical descriptions for almost all extant editions of Duncan's twenty-two monographs. Impressions of the Chatto and Windus edition, dated 1890, 1891, and 1893, can be further distinguished by the six different dates on the publisher's catalogue which appears following the text. Impressions of the Appleton subedition, dated 1890, 1891, 1893, and 1901, can

sub-edition (available in both cloth and paper) had sold more than sixteen thousand copies by 1904.¹² Several other editions appeared, both authorized and un-authorized, including those by M. J. Ivers (1891) and by A. L. Burt, both of New York. A continental edition was published by Heinemann and Balestier in 1892, followed by editions for George Munro's Seaside Library and for the Booklover's Library. Sometime after 1908, Thomas Nelson and Sons included the title in their reprint series, the Nelson Library of Notable Books.

Not only an international bestseller, *A Social Departure* was highly praised by critics.¹³ More than thirty years after it first appeared,

be further distinguished by the various states of the publisher's advertisements which follow the text. I have examined copies of *A Social Departure* as follows: Chatto and Windus edition (multiple copies in the British Library and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, and a single copy in Massey Library at the Royal Military College, Kingston); Appleton sub-edition (numerous copies in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and in the Dana Porter Library at the University of Waterloo, as well as single copies in the McLaughlin Library at the University of Guelph, the Massey Library at the Royal Military College, the McLennan Library at McGill University, and a copy in a private collection); M. J. Ivers edition (Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library); A. L. Burt edition (Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library); Heinemann and Balestier edition (Davis Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill); Thomas Nelson edition (copies in the British Library, the McLaughlin Library, the Jordan Library at Queen's University, and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library); Booklover's Library edition (Bennett Library at Simon Fraser University).

- 12 The publisher's advertisements, which appear in the Appleton editions of Duncan's *The Pool in the Desert* (1903) and *The Imperialist* (1904), not only indicate that the publisher continued to promote *A Social Departure*, but also that sixteen thousand copies of the subedition had been sold. Copies of the Appleton edition of *The Pool in the Desert* were examined in the E. J. Pratt Library at Victoria University in the University of Toronto and the McLennan Library at McGill University. Copies of the Appleton edition of *The Imperialist* were examined in the Jordan Library at Queen's University and at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at University of Toronto.
- 13 In *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire* (Port Credit, ON: P. D. Meany, 1980), Thomas Tausky calls the novel a "great critical and popular success" (54) and suggests that this was due, in part, to good timing: "the public was no doubt inclined to be more amused and less shocked by the adventures of two unchaperoned young women in Asia than it would have been even a few years earlier" (54). In *Redney: A Life of Sara Jeannette Duncan* (Toronto: Anansi, 1983), Marian Fowler reports that, "With *A Social Departure*, [Duncan's] dreams of fame came true; it was an instant success with both critics and the public. The London reviews in the spring of 1890 were raves ... Now there was a new star, of medium magnitude, on the London literary horizon" (186). Perhaps the most compelling evidence for this claim can be found in the excerpts from seventeen

in his 1924 study of Canadian literature, Archibald MacMechan characterized Duncan's *A Social Departure* as "the wittiest book of travels ever written by a Canadian."¹⁴ Today *A Social Departure* is a text which receives scholarly attention because it is Duncan's first novel, because it provides a remarkable opportunity to study the intersections between her journalism and her fiction, because it is one of her finest comic novels, because it is a complex, satiric exploration of the rhetorical conventions of travel writing, particularly women's travel writing,¹⁵ and, I propose, because it reveals the sustained study of cultural displacement at the heart of Duncan's large body of fiction. It is one of several of Duncan's novels which are of interest to me as a bibliographer, as a book historian, and as a literary critic.

In discussing my own work, I have attempted to demonstrate some of the ways in which bibliography is foundational. Stephen Schwartz and others may imagine bibliography and literary criticism as mutually opposed, but it seems to me that they work best together. My own work demonstrates that bibliographic methods can be particularly useful for projects which grapple with marginalized authors and texts – those which are underrepresented in archival collections. It is a message which is largely lost on the current generation of graduate students and that is unfortunate indeed.

SOMMAIRE

La bibliographie descriptive (ou analytique) peut paraître ces temps-ci démodée ou obscure du point de vue des départements de littérature canadienne anglaise alors que c'est dans ce champ d'activité que doivent trouver leur source l'histoire du livre et la critique littéraire. La Société bibliographique du Canada devrait continuer de promouvoir la discipline et y attirer du même coup de nouveaux chercheurs. Le cas de la romancière Sara Jeannette Duncan illustre bien l'importance de

glowing reviews for *A Social Departure* included in the publisher's advertisement in the Chatto and Windus impression of *A Social Departure* dated 1893. The advertisement also appears in the Chatto and Windus edition of *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* issued the same year.

- 14 Archibald MacMechan, *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1924), 137.
- 15 Denise Heaps, "Genre and Gender in Sara Jeannette Duncan's Travel Satire, *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 74 (2001): 73–95.

ce propos. Considérant que les critiques littéraires ont pour des motifs nationalistes mis l'accent presque exclusivement sur *The Imperialist* (1904), la description bibliographique de l'oeuvre complète de Duncan révèle que sa carrière fut profondément influencée par le succès de son premier livre, un récit de voyage à demi romancé intitulé *A Social Departure* (1890).