

# *The Mirage of the Scepter'd Isle: An Imagological Appraisal*

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IT HAS BEEN SHOWN how important national stereotypes are whenever the quest for national identity arises in the context of any literature.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the new literatures in English, the concept of a national literature is particularly problematical,<sup>2</sup> and so the quest for national identity assumes a special significance, in the primary texts as well as in literary criticism. With reference to Australian and Canadian literature, therefore, the scholarly investigation of national stereotypes becomes an important task in the general assessment of these literatures from within and without.

The methodology needed in such an assessment is one that takes into account the philosophical, socio-economical and ethno-psychological implications of national stereotypes, and it must be able to draw certain results from an interdisciplinary approach. In literary criticism, such a methodology has been developed, within the past three decades, mainly by a special branch of comparative literature, first in France, then in the United States, then in Germany.<sup>3</sup> Despite its origin in comparative literature, it has grown into a methodology which manages to bridge the chasm between comparative literature and the study of individual national literatures. Because, in most recent years, German scholars have seemed to be most productive in this area, the methodology, although originating in France, was given a scholarly name by the Germans. Today, one generally refers to it as comparative imagology.<sup>4</sup> With an imagological approach, then, it is possible to throw more light on the various heterostereotypes and their corresponding autostereotypes in Australian and Canadian literature. The most important heterostereotypes, in both literatures, are the ones about Europe, particularly about Great Britain.<sup>5</sup>

The cultural development which can be found in Australian, Canadian and any other colonial, post-colonial and young national literature in the English language all over the world is one from Anglo-centric dependence to mature self-consciousness. This development, which does not take the same course in the case of each individual literature — it is less recognizable, for example, in New Zealand than in Australia — can be followed up from stage to stage in imagological terms, in general literary criticism, or in terms set up by the creative writers themselves. In this paper I am going to demonstrate how the development of images of Great Britain, which, in Australian literature, is a process over generations of writers, can be found — in a nutshell, as it were — in the work of the Canadian writer Margaret Laurence (b. 1926), particularly in her novel *The Diviners* (1974). It will become clear that the development of images of Britain in the new literatures in English runs parallel to, and is an expression of, the general cultural development in these countries.

In the case of Australia, the discussion on the relative superiority of English or Australian culture is almost as old as Australian literature itself. It was instigated in 1856 by Frederick Sinnett (1830-1866) in his long essay, "The Fiction Fields of Australia," where he inquires "into the feasibility of writing Australian novels; or, to use other words, into the suitability of Australian life and scenery for the novel writers' purpose."<sup>6</sup> Sinnett measures the few Australian novels of his time against English literature. His attitude is the generally accepted one in the nineteenth century. It perpetuated the literary image of England as the Australian's true Home, the country of his ancestors, of romance and of the old myths. In 1935, P. R. Stephensen (1901-1965), in *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, wrote: "Australian nationalism, with or without the idea of the British Empire, has a right to exist; and there can be no nation without a national place-idea; a national culture."<sup>7</sup> This was opposed by G. H. Cowling, a professor of English at Melbourne University. "Starting at the outset that he regarded an Australian as a 'Briton resident in Australia', Cowling judged the country to be 'thin and lacking in tradition' because of its lack of 'ancient churches, castles, ruins'.<sup>8</sup> It was the Jindyworobak movement that first

stressed the environmental values in the natural and cultural distinctiveness of Australia. In *Conditional Culture* (1938), Rex Ingamells (1913-1955) wrote: "However strong and innumerable, however desirable and inevitable, however traditional our cultural ties with Europe may be, it is not in these ties that we must as a people seek our individuality. Its quintessence must lie in the realization of whatever things are distinctive in our environment and their sublimation in art and idea, in culture."<sup>9</sup> This long discussion was taken up again in 1978, in the notorious controversy between the two Australian poets Peter Porter (b. 1929) and Les A. Murray (b. 1938), who see the dispute over the relative superiority of English or Australian culture in terms of the ancient Greek dispute between metropolitan Athens and provincial Boeotia.<sup>10</sup>

The imagological interpretation shows several stages in the development from Sinnett's image of England as the Australian's Home, the country of his ancestors, of romance and of old myths, over more critical attitudes toward the old country, to the re-adjusted present-day image of Great Britain. Let me trace these stages in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and put them next to parallel examples from Australian literature.

The initial image of Great Britain in *The Diviners* is conditioned mainly by two factors: First, since national stereotypes usually function in antinomical structures,<sup>11</sup> the numerous negative autostereotypes of Manawaka, in the judgement of the young protagonist Morag Gunn, evoke positive heterostereotypes of everything outside Manawaka. The second factor is introduced by the stories told by Morag's stepfather, Christie Logan, who is the garbage collector of Manawaka. First he tells her of his own family history: "Was I not born a Highlander, in Easter Ross, one of the North Logans? An ancient clan, an ancient people. Is our motto not a fine, proud set of words, then? 'This Is the Valour of My Ancestors'" (47).<sup>12</sup> Then he tells her something about her family history in Sutherland:

Among all of them people there on the rocks, see, was a piper, and he was from the Clan Gunn, and it was many of the Gunns who lost their hearths and homes and lived wild on the stormy rocks there. And Piper Gunn, he was a great tall man, a man

with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction. . . . When Piper Gunn played, the very seagulls echoed the chants of mourning, and the people wept. . . .

Then Piper Gunn spoke to the people. (49)

Christie tells the story of how Piper Gunn led the people to the New World, how they first settled there, and how Piper Gunn led them to a more suitable region on the Red River. The name of Piper Gunn's wife was Morag. Thus, it is natural for the Morag in the novel to combine the two sets of images, the negative ones of Manawaka and the heroic ones of Scotland, and to believe in the romance and the superiority of the past, represented by her ancestors and by Scotland.

In Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels, Morag Gunn is not the first young girl to be brought up with the stories of her heroic Scottish ancestors. Hagar Currie, in *The Stone Angel* (1964), is also made aware of her Scottish ancestors, the Curries of the Clanranald MacDonalds, of their pipe music, their motto and their war cry. Rachel Cameron, in *A Jest of God* (1966), and her sister Stacey, in *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), both belong to one of the oldest Scottish families in Manawaka. Their family name appears in the Cameron Highlanders, the regiment that most of the local young men join in the Second World War. Vanessa MacLeod, in *A Bird in the House* (1970), is told about her noble Scottish heritage by her paternal grandmother, who was a MacInnes before she got married. Vanessa looks up the motto of her family and those of some other Manawaka families, in a thick volume entitled *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland*.

*The Clans and Tartans of Scotland* is also on Christie Logan's bookshelf in *The Diviners*. Morag Gunn's belief in the importance of her Scottish heritage is not only strengthened by Christie's stories of Piper Gunn and by that book, but also by the poems of Ossian in Macpherson's translation. All this, together with the girl's rejection of Manawaka's provincial vulgarity and narrow-mindedness, establishes the firm stereotype of Scotland as a distant and superior land, the home of Morag's ancestors.

This corresponds to images of Great Britain in nineteenth-century Australian literature, especially up to Henry Kingsley.

The acknowledgement of British superiority can again be found in Henry Handel Richardson's fascinating trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, especially in the first volume, *Australia Felix* (1917), where Richard projects the most wonderful and beautiful images of England and yearns for a return to Great Britain. In Martin Boyd's family sagas, the same image of England can usually be found among the members of the first generation and often also in the second generation, where it can take the form of an eager interest in genealogy and family history, for example in *The Montforts* (1928), but also in the Langton novels.<sup>13</sup> In fact, this initial image of Great Britain, the acknowledgement of British superiority justified by history, genealogy and romantic myths, represents the colonial stage of these literatures.

The second stage, which is the realization of the colonial or post-colonial situation, is signalled in literature by a deterioration of images of Britain. This can become particularly pronounced if, as in the case of Australia, the pendulum of favour swings into the opposite direction, propelled by fervent nationalism. Thus it is possible to find negative images of Britain in Australian literature even before the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> Much more subtle and credible than loud outcries against the old country, however, are the examples of two fictional characters in Canada and Australia, created as symbolic bearers of the changing image of Britain: Brooke Skelton in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Hugo Brayford in Martin Boyd's *Lucinda Brayford* (1946), the British husbands of the Canadian or Australian female protagonists, respectively. Let us look at these two characters and their function in the two novels more carefully.

Morag meets Brooke Skelton at the university, where she is a student:

... Dr. Skelton, who teaches the Seventeenth-Century Poetry course and the Milton course. He is English (from England, that is) and has an impressive accent. He is also about ten feet tall — well, six-four anyhow, and with a fine-boned handsomeness that gives him an aristocratic look, or what Morag imagines must be aristocratic. . . . He is, of course, swooned over by various bird-brained females in the class who couldn't care less about John Donne but just go to twitter over Brooke Skelton. Morag, who

secretly thinks he is a prince among men, scorns such obvious ploys. . . . (189)

This description introduces him as a most impressive and desirable man in Morag's eyes, a man whose position in life is so far above hers. She is overawed by him, by his charm, by his scholarly learning, by his social position and by his Englishness. She even keeps up this awe through their courtship and the first years of their marriage. She tells him that she has no past, and he likes this; he has a past as an Englishman in the colonies, he spent his childhood in Calcutta. She asks him: "But Brooke — surely you can't believe it was right for them, the British, even for you, to have lived like that, in that way, house and servants, while —" (217). He simply tells her she does not understand. He has also been to an English boarding school, which was a military school mainly for the sons of officers. This may suffice to show in how many ways he represents England as a colonizing power. He never really takes Morag seriously, treats her as a child, does not believe in her talents, mocks her Canadian English, and is only interested in his own career. Slowly, Morag begins to understand, and when her first novel is accepted by a publisher she gains enough self-confidence to admit her situation.

Hugo Brayford makes a familiar first impression in Australia. He appears as an aristocratic young aide-de-camp at Government House parties in Melbourne, where his superior position attracts all the young girls even though he does not know anything about Australia and mixes it up with New Zealand. He marries Lucinda Vane for her money and takes her back to England, leaving all her relatives and friends behind, deeply impressed and envious. Once back in England, Hugo continues his usual life of hunting, sporting and womanizing, and he thoroughly neglects Lucinda. When he is away in France to fight in the Great War, she finally realizes:

She doubted whether Hugo had ever felt for her more than mild affection and physical attraction, and her own feeling for him, after her first infatuation for this resplendent young creature with his almost princely background — it would be humbug to pretend that she had not been influenced by that, just as it would be to pretend that Hugo had not been influenced by her money

— had died down to the same thing. She felt an intense relief as she admitted these things to herself. She was also indignant, and the more she reviewed her marriage the stronger became her indignation. Hugo had simply used her as a banker and a bed-fellow. (212)<sup>15</sup>

The parallels between Skelton and Brayford are as obvious as the parallels between individual and national exploitation and emancipation. They both stand as symbols of the imperial power and imperial exploitation, and the process of emancipation that their wives experience stands for the decolonizing process in Australian and Canadian culture. (At this point it is interesting to note that in many recent texts from Canada the need for cultural emancipation from the United States is more clearly pronounced than the one from Britain, for example in a great deal of Margaret Atwood's work.)

The third stage in the general development consists of a visit to the imperial seat and the ensuing final disillusionment. Although Morag knows that it might turn out a disappointment, she goes to Britain and spends over a year in a London basement flat. Despite the "unsurpassed ugliness" of the scenery and "the thick sulphurous fogs," she keeps her belief in "the myth that the English are an orderly and law-abiding people" (358). She was originally attracted to "this sceptr'd isle," and now she finds out all the mean and parochial aspects of living in London. Through her futile love affair with Dan McRaith she comes into close contact with Scotland. When she visits his Scottish village she takes in the emotional effect of the landscape and the quaintness of the place, but just as she realizes that it was wrong to come to Dan's home and meet his wife she realizes that it would be wrong to go to Sutherland, to the very region where her ancestors came from: "Only now does Morag realize what the real mistake has been in coming here. No longer can Bridie [i.e., Dan's wife] be a fantasy woman. She has become, in this instant, real to Morag. Her drawn, tense, determined face will now forevermore come between Morag and McRaith" (385). What she says about Bridie holds equally true for Sutherland: If she went there she would destroy her images of it, and the reality of the region would forevermore come between her and her images of her

ancestors. Thus, the whole idea of the exclusive significance of the "sceptr'd isle" for her reveals itself as a mirage.

There are many parallel experiences in Australian literature. The most memorable Australian characters who are disappointed on first seeing Britain and who go through a process of disillusionment that leads to a readjustment of their attitudes toward their own roots, include Richardson's Richard Mahony in *The Way Home* (1925) — although, for him, it is not the first view of England — Christina Stead's Jonathan Crow in *For Love Alone* (1945), Patrick White's Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* (1970), David Malouf's Dante in *Johnno* (1975), and most of the characters who go to fight in a European war, as, for example, in Roger McDonald's *1915* (1979) and David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982). Let me just mention two more detailed parallels to Morag Gunn's experiences in Britain. Her description of the village of Crombruach in Scotland corresponds in many ways to Richardson's description of Buddlecombe in *The Way Home*, both stressing the antiquity, quaintness and narrowness of the places. A parallel process of thought to Morag's realization quoted above can be found in Martin Boyd's *The Montforts*, where a character says: "Perhaps the people who never go to Europe enjoy it most. They retain an illusion of existing, almost supernatural beauty" (224).<sup>16</sup> The question, then, is whether or not one needs to destroy one's illusions about one's European roots in order to come to terms with one's life in the New World.

As has been pointed out, the fact that Morag's image of the "sceptr'd isle" with all her imperial and ancestral connotations reveals itself as a mirage enables her to readjust her attitudes toward her roots. It is important to remember that her roots are not completely negated; they merely recede from their prominent position to make room for other roots. To look at the whole development now, we can say that, for Morag as well as for many other sensitive people in Canada and Australia, the changing images of Britain serve the important, necessary and conscious readjustment of roots. In Morag's case, this means a partial acknowledgement of British reality, a conscious protection of cherished ancestral myths, and a partial adoption of new roots in the New World. It is this last element which is necessary in



rounding off the full account of Morag's process, for, after leaving Brooke Skelton, she pursues her own career as a writer and leads quite a hard life but finds satisfaction in her self-realization. She has a child from her Métis friend Jules Tonnerre, whose French and Cree roots are thus not only partially acknowledged by Morag but become very important for their daughter, Pique Tonnerre Gunn. So Pique is a perfect Canadian with her Scottish, French and Cree ancestry.

If we inquire into the need for national stereotypes and their readjustment in Canadian literature, we find that it lies precisely in the need for a readjustment of roots in the New World. This readjustment of roots by means of changing images of Britain or Europe is also one of the important factors through the history of Australian literature. The most important writers who have contributed to the process include Henry Handel Richardson, Martin Boyd, Christina Stead, Patrick White and David Malouf. The fact that this process, which is a matter of several generations in most new literatures in English, can be found in one single Canadian novel makes this novel one of the highest importance.

The important imagological contribution to the interpretation of Canadian and Australian literature was recognized some time ago. However, the usual imagological studies are aimed at an appraisal of Canada's and Australia's native peoples, as the two most famous examples by Leslie Monkman and J. J. Healy show.<sup>17</sup> That is certainly an important direction, but as I have tried to show, the imagological appraisal of Britain or Europe promises to be of equal importance in literary research, because it touches on fundamental aspects of Canadian and Australian culture and on the cultural awareness of Canadian and Australian creative writers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Jean-François Brossaud, "Réflexions méthodologiques sur l'imagologie et l'ethnopsychologie littéraires," *Revue de Psychologie des Peuples* 23 (1968): 366-77; Franz K. Stanzel, "Der literarische Aspekt unserer Vorstellung vom Charakter fremder Völker," *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 111 (1974), Sonderheft 4: 63-82; H. C. J. Duijker and N. H. Frijda, *National Character and National Stereotypes* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publications, 1960); Peter Boerner, "Das Bild vom anderen Land

- als Gegenstand literarischer Forschung," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* H. 56 (1976): 313-21.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jürgen Schäfer, *Commonwealth-Literatur* (Düsseldorf: August Bagel Verlag, 1981); particularly Schäfer's own contribution, "Sprache oder Nation: Zum Problem einer englischen Nationalliteratur" 12-28.
- <sup>3</sup> See Hugo Dyserinck, "Zum Problem der 'images' und 'mirages' und ihrer Untersuchung im Rahmen der vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft," *Arcadia*, 1 (1966): 107-20; Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, "National Stereotypes in Literature in the English Language: A Review of Research," *REAL* (The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature) 1 (1982): 75-120.
- <sup>4</sup> See Manfred S. Fischer, "Komparatistische Imagologie — Für eine interdisziplinäre Erforschung national-imagotyper Systeme," *Zeitschrift für Sozialpsychologie* 10 (1979): 30-44; Thomas Bleicher, "Elemente einer komparatistischen Imagologie," *Komparatistische Hefte* 2 (1980): 12-24.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Rudolf Bader, "The Visitable Past: Images of Europe in Australian Fiction," diss., U of Berne.
- <sup>6</sup> Frederick Sinnett, *The Fiction Fields of Australia*, ed. Cecil Hadgraft (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1966) 22.
- <sup>7</sup> P. R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, quoted from Brian Elliott (ed.), *The Jindyworobaks* (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1979) 224.
- <sup>8</sup> Craig Munro, *Wild Man of Letters: The Story of P. R. Stephensen* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1984) 151.
- <sup>9</sup> Rex Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*, quoted from Brian Elliott (ed.), *The Jindyworobaks* 229.
- <sup>10</sup> Les Murray, "Peter Porter: 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod,'" in P. K. Elkin (ed.), *Australian Poems in Perspective* (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1978) 171-84; Peter Porter, "Country Poetry and Town Poetry: A Debate with Les Murray," *Australian Literary Studies* 9.1 (1979): 39-48.
- <sup>11</sup> See Bleicher, "Elemente einer komparatistischen Imagologie" 18.
- <sup>12</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1975). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>13</sup> Martin Boyd, *The Cardboard Crown* (1952), *A Difficult Young Man* (1957), *Outbreak of Love* (1957), *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962).
- <sup>14</sup> See Rudolf Bader, "The Visitable Past," especially chapter III. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Boyd, *Lucinda Brayford* (Sydney: Lansdowne Press, 1969).
- <sup>16</sup> Martin Boyd, *The Montforts* (Sydney: Lansdowne Press, 1975).
- <sup>17</sup> Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981); J. J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1978).