

“Perhaps nobody has told you why the English are called Sahibs in India”: Sara Jeannette Duncan’s Imperialism for Children¹

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Résumé: Sara Jeannette Duncan, auteure de récits à la gloire de l’empire britannique, a composé un seul roman pour la jeunesse, *The Story of Sonny Sahib*. Peu connue, cette oeuvre publiée en 1894 a été rééditée à maintes reprises dans les premières décennies du vingtième siècle. Cecily Devereux analyse les manifestations de l’idéologie impérialiste dans ce récit, qui, bien qu’il ne soit pas entièrement conventionnel, respecte les valeurs que la romancière a exprimées dans ses autres romans et que l’on retrouve dans le vaste corpus des ouvrages didactiques et impérialistes pour la jeunesse de l’ère victorienne.

Summary: Anglo-imperial English-Canadian writer Sara Jeannette Duncan wrote only one children’s book: *The Story of Sonny Sahib* was published in 1894 and, while it is not a well-known text of imperial children’s literature, it did remain in print until well into the twentieth century. This paper considers the imperial and ideological work of this novel and begins to question this work in terms of the novel’s relation to Duncan’s other fiction and to imperial children’s fiction in general: *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is not a formulaic novel, but it does align itself in important ways with both Duncan’s “grown-up” fiction and the nineteenth-century proliferation of didactic and imperial writing for young people.

For the performance of the ordinary duties of citizenship, it is every day becoming more essential that all British people should understand clearly the relation to each other of the various portions of their vast national domain.

Our children cannot begin the study of this subject too soon; our statesmen and thinkers can scarcely pursue it too far.

(George R. Parkin vii-viii)

The Story of Sonny Sahib, first published in 1894, is the only children's book to have been written by Canadian-born Anglo-imperial novelist Sara Jeannette Duncan. Duncan, still best known in Canada for *The Imperialist* and still well known for her Anglo-Indian fiction, notably *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib*, *The Pool in the Desert*, and *Set in Authority*, published nineteen novels in her lifetime (see Tausky 289-90). Her novels, which are generally imperial in their context as well as in their ideology, are also for the most part clearly directed at an adult readership: Tausky notes *The Story of Sonny Sahib* as her "one children's book" (191). Her writing is almost invariably complex and political, usually in quite specific ways; it is, moreover, rarely obviously didactic in a way that would make its imperialism palatable — or even comprehensible — for a child. Indeed, it is rarely *about* children in any way, unless, as in the case of the story "A Mother in India" in *The Pool in the Desert*, or *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib*, it engages with questions of the relationships between Anglo-colonial parents in India and their children in England; and even then it is the adult who is the focus of the text. Duncan thus seems an unlikely candidate for the work undertaken in so much young people's fiction in English in the 1890s and the early twentieth century of inculcating children through narrative into imperial ideology, and marshalling them, through the representation of race, gender, and class, to exhibit their best qualities for the good of the empire. Arguably, however, this is precisely the work of *The Story of Sonny Sahib*.²

Although *Sonny Sahib* is not particularly well known as a work of imperial children's fiction, its appearance in numerous editions suggests that it was quite widely circulated, and it did enjoy a relatively long publishing life. Macmillan published the first edition in London in 1894, Appleton in New York an edition in 1895. It was still in print in 1917, nearly twenty-five years after its first publication, one of the titles in "The Children's Bookcase" series edited by E. Nesbit and published then by Oxford University Press. Duncan, moreover, evidently saw something important in the novel: as Tausky notes, "She wrote Macmillan in 1894 that she had dramatized *The Story of Sonny Sahib*" (although there is no record, as he also points out, of any production of what appears to be her earliest play) (273). What is most significant about Duncan's conversion of the text to drama is her apparent sense that the story's work was fundamentally performative: that is, *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is a narrative which is intended to engage its readers as subjects who are to recognize themselves — by race, gender, and class — in its eponymous character, even as he comes to recognize himself on these terms.

Duncan, in most of her fiction, reproduces an idea of imperial identity as an immutable social and racial essence: in her view, as in that of so many imperialists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Englishness through birth or, in the colonies, direct heritage emerges in certain

shared characteristics and, in a heightened way, in “natural” responses to crisis, displacement or external threats to the individual or the group by identifiable strangers or outsiders. As Mr. Earle puts it in the 1906 novel, *Set in Authority*, “There is nothing ... like the administration of other people’s affairs to make an Englishman recognise his mission in the world” (102) — or, we might add, to recognize his Englishness. Empire, then, is itself marked, for Duncan at any rate, by the presence of this racially identifiable constituency: empire is, literally, where they are. They — the English in the colonies, or “the race” — actually embody empire, carrying it with them and within them as they (not a bureaucracy or a political system or the economic and military imperatives of a dominant nation) “overspread” the globe in what was regularly represented as a natural and organic process of “racial” expansion through the movement of individuals: Duncan described this as “the empire of the race” (103).³

It is this idea of empire that is so evident in *Sonny Sahib*: although this novel is built around military conflict, the sense of imperial duty which it propagates and directs at child readers has to do with the recognition of what are understood to be the identifiable characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon “race.” *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is all about imperial identity: it is the tale of a little English boy, who, born into the midst of the sepoy uprising at Cawnpore in 1857, is separated from his parents shortly after his birth, and who begins to realize his own displacement on the Indian landscape and to search for his missing “birthright,” the term that is used in the novel to indicate what we are to see is the racial heritage which has produced him and which he needs to isolate and claim.⁴ The novel takes the position that Sonny’s racial identity — as an Anglo-Saxon and Christian child with certain salient characteristics — is already intact at the moment of his birth and persists despite his having spent his entire life in India under the care of his Muslim ayah. His racial identity, the novel maintains, is as definite and, crucially, as resistant to external influence as his white skin, blond hair and blue eyes.

The story begins a few weeks after Sonny’s birth with an English doctor attending to the child’s dying mother in a hut that has been blown apart by explosives. We are shown the “ruined south wall of the hut, where the sun of July, when it happens to shine on the plains of India, was beating fiercely upon the mud floor. That ruin,” we are told, “had happened only an hour ago” (8). As the child is in flight with his mother and ayah, Tooni, from the rebel Nana Dhundu Pant, his mother dies in an ox-cart of what appears to be puerperal fever, her condition represented as an effect of the “fierce” assault by the country itself, more than it is the result of the rebels’ attack. The child’s father, “himself in hospital four hundred miles from Cawnpore” (20), knows of neither his wife’s death, nor of his son’s survival. He believes that his wife and son have been killed with the other English people at the settlement. In fact, Tooni and her husband, Abdul, covertly alerted to the rebels’

intentions to kill the English people by "one of the Nana Sahib's servants" (19), hide in the bazaar, and travel "hundreds and hundreds of miles" to their "own country" (23), taking the baby with them. Abdul and Tooni, who clearly love the child whom they have named "Sonny Sahib" (26), continually defer any attempt to find the baby's father: they keep Sonny with them, and raise him as a "Mussulman" (28), albeit, we are told, with "misgivings as to what his father would say" (30).

Word spreads of the English child in Rubbulgurh, and Sonny is "adopted" by the Maharajah of Chita, ostensibly to serve as a playmate for his own son. Tooni goes with Sonny to live at Lalpore, Sonny taking up residence inside the palace. While they are there, an English missionary arrives: the missionary, Dr. Roberts, wants Sonny to be removed from the palace and to live with him; he also wants to initiate inquiries as to his identity, with the object of restoring him if not to his parents at least to English relations. These inquiries are blocked by the Maharajah, who does, however, implement several of what we are to see as Dr. Roberts's beneficial technological advances in what is presented as a backward, undeveloped community.⁵ Concerned that Roberts's success might lead to his rising "in the confidence and affection of the Maharajah" (93), first Minister Surji Rao plots to throw suspicion on Roberts, implicating him in the death of a child, and leading to his assassination. British troops arrive in response to Roberts's death, the small battalion led by Sonny's father, Colonel Starr — who does not know his son is alive. Sonny — who does not have any idea who his father might be — climbs out of the palace to join the British troops. The Maharajah, fearing that Sonny will have informed the British that there is no functional ammunition in Lalpore — and thus no defence — surrenders. At a ceremony following the surrender, Tooni tells the Colonel that Sonny is his son.

What is crucial to the narrative is Sonny's ignorance of his identity. He knows, because Tooni has told him, that he is English, and he is aware of his visible difference from the children around him; what he does not know, in addition to not knowing his patronymic or of the existence of any father other than Abdul, is what Englishness means, or what it is. Until he meets Dr. Roberts, he does not know any more English than the three words — "bruss'," "wass'," and "isstockin'" (33) — which Tooni has taught him. Indeed, the point is made that "[i]t was a grief to Tooni, who could not understand it; but Sonny Sahib perversely refused to talk in his own tongue" (33). Of course, he cannot "talk in his own tongue," as there is no one around him who speaks English; he has been separated, the novel pointedly indicates, from the language as well as from the religion of his parents. Nonetheless, Sonny, very early in his childhood, begins to exhibit what we are to understand as English characteristics that differentiate him from the others around him. For instance, he shares his sweetmeats with "whoever happened to be

his bosom friend at the time ... in which he differed altogether from the other boys" (36). Similarly, he "want[s] to pretend ... [but] the other boys d[on]’t care about making believe soldiers, and running and hiding and shouting and beating Sonny Sahib’s tom-tom, which made a splendid drum" (36). As Misao Dean has noted, in this novel, "imagination is a racial characteristic of the English, for it is Sonny’s ‘birthright to pretend, in a large, active way’" (Dean 85; Duncan 36). So, it might be added, is boyish militarism — even where there are no soldiers to emulate. Physical activity and intrepid exploration for their own sakes are also apparently racial characteristics of the English: Sonny is "the only boy in Rubbulgurh who cared to climb a tree that had no fruit on it, or would venture beyond the lower branches even for mangoes or tamarinds" (37). The "single thing [the local boys] could do better than he did" was to tell stories (39): Sonny, we see, has only the one story, "about the fighting Abdul saw" at Cawnpore (39).

It is just as Sonny "beg[ins] to prefer the society of Abdul’s black and white goats" to that of the local children (39) that the Maharajah sends for him. In the palace, where he is juxtaposed with the Maharajah’s son, Moti, and not the putatively lower-caste children of Rubbulgurh, the emergence of Sonny’s racial characteristics continues — in fact, is emphasized in terms of its class marks. Sonny does not show any tendency to the kind of self-abnegation which characterizes Tooni’s meetings with the Maharajah or his officers. When the Maharajah agrees to let Tooni stay, she "kisse[s] his feet, [but] Sonny Sahib nod[s] approval at him. Somehow," we are told, "Sonny Sahib never could be taught good Rajput manners" (64-5). In other words, Sonny never could be taught to perform subordination — or dishonesty, or artifice, or self-serving duplicity, characteristics which, in this novel, inhere in nativeness across boundaries of caste, gender and age, as honesty, directness, and loyalty inhere in Englishness and emerge in Sonny. The Maharajah, we see, recognizes Sonny’s position and what is presented as his natural superiority — and resents it. "Look you," he tells him angrily shortly after his arrival at the palace, "Follow my son, the Maharajah, into the courtyard, and there do his pleasure. Do you understand? *Follow him!*" (66). Sonny, evidently, has to be reminded of his servile position in the palace: although he has no reason to imagine his own class or race identity, he instinctively knows it — and, increasingly throughout the narrative, performs it.

Sonny demonstrates his true mettle and his "race" when he meets his father — as commanding officer of the regiment and not yet as his parent — and refuses to tell him about the lack of ammunition in the palace: Sonny will not betray the Maharajah, even when the Colonel reminds him that he is "English" and therefore "must serve the English Queen [who] has sent [the Colonel] here to punish the Maharajah for killing the padre-sahib" (146). Even when the Colonel tells Sonny that if he does not tell him about the ammunition in five minutes "it is [his] duty to have [him] shot" (148), the

child does not give up the information. What is interesting about this crucial scene of self-recognition is the ironic reversal of authority which leads to the constitution of identity: Sonny becomes the representative of the "best" British characteristics — honesty, honour, courage — while the Colonel is to be seen to be invoking military right with some duplicity. Sonny, here, is instructing the Colonel — and the reader — in the proper behaviour of Englishmen, his propriety reinforced by the outcome of the story. The victory without bloodshed is attributable to the child's actions: Sonny saves Lalpore and upholds the empire.

The process of identity formation which *The Story of Sonny Sahib* narrativizes is in part understandable in the terms of what Edward Said has called Orientalism, the fundamentally Oedipal process of imperial self-recognition in which nativeness serves as the negated obverse of Englishness, and English — masculine — subjectivity is formed in the confrontation of the emerging imperial subject with his colonized opposite. Sonny can never feel "at home" in India because he "naturally" positions it and its inhabitants as his "other"; concomitantly, he "naturally" locates himself outside of it. He has not internalized Indianness to any notable degree, despite his growing up using only local language, knowing only local custom, wearing local dress, eating Indian food, being Muslim. None of the ideological apparatuses of his location has had any real effect upon him, apart from what we are to see as a slightly humorous disinclination to "eat of the pig" (142). By contrast, it is obvious that Sonny is deeply and instinctively English: when he inadvertently saves Moti's life by making it impossible for him to eat the poisoned cakes an unknown giver has dropped in the way of the two boys, the Maharajah wishes to reward him; but, we are told, Sonny "could not think of anything he wanted, except to learn his own language from the Englishman" (81). In other words, Sonny's greatest desire *is* to learn English.

Although language is not actually one of the categories of difference which separate Sonny from other children in the village, when he begins his English lessons it is clear that, in and with this language, he also begins to develop an idea of "home," of his origins, of his *missing* identity as someone's son, and as a displaced national subject. The sense of displacement which he learns to articulate is marked first in his instinctive affinity for the English missionary: when Moti indicates that he is "very tired of talking of this Englishman," Sonny responds by saying, "I could talk of him for nine moons" (71). Roberts signifies — as a speaker and teacher of English, as a Christian missionary, as a white-skinned man — the country Sonny has come to be aware he does *not* inhabit.

The murder of Dr. Roberts thus has a profound effect upon Sonny, as if for the first time he derives a sense of his own insecure and threatened position as an outsider. Sonny goes "into mourning [as a Muslim] for nine days in defiance of public opinion because," we are told, "he owed it to the

memory of a countryman" (102). Even more significantly, he "beg[ins], too, to take long restless rambles beyond the gates, and once he asked Tooni if she knew the road to Calcutta" (102). While he is in this process of discovering that what the language has enabled him to see is his national difference and his unnatural location in Lalpore, he hears the strains of "English bugles half a mile away. They were playing 'Weel may the keel row!' the regimental march-past" (117):

He was the same yellow-haired, blue-eyed Sunni, considerably tanned by the fierce winds of Rajputana; but there came a brightness over his face as he listened that had not been there since he was a very little boy.

'How beautiful the music is!' said he to Moti.

Moti put his fingers in his ears.

'It is horrible,' he cried. (117-118)

Sonny hums the air "all day long," and "gr[o]w[s] very thoughtful toward evening, but his eyes sh[i]ne brighter than any sapphires in the Maharajah's iron boxes" (118). Hailed by the military music of what he instinctively knows to be his homeland, he hatches, as we learn in the next chapter, his plan for escape.

When he leaves the palace to join the British troops, he writes to the Maharajah — in English and indeed "with his English pen" — that he "will take [his] Honner in his hart to his oun country" (123). It is to go to "his own country" that is his object in running away, as he tells the Colonel (143); it is, in symbolic terms then, to constitute the identity that had been fractured at Cawnpore when he was separated from his mother and father, and that he has recognized through his perception of native alterity is his "birthright." Sonny thus emerges into his racial identity in a process that is represented in the same terms as what Jacques Lacan has called the "mirror stage," when, Lacan has suggested, the little boy can — in language — mark his separate-ness from the world he has heretofore inhabited (his mother, her nurturing; here, his ayah and his Indian home) and name himself *as* self-referential subject.

Sonny's story ends when he affirms his own name to his father — in English. Tooni tells the Colonel: "*Hazur, ha! [...] Sonny Sahib hai!*"; this is translated in the text as "Your Honour, yes. It is Sonny Sahib" (161). When Sonny smiles up into his father's face, he repeats Tooni's statement, making the name that had been to this point an unstable signifier, without paternal authority, conclusively his.⁶ Duncan slips back and forth throughout the narrative between the two designators of the eponymous child hero, both Sonny Sahib (the name given him by Tooni) and Sunni (the name given him by the Maharajah). These signifiers are not arbitrary, but they *are* deliberately

presented in the narrative as contingent, temporary, unfixed. Sonny/Sunni can be either because, in effect, he is neither: neither name is represented as having any authority — at least, not until the end when his paternity is affirmed by his father, as both parent and military representative of British colonial rule. His father brings him what he has not had: recognition and acknowledgement, as well of course as the patronymic which has been kept from him.

If Sonny's identity — by race, gender and class — is confirmed when he meets his father, the suggestion is concomitantly made that the Maharajah's renaming of the child should be understood as an attempt to erase his identity. The name "Sonny Sahib" had been developed by Tooni at his birth: it significantly identifies him as the son of a "master" *and* as a "master" himself. When the Maharajah learns that this is his name, "his face [goes] all into a pucker of angry wrinkles, and his eyes sh[i]ne like little coals":

'What talk is that?' he sa[ys] angrily. 'His great-grandfather was a monkey! There is only one master here. Pig's daughter, his name is Sunni!' (65)

The renamed Sunni's lack of a patronymic is a measure and a mark of his captivity and his unnatural position in the palace of the Maharajah: when the missionary Dr. Roberts — himself a symbolic captive of the Maharajah, living as he does in the "jail behind the monkey temple" (82) — begins to inquire about the "yellow-haired, blue-eyed English boy [he has discovered] in a walled palace of Rajputana, five hundred miles from any one of his race" (83), he finds nothing, the truth about Sonny as securely protected as the Rajput inhabitants. "The boy's name was Sunni," he learns,

he had no other name; he had come 'under the protection' of the Maharajah when he was very young; and that was all His Highness could be induced to say. Any more pointed inquiries he was entirely unable to understand. There seemed to be no one else who knew. Tooni could have told him, but Tooni was under orders that she did not dare to disobey. (83)

What is evident here is Duncan's insistence that we see Sonny/Sunni not as a "waif and stray," as Dr. Roberts sees him (84), but as the prisoner of the Maharajah. We already know that his story is one of capture (Ram Dass, the Maharajah's horseman, is sent to take Sonny/Sunni to the palace [43-47]). If his captivity is by and large benevolent, it is nonetheless configured as an imprisonment from which he has to escape.

The novel suggests that Sonny's separation from his "birthright" is a deliberate act, whose ultimate effect is to be the undermining of British authority in India. Tooni, while she loves Sonny, is figured in her retention of

the child somewhere between saviour and kidnapper; the Maharajah, meanwhile, although shown to be somewhat benevolent, is emphatically represented as a captor. In holding Sonny, and stripping him of his status and his connection to his father, he has in mind a vengeful act of retaliation against the British occupation. When he learns of the circumstances of Sonny's birth, for instance, he expresses "a shade of regret" that his own soldiers were not at Cawnpore (60). Given the extent to which this novel reproduces what Jenny Sharpe has shown was a widespread imperial response to the events at Cawnpore, this "shade of regret" is to serve as a powerful indication of a dangerous bloodthirstiness on the part of the Maharajah. Sonny, as Roberts sees, is always in danger; Roberts wants to get him away from the palace not only to remove him from the taint of Indianness, but also to release him from his captivity and to save him from potential harm.

Sharpe has traced the representation of the sepoy uprisings of 1857 in her important 1993 study of the figure of woman in the colonial text. According to her, the series of anti-colonial actions undertaken in 1857 were "started by a rumor":

Suspecting the British of converting them to Christianity, sepoys believed that the cartridges of a new Enfield rifle had been greased with beef and pork fat. Faced with the choice of breaking their religious faith or disobeying their commanding officers, good men, who were otherwise loyal, trustworthy, and 'true to their salt,' believed the lies about the greased cartridges and refused to follow orders. (Sharpe 59-60)

Accounts of the rebellion foregrounded what Sharpe suggests was an idea of "Oriental barbarism" (58): she notes a proliferation of stories which told of "helpless women and children being cut to pieces by leering sepoys" (64). "The primary reference for this emblem of barbarism," she writes,

was Nana Sahib, the Hindu leader responsible for the massacre of British civilians at Cawnpore (*Kanpur*) on 15 July 1857. Upon retreating from Cawnpore before an approaching British army, he ordered the execution of his hostages. Around two hundred English women and children were put to death in the Bibighar, or 'House of the Ladies.' Their bodies were concealed in a well at the back of the house or else thrown into the Ganges River. (64)

This, with the other stories of "Sepoy atrocities" "formed," Sharpe observes, "a racial memory of the 1857 uprisings ... This memory was kept alive through pilgrimages to all the major sites where Europeans had been killed. At Cawnpore a plaque was placed on the well into which the bodies of the Bibighar inmates had been thrown" (85).

Duncan ends the first chapter of *The Story of Sonny Sahib* with a sol-

emn reference to this plaque and to the pilgrimage site: "There is," she writes,

a marble angel in Cawnpore now, standing in a very quiet garden, and shut off even from the trees and the flowers by an enclosing wall. The angel looks always down, down, and such an awful, pitiful sorrow stands there with her that nobody cares to try to touch it with words. People only come and look and go silently away, wondering what time can have for the healing of such a wound as this. (Duncan 20-21)

She also reproduces the inscription on the plaque:

SACRED TO THE PERPETUAL MEMORY OF A GREAT COMPANY OF CHRISTIAN PEOPLE, CHIEFLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN, WHO NEAR THIS SPOT WERE CRUELLY MURDERED BY THE FOLLOWERS OF THE REBEL NANA DHUNDU PANT OF BITHUR, AND CAST, THE DYING WITH THE DEAD, INTO THE WELL BELOW, ON THE 15TH DAY OF JULY MDCCCLVII. (21)⁷

Her situating of the narrative in memorializing relation to this event, with the image of the angel and the plaque, clearly indicates its ideological trajectory: imperialism is a righteous principle for global advancement; the English the "race" naturally selected for this work; the slaughter at Cawnpore an index of the necessity for English presence in India, and of English moral superiority. The inscription serves the purpose of overwriting the bodies of the women and children who died there with an idea, which observers cannot help but recognize, of the innocence and purity of the imperial mission itself, represented here in notable distinction to the obvious "cruel[ty]" and implied barbarism of the "rebel" and his "followers." The story of Cawnpore, that is — and thus the story of Sonny Sahib who, we are told, "came of the Folly" (59) and for whom the telling "over and over again" is his only story (39) — explains and justifies imperialism. The narrative thus represents the same act of memorialization that is symbolized by the image of the plaque; its readers are invited to make a pilgrimage to that site and to find there an affirmation of the global Anglo-imperial community.

The imperialism of *Sonny Sahib* is that of the 1890s and early-twentieth century, which was frequently articulated in terms of the Christian civilizing mission, and of the divine authority for expansion and militarism — for children as much as for adults. *The Wonder Book of Empire for Boys and Girls*, published early in the century, for instance, bears on its cover an image of Britannia, holding a trident, with a ship, a zeppelin and several airplanes in the background; Britannia's shield, marked all around with colonial emblems, has at its centre a silver star on a background of flames, with the motto, "Heaven's light our guide." After the Boer war, boy scouts and girl guides would represent one important strategy for the implementation of

this imperialist ideology for children. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, juvenile fiction and other kinds of writing for children had undertaken to prevail upon young Britons to apprehend their duty as Anglo-Saxons and as Christians. John M. MacKenzie has outlined the development through the nineteenth century of a national children's popular literature with origins in evangelical Christian organizations: he notes the founding in the 1790s of the Religious Tract Society (RTS) and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) (200). MacKenzie suggests that the ideological imperatives of the evangelical children's literature published by these organizations — "tracts, penny histories, little books of heroes, children's stories, and Sunday magazines" (200) — had to do with a middle-class fear of the "spread of insubordination, irreligion and revolutionary activity" attendant upon a rising literacy. By the 1880s, the beginning of the intensely expansionist years, these works shifted focus from the constitution of a national community of young people with a notion of their collective identity as a Christian nation to that of an imperial community which would carry this collective identity with them into all the parts of the world which were now to be seen as British. He notes that in this period, "[A] new wave of journals presented imperial ideas, in all their nationalist, racial, and militarist forms, in adventure stories and historical romances[...] The RTS led the way with the *Boys' Own Paper* in 1879" (201). Others followed suit: MacKenzie points out that the "S.P.C.K. published some of [G.A.] Henty's [adventure] stories" (212). The message was obvious: as Jeffrey Richards puts it, "Christianity and Anglo-Saxonism went hand-in-hand" (4).

Duncan deliberately presents her novel for children as a story which is to be understood on the same terms as the publications of evangelical organizations: she makes explicit reference to the SPCK and, significantly, does not explain the acronym to her readers, who might be expected to know what it meant. Dr. Roberts, the English missionary who lives in the unused jail behind the monkey temple, files reports, we are told "for the S.P.C.K. in England" (82). *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is itself, in effect, an SPCK document: not written necessarily for the organization, nor published by them, it is nonetheless a fiction that works to propagate an idea of Christianity and empire as "knowledge." Sonny's identity is bound up with the principle of an imagined imperial (or expanded and dispersed national) community connected by a shared "light." His story begins with the marble angel and the plaque: "Sonny Sahib's father," we are told, "believed that all he could learn while he lived about the fate of his wife and his little son was written there" (22). It ends with the recovery of the little black book which Tooni knows contains the secret of his identity: although she does not comprehend the nature of the book — it is *The Book of Common Prayer* — she has recognized it as a sacred text, wrapping it in oilcloth and hiding it away. Sonny, who also knows that his identity is somehow contained in the book, demands it

from Tooni before he escapes from the palace to join the British troops. The little book holds Sonny's "birthright" in two ways: first, it is inscribed by his mother to his father, and thus provides him with his missing patronymic; second, it reunites him with the English Christian "company" from which he had been separated at birth.

The foregrounding and reinforcement in *Sonny Sahib* of the Christianizing principle of imperialism make this novel slightly unusual in Duncan's fiction: her work does not usually foreground the religious argument for and racial idea of religion in the empire. The fact, however, that the novel is written for children in some way explains the proselytizing impulse; and the fact that it is written *at all* suggests that she saw a need to narrativize the mutiny for children, and to affirm in some way the right of the imperial mission in the context of its memorialization. Indeed, the narrator of this novel addresses the child reader directly, in order to clarify its own mission in telling Sonny's story: "Perhaps," the narrator says, "nobody has told you why the English are called Sahibs in India. It is because they rule there" (65). This novel is all about why "they rule there," why that rule is to be seen as necessary and beneficial, and why "Sonny Sahib" is an appropriate name for a child whom we are to see as born to racial mastery. In this work, the novel is definitively instructional in ways that are not so different from the other fictional — as well as non-fictional — texts of imperial knowledge that proliferated after the 1880s. Duncan's uncharacteristic position as a writer for children strongly suggests that the expansionist imperative to instruct children and to inculcate them into imperial ideology was becoming increasingly urgent in the 1890s. Parkin makes this point in his little book for children, *Round the Empire*, quoted here in the epigraph: English people need to know their "new" territories; they also need to be certain of their Englishness and of their duty to transport the empire with them and within them into these territories. It is possible to see *The Story of Sonny Sahib* responding not only to the memory of the Mutiny as an index of imperial right, but also to the widening imperial need to know how dispersed Anglo-Saxons recognize themselves when their locations do not, as Sonny's story indicates, reflect their national identity. In terms of its instruction, *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is arguably as complex and in many ways as serious as Duncan's other imperialist novels, in that it is not simply reinforcing love for empire as an index of belonging but teaching Anglo-colonial children what imperialism means in the 1890s. That is, where a book such as *The Wonder Book of Empire for Boys and Girls* is "written in the hope of making people in the Homeland prouder than ever of their glorious heritage, and people in the various parts of the Empire prouder of each other and of all they hold in common" (9), *Sonny Sahib* goes beyond the relative jingoism of imperial histories for children, and presents the politics of expansion, militarism, colonial government, and "racial" duty. Sonny's duty, moreover, to exhibit and

protect Englishness in India is not figured as less than the duty of an adult: although he is only nine years old, he must act diplomatically as an endangered outsider in the palace of the Maharajah; he must undertake a perilous escape from political imprisonment; he must staunchly face death rather than act duplicitously to save himself; he must always behave as an English *man*. In its directing at children, *The Story of Sonny Sahib* is an unusual book for Duncan to have written; in its representation of imperial politics and of the urgency of performing Englishness it is a rather unusual children's "book of empire."

Notes

- 1 This essay is dedicated to Tom Tausky, who died suddenly on September 5, 2001, in London, Ontario. Tom's early and foundational work on Sara Jeannette Duncan continues to be influential; his more recent work, including his 1996 edition of *The Imperialist* for Tecumseh Press is characteristically both superbly researched and elegantly articulate. His loss as a scholar, mentor, colleague, and friend is immeasurable.
- 2 Tausky cites a 1904 review of *The Imperialist* which makes the point that it "is not a book to be read in a hammock on a summer afternoon" (1996 317).
- 3 J. Seeley's argument for the British having acquired the empire through forgetfulness is probably the most famous articulation of this idea of natural and inevitable territorial growth. See Dilke for the notion of "the race" overspreading the globe: for Dilke too this is a natural process.
- 4 Sepoy: "Native Indian soldier[s] disciplined by European methods, esp. one of those serving in the British-Indian army" *OED*.
- 5 We are told that,

In the State of Chita and the town of Rubbulgurh there was no fighting, because there were no sahibs. The English had not yet come to teach the Maharajah how to govern his estate and spend his revenues. That is to say, there was no justice to speak of, and a great deal of cholera, and by no means three meals a day for everybody, or even two. But nobody was discontented with troubles that came from the gods and the Maharajah, and talk of greased cartridges would not have been understood. (23-24)
- 6 There is some ambiguity in the third-person pronoun: it is not entirely clear if the "he" who speaks is Sonny or his father. The "assur[ance]" which is noted suggests that it is Sonny.
- 7 Sharpe notes that the plaque was removed, "along with other colonial historical markers after Indian independence" (178n1).

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