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THE NEW ENGLISH LITERATURES

cultural nationalism in a changing world

Bruce King

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Other books by Bruce King

Dryden's Major Plays (Oliver and Boyd, 1966)
Marvell's Allegorical Poetry (Oleander Press 1977)

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Twentieth Century Interpretations of All for Love (Prentice Hall, 1968)
Dryden's Mind and Art (Oliver and Boyd, 1969)
Introduction to Nigerian Literature (Evans & Holmes and Meier (USA), 1972)
Literatures of the World in English (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974)
A Celebration of Black and African Writing (Oxford University Press, 1976)
West Indian Literature (Macmillan, 1979)

To Jeanne, Bo and Derry

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Preface

Many of the best contemporary authors in English come from new nations that not long ago were part of the British Empire. This book is a comparative study of the emergence of the new English literatures and their major authors. It looks at the origins, themes and context of creative writing in newly independent nations, especially the effect of political and social change on culture, and suggests parallels between the literature of the Third World and that of the older dominions of the British Empire. As my subject is the new literatures that have come to international attention since the Second World War, I only occasionally mention similarities to Irish and American writing. Reasons of space also preclude discussion of English literature outside Nigeria, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and the West Indies.

My concerns include why the new literatures developed when they did and their relationship to local nationalism, to each other and to international English-speaking culture. It will be found that writers from the new nations often express similar themes and are concerned with analogous problems; sometimes the parallels reflect a common history; often the resemblances are local expressions of movements of western culture or of social changes that took place throughout the English-speaking community during a decade. The recent outburst of creative literature in the new nations can, for example, be attributed to the effects of the last war, the subsequent British withdrawal from their former Empire, self-determination and the continuing problems of decolonisa-

tion and nation building. While creativity is closely connected to the growth of nationalism, there were anticipations of such developments since at least the late nineteenth century. The present relevance of writers from new nations to international English literature was anticipated in previous decades by Jean Rhys, Claude McKay, Henry Handel Richardson and Katherine Mansfield, to name some of the better-known authors who came from colonies.

In the first two chapters I summarise the main periods of literary development of the new English-speaking nations from colonies of the British Empire through national independence to the social changes of the 1970s. Although a historical survey of colonial and national development will be useful to many readers, my purpose is to show that the new literatures often began at approximately the same time, followed similar courses of evolution, shared similar styles in each decade, and reflected locally what were international political and social changes within the western world. My third chapter explores the relationship of the new literatures to the social causes that produce nationalist movements. Subsequent chapters treat of separate new national or regional literatures and their major writers. I begin with Nigeria which because of its comparative lateness on the scene of English literature provides a useful example of the evolution of a new literature and its development in response to social change. The Nigerian Wole Soyinka is discussed at length because his work shows one solution to the recurring problem of 'authenticity' and because it reflects later stages of national independence. V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite, four major West Indian writers, are studied as different responses to the problems of colonialism, nationalism and decolonisation. Frank Sargeson, of New Zealand, illustrates that the mastery of a colloquial realism is a liberating step in the evolution of a literature. A survey of major Australian writers shows that both nationalists and those identified with high culture have sought to create other sources of values than those produced by modern, urban, middle-class society. It will be found that the characteristics, problems, themes and context of each literature have an applicability to the writing of other nations. Certain topics, therefore, are alluded to throughout the book. The

conclusion suggests that the concerns of the new national literatures are related to the problems of modern western culture; analogies are made between developments in the new nations and those within Britain and the United States.

To make this book more useful to students of English, its focus is primarily on works of literature and literary history rather than on the social context of national writing. While the works discussed are among the best of our time, the proportion of this book given to each author is not a reflection of relative value. I am particularly sorry that there is not space to discuss other African literature beyond Nigeria, and the recent development of creative writing in the Pacific islands. As the new English literatures grow and produce significant authors, their comparative history will become increasingly more difficult to summarise.

While I have in previous publications argued for the need to see each of the new national literatures as having its own traditions which reflect local social, political and cultural history, in this book I attempt to define what is common to the new literatures of the English-speaking world. The two approaches are not contradictory. If, for example, a knowledge of Indian spiritualism or Yoruba culture contributes towards an understanding of the works of R. K. Narayan or Wole Soyinka, it is also useful to compare how both writers have used aspects of their local cultures in responding to the effects of colonialism and modernisation on their societies. Although writers from each nation will respond according to their own perspectives, modern means of communication, travel and the effect of industrialisation, urbanisation and western education on most societies result in similar problems.

Although a book of this kind must necessarily be selective, impressionistic, and occasionally assertive, it may offer readers a general introduction to the major writers from the new nations, while placing the new literatures in a historical and cultural perspective.

I want to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for a Humanities Fellowship during 1977–8 which made the research for this book possible.

BRUCE KING

Contents

1 Literature and colonial society before the Second World War

As it is commonly said that the British Empire developed by accident, without any imperial plan, it may seem unusual to treat the development of new national literatures as if there were strong similarities to be found between the white dominions of settlement and the colonies in which Europeans did not settle. But from the perspective of a literary and cultural historian, there is a unity to the evolution of the Empire and the Commonwealth of independent states that followed. Nor are the cultural and historical differences between the new nations as great as is sometimes claimed. The Amerindians and Aborigines may form a small part of Canadian and Australian society but the literature of the two nations has been concerned with native inhabitants, if only as symbols of an authentic local culture which colonisation destroyed. If African or Indian writers have idealised the past, so some white Australian and Canadian writers have tried to locate a national culture in pre-colonial history.

Each of the former colonies and dominions, whether white, black or racially mixed, was a product of conquest or imposing British administration over natives, and the result in each case has been a nation of various races, tribes, tongues or blood stocks. While Nigeria has its many tribes of which the Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo are the best known, Canada has its English, French, Eskimos, Amerindians and various large communities of immigrants to whom neither English nor French is a first language. Less than half the Canadian population is of British stock. If Hindu India is an illusion masking the presence of

Muslims, Dravidians and others, white New Zealand has its large Maori minority and Australia has its Aborigines. The West Indies and South Africa also consist of various races, cultures and languages.

The new nations were the consequence of British expansion and international events; although settlement or political subjugation began at different times, the colonial histories and the emergence of new nations reflect the beginnings, growth and break-up of the Empire. England and France had been in competition as world powers throughout the eighteenth century until victory in the Seven Years War (1756–63) left England in control of the seas. A large part of the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Canada and coastal areas of West Africa came under English dominion at this time or were secured as English trading bases. At the end of the Seven Years War England had become the main power in India and leader of the slave trade in West Africa. An important consequence of the war was that the American Middle West, taken from the French, attracted illegal settlement, which in turn meant the need to raise taxes to protect the settlers from the Indians. The resulting outcry in the colonies soon led to the American Declaration of Independence (1776), the need to strengthen Canada as a political unit against possible American expansion and the need to create new colonies to which to transport criminals—which led to the settlement of Australia in 1782. The American Revolution caused the breakdown of the old colonial system and led to the creation of a more centralised, better administered Empire in which some form of local representative government was seen as necessary if other colonies were not to follow the American example. The American Revolution can be said to have precipitated the creation of a Canadian nation (especially with the immigration of forty thousand loyalists north to Ontario and the Maritime provinces), led to the settlement of Australia (and in turn the settlement of New Zealand) and had lasting effects on the West Indies.

While the eighteenth century produced little literature that can be said to be part of the usable histories of the recent new nations, a few writers of African descent began to appear in

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England. The cultural and racial tensions noticeable in Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative* (1789) and Francis Williams's poetry anticipate some of the themes that will appear when colonial authors become conscious that they are not Englishmen. The attempts by early white settlers to write poetry in the colonies reveal the problems which result from transporting European literary styles to dissimilar, often inappropriate environments.

The rapid growth of the Empire during the nineteenth century followed from British dominance of the seas, which increased maritime trade; the profits from trade provided the basis of the Industrial Revolution which in turn gave England such a lead over other nations, until later challenged by Germany, that what began as a commercial venture became the Victorian *Pax Britannica*. Imperialism brought the modern state, modern scientific thought, modern technology and what is known as westernisation to other continents and eventually created the basis of the new nations, especially as industrialisation, education and the creation of an administrative cadre produced local elites, politicians and urbanised masses who saw themselves as members of a country dominated by foreigners.

The abolition of the slave trade (1807) and the abolition of slavery through the Empire (1833) produced the paradoxical result of increased British involvement within Africa. Some freed slaves resettled in what became early colonies along the West African coast; it was from such early coastal settlements as Freetown (1790) that a new elite developed which was later to provide the early nationalist leaders. The attempt to stop other European powers from carrying on the slave trade, which disrupted the newly profitable trade in materials and products, necessitated more naval bases and forts. The protection of local enclaves and the support given to local anti-slavery rulers resulted in a further presence, spheres of influence and eventually crown colonies.

The incorporation of many parts of the Empire, either as crown colonies or through annexation, took place during a sixty-year period of the nineteenth century, as did the start of an English educational system. Capetown was taken in 1806 to

protect the route to India against the French; with victory over Napoleon the Cape of Good Hope became British property and the British became involved in South Africa. In 1833 the British government purchased the East India Company and opened the Indian market to free trade. The Hudson Bay Company sold its claims to sovereign power and monopoly to the Canadian government in 1865. Natal became a colony in 1844. Except for a few areas, Australian settlement mostly occurred after 1830; New Zealand was annexed and settlement started in 1840. Between 1825 and 1850 Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Christchurch and Wellington were founded in Australia and New Zealand, and the Vancouver Island Colony (1849) established in Canada. By the middle of the century a system of schools had been founded in Australia and universities established at Sydney (1852) and Melbourne (1853). A South African college was founded in 1829, which later became the University of Cape Town. In India the Hindu College (1816) included English language and literature among its subjects. It was after the Macaulay Minute (1835) recommending the study of English and European culture that universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras started (1857). By the mid-nineteenth century universities had been established in New Brunswick, Toronto, Kingston and Ottawa in Canada. The decision to promote English schooling in the West Indies for the descendants of the freed slaves belongs to this period of educational expansion, as does the founding of the first missionary schools in Nigeria. By the 1870s the universities of Otago and Canterbury had been started in New Zealand. Fourah Bay College in 1876 was affiliated with the University of Durham, and provided the elite that was to dominate the professions, trade and missionary activities, and to spread European values along the coast of West Africa.

The colonial literature of the first half of the nineteenth century is generally uninteresting and derivative. There are diaries, journals and reports from the colonies, often written by the wives of British administrators—*Lady Nugent's Journals* (West Indies, 1839)—or of early settlers—Susanna Moodie's *Rough-*

ing It in the Bush (Canada, 1852). Often the histories of exploration are more interesting than the creative writing. The high proportion of female authors in the early writing of the colonies can be explained by the presence of educated immigrant wives who recorded their strange surroundings in autobiographies or in letters to England. In pioneer societies the arts are likely to be women's occupations: the continued prominence of women writers in many Commonwealth countries may reflect a continuing prejudice towards the arts as feminine and impractical. Early Australian, Canadian and Indian poets followed English models; Augustan verse forms and Wordsworthian descriptions of nature predominated, with the substitution of local names for European references. Even descriptions seem more appropriate for the settled woods of England than the different landscapes of the colonies. Charles Harpur's *Thoughts: A Series of Sonnets* (1845) reveals a feeling for Australian landscape, but the style is artificial and bookish in the late eighteenth-century manner. One of the earliest Indian poets, Henry Derozio, a teacher at Hindu College, of Eurasian origin, wrote the kind of patriotic and inspirational verses that could be found throughout the Empire until the actual attainment of national independence. If such imitativeness was an attempt by Englishmen to carry their culture abroad, for the non-European it was a means of assimilating oneself to the dominant colonial culture. National consciousness, or even clear physical boundaries of the state, often did not exist.

If it is easy to laugh at Judge Barron Field with his poetic exclamations to the Australian kangaroo ('Kangaroo, Kangaroo!/Thou Spirit of Australia,/That redeems from utter failure'), early Indian poets often imitated Lord Byron or Sir Walter Scott. 'Except for a name here and there, the events might just as well have taken place in the Scottish borderland.'[1] Many early Canadian novels, such as Major John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832), are also influenced by Scott, as is the Australian romantic novel, *Robbery Under Arms* (1888) by Rolf Boldrewood. A common theme of American writing, which will appear in many of the new nations, is expressed by the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village* (1825): the decay of the Old and the virtue of the New World. Perhaps the

only notable writer of this period is Thomas Chandler Haliburton, whose Sam Slick stories (1835) reflect the somewhat ironic relationship that had developed between the long-settled Maritime provinces and the American New England states to which they were culturally and historically related. Although a Tory in spirit, Haliburton was aware that colonial dependence had left the Nova Scotian unable to help himself during a period of economic depression. His humorous stories of an American pedlar contrast Yankee with English ways; while both are found wanting, the stories inculcate the need for thrift, industry and self-help.

With the Industrial Revolution the colonies were becoming increasingly useful to England as sources of raw material and for trade. West Africa supplied palm-oil and ground nuts, Australia supplied wood, and New Zealand exported wood, butter and cheese. During the nineteenth century England's population doubled and the colonies provided a new start for millions of the working class. Towards the end of the century the labour unions were among the main supporters of the new imperialism. The 1870s and '80s saw massive emigration from Europe to North America and the British colonies; a product of the increased population and urbanisation in the colonies was unemployment during the depression of the 1880s and the rise of trade unionism and radicalism during the 1890s. The discovery of gold in Australia, New Zealand, West and South Africa and Canada during the second half of the century also helped to attract new immigrants and to make the colonies economically stronger. In New Zealand, for example, the population of the South Island more than tripled during the 1860s, mostly as a result of the discovery of gold.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the British had begun to invest in the colonies. Improved communications increased trade and helped centralise administration and finances, while speeding the development of the colonies. Steamships cut the time of travel from England to India from six to two months. Electric telegraphs and railways opened up and unified the colonies. By 1870 cables were laid under the ocean linking Canada, India, New Zealand and Australia with London. Refrigerated cargoes became common in the 1880s. It

now became possible for officials to travel between England and the colonies on leave, and to bring their families with them. A new social class was created, mostly products of the public schools, which manned the Empire and which, both to the African native and to the working-class immigrant, was to appear the oppressor. The consolidation of the colonies under centralised administrations is noticeable from the mid-century onward. After the mutiny of 1857 India was brought under crown rule. Lagos became a crown colony in 1861, the Gold Coast in 1874. The Union of New Zealand was formed in 1876. In 1867 the British North American colonies confederated and became the Dominion of Canada. British Columbia was added in 1871.

The period from the third quarter of the nineteenth century until the First World War coincided with the rise of liberal economic imperialism. This is the period of Disraeli's New Imperialism and the move towards Imperial Federation. At the 1897 Imperial Conference a programme of federation was proposed. British colonisation had created schools and colleges; cities now had histories; settlement had increased to the point that the comforts of western middle-class life were possible for an elite; a local intelligentsia had started to develop among doctors, lawyers and colonial clerks. Samuel Ajayi Crowther was appointed Bishop of the Anglican Church in Nigeria in 1864. In Lagos by 1875 the Head of Police, Head of Posts and Telegraph, the Collector of Customs and the Registrar of the Supreme Court were all Nigerians.[2]

The growing consolidation of the Empire, and its expansion into Africa, was paralleled by the development of nationalist cultural movements. Aestheticism and naturalism developed alongside a colloquial realism in literature. Aestheticism and regionalism were both products of the Romantic movement.

If the new imperialism of the late nineteenth century partly resulted from the ability of the colonies to absorb immigrants, there were also economic reasons. England's early start in the Industrial Revolution had been caught up by other countries, particularly Germany and the United States. Instead of free

trade being to British advantage, it now seemed preferable to turn towards protectionism and guaranteed markets. While the colonies and new dominions saw in imperialism a threat to their established trading patterns, they were interested in the possibility of expanding their own industries and trade within a closed economic community. The liberalism which had earlier created the Empire was superseded for a time by thoughts of the benefits that might be gained from closer links.

While it is often said that the Boer War ended plans for an Imperial Federation, the same developments that had turned the colonies into thriving states had started to produce strong nationalist sentiments, often in opposition to imperial ideas. The Indian National Congress was formed in 1885. The Australian Labour Federation (with its demand to stop immigration, keep Australia white and employ Australians) was founded in 1890. Dominion status and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1886) had brought a new patriotism to Canada (which once more felt threatened by its southern neighbour). The spread of various progressive ideas and movements during the last decades of the century also contributed to nationalism. If the newly enfranchised worker was in favour of the Empire as providing living space for his class, the intellectuals, whether Marxist or Fabian, were often anti-imperial. With improved communications and travel, their attitudes spread to the colonies. The Pan-Negro movements of the age are similar to the Indian National Congress as an expression of the new native elites who had begun to demand political and cultural recognition. The West Indian Edward Blyden settled in West Africa where he wrote books arguing the uniqueness and dignity of traditional African culture at a time when a new professional class of African lawyers, clergymen and teachers was beginning to demand a role in local government and to discuss the possibility of a West African nation.

Both imperialist and nationalist sympathies can be seen in the literature of the period. And it is noteworthy that there was a considerable body of good literature. The progress that made the Empire of economic interest also began to produce political and creative literature. Henry Kendall's *Leaves from Australian*

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