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Abstract

Although imperial and colonial discourse has existed in English since at least the sixteenth century, reaching extensive proportions in the United States both before and after Independence and in India during the nineteenth century,² the forms of twentieth-century debate, often called postcolonialism (or, less plausibly, postcolonial theory) have altered in the direction of trying to displace the imperial power, perfidious Albion, from the centre of the discussion and to treat it contumeliously while concentrating on supposed similarities of culture among the colonies and former colonies. An early text for the first of these twentieth-century trends might be found in the half-hoping, half-despairing lines of W.B. Yeats in 'Easter, 1916':

KEN GOODWIN

Dymphna Cusack as a Precursor of Commonwealth Literature¹

Although imperial and colonial discourse has existed in English since at least the sixteenth century, reaching extensive proportions in the United States both before and after Independence and in India during the nineteenth century,² the forms of twentieth-century debate, often called postcolonialism (or, less plausibly, postcolonial theory) have altered in the direction of trying to displace the imperial power, perfidious Albion, from the centre of the discussion and to treat it contemptuously while concentrating on supposed similarities of culture among the colonies and former colonies. An early text for the first of these twentieth-century trends might be found in the half-hoping, half-despairing lines of W.B. Yeats in 'Easter, 1916':

For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said (Finneran182).

Novels and poems from and about the colonies tend to deal with the questions of imperialism. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is one example (see Cronin and Moore-Gilbert). Another, covering a wider set of colonies, is Herman Melville, in *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi* (see Rowe). But one Australian novelist and playwright, Dymphna Cusack, goes far beyond the sometimes off-hand comments found in these works to deal with the general question of colonialism, wherever found, and to anticipate much of the discourse to be found in postcolonial writing during the post-Second World War decolonisation process and later.

Shelley said that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind (*Defence of Poetry*). Al Alvarez, in his Introduction to *The New Poetry* says that they provide humanity with an 'early-warning system'. Certainly, Dymphna Cusack's *The Sun in Exile*, published in 1955, amply demonstrates Alvarez's agenda. She raises, decades before most other Commonwealth novelists, virtually all the key issues in the decolonisation debate.³ In the fading light of the assertiveness, even menace, of high theory, it is sometimes difficult through the static to know whether the few persisting, unreconstructed theorists are saying that theory purports to explain existing texts or to generate new texts of a certain character. In either possibility, a persuasive case can be made that one writer, the Australian novelist and playwright, Dymphna Cusack, was a prophet, precursor, early-warning system, even unacknowledged legislator of many of the concerns of what later called itself postcolonial theory.

In literary history Cusack is generally assimilated to the substantial group of left-leaning social realist writers of the 1930s, a group that in Australia encompasses Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Miles Franklin, Jean Devanny, Judah Waten, and D'Arcy Niland; in India Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and K S Venkataramani; in New Zealand John A Lee, Robin Hyde, John Mulgan, and Frank Sargeson; in southern Africa Herman Charles Bosman, Pauline Smith, and, somewhat later, Stanlake Samkange, Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, and J M Coetzee; in the Caribbean Alfred Mendes, V S Reid, and, later, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, and Andrew Salkey. All of them draw attention to social and political injustices arising from such prejudicial factors as class, gender, and race.

Generally considered, like John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, or Morris West, as a novelist engaged with social problems, though in a quieter mode than these exemplars, Dymphna Cusack has a so-far unacknowledged place in the history of Commonwealth studies. It is true that many of her novels and plays deal with Australian social history of the immediate past — education bureaucracies, the 1939–45 war, the treatment of Aborigines, and so on — but in one novel, *The Sun in Exile*, she brings together a cast of characters from many parts of the then-recently renamed British Commonwealth of Nations and has them engage with social issues of common interest.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Dymphna Cusack started off Commonwealth literature. There had already been many novels and personal accounts about the return 'home' from a dominion or colony to the European imperial power, the best-known till then being Alan Mulgan's *Home: A New Zealander's Adventure* (1927), Robin Hyde's *The Godwits Fly* (1936), and Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1945). Later examples, in some of which the journey is imaginary, include Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Andrew Salkey's *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly* (1969) and *Come Home, Malcolm Heartland* (1976), George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954), V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* (1953), Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*, (1953), and Ferdinand Oyono's *Chemin d'Europe* (1960). But these were all about a colonial or dominion national returning to what, at least from afar, seemed like cultural roots. *The Sun in Exile* is quite different. It brings together Australians, New Zealanders, a few English people, Indians, Nigerians, Jamaicans and other Caribbeans, and a single Canadian almost in a proleptic fictional scenario for that kind of postcolonial theory that emphasises the shared experience of the colonised and their hostility, born of the experience of British imperial dispossession, oppression, snobbery, or disdain, to the 'Motherland'.

As in most of Cusack's novels and plays, a small number of characters are brought together in a confined space with the opportunity to talk about common concerns, and, as is also common with Cusack's work, there are many flashbacks

from the narrative present to comparable situations in the earlier fictive life of the narrator. The novel is mostly set on board the old Swedish cargo boat, *Boadicea*, which is sailing from Australia to England via the Panama Canal, but the story of Pen and the other passengers on *Boadicea* is not written contemporaneously with the action; it is written while Pen is on a modern Swedish cargo-boat, *Eknaren*, travelling along the west coast of Africa en route to South America. Additionally there are many reminiscences of an earlier voyage, undertaken by Pen and her twin sister, Virginia at the age of nineteen when their father was taking them on a world tour. While it is true that in some of her novels the issues raised seem not to penetrate below the surface dialogue into the theme or plot, the postcolonial issues in *The Sun in Exile* are organic to the plot and situation. The narrator, an Australian travel-writer, Miss Alexandra Pendlebury, is part of a group of shipboard friends which includes her cabin-mate, Vicky, a painter, and Vicky's Australian admirer, Hal — a man who has been a soldier in New Guinea. Just as Vicky is contrasted with Myfanwy, who is described as 'Born in New Caledonia of a French mother and a Welsh father, she had been educated partly in Noumea and partly in Australia' (31), and as with many of the minor characters in this twinning novel, Hal has a parallel, a rival, Bernard — an Englishman who 'had been caught in Malaya when the Japanese shot down his rattle-trap Hawker' (31). At times Vicky also seems interested in Ashram, who boards at Trinidad, for 'the new-arrivals were a cross-section of the Southern Caribbean. All the types that conquest, slavery, indentured labour had contributed to the original stock to make a West Indian, converge on the *Boadicea* from Trinidad, British Guiana, Tobago, Barbados, St. Vincent, St. Lucia' (104). Ashram is a barrister of the Middle Temple, of whom Pen observes, 'born in British Guiana, descendant of Indians from Bengal, handsome in an essentially Indian way, the counterpart physically and mentally of the Parsees we had known and liked during our long stay in India thirty years before. With this difference: his life-blood was politics, where theirs had been poetry and philosophy. I prefer the latter' (104). Pen as narrator finds Ashram's obsession with politics — 'his fiery nationalism which so often degenerated into propaganda' (118) — infuriating. As reference point and combatant for the colonials there is an English Parson, besotted with the virtues of the Empire and terrified of the dangers of Communism. Like many of the Caribbean social-realist writers mentioned and like many black South African writers, Cusack sees Communism as allied with the struggle for freedom from colonialism; the Parson is accordingly treated satirically.

When the ship docks at Port of Spain a number of locals board, mainly professionals, all intending to seek work in London. One is Doctor Sargent, a Jamaican, accompanied by an English wife; he had studied in New York. Previously, at Kingston, Jamaica, another new passenger, Lance Olumide, had come on board. He is a Yoruba, who speaks knowledgeably of Nnamdi Azikiwe⁴

and his ideas. During a shipboard dance, he dances with Vicky, which causes much white disapproval and some downright rudeness. Thus white praise of the Empire and its generosity in granting self-government to the colonies is exposed as a sham. Even the sympathetic characters are somewhat taken aback by the cultural spread of passengers on board after the West Indies. Hal says to Pen:

‘I never struck anything like this before, you know, Pen. Up till now the only coloured people I’ve known well were the natives in New Guinea. Great blokes, but —’
 ‘But the New Guinea natives weren’t your competitors.’ With a serious face I quoted a remark of Ashram’s that I suddenly fished out of the unconscious.
 He looked at me sharply, recognised the quotation and gave a short, hurt laugh.
 ‘Sometimes I feel a complete dim-wit beside the Doctor and Ashram.’
 ‘And Olumide?’
 ‘No, I feel Lance is rather like me.’ (111–12)

While the ship is still in the Caribbean, Ashram buys an airmail copy of *The Times* and passes round the news that Peking had fallen. This leads to a protracted discussion of colonialism:

The Captain murmured non-committally; the Professor humphed; the Squatter muttered something about the Yellow Peril; the Planter [from Malaya] declared that to encourage revolution in China was to set the whole Coloured world at our throats. ‘Look at Malaya, look at India, look at Africa—all at our throats.’
 ‘We must agree to differ, sir. They are not all at our throats and, where they are, so often it has been due to our lack of foresight. They would prefer to be at our sides.’

The Professor frowned.

‘If by that you mean to give them self-government, I think your policy is wrong, definitely wrong. They are not ready for it.’
 ‘And never will be.’ The Planter was final.

As the Parson made to speak I rose (I hope my face did not reflect my impatience), made some confused mention of a headache, excused myself and fled.

Then — I groaned to myself as I walked straight into it at morning tea. For Doctor Sargent, his wife and Ashram, the fall of Peking excluded all other topics. For the rest of the group it was a new topic of conversation. I remember smiling through Myfanwy’s sole contribution: ‘How can one talk of a Chinese city falling when it fell to the Chinese?’

Ashram was more animated than ever. He behaved as though it was his personal victory.

‘For us West Indians the irresistible progress of the Chinese Peoples Army is the most important thing that has happened since India won her independence,’ he declaimed didactically. ‘What India has won and China is winning we must win.’

He raised the chipped cup Vicky had passed to him. ‘Let us drink to a free Caribbean.’

I think most of us would have raised our chipped and cracked cups to any casual toast so long as it sounded innocuous. But not so the Parson. He was a man who insisted on having his terms of reference clear.

‘Free from what?’ he demanded of Ashram, who was too exalted even to sit down; he stood poised (I almost wrote posed) cup in hand.

‘Free from poverty, ignorance, disease and all the vestiges of slavery that still oppress so many of our people.’

The Parson’s short-sighted eyes were fixed on him. He demanded even more specific clarity: ‘Within the British Commonwealth?’

Ashram leaned forward, the expression on his face suddenly changed to sternness. ‘Surely, sir, that depends on you?’

Olumide moved, looked from one to the other. ‘Where else would they seek it?’ There was such finality in his words that we all raised our cups.

It was the first time that Olumide had voluntarily contributed to any of the debates. (120–21)

Publishing in 1955, Cusack relies on the memory of her readers to provide the significance of the fall of Peking. Her own memory seems a little askew because she allows Myfanwy, unchallenged, to say that Peking was a Chinese city that fell to the Chinese. In fact it was Japan in the second Sino-Japanese War that entered Peking on 29th July 1937. By that stage, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang government, had agreed to join with his civil-war enemies, the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, to form a united nationalist front against the Japanese. Cusack perhaps for some unstated political reason, chooses to avoid any discussion of the Japanese imperialist incursions into Manchuria and northern China, including the setting up of a puppet state (the North China Executive Committee); she is thus neutral about the relationship between Communism and freedom-fighting against imperialism and about the existence, in Japan, of an Asian imperialist and colonialist power. Many of her readers would almost certainly have recalled the flight of the Kuomintang to their wartime capital of Chungking in western central China and the triumph in 1949 of the Communists in the formation of the People’s Republic and the flight of Chiang (a hero in most of the American press) to Taiwan. Rather oddly, her subsequent dialogue raises the question of alternative colonial masters, a matter that she had suppressed with the excision of Japan from the previous discussion.

Later in the discussion, Olumide asks Ashram:

‘I’ll admit from what you’ve all said that conditions are pretty bad everywhere in the Caribbean, but would you be better off under, say America or Russia?’

Ashram made an impatient gesture.

‘Don’t you ever remember that there are independent countries like Sweden, Switzerland and India? Everything in this world doesn’t resolve itself into two alternatives! We don’t want American or Russian control. We want to govern ourselves.’

Hal asks whether they are capable of self-government and the Doctor accuses him of race prejudice. (124). Ashram says to Hal, putting in a word for the possible benignity of an imperial power but also drawing attention to the typical supercilious assumption of racial superiority by such a power:

‘But there are two Englands, Hal, as you’ll find when you get there. I was accepted at the University, as you say, yet four years later, when I went back to play cricket with the West Indian team, a London hotel refused accommodation to me and others of the team.’

‘Still, you must admit that you fellows are exceptional. Most of the — er — primitive races need to be looked after until they are ready to look after themselves.’ He was obviously regretting his words.

‘You might explain how we’ve looked after *our* primitive race,’ Vicky broke in.

Oh God, how like Virginia, always to come in fighting; always to throw a gallon of petrol on an argumentative fire that looked like going out.

‘But, Vicky, you’re off the track altogether. Dr Sargent, Olumide, Ashram and an Australian Abo! After all, the Abos are Stone Age people.’

‘While I have the inestimable benefit of three centuries of slavery to the white man as well as an infusion of his blood?’ (124–25)

The discussion passes on to elected parliamentary government, Dominionhood, foreign investment, and the opportunities for education and health in former colonies. Ashram makes the point that even the uneducated Australians on board ship have the right to vote, and then says,

‘And the Parliament you elect governs you without interference from any outside power?’

‘Of course,’ Hal repeated. ‘We’ve been a Dominion for half a century.’

‘But you would not agree to our governing ourselves?’

‘I can only say that primitive people have to learn to govern.’ (123–26)

Doctor Sargent asks Olumide in what generation he thinks his country will be ready for self-government ‘eventually’. Olumide, slightly goaded, replies that he wants it in his lifetime, to which the Doctor replies:

‘Forty years ago, my son, that eventually was for me. And what will you find in my country to-day?’

‘You have a Legislative Council, haven’t you, with your own representatives on it?’

‘They have no real power.’

‘What more would you have?’ This time Olumide challenged him.

‘Freedom. Without that, Lance, your “eventually” is without meaning.’

A discussion ensues about the nature of ‘freedom’ and its relationship to independence:

‘Is that what you want, Lance?’

He shook his heads slowly.

‘If by freedom you mean independence, No. We don’t want to break with England. She’s helping us.’

The Doctor’s hand rose and fell.

‘I am back forty years hearing the old promises.’

‘We’re simple people Doctor. When we’re promised things we believe the promise is the step to its fulfilment.’

‘And the promises made to you have been fulfilled?’

Olumide hesitated. 'In part only. But my father says that's because of a lack of money due to post-war circumstances. they'll be fulfilled in entirety when the time is suitable.'

Ashram goes on to talk of the importance of politics and economics to the solution of colonial problems. Hal accuses him of 'trying to ram a lot of Communist slogans down our throats' (128) to which Ashram replies:

'So you think all this ferment in Asia and Africa and the West Indies is Communism?'

'Of course it is.' (127-28)

The Parson enters the discussion, saying,

'I'm afraid it can't be dismissed so easily, Hal. In Asia it has been and is nationalism from within far more than Communism from without. In Africa, where so few are literate, it seems to be social and economic protest rather than political. The West Indies are more politically advanced, but, as Ashram says, the basis of the trouble throughout is the same.'

The Parson lit his pipe and puffed reflectively, with his shortsighted eyes looking away to the horizon he probably could not see. Then he added: 'But whether it be Asia, the West Indies, the Middle East or Africa I feel strongly that only our practical application of the Christian principles will prevent it from becoming communist.'

To my surprise, Olumide once more broke in:

'My father is a minister, a deeply religious man, who believes that Communism is anti-Christ. He says that if the extremists and agitators are successful, they will destroy all we've built with the help of Britain.'

'You are satisfied with what you have built?'

'No. Far from it.' He paused and then added with conviction: 'But with English help we shall gradually advance.' The Doctor sighed. 'Such faith deserves to be rewarded, Lance. So you are prepared to wait?'

'If waiting is not standing still.'

Ashram moved with one of his caged-leopard actions I found disconcerting.

'We are not prepared to wait. Gradual advance suits us no more than it suited the Gold Coast. I think Lance will find it does not suit his people either. The world moves too fast to-day.' (128-29)

In accordance with the conventions of the conversation novel, Cusack here presents an impartial balance of ideas about how Communism is linked to the freedom movement, whether it is essentially anti-Christian, and to what extent England, as an imperial power, can be trusted to advance the agenda as fast as the colonised peoples desire.

The racial hatred of the anti-'nigger-lovers' on the ship is gradually overcome by a spirit of multi-racial bonhomie. Pen learns that among the West Indians going to seek work in England are musicians, a mechanic trained by the RAAF, etc. Even she, then, has been guilty of class superiority, assuming that black West Indians would be unskilled workers, whereas the truth is that many of them are headed for England as professionals. Class, then, comes into a matrix

with anti-colonialism, Communism, and the possibility of England's benignity in granting independence as part of the discussion.

A good deal later, there is a reunion of some of the principal characters in London. Pen meets Vicky, Hal, Lance Olumide. Pen asks Lance:

'Of course, this city is strange to you,' I began, feeling more beyond his words than they actually expressed.

'I've been a stranger in many other strange cities — Rio, Buenos Aires, New York, Cairo — but never before in one that had its face turned away from me.'

'London is the most impersonal city in the world.' I found myself wanting to give some explanation that would take me away from that first week in the Caribbean. I wanted to smother the spectre I, more than the others, knew of old. I wanted to believe the war really had changed things in that regard, as in so many others.

'We all feel that at first, even people from the Dominions,' I went on to explain. Olumide nodded without taking his eyes from my face.

'You're probably right.'

'Of course she's right.' Hal blundered in with his well-meant kindness that so often was as bad as deliberate offence. 'They say London's the most tolerant city in the world, and England's always been an asylum for all kinds of people, whatever their race or religion.'

I saw Vicky flush and bite back a retort. I saw the flicker of a smile on Olumide's lips. He knew Hal too well to be hurt by his unfortunate choice of phrase. He smiled at him as he leant forward to offer him a cigarette and light it.

'Mind you, I think it's a bad principle to coop coloured people up in hostels,' Hal added. 'You'd be better apart, mixing with white people and learning about each other.'

'Hostels!' Vicky was vehement. 'If it was a hostel he was in he'd be a lot happier.'

'Where are you then?' I asked.

'I found it difficult to get accommodation when I got to London, like a lot of other Africans and West Indians, so the Colonial Office sent us to what is called a common lodging-house in the East End.'

'I say,' Hal protested. 'That sounds pretty tough. What's the place like?'

Olumide hesitated, obviously choosing his words carefully. 'The living quarters are adequate and we cook for ourselves in a communal kitchen.'

'Is it for coloured men only?'

'No. There are forty to fifty of us, and over seven hundred white men. So, you see, we are learning about each other.'(145–46)

Later, Olumide says to Hal: 'Many of us come from good homes. We did not think we would ever have to live in such a place as we are living in now' (148).

Out of this piece of reportage (for Pen is a journalist specialising in travel-writing), re-emerges the romantic strand of the plot. Vicky decides to marry Lance Olumide. Pen is surprised to find that his table manners are impeccable. She goes on to write:

His father became a personality. I had met his like before in other parts of Africa: men who joined the Ministry during the first world War, beginning their career as elementary teachers, and progressing to Catechists of the Church. I saw him older,

wiser, graver than Olumide and yet essentially like him. He showed me a photograph of him at a council of the district, incongruous in his conventional parsonical garb among the magnificently attired chiefs to whom he apparently acted as adviser. He spoke an English as pure as his son's, yet found his greatest pleasure in writing in the African language the folk-lore of the warriors of the Yoruba. (162)

Pen is curious about Olumide's schooling and its relationship to his home culture. He replies that his schooling was in English:

'Yes, though we rarely saw Europeans, except occasionally the resident officer. We studied our own language only as a subject.' He gave his rich laugh. 'I remember learning "this precious jewel set in a silver sea", and wondering what it was all about. It's only since I've been over here that I've begun to realise that we have a culture of our own.' (164)

He says that he went to the Church Missionary Society Grammar School in Lagos, served in the Forces, then became a clerk in the Treasury getting money to go to university.

Pen also sees Olumide exposed to racial prejudice, as, for instance, one day in St James's Park, when a mother threatens her small boy with 'If you do that again I'll give yer to the black man, see, and he'll eat yer!' (173). Olumide, in his mildest and politest mode, remonstrates with the woman: 'it is a very wicked thing to use another human being to frighten a little child' (174).

At Christmas there is to be a party at Vicky's hostel. She tells Pen:

'Well, the Secretary asked us to hand in the name of the guest we are inviting. We can each ask a man.... Naturally I put in Lance's name.'

'What happened?'

'The Secretary sent for me to-night after dinner. I went into her office. It's a horrible, stuffy hole stinking of her dog. When you come out you find his hairs all over you.... She didn't ask me to sit down; the dog was on the second chair, anyway. She sat looking at the list in front of her, tapping her teeth. She's got one of those rather rabbit faces. You know.'

I nodded.

'She calls herself a gentlewoman. Grades everybody in classes — lower, middle, upper; and sub-grades — lower, lower, lower middle, lower upper.'

I nodded again.

She gave me a toothy smile and asked in the nicest voice: Miss Latrobe — ah — this, ah — Mr Olumide; he is a foreigner?

'No,' I said, 'he's British.'

'Ah!' she tapped her teeth again. She knew as well as I. She's seen Lance bring me home and call for me dozens of times.

'The name sounds — a little — ah, Greek.'

'Oh, no,' I said, 'it's African. Nigerian to be exact.' I had a feeling of what was coming. . . You know? Then she bleated: 'Then he is—a—coloured?'

'Naturally! He's African. Didn't you know before Africans are black?' I suppose I oughtn't to have spoken like that, but she forced me, she's such a snooty sort of bitch. It gave her the chance she wanted.

‘We [it’s always we] are not accustomed to our students speaking like that, Miss Latrobe. It only makes more unpleasant what we have to say! Namely, that we cannot possibly allow you to invite a — a black man to a party here.’

‘Not even if he’s British, like the rest of us?’

‘You must recognise, Miss Latrobe, there are British and British.’

I gave her a long look and said: ‘One can hardly avoid noticing it.’ She went an ugly mottled puce, but evidently felt she’d gone too far and began to wheedle a bit:

‘What about that nice young man you asked to our first party [she is referring to Hal]—a Colonial, wasn’t he?’

‘He’s an Australian.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

You know, darling, I went off the deep end at that and bunged straight at her with: ‘He isn’t a colonial. He wasn’t born a Colonial. I wasn’t born a Colonial. We haven’t been a Colony for more than half a century.’

She purred in a saintly sort of way. I’ll swear my blood-pressure hit two hundred as she said: ‘Don’t let us quarrel about a word; and as you are naturally in rather an emotional state at the moment, I’ll overlook your manner.’ She laughed coyly and went on: ‘I find you Colonials are apt to be ultra-sensitive. Now, if you’d care to substitute another name for the guest list?’

‘I don’t wish to substitute another name,’ I flung at her. ‘And since that’s your attitude to my fiancé, I give notice that I shall leave the Hostel at the end of the month.’ Then I stamped out. (177–79)

Vicky is nevertheless worried about finding somewhere as cheap to live, though she refuses Pen’s suggestion of an apology. Instead she suggests that ‘an awfully nice Canadian girl [who is] also sick of having her accent criticised’ (180) might share digs with her. Pen invites her to share her flat and she accepts.

Pen organises a Christmas party. There is a very heavy pea-souper fog, but the guests come. The narrative is designed to show that some English go even further than the hostel secretary by finding all colonials, even the whites, not only strange but also convenient objects of patronage.

Together we studied my guests. What a varied assembly! Natul [an Indian girl from Kenya], lovely as a butterfly; her Pakistani fiancé, whose hawk-like face was constantly broken with laughter one did not expect to find there; West Indians; West Africans; Sylvia, the Canadian ash-blonde, vivid in a scarlet skating costume she excused as the only anti-fog garment she possessed; the Australians; the New Zealanders.

‘Their vitality strikes you like a strong wind when you see them in an old-world setting,’ Bernard commented. ‘They’re alive as we’ve forgotten how to be.’ (191)

When a young Englishman comments that it must be ‘odd’ living in Australia or New Zealand, with ‘everything upside down. Christmas at the wrong time of the year and all that’ (194) he is greeted with a burst of laughter, and Hal says ‘Don’t you realise that down there, Europe is now the Antipodes?’ (194) They burn some gum leaves as an act of assertion of the legitimacy of their own civilisation compared with that of the Mother Country. Here Cusack moves

farthest away from the cosiness of the British-led Commonwealth notion and asserts the value of her Australian heritage. Yet that pride is about to be undercut by mention of Australia's immigration policy.

The next morning, when Vicky has announced her impending marriage, Hal raises the question of the White Australia Policy and how that will affect Lance.

'[T]he laws say permanent migrants to Australia must be 75 per cent. or more of European descent, fully European in outlook and education—'

'So Hitler would be welcome but not Lance?' Bernard made the statement factually. (199)

Olumide suggests that in Nigeria they would not experience such a level of prejudice, though there would be difficulties. Bernard suggests, 'England is finished. The future lies somewhere else' (202). Pen disagrees. Natul talks about the attempts of neighbouring white farmers in Kenya to drive her sister and her English husband from their farm.

Because Olumide has poor facilities for study [he is a law student, Vicky an art student] at his hostel, Pen makes a study for him in her flat. When there is racial rioting around the Hostel, and the police try to move all non-whites from the streets, Lance is arrested on charges of obstructing the police and resisting arrest. The magistrate finds Lance technically guilty, but, because of the circumstances, gives him an absolute discharge. A friend finds a flat for them, but then the solicitor discovers that there is a clause in their lease forbidding letting to Jews or coloured people. Pen finds when she hunts for them that there is a high prevalence of 'No Foreigners', 'British only', or 'No Coloured People' (221).

When a place is found the landlord comments on the fact that West Indians and West Africans used not to get on with each other. George, a West Indian rather disliked by Pen, is turned to for confirmation. 'Sure.' George's lips twisted in his usual smile. 'We've learned that all dark skins are the same before the Labour Exchange' (230).

Vicky's father is not amenable to the marriage and writes her a wounding letter. By contrast:

The letter from Olumide's father comforted her with its warm welcome expressed in rather old-fashioned phrases that had a hint of dignity in them.

She was pleased, too, with his gifts, although secretly a little embarrassed at the Bible. 'You know, Pen, I've never had a Bible,' she confessed; 'Lance thinks I'm a real heathen.'

She took out the garments of native woven cloth and fingered its heavy texture. The design in strong primary colours on a biscuit background pleased her as it pleased me.

Then she picked up the Bible again. She read the inscription written in a strong, distinctive handwriting: "'To my beloved son and daughter.'" Sweet, isn't it?' she said. (237)

At the wedding, there is ‘A mixed group in the church, white and black.’ (239)

Cusack is writing a serious social novel, not a romance, so marriage must not lead to living happily ever after. In dire contrast, after an afternoon experiencing racial hatred at Hyde Park Corner, Olumide is attacked from a lorry with a cosh but Vicky’s hand takes the blow and is shattered, so that she is unable to hold a painting brush.

In these long extracts can be seen many Commonwealth and postcolonial literature concerns: the racism, colour prejudice, and entrenched class structure of the imperial power; the colonial sense of being on the periphery rather than at the centre; the common desire of the colonies for self-government; the sense that flag independence may not mean the end of cultural imperialism; the preference given to white settler colonies over black administrative colonies; and the actual (and not always planned or applauded) hybridisation among the colonies and between the colonies and Britain.

Cusack made a living as a writer in Sydney by writing for the women’s sections of newspapers and magazines. Her novels made some concession to popular and publishers’ taste by having a romantic strand, but she was concerned to be considered a writer in at least the English-speaking world and to gain the best deal from publishers. She wrote before academics had invented the category of Commonwealth or postcolonial writer, and she would probably, like most later writers, have repudiated the classification. In fact, I have lost track of the number of times at academic conferences I have heard an invited imaginative writer, feeling perhaps like Exhibit A or like a literary lion pacing around a theme park of academic jackals, growl, ‘I am not a Commonwealth (or postcolonial) writer; I am not a Nigerian (Jamaican, Malaysian, Maltese, Fijian, Sri Lankan, Canadian, etc.) writer. I am a *writer*.’²⁵ Yet, whatever Cusack’s placement of herself in the categories of writers, *The Sun in Exile* undoubtedly is proleptic about the concerns of later theorists.

NOTES

¹ My thanks are due to Suzanne Mallon of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, for help in using the Florence James Papers and other manuscripts. I have quoted extensively from *Sun in Exile* in this essay because access is limited, the text being currently out of print.

² See, for instance, Goodwin, ‘Postmodernism under the Raj?’.

³ *The Sun in Exile* was published some years before the great flourishing of the Caribbean novel about growing up or travelling to Europe for work or education, as manifested in the work of V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, and Andrew Salkey, or in slightly later burst of west African novels by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, and Camara Laye, and the later still output from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and elsewhere in the Pacific.

⁴ Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe (‘Zik’) was a Nigerian Igbo who, after study in the US returned to Ghana and practised as a journalist. As editor of the *Africa Morning Post* (1934–37) and later, in Nigeria, the *West African Pilot*, he was highly respected as a spokesman for independence and for left-wing ideas. When Nigeria became a republic in 1963 he was unanimously elected President.

- ⁵ Inez Baranay lines up a number of contemporary Australian writers as accepting the obligation to be prophetic about their country, to have ‘a political purpose in their writing’ (10). Using Nadine Gordimer as an exemplar, she places in this group Jessica Adams, Nick Earls, Les Murray, Rosie Scott, Tom Keneally, Nicholas Jose, Judith Rodriguez, Eva Sallis, Susan Varga, Anne Coombs, Arnold Zable, Geoff Goodfellow, Anita Heiss, Lionel Fogarty, and Kerry Reed-Gilbert. Rather than list an alternative group, opposing any such obligation and using Margaret Atwood as an exemplar (V.S. Naipaul would have done equally well), she simply quotes Frank Moorhouse’s cautionary note, ‘If we have things to say about politics it should be complex and said in our work. We writers are if anything *disqualified* from public statement because we are often falsely (but seductively) seen to have special insights by the general public and media which we do not necessarily have’ (11).

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