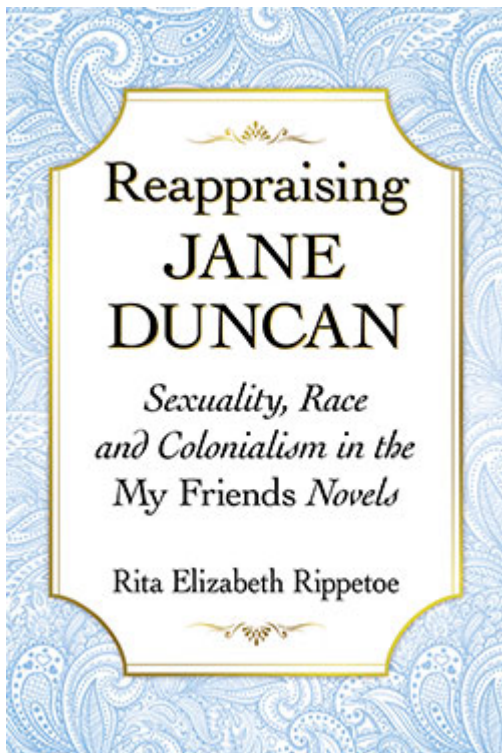


# 'Reappraising Jane Duncan: Sexuality, Race and Colonialism in the My Friends Novels' by Rita Elizabeth Rippetoe

Review by Glenda Norquay



Jane Duncan is a Scottish writer neglected by critics and ripe for reappraisal. Rita Elizabeth Rippetoe's study goes some way to addressing Duncan's overlooked fiction, illuminating the life of an author who can best be understood in relation to the changing world she inhabited and the specifics of her own geographical journey. Her book indicates new ways of thinking about Duncan's life and work in the context of Empire and twentieth-century Scotland. Recognising that readers are likely to be unfamiliar with both the writer and her oeuvre, its emphasis is on her life and detailed accounts of works. Through this, it provides timely stimulus for a new appreciation of Duncan although structure and

approach are not without problems.

Born Elizabeth Jane Cameron in Dunbartonshire in 1910, the daughter of a policeman, Jane Duncan was shaped by emotional allegiance to the crofting world of her grandparents in the Black Isle which stayed with her through later experiences in the Caribbean and brought her back to Cromarty after the death of her partner. The nineteen 'Friends' novels, beginning with *My Friends the Miss Boyds* (1959), are those most associated with the author, although she wrote a quartet on the life of Jean Robertson, five children's novels and three children picture books. A significant number of her novels are now published by Bello in attractive on-demand editions; three children's book were republished in 2002

with illustrations by Mairi Hedderwick. The University of Glasgow, which holds some of her archive, has also drawn attention to Duncan [through the research of Katharine Woods](#).

Duncan was something of a publishing phenomenon: her first novel was published at the age of forty-nine as part of a highly unusual contract with Macmillan for seven novels which sold across the globe. (This narrative of late emergence into commercial success, recent research suggests, may in itself have been something of a marketing ploy; Duncan possibly tried to publish earlier.) The highly successful *Friends* series, which brought her many fans but limited critical attention, fell from fashion but is now rightly attracting interest.

Duncan's early life provides material for the fictional explorations of *Friends* narrator, 'Janet Alexander' and her experiences in the crofting community of 'Reachfar' and Lowland town of 'Cairnton'. When Duncan's own romance took her to the Caribbean, challenges she faced in coming to terms with the tropics and the dynamics of race at the end of imperial rule in Jamaica also became part of her fiction. Her writing is not without its problems: the reflections on race, on nationalism, on different ethnicities within Scotland can be challenging to a modern reader. But her unusual combination of memoir and fiction, consistently well-crafted and frequently absorbing in its honest interiority, merits critical attention.

Rippetoe's study both challenges the neglect of Duncan's fiction and reproduces some of the problems it poses. It rightly questions the easy labelling of her writing as Kailyard or populist and highlights the nuanced exploration of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. But the focus in the first half of the book on the life of the author as understood through her fiction and her fiction as read through the life plays down a fascinating reworking of experience. In a series of novels that conflate chronology, or revisit characters and situations from different angles, Duncan confronts and re-imagines some of the uncomfortable elements of her situation and personality. Her curious technique of basing novel titles on their most marginal characters - Annie, for example, remains mysterious through *My Friend Annie* and reappears in equally enigmatic guise in *My Friend Sandy* (again not particularly about Sandy) - suggests a slanting of perspective which makes our engagement with the narrator more compelling but unsettling. Rippetoe acknowledges that her study does not attempt to offer literary criticism of the texts themselves, but discussions of the novels tend to reinforce conflation

of author's life and fiction through its emphasis on plot.

Rippetoe's study also precludes the situating of Duncan in a framework of contemporary writers whose concerns might illuminate her own: there is hardly any cross-referencing in this book. Duncan's predecessors among Scottish women writers - Nan Shepherd, Lorna Moon, Willa Muir - or her near contemporary, Jessie Kesson, who are all novelists with a north-east or Highland base, interested in aspiration, ambition, landscape and escape, would offer fruitful comparison but are missing from the index. Duncan's own unconventional domestic life — a late and public relationship with a married man, and a scorn for those who settle for life in the home — could again provide rich contrasts with other narratives of self-development. (Indeed, as a graduate of literature from Glasgow University Duncan might have been expected to have some familiarity with other Scottish writers.) Rippetoe's analysis of race would also be enriched by a wider framing. Her observation that Duncan began with different ethnicities perceived between the farming and fishing folk might equally be applied to Lorna Moon. Duncan's representation of those she terms 'tinkers' could be set against Kesson's. Violet Jacob and, later, Robin Jenkins offer further fascinating parallels in their negotiations of Scottish ethnicity read against Empire and race. Another precursor of Duncan's own struggles with mapping out Scottish ethnicity - oppressed and oppressing — onto a colonial context is Robert Louis Stevenson's South Seas writing. And while Rippetoe's discussion of Duncan's move from secretive private writer to a public author is fascinating, consideration of a wider Scottish literary history might have avoided such pronouncements as: 'The idea of making a career as a writer would have been regarded as outlandish by her family and neighbours. Scotland had long been known for a respect for leaning but a poor and scattered population usually produces few scholars' or 'writing of books was seen as the prerogative of the upper classes'. (p. 31). Examples abound to contradict this, from women writers in the late nineteenth-century who made their living by writing - Annie S. Swan and the Findlater sisters being obvious examples - through Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Kesson, to those working in the realist tradition of the 1950s.

Rippetoe is right to focus on the importance of geography in Duncan's writing. Although her father worked in Lowland Scotland during Duncan's childhood, Jemimaville in Cromarty, was the centre of family identity: her father moved back there in 1951 and her own return in later life made it a place of pilgrimage for her

many fans. The Black Isle setting is powerfully rendered at specific moments: *My Friends the Miss Boyds* presents an unflinching analysis of changes to crofting communities at the end of World War One. As one of her most perceptive critics, F. R. Hart, noted, Duncan's attentiveness to manipulations of space and time is intricate. Her interest in the natural world likewise deserves Rippetoe's attention - although again there are more connections to be made with writers such as Nan Shepherd who express a strong physical engagement with the world around them. The bodily connections identified by Rippetoe perhaps explains both author and character's dislocation in the Caribbean. Her visceral reaction to the louche sexuality of a late Colonial class and to the apparently alien culture of Jamaica is vividly depicted in *My Friend Sandy* and other novels set in 'St Jago', although responses to her fiction in the local press were minimal and unenthusiastic.

Rippetoe's discussion of race - which is one of the most challenging but also interesting aspects of Duncan's work - lacks the underpinning of postcolonial theory the title of the study suggests. As a result, Duncan's own perceptions are not always interrogated. It is distinctly uncomfortable to encounter such outmoded and now unacceptable terms as 'colored' or 'Negro' or 'Mongoloid' (although Down's Syndrome is also used) passing unquestioned in critical discourse. But the discussion recognizes the extent to which Duncan's mapping of difference in a Scottish context is then replayed in various ways in the setting of the West Indies. Differences between Highlanders and Lowlanders, Irish and 'tinkers' are articulated in essentialist terms repeated but also re-examined in a different contexts. The challenge for Rippetoe in exploring this sensitive area is again the conflation of novel's narrator and author which makes a more distanced and political analysis difficult. While an unease with the established racial hierarchies may be expressed in the narrator's strongly physical reactions to the Jamaican environment, unwitting reinforcement of ethnic categories by 'Janet' in her narratives encapsulates colonial characteristics of the time and context. Although Rippetoe argues the novels are engaged with the personal rather than political, suggesting the various characters provide a range of perspectives on colonialism, the novels (and this study) make for difficult reading at times.

One of the most interesting parts of Rippetoe's book is the final section of Part One which explores the rise and fall of Jane Duncan's literary reputation. Yet given Duncan's unique engagement with space and time there is still more to investigate in the evidenced responses from the United States, Australia,

Scotland, Jamaica. And while Rippetoe argues against the neglect of serious concerns in the novel, there are alternative ways of examining their darker elements than plot content. Both the brutal self-reflection of the novels and their attentiveness to the construction of different versions of self created by the complicated chronologies, geographical play and reworkings of individual stories might better support claims for serious attention to be given Duncan.

Rippetoe rightly notes the academic neglect of Duncan: she is missing in most Scottish literary histories, most histories of women's writing and histories of Scottish women's writing. The exception is F. R. Hart, who became a personal friend and first published on her in *Studies in Scottish Literature* in 1969, offering the apt image of her writing as a rug, with the various friends 'serving as threads to weave the picture of a Reachfar that is 'both 'always' and always receding into a non-recoverable past.' Hart returns to her work with characteristic percipience in *The Scottish Novel* (1978) and writes about Duncan a third time in *The History of Scottish Women's Writing* (wrongly attributed to Douglas Gifford alone; Dorothy McMillan is co-editor.) Alan Bold in *Modern Scottish Literature* (1983) situated Duncan as one of few women among Scottish realist writers, while Elizabeth Waterson (*Rapt in Plaid*, 2001) placed her as a neglected contributor to the challenging of Kailyard.

The final part of this study offers a guide to the novels, giving plot details, character and locale lists. While useful in tracing individual novels and the relationships between them, this section might have mitigated the lengthy plot descriptions of the first part: it would seem more appropriate as an Appendix. Appendix A itself offers a list and description of the main characters; Appendix B is a glossary of Scots words used, referenced to the novels rather than any Scots dictionary.

Duncan herself is a fascinating figure. She writes with ease, energy, humour and insight. Her fiction is idiosyncratic but illuminates the dynamics of Scots mobility, historical and geographical, in the mid-twentieth century. In describing her work in such detail, Rippetoe opens up further opportunities of assessing the new dimensions Duncan brings to Scottish literary formations.

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