Jessie Kerr Lawson's Scoto-Canadian Romance

By Juliet Shields

Even the most ardent readers of nineteenth-century literature are unlikely to have heard of nineteenth-century novelist, poet, and satirist Jessie Kerr Lawson. Her writing, most of it published in periodicals, may strike twenty-first-century readers as alternately mawkish in its sentimentality and brutal in its humour. But her wildly improbable plots and boldly drawn caricatures are undeniably entertaining. If Lawson's work does not merit reviving for its literary value, it *is*worth studying, I will argue, for what it reveals about the workings of a transnational Scottish-Canadian print culture at the end of the nineteenth century and about the challenges and affordances this transnational print culture presented to someone who wrote for a living.

Jessie Kerr Coupar was born in 1838 to Janet Kerr and Andrew Coupar of Edinburgh. Her parents died while she was still an infant and she was adopted by her maternal grandfather, James Kerr, and an aunt, Jessie Kerr, who raised her in St Monans, Fifeshire, which serves as a model for the fishing village in one of her novels, *Euphie Lyn, or the Fishers of Old Inweerie* (1893). In 1860, she married William Lawson, a sailor; and five years later, in an incident worthy of one Lawson's novels, William was shipwrecked off Cape Horn and left with injuries that made a sailor's life untenable. Jessie decided that the family, which now included four children, would emigrate to Hamilton, Ontario where the cost of living would be lower and economic opportunities more plentiful. There, William found employment in a shipyard while Jessie worked in a dry-goods store and bore six more children. She was thirty-five when her husband's poor health forced him to retire and left her the family's sole breadwinner. In 1881 the family moved to Toronto where Jessie Kerr Lawson proceeded to launch her literary career.

Carole Gerson has identified Lawson as one of Canada's first professional writers – that is, one of the first to support herself successfully by writing (p. 83) – but she does not acknowledge that Lawson had to turn to overseas markets in order to do so. It was not until the 1890s that Canada began to develop 'the commercial and

cultural infrastructure' necessary to support authorship as a profession (Gerson p. 83), so it is not surprising that Lawson peddled her literary wares both in Canada and in her native Scotland. At this time, the audience for 'Canadian periodicals was […] much larger than that for Canadian books', the publication of which tended to be financed at least in part by the author (Gerson, p. 69). Scotland's publishing industry was centuries older and much better developed than Canada's, but even there writing for the periodical press was more lucrative than writing books, as newspapers and magazines were in constant need of new material. Lawson's skill lay in her ability to accommodate her literary products to the available markets. In the Scottish literary marketplace, she specialised in sentimental or romantic fiction, while in Canadian periodicals she published satirical sketches and poems under a series of male pseudonyms. She also cultivated another entirely distinct niche as a writer for children under the name Mona Fife (an allusion to her childhood home of St Monan's, Fife), but that's a subject for another paper.

In Scotland, Lawson's serial stories appeared regularly in the Dundee-based *People's Friend* and the *Glasgow Weekly Herald*, which paid between £80 and £100 for a story that ran in weekly instalments over three or four months. Lawson conducted much of her business with the *Friend* and the *Herald* in person, sailing from New York to Glasgow every eighteen months or so to deliver several completed serial stories at once and confer with her editors. It is fitting, then, that these stories often thematised transatlantic crossings between Canada and Scotland and were advertised in the *People's Friend* as 'Scoto-Canadian', or sometimes 'Scoto-American', romances, suggesting a rather cavalier disregard for distinctions between Canada and the US that their inhabitants might not have appreciated.

In *Dr Bruno's Wife: A Toronto Society Story* (1893), Edward Arbuckle, a respectable doctor living in Toronto, finds himself haunted by a rash dalliance with a serving-maid at an inn that occurred while he was on a walking tour of the west coast of Scotland some years earlier. Nine years later, the maid has become a wealthy widow named Mrs Tranent who also resides Toronto and who falls in love with Arbuckle, recognising him from her days as a barmaid, although he does not recognise her. Overcome with jealously when he does not return her overtures, she blackmails Arbuckle, charging him with a murder that took place at the inn, unbeknownst to him, on the night of his departure. Arbuckle returns to

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But although Hugh Airlie, Barney O'Hea, and J. K. Washington White were figures of fun, the latter two express political opinions that were remarkably similar to Lawson's own. Barney is a staunch supporter of Irish Home Rule. When, in an 1892 sketch titled 'Barney as Ticket Clerk', he is asked to speak in 'plain Queen's English', Barney replies indignantly, 'Is it *me* you'd be afther hearing spake in durthy Queen's English? Is it *me* 'ud be afther goin' back on the beautiful brogue av me native land, acushla? […] Where's Queen's English when Home Rule for ivir

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In comparison to Barney O'Hea and J. K. Washington White, Hugh Airlie is closer to a simple figure of fun. His ignorance of the workings of Canadian society constantly land him in scrapes, and he relates his adventures in a series of letters to a nephew at home without any consciousness of how ridiculous he appears. Lawson wrote more often under this pseudonym than under her other two, and in 1888 the letters were published in one volume as *The Epistles o' Hugh Airlie* with illustrations by J. W. Bengough. Whereas Barney O'Hea and J. K. Washington White become mouthpieces to advance a political agenda, Hugh's misadventures do not serve to criticise Canada; they serve only to show up Hugh. Perhaps Lawson felt herself on safe ground making a Scot into a figure of fun and perhaps she also felt a kind of kinship with this recent arrival from her native country. In at least one instance, she poked fun at herself by poking fun at Hugh, who is determined to find himself a Canadian wife. Of one candidate for this illustrious position, he relates:

> *Abune a' thing I tellt her that gin she was a leeterary woman I wad hae naething whatever tae dae wi' her. I said I was a bit o'a leeterary man masel-an' a poet forbye, an' I wasna gaun tae hae ma ain wife settin' up in opposition tae me, besides, I believed in women keepin' in their ain places, an' no trespassin on the preserves o' the nobler sex. It was a' vera weel tae crack aboot the works o' Mrs Hemans, an' Mrs Brownin', an' George Eliot, an' Mrs Stowe an' a wheen mair but just think what has been lost tae the world in the way o' washin' an' mendin' sarks, daurnin' stockin's, shooin' on buttons, an' scrubbin' fures, the time they were daidlin' awa wi' their poetry an' sic like. Anither thing, a leeterary woman is no near sae apt to be meek an' obedient tae her*

> *lord an' maister as a woman wha is content tae tak her ideas frae her lawfu' husband, or tae live for him an' him only, an' tae be humble an obedient according tae Scripter. Na! na! nae leeterary woman for me; I couldna' pit up wi' ony sic truck. (p. 32)*

Did Lawson consider herself a literary woman? She certainly doesn't belong in the same category with Hemans, Barrett Browning, Eliot, and Stowe, but she was a professional author. She supported her family through her writing, even while she also washed the shirts and mended the socks.

Lawson's ability to write for distinct transatlantic markets is remarkable. In some ways the Scoto-Canadian Romances she wrote for the *People's Friend* and the *Glasgow Herald* could not be more different from the satirical sketches she wrote for *Grip*. Yet it is clear that as a novelist she was not interested in plumbing the psychological depths of her characters or in depicting the nuances of everyday social interactions Instead, her gifts lay in humour and caricature. While the main characters in her novels tend to range from bland to saccharine, as suits the romance plot, the minor characters–such as Thomas Mathers, the fisherman poet, in *Euphie Lyn or the Fishers of Old Inweerie*, or Freddie Tranent, the mischievous schoolboy, in *Dr Bruno's Wife* are much more entertaining. In these boldly drawn and eccentric characters Lawson employs the strengths that brought her success in the pages of *Grip*. These characters are reminiscent of a long tradition of Scottish satire that includes the novels of Tobias Smollett and John Galt.

Why did Lawson choose to remain in Canada when Scotland offered a more lucrative market for a writer of serial fiction? Why didn't she simply return with her husband and children to her native country? Given the scant biographical information available, it is impossible to know with certainty. Quite possibly Lawson's market value in Scotland depended to some extent on her status as a 'foreign' writer – something of an exotic curiosity. In returning she would have renounced this status and the veneer of authenticity it brought to her representations of Canada. Or perhaps the prospect of moving a family of ten children and an invalid husband across the Atlantic again was simply too exhausting. Six of her children were Canadian by birth, and the eight that survived into adulthood were exceptionally successful. According to the Canadian Early Women Writers Database, Daughters Alice and Kate followed closely in their mother's footsteps, becoming journalists; Andrew became a Professor of

Geology at the University of California, and his brother Abercrombie a Professor of Botany at the University of Sydney; William was trained as a chemist and managed the Great Western Sugar Company; and James became a renowned painter who produced most of his work in Europe. Late nineteenth-century Canada's publishing industry may have been in a 'deplorable state', but the country clearly had much to recommend it to a striving family of Scottish immigrants.

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