Cornering the Triangle: Understanding the “Dominion-itive” Role of the Realistic Animal Tale in Early Twentieth-Century Canadian Children’s Literature

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Introduction

POSTCOLONIAL CONCERNS ARE important to understanding the place of children’s literature in pedagogical and extracurricular pursuits. Peter Hulme has described “the classic colonial triangle . . . [as] the relationship between European, native and land” (qtd. in Bradford 196). In his view, territories, culture, and world-views are appropriated once certain tropes of superiority and dominion over “others” have been established by colonizers. It would be naive not to recognize that realistic animal tales for children were part of the discursive practice of colonialism in Canada’s history. These tales cohere around colonial constructs of dominion, had a significant role in the civilizing or taming of European and British settler children, and can be studied as both literary and cultural artifacts.

The popular early twentieth-century children’s stories of Ernest Thompson Seton, who produced many acclaimed realistic animal tales that received wide circulation in the early 1900s (Waterson 97–98), were avidly consumed by several generations, and continue to this day to be enjoyed by readers. My project in examining these realistic animal tales in children’s literature is to discover the colonialist and postcolonial themes embedded in narratives that are ostensibly delightful and enthralling tales of the animal kingdom A case may be made that Seton, as part of an early
nationalist experiment in writing for children, employed the arts of the
storyteller with the insights of the pedagogue in the employ of the Domin-
ion of Canada. Whether justifying historical events by showing the “natu-
ral law” of dominion in the wild, or plotting to gain mastery within and
over the landscape, this genre of writing was not mere innocent pleasure,
not was it vacant of colonialist intent.

Deconstructing Worlds: Children’s Literature and
Postcolonial Pedagogy

What is lacking in the contemporary public-school classroom is a means
to use extant literature in working toward anti-colonialist understandings.
An effective pedagogical intervention would encourage a discourse that
recognizes situatedness on the ground—that is, where we’ve been, where
we are, and where we’re going—and would present children with a means
to assess the history of colonialism and its continuation in processes of
neo-colonialism and global transnational capitalism. Peter McLaren states
that “Post-colonial pedagogy . . . is a pedagogy for anti-imperialism which
challenges the very categories through which the history of the colonized
has been written” (228). Although young readers in the classroom are
exposed to the narrative act and questioned about the sequence of events
and literal meaning, they are rarely asked to explore the “actual function-
ing of the language” in the “fictive worlds” constructed by writers (Hutcheon
30)—nor do they consider these worlds as co-constructed by the writer
and the reader.

Young readers are perfectly capable of being guided toward under-
standing colonialist mindsets through analysis of the “internalized gram-
mar or code” of genres (Hutcheon 30)—in Seton’s case, realistic nature/
animal stories. In my observations of student-teacher projects in a course
teaching approaches to reading for elementary-school students, the main
interests of the teachers-in-training were the aesthetics of picture books,
how stories helped children in their daily personal relationships, and
narrative progression. Only poetry was analyzed for how it worked, not
merely what it said. It seems a rather chauvinistic oversight to keep
children from deeper literary understandings of the novels and stories they
invest time in. Stories—written, spoken, and cinematic—are the primary means by which children learn of their world and their place in it. An early acquisition of the tools to read between the lines can aid in producing critical thinkers for the postmodern and globalized world.

The absence of children’s literature from an understanding of the degree to which power is played out in the socially constructed interactions with language devalues and silences children as readers, divorcing their experience of text from the awareness of the nature of fiction from which notions of literary pleasure derive. Excluding children’s literature from the map of a theory of literature constructed in the academic mainstream enforces these silences, by attempting to redefine a literary discourse without acknowledging the relevance of these formative experiences. (Thacker, “Feminine” 4)

Children’s literature and its reception have been marginalized in mainstream academic discourse, a fact which has been examined by several scholars in the field of children’s literature and childhood studies. Mary Galbraith examines this problem in her article “Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Literature.” Part of her argument is that the link between adult and childhood experiences and relations must be explored despite the supposed gap:

In fact, controversy has been raised over whether there can be any adult experiential access to this subject position. At the same time, it is fairly uncontroversial to say that our own undergoing, from the child position, of the meeting between childhood and adulthood determines how each of us experiences existence, freedom, belonging, and possibility throughout life. Therefore, childhood studies is in some sense a conceptual trunk linking all other critical and emancipatory human studies, but a trunk not easily perceived through its surrounding branches. (188)

Deborah Thacker also observes how children are marginalized within mainstream literary studies, and broadly asserts that children’s literature is ignored by theoreticians who either reluctantly or never refer to children’s literature (“Disdain”).
Seton and the Realistic Animal Tale Genre

Ernest Thompson Seton was born into a Scots-English settler family that immigrated to Ontario, Canada, after his father lost his fortune as a ship-owner. From a young age, Seton was attracted to art, and he attended the Royal Academy of Art in London. Upon his return to Canada, he moved to Manitoba where he was able to immerse himself in natural history. In 1883 he began to visit and correspond with various naturalists, ornithologists, and writers in the United States, and became an established wildlife artist. His first animal story, "Lobo, Rag, and Vixen," was published in Scribner's School Book in 1899. Later stories appeared in the 1899 and 1900 Wild Animals I Have Known books with Seton's illustrations.

Wild Animals I Have Known is probably Seton's best-known and most widely disseminated collection of nature stories for children, and it has been republished into the latter half of the twentieth century. He is also known in Canadian children's literature for his Two Little Savages: Being the Adventures of Two Boys Who Lived as Indians and What They Learned, first published in 1903. Seton gained wide acclaim as a naturalist and educator for youth, and his ideas were adopted by the Boy Scouts of America movement. Seton was also responsible for the inception of The Woodcraft League of America. A brief article in National Wildlife entitled "A Man ahead of His Time" portrays him as supremely absorbed by and dedicated to his craft, for "He prided himself on the biological accuracy of his writing and drew on his own experiences. He had observed wolves in New Mexico and had even buried himself in a Yellowstone National Park garbage dump to get a close look at bears" (Darland 1).

Why did Seton choose animals as the main actors in his stories for children? One obvious answer is that he wrote, as he drew, what he knew. On a broader level, why were animals, the "four-footed friends" and the denizens of air and water, of such compelling interest in children's tales, and considered to be appropriate characters to appear in stories for youth of the recently established nation?

Settler colonies are part of the historical, political, and social phenomena of colonization, and involve "the displacement of native populations and the incultation of a European worldview on them" (Yew 1). As well, settler colonies have the self-appointed task of defining and maintaining suitable enculturation devices to continue the colonial order. En-
listing the native animals of the new territory provided lessons on how to know and master the lands constituting the Canadian dominion. In creating an imaginative world for children of the normative educated, bourgeois upper and middle classes of turn-of-the-century Canada, and likely intended to be transmitted to all sub-colonies within the nation, stories such as those written by Seton constructed a means to simultaneously order and civilize notions of the land, while laying claim to and establishing dominion from coast to coast.

The stories in *Wild Animals I Have Known* are a living colonial artifact in the sense that they were read by readers from 1898, the time of initial publication, and continue to be read today. They are compiled in an easily accessible Dover Publications paperback (2000), and are on library and children's bookshelves throughout North America in various other printings. This accessibility and the instant accessibility on-line of the text of “The Snow Shoe Rabbit,” another Seton story, are manifestations of the continuing status of classic children's stories, often available in updated formats. Understanding the popularity of books and stories read in the past and which continue to be read today has often been “explained” under the rubric of studies of classic children's works. However, a postcolonialist framework, in conjunction with a cultural studies approach, particularly as articulated by Richard Johnson and others (Storey 1-13), also holds promise for new insights and new opportunities in the classroom. In the case of Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*, tales of nature can be explored in terms of their message to both young colonial lords and ladies and present-day readers.1

**Two Cases of Seton's Tales: “Raggylug, the Story of a Cottontail Rabbit” and “Redruff, the Story of the Don Valley Partridge”**

To read Seton's “true” stories, for his animal characters were all “real” (see his “Note to the Reader” in *Wild Animals*), is to enter the world of an artist-observer who chronicled the changing and disappearing natural habitats of Canada. “Raggylug, the Story of a Cottontail Rabbit” is a story of the training and survival of a young cottontail rabbit. The perils of the young rabbit's life are documented and a theme of mother-love, the love and protection of Raggylug’s mother, Molly, runs throughout the tale. In
the end, Raggylug’s survival is effected by Molly’s sacrifice of her own life to save her son. Thus, the story ends tragically, but realistically, as the balance of nature pivots upon life and death. Redruff, the Don Valley Partridge, “really lived in the Don Valley north of Toronto, and many of my companions will remember him. He was killed in 1889, between the Sugar Loaf and Castle Frank” (“Note to Reader” 11), by a man Seton called “Cuddy” who was intent on killing all the game in his vicinity. Redruff was symbolic of the disappearance of a race once extant in the Don Valley, and Seton chronicled every event of his hard-won survival and eventual demise at the hands of a ruthless colonial power. Clearly, Seton’s sympathies were with the noble animals who were once the original denizens of Canada’s wild.

If Seton’s two stories, “Raggylug” and “Redruff,” are examined in terms of the theory of narrative exchange discussed by Jack Zipes (136–40), it can be proposed that Seton’s gifts to readers were the insights of his years of observation and drawing animals in the wild. Readers were to reciprocate with unequivocal sympathy for, and identification with, the noble animals he brought to life in the pages of Wild Animals I Have Known. The animals were to be appreciated and mourned as corporeal evidence of the vanished paradises that once were “Oliphant’s Swamp” (in “Raggylug”) and the Don Valley (in “Redruff”). Thus, lessons were drawn up for the youth of the Dominion of Canada that, although a way of life must disappear, as the cost of progress, one may still feel emotions of regret and nostalgia. Lessons of moral indebtedness and justification of conquest were thus embedded within the stories.

In “Raggylug, the Story of a Cottontail Rabbit,” the narrator poses as the guide leading the way through nature. The story begins with a declaration of realism: “Those who do not know the animals well may think I have humanized them, but those who have lived so near them as to know somewhat of their ways and their minds will not think so.” He further validates his observation, making of himself a broker of animal customs, an anthropologist of the rabbit realm: “Truly rabbits have no speech as we understand it, but they have a way of conveying ideas by a system of sounds, signs, scents, whisker touches, movements, and example that answers the purpose of speech; and it must be remembered that though in telling this story I freely translate from rabbit into English, I repeat nothing that they did not say” (72–73). The reader cannot help but be
intrigued and thus drawn into the narrative of what life was really like in
the real natural realm of Raggylug and other animal denizens of the
swamp.

The world recreated by Seton is at once familiar to those who have
gone out to natural sites, and simultaneously unfamiliar, for Seton’s obser-
vations take the reader-initiate on a guided tour below the surface of
observations to the emotions and tensions of the animal realm: “After a
while he [Raggylug] heard a strange rustling of the leaves in the near
thicket. It was an odd, continuous sound, and though it went this way and
that way and came ever nearer, there was no patter of feet with it” (73).
This is a description of the baby bunny Raggylug’s first experience with a
snake, an almost fatal encounter mediated by the bunny’s vigilant mother
Molly: “No longer a shy, helpless little Molly Cottontail, ready to fly from
a shadow: the mother’s love was strong in her. The cry of her baby had
filled her with the courage of a hero, and—hop, she went over that
horrible reptile” (74–75). No matter that the feckless Raggylug had gotten
into trouble with the snake due to curiosity to investigate the unknown
sound of the snake’s slithering, his maternal saviour was there to bail him
out. Thus was the young colonialist reader aware that sovereign (parental)
power was present to fall back on while exploring and taking command of
the new lands.

The drama of the ever-present struggle of animal parents to secure
the safety of their young is a theme also in “Redruff, the Story of the Don
Valley Partridge.” The partridge family that Redruff originates from is
aptly tutored by wise old Mother Partridge who is able to lead them
through many natural obstacles but whose tutelage falters when faced by
the obstacle Man, in the persona of a hunter. In his turn, through an
unusual twist of fate not always seen in nature, Redruff himself becomes
the protective parent, his mate having been killed by the hunter. Lessons of
parental bonding with young would be of great interest to juvenile readers
learning who can be trusted and who must be feared. A common enemy of
the hunted animal and the young colonialist is the wanton hunter, who
does not conserve and kills only to feed his own ego, a hunter char-
acterized by the ignorance of “Cuddy,” the Don Valley squatter
who exemplifies a coarse and immoral attitude toward nature. Thus, the
naturalist-educator Seton strove to teach lessons of conservation and re-
sponsibility to young colonial children through empathy with the noble
animals striving to survive and, more importantly, to altruistically save their families from foes.

Seton’s discursive strategies are based upon his own experiences as a naturalist, illustrator, and note-taker. His narrative is narcissistic, but with a larger purpose to support and promote his philosophy that mankind has been exceedingly unfair to their animal kin (“Note to the Reader” 12). Seton managed to create a hybrid form of literature, combining British traditions and history with an indigenous worldview. Although he attempts to portray the reality of the frontier environment, its representation is mediated through the sensibilities of the author and presented to readers as a simultaneous placement and displacement.

Just as a “process of displacement and estrangement” serves to disarm a dominating discourse (Allen 3), so the tensions created by illustrating how one does not belong but could if certain rules were followed are present in Seton’s stories. Tales such as “Raggylug” and “Redruff” are crafted to instill in the reader a desire for knowledge of the land (love and compassion for animals and the changing Canadian landscape) while seemingly distancing the reader from the colonial depredations enacted upon the land. Although the way of life that Seton knew disappeared even as the tale was told, it was now in the possession of the (child-)reader as he or she sat at the knee of the storyteller. As Hulme has argued, cornering the triangle of land, colonizer, and colonized resulted in clearly drawn cultural and social templates and served to initiate future young leaders of the realm into a literature calculated to make them feel one with nature and the land, while preserving the vigilance required for mastery of new lands. Seton’s animal stories served to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (after educational anthropologist George Spindler), thus establishing eminent domain over the symbolic and the real Canada.

In order for present-day educators and school children to read the postcolonial message in Seton’s *Wild Animals I Have Known*, they must be shown that a subtext resides within the nature tales. Furthermore, they would have to understand the “institutional literacy” of colonialism (Collins 204). Increasingly, in today’s schools, students are made aware that history is currently being revised and expanded to include space for the stories of the minority cultures of Canada, stories that were silenced by a dominant discourse of the colonizing powers. Thus, an awareness of the subtext of colonialism within Seton’s tales can be cross-curricular, drawing from
social studies and other relevant subject areas. However, a reading of Seton's tales becomes social studies in demonstrating how his dedication to illuminating a vanishing world was inspired by colonialism. Seton is a chronicler and, just as importantly, a commentator on change brought to the natural realm by the civilizing forces of the European settlers.

Interpretation of the Realistic Animal Stories:
Sentient Animals—Metaphors or Agents?

Seton's strategic placement of thinking, feeling, and talking animals within stories for children promoted notions that civilized British culture was superior to others by imposing colonial terms of reference upon nature. The values Seton developed and promoted, that mankind was kin to animals, and that humans have a responsibility to their animal brethren, were not opposed to colonial dominion. The internalized grammar or code of the stories in *Wild Animals I Have Known* is a product of Seton's own colonial upbringing. It was his mission to educate, while simultaneously enchanting, his reader-audience. The metaphorical fantasy of sentient animals who could commune with them, think like them, and instruct them in the all-important lessons of survival was, no doubt, seductive and appealing.

Perhaps the continuing status of *Wild Animals I Have Known* as a children's classic can be attributed to its mode of narration that sets up a relationship between animals and people. Many writers have recognized and used the childhood fascination with and trust of animals in their stories. The ideology that there rightly is, and should be, a connection between humans and (wild) animals is part of a colonial domesticating policy that naturalist authors from Jack London (*Call of the Wild*) to Sterling North (*Rascal*) to E.B. White (*Charlotte's Web*) have drawn upon. Thus, the appeal of Seton's tales, now and in the past, was/is to fulfill an immediate desire of children: to find allies to confide in and trust. Through Seton's tales, children can walk with and "talk with" the animals.

Guided by Perry Nodelman in *Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction*, Thomas Travisano explores the intersections of childhood literature with childhood studies. He examines how certain works of literature contribute to forming a "divided con-
sciousness" within adult and child reading audiences. According to Travisano, one of the most fascinating and important effects of literature intended for children is that, in the process of reading, the child crosses over at times into dangerous or adult social worlds while safely residing within the realm of childhood. The ability to be aware of and recognize this state of reading permits the child a knowledge of socially constructed relationships and processes while safely residing in childhood. The ritual re-enactment of the move from childhood to maturity, innocence to knowledge, is a recurrent theme in coming-of-age stories, with the added feature that, for settler colonies, knowledge of new terrain and flora and fauna means survival and mastery, and failure to learn the lessons means extinction and surrender of territory. Sentient animals are thought of as a "safe" third party and a simple subject suitable for consumption by the child. The delightful intimate dialogue interpreted by the child as a direct message from the animals takes children to the threshold or "boundary between nature and culture" (Kristeva, qtd. in Morgenstern 115). According to Julia Kristeva, rhythmic lessons set up between desire and duty are tied to the early language of childhood, which is made both palatable and compelling for the child to attend to. However, tension is created when the child realizes that he/she must return to civilization. Thus, "The symbolic is firmly in command" (Morgenstern 115), and the placement of children into the colonial order is complete.

As Canadian children were led to believe in the ability to commune with sentient animals of the colonial landscape, they could be further led to an implacable belief in their personal and collective powers, and thus be convinced that mastery of the lands was their "dominion-itive" right. In addition, the colonial order of adult hierarchy over children was preserved by the diminutive positioning of children in a hierarchy of being more or less equal in status to the sentient animals, while holding out the promise that they would be in a position to advance over the animals some day. That is, it was understood from the structure of the stories that once children mastered the lessons taught by the animal characters, they would become second in the hierarchy of Euro-British adult humans at the top, children in the middle, and animals at the bottom as the willing teachers/servants of the settlers.

Engagement with the natural world was part of the means to position as subjects the future Euro-British lords of the realm. As they
learned about the landscape, they would gain familiarity and ease with the
habits of the natural denizens, the wild animals portrayed in the tales, and
also appropriate Native rhetoric to the hegemonic colonial-imperial order.
With the natural denizens of the earth, sky, and water as allies and
sponsors, children would be positioned to see themselves as possessing a
right to the new territories, as having the agency to exercise dominion
from sea to sea. Although Native Peoples did not always appear in the
animal tales, part of the lessons of colonialism would be to learn that the
human predecessors, the indigenous peoples, should be treated benignly,
under the rules of a patriarchal colony, particularly as embodied in The
Indian Acts. This lesson is apparent in how Native Canadian or American
voice was used, or appropriated, in adaptations such as Seton’s “The Snow
Shoe Rabbit.” Although only animal characters appear in the tale, the
voices of unseen Native deities serve as the teachers/servants, with the
hapless Snow Shoe Rabbit the device for learning about natural adaptation
to the North American landscape, and the presumed audience and benefi-
ciary of the information the Euro-British settler child who needed to know
these things.

As a naturalist and hunter of wildlife at the end of the nineteenth
and beginning of the twentieth century, Seton was quite cognizant of the
“disappearing wilderness” and biological populations in danger of extinc-
tion. Was Seton perhaps also cognizant that the old colonial order was, in
its truest sense, at an end, and a postcolonial order was being negotiated
and formulated in Canada? Part of the project of settler colonies is to
retain a nostalgic sense of the past, and this nostalgia is often the material
informing tales passed on to children. Seton, as a naturalist-author, had
decided to enlist animals, part of Canada’s natural landscape, during a
period of emergent nationalism in the early twentieth century, as a signify-
ing device to construct a unique Canadian children’s literature drawing
upon first-person observations and transliterations of Native lore and
legend, presenting it in a Europeanized package.

The archival preservation of vanishing ways is part of the colonial
mindset, for even if progress must erode populations and cultures, they
can at least be documented for the sake of nostalgia and to ease any qualms
of settler guilt. Several years ago when I visited Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo
Jump, a World Heritage Site in Southern Alberta, part of the tour featured
the guide reconstructing, through a scripted narrative, the panorama of the
multitude of buffalo that roamed the plains below the cliff. There are no buffalo now, but phantom buffalo are symbolically summoned to an archaeological interpretative site that seeks to atone for years of colonial usurping of Blackfoot lands and the lands and resources of other First Nations across Canada. The popularity of Seton's realistic animal tales then and now reflects their rootedness in the nostalgia for a vanished time and place written even as the time and place were vanishing into the order of colonizing "progress."

My examination of the survival of Seton's stories in contemporary contexts is guided by the idea that they can be viewed as colonialist writing with appeal to a postcolonial audience. Clare Bradford writes of Australian children's texts of the early 1900s that "omit Aborigines from accounts of Australian history or reconfigure historical events to produce stories of white heroism and black savagery, thus positioning child readers to see themselves as citizens of a white Australia and the inheritors of a tradition of pioneer endeavor" (197). This use of children's literature is only one means to promote new national identity, via re-inscribing the past. A postcolonial archaeology would excavate the colonial past as well as the childhood past to come to terms with present realities of neo-colonialisms in what is generally considered to be a grown-up world. Healing processes for colonized populations are part of this archaeological project. For example, in "Writing the Childhood Self: Australian Aboriginal Autobiographies, Memoirs and Testimonies," Australian children's literature scholar Heather Scutter elucidates Australian Aboriginal attempts to deal with "two centuries of cultural loss by calling sharply on childhood memories in order to restore, to use the poet Errol West's words, a sense of reality, significance, wholeness" (226).

When I think of pedagogical implications, I think of the classroom and also the learning space outside the classroom, particularly that which is accessible to children through literature and other experiential resources, such as museums or field trips. I think of the pedagogical opportunities forged by educators who are able to teach on multiple levels, that is, seeing a Seton animal tale as natural history, as an example of social history, and as literature. Many educators who espouse anti-racism as part of an anti-colonial practice teach in this manner, and they are remarkably successful. These critical educators are employing border pedagogy to "make visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those
places and borders we inherit and that frame our discourses and social relations" (Giroux 32). According to Henry Giroux, “border pedagogy” seeks to assist postcolonial discourse in rewriting “the relationship between the margin and the center by deconstructing the colonialisand imperialist ideologies that structure Western knowledge, texts, and social practices” (27). The themes presented in Seton’s realistic animal tales are a perfect site for the practice of border pedagogy.

Conclusion

The colonial past is variously rehearsed, reinscribed, and contested in postcolonial children’s texts, and it is increasingly a site of tension, producing different and conflicting significances. (Bradford 198)

In the contemporary Canadian classroom of multicultural and gendered realities, one can be blissfully unaware, ignorant, or complacent about the historical contexts of colonization. Knowledge of this history can promote paradigm shifts and lead to mediated social constructions to be articulated in literature, in pedagogy, at conferences, and in other contexts. The examination of historical literary case conditions may serve as a postcolonial interrogation by making people aware of what specifically influences their formation as members of a former colony. In the case of classic Canadian children’s literature, teaching children to be aware of how to read the intertwined stories of colonialism and postcolonialism will prepare them for the neo-colonialisms they will encounter. The teachable moments reside in the actual stories and in the equally fascinating stories within the stories.

If a study of postcolonialism in education is to be something more than an autopsy of worlds that collided, a decision needs to be made about how to extend theory into pedagogical practice. Children are capable of understanding and benefiting by having the ripple effects of colonization pointed out to them, in turn leading to an ability to analyze the contemporary effects they live with, such as racism, sexual discrimination, economic exploitation, silencing, and other injustices. In order to focus on constructions that may deliberately cohere around issues of postcolonialism and pedagogy, I have found it useful to “corner the triangle.” For this paper, a
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concluding triangle of critical reading, awareness, and theorizing offers a template situated within cultural studies to present the lessons and delights of those tales socially and culturally constructed for young people who will grow into their future worlds.

NOTE

1. When I use the terms colonial and colonialis to describe the readership of Seton’s stories, I am of course referring to the colonial character of the culture at the time and not to the actual political status post-Confederation.

WORKS CITED


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