

CULTURE/IDENTITY/NATION

'NEAR THE HEART OF THE IMPERIAL ETHIC': IMPERIALISM, PATRIARCHY AND THE BOARDING SCHOOL IN *THE GETTING OF WISDOM*

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Very little attention has been given to postcolonial strategies in the writing of Henry Handel Richardson. This is partly because her work was first published in the earlier twentieth century, but also because she suffered the fate of many expatriate writers. Her 'Australianness' was in doubt, and personal reticence on Richardson's part did nothing to allay this doubt. However, it is not her 'Australianness' or lack of it which is of interest to the postcolonial critic: it is her sharp insight into the discourses at work in the society in which she was raised. Of particular interest is her examination of the boarding school as prime site for the distillation of values of imperialism and patriarchy. In Richardson's analysis of these forces in *The Getting of Wisdom*, each underpins the other to such an extent that they seem inseparable. The heroine Laura's attempts to maintain her own autonomy mean that to resist one is to resist the other. Enculturation in the boarding school environment is shown to be loaded with imperialistic and patriarchal agendas. Laura's initial attempts to conform to these result in failure, followed by outright resistance. If, as Germaine Greer has said, 'the school is the instrument whereon the soul of Laura Rambotham is strung out for the torture', then the experience of colonisation and gendering is shown to be a form of torture (11). Their discourses are also shown to be so pervasive that neither Laura nor the narrator can escape from them fully. The positions of both the heroine and the narrator are necessarily ambivalent, reflecting the condition of the resistant white middle-class woman in colonial society.

Laura's first hint of what is before her at boarding school comes when her mother tries to explain that 'she was growing up apace and would soon be a woman' (10). When Laura runs from Mother's summons to hide in the garden, she is running from the news that 'she must now begin to give up childish habits and learn to behave in a modest and womanly way', things she does not want to hear (10). In the garden Laura has not been bound by gender expectations. Here she has tended her stray animals, organised her brothers and sister, and given free reign to her imagination. She has been able to cast herself in the active role of Romeo, to sister Pin's Juliet, and as Crusoe amongst the bamboo. It is the place where Laura has explored her own subjectivity, and hence the safest place in which to resist Mother's threat

of her coming loss of autonomy and choice. However, Laura cannot stay in her Edenic garden; she goes to school where the reality of Mother's words is borne out both by the school authorities and by the other girls. She experiences the force of the school as an Ideological State Apparatus (in Althusser's term), naturalising, as it does, the constructions of gender and colonialism in late Victorian Australia.

The Ladies' College represents the collusion of several discourses of power, most notably those of patriarchy and imperialism. Both of these employ fear and repression as a tactic, as Laura discovers when she arrives at school. The person she first encounters is the head of the boarding house, Mrs Gurley, who is later described as having a 'genius for ruling through fear' (55).

While Mrs Gurley is portrayed as dictatorial, she does not merely serve her own interests. She stands for male authorities and their hierarchies. Marian Arkin suggests that the school is a 'world totally contingent on males, who "doggedly" guard the entrance to the free world outside' (126). All the positions of final authority are held by males, and all the 'serious' classes are taught by males. It goes without saying that all of these men are British. It is clear that the school's purpose is at least in part an imperialist one. The Principal, Mr Strachey, 'quelled the high spirits of these young colonials by his dignified air of detachment', while the efforts of the elocution teacher to instil a correct British accent in the 'emotionally shy young colonials' leaves the girls feeling 'half amused by, half superior to the histrionic display' (78, 100). These colonising efforts are not completely successful, and there remains something irrepressible about the native-born Australians. For Kate Grenville, this school 'is a little bit of England desperately trying to keep Australia at bay. Laura represents that Australia: she's a bit rough, a bit uncouth, and her money comes from hard work, not inherited wealth' (Grenville 62). The problem with Kate Grenville's analysis is that Australia has never had one identity as a colonised nation, neither in the time of *The Getting of Wisdom* nor now. That it was a colony of Britain is undeniable, but the experience of that colonisation varied in ways dependent on class, gender, and especially race. The white middle-class female protagonist of a colonial/postcolonial text will always be compromised in terms of her relationship with the indigenous peoples of the country, if only by her presence. In invader/settler colonies such as Australia, the roles of colonised and coloniser can intersect in one character.

While Laura is not colonised to the degree that indigenous Australians have been/are being, she *is* being assigned an object position which is designed to indicate her difference and consequent inferiority. I am not wishing to participate in what Arun P. Mukherjee calls 'the post-colonialists' erasure' of "race" as an analytic category', nor to imply that the experience of white women and indigenous peoples is the same (2). Rather, I want to suggest that the strategies of sexism, racism and colonialism are similar, and often interconnected. Laura demonstrates the ambivalence of postcolonial resistance, especially that of a white female. She and her fellow students are not assigned the more objectifying 'native', or 'black', yet they are regarded as 'colonial'. They, in turn, apply this same colonising discourse of 'otherness' to those of lower class, or to the (briefly mentioned) Chinese, and (still less mentioned) Aborigines. Laura is thus both colonised, and colonising. She is also linked to the colonisers through her identification with the role of Crusoe the subject, rather than Friday, the object, and by her later absorption in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, with its romantic portrayal of white imperialistic masculinity and the savagery and alterity of those of different race.

Part of Laura's distaste for the educational emphasis of the school has to do with its unspoken, but clearly demonstrated belief that English history is essential to the education of those who live thousands of miles away from England. James Morris describes the spread of English public schools across the Empire during last century, claiming that they 'were assiduous and highly successful brainwashers' (141). Instilling the sense of Empire and loyalty to it was their object, and English history was the common thread which linked the diverse dominions in which they were placed. Laura's query—'Why could it not have been a question about Burke and Wills, or the Eureka Stockade, or the voyages of Captain

Cook?...something about one's own country, that one had heard hundreds of times and was really interested in'—demonstrates that she already has a sense of Australia's nationhood, and hence has an inbuilt resistance to being absorbed, even mentally, by Britain (221).

Geography and history were consciously introduced into the British public school system in the later part of the nineteenth century, in order to facilitate the absorption of 'tenets of imperialism', to use Joseph Bristow's words (20). Advice to teachers at this time, taken from the official directive entitled *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools*, held that students would not know what 'distinguishes them from the people of other countries... unless they are taught how the British nation grew up, and how the mother country in her turn has founded daughter countries beyond the seas' (42). This benign picture of the formation of empire, the cosy domesticity of the mother and her daughters, shows the selectivity of the history to be taught. This 'history' is designed to demonstrate the loyalty owed to the mother, who has lavished such care on her daughters. Australian history does not serve the interests of empire quite so well as British history. Laura's understanding of Australian history is largely about the 'discovery' of Australia and its interior. Such a view obviously ignores Aboriginal occupancy and intimate knowledge of the land. It is thus a history which perpetuates the notion that Australia was indeed *terra nullius*, unoccupied and open to settlement. In essence, the ideological function of Laura's ideal history curriculum and the one she was actually taught are the same: both provide a justification of colonisation by silencing the voices and stories of the colonised. While Laura resists the Empire on the one hand, she supports the ongoing imperialist activities of Australian settlers on the other.

Brian McFarlane has stated that *The Getting of Wisdom* accepts as a fact that life is a stultifying process' and that this, 'at least as it happens at the girls' boarding school, is not an expansive process but one of diminution' (52). The boarding school is intentionally forming citizens for the Empire, and the construction of gender is very much a part of this. A boys' boarding school of the time was not, of course, a haven for free thought and self-discovery. According to John A. McClure, in his study of Kipling and Conrad, the virtually institutionalised tortures and humiliations of the boys' public school 'encouraged adjustment and conformity' and 'prepared the victim to assume an authoritarian stance: to obey orders, grapple himself to a powerful group, channel his aggression outwards against weaker parties'; in short, to assume a position in the colonial administration or the military (15, 17). For girls, the ideology of conformity demanded that girls blend in, and not draw attention to themselves. Certainly the Principal Mr Strachey's 'dignified air of detachment', and 'the very unseeingness of his gaze, inspired awe' (78). By choosing not to see or acknowledge the girls, Mr Strachey makes them of no account, and reinforces his status. When Laura breaks this unwritten law and makes conversation with him, she is accused of 'gross impertinence' by Mrs Gurley, who of course is acting on the Principal's behalf (82). Morris describes 'aloofness' as an imperialist strategy, which precluded understanding of others, particularly subordinates, and thus was a mechanism for maintaining power.

The girls also enforce the belief that all should blend in, when they demonstrate their disapproval at Laura's readiness to display her sight-reading ability on the piano. This aspect of the public school ethos, outlined by McClure, that 'One did not, as a general rule, wish to appear too clever, or too enthusiastic', comes as a surprise to Laura (226). Laura's first piece of wisdom is, then, that 'if you had abilities that others had not, you concealed them, instead of parading them under people's noses' (83). The function of this unwritten but ingrained law is to make the girls an homogeneous group, invisible as individuals, ready to fit in at all times. Conformity, however, is impossible for Laura, as it involves submitting to the artificiality of the female role. She is not at this point objecting on ideological grounds: she simply cannot do it. Yet her companions continue to judge one another by these narrow criteria. In this way the gendering process occurs, with the girls the unwitting partners in their own oppression.

Boarding schools for both genders were authoritarian and repressive, but it is interesting

to note how the different constructions of gender dovetailed. While young men were trained in a certain amount of physical aggression, young women in *The Getting of Wisdom* were trained in passivity and restraint. The 'diminution' McFarlane notes is principally the result of the process of feminisation. This is reflected in the process of colonisation, in which subject nations are feminised, becoming daughters (as they are pictured in the directive to teachers). Feminisation necessarily means being placed in a position of inferiority and otherness, under control.

Laura begins to feel removed from this process when she observes her own reactions to another girl's expulsion for stealing. While Laura is able to understand the girl's probable motivations, she sees that the other girls do not. Laura's realisation of her own difference results initially in the desire to conform. In fact 'she genuinely despised herself', but at the same time cannot shut out her perceptions of injustice and the moral complacency of the wealthy (107). Critical perceptions clash with gender construction as Laura realises that there is something intrinsically unladylike about her insights. To perceive with thoughtful eyes is to break the gender code, and to refuse to be feminised. This strategy has also been used to resist colonialism, as Sara Mills notes: 'Simply identifying a position which one has been assigned and rejecting it...has been of great use in work on representation in colonial discourse' (16).

However, the assigned position can also be embraced. Although many of the girls sit examinations to prepare them for university study, finding a career is not their aim in life. There is no doubt in the minds of most of the girls that marriage is the end at which they will arrive:

For this was the goal; and the thoughts of all were fixed, with an intentness that varied only in degree, on the great consummation which, as planned in these young minds, should come to pass without fail directly the college-doors closed behind them. (130)

It is evident that the gendering process, preparing girls to be submissive wives and mothers, has been largely effective. That marriage might actually work against their development is certainly realised by Laura: 'it was impossible to limit yourself to one single event, which, though it saved you from derision, would put an end, for ever, to all possible exciting contingencies' (130). Yet this is what the girls aim for. Until this occurs, much of their time is spent in flirtation rituals or in making their bodies conform to an acceptable shape. These activities concentrate on the body as the site on which the agendas of patriarchy are ultimately enacted. This reflects the practice of imperialism, which utilises the bodies of its subjects as labour and resource. Whether they are to produce, or reproduce, it is the body over which control is sought. As Anne Summers has observed, the colonisation of women is not a metaphor, because 'women do possess a territory: their bodies' (199). The absorption of patriarchal thought has been quite complete in most of these young women, and they have little chance of thinking otherwise, as this discourse saturates their world. Richardson is blunt about women's role in upholding patriarchy: in *The Getting of Wisdom* women are complicit, the enforcers of the day-to-day process of gendered enculturation.

In *The Getting of Wisdom*, Henry Handel Richardson examines the public school of 1880s Australia as a prime site for the instillation of patriarchal and imperialistic values. In doing so, she demonstrates how inseparable these two forces are, suggesting that any hegemony producing hierarchies will use similar methods to maintain itself. If imperialism and patriarchy are so intertwined, it does raise the question of implications for postcolonialism and feminism. Are the connections between the two in fact much more significant than the metaphorical relationship which has been acknowledged in the past? If the British public school, scattered in its various forms across the Empire, 'lay somewhere near the heart of the imperial ethic', as James Morris has claimed, then Richardson's delineation of the processes of power in one small colonial city is in fact an examination of hegemonic strategies in the Empire as a whole (220). When Laura Rambotham discards her hat, gloves and schoolbag to run away from the college on the final day of school, she is not just, as Delys Bird suggests,

discarding the 'trappings of conventional feminine life', but also throwing off the uniform of empire (176). However, just as the schoolgirls are shown to have absorbed misogynist values, and take part in the oppression of one another, so the discourse of colonialism is apparent in Laura's attitude to Australia's history, and in her brief references to Chinese and Aborigines. *The Getting of Wisdom* demonstrates the tensions of the white middle-class woman in a settler colony. Resistant to both imperialism and patriarchy, she is still caught in their discourses, and indeed cannot speak without being complicit in some senses with them. The narrative move which allows Laura to escape from the school can be seen not only as a means of rescuing Laura: it can also be seen as the narrator's escape from the positions of ambivalence in which these discourses place her.

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