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**FLORA ANNIE STEEL:
THE WALTER SCOTT OF THE PUNJAB?**

Juliet Shields

Flora Annie Steel, a late-nineteenth-century Scottish author of twenty novels and numerous short stories about India, has most often been likened to her contemporary, Rudyard Kipling, as both offer their readers a “virtual taxonomy of gender and racial structures at work in the colonial society of mid-nineteenth-century India.”¹ Steel developed this taxonomical knowledge during the twenty-two years she spent in the Punjab, where her husband was an engineer with the Indian civil service and where Steel became Inspectress of Schools.² Her representations of the complicated and often compromising roles that British women played in colonial India have made her novels particularly interesting to literary critics working in postcolonial and gender studies. These critics have reached little agreement regarding the extent of Steel’s complicity with or resistance to British imperial ideology, but their disagreements are a testament to the richness of Steel’s fiction and an indication of the further critical attention it demands, particularly in terms of literary form.³ For, in approaching Steel’s novels as what Jennifer Otsuki describes as a “case study of colonialist typologies,” scholars have read them in the same terms as Steel’s very popular cookery book, *The Complete Indian Housewife* (1888), or her

¹ Helen Pike Bauer, “Reconstructing the Colonial Woman: Gender, Race, and the Memsahib in Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters*,” *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms*, 6 (2002), 75. 74-86.

² For further biographical details see Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity* (London: Macmillan, 1930), Daya Patwardhan, *A Star of India, Flora Annie Steel: Her Works and Times* (Bombay: A.V. Griha Prakashan, 1963), and Violet Powell, *Flora Annie Steel: Novelist of India* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

³ A recent volume of essays, *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional Memsahib*, ed. Susmita Roye (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2017), substantially advances scholarship on Steel by examining the full range of genres in which she wrote, from short stories to journalism.

autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930), that is, as transparent representations of Steel's perceptions of India.⁴

Yet form and ideology are inseparable, and in formal terms, Steele's works are arguably far more indebted to Walter Scott than to Rudyard Kipling. Steel's historical novels about India, like Scott's about Scotland, formalize an understanding of historical change that derives from the Scottish Enlightenment. We know that Steel was familiar with Scott's works because in her autobiography she mentions reading the Waverley novels to a group of "country-bred" Anglo-Indian women at a remote station in the Punjab.⁵ But I do not want to claim that Steel consciously set out to imitate Scott any more than she did Kipling. Rather, I want to suggest that Steel's understanding of historical change was indebted to the same general principles of Enlightenment historiography that inform Scott's Waverley novels.

In the historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment, civilization is an inevitable and relentless process. All societies progress through various stages from primitive origins towards modernity, albeit at different rates. The slower-moving societies are always in danger of being conquered by or otherwise assimilated into more civilized ones until they disappear entirely.⁶ Following Enlightenment historians including Adam Smith, John Millar, and Dugald Stewart, Scott's and Steel's novels represent historical change as emerging from conflicts between so-called primitive and civilized peoples, whether the conflict in question is between Highland Jacobites and English troops in Scott's *Waverley* (1814) or between the representatives of the Muslim Mughal dynasty and colonial Britons in Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896).

Like their Enlightenment predecessors, Scott and Steel perceived themselves as ethnographers whose responsibility it was to preserve in writing those culturally distinctive traditions that were likely to be lost in the wake of this conflict, when the forces of civilization inevitably prevailed. Both writers adopted what James Buzard, in his analysis of *Waverley*, has described as the liminal perspective of the participant-observer, an individual who is deeply familiar with the culture she or he

⁴ Jennifer L. Otsuki, "The Memsahib and the Ends of Empire: Feminine Desire in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 24 (1996), 4, 1-29.

⁵ Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, 156.

⁶ On the stadial theory underpinning Enlightenment historiography, see, e.g., Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 91-115, and Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress*, trans. Jeremy Carden (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 45-58.

describes, but who maintains enough critical distance to explain it to outsiders.⁷

Scott and Steel honed their ethnographic skills before they took to writing novels by collecting the indigenous lore of, respectively, the Scottish borders and the Punjab. Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3) incorporated materials gleaned during his work as Sheriff deputy for Selkirk; while Steel collected the folktales published in England as *Tales of the Punjab* (1894) during her casual interactions with the women and children who attended her informal schools. The extensive editorial apparatuses employed in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* and *Tales of the Punjab* foreground Scott's and Steel's doubled perspectives as participant-observers.⁸ Annotation is a form of interpretation, implying the opaqueness of the material presented to readers; border ballads and Punjabi folk tales might be enjoyed, but could not be properly understood by geographical or historical outsiders, without editorial commentary. Both Scott and Steel took pains to assert the authenticity of the material they presented to readers, claiming to have interfered with neither diction nor narrative more than was necessary, while at the same time acknowledging that ballads and folk tales were inherently impure forms, created through accretion and synthesis. Although both authors offered their collections to the public as a repository of endangered traditions, their creative impulses were undoubtedly at work.

Scott brought the ethnographic sensibility honed by his ballad collecting to the heavily annotated Waverley novels; and Steel's series of historical romances of the Moghul Emperors—*A Princes of Dreamers* (1908), *The King Errant* (1912), *Mistress of Men* (1918), and *The Builder* (1928)—reveal a similar concern with source materials. But this concern is most obvious in the novel that Steel considered her best, *On the Face of the Waters*, a story of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 that adapts through allusion Scott's account of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 in *Waverley* (1814). By the time Steel wrote *On the Face of the Water* numerous novels had already been written about the series of localized military rebellions against British colonial authority that became known as the Indian Mutiny, all of them representing in lurid terms the dire threat that depraved Muslim rebels supposedly posed to white, Christian womanhood.

⁷ James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century Novels* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15-18.

⁸ *Tales of the Punjab* was first published in India as *Wide-Awake Stories* (1884). The British edition (Macmillan, 1894) included notes by folklorist Major R. C. Temple. Steel explained that the work's "double intention" was to "interest children" and to be "valuable to those who study Folklore on its scientific side" (ix).

On the Face of the Waters incorporates various forms of official and unofficial history in a valiant but not entirely successful attempt to provide an unbiased account of the Mutiny, one that would represent British and Indian perspectives sympathetically and without sensationalism. Steel had left India in 1889 when her husband retired from the civil service, but she returned alone in 1894 to carry out research for *On the Face of the Waters*. She was given permission to look through “confidential boxes of papers” in government offices in Delhi, later writing:

It was like digging for gold, uncertain each instant if some priceless treasure would not turn up. And there was a breathless haste, an inevitable hurry about it, almost as if the spirit of the times had been caught and prisoned in the papers (Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, 213-14).

Steel also “succeeded in getting oral traditions about most Mutiny incidents,” although these, she remarked in her autobiography, were “very contradictory” (ibid., 218). These written and oral sources allowed her to write a work that was, like so many of Scott’s novels, “at once a story and a history,” in which “every incident bearing in the remotest degree on the Indian Mutiny, or in the part which real men took in it, is scrupulously exact, even to the date, the hour, the scene, the very weather.”⁹ However, Steel admits that the exception to this exactitude of historical detail is the romance plot that she has woven through historical events.

And it’s here, as Jenny Sharpe has observed, that Steel departed from previous novels about the Mutiny, which “replayed the same hackneyed set of imperialist plots” and “Orientalist stereotypes of Asiatic depravity and licentiousness.”¹⁰ Steel revises previous Mutiny narratives by refusing to represent Englishwomen as helpless victims, introducing the fin-de-siècle New Woman into mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-India. When the novel opens, Kate Erlton, a rigidly conventional *memsahib* has become estranged from her gambling, womanizing husband; yet when she learns that he has rigged a horse race and may lose his military office if his dishonesty is discovered, she persuades Jim Douglas, alias Greyman, owner of the losing horse, to give her husband a second chance. Douglas, a Scot, is already an outcast, having been ousted from the army and Anglo-Indian society after getting into a fight over another officer’s wife. Douglas has spent the last

⁹ Flora Annie Steel, *On the Face of the Waters* (London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1985), n. p.; in-text citations below in parentheses from this edition. On the complex relationship between fiction and history in the Waverley novels, see, e.g., David Brown, *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1979); and James Kerr, *Fiction Against History: Scott as Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 85-6.

few years working in the household of the recently deposed King of Oude where his observations have convinced him “that a storm was brewing” in which he too “might find his chance” for redemption by providing information to British officials (43). Donning a series of disguises, Douglas keeps careful watch on the incendiary Moulvie of Fyzabad, who is stirring up discontent among sepoys about flour contaminated with bone, and cartridges greased with animal fat. Meanwhile, despite Kate’s efforts on her husband’s behalf, Major Erlton determines to divorce her and marry his mistress, the frivolous Alice Gissing.

When violence breaks out, Kate and Alice are both caught in its midst, and the latter is killed nobly defending the life of a child. Douglas finds Kate trapped inside the walls of Delhi and vows to protect her. Disguising himself as an Afghan trader and Kate as his wife, he keeps her safe on a rooftop above the city, which Kate transforms into the image of an English home even while she “goes native,” dressing in the clothes of Douglas’s former Indian mistress, staining her skin with walnuts, and learning Hindustani in order to conceal her identity. When fear of a raid compels them to abandon the rooftop in haste, Kate makes her way back to the military camp outside of Delhi, where she is reunited with her repentant husband Erlton, who is conveniently killed in battle the next day. As the fighting continues, Kate goes in search of Douglas, and finding him wounded and near death, nurses him back to health in their rooftop abode. A letter that closes the novel informs readers that she and Douglas are now residing in Scotland where they are about to be married.

Admittedly, this doesn’t sound much like anything Walter Scott wrote. But Steel invites us to recognize her debts to Scott when Douglas compares Bahadur Shah, the last of the Mughal emperors, to Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, who, as the personable but ineffectual leader of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, features in *Waverley*. British military officials are inclined to dismiss the Moghul court in Delhi as “a sham” and its monarch as “a miserable pantaloon of a king, the prey of a designing woman who flatters his dotage” (44). But Douglas differs. Warning of a possible rebellion “comparable to the ’15 or the ’45,” Douglas points out that “Prince Charles Edward was not a very admirable person, nor the record of the Stuarts a very glorious one,” and yet he could command a following powerful enough to worry King and Parliament (44). Douglas’s mild contempt for Charles Edward contrasts strikingly with *Waverley*’s fervent admiration of him. Yet readers of *Waverley* would recognize, as Douglas does, that the cause of a seemingly wronged ruler carries a seductive charm that might win adherents even to so “miserable” a king as the Bahadur Shah.

Douglas is aware of discontents that colonial officials have overlooked and that might incline native troops to join forces with the Moghul court

because he occupies a liminal position in relation to both Anglo-Indian and native society. Much as Scott's famously wavering hero Edward Waverley mixes with Jacobite rebels without abandoning his Whiggish loyalty to the established political order, Douglas can mix with Indians of various classes, religions, and political persuasions without losing his allegiance to the British colonial powers that have rejected him. As his alias "Greyman" suggests, Douglas is adept at disguise, having practiced this art under traveling tricksters, and can blend into any crowd. The narrator attributes this penchant for disguise to Douglas's "Celtic birth": "He had not been born in the mist-covered mountains of the north for nothing. Their mysticism was part of his nature" (42-3). Imaginative, superstitious, and a devout believer in fate, Douglas exhibits the traits that Matthew Arnold, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), attributed to Celts, and that in Steel's fiction are also shared by Indians, even those that have been Westernized.

In addition to explaining his talent for disguise and mimicry, Douglas's Highland roots perhaps also account for his ability to perceive analogies between the Jacobite uprising of 1745 and the impending mutiny. He fears the outbreak of rebellion not because he believes that it will succeed, but rather because of the bloodshed that must result. When Major Erlton scoffs of the Sepoys, "Disloyal scoundrels!...As if they had a chance!" Douglas responds, "They have none. That's the pity of it" (146). And, indeed, Soma, a Rajput soldier who has served Douglas in the past, comes to regret his decision to join the Moghul court, deciding after three months shut inside the city walls that "The Huzoors were the true masters; they had men who could lead men; not princes in Kashmir shawls who couldn't understand a word of what you said" (347). Much as Scott's *Waverley* represents the Jacobite rebellion as destined to fail, Steel never questions that the Indian mutiny might have succeeded in permanently overturning colonial authoring.

Even while celebrating the retrospectively inevitable triumph of civilization, Scott and Steel express ambivalence about so-called progress, regretting the loss of culturally distinctive ways of life and rendering history's losers sympathetic to readers. The forward momentum of their narratives of progress is retarded by backwards glances as they attempt to preserve in writing traditions that might otherwise be lost. *Waverley* suggests that the inevitable defeat of the courageous but misguided Highland Jacobites hastened the demise of the traditional ways of life that underwrote their feudal loyalties to the Stuart monarchy. In the Postscript to *Waverley*, Scott remarks, "There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland," and explains that he wrote the novel "for the purpose of preserving some idea of the ancient manners of which I

have witnessed the almost total extinction.”¹¹ The Jacobite rebellion, although not the sole cause of this extinction, was a catalyst, impelling Parliament to bring the Highlands more firmly under centralized rule through legislation proscribing certain aspects of traditional Highland culture including dress, weaponry, and the exercise of heritable jurisdiction.

On the Face of the Waters similarly depicts an India that has already begun modernizing, a process only accelerated by the consolidation of British rule in the wake of the mutiny. The title of the novel’s first chapter, “Going, Going, Gone,” refers explicitly to the cry of the auctioneer who is selling off the menagerie previously belonging to the recently deposed King of Oude in Lucknow. But the chapter’s title also refers to the disappearance of traditional ways of life. As the crowd of natives listen, it asks

What was going? Everything if tales were true; and there were so many tales now-a-days. Of news flashed faster by wires than any, even the Gods themselves, could flash it; of carriages, fire-fed, bringing God knows what grain from God knows where! Could a body eat of it and not be polluted? Could the children read the schoolbooks and not be apostate? Burning questions these, not to be answered lightly (10).

That India is already becoming Westernized is evident in the growing emancipation of its women. Enlightenment historians posited that the condition of women provided an index to a society’s place on the trajectory of development from primitive to civilized society.¹² In Delhi, Steel’s narrator relates, “even the women-folk on the high roofs knew something of the mysterious woman across the sea, who reigned over the *Huzoors* and made them pitiful to women” (92). Although cloistered by their husbands and allowed limited rights in a strongly patriarchal society, Delhi’s women are aware that Britons are ruled by a woman, Queen Victoria, and believe that this matriarchal figure accounts for comparative civility with which Englishmen treat women. While these women’s oppression indicates the primitiveness of Indian society, their very awareness of the possibility of greater equality between men and women suggests that progress is already underway.

On the Face of the Waters does not question whether progress, in the form of Westernization and under British authority, is desirable for India, but only how quickly it should happen. When Douglas warns British officials of the general unrest and resentment stirred up by the Moulvie of Fyzabad, Theophilus Metcalfe, an agent of the Governor General of India,

¹¹ Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'tis sixty years since*, ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 363.

¹² See Sebastiani, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 134-41.

replies testily, “We simply can’t do the work we are doing without making enemies of those whose vested interests we have to destroy. We may have gone ahead a little too fast; but that is another question” (125). Steel again calls into question the pace at which Britain has attempted to Westernize India when she describes General John Nicholson, the man who planned, led, and was wounded in the storming of Delhi, as a “symbol of the many lives lost uselessly in the vain attempt to go forward too fast” (425). Steel’s self-avowed hero-worship of the abrasive Nicholson, the only historical figure to feature in her cast of military officers, is evident in her representation of him as a victim of progress. But she also depicts the detrimental effects of too-rapid modernization on the many hybridized characters that populate her novels, such as Tara, the widow who becomes a pariah when Douglas prevents her from committing suttee by pulling her back from her husband’s funeral pyre. Douglas’s attempt to “save” Tara from what he perceives as a barbaric death only leaves her in limbo, rejected by her own people but unable to assimilate into Anglo-Indian society even though she secretly dreams of becoming Douglas’s wife. Steel elicits sympathy for characters that the advances of civilization leave behind or leave out, even though she offers no solution to their plight.

Is *On the Face of the Waters* then, as Benita Parry and Nancy Paxton have argued, “a vindication of the English [*sic*] position” in India? If we acknowledge Steel’s indebtedness to the Enlightenment historiography brought to life in Scott’s *Waverley* novels, we must also acknowledge the novel’s ambivalence about the British colonial project. This ambivalence permeates the novel’s ending, which finds Kate and Douglas in the Scottish Highlands, where he is convalescing. Helen Bauer reads their retreat to Scotland as a rejection of “the work of imperial government.”¹³ Yet this reading overlooks the Highland’s central role in British imperialism, both as testing ground for colonial practices in the wake of the ’45, and as breeding ground for the troops that sustained Britain’s imperial projects further afield. It might be more accurate to see Kate and Douglas’s enjoyment of the “pleasures of that Scotch home” mentioned so fleetingly in the closing pages of Steel’s novel as a kind of return to the origins of empire, where Douglas will regain his strength and they will raise up a new generation of soldiers and civil servants (416).

While Steel’s account of the Indian Mutiny in *On the Face of the Waters* recalls Scott’s recounting of the Jacobite Rebellion in *Waverley*, her subtle exploration of the historic ties between Scotland and India recalls *The Surgeon’s Daughter*, the last of the three tales included in Scott’s *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827). The previous stories, “The Highland Widow” and “The Two Drovers,” both depict a conflict between

¹³ Helen Pike Bauer, “Reconstructing the Colonial Woman,” 84.

traditional Highland manners and mores, and those of southern Britain. At the beginning of “The Surgeon’s Daughter,” Crystal Croftangry, the fictional compiler of the *Chronicles*, admits that he wants a “topic to supply the place of the Highlands” as “that the theme is becoming a little exhausted.”¹⁴ Croftangry’s friend Mr. Fairscribe advises him to

do with your Muse of Fiction, as you call her, as many an honest man does with his own sons in flesh and blood....Send her India, to be sure. That is the true place for a Scot to thrive in; and if you carry your story fifty years back, as there is nothing to hinder you, you will find as much shooting and stabbing there as ever was in the wild Highlands (Scott, *Chronicles*, 155).

Scott alludes to the concrete interconnections between Scotland and India—the disproportionate number of Scots who flourished, sometimes through dubious practices in military or civil posts in India—while also suggesting that they play an analogous role in fiction as exotic imaginary spaces. The terrains of India and the Highlands are mapped by a geography of romance, with each locale offering a compliment of lawless rogues, primitive customs, and striking scenery. It doesn’t matter that neither Croftangry nor Scott has been to India, for as Fairscribe tells the former, the story will be “all the better that you know nothing of what you are saying” (*ibid.*, 155). India, in “The Surgeon’s Daughter,” is a fictional land of opportunity much as the Highlands, in *On the Face of the Waters* is a shadowy space of spiritual regeneration.

If my reading of *On the Face of the Waters* illustrates Steel’s indebtedness to Scott, the explicit forms of colonialism described by Steel in turn expose the imperial assumptions embedded in Scott’s depictions of the Highlands and of the Jacobite rebellion in *Waverley*. Scott’s novels provided a flexible yet distinct set of conventions through which to narrate the conflicts out of which, for Enlightenment thinkers, historical change emerged. The idea that history too has its plots and conventions has become commonplace since the publication of Hayden White’s now-classic *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* in 1973. Narrative forms are, of course, ideological, and in attending to Steel’s formal and aesthetic debts to Scott, I do not mean to excuse or legitimate her perpetuation of deeply racist and sexist ways of thinking. Indeed, I would suggest that it’s only by recognizing the ideologies embedded in and perpetuated by narrative forms that we can begin to come up with other stories.

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¹⁴ Walter Scott, *Chronicles of the Canongate*, ed. Claire Lamont (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 154.