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The Authorship of Two Girls on a Barge (1891), Reassessed

Karyn Huenemann

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

Jusqu'à récemment, le roman Two Girls on a Barge (1891) avait été attribué à l'auteure-journaliste canadienne Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) écrivant sous le pseudonyme de «V. Cecil Cotes». Cet article offre des preuves que même si Duncan semble avoir influencé le style et la structure du roman, l'auteure du roman était en fait Violet Cecil Cotes (1868-1915), la belle-sœur de Duncan.

The Authorship of *Two Girls on a Barge* (1891), Reassessed

Karyn Huenemann

Abstract

Until recently, the novel *Two Girls on a Barge* (1891) has been attributed to Canadian author and journalist Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861–1922), writing under the pseudonym "V. Cecil Cotes." This article provides evidence that, while Duncan did appear to have influenced the style and structure of the novel, the author was Violet Cecil Cotes (1868–1915), Duncan's sister-in-law.

Résumé

Jusqu'à récemment, le roman *Two Girls on a Barge* (1891) avait été attribué à l'auteure-journaliste canadienne Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) écrivant sous le pseudonyme de « V. Cecil Cotes ». Cet article offre des preuves que même si Duncan semble avoir influencé le style et la structure du roman, l'auteure du roman était en fait Violet Cecil Cotes (1868-1915), la belle-sœur de Duncan.

During her adventurous life, Canadian author Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861–1922) published copious journalism, twenty novels, one story collection, and one volume of personal reflections, and also wrote a number of performed but unpublished plays. Her oeuvre is catalogued and discussed elsewhere, most notably in Misao Dean's *A Different Point of View*;[1] my present interest concerns the authorship of one novel until now attributed to Duncan: *Two Girls on a Barge* (1891).[2] Taken individually, the observations I present do not constitute an irrefutable claim; collectively, however, they form a compelling argument that the author of this novel was not Sara

[1] Misao Dean, *A Different Point of View: Sara Jeannette Duncan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

[2] V. Cecil Cotes, *Two Girls on a Barge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1891).

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Jeannette Duncan but rather her sister-in-law, Violet Cecil Cotes (1868–1915).

Duncan began her career as a journalist, writing initially under the byline "Garth Grafton." She did not make much of an attempt to hide her gender behind a pen name: only two years into her journalistic career, she was alternating between the bylines Garth Grafton and Sara Jeannette Duncan, as indicated in the *Montreal Star*'s report on 18 September 1888 that "Miss Sarah Jeannette Duncan (Garth Grafton) of the Montreal *Star* left Brantford yesterday for a tour of Japan."[3] During her early career, Duncan used pseudonyms for some of her journalism and for two novels: "V. Cecil Cotes" for *Two Girls on a Barge* and "Jane Wintergreen" for *Two in a Flat* (1908). In August 1892, as "Civilis," she published "A Progressive Viceroy" in the *Contemporary Review*, explicitly requesting to remain anonymous because of the political content of her writing.[4] "V. Cecil Cotes" appears as a byline in *Atalanta*, a British girls' monthly, in 1892, where she wrote the column "Music of the Month" and commented on music and opera in the "Brown Owl" section; and "M. E. Rowan," also attributed to Duncan, appears in *Atalanta* in July 1892.[5] Of note is that Duncan also published in *Atalanta* under her own name: the well-known semi-biographical article "How an American Girl Became a Journalist," for example, appeared there in November 1889, long before V. Cecil Cotes's and M.E. Rowan's articles; and "O-wuta-san," a traveller's tale of Japan, appeared there in the summer of 1890. Duncan's rationale for using "Jane Wintergreen" was explained by her niece, Mrs. Sanford Ross, who noted that because *Two in a Flat* was "mainly an amusing dialogue between herself and a very loquacious cockney maid," Duncan "obviously could not put her name to it."[6] However, no such explanation has surfaced regarding the second pseudonymous novel. While the attribution of *Two Girls in a Barge*

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3 Quoted in Marian Fowler, *Redney: A Life of Sara Jeannette Duncan* (1983; Markham, ON: Penguin, 1985), 151.

4 Linda Quirk, "Breaking New Ground: The First Generation of Women to Work as Professional Authors in English Canada (1880–1920)" (PhD diss., Queen's University, 2011), 113–14.

5 Linda Quirk, introduction to *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves*, by Sara Jeannette Duncan, ed. Linda Quirk with Cheryl Cundell (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 2018), 13.

6 Quoted in Misao Dean, introduction to *Cousin Cinderella*, by Sara Jeannette Duncan (1908; Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1994), vii–xxvi (xxvi).

has been accepted by a number of critics, there is evidence that this novel was not primarily Duncan's work.

In *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire* (1980), Thomas Tausky, one of the first scholars to consider Duncan's work in any depth, notes that "several clues, most notably the author's surname [Mrs. Everard Cotes], identify the book as Sara's."[7] His lengthy consideration of the question—"one must wonder why she chose to use the pseudonym"—is a good jumping-off point for my discussion:

> Several clues, most notably the author's surname, identify the book as Sara's. It was issued by the same publisher (Chatto & Windus) as *An American Girl* and *A Social Departure* and contains advertisements for the other two works which are said to be (and are) "uniform with the present volume." The style is also unmistakably hers.
>
> One must wonder why she chose to use the pseudonym, especially since the other two books were clearly a success with both the critics and the public, and her real name would presumably have increased sales. It is conceivable that she recognized the obvious inferiority of *Two Girls on a Barge* and wished to escape responsibility for it.[8]

Tausky then proceeds to discuss the "obvious inferiority" of the text—later calling it "an unsuccessful experiment in light fiction"[9]—but concludes nonetheless that the novel is indeed Duncan's.

The novel is an episodic travel narrative similar (as Tausky points out)[10] to Jerome K. Jerome's 1889 *Three Men in a Boat*, a recent and very popular publication that the author of *Two Girls on a Barge* was undoubtedly mimicking. The formula had served Duncan well in her first novel, *A Social Departure* (1890), and to a lesser degree in *An American Girl in London* (1891), published the same year as *Two Girls on a Barge*. Despite the similarity in structure, it seems unlikely that at this point in her career Duncan would have been writing two novels at the same time. If she had, this might explain the indisputable inferiority of *Two Girls on a Barge*; however, the reason for its weakness is more likely that Duncan did not write this novel, although she likely contributed to its production.

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7 Thomas E. Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire* (Port Credit, ON: Meany, 1988).

8 Ibid., 100.

9 Thomas E. Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan and Her Works* (Toronto: ECW, [1988]), 35.

10 Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire*, 101.

The details of Duncan's life support this assertion. In September 1888, Duncan and fellow journalist Lily Lewis began a journey around the world, journalling their travels in articles submitted to various Canadian and American newspapers and magazines. This voyage became the foundation for Duncan's first book, *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round The World by Ourselves* (1890), in which Lily Lewis becomes the fictional Orthodocia. In Calcutta, Duncan met Everard Cotes, and the couple became engaged. Duncan then continued on her journey, spending a substantial period (at least from May 1889 to February 1890) in England with the extended Cotes family before returning to her home in Brantford, Ontario, for the summer. In October 1890, she left Canada for good, moving to India where she married Everard Cotes on 6 December 1890. In *Redney: A Life of Sara Jeannette Duncan*,[11] Marian Fowler provides further detail about Duncan's time in England before her marriage. Although Fowler does not adequately document many of her sources, a sufficient number of details have been verified by other scholars. Combining Fowler's research with my own, then, I have built the following case for Everard Cotes's sister Violet as the author of *Two Girls on a Barge*.

Fowler tells us that while in England, "[Duncan], another young lady and two young men, probably Cotes connections, hired a barge from Messrs Corbett of the London Salt Works in which they could float down the Grand Junction Canal."[12] She proceeds to describe the canal boat journey, but as these details are taken largely from the fictional account, they cannot be considered as supporting evidence; they do, however, speak to the author's firsthand experience of the trip from London to Coventry along the Great Junction and Great Union Canals. Fowler's discussion of the authorship of *Two Girls on a Barge*, though, is pertinent, including as it does letters between Duncan and her publishers Chatto & Windus. Fowler notes that "for some reason [Duncan] wanted this book to come out as anonymously as possible, with initials 'V.C.C.' only, but a Chatto letter of June 19th reveals that she reluctantly consented to have the full pseudonym 'V. Cecil Cotes' appear on the title page."[13] Fowler then opines that this seemed "a curious choice, for Violet Cecil Cotes was the name of a deceased sister of Everard's."

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11 See n3, above.
12 Fowler, *Redney*, 180.
13 Fowler, *Redney*, 206.

Fowler's interpretation of the letters—like much of her biography—erroneously attributes an emotional tone to Duncan's interaction with her publishers. The serialized edition of *Two Girls in a Barge* in the magazine *The Lady's Pictorial* was signed only "V.C.C."; the novel is signed "V. Cecil Cotes"; and there is no tone of reluctance in the associated exchange of letters. In a letter of 15 June 1891, a representative of Chatto & Windus writes:

> Dear Madam—
>
> We have bought from Mr. A. Gibbons the copyright of the papers entitled *Two Girls on a Barge* that you contributed to his journal *The Lady's Pictorial* … Will you kindly say we may … print your name in full on the title page as the author of the book?[14]

The answer to this standard request is recorded in the publisher's letter of 19 June:

> Dear Madam—
>
> We beg to thank you for permission to print your full name in place of initials only on the title page of *Two Girls on a Barge*—the copyright and all interest in which, as already mentioned, we have bought from Mr. A. Gibbons.

While this letter is addressed to "Mrs. Cotes, Calcutta," of essential significance is that the letter of 15 June, as well as the letter preceding this one in the Chatto & Windus archives, are both addressed to "Miss V. Cecil Cotes"—in the latter case, to an address in Paris ("3 rue Baka, Luxembourg, Paris"). In the 15 June letter, "Miss V. C […] Cotes" is discernable, although part of the name and all of the street address are too faint to read. My conclusion is that Duncan, having a previously established relationship with Chatto & Windus, was working as an intermediary for her sister-in-law Violet Cecil Cotes, who—contrary to Fowler's statement—was alive and well and living in Paris in 1891. She died on 7 November 1915, in a suburb of Oxford.[15] The fact that *Two Girls on a Barge*—like *A Social Departure* and *An American Girl in London*—is delightfully illustrated by F. H. Townsend and has been made to appear similar to Duncan's previous

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[14] Chatto & Windus to Miss V. Cecil Cotes, 15 June 1891, Chatto & Windus Archives, University of Reading.

[15] *General Register Office, England and Wales Civil Registration Indexes* (London: General Register Office), retrieved from *England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915*, ancestry.com, 5 January 2017.

books from Chatto & Windus, should be seen as a sign of canny marketing rather than proof of Duncan's authorship.

This evidence, perhaps solid enough, is further supported by the text itself: not the content or structure, which are in keeping with Duncan's previous episodic novels, but the actual writing. If we assume that Violet Cotes was the other "young lady" that Fowler tells us Duncan travelled with, and that Duncan assisted her in writing a novel about their experiences—an activity which Duncan had just successfully accomplished twice—then we can see how snippets of Duncan's characteristically wry voice seeped into the text, between long passages of far more mundane narrative. Violet Cotes was seven years younger than Duncan; it is perhaps valid to surmise that Duncan, as an older, published author, was somewhat of a mentor.

While *Two Girls on a Barge* does exhibit some of Duncan's clever turns of phrase (references to *dhurries*[16] and William Dean Howells[17] speak strongly of Duncan's participation), it contains none of her characteristic irony nor her clever association of words and ideas: although attempts are made, they almost universally fail. Problems of diction argue for authorship other than Duncan's. The repetition in "We hadn't got a barge, and we wanted one. We wanted an empty barge that we could furnish our own way"[18] is jarring, as is the contrast between formal language and slang: "His quadrilateral designs had certainly fulfilled themselves in a most natty way."[19] Attempts at clever use of unexpected words—an ironic technique Duncan excelled at—also fail: "We bought the most applicable little red stone jug to take the milk away in."[20] And the immaturity of the language and the form of expression in many sentences do not feel like Duncan's work: "Girton said it was a Barge, 'and if it's not a Barge, I won't play!' she added."[21] Other examples abound, but many are too lengthy to record here.

There is also at times a lack of sympathy with the characters not present in Duncan's other works: the "child who … so narrowly escaped with its worthless little life";[22] the four travellers welcoming

16 Cotes, *Two Girls*, 20.
17 Ibid., 91.
18 Ibid., 1.
19 Ibid., 12.
20 Ibid., 44.
21 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 78.

guests with "outraged hospitality";[23] Edna Devize, who expounds "maliciously" and in detail on the finances of the bargemen[24] and whose "cajoleries" are accepted "in the irresponsive spirit of small grubby heathen gods."[25] This underlying negativity is also reflected in the characterizations of Edna Devize and the narrator's brother, "the Cadet." The narrator is derisive of Edna for her university education, labelling her "generically 'Girton,' to that sweet girl graduate's natural wrath. Girton, she said, was a collective title, and she wouldn't be called a horde!"[26] In contrast, Duncan's female protagonists tend to be explicitly representatives of a "type": Mary Trent (*Cousin Cinderella*, 1906) of Canadian womanhood; Evelyn Dicey (*Cousin Cinderella*) and Mamie Wick (*An American Girl in London*, 1890) of American women; Elfrida Bell (*A Daughter of To-Day*, 1894) of the frustrated realist artist; Laura Filbert (*The Path of a Star*, 1898) of the Salvation Army religious devotee. Admittedly—unlike the fictional Edna—Violet Cotes does not appear to have attended any of the women's university colleges operating in the 1880s. Based on the subject matter of V. Cecil Cotes's contributions to *Atalanta*, though, she does appear to have had a musical education. Perhaps this informed her attitude toward more formally educated women; denigration of what were considered "male" subjects (math and sciences) compared to the more "womanly" sphere (music and other arts) underlies much of the narrator's conflicted attitude in *Two Girls on a Barge*. The narrator similarly derides the Cadet for his mathematical intelligence: "I am sorry to accuse him of it, but I am afraid there are no extenuating circumstances—the Cadet was mathematical. It was borne in on us persistently, and yet was a continual surprise on this vessel of illogical development."[27] In contrast to Edna and the Cadet, the narrator exemplifies, in a self-laudatory manner, uneducated and unintelligent womanhood: "It appeared to me unnatural that in a course of years the canal did not run dry since it was not circular, and the locks all ran out towards the same direction. The Cadet was not explicit on the point. He suddenly remembered he ought to write a letter. Then Edna turned to remonstrate."[28] At least in this instance the Cadet refrains from pontificating. The attitudes of and toward the male

[23] Ibid., 76.
[24] Ibid., 93.
[25] Ibid., 105.
[26] Ibid., 2.
[27] Ibid., 50.
[28] Ibid., 52–53.

characters in *Two Girls on a Barge* are shallow and stereotypic: the male characters are mere foils for the female narrative wit, however unsuccessful it may be.

The narrator's attitude toward education gives rise to two concerns: the first is its incompatibility with Duncan's opinions expressed so forcefully elsewhere; the second is the contradiction between the narrator's character and her diction. "Careers, if possible, and independence anyway, we must have," Duncan asserted in 1886. "Politics are beginning to fascinate us, and we have concluded that we want to vote. We have opinions … and we wish them to be treated with respect."[29] Duncan was not arguing against the feminine so much as the stereotype of the sentimental, vacuous woman embodied by the narrator of *Two Girls on a Barge*: "When you sit in your place and wait for strong statement or trenchant ideas or promising plans, and Mrs. A opens the deliberations by asserting with tears in her eyes that she is convinced that this is a good work and ordered of the Lord, you feel she has not speeded it towards its consummation."[30]

There is a strong suggestion in the style of the text that the author was formally educated, and was trying to present herself (as an author) as intelligent in a masculine way while at the same time presenting herself (as a character) as unintelligent—rather than merely uneducated—in a way that only women could be, according to late Victorian gendered stereotypes. Yet the journalist who demanded "Cannot the higher mathematics co-exist with frills?"[31] would be unlikely to create a central narrator unable to understand the basic physics of a lock system. Nor would she have that same narrator use terms such as "rectilinear,"[32] "Impressionistic Queryist,"[33] "a quizzical expression of disapprobation and astonishment,"[34] "meteorological apologies of an amiable, if evanescent sort,"[35] "supercilious,"[36] and "the immutable laws of leverage."[37] While Duncan herself does not shy from this higher level of diction, she does not in her other works

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29 Quoted in Thomas E. Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Selected Journalism* (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1978), 34.
30 Quoted in Dean, *A Different Point of View*, 63.
31 Quoted in Fowler, *Redney*, 118.
32 Cotes, *Two Girls*, 6.
33 Ibid., 12.
34 Ibid., 14.
35 Ibid., 28.
36 Ibid., 50.
37 Ibid., 51.

make the glaring mistake of putting such words into the mouth of a character otherwise identified as both proudly uneducated and unintelligent. Duncan, in her journalism and other narratives, does not *assert* her intelligence; it comes naturally through in her writing, more powerfully for being less forced. Nor would Duncan, "one of the first significant advocates of literary realism in Canada,"[38] construct an exchange in which Edna chides the narrator with "You are realistic," yielding the immediate, insulted response "No, I'm not! And I quite agree with you."[39]

Simply put, then, we have a novel that is poorly written except for a very few passages in Duncan's clever literary style; the title page of the novel contains the author's "full name," V. Cecil Cotes, instead of the initials used for its serial publication, V.C.C.; the novel was illustrated by F. H. Townsend, like both of Duncan's previous novels; and it was published by Chatto & Windus, who were in communication with Violet Cecil Cotes as well as Sara Jeannette Duncan in preparation for its publication. It is justifiable to conclude that *Two Girls on a Barge* is not the work of Sara Jeannette Duncan, but of her sister-in-law, Violet Cecil Cotes, albeit with editorial assistance from Duncan.

Author Biography

Karyn Huenemann is an independent scholar and manager of the Canada's Early Women Writers (CEWW) project at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC. She was previously an instructor in English Literature specializing in Children's Literature and Canadian Literature before 1920. Huenemann has published book chapters on Flora Annie Steel, James De Mille, and Robert Cormier, and a number of articles on Sara Jeannette Duncan and Rudyard Kipling. She is currently working on a critical edition of Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Path of a Star* (1898).

[38] Dean, *A Different Point of View*, 41.
[39] Cotes, *Two Girls*, 69.