

# *A Canadian Author in Chelsea: Sara Jeannette Duncan or Mrs Everard Cotes*

by Debra Martens

**E**arly in 1919, a well-travelled couple moved into their newly acquired home at 17 Paultons Square in Chelsea. They were Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922, a popular novelist and journalist, and her journalist husband Everard Charles Cotes (1862-1944). Duncan had been living in various flats in London, and with in-laws in Oxford, off and on for many years, escaping the hot season of Calcutta. Her most recent and, as it happened, permanent stay began in 1915, when she found that the war discouraged travel by sea. In 1919, Cotes was fresh from India, where he'd sold up everything to start a new career as a Reuters correspondent. In fact, he would soon be on the road again for his work.

Their house was comparatively new: 54 years old, with drainage put in 24 years before their arrival. Paultons Square is very much today as it was then. According to *A History of Middlesex*, an attempt in 1961 to lift the LCC preservation order on the Georgian square was defeated (with the help of the Chelsea Society), thereby halting plans to tear down buildings. At the time, the square was praised as 'one of the best surviving squares in West London, with elegant brick houses and wrought-iron balconies.' (*The Times* 31 May 1961\*) The most significant change was at the beginning of WWII, when trenches were dug in the Square's garden, which cut tree roots and led to the deaths of some grand old trees.

How did a writer born in 1861 in Brantford Ontario, in what was then Canada West (Dominion of Canada 1871), come to be living in Chelsea?

The eldest of a large family, Sarah Janet Duncan (her pre-pen name) was tied to Britain through her parents: her father Charles came from Cupar, Fifeshire, Scotland and her mother, Jane Bell, was born in New Brunswick to a father from Ulster. Duncan's father was a dry-goods and furniture merchant and did well enough to buy a large house in Brantford, with elegant furnishings provided by his import business. Although Duncan was happy there as a child, she wanted nothing more than to leave. To leave not just the place but the confines of social expectations. At that time, girls who were good at school had few

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*Paultons Square c.1905. © Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.*

career options open to them: she trained as a teacher. Duncan did well at school and in her teaching exams. But she soon arranged for her escape.

Duncan had been writing since childhood, encouraged in her reading and writing by her father. Her first poem was published in the *Toronto Globe* in 1880. It was followed soon after by an essay published in *The Canada Monthly*, 'Diogenes on Bric-a-Brac', in 1880. Two publications in one month gave the nineteen-year-old the confidence to pursue journalism. By 1884 she was working for the *Brantford Courier*, and by the end of that year she had persuaded the editors of the *Globe* and of the *London Advertiser* to buy her copy on the New Orleans Cotton Centennial, a world's fair. This reporting (under the name Garth Grafton) led to work with the *Washington Post*, where she began in 1885 as an editorial writer and was in charge of 'Current Literature', catching up on the latest trends in fiction by writing book reviews. From Washington she went to Toronto to work for the *Globe*, and from there to Montreal to write for the *Montreal Star*. It was for the *Star* that she found herself mired in the slushy streets of Ottawa as their parliamentary correspondent, one of two women in the press gallery. Having pushed her way into the male domain of newspaper offices, Duncan wrote in favour of employment for women, among her many progressive topics.

Duncan was one of the New Women, the generation that would travel and seek careers. Two of her friends were the first to obtain a medical degree in the early

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*Sara Jeannette Duncan in 1903.*

*Courtesy of Johnston and Hoffman/Library and Archives Canada/C-046447*

1880s in Canada. Another was Pauline Johnson, whose poetry performances took her on stage in many cities, including London in 1894. Soon after its founding in 1902, Duncan was a member of the Ladies' Empire Club in London – its members were formidable women active in charities, health issues and politics, most of whom published books on such topics as history and travel, and included two playwrights.

On 7 November 1885, the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed. This meant that it was now possible for travellers to go around the world under the British flag, as Florence Donaldson points out in *The Bookman* of June 1898. How could an adventurer like Duncan resist the notion? In the fall of 1888, she and a journalist friend, Lily Lewis, rode on the cowcatcher at the front of the train through the mountains of British Columbia. By ship and train they continued to Japan, Ceylon, India, Malta, Gibraltar, Egypt and England. Both women had arranged for the newspaper serialization of their accounts of their unescorted trip around the world. Duncan's articles appeared first in the *Montreal Star*, then in the London magazine *The Lady's Pictorial*. Finally, she revised them (changing the nationalities of herself and her friend to American and British respectively) to produce the book *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves* (1890). Her first book sold well and made her name as a writer.



*Paultons Square, 1949. Watercolour by E. Glasgow.*  
© Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

But they were not by themselves one moonlit night at the Taj Mahal. A young man whom Duncan had met at the Viceregal residence in Calcutta surprised them. Charles Everard Cotes had chosen his moment perfectly, for Duncan accepted his proposal and they were engaged. (This is according to her biographer Marian Fowler, who writes that she had it from Dr John Cotes.) And then, in a pattern not unusual for their relationship, she left. After she finished her world tour with Lewis in May 1889, Duncan went to Newington Rectory in Wallingford near Oxford to spend the summer with Everard's family.

Who were Everard's family and who was this Englishman who had snared the adventurous writer? His father was the Reverend Septimus Cotes and his mother Ellen was Irish. One of six children, he took an MA from Oxford. He went to Calcutta in 1884, working as an entomologist at the Indian Museum, publishing several pamphlets on pests over ten years. His career would change soon after his marriage to Duncan in December 1890. In May 1892 he was promoted to Deputy Superintendent of the museum. He resigned in 1894 to seek a new

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*Sara Duncan's home in Paultons Square, in 2012. Photo Debra Martens.*

occupation, taking his wife first to Paris then home to England.

After half a year, at the beginning of 1895 they returned to Calcutta because he was offered the position of editor of the *Indian Daily News*. Duncan joined him for a working trip to Burma in 1902. While Duncan was later ensconced in London, he joined journalists touring China, Manchuria, Korea and Japan, publishing from it *Signs and Portents of the Far East* (1907). In 1910 he became the Managing Director of the Eastern News Agency (Associated Press of India and Indian News Agency), staying on through the war.

During their 32 years of marriage, Duncan wrote every day. Despite moving from Calcutta during the hot season to either Simla or London, she was prolific. She published 19 novels,

two collections of non-fiction and a collection of short stories, as well as many newspaper articles. Some of her novels first appeared in print as serials in periodicals in England. Her journalism was published in North America and most regularly for the *Indian Daily News*. Her support of the Empire is evident in both her journalism and her fiction. The novel now considered her best, *The Imperialist*, is set in Canada during a by-election that sees the hero run in favour of imperial federation. Reviews were not wholly favourable, with some suggestion that a woman should not attempt politics. *The Spectator* reviewer of 23 April 1904 dismisses the novel as wearisome and as a fiscal pamphlet disguised as a modern novel.

Her bestsellers of the day were her novels that compared nationalities – wittily and ironically – and that ended with marriage. Through humour she delivered her more serious messages about the role of women and the negative aspects of colonialism. For example, *A Daughter of To-day* is very much the story of a new woman. The reviewer in *The Bookman* of June 1894 calls *A Daughter of To-day* 'a very clever novel' that employs Duncan's 'blessed gift of Heaven, unflinching humour.' The daughter, Elfrida Bell, is praised for 'her pluck, her general good-nature, and in spite of all her tricks and arts and escapades, her idealism and her loyalty to the art she quoted so much...!'

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The description could apply to Duncan as well as most of her female characters. Mary, the Canadian heroine of *Cousin Cinderella* (1908), set in London, is not quite so bold as Elfrida but comes to a happier end. Soon after Mary and her brother take a flat in Kensington, they are introduced into Society by an American friend of theirs. Duncan suggests that marriage of the North Americans to the English would rejuvenate the English both financially and physically, as Canadians are more robust. The differences between the Americans, British and Canadians are also taken up in *An American Girl in London* (1891), *Two Girls on a Barge* (1891), *Those Delightful Americans* (1902) and *His Royal Happiness* (1914).

Duncan seems to have alternated between the lighter novels above with the more critical works set in India. In *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893), *His Honour and a Lady* (1896) and *The Pool in the Desert* (1903) she was at pains to show the personal cost of colonization to the colonizers, both physical and moral. In *The Pool in the Desert* she paints the superficial and hypocritical society life of Simla – when the grass widows lived apart from their husbands who laboured in the heat on the plains below. The book that brought her income for the longest period, *The Story of Sonny Sahib*, was inspired by an ayah's account of the slaughter of English children during the Indian Mutiny. Sonny Sahib is revealed to be the lost child of an English military man. This story was adapted to a stage play with the help of Forbes Dawson.

Duncan left her Simla home in the spring or summer of 1914 to travel to Canada, where a play based on her novel, *His Royal Happiness*, was performed first in Rochester NY in December 1914 and then at the Princess Theatre in Toronto in January 1915. Described as a comedy, it starred Annie Russell late in her career (she retired in 1918). A love story involving hidden identity, royalty and the daughter of a former American president, it may have seemed the perfect bit of theatrical escapism while men were dying in Europe. According to *The Times*, *His Royal Happiness* was performed on 4 November 1918 at Eastbourne, with plans to take it to London, noting that the influenza epidemic made fewer theatres available.

After her return to Simla in March 1915, Duncan wrote a new play staged by the Simla Amateur Dramatic Club, which was well received. Despite the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May, Duncan decided to take the play to London, arriving in late autumn 1915. Her Simla play was revised as *Beauchamp and Beecham: a Comedy in Khaki*, based on the switched identities of two soldiers convalescing in Hawthorn Villa. Although her obituary states that *Beauchamp and Beecham* ran for two years in the country, I found no evidence of this. The typescript cover indicates that it was produced at the Lyric Theatre in London in 1915.



*Duncan, ever the adventurer, was one of 40 members of the Empire Press Union to fly over London in the newly completed Handley-Page V/1500 biplane, which climbed to 6,500 feet and set a record for the number of passengers carried by a plane over London. Photo: courtesy of the family of pilot Clifford Prodger.*

*Billjim from Down Under*, which ran for several nights in Adelaide, produced by Courtneidge's London Comedy Company, raises the issue of wartime babies and their unmarried mothers, as well as the hypocrisy of some committee women. Similarly, Duncan makes food shortages a key to the plot of *Mrs Bobby-Bigamist*. In several of the plays, the men do not succeed in love until they agree to go off to war. *A Knight of Two Hats* is a comical treatment of the options open to a returning soldier. Of the dozen plays written in this period, only a few were performed.

Everard Cotes returned to England as a Reuters correspondent early in 1919. That autumn, he joined the press entourage that accompanied the Prince of Wales to Canada. Duncan went too, returning to number 17 by November. Then he was off again, a correspondent on the Prince of Wales' tour of Australasia and West Indies in 1920, which led to his publication, *Down Under With the Prince* (1921).

In 1900, Duncan sat in her garden in Simla for the entire summer as a cure for consumption. (See *On the Other Side of the Latch*, 1901). Since childhood she had been prone to bronchitis, and in Calcutta the germ-laden dust made her worse. Tuberculosis was called the White Plague; in 1910 Pulmonary Phthisis (consumption) killed 1,878 denizens of Calcutta. By the time she moved into Paultons Square in 1919, she was not the hardy young woman who had set off to conquer the world. Indeed, she may have chosen Paultons Square because of its proximity to the Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest, which

Because several of her wartime plays are comedies involving soldiers, I thought they might have been performed to raise funds for various war charities, as many plays at the time were. In fact, Duncan donated the Toronto opening-night royalties of *His Royal Happiness* to the Canadian Red Cross. For the other plays, however, I found only one mention of such a purpose: her play *Julyann*, 'a new comedy of Irish peasant life' (*The Times Court Circular* 24 July 1917), which was performed at the Globe for the Irish Women's Association in aid of Irish prisoners of war.

In her plays\*\*, Duncan mixed politics with comedy. Her play

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*Gravestone of Sara Janet Cotes, St Giles's Church, Ashtead.  
Courtesy of Karyn Huenemann.*

is now the Royal Brompton. In Simla she and her husband rode ponies every morning for air and exercise. What did she do in Chelsea? Perhaps the garden in the Square attracted her. Whatever it was may have not been enough to keep her healthy. In 1921 she and Everard left Chelsea for the fresher air of Ashtead, Surrey. According to Everard's niece, M E Masterman (later Mrs Sandford Ross), who had been staying with them in both Chelsea and Surrey, Duncan took ill while gardening. Five weeks later, on 22 July 1922, she died. The phrase, 'this leaf was blown far' is inscribed on her tombstone in the churchyard of St Giles Anglican Church in Ashtead.

*The death of Sara Duncan, as noted in the Illustrated London News, 29 July 1922.  
Courtesy of Special Collections, Toronto Reference Library.*



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Everard Cotes began life anew. From 1922-39, he was the parliamentary correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*. In 1923, at the age of 61, he married Phoebe Violet Delaforce, with whom he had two children. The Register of Voters records his name at 17 Paultons Square as late as the autumn of 1923, but by spring 1924 he seems to have signed it over to another family: Evelyn and Duncan Le Geyt Pitcher.

### Sources or Secondary Reading

\*cited in *A History of Middlesex XII Chelsea*, edited by Patricia Croot (Boydell & Brewer 2004) p. 97

\*\* The typescripts of Duncan's plays were deposited in the special collections of the D B Weldon Library of the University of Western Ontario by Mrs P V Cotes of Oxshott, Surrey (Everard's second wife, when she was his widow).

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