

THE DEPTHS OF ALL SHE IS: ELEANOR CAMERON

Good writing, the best that any individual writer is capable of, full and rich and wholly expressive of himself, works from . . . the depths of all that he is as a human being.¹

Eleanor Cameron has written criticism, science fiction, historical fantasy, and nostalgic realism. But her nostalgic realism hints at inexplicable forces; her science fiction attacks scientific rationalism; and while her criticism is intelligent, it says as much about Eleanor Cameron as it does about other writers. In fact, Cameron's writing is almost always expressive of herself and, I would guess, all that she is as a human being.

The oddest (and most illuminating) thing in Cameron's work occurs in The Court of the Stone Children. The past comes alive, not in an old house, but in a museum, a confused reconstruction of a house which once existed in another country. Domi, the eighteenth-century Frenchwoman who once lived in the house, says, "These rooms are from my home in France But it is not the same . . . ! this is a kind of strange, twisted dream of my home, the same and yet weirdly not the same."² The museum accurately evokes neither eighteenth-century France nor the past of San Francisco, where it now stands. It is only a re-invention, a fantasy of the past designed to satisfy present needs--and a peculiar place to build a book around.

In her critical writings, Cameron expresses much admiration for the English time fantasists, on whose books The Court of the Stone Children is modelled. She speaks of "the taken for granted presence in their lives of a past thick with myth and legend and fairy tale, that gives the English fantasists, and especially the time fantasists, their depth and their peculiar power of evocation."³ Cameron feels the lack of such a presence. But while her own work is anything but typically American, she is not just an imitation English fantasist either. Lucy Boston's and Alison Uttley's ghosts of the past come to life in old houses; Cameron is honest enough to acknowledge a New World lack of facilities so thoroughly convenient for the uses of a would-be fantasist. Her museum is both literally and symbolically an American version of a European tradition, an accurate image of the true relationship between North America and its European past.

For Nina, the youthful heroine of The Court of the Stone Children, the museum feels like "home." In fact, Cameron frequently writes about people who are at odds with their environment, and who feel at home only in places with which they have no real connection. Her characters spend much of their time rejecting the implications of their actual experience, and in particular, its "American" virtues--practicality, reason, common sense, ignorance of beauty, distrust of the imagination. In The Terrible Churnadryne, Jennifer rejects both the common sense explanation of the beast she thinks she has seen, and the scientific one. When her scientific friend calls it an "elamosaur," she thinks, "He will always think it was that, and the people of Redwood Cove will always say, 'It was nothing but a cow'--but I'll know what it really was."⁴ What it "really" is is a creature "like some terrible and marvellous beast out of a story long ago" (p. 128); and it is that, in spite of the ugly fact that the beast's name, so evocative for Jennifer, turned out to be a comment about the parts of a butter churn drying in the sun. Cameron allows the "terrible and marvellous beast." Magic triumphs over logic--even over the logic of the story, which seems to demand that Jennifer realize her error and laugh at it. Cameron says the novel started with the joke about the Churnadryne--but its presence in the finished work seems to interfere with what turns out to be the novel's imaginative texture.

In other novels, Cameron makes her defiance of common sense more convincing. When David requires a place different from ordinary reality in The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet, his mother says, "Perhaps you'll find it in your dreams."⁵ But he says, "I don't want to find it in my dreams That wouldn't do at all. I don't want it to be a dream. I want it to be real." And of course, it is real, real enough to be the subject of an entire series of novels. When Cameron's characters imagine something better than they already have, they usually get it--a wonderful mushroom planet, a wonderful churnadryne, Nina's wonderful apartment in The Court of the Stone Children (not to mention her wonderful solution to Domi's problem); even the wonderful mountains that Kath in To the Green Mountains has dreamed of since early childhood: "these mountains she had dreamed of, lofty and green, swept with cool

winds--that heavenly vision."⁶ The actual mountains may not be so perfect as the ones Kath imagines; but the novel ends with her actually heading towards them.

In Stowaway to the Mushroom Planet, Mr. Theo Bass says, "I believe that there is almost nothing in the heavens nor on the earth, which is too preposterous to be impossible."⁷ Cameron's own faith in the preposterous is much greater than her faith in the factual. In The Green and Burning Tree, she balks at the pretend science of Wells' description of his time machine: "I could not convince myself, even for an instant, no matter how I tried, that this bathroom appliance would be capable of carrying a human being, astride the saddle, into the future." (p. 80). It's clear that she would have believed it more if Wells had not tried so hard to convince her; it's no wonder that her science fiction novels about the Mushroom Planet should so frequently attack science--or that, unlike most science fiction, they should describe a world without technology, a romantic's nostalgic dream of a small, simple, soft, misty Eden. Most science fiction heads off into hard-edged Utopian futures into which we could presumably evolve; the Mushroom Planet is more primeval than evolutionary. And in Time and Mr. Bass, Cameron turns the series into something more like Narnia than like 2001. The novel describes the reawakening of a glorious (and mushroom-like) past, this time on earth itself. The Mycetians, a once great race, rediscover their heritage. Time moves backwards.

In Cameron's work, time inevitably moves backwards. If she is to reject the world outside the museum, the world as we ordinarily understand it, then she must reject the logic of time--that what is past is past. In The Court of the Stone Children, Gil says, "All time--past, present, and future--is one time." (p. 142) And in The Green and Burning Tree, Cameron herself insists that "time is not a thread at all, but a globe." (p. 71)

Cameron's resistance to time opens possibilities. It allows her, as a writer of children's books, to be young again. But, more than that, it allows the preposterous. If time does not really pass, and all times are one time, then the confusions of a museum may be a truer image of the truth than a decaying old house is. Time limits; not surprisingly, many of Cameron's characters suffer from a feeling of limitation, of being hemmed in by actual circumstance. The world as they know it is too small,

too ordinary, too logical, too "American." It is not just that they prefer churna-drynes to machines for making butter, and mushroom planets to the narrow possibilities of space technology; they are frequently constricted by the actual places in which they live. In To the Green Mountains, Kath lives in one small hotel room with her mother and dreams of "a place, cool and empty and quiet, sitting there by itself ready for me to come and fill it up with whatever I had a mind to." (p. 130) And in The Court of the Stone Children, Nina dislikes her small apartment--"not home, but where temporarily she had to come." (p. 26) Her real "home" is the museum, where she feels free to dream.

In fact, what Cameron's characters want (and usually get) is freedom--the freedom to be themselves. We usually think we are ourselves in the ordinary world, and that fantasy allow us to escape both that world and ourselves. But for Cameron, the ordinary world hides us from ourselves. We are most ourselves in the world we dream of, beyond ordinary possibility and time and common sense. For her, magic and selfhood are the same thing.

In The Green and Burning Tree, Cameron says, "What one remembers from the great piece of writing is the voice speaking in a way that is indefinably different from any other voice." (p. 179) And again, "There is the heart of the matter: the private universe not seen by others--and which can never be seen if the struggle is not engaged, honesty not given the upper hand over echoing others, over avoiding or ignoring the self." (p. 155) Good writing is magic, and magic is selfhood. Or, to put it technically, magic is style: "style in its simplest definition, it seems to me, is sound--the sound of self. It arises out of the whole concept of the work, from the very pulse-beat of the writer and all that has gone to make him." (pp. 138-39) So Cameron equates three things--a writer's style, his personality, and his divergence from the norm--and all of them are magic.

This has its drawbacks as criticism. Cameron tends to care too much for the often uninteresting facts of the lives of the writers. She confuses a writer's imaginative self, that magical thing evoked by his style, with the actual event of his mere living. But in her fiction her belief in the magic of self makes Cameron especially sensitive to the problems of special people. In fact, she makes idiosyncrasy a pleasure instead of a problem. In A Room Made of Windows, Julia's brother has an eccentric

interest in things Egyptian; but as Greg stands by the statue of Pharaoh Ikhnaton, Cameron turns oddity into magic: "when you looked back and forth at those two, you would have sworn that Greg and Ikhnaton were twin brothers."⁸

Eccentricity is personality. Selfhood is magic, and magic is "the power that causes unexplainable effects to be produced."⁹ "Unexplainable," "inexplicable"--these words recur throughout The Green and Burning Tree, and they always stand for praise: "so it is with the finest of these tales: they let in almost everything; they make welcome the ununderstandable." (p. 134)

So, too, do Cameron's fine tales. Their personality is their faith in the magic of self, and they are filled with moments like the one Mrs. Rhiannon Moore in A Room Made of Windows calls an epiphany: "it means an illumination, an understanding brought by some brief happening, but for me it's come to mean any sort of rare moment, any treasurable combination of events never to be forgotten. A moment of being." (p. 33) But surprisingly, these mystical moments, so treasured by Cameron's characters and so amply explained and justified in her criticism, are no more persuasive than her evocative descriptions of ordinary reality. To read A Room Made of Windows is to be convinced that one is reading an autobiography; the book simply feels real, like reminiscence rather than like storytelling. But To the Green Mountains provides exactly the same feeling; and the two books describe two quite different times and places. Both novels cannot be acts of memory; each is convincing enough to persuade us that it must be. Cameron has a double gift; her faith in the magic of self is balanced by a clearheaded knowledge of the world as it actually is. And despite her faith in the healing powers of fantasy, she never lets her characters get away with lies about the world as it actually is.

I suspect it is because she sees the actual so clearly that she believes so fervently in her right to transcend it. The message the Mycetiars receive from their ancestors in Time and Mr. Bass is one that Cameron believes in profoundly: "only in the act of creation can our people discover themselves again, and regain strength and courage."¹⁰ For to create is to make a world of one's own, and to do that is to experience the magic of being oneself. The mixed-up museum, made out of the wishes and dreams of its ardent curator, turns out to

be a powerful and meaningful symbol.

Cameron believes children are especially able to be themselves, simply because they are so tolerant of the unexplained. In The Green and Burning Tree, she says that children have "a continuing wonder about much that seems drab and familiar to adults." (p.14) and that the best children's writers "see all things with the continually astonished eyes of a child." (p. 158) If children's literature is, indeed, a literature of wonder, then Eleanor Cameron is a wonderful writer from children.

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Notes

- ¹ Eleanor Cameron, The Green and Burning Tree (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1969), p. 202.
- ² (NY: Avon, 1976), p. 38.
- ³ The Green and Burning Tree, p. 131.
- ⁴ (NY: Archway, 1972), p. 129.
- ⁵ (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1956), p. 11.
- ⁶ (NY: Dutton, 1975), p. 75.
- ⁷ (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1956) p. 53.
- ⁸ (NY: Dell Yearling, 1974), p. 43.
- ⁹ The Green and Burning Tree, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1967) p. 216.



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