

MYTH, TRUTH AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN REALITY  
IN THE FICTION OF SARAH GERTRUDE MILLIN

by

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Mrs Sarah Gertrude Millin was a peculiarly South African phenomenon. She was the dominant South African novelist for a period of more than thirty years, and by far the most prolific in all Anglophone Africa to date. Her first novel was published in 1917 and her last in 1965: she wrote seventeen altogether, as well as two autobiographies, six "war diaries", biographies of Rhodes and Smuts, a volume of short stories, a book of "essays", and a sort of biographical work, first called The South Africans, which went through three revisions, apart from reprints, and was finally called The People of South Africa; and she also adapted one of her novels to the stage. She was an ardent and untiring journalist and book reviewer.

It may be said that her life's work is almost calculated to provoke, from the critic, a vast army of irrelevant responses. One of the main reasons for this must be the late Mrs Millin's extraordinarily powerful preoccupation with herself. It strikes one as ironic that Olive Schreiner rather than Mrs Millin has been the subject of a Freudian case study. (The two were often compared, which caused Mrs Millin, convinced of her artistic superiority, a fair degree of indignation - as well as several opportunities for hinting at her greater gifts.) Therefore it is a good idea of eliminate the considerations which may lead to these responses.

In the course of this paper Mrs Millin herself will be firmly, even heroically, pushed into the background. This will not prove easy, because of the large presence of Mrs Millin and her various afflictions and obsessions in all her novels. As she herself wrote, not without a measure of truth: "I am all the people I write about." The intention is to examine closely a number of Mrs Millin's novels, which are selected from her work for reasons which will become clear, and to ignore as far as possible the host of extra-literary considerations which may seem inevitably to obtrude.

A brief chronological framework is useful at this point. Mrs Millin was born on the diamond diggings on the bank of the Vaal river in the Barkly West district, and grew up there and in and around Kimberley; then, shortly after her marriage, she went to live in Johannesburg with her husband, who was afterwards a judge of the Supreme Court of South Africa. Her early novels were set at the river diggings and in Johannesburg and Cape Town; the canvas of God's Stepchildren (1924) is broader both in time and space, though its setting is still the Cape; Mary Glen (1925) is set in the platteland, the rural heartland of South Africa, as is An Artist in the Family (1928), but these are very slight works; The Coming of the Lord (1928) is set in a small rural town, based, no doubt, on Bulhoek, where the events which are dramatized took place; The Fiddler (1925) finds a more northerly setting, in Mozambique and Swaziland; The Sons of Mrs Aab (1931) returns to the river diggings; Three Men Die (1934), like the events on which it is based, is set in Johannesburg; What Hath a Man (1938), something of a departure in more ways than one, veers from London to Northern Rhodesia and back again; The Herr Witchdoctor (1941) returns to the setting of the first section of God's Stepchildren, which is the Northern Cape where it borders on South-West Africa; King of the Bastards (1950) rolls from Cape Town to the Mozambique border in the north; The Burning Man (1952) is set mainly in Holland and the Cape; The Wizard Bird (1962) grinds out its gruesome plot in Northern Rhodesia; and Goodbye Dear England (1965) happens in Chelsea and Mrs Millin's mind.

Sarah Gertrude Millin was, then, consistently faithful to the Southern African environment (which, of course, she knew best) throughout her career as a novelist. She sampled most of its aspects: the rural, the urban both large and small, the modern, the old, the black, the white, the "civilized" and the "savage". Her themes appear as consistently as does their setting, and it is fair to say that it is difficult to imagine a set of preoccupations more representative of the dominant obsessions of the white group in Southern Africa in the period covered by Mrs Millin's novelistic activity. Because in some ways Mrs Millin herself becomes a symbol, an embodiment of a certain ineluctable level of truth about South African society, more striking and more apt, perhaps, than any she employs or elicits in her work. These ways will emerge.

Sarah Gertrude Millin's most persistent literary symbols were diamonds, half-caste children, and buildings of unburnt brick, primitively constructed in wild and remote places. She saw man's fate as a sort of natural tug-of-war between self-escape and conquest - the latter being precisely not conquest of the self but of the environment, and a phony conquest at that, resulting in destruction and disfigurement rather than order and controlled growth.

She operated on a remarkably restricted ideas budget, like the writer of children's comic stories. There are three or four basic situations and settings in her work; behind them are two or three governing preoccupations. These emerge even in novels based on specific occurrences, such as Three Men Die, which was inspired by the trial of Daisy de Melker, the famous poisoner of husbands (and the symptoms of strychnine poisoning which Mrs Millin read up for that one are characteristically exploited again in a book dealing with a different period and setting, King of the Bastards).

Mrs Millin's limitations of theme and technique are partly her limitations as a writer; but it is possible that they are also related to her narrow range of topics and settings, which spring directly from the psychological and physical environment - Southern Africa from 1920 to 1960. Her preoccupations are those of the group she belonged to - the English-speaking South African whites. She expressed them in terms of the situations most familiar to the members of that group, most typical of their experience.

Her first novel, The Dark River (1919), conveniently combines most of the themes, situations and attitudes employed by Mrs Millin throughout the forty-five years of her career as a novelist. It is the story of an Englishman who comes to South Africa as a volunteer during the Boer War, remains to try his luck searching for diamonds at the river diggings (one of Mrs Millin's three or four stock settings, and perhaps the most frequently employed), has no luck, degenerates, drinks, takes a non-white woman to live with him, has children by her, leaves the diggings to volunteer for service against the Germans and the rebels in German South-West Africa in 1914, distinguishes himself by saving the life and reputation of a rich man's cowardly son, is set up by the rich man as a buyer, marries a respectable girl whom he met momentarily years before at the diggings and who had moved to Cape Town. Inevitably she discovers his past life and cannot forgive him, but by then she is already pregnant by him. She leaves him and he goes off to fight in Europe, sending her a final letter in which he says that even if he comes through the war he will not return to South Africa. Showing the letter to her spinster sister, she comments:

"But he will come back if he gets through this war."

"How do you know?" asked Alma.

"They all do. And back to the diggings too. And back to the black woman and the halfcaste children. It's like a magnet. Back to the diggings again." (p. 277)

The site of the particular diggings in The Dark River is called "Lost Hope", and it is typical of all the diggings situations described in Mrs Millin's novels. For her, the river diggings suggested aspects of human character which she considered to be central and decisive, even universal. The total situation issues in despair, which is clear from the name of the diggings. But the dominant activity - the search for diamonds in the soil of the river bank and the bed during the dry season - is clearly symbolic of man's preponderant tendency to conscious self-deceit, as well as his avowed helplessness before the power of fate.

The self-deceit must be conscious, because it is Mrs Millin's peculiarity that she allows her characters rather a large degree of self-knowledge - which is usually accurate and unflattering. But "hope springs eternal" - which is really the unfortunate thing, since fate must, of necessity, be a strong and dominant force in a universe like Mrs Millin's. Not surprisingly, he is clearly conceived in visual detail, in her imagination, as "a man with a big round yellow face, a man who smiled and had no teeth". (There is no doubt, in terms of white South African mythology, of the relevance of his colour: if Mrs Millin

had been born in the Transvaal, Fate may well have had a black face.)

Thus, for instance, John Oliver in The Dark River knows very well what he is doing and what is becoming of him when he takes up with Annie and begets a number of half-caste children, living a drunken, degenerate life the while. He makes no attempt at self-justification. "You needn't think I don't know that what I have done is worse, in a way, than murder", he tells his former partner, the steady and respectable McInerney:

"I've thought of it often enough. When you've murdered a man you've murdered him, and there's the end of it. But I've started a sin that's going on for generation after generation, and nothing anyone can do can stop it now. It's worse than murder and I deserve worse than hanging. But as things are nobody can punish me for it. And I swear to you, McInerney, I'm not going to let it interfere with anything good that may be coming to me."

(The Dark River, p. 86.)

This comes at a hopeful moment, when he has grasped the chance of leaving Lost Hope and joining up to fight the rebels and Germans in South-West Africa. But hope is, for Mrs Millin, the central illusion, subject to inevitable punishment by Fate. And the punishment, of course, comes, all the more staggering in its impact because John Oliver has allowed himself to build a further structure of illusions on the basis of his hopes. He is portrayed as a character with a psychological weakness, which seems to be embodied as much in the desire for change and reform (an illusion) as in his actual fall from grace.

Time and again Mrs Millin portrayed characters arriving by painful degrees of introspection at self-knowledge, only to be denied the benefits that may have been expected to arise out of the success of the exercise. For example, John, the young African intellectual in The Herr Witchdoctor, examines his motives for preferring the German church run by Nazi agents covering as missionaries to that of his patron, adviser and friend, Barry Lindsell.

"John was ashamed of himself for going to Dr. Schmidt's church. For sixteen years Barry had been his faithful friend, guide and helper. How could he now desert him? He made the excuse to himself that he had to accompany his mother to her church, that he went only out of curiosity. But he knew also the tendency of Africans to recede when, having risen a certain height, they contemplated the difficult peak. It was as if their souls denied them the means or title to it. 'And I', he then said to himself, 'am no better than my brethren.'"

(The Herr Witchdoctor, p. 227.)

His self-knowledge, adequate enough as far as Mrs Millin's beliefs are concerned, does not prevent him from falling into the trap set for him by the Nazi "missionary". As the crisis approaches Schmidt requires John's complete commitment and plays skilfully on his hopes and illusions (always Mrs Millin's characters' weakest points).

"'You told me about Prester John. You told me about the dreams of your boyhood.'

"Irresistibly, as the magic name flowed into the air, John touched again the old enchantment.

"'And we discarded, did we not' (a warmth came from Dr. Schmidt that crept about John's heart) 'the old dead world and spoke of a world to come, a living world with living hopes: for all men, for Africans, for yourself?'

"Through his spell John felt he was being fooled. But beneath this, again, he was, in his soul, tired. He knew the fundamental tiredness of the African." (p. 276)

Once again the element of self-knowledge, of awareness of what is going on, of how he himself is being affected, is present; but this does not prevent John from telling Barry Lindsell, in Schmidt's presence: "... I am joining Dr. Schmidt's ... church." John operates within the confines of a trap devised for him by his creatrix, a trap which is constituted by the very essence of his being. This is a trick Mrs Millin frequently plays. She entraps Coenraad de Buys, the central character of King of the Bastards, for example, in the very largeness of his own physical and spiritual person, which enables him to defy every convention, to rise above social rejection, to win the approval of governors and intellectual missionaries, to venture farther into the northern hinterland of South Africa than any white man had done. Outlawed by the Cape government, Buys is pardoned years later; in his growing isolation and dependency he is adopted brother of an African chief in a ceremony which entails the crawling through the belly of a freshly slaughtered cow:

"Despite the laving and anointing beside the cow's carcass, and a constant washing by himself with river sand (since he had no soap), it seemed to him for days that he smelled the inside of the cow's belly. Sibonello had not thought to make him ridiculous, for he had preceded him into the cow's belly. The people had not thought him ridiculous: they had exclaimed in awe at the whiteness of his skin where it was undarkened by the sun. The ceremony was not meant to be ridiculous: it was an ancient holy rite in which priests officiated. But he had felt, to his heart's depths, ridiculous, crawling after the fat black man through the body of the cow; standing there, before the yelling savages, so big, so white, so old, with the cow's mess over all his skin and upon his ears and eyes and mouth and nostrils and white hair and white beard and white man's pride.

"For beyond everything, in the eyes of both black and white, lay his white skin. Despite his bastards and wild existence, he remained white. He had been a prisoner before - Gaika's prisoner. He had lived, the only white man, among Dingiswayo's Tswana. Mahura had made him his Commander-in-Chief. But no Kaffir chief, until Sibonello, had required of him participation in Kaffir custom or way of living ...

"... He pondered on the invitations offered him by the government to become a lawful citizen and aid it in the establishment of law. But, alone in his hut as he was, he

shook his head. He had said twenty, and indeed forty, years ago: 'The dawn does not come twice.' He had proved it in his life. He could not go back. Could he even go forward?"

(King of the Bastards, pp. 267, 268.)

De Buys's circumstances grow out of his character, and the combination entraps him: self-knowledge only seems to enforce the bars of the trap, to perpetuate the narrow wandering. "He felt both a desperate desire to rest and a desperate drive not to rest." (p. 269)

One may return briefly to The Dark River, the first published novel, for an introduction to a theme that was to be pursued on a more or less conscious level in all of Mrs Millin's works. It is, indeed, almost the knife-edge on which her work balances - if it can be said to achieve that feat. This persistent theme is the relationship, at the level of values in action, between South Africa (and its inhabitants) and England, the "mother country" (Mrs Millin did not create many Afrikaner characters). John Oliver, it will be remembered, came from England, where, "Being one of a respectable English family, he had left neither a past nor a future behind him". While there is evidence in her non-fiction that Mrs Millin never really attained an adequate understanding of England or the English in situ, she was clearly preoccupied primarily in her fiction by that section of the South African population for which English is the mother tongue. And it is interesting that she, like another South African Jewish author who came after, seemed to see the English colonial stock which inhabited the river diggings of her childhood or the mining suburbs of her early years in Johannesburg as of mediocre quality, weak-charactered, over-ready to surrender to impulse, with few, if any, moral resources. This may seem paradoxical in a writer who, in the words of Dora Taylor, "aligns herself with the English tradition" (1), and who, according to Mrs Taylor as well as Francis Brett Young (2) and J. P. L. Snyman (3), "looks to an overseas public to appreciate her books, more, possibly, thanks to a meagre South African public". (4) But the source of the trouble is only too often English, whether the area of it be miscegenation, dishonesty, or just plain fecklessness. Oliver has his coloured brood, which leads to his eventual rejection by the white South African code (after he has espoused it, in his rehabilitated phase, so vehemently); in Middle Class the working class leader, Bob Rivers, who seduces Tessa Wendover and marries her bigamously, destroying quite finally her prospects of happiness and fulfilment, is English, distinct from Tessa and her brother and her admirer, Michael Stranger, in that he is English-born, has come from England and, indeed, has left his legal wife behind there; in An Artist in the Family, Theo's degeneracy (in the eyes of his respectable bourgeois father) begins in England and is accelerated by the corrupt and pathetic London girl whom he marries out of shallow compassion (a form of romantic-liberal illusion) for her and her illegitimate child and brings back with him to his parents' home, only to insult and degrade her and have her sent back to England after he has more or less driven her into the arms of an American negro missionary. Significantly, it is she, the born Englishwoman, who transgresses against the colour code. In Mary Glenn it is Mary's weak-willed English husband who provokes her neurotic conception of herself to the point of breakdown, partly through his inability to provide for her on the level to which she feels her gifts

entitle her, and partly through his killing their son in a shooting accident and then failing to admit the truth of what has happened until his wife has become almost totally insane; and it is during Mary's stay in England that she allows her perceptions to be dulled into marrying him in the first place. The central character of What Hath a Man is an upper middle class Englishman with too much imagination, who adopts Catholicism in his youth and spends his life in Rhodesia serving the Chartered Company and gradually having the irrelevance of his views on most matters affecting practical reality (as well as his fundamental weakness of character) being ruthlessly exposed by the harsh glare of the African sun (or something of the sort). The death of his son, the only person he really loves, functions as a sort of punishment for his illusions, particularly those which he has translated, as it were, from the religious to the political field.

The root of the trouble is expressed most clearly and directly in the most famous of Mrs Millin's works, God's Stepchildren. Andrew Flood, the English missionary, makes his trek to the interior to his mission station, Canaan, from Cape Town:

"It was the month of December - the hottest summertime. The sun poured down a flood of heat and light: the earth lay burning beneath it, swamped in fire; the air danced and quivered as to the music of a thousand cicadas. The Rev. Andrew Flood sat under the hood of his waggon in his close black clothes, his long, tight, black trousers strapped under his instep, sweat pouring down his body, his skin red and prickly ...

"... The three Hottentots, wearing their sheep-skins - their karosses - to protect them against the sun, as in winter they wore them in defence against the cold, only turning them the hairy side inwards: with the little skin pouches round their necks (they kept in those their knives, pipes, tobacco, charms and the drug called dagga); with their feet bare and insensitive to the burning earth as they would be to coals of fire even - the little, wizened face Hottentots danced along their native soil - their Karroo, as, for its dryness, they significantly called it - happy.

"The Rev. Andrew, in his scruffy black clericals, sat, smouldering towards exhaustion, in the wagon."

(God's Stepchildren, pp. 11-12.)

The Reverend Andrew Flood dresses, thinks and behaves in a way that is radically irrelevant and incongruous to the South African environment. He is English, and the forerunner of a particular English tradition (not the dominant one) in South African affairs. But his Hottentot companions, degraded and vicious as Mrs Millin takes pains to illustrate that they are, are none the less at one with it, and even happy. They are a pure strain, resistant to Christianity: they are indigenous, and their very resistance to the doctrines of Christian belief as they are propounded to them by the Rev. Andrew Flood is a sign of this. Because, Mrs Millin is suggesting, the introduction of Christianity to this alien environment can have, in the main, only a corrupting effect, since it incorporates values and ideas about

behaviour in a social situation which are irrelevant to indigenous peoples who have not attained the necessary height of intellectual function to understand such concepts. And this corruptive tendency is embodied in the feeble Flood's self-indulgent and self-deceiving decision to marry Silla, a very Hottentot lass, in the name of what seems to him the centrally applicable tenet of the creed he has imported with himself from England:

"He had gone around, the Rev. Andrew, for the last eighteen months, telling the Hottentots that, in the eyes of God, in his own eyes, there was no difference between black and white. And they had not believed him.

"He would prove it to them!"

(God's Stepchildren, pp. 37-38.)

This central but alien element of Christian belief is, of course, that of equality between the races, and it is clear that Mrs Millin saw it as originating, from the point of view of its South African application, in England. And much of her writing about the "colour problem" - and, indeed, on South African themes in general - can be seen in terms of an attempt to explain to this English, or at any rate "overseas", audience the white South African (and, to her, indubitably the correct and only possible) attitude to the question of colour. It is only too clear that, as far as she is concerned, the inevitable tangible result of colour egalitarianism is half-caste offspring, than which, to her, no greater disaster can be imagined. (In this, as in many other matters, she was peculiarly representative of the opinion of her contemporary white South Africans of English stock.) It may be interpolated at this point that this insistent desire to explain and to justify, especially to the English audience, places her within the main stream of African writing all over those parts of the continent which once were under British sway. It is a phenomenon which has tended to dominate, for instance, what has come to be called the "Ibo novel"; though the felt need has been dealt with on a considerably sophisticated level by some authors, particularly Achebe, Soyinka and Gabriel Okara, it is none the less one of those crosses that a literature developing out of a colonial situation has to bear. Mrs Millin's technique for bearing it is perhaps a little less graceful than some of those developed by her successors in various parts of the continent, but then, as she seems to recognize, she has, really, no local tradition of any great virtue or antiquity on which to draw for counter-proposals, as it were - or, at least, no local tradition which she is able to understand. On the other hand, it is to some extent the purpose of this paper to point out that Mrs Millin was not quite as eager as many of the younger writers to adopt the standard Western moral framework for her novels: and in the sense of being "non-western liberal" her works may be claimed to be more truly "African" than theirs.

But Mrs Millin's writing suffers largely from what may simply be described as a failure of imagination. In fact, Mrs Millin lacked genuine imagination, of the kind that enables the writer of fiction to make a sympathetic leap into the heart of situations which were only superficially familiar to her experience. There are many technical indications of this in her work: frequent use of identical situational



devices in several novels, degenerating on more than one occasion to the merest repetition; the insistent reiteration of the same prejudices throughout her work, given the full weight of authorial authority; obsessional concerns with certain themes; an overriding tendency to tailor plot and character to the necessity of establishing the "validity" of one or two very simple, very basic, "facts".

This is fortified by the rejection of alternative versions of reality through one simple rhetorical device of associating them with unsuccessful characters, such as Andrew Flood who is weak, boring, physically repulsive, and stupid, and dies insane as a result of having married a Hottentot woman; or his descendant, Barry Lindsell, whose cowardice as a military chaplain in the first world war prefigures his total failure as a missionary in the years following, up to the outbreak of the second, and whose sacrificial rejection of his wife and child because of his obsession with his measure of black blood is reminiscent of his ancestor's sacrifice of his "European heritage" and, in its way, equally counter-productive. Another example is Oliver Smith, the attractive moderate anthropologist in Mrs Millin's penultimate novel, The Wizard Bird (1962), whose detached, academic view of human behaviour prevents him from removing his family from the orbit of Chisiba, the young, English-educated African nationalist upstart, before his daughter has been repelled-fascinated into a sacrificial marriage to him and has died trying to escape the consequences. Oliver Smith is a late creation of Mrs Millin's and an interesting one because he represents, for her, liberalism at its informed but unguarded best, and at this stage she is speaking with the voice of those who advocate constant vigilance to preserve "the standards of white civilisation in Africa". (The book is dedicated to Roy Welensky, "The Dyke of Africa".) Smith admits his guilt: he says to his racist wife, who is depicted as a tower of commonsense and strength:

"You know, Gwen, I am a cad, that's the truth. I've failed in my duty and so, to pacify my conscience, I blame the poor child, and I talk about conscience." (p. 207)

Once again, the message is outer-directed, constituting a sort of last-thing attempt to explain and justify and scold and accuse the accusers of those in Southern Africa whom Mrs Millin represented, and for whose cause she saw herself in the role of a bridge or a link with the metropolitan civilization (whose central assumptions she had by this time come to reject entirely, out of a sort of despair). Despite this, her need to communicate with them remained strong to the end: her last novel is a lengthy non-event, a strange shambles of episodes in the lives of an Edwardian upper class professional family living in Chelsea, interspersed at regular intervals with the Millin interpretation of European history from the late 12th century to the present day. The "historic" material comes near to outweighing the fictional in sheer bulk; but what is germane to the question of Mrs Millin's perennially ambivalent relationship to the mother country comes strikingly out of the very title of the book, Goodbye Dear England, words which also conclude the work. It is also significant that the book begins with a warning by a South African to certain prominent Englishmen of the apocalyptic danger of Germany long before the first world war. It is ironically stressed that the source of wisdom is South African, while the English are already beginning to

betray their heritage through their lack of vigilance. Mrs Millin's conviction that England was in the grip of some form of ultimate decline, amounting to decay even, had been stated in a characteristic enough way as a preamble to the action of The Wizard Bird three years before:

"In the year 1960 a man and a woman were sitting in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. They were old enough to have traversed the German war that began in 1914 and was not yet over - the shooting apart - in 1945. They were people who, knowing one another in South Africa, had just met by chance in London.

"The woman said, speaking of the porcelains:

"'Those will never be made again.'

"The man said:

"'Many beautiful things will never be made again. We are now in process of unmaking things. When I come to Europe these days, I feel a civilisation going down.'

"The woman said:

"'Or a planet exploding. But if our civilisation is going down, need we mind about the planet? We accept it that our lives must end. It would only mean they'd all end together.'

"'Easier said than borne', said the man. 'Well, we live at the bottom end of Africa but our civilisation is European - English chiefly. And we agree it's going down. And rapidly.'

"The woman said:

"'Rapidly.'

"The man said:

"'I begin to feel I don't want to come to Europe again. I hope to be left alone to cultivate my piece of veld in South Africa. I wish I could keep a little of the England that is now being lost - no, given away, thrown away ...'

"... The woman said:

"'Have you been to the Picasso exhibition?'

"The man said:

"'Hasn't everybody?'

"'Did the people there strike you as very odd?'

"'People at art exhibitions are always odd.'

"'These were odder ...'

"... She remained silent.

"The man said:

"'You are thinking of something else.'

"'I am', she said. 'When I spoke of the odd people at the exhibition I was thinking in particular of a very fair, dirty English girl, all in black, clutching a big black man with the monstrous face of a Jomo Kenyatta - only, of course, about thirty years younger.'

"'If the man had been white, would you have minded then?'

"'Not so much. But it was that adoring look.'" (pp. 7-9)

The attitude to English culture and society, especially in relation to white South African values, emerges very clearly. The passage above is the final form, but this is not very different from the first coherent and unified statement of it, which found expression in God's Stepchildren in 1924. This attitude embodies the specific achievement of Mrs Millin in relation to African, and especially South African, literature. The nature of this achievement has now to be examined, stated and assessed. It is best seen initially against the background of her attitude to English culture because it constitutes a sort of rebellion against the dominant currents of opinion within that culture in regard to a broad range of activities, from art through literature to everyday morality. If one accepts that the English novel since Richardson has been associated with phenomena such as the rise of the cult of the individual in English (and European) society, that it absorbed in its great years in the nineteenth century the moral doctrines of romanticism and liberalism, especially as these related to the centrality of the individual in relation to society, and that these moral doctrines, often in a form peculiarly unadulterated by the passage of time, continue to dominate the novel as a genre in the West, and indeed that the moral assumptions underlying the literary shape taken by these doctrines have themselves persisted with great resilience and are still supremely influential forces in the formulation of public as well as private behaviour, despite, or even because of, the recurrent crises they have been subjected to, then one is aware that Mrs Millin's position as novelist, as interpreter of, commentator on, and judge of the standards of human conduct, though it starts from shared assumptions, issues in what amounts to a virtual counter-ideology. Of course, she is not unique in this: perhaps the English novelist whose moral standpoint most closely resembles hers is William Golding. Mrs Millin, like Golding, dwelt on human weakness: the limited scope of human activity; what she saw, in a comparatively incoherent but none the less thoroughly persistent way, as the inevitable tendency of the individual towards immediate self-gratification and self-indulgence; his imprisonment within the petty limits of selfishness, self-pity and greed, both emotional and material. All this is based on the overriding human ability - or necessity - for self-deception, the illusory basis underlying all behaviour.

Mrs Millin is thus an anti-romantic, anti-liberal pessimist, in the larger context of the Western novel, in which her work runs counter to the main stream. In relation to the South African novel in English, her work occupies a similar position, quite apart from her attitude to the question of colour. It is in relation first to this question that I propose to assess her ideological position at this stage, through a fairly detailed analysis of God's Stepchildren.

"In the Cape Colony they (the halfcastes or coloureds) had political and industrial, if not social opportunities, but they barely availed themselves of them. They achieved nothing of any consequence. Now and then (very seldom) it might happen that a real black man, the son of some African chief, rich in land and cattle (not so many of these left

either), would struggle as far as an English or Scottish university, and, through it, to a profession; and would come back to South Africa to practise that profession. But he would never really succeed at it. Putting aside all questions of prejudice, he could not hold his own against white competition. He had not the brain, the persistence, the temperament. Nor would his white colleagues greatly trouble their heads about him. They would hardly think him worth discussing. 'Not much good', they would briefly say, and thus dismiss the subject. And still this aboriginal would have done what practically no halfcaste ever succeeded in doing."

(God's Stepchildren, pp. 228-9.)

Sarah Gertrude Millin was a racist, obsessed in an all too familiar way by "blood" as the most inescapable determinant of moral or any other kind of virtue in an individual, and by the inevitably disastrous consequences of "mixed" blood, in her specific context the mixture of "white" and "coloured" or "black" blood. God's Stepchildren is the book in which this obsession is most thoroughly worked out.

The novel begins with an English missionary who comes to the Cape in 1821 to work among the wild Hottentots of the interior. We have already seen how the odds are stacked heavily against the Rev. Andrew Flood, who is made an authorial figure of fun from the word go by his relentless creatrix: his acceptance of "the essential equality of all human beings, whatever their colour, in the eyes of their Creator", which was "the creed of the moment throughout Britain", is made after his having heard only one "tremendous sermon" on the subject, and he finds an object for his immature desire to "sacrifice himself" in this creed. During the voyage to the Cape he falls in love with a pretty English girl but fails entirely to win her heart, and when he reaches the remote Hottentot village which is to be the location of his mission he is intellectually humiliated by the sophistries of the savage, naked Hottentots who pick holes in his theology. Eventually he marries a young Hottentot girl, daughter of the previous missionary's servant, partly out of need for solace, partly, it is hinted, out of animal attraction, and to convince the Hottentots of the validity of the equality he preaches; he also sees it as the ultimate offering on the altar of self-sacrifice.

Naturally, the marriage is a tragedy: it soon ceases to have meaning and breaks up, and Flood, who has sacrificed his coming child's white heritage - "if not his body, the purity of his blood" (p. 46) - swiftly degenerates to the point of complete helplessness, though he does manage to teach his second child, Deborah, who is intelligent, or in Mrs Millin's characteristically patronizing phrase "not unintelligent", to read, write and figure a little. When she is twelve she is taken from her father by the nearest neighbouring missionary (whose station thrives a hundred miles from Flood): he overcomes his much more sensible wife's protests and takes Deborah into his home, to try to educate and redeem her:

"He had thought that a child with a white father might be different. He knew that native children arrived at their

full capacity very early. At the age of four or five they were far in advance of white children of the same age; but at fourteen or fifteen they would begin to falter, to lag behind, to remain stationary while their white competitors went ahead. It seemed to the missionary as if their minds were unlocked sooner, but also sooner locked again. He had a vague theory that it all had to do with the traditional hardness of their skulls.

"But he had certainly hoped that Deborah might be more white than black in intellect ... He often wondered now in what way her white blood would manifest itself ...

"The years passed --

"... At the age of sixteen, in the year 1841, Deborah Flood was a fully-developed young woman who had recently risen to the dignity of school assistant. Four years of constant oiling and plaiting and hard brushing had trained her outstanding fuzz hair to lie flat against her head like a cap ... She was by no means an ill-looking girl, and her manners were soft and complaisant.

"Her position in the household had gradually adjusted itself, too. Although she was treated with an easy intimacy by the members of it, in the end, the very fact that her skin was a different colour had been enough to make a sharp distinction between the other children and herself. She might learn with them, eat with them, live with them - but never could she belong to them.

"It was not necessary to assert the fact even. Never, subconsciously, was the knowledge of it absent from any of their thoughts. Without defining it to herself, Deborah realised that there were certain limits beyond which one might not go in her intercourse with white children ...

"There was no use in deploring or resenting such a condition of affairs. This was her position in life, and Deborah accepted it.

"But now the time had come for new cravings to occupy Deborah's heart. And, as naturally as any animal, Deborah looked about her for a mate." (pp. 64-5)

She finds a couple: first, a full blooded Hottentot pupil of hers, whom the Rev. Mr Burtwell sends away because he has hoped to redeem Deborah from the Hottentot half of her ancestry; and then a white one, member of a party of trekking Boers, who gets her with child:

"'When you brought her to us five years ago, Thomas, I told you there would be trouble', Mrs Burtwell pointed out.

"Mr Burtwell made no reply.

"'Now I am not listening to you any more. The next waggon that goes to Canaan takes Deborah back to her father. We have our own children to consider.'

"'I am sorry for the girl', said Mr Burtwell.

"'Sorry? She is an unprincipled savage.'

"'That is why I am sorry', said Mr Burtwell." (pp. 72-3)

She is sent back to Canaan, Flood's mission, where she arrives just before her father dies, mad; she and her grandmother and son join a tribe of Griquas and half-castes led by Adam Kok V. Her son, Kleinhans (named after his Boer father, who, of course, is only in the picture long enough to beget him), turns out well. "Heaven knows what germ in his distant white ancestry had quaintly chosen to establish itself in Kleinhans' character, but it happened that he was, by nature, a husbandman. In that community where work was universally despised, Kleinhans vigorously farmed his land, he wrought in wood and iron, he was sober, he was frugal, he was religious." (p. 83) But the consistency of Mrs Millin's application of theory is there to be maintained, not flouted; no exceptions to its rules are allowed. They are like an iron framework around the activities of her characters. She proceeds:

"But he was something else. He was bitter with hate. He hated the people he lived among for the blood that was in them; he hated his mother for her fuzzy hair, her high cheekbones, her thick lips, her yellow-brown skin; he hated his own flesh ...

"But he did not hate the white man who had idly begotten him; nor the white man who, in the service of God, had betrayed his unborn descendants; nor all those other white men who had sown seeds of disaster in a clean land. Of these he was proud. It was the meek, dark bearers of shame whom he hated. He despised a man in proportion as he was brown. Just physical lightness or darkness was his only test ---

"Rather later than if he had been a pure white man, Kleinhans' beard began to grow. It grew slowly, and it was too curly, but it was a fair beard, much lighter than the hair on his head - quite tawny-coloured.

"Kleinhans treasured his beard. He oiled it and brushed it, and all day long fingered it. It made him feel whiter. As it grew it made him feel more of a European too. He trained his moustaches widely across his face, and, in time, his beard grew to cover all his throat.

"'You look like Hans Kleinhans, your father', Deborah told him.

"'Like a Boer?'

"'Yes, like a Boer.'

"'If a person did not know, could he tell that - ?' He left his sentence unfinished.

"'Yes, he could tell', said his mother, Deborah.

"'But there are white men with the sunburn on their faces as dark as I am.'

"'Yes, that is so', admitted Deborah.

"'And still - ?'

"'And still it can be seen.'

"'It is because everyone here is known to be a Bastard.'

"Deborah shook her head.

"'It is not for that. It is the blood. You cannot hide the blood.'" (p. 85)

This form of genetic determinism is one of the major factors preventing Mrs Millin's characters from emerging into life. Her most sympathetic critics admit her shortcomings in the field of character, and in almost all her novels the reason for this is that the important characters are created in order to fulfil a known stereotype, which in turn exists in order to bear out Mrs Millin's theories about the behaviour of just such a stereotype. These puppets are derived from the perceptual world of white South Africa, and it is a white South African puppet-mistress who is pulling the strings. Mrs Millin was expert in her knowledge of the last wrinkle of the white South African stereotypes of all other South Africans: in her work she may be said to embody this knowledge, turning it into a principle of fate.

This is illustrated by Kleinhans' further experiences. He leaves his mother and tries to be accepted by whites at the new diamond fields, but his mother is right, they recognize his blood, though half of it is Boer, like their own, reject him, beat him up and leave him unconscious on the veld for speaking to one of their daughters; he is picked up by a rich valetudinarian farmer, Lindsell, who looks like "The final effort of an exhausted, aristocratic family". Lindsell is of English birth, of course. He makes Kleinhans his farm manager, and Kleinhans, who had been determined to marry a white woman, takes to wife a Cape coloured servant of the family who is light coloured. Her racial ancestry is described with Mrs Millin's customary obsessional care:

"She was quite a different type of halfcaste from Kleinhans himself. She was a light coloured Cape girl. Her father had been a German - his name Schmidt anglicised into Smith - and her mother a coloured woman, with a little Malay blood in her and little St. Helena blood, and the usual incursion of white blood.

"Lena herself showed in her delicacy of feature and clear yellowish skin her ancestral superiority over Kleinhans. For all she had the straight, coarse, black hair and shadowed black eyes of the Cape girl, and Kleinhans' hair and eyes were light in colour, it was quite obvious that she was further removed from the aboriginal than he was. The Hottentot blood in him expressed itself in his heavy, triangular-shaped face and wide nose; but she had the thin little nose, the well-cut mouth and the oval cheekline of her Malay grandmother, her German blood showed in her paler skin, and her voice, too, was light and gentle where that of Kleinhans was heavy with nearness to the African earth."

(pp. 107-8)

It is amusing to consider what the passage of a relatively short space of time has done to the connotations evoked by that final phrase, "nearness to the African earth" - in African literature - and on a certain level it also illustrates the shortcomings of Mrs Millin's technique as well as the failures of her achievement. If the liberal tradition stands for anything in the Western novel, if it can be said to have contributed to the artistic viability of the genre as a close imitation of life, it has done so by suggesting the open-ended nature of experience, the largeness of possibility in human affairs, contained

within the very human soul itself if the nature of its environment is bleak enough to deny most of the external possibilities. Mrs Millin, with her talk of "ancestral superiority", her five-fold mention of blood, negates the existence of inner as well as outer potential - something which even a Golding does not do - and thus confines herself ultimately to the level of stereotype in both character and action. In this she was typical of her group, in a sense merely embodying its perceptions in fiction.

The first child of Lena and Kleinhans is a daughter, and she is beautiful and white enough to pass. Mr Lindsell, who is a misanthrope, takes a fancy to her and sends her to a boarding school in the nearest town. After four years of living two lives, she contracts scarlet fever while at school and the nuns send for her parents. Inevitably, her secret is revealed, and after her convalescence she is excluded from the convent. Lindsell sends her to a boarding school in Cape Town, where in some ways she does very well, but:

"She was not as clever at her school work as she had promised to be when a child. It was as if her brain, running a race against the brains of white children, was very quick at starting but soon tired and lagged behind, so that the time came when it fell altogether out of the running. At sixteen Elmira had ceased to make any mental advances, and was really, in all essentials, a mature young woman." (p. 132; cf. pp. 64-5)

The limitations of the stereotype inevitably emerge, progressively diminishing Elmira's interest or even viability as a character. The content of the passage is identical with that applied to her grandmother, Deborah, at Kadesh mission station at a comparable age (see above, pp. 12-13). In Cape Town she meets the son of a rich merchant, and marriage is in the offing; but the cautious businessman writes to Mr Lindsell, with whom he is acquainted, to inquire about his prospective daughter-in-law's background, and Mr Lindsell replies that she is coloured. She returns disappointed to the Lindsell farm and "sinks into the family rut", working in Mr Lindsell's dairy.

By this time Mr Lindsell is an aged and repulsive widower; but he determines to marry Elmira, and does, overriding her father's opposition with threats. She soon comes to hate her husband, who dotes on her, but before she leaves him she bears him a son, Barry, to whom he becomes pathetically devoted (which is somewhat inconsistent with one of Mrs Millin's most frequently reiterated convictions, which is that father-love is not "instinctive" but depends for its existence on favourable - or, rather, orthodox - circumstances; and, peculiarly enough, her evidence for the validity of this assertion, which occurs many times in her novels, is invariably the reluctance of her feckless white adventurers at the river diggings to assume responsibility for their illegitimate half-caste offspring). Lindsell dies when Barry is seven: the Kleinhans family try to claim Barry, but he shows an "instinctive" preference for his ugly white spinster half-sister, his father's oldest daughter, who is twenty-nine years older than he is. She becomes his guardian and they move to Cape Town.



Barry is white, but knows of his coloured blood. The knowledge is a torment to him, not mitigated by his half-sister who takes out her frustrations on him by saddling him with a sense of guilt. He goes to England, becomes an Anglican priest, then an army chaplain in France in the first world war. Within three months he is back in England, shell-shocked; a year later there is a repeat performance, only quicker. He returns to South Africa at the end of the war, married to an English girl. Driven by his jealous half-sister to reveal the "guilty secret of his black blood to his wife", she responds: "Is that all?" His reaction to this is a significant example of the Millin technique of imprisonment of character within a stereotyped fate: Nora's response to the situation is entirely English, liberal, unconcerned, and this is the most galling aspect for Barry.

"He could not enjoy the feelings he ought to have had of relief and gratitude, for the irritation that possessed him because he was addressing an uncomprehending mind.

"'I don't see what difference it can make', said Nora. 'We're all awfully light on my side, and you're not dark yourself. The chances are we'll have quite a fair baby.'

"'And if we don't?' asked Barry in a low voice.

"'I love dark children myself', said Nora cheerfully.

"'But, Nora - ' he began, and, rising from his chair abruptly, crossed the room to the window. He saw Edith [his half sister] walking agitatedly up and down among her flower beds. He had argued with her as Nora was arguing with him, as if it were simply a question of skin. Yet he had known better within him. He felt suddenly at one with his embittered sister, and far away from his easy-minded wife.

" She came and stood comfortingly beside him.

"'Poor old Barry', she said. 'Don't worry. It will be a white child.'

"They were a repetition of words spoken seventy years ago by Deborah to her father, the Rev. Andrew Flood, when she had come back from Kadesh carrying within her body the burden of future generations. And, across time, the Rev. Barry Lindsell echoed his ancestor:

"'There can be no white children, Nora. No white children to us.'" (p. 274)

Quite apart from the extreme technical clumsiness and gaucherie that the heat of Mrs Millin's enthusiastic convictions apparently gave rise to at this point, if this novel could be imagined to exist within the dominant moral conventions of the genre, this would surely have been the logical, if not the only place to stop, because it would have left open at least the possibility within the human spirits involved of overcoming the difficulties that apparently lay before them, the possibility that Barry was wrong. But it is precisely the human spirit that cannot be allowed to triumph in Mrs Millin's system, and it is this, generally, that prevents her novels from being an adequate representation of reality. (Incidentally, Mrs Millin was much admired by more liberally minded white South African

contemporaries precisely for her quality of "realism".)(5)

So the story must drag on. Barry receives a letter from an unknown coloured aunt, saying that his mother is dying. He goes to her bedside, six hundred miles away, and afterwards he refuses to return to England with his wife. He renounces her, gives up his unborn son, and the book ends on this note:

"Nora, I have just come back from where I found myself at my beginnings. There at Doornkraal, I saw my whole story. The natives in their huts. My great-grandmother, Old Deborah. Her son, Kleinhans. My mother. Myself. I saw what had come down to me, and what I was handing on to others ... Don't stop me, Nora. Let me tell you everything ... And, standing there among my brown people, I made a vow.' His voice was rising. He was trembling as he spoke.

"Nora sprang up from her seat.

"I won't hear it', she interrupted him.

"I made a vow', he repeated.

"Oh, you are mad, Barry!' she cried.

"Edith used to call my ancestor, the Rev. Andrew Flood, the mad missionary', said Barry, calmer now. 'Perhaps I owe him other things besides my black blood.'

"He seemed to be sending his mind back. Nora looked at him frightened.

"This is my vow', he said at last. 'For my sin in begetting him, I am not to see my child. And, for the sorrow I share with them, I am to go among my brown people to help them ...'

"I thought', he added after a moment, 'of settling down in the very parts around Canaan where the Rev. Andrew Flood had his mission. In no other place, I hear, are things as bad.'

"He stood up. She had never seen strength in his face before.

"It seems to me right that I should go there', he said."

(pp. 305-6)

The exact significances of this passage are perhaps more difficult to determine than they seem. Is Barry's decision the same kind of weak foolishness, the immature need to sacrifice oneself to a cause, that was the start of all the trouble? Or is his sacrifice more relevant than the Rev. Flood's, related in a meaningful way to a century of experience? Does it mark Barry's emergence as a free spirit, making a purposeful choice about his destiny? It seems to me to be another - and perhaps the crowning - example of the trap of fate that Mrs Millin set so frequently for her characters. From the outside one may argue that Barry is the victim of race prejudice - Mrs Millin's particularly and white South Africa's generally. But in relation to the internal structure of the novel, the choice is inevitable and therefore not a choice at all, merely the illusion of one. It is the inevitable result

of Barry's ancestry, of the "coloured blood" in his veins. And the reason why he reveals strength in his face at this unlikely point is that by the lights of the novel and, we may suppose, of the authoress, Barry is doing right, in that he is giving up what is not rightfully his - a white wife, white offspring, possession of the European heritage. It is equally a product of his "coloured blood" that the "choice" is also a selfish one, causing the innocent to suffer with the "guilty". Mrs Millin gives her hero no chance of heroism.

She drives home the point in the sequel to the book, The Herr Witchdoctor (1941), which equates African demands for political freedom with the advent of Nazism, and shows Barry Lindsell to have been a total failure as a missionary because of the flaw in his character caused by his black blood.

Colour pervades these two books, making it difficult to decide whether Mrs Millin's mechanistic view of experience as it is presented here is, in a sense, a special case or whether it expands beyond the narrow range of preoccupations presented in God's Stepchildren. What is demonstrated beyond any need for further evidence is Mrs Millin's position as mouthpiece for the views of a whole group within a society on the question that most affects the well-being of that society. She shares all the weak points, blind spots and failures of imagination of the white South African view of colour, and in elevating it to a central principle in a novel she presents this view in ideological form. We have already sampled an extract from her last work to treat of the theme (The Wizard Bird, 1962). In it, the young African nationalist leader on a politicizing visit to Kenya (dated in the late '50s or early '60s) claims that: "The Mau Mau are not finished. They consult with Kenyatta. They are still needed to inspire - oh, Africans and Englishmen and Americans." He further tells his young white anthropologist friend: "There was an affair about the Mau Mau I didn't tell you. It wasn't at a formal oathing. I was persuaded for an experience to take out the eyes of a living man, and suck the juice. The man was white and his eyes were blue - like yours." (The Wizard Bird, p. 109.) It is clear that in forty years no change took place in Mrs Millin's racial attitude. On colour, at any rate, Mrs Millin was the illiberal spokesman for an illiberal society.

The peculiar thing about Mrs Millin's reputation in the years of her dominance of the South African novelistic scene is the fact that she was in some way strangely attractive, even satisfying, to the "liberal conscience" of English-speaking white South Africans from the 'twenties to the 'fifties. (6) It may sound like a paradox to say that Mrs Millin had found liberalism's true voice in the situation, though for a Marxist this would be an easy proposition to defend. The South African environment is venomously hostile to the delicate plant of European liberalism, and where it manages to take root in the literature the result may be a hideous mutation. And thus the paradox for Mrs Millin may indeed be real: for all her rejection of European liberalism as sentimental, decadent and out of place in the South African environment, was not the ideology she preached the South African version of the European idea? And, if so, perhaps those South Africans who between the wars (and after) accepted her as the prophetess of their humanitarian consciences were not far wrong, after

all: they, and she, were merely interacting within the web of historical circumstance that surrounds South African society.

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### Notes

- (1) Taylor, Dora: "Sarah Gertrude Millin, South African Realist" in TREK, Vol. VII, Nos. 23, 24, Vol. VIII No. 1, 7th and 21st May, 4th June 1943.
- (2) Young, F. B.: "South African Literature" in The London Mercury, Vol. XIX, No. 113.
- (3) Snyman, J. P. C.: The South African Novel in English (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1952), see p. 114.
- (4) Taylor, op. cit.
- (5) See, for instance, Lewis, E.: "The Truest Living Realist" in Rand Daily Mail, 14 th March 1928.
- (6) Thus Max Drennan, one-time Professor of English at the University of the Witwatersrand: "Like Mrs Millin [Pauline Smith] is always on the side of the underdog." ("My Favourite South African Novels" in Outspan (Bloemfontein), 30th November 1934.)