

Adventure Tales, Colonialism, and Alexander Montgomery's Australian Perspective

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**Christine Doran,**

**"Adventure Tales, Colonialism, and Alexander Montgomery's Australian Perspective"**

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Adventure Tales, Colonialism, and Alexander Montgomery's Australian Perspective," Christine Doran discusses an early nineteenth-century example of Australian literature dealing with Southeast Asia. The text analysed is about Borneo, in a collection of short stories by Alexander Montgomery entitled *Five-Skull Island and Other Tales of the Malay Archipelago*, published in Melbourne in 1897. In the paper, Doran's focus is on Montgomery's adventure tales and she situates the texts within their literary and cultural contexts. Montgomery's writing is then analyzed in the light of postcolonial scholarship. Doran argues that in several important ways this author's work runs counter to the assertions made by some scholars of postcolonial studies concerning the nature of late nineteenth-century colonial fiction. In particular, Doran's analysis suggests that a close-text interpretation -- executed within a cultural context -- of Montgomery's text allows several commonly accepted generalizations concerning racism and masculinism within colonial literary discourse to be questioned. A minor Australian writer, of Irish descent and with marked working-class sympathies, Alexander Montgomery was able to adopt a perspective on colonial Southeast Asia from "down under." As Doran shows, Montgomery wrote from the point of view of those, whether of European or Asian ancestry, who struggled for survival in the colonized territories. Montgomery's texts thus present a challenging view of the colonial context from the margins of the British-European empire.

**Christine Doran**

### **Adventure Tales, Colonialism, and Alexander Montgomery's Australian Perspective**

In 1897 a collection of colonial adventure tales was published in Melbourne, Australia, under the auspices of *The Bulletin*, an influential radical working-class newspaper. The author was Alexander Montgomery, an Australian of Irish descent; the volume was entitled *Five-Skull Island and Other Tales of the Malay Archipelago*. As is suggested by the title, themes of violence and horror unite the various stories included in the collection. This text is significant as one of the earliest examples of literature dealing with Indonesia produced in Australia. In all there are fifteen short stories in the volume. Six of them are set in Borneo, and they will be the main focus of the following discussion. The main interest of this text lies in its very early representations of Southeast Asia, in particular of Borneo, by an Australian writer. Among other things the existence of such colonial fiction does show that, contrary to popular perception, as early as the nineteenth century Australians were producing literary responses to Southeast Asia, reflecting their experiences and views of the region (see Vickers 7). Part of my aim in this paper is to situate the text in its historical context, including its literary context. Further, it will be shown that the tenor of Montgomery's writing runs counter to many of the assertions and assumptions of postcolonial scholarship about the nature of late nineteenth-century colonial literature. In particular, it will be shown by a close analysis of Montgomery's work that many commonly accepted generalizations concerning racism and masculinism within colonial literary discourse do not apply unambiguously to this particular text. It is not suggested that analysis of the work of one relatively minor author could overturn the body of postcolonial scholarship. Nevertheless, this example is significant in that it draws attention to the existence of interesting cultural cross-currents, thus allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the culture of colonialism at the fin-de-siècle.

#### **The Book**

Montgomery's book was published by George Robertson & Company in Melbourne, under the auspices of *The Bulletin*. *The Bulletin* was a popular radical left-wing newspaper at that time, having been founded by J.F. Archibald in 1880 (see Lawson). *The Bulletin* office in Sydney was involved in the distribution of the book. Alexander "Alex" Montgomery (1847-1922) was an Irish Australian, born in Londonderry, and fifty years old at the time of the publication of *Five-Skull Island*. *The Bulletin* had previously published some of Montgomery's stories. As well as short stories, Montgomery also wrote serialized novels for the papers. An historical novel set in Europe was published by George Robertson in 1898. Well-educated, Montgomery worked at a wide range of occupations on both sea and land, but most often as a journalist. He traveled through the Indo-Malay archipelago in the 1870s (see Miller 674). As an anonymous reviewer in the *Australasian* (newspaper) commented on *Five-Skull Island*, "the scenery and people are described with a reality that one would imagine can only be due to personal experience" ([13 February 1897]: 336). Montgomery's tales in *Five-Skull Island* are set variously in Java, Maluku, Lombok, and Singapore, as well as in Borneo. With the exception of Singapore, all of these areas were at the time subject to Dutch colonial rule. In Borneo the Dutch had only begun to exert closer control in the late nineteenth century. Two of Montgomery's stories set in Borneo -- "A Bornean Tragedy" and "Her Father's Head: A Bornean Nightmare" -- are the only two stories in the collection which focus exclusively on indigenous characters and do not involve white people in the action. Most of the other stories are based on interactions between Westerners and the various peoples of the Indonesian archipelago -- most often interactions of a conflictual or violent nature. Montgomery also recognized clearly the multi-ethnic composition of society in Borneo and was well aware of interethnic tensions. It is notable that women often appear in Montgomery's stories and they play a significant role in three out of the six stories set in Borneo.

The most outstanding feature of Montgomery's writing in *Five-Skull Island* is its raw quality. This is a reflection of his subject matter and to some extent of narrative techniques, rather than of any lack of literary polish in his style. The major theme that runs consistently through Montgomery's work is

the essential baseness of human behavior. The dominant motives that drive his characters are greed and lust, which lead in turn to selfishness, betrayal, revenge, and violence. Frequently betrayal is heaped upon betrayal, treachery upon treachery. In several stories people harboring treacherous plans are themselves betrayed by others. In "Swamp-Swallowed," for instance, two white men are searching together for treasure, the jeweled hilt of a *kris*, a Southeast Asian dagger. Their actions reveal that both are ready to betray and murder the other; in the event they are both betrayed by their Malay crew and they die together.

Montgomery's handling of these themes challenges the assumption that colonial fiction is deeply imbued with racism and sexism. I argue that Montgomery does not approach the issue of human depravity from a racial or gendered point of view. Instead, he attributes moral turpitude quite indiscriminately to all comers, whether European, Asian, or of mixed descent, whether male or female. It might be said that rather than reflecting an essential racism or sexism, Montgomery's writing shows a universalizing, non-discriminatory misanthropy. In one of his tales of Borneo, "Live-Man Gardiner," Montgomery uses a phrase that could be regarded as a summary motif for the various stories making up his anthology: "Half a dozen whites -- the rest all sorts and colours, and every man of 'em a bigger scoundrel than the next!" (*Five-Skull Island* 23). Without fear or favor, Montgomery portrays virtually all of his characters, white, Asian or Eurasian, male or female, as vicious, revengeful, and morally bankrupt. The author's attitude to the moral dissipation of his characters is ambivalent. Most often he appears to take a stance of detached objectivity, as a scientific observer; sometimes he seems to judge his characters' actions and natures quite harshly; sometimes all is presented as just rip-roaring good fun, life's rich tapestry. Another phrase, which could also be taken as a keynote for the whole collection, Montgomery uses in describing a colonial Dutchman, but it could be applied across the whole spectrum of his characters: "a moral nondescript, with brutal possibilities" (*Five-Skull Island* 89).

### **The Borneo Stories**

In this section I sketch briefly the six short stories set in Borneo. This provides essential background for the analysis undertaken below, as well as conveying a sense of the characteristic subject matter and flavor of Montgomery's writing. The first story dealing with Borneo is the third in the collection, entitled "Live-Man Gardiner." This tale is especially interesting because it confronts head-on the issue of cannibalism among the Dayaks, the main indigenous ethnic group of Borneo. The story begins with a group of white men drinking together and talking, when the question of Dayak cannibalism comes up. Roderick "Daddy" Murchison claims to know the truth of the matter, and recounts an experience he had thirty years before. He had fallen in with a group of Dayaks and accompanied them on a raid against a village up-river. The Dayaks took "nearly a couple of hundred heads, besides a big haul of women and kids" (24-25), as well as a few male prisoners, the purpose of which Murchison did not at first understand. At the subsequent feast, the Dayak *orang kaya* (chief) presents Murchison with a difficult choice: either to eat human flesh or to die. Murchison chooses to live, and in order to do so agrees to engage in cannibalism. Murchison is still much troubled by his decision thirty years later. He feels the need to tell someone the story, describes the whole experience as a "horror" and finally decides to kill himself, as he thinks he should have done thirty years earlier. The other white men disagree about whether Murchison should have eaten human stew. Fleming is revolted by the idea, but William Gardiner defends Murchison's decision, saying simply that Murchison is "a man who preferred his life to his prejudices, that's all" (29). Murchison then commits a form of suicide by insulting a Dayak man, who retaliates by mortally wounding him with a machete. When the Dayak is brought to trial before a "kangaroo" court, Fleming and the local *orang kaya* wish to acquit him, but "Chief-Justice Gardiner" takes a hard line and rules that the death penalty must be invoked to avoid setting the precedent that a Dayak might kill a white man if provoked: "He found prisoner guilty, sentenced him to be shot, and then and there -- before anybody could lift a finger -- did shoot him!" (34). Gardiner has the last word, describing himself as "Live-Man Gardiner." As the title of the story indicates, if confronted by Murchison's dilemma Gardiner would have chosen to live, and in order to do

so would have agreed to cannibalism. It is also suggested that in order to live, Gardiner realizes that it is essential to give no quarter to the Dayaks. The way in which the author handles this story suggests that he would endorse Murchison's and Gardiner's decisions. The story portrays the Dayaks as violent and cruel cannibals, and argues that the only way to handle them effectively is to be willing to respond in kind with summary violence. Interestingly, this story also throws into question the European cultural taboo against cannibalism. Gardiner's willingness to ignore the taboo in the interests of self-preservation is portrayed as demonstrating his strong life force and freedom from conventional social constraints. Gardiner emerges in this story as a type of heroic figure, with manly qualities of decision and pragmatism, as contrasted with the much larger but weak and hide-bound Fleming.

"A Bornean Revenge" is the sixth story in the volume and is significant in that it is the first that does not involve white people in the action. It is concerned with love, hatred, and revenge among the indigenous people of Borneo. Sinsha is a beautiful young woman of Borneo. The author shows an erotic appreciation of the allure of Bornean women in his description of her: "The broad equatorial moon sent a sheen off her glossy skin, struck fire from the brass wire coiled upon her shapely arms, and deepened the shadows of her long-lashed eyes" (64). A Kayan man, Dusi-Mota, falls in love with her, but her father, Muniad, refuses to allow him to marry her, insulting him and his ethnic group in the process. In response the Kayan murders both father and daughter using poisoned arrows. The real actors in the story are the men. This woman of Borneo appears only as a glittering prize over whose disposition the men disagree. Nevertheless, this story certainly does attribute powerful human motives to Asian characters. Whereas in this tale the indigenous woman is merely passive, in the following story a woman of Borneo is portrayed as the central actor.

The seventh story in the collection is called "Her Father's Head: A Bornean Nightmare" and concerns a Bornean woman, Malita, who goes stealthily at night to the bachelors' long-house in an enemy village to take back her father's severed head. Interrupted, she knocks out a man using her father's skull as her weapon. When the villagers realize what has happened they murder one of their own young men in order to replace the missing head. This story brings to the forefront the issue of headhunting among the people of Borneo. Even beautiful young Malita with her "jaunty little Dyak nose" is portrayed as nonchalant about head taking: "the heads her long-lashed Dyak eye regarded no more than so many cocoanuts" (70). Intertribal rivalries are emphasized, but it is indicated that the violence can just as easily be turned upon members of the same tribal group. The characters are all indigenous, and they are driven by strong human emotions. This story is especially notable because it makes an indigenous woman the protagonist. Indeed as the main actor in the story, she shows herself to be both remarkably athletic and aggressive. Certainly, this is a portrayal of a strong, active woman. Indeed, Malita shares most of the same violent tendencies as virtually all of the men in Montgomery's tales. However, although the story portrays female action, strength and resolution, in some important respects the author falls into female stereotyping. As in the previous story, Montgomery reveals an erotic response to the women of Borneo in his lyrical description of Malita as "slim young mischief in bedang and bracelets, with shining beads about its graceful neck, and long hair streaming to its slender waist" (69). The use of the pronoun "its," however, is dehumanizing, emphasizing her positioning as a sex object under the author's male gaze and in the process reducing her to an inanimate object. In spite of Malita's strength and intrepidity in recovering her father's head, in the last line of the story the author takes away her achievement by noting abruptly that when she later married her husband "threw it to the pigs!" (76). Despite all that recovery of the head meant to the woman, a man is given the final decisive authority. Although this story does portray Malita as an active woman, strongly exercising agency, the author still falls readily into stereotypes of female passivity.

In "A Lamb to the Slaughter" Montgomery returns to the themes of headhunting and ethnic conflict between different indigenous ethnic groups in Borneo. The story is based on the idea that "Dyak girls often did want a head from their suitors" (100). Because Sabi was a belle and her father rich, however,

she raised the stakes higher and demanded that her lover, Achang, bring her the head of a white man. Achang plans to kill Beckley, a white man, but he is betrayed by a Kayan man and Beckley is tipped off. Beckley arranges for a Chinese man to be disguised as himself and the Chinese is beheaded. There is no consummation for Achang, however, who is eaten by a crocodile. This story emphasizes the role of Bornean women in perpetuating the practice of headhunting.

The following story, "Below Proof!," also focuses on headhunting and ethnic differences. The story concerns a conflict between two white missionaries in Borneo, Morton and Hankey. Montgomery begins with some scathing comments about the missionary enterprise. The Dayaks are represented as merely "rice Christians," showing cynically a semblance of religious conversion in order to acquire European guns, axes, pictures, looking-glasses and cloth. Morton has a grievance against Hankey, who has insulted him and "pulled Morton's hut about his ears" (107). Morton shares his resentment with a Malay friend, the *orang kaya* Matu. Morton, however, explains to Matu that as a Christian he abhors revenge. Nevertheless, when hit by the Malay Morton hits back, and Matu takes this to indicate that the missionary really does believe in revenge. The story ends with Hankey's head being presented to Morton. As well as providing a vehicle for Montgomery to express some critical views about missionaries, in this story the author suggests that Malays are just as prone to revenge, violence and head taking as Dayaks.

The final story set in Borneo, "Two of a Trade," also emphasizes tensions among the "colonized," whom Montgomery certainly never depicts as a homogenous or unified group. The story concerns a conflict between a Malay raja, Hamsut, and Hafan, a Persian healer. Their disagreement reflects a major religious division within the community of Islam, as Hafan is a Shia and Hamsut a Sunni. Hamsut decides to put Hafan to death by leaving him in a cage with a panther. To save Hafan, a white man, Beckley, doses the panther with opium. Kamsut finds out, but instead of punishing Beckley he is so amazed by his altruism that he gives him his gold hilted *kris*, but warns him that he will not last long in Borneo. Beckley's is one of the very few unselfish acts depicted in any of the fifteen stories in the collection.

### **The Literary Context**

Alexander Montgomery's book takes its place among the first expressions of Australian responses to Southeast Asia in fictional form. The first Australian novel set in Southeast Asia was Ernst Favenc's *The Moccasins of Silence*, set in Timor. It was published in 1895 by George Robertson as the first in the series of which *Five-Skull Island* was the third and last. This was followed by two novels written by Guy Boothby, *The Beautiful White Devil* (1896) and *The Fascination of the King* (1897), both published in London. On the Australian literary scene at this time one of the writers who stood out was Louis Becke. His work is readily comparable to that of Alex Montgomery, and given the character of his stories, the similar tropical island setting, and the publishing success and popularity which Becke had already achieved, it is highly probable that Montgomery was influenced by Becke's example. George Lewis "Louis" Becke (1855-1913) was, like Montgomery, a *Bulletin* writer. After a varied career spanning twenty years trading in the Pacific islands, Becke turned to writing short stories and novels based on his experiences there. His first published story, "Tis in the Blood," appeared in *The Bulletin* in May 1893. In 1894 a collection of his short stories entitled *By Reef and Palm* was published in London. By 1897, when Montgomery's book came out, Becke had already published six volumes of stories. These and many other collections of his stories set in the South Pacific proved highly popular. Becke's stories dealt mainly with the interactions between Pacific islanders and Westerners, especially traders, adventurers, and missionaries. These interactions are generally portrayed by Becke as full of violence, cruelty, adultery, and revenge, themes also repeatedly played upon in Montgomery's tales.

Looking at the wider literary context, during the 1890s Joseph Conrad began publishing novels and stories set in Borneo. Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published by Fisher Unwin (also Becke's publisher) in 1895, followed by *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896); a short story, "The Lagoon," was published in 1897. Hugh Clifford, a British administrator in Malaya, also began publishing stories

on Borneo and Malaya in the late 1890s. This was the high era of colonial adventure fiction, the period of efflorescence of Rudyard Kipling, H. Rider Haggard, R.M. Ballantyne, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Montgomery's book was reviewed on the famous literary Red Page of *The Bulletin* in February 1897. The reviewer, A.G. Stephens, argued that the appeal of Montgomery's stories was wholly intellectual rather than emotional, and that this limited their universal human significance. He explained that Montgomery constructed his tales "as he might build a chess problem," and that this architectonic skill aroused intellectual admiration on the part of the reader rather than emotional investment (n.p.). Stephens complimented Montgomery on his clean and spare prose style, but noted an absence of both humor and emotional response. Unfairly, Stephens accused Montgomery of omitting "the Woman" from his stories. Stephens developed an explicit contrast with the stories of Louis Becke, with their "recital of his vivid emotional impressions" (n.p.). In the final assessment, Stephens considered Montgomery's tales too detached in their stance and objective in tone to be classed among the best examples of the short story, for a model of which Stephens turned to Maupassant. Stephens's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Montgomery's work was consistent with the standards of judgment and literary preoccupations which he generally enforced in his reviews for *The Bulletin*, in his campaign to raise the quality and claims to universality of Australian literature (see Lawson 172). My proposition is that in several important ways Montgomery's work is not consistent with, indeed contradicts, some of the general characteristics that have been attributed to the colonial literary archive in postcolonial studies. Obviously, the work of a minor Australian writer cannot overturn the conclusions of postcolonial scholarship. It can, however, raise significant doubts about the general applicability and universal validity of some of the generalized assertions that have been made.

The colonial adventure fiction that proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century took advantage of the interest of the reading public in lesser known locales and cultures. Thus it "served as a form of voyeuristic education about the exotic for the stay-at-home adventurer" (Pollak 35). By setting their story in an unfamiliar location, writers tried to capitalize on the excitement and fascination usually associated with the unusual or the "exotic." However, it has been pointed out that in Western literature set in Asia, the Asian background is often used by the author merely as an exotic backdrop for the development of the plot. In *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, for instance, the Malaysian literary critic Zawiah Yahya asserts that in Western literature "exploitation of the romantic and exotic has reduced the country to no more than a mere backdrop" (138) and that "until the end, colonialist literature never seems to be able to outgrow the temptation of turning the colonies into an exotic stage on which the human drama of white individuals is managed" (64). In his tales, by contrast, Montgomery gives very little attention to painting the scene or describing the local environment, and shows little or no interest in the "exotic" or the "picturesque" (see Nochlin). As Stephens put it in his critique, there was a "want of atmosphere" in his stories (n.p.). On the very rare occasions when he offers a descriptive passage, it is more evocative of danger, discomfort and corruption than of pleasure or beauty, somewhat reminiscent of Conrad's brooding Bornean landscapes: "Across the long perspective of the mangrove flats the sun glared fierce and crimson. From the black mud banks, white, pestilential vapours rose upon the torpid air. A subtler miasm quivered over the long stretches of mephitic ooze, against the sickly green of which gleamed out the hideous reds and yellows of fantastic crabs that scuttled -- as the boat came near -- into pools prismatic with stagnation. Beneath the slimy surface the banded water-snakes glanced to and fro; from the reed-beds came in hungry swarms the tiger-mosquitoes; and from the mangrove roots the sword-flies darted out in swift detachments upon the half-nude rowers -- sweltering in a bath of vegetable fetor" (*Five-Skull Island* 10) and "On the sodden sand the two men stood, secluded by the blinding rain that shut out all save here and there the ghostly shadow of a coco-palm, and, down at the end of the sandspit, the jetty fading into the dreary mist that hung upon the sullen sea" (*Five-Skull Island* 136). This scenery is the objective correlative of the fierce and pestilential human emotions that fascinated the author-- in both his European and Asian characters. Its functions in the story-telling go well beyond that of a mere

irrelevant "exotic" backdrop.

Another criticism often made of writers of colonial fiction is that indigenous characters in their stories are few, poorly developed and marginalized from the action. Indigenous characters, who are often merely the servants of the main white actors, are usually not named or assigned distinctive personal traits or a life outside their function of service to the Europeans. Megumi Kato, for instance, has commented in her paper "*Madame Izan*, Butterflies and the Incomprehensible Japanese" that Asian characters are often lumped together, without individual faces, characteristics, or even names (169). In general, they are denied agency and influence. Or, as Anne McClintock puts it: "The black servants are reflector figures, casting light or shadow on the white people, their imaginations wholly absorbed in the colonial drama, assisting the white's comings and goings, bearing witness to their scenes, but never acting in their own regard. They have no family life of their own; their houses are a shadowy tumble on the edge of domesticity, marking the limits of colonial space. Their genealogies are broken; their names, like their children, are stolen from them. They facilitate plot, but only as vehicles, not as agents" (271). In this context it is notable that Montgomery always names his indigenous players. They are shown to be active and assertive, indeed often aggressive, in pursuing their own interests and motives. Some of Montgomery's stories deal only with indigenous characters. In those stories where Westerners and Indonesian people interact, the indigenous characters respond to but are not merely reflective of the behavior of the whites. More specifically, the criticism is often made of the authors of colonial fiction that they demeaned their non-European characters by having them speak in broken or pidgin English. For example, Adrian Vickers writes: "The worst of the characterisations use broken English to present the native characters, particularly the Chinese of the Indies. The Chinese often have a buffoon-like character" (10). In this regard it is interesting to consider Montgomery's representation of a wily Chinese forger in Singapore, approached by a white female client: "'No harm, John!' she said. 'Only me wantee you writee me something! That all!' Yee Wung cackled. 'Sit down, madam! If you wish to speak English, speak it! -- or Dutch, or Spanish, or Malay! -- I am at your service in whichever you please! Did I understand you to say that you want something written for you?' The astonished woman sat down" (*Five-Skull Island* 79). Montgomery uses a lot of dialogue, which makes his stories fast-moving. To develop his characters, he often uses colloquial language, including slang. However, his choice of language is related more to the type of character he is trying to build up, rather than to derogatory racist stereotyping.

An analysis of Montgomery's stories challenges other generalized assessments that have been made about the nature of colonial adventure fiction. In a study of the contribution of concepts of masculinity to the imperial imaginary, for example, John Beynon, in his book *Masculinities and Culture*, offers some generalizations about British colonial adventure stories of the late nineteenth century. He argues that such tales usually portray chaste white men, elevating sexual purity and deeming heterosexual desire to be unmanly; they represent a world of homosocial comradeship among white men; the sexuality of indigenous people was never mentioned; women, whether white or indigenous, seldom appeared, except occasionally in service roles or to prompt heroic action by white men; and there is reverence for a kind of muscular Christianity which is seen as central to the European civilizing mission in colonized territories (34, 26-52). It is significant that none of these generalizations apply to Alex Montgomery's *Five-Skull Island and Other Tales of the Malay Archipelago*. There is, indeed, little evidence in these stories of sexual purity or chastity. Instead sexual desire and sexual relations are depicted frequently between white men and indigenous women, as well as between indigenous women and men. The author himself evokes an erotic charge in his fulsome descriptions of the beauty and allure of indigenous women. It is notable that in none of the stories is a white woman represented as sexually appealing. In fact in two stories, one actually entitled "The Woman Scorned," European (Dutch) women are rejected in favor of Asian women; however, these white women certainly do not accept this treatment passively. Montgomery portrays little camaraderie between white men. Instead betrayal and revenge are the dominant forms of relationship between his white characters, as indeed



between his Asian characters. Contrary to Beynon's summary of the features of colonial adventure fiction, the sexuality of indigenous people, both women and men, is often shown in Montgomery's work. Women, both Western and indigenous, appear frequently in Montgomery's tales, sometimes in very active, assertive and even aggressive roles. Finally, Montgomery seems to despise missionaries and their Christianizing mission in the East.

Certainly a theme of masculinity or machismo runs through Montgomery's tales. Most of Montgomery's male characters are distinguished by their ethos of swashbuckling adventurism; freedom from conventional social restraints; their roving life in search of profit making opportunities; their propensity for violence; and their sexual freedom to embark on liaisons with women, often in interethnic relationships. These men are motivated by strong passions -- notably those of greed, hate, lust, revenge, and the sheer will to power -- and they acknowledge no social or moral constraints on following their drives. Machismo, or a sense of pride in masculinity, is a sub-text running through all of Montgomery's characterizations of male identity. Montgomery's stories thus present a particular image of masculinity -- one characterized by tough independence of action. This emphasis on masculinity can be seen reflected in other aspects of the author's narrative technique as well as in characterization and plot. Most of the stories are told from the point of view of a male, usually -- although not always -- a dominant, white male. Montgomery has a vigorous, muscular style of writing. The language used is direct, clipped and untinged by emotionality, as Stephens emphasized in his review.

Important historical shifts in gender relations were occurring in Australia -- as in other Western countries -- during the 1890s which provide the context for Montgomery's writing. In this period there was a significant feminist push, with active campaigns for women's suffrage; women gaining the vote from 1894, first in the colony of South Australia; changes in property legislation to protect women's interests; and frequent discussion of women's rights in political, social and economic life. This was the era of the "new woman," who enjoyed a widening scope of social opportunities. The term "masculinism" has been used by Marilyn Lake to refer to an assertion of the value of masculinity and of men's interests in this period, a response often evoked as a counter to the claims of feminism. In her study, "The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context," Lake has written of a "contest between men and women at the end of the nineteenth century for the control of the national culture" and also of a related battle "between competing ideals of masculinity" (116-17; see also Allen's "'Mundane' Men: Historians, Masculinity and Masculinism"). In particular, Lake describes a form of militant masculinism propounded by the writers of the *Bulletin* school. One of the foremost targets of these writers was the encroaching domestication of men, which they believed undermined their masculinity as well as depriving them of all enjoyment, especially in drinking, smoking, gambling, roving, and extramarital sexual relations. Montgomery's assertion of a particular version of masculinity should be understood within this historical context.

Yet, Michael Sturma has pointed to some of the ambivalences and ambiguities in Louis Becke's writing with regard to issues of masculinity, gender relations, and sexual politics: "If we look at Becke's stories as a form of cultural politics, however, the message is ambiguous. Along side the 'macho' themes of roving and relations with exotic women, we also find the 'domestic' values of love, fidelity, and responsibility. While Becke's stories offer escapism, they do not rail against the responsibilities of marriage. Becke's fiction suggests that the militant masculinist/domestic man dichotomy is at least problematic" (Sturma 115). Compared to those of his Australian contemporary, Becke, Montgomery's tales seem to be less ambivalent, more consistently misanthropic and dystopian, and also more in line with the themes of militant masculinism as depicted by Marilyn Lake. Nevertheless, there are important counter-currents in his work, although different ones to those that Sturma found in Becke's texts. Women often appear in Montgomery's tales, where they play significant and energetic roles in the action. One story, "Her Father's Head: A Bornean Nightmare," features an Asian woman as its protagonist. In Montgomery's stories Asian women are portrayed as following their own drives and interests, subject to the same impulses towards greed, treachery,

revenge, and violence as the male characters. European women are not presented as objects of desire, but nevertheless they are shown as strong characters, using cunning and determination in pursuit of their goals. At times Montgomery falls into stereotyping women as passive or as sex objects, but on the whole his militant masculinism did not preclude an equally active role for women.

### **Conclusion**

Alexander Montgomery was a minor Australian writer, whose "ripping yarns" have now been virtually forgotten. Such popular fiction, perhaps even "pulp" fiction, is often overlooked as part of a national culture's literary history. Yet, Montgomery's tales are not without their own stylistic attractions. Furthermore, through a close reading of his stories it is possible to gain insight into contemporary social and political attitudes, particularly the interlocking systems of race and gender relations which prevailed at the time. Serious analysis of the work of minor, popular and often-neglected authors has been one of the central tenets within the program of postcolonial scholarship. Scholars of postcolonial studies such as Edward Said argue that cultural production is not undertaken exclusively or even mainly by literary geniuses and heroes, "but by great anonymous movements whose function is to keep things going, keep things in being" (34). Gayatri Spivak concurs, pointing out that the characteristic themes of imperial discourse run continuously through the whole of the colonial literary archive, discernible in the minor productions of "small unimportant folk" as much as in the canonical texts of the "great names" (133.) Yet, what is interesting about Montgomery's work is that in significant ways it runs counter to many of the themes and tropes to which postcolonial scholars have pointed as characteristic of imperial discourse. Montgomery's handling of issues of race and gender in particular reveals him as perhaps idiosyncratic, perhaps something of a cultural maverick, maybe even counter-hegemonic in the sense of Gramsci. It is worth asking -- although no definitive answer can be offered -- what made it possible for this author to adopt what appears to be an alternative, even a counter position on what were the essential questions of his time? It can be suggested that Montgomery's position as first, an Australian author and second, a working-class author, allowed him the scope which made possible a divergent view of the colonial encounter, a form of cultural contact which threw these central issues of race and gender into sharp relief.

As an Australian writer, Montgomery was in a position to adopt an alternative perspective on colonization and its discontents. Robert Dixon has argued that colonial adventure fiction produced in Australia was extremely heterogeneous, located "between worlds"-- at the same time imbued with the preoccupations and conventions of British imperial writing but also influenced by developments in literary nationalism, such as the masculinist realism promoted by *The Bulletin* school. By the 1890s a series of crises in international relations had made it clear that British imperial and Australian colonial interests could be divergent. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of the importance of "hybridisation" in colonial responses to imperial discourse, Dixon shows that Australian cultural activity was able to create "a space in which local knowledges can unsettle and disarticulate metropolitan knowledges" (9). As an Australian writer Alex Montgomery was able to occupy such a space. In Australian historiography neither *The Bulletin* nor the working class in general have been credited with enlightened or tolerant attitudes on matters of either race or gender (see Burgmann; Lawson). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that a working class writer outside of or on the margins of the prevailing cultural hegemony dominated by the middle and upper classes had some latitude for taking a counter-hegemonic stance on these issues. Montgomery wrote of the colonial experiences of the usually penurious petty traders and profit-hungry adventurers who went to Indonesia in search of lucrative opportunities. Clearly, he saw a great deal of similarity between their motives and behavior and those of the often poverty-stricken indigenous and immigrant groups already resident there. The female characters who populated his stories were often local women, but whether indigenous or Western their lives also were far from those of luxury or leisure, and they correspondingly showed themselves to be active and assertive in attempting to reshape their fate. Montgomery wrote from the point of view of those who struggled for survival, rather than from the comfort zones of empire

inhabited by the merchant and official echelons whose ideologies -- recently thoroughly dissected by David Cannadine in his study *Ornamentalism* -- were dominant within imperial discourse. Montgomery's was a view of the colonial experience from the margins -- from "down under" in at least two senses of the term. Through the medium of these violent and seemingly amoral Indonesian adventure tales, he expressed his own idiosyncratic variety of universalizing misanthropy. It would seem that Montgomery's positioning as an Australian working-class author made it possible for him, on the crucial issues of race and gender, to begin to embrace an ethos of rough egalitarianism.

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