Vigorous and Wholesome

Canadian Brides of British Peers and Their American Rivals
Titled colonial women, including many Canadians, were vastly superior to their American “rivals,” according to London columnist Jessie Weston. She dismissed Anglo-American marriages as alliances between titles and dollars, and claimed that American wives were shallow, vulgar, frivolous, and extravagant. They invaded the British Isles, where they deliberately “shopped” for husbands. With a clear anti-Semitic message mingled with eugenics, titled American women were condemned for being of “foreign parentage or descent.” They were either “sterile” or had very few children and were not good at producing sons. By contrast, titled colonial women, according to Weston, were “nearly all English,” were brought up with a passionate loyalty for the Mother Country, and had many sons …

“OLD PEER TO WED CANADIAN BEAUTY” was one of the headlines describing the December 1902 wedding that caused a sensation throughout the British Empire and in the United States, even though marriages between impoverished British peers and American heiresses were reasonably common. The marriage of 22-year-old Violet Twining, from Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the titled but penniless octogenarian George Augustus Chichester, the Marquess of Donegall, was astounding. The groom was denounced in the press as a “notorious rogue,” a “hopeless bankrupt,” and a “senile old wreck.” Twining had allegedly answered an advertisement placed in the London papers by the marquess, offering his hand in marriage and his title in return for an annuity. “It is a sale pure and simple,” one columnist wrote, “he has a title; she has money.”

That the bride was “given away” by Canada’s high commissioner Lord Strathcona provided the occasion at St George’s Church in Hanover Square, London, with a shred of respectability, but not much. The bride, the daughter of Ada Louise (Black) and Henry St George Twining of Halifax, had money through her own well-to-do family, and she had been left a considerable sum in the will of her sweetheart, Henry Phelps Dangar, who died in London in 1901, just before their planned marriage. An
Australian, Dangar caught malaria while serving in the South African War with his New South Wales regiment.

Perhaps still in mourning for Dangar, Twining married a man whose ancestors had once owned vast tracts of land in Ireland, but he had declared bankruptcy in 1889, the very year he inherited his titles, which included Earl of Belfast and Baron Fisherwick. He had been married twice before. His first marriage was annulled, and his second wife had tried to divorce him for cruelty and adultery in 1889, but her case was dismissed. (There were conflicting accounts, but it was widely reported that his second wife had wound up in a workhouse and found rest and oblivion in a pauper’s grave.) Despite two marriages, however, there was no heir. The nearly equally aged brother of the marquess was the heir presumptive, and it was no secret that the brothers did not get along.

The chances of an heir seemed slim at the time of the wedding; the groom was described as “rickety,” and “as battered in reputation as physique.” It was observed that when the ceremony was concluded the groom was not able to rise from a kneeling posture without the assistance of his bride. But the new and third Marchioness of Donegall astonished society by giving birth to a son in October 1903, scarcely ten months after the wedding (despite the fact that she and her mother had left on an extended tour of the East in early 1903). The baby was given the weighty name Edward Arthur Donald St George Hamilton Chichester. Not surprisingly, the new bride and mother was soon a widow; the marquess died in May 1904, and Violet was now the “dowager” marchioness, and the single parent of the youngest peer in the realm, the sixth Marquess of Donegall.

VIOLET TWINING was one of many Canadian women who acquired titles through marriage. Yet they have been largely forgotten. There are histories, novels, biographies, movies, and television series about the nineteenth-century American women who married into overseas aristocracy, such as Jennie Jerome, who became Lady Randolph Churchill, mother of Winston. But there were also many titled Canadian women. It is curious that they have been forgotten, as they found themselves the objects of much attention and scrutiny at the turn of the twentieth century when they were drawn into a heated controversy about who made the superior contribution to elite British society – titled American or titled colonial women.

Much of the controversy was fuelled by the many articles of New Zealand-born writer Jessie Weston, who lived in London and often published under the pen name Cecil de Thierry. A devoted British imperialist, she wrote on a variety of topics such as imperial federation and the
Jessie Weston published her scathing attacks on wealthy American husband hunters under the pen name “Cecil de Thierry.”
“surplus” women problem in Britain and the solution to this that the colonies provided. All of her work was in praise of the “triumphant progress of Anglo-Saxon dominion.” She was the author of a novel set in New Zealand, Ko Meri, about a “half caste” Maori woman who realized by the end of the book that it was best for indigenous people to “cease to stand in the path of the white man.” A book of her essays by Cecil de Thierry entitled Imperialism was published in 1898.

When Weston arrived in London from Auckland in the early 1890s, she was “outraged that so little prominence seems to attach in London society to colonial girls, as compared with their American cousins.” In a series of articles comparing titled colonial women to titled American women, published in respectable journals such as the English Illustrated Magazine and Contemporary Review, Weston/de Thierry generated a storm of controversy that began in 1896 and lasted well into the first decade of the new century.

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By contrast, titled colonial women, according to Weston, were “nearly all English,” were brought up with a passionate loyalty for the Mother Country, and had many sons. Titled colonials were not necessarily from wealthy families, and had not shopped for husbands overseas; rather they were “wooed and won in their native land.” The husbands-to-be were likely serving with their regiments or appointed as aides-de-camp to the governor general of a colony. The wives they returned to the motherland with, according to Weston, were cultured, refined, dignified, and retiring,
not seeking to be part of the “smart” or “fast set” – and abhorring displays of wealth. Women raised in the colonies were healthy and wholesome, fond of the country and outdoor sports, winter and summer, and they were accomplished riders. They were, however, as “pretty, clever, vivacious, and well dressed as the American.” Their fathers kept a tight rein on them; they would not “allow their womenfolk to wander over Europe ...” As she summed up one of her articles: “Colonial influence in England is masculine, vigorous and wholesome; American influence is feminine, frivolous and fleeting.”

WESTON HAD TO TURN A BLIND EYE to marriages such as Violet Twining’s to build her case, but she had some sterling examples, including the Countess of Erroll (Eliza Amelia “Leila” Gore). She was born in Montreal in 1829, and her mother, Sarah Rachel Fraser, was born in Halifax. She had aristocratic roots, as her father Major General Sir Charles Stephen Gore, district commander of British North America, was the sixth son of the second Earl of Arran of Ireland. But the countess’s father was not a wealthy man; he had to make his own living in the military, as he was distant from the title. Leila was well educated in music and languages but was fond of outdoor sports in winter and summer. She was at home in skates and snowshoes, and on a toboggan, and she was a daring horsewoman and driver, or “splendid whip.”

In 1848, at her parents’ home in Montreal, Leila married William Harry Hay, the nineteenth Earl of Erroll. This was a brilliant match for the Gores, Frasers, and for elite Anglo-Canadian society. The earl, who inherited his title in 1846 at age 23 after the death of his father, was serving in Canada with his regiment, the 23rd Fusiliers, and he was aide-de-camp to Governor General Lord Elgin. He was the head of an ancient and illustrious Scottish family that was ranked high on the aristocratic ladder, and whose main residence was the dramatic and sprawling Slains Castle, on the rugged northeast coast of Scotland.

The Countess and Earl of Erroll remained in Canada until 1852, living in Kingston and in Montreal. Their eldest two sons were born in Canada, although their first died in infancy. In 1854 Leila Erroll accompanied her husband to the Crimea, where he was sent in command of a rifle brigade. There she kept a close eye on her spouse, who was known for getting into “scrapes,” and she became “an object of great curiosity and wonder to the Turks.” She wore a brace of pistols at her waist, and rode sidesaddle with the Light Division on manoeuvres. In August 1854 Omar Pasha, commander of the Turks, presented her “with a very beautiful Arab charger, on which Lady Erroll rode back to the English camp, after paying a visit to his
The Countess of Erroll accompanied her husband to the war in the Crimea, where she wore a brace of pistols at her waist and rode sidesaddle with the Light Division on manoeuvres.
Excellency.” The Earl of Erroll was wounded early in the war, at the Battle of the Alma on September 20, 1854. They returned to Scotland, although they spent the London social seasons at their elegant mansion on Grafton Street. They had four other children. Leila became a close friend and faithful servant of Queen Victoria; in 1872 she was appointed Lady of the Bedchamber to the Queen.

The Countess of Erroll exemplified all of the qualities Weston celebrated in the “titled colonial.” She was not “foreign.” She had met and married her husband in Canada, was devoted to the Queen and to the Mother Country, and she had lots of children, including several male heirs. She was an accomplished horsewoman. In accompanying her husband to the Crimea, she proved brave and fearless, “masculine, vigorous and wholesome.”

But there were many others that Weston held up as exemplars. In her 1900 article “Titled Colonials” by “Cecil de Thierry,” in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, Weston provided numerous examples of Canadian brides who were “quickly at home in the Mother Country, which is not the case with the American, whose social ideas, modes of thought, and habits of life are different from our own.” Because they adapted so well and so quickly, the titled colonial woman was “almost unknown to the general public” even though they outnumbered the American women married to peers, according to Weston.

She wrote that the “best known of all Canada’s daughters this side the water is tall, handsome and stately Lady Clarke,” whose husband Sir Stanley Clarke was equerry to the Prince of Wales and private secretary to the Princess of Wales. Lady Clarke, the former Mary Temple Rose, was born and educated in Montreal. Her father was diplomat, financier, politician, and lawyer Sir John Rose, a close friend and confidant of Sir John A. Macdonald. (Sir John Rose dismayed his family in 1887, when as a widower he married the much younger Julia, dowager marchioness of Tweedsdale. This event was the source for the Henry James short story “The Marriages.” James was related to the Canadian Lady Clarke through her Temple mother.)

Particular attention was paid in Weston’s “Titled Colonials” article to Viscountess Louisa Wolseley, the wife of the distinguished military officer Sir Garnet Wolseley, and her photograph was featured on the first page.
Louisa Wolseley was the accomplished wife of Sir Garnet Wolseley, one of the most renowned British military leaders of all time. Here the two are shown in Canadian dress in Montreal, 1868. Colonel Wolseley, *Montreal, QC, 1868 (I-30225)*, ©McCord Museum, Montreal.
The heroine of Bessie Marchant’s *A Countess from Canada* (1911) is both a hardy frontierwoman and an educated and refined daughter of the Empire.
It was claimed that she was the daughter of Mr A. Erskine of Ottawa and that she had met her husband when he was posted to Canada in the late 1860s. (Whether Lady Wolseley was in fact born in Canada has never been confirmed.) She was a renowned hostess; she was literary, artistic, and cultivated, and she did philanthropic and educational work. Other titled Canadian women featured in the article by Weston were Lady Glen-Coats (Elise Agnes Walker from Montreal), Lady de Blaquiere (Marie Lucienne Desbarats, from Sainte-Foy, Quebec), Lady Jephson (Harriet Julia Campbell from Thornhill, Quebec), and Lady Houston-Boswall (Phoebe Mary Allan from Montreal).

In a 1905 article “Titled Colonials v. Titled Americans” in The Contemporary Review, written by “Colonial” but bearing the unmistakable imprint of Weston/de Thierry, criticisms of American women were more shrill and venomous. American wives of peers were censured for failing to produce male heirs, and for what she described as their “foreign” backgrounds, writing that “... among them we may see foreign names which have no place in the Almanach de Gotha [a directory of Europe’s royals and nobles], having come to us from Judaea apparently by way of Germany and the United States.” Canada stood out in sharp contrast to this situation, according to Weston. Titled Canadian women were seldom the children of European emigrants, but belonged to families with a tradition of loyalty and service: “For this reason Canada has more cause for pride than any other Colony. She takes her place in the Mother Country less on account of her wealth than on account of her achievement.... Of all the offshoots of the British race, she resembles the great original most closely.”

WESTON/DE THIERRY was not alone in her condemnations of American women. Social commentators such as writer H.B. Marriott Watson wrote about the “degenerate” American woman who was infertile, materialistic, and too obsessed with “society.” He condemned the “pork-packers’ daughters from Chicago” who bought coronets and titles. He argued that American men were deteriorating, becoming emasculated because of the behaviour of American women, writing that “... whereas the savage woman acted as beast of burden to her lord, the American man works like the beast of burden beside his triumphing lady.”

Hostility toward titled American women had been expressed for decades before Weston waded into the fray. They were cast as “gilded prostitutes” or “forward hussies.” Explanations for these attitudes include envy of their success and wealth and concern for competition in the marriage market when there was anxiety about the “surplus” women of the UK.
British were deeply troubled by a host of fears: of “race” degeneration, the demise of the class system, and the extinction of the higher orders in British society. Titled American women were unsettling and unwelcome icons of change.

There were also condemnations of the “scathing diatribes” and “ill-tempered rubbish” of de Thierry/Weston, although no one, except in New Zealand, knew the identity of the author. In the Morning Times (Washington, DC) of November 1896 readers were advised: “If you are in a bad humour and can’t find words strong enough to express the smouldering resentment, read Cecil de Thierry on American women in the October Contemporary. A more smugly put together compost of offensive remarks is rarely seen.” One retort was a 1908 article, “The American Woman as a Higher Type,” by Elizabeth (Paschal) O’Connor from Texas, who was married to the prominent nationalist Irish politician and journalist T.P. O’Connor. She argued that English women were inferior, that they were oppressed by their husbands, and had no ideas of their own. The American woman, by contrast, was “frank and happy, without guile, honest, fearless and courageous, and sure of herself and sure of her own opinions.”

The ideal of the wholesome, outdoorsy yet domestic titled Canadian woman who was wooed and won in her native land – and who was not interested in social climbing, tiaras, or frivolous, lavish display – persisted and proved tenacious. The cover of Bessie Marchant’s 1911 book A Countess From Canada illustrates the ideal. On snowshoes in the wilderness, the heroine Katherine Radford rescues a lost and injured trapper. She also saves her fiancé (who at the very end of the book inherits a title) from drowning, runs a trading post for her ailing father, trades with the Cree and the Ojibwa, canoes on lakes and rapids, lugs heavy burdens over portages, and spears fish. Educated in Montreal, she is also accomplished, refined, and reserved. When her new husband informs her she is to be a countess, she is not even sure she wants the title.

Curiously, a titled Canadian woman who lived up to many of the ideals promoted by Weston/de Thierry was Violet, the Marchioness of Donegall, although she was never able to completely recover from the scandal of how she acquired her title. She never remarried. One social columnist wrote in 1911 that her “efforts to obtain a firm footing in the smart set have so far failed. She has been widely and tactfully advertised, and her appearance with the boy marquis dressed in a sailor suit at countless charitable functions has been duly chronicled and photographed without avail.”
But Weston would have approved of Violet, the exemplary titled colonial widow and mother of a peer, as she devoted herself to many worthwhile philanthropic causes, hosted parties for visiting Canadian and colonial dignitaries, was instrumental in the establishment of the Imperial Colonial Club and Overseas Union, and was an active member of the Canadian Women’s Club in London. For ten years, including during World War II, she was head of the Red Cross hospitality department in London. She often visited friends in Halifax and Boston, where she had attended Wellesley College before her marriage. Violet also exemplified the wholesome, outdoorsy, sporty colonial woman Weston admired. One journalist wrote of Violet: “A true Canadian, she revels in skating, and riding has always been a favourite exercise, particularly in the country.” She lived until 1951. Her son, the sixth Marquess of Donegall who died in 1975, was a journalist, war correspondent, and BBC disc jockey. Weston would not have been pleased, however, that her titled colonial women are today largely forgotten. They continue to be overshadowed by their American cousins.

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