

PLANTING CIVILIZATION IN THE WILDERNESS:  
THE INTERSECTIONS OF MANIFEST DESTINY AND THE CULT OF  
DOMESTICITY IN ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS'S *THE GREAT  
MEADOW*

Constante González Groba  
*Universidad de Santiago*  
gulans@telefonica.net

This essay explores the collusion of the domestic discourse and the imperialistic thrust of America abetted by the doctrines of Manifest Destiny in Roberts's *The Great Meadow*. Roberts assigns a crucial role to domesticity in the project of civilizing the wilderness: despite her attraction to the frontier, the female protagonist, who controls those spaces traditionally assigned to women, makes the home and the hearth into essential tools for the cultivation of a new civilization. Roberts's heroine is seen at the time when the house of America was beginning its imperialistic expansion. Domesticity, the sphere in which women exert moral influence, is here endowed with mobility, thus contributing significantly to the expansion of the nation. Diony is a female protagonist in the traditionally male plot of the outward journey, and her story of establishing a home in the wilderness combines the contracted space of the woman's sphere with the hugely expansive one of the burgeoning American empire. Her journey into the wilderness is to plant the values of an exclusively white Anglo-Saxon American domesticity. Although we tend to conceive of the home as a stable center, domesticity becomes in Roberts's novel spatially and conceptually mobile, capable of traveling to the new frontiers of the nation.

Keywords: domesticity; imperialism; Manifest Destiny; E. M. Roberts; frontier

---

CIVILIZANDO LA TIERRA VIRGEN:  
EL DESTINO MANIFIESTO Y EL CULTO A LA DOMESTICIDAD EN *THE GREAT  
MEADOW*, DE ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS

*Este artículo explora la relación entre la domesticidad y el impulso imperialista de los EE. UU. en la novela The Great Meadow, de Elizabeth Madox Roberts. La protagonista convierte el hogar en herramienta esencial para implantar una nueva civilización, justamente cuando la nación americana inicia su expansión imperialista. El ámbito doméstico, en el que la mujer ejerce su dominio moral, está aquí dotado de movilidad, con capacidad para contribuir a la expansión del país. En su intento de establecer un hogar en la tierra virgen, Diony combina el espacio restringido del ámbito femenino con el espacio expansivo del naciente imperio. Su viaje a las tierras salvajes de Kentucky tiene como objetivo implantar los valores de una domesticidad exclusivamente blanca y anglosajona.*

Palabras clave: domesticidad; imperialismo; Destino Manifiesto; E. M. Roberts; frontera

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;  
 The four first Acts already past,  
 A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;  
 Time's noblest Offspring is the last.  
 (George Berkeley 1955: 373)

The Manifest Destiny of the nation unfolds logically from the imperial reach of woman's influence emanating from her separate domestic sphere. Domesticity makes manifest the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race, while Manifest Destiny becomes in turn the condition for Anglo-Saxon domesticity. (Kaplan 1998: 597)

A most popular writer in her day, Elizabeth Madox Roberts has not fared well on literary history's roller coaster ride of critical opinion. Her first novel, *The Time of Man* (1926), was an instant success with readers and reviewers alike.<sup>1</sup> It was praised by notable writers such as Sherwood Anderson, who said about it: "A wonderful performance. I am humble before it" (in Campbell and Foster 1956: 46).<sup>2</sup> Ford Madox Ford signaled it as "the most beautiful individual piece of writing that has as yet come out of America" (in Slavick viii). The novel was chosen in October 1926 as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and later published in England and translated into Swedish, German, Norwegian, Danish, Spanish and French. From the early 1930s onwards, though, sales of Roberts's books fell dramatically, and her popularity plummeted further still following the publication of *He Sent Forth a Raven* in 1935. In the 1950s Roberts's work enjoyed a revival, led by Edward Wagenknecht, who in his *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (1952) wrote that "her kind of poetic insight is the very thing that is needed to save the novel from its exhausted naturalism and sentimentalism" (1952: 396). Interesting reevaluations of Roberts's achievement include Harry Campbell and Ruel Foster's *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Novelist* (1956),<sup>3</sup> containing valuable biographical information and extensive reference to Roberts's journals and papers in the Library of Congress, and Earl H. Rovit's *Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (1960), which remains the most insightful study of Roberts's major works. One contributing factor to the renewal of interest in this Kentucky writer was the unprecedented fascination with modern southern literature by readers and critics. Willard Thorp reviewed her work extensively in the chapter 'Southern Renaissance' in *American Writing in the Twentieth Century* (1960) and placed *The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow* "among the classics of our literature" (1960: 240). In his introduction to the 1982 University of Kentucky Press edition of *The Time of Man*, William Slavick joined the ranks of Roberts's admirers, asserting that this novel made her "the first

<sup>1</sup> The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the European Regional Development Fund (project HUM2007-63438/FILO) as well as by the Xunta de Galicia (network 2007/145).

<sup>2</sup> On reading the novel, Anderson wrote to Roberts: "My love of the book is beyond expression. . . . No one in America is doing such writing" (Slavick viii).

<sup>3</sup> Campbell and Foster enthusiastically predicted that "*The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow* will almost certainly endure as major American novels" (xvi).

major novelist of the Southern renaissance” (1982: vii), and expressed his confidence that renewed interest in feminism and southern art would guarantee its ultimate success. But so far none of these studies have had a lasting impact, and neither have their predictions proven true. The current relegation of Roberts to the margins of American literary history is even more surprising in light of the recent feminist enterprise of reclaiming and celebrating the regenerative and ritualistic dimensions of domesticity and traditional female culture, dimensions which are central to both *The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow*, Roberts’s most successful works.

*The Great Meadow* was Roberts’s fourth novel, but was first conceived of in 1915, even before she went to the University of Chicago to study English (Rovit 1960: 48). Set in the late-eighteenth-century settlement of Kentucky, the characters are intended to resemble the author’s own pioneer ancestors, who came to Kentucky along the Wilderness Road at a time when the West was free from the commercialism that would later assail it. The novel spans the years 1774 to 1781, the period when the lush region in today’s central Kentucky, called ‘The Great Meadow’ in the eighteenth century and later known as the Bluegrass, became a magnet that pulled thousands of people from Virginia and the Carolinas across the Appalachians to settle along the Cumberland and the Kentucky rivers. This ‘land rush’ was almost as powerful as the discovery of gold in California decades later. The settlement of Kentucky, which became the fifteenth state of the Union in 1792, involved a far more extensive frontier than any previous westward settlement, always contiguous with existing settlements. The trans-Appalachian emigrants suffered greatly from Indian attacks, much more so than the emigrants of the Overland Trail in the nineteenth century. During the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) the British garrisons around the Great Lakes were very generous providers for their Indian allies (Eslinger 2004: 65). Indian resistance to trans-Appalachian migration had all but disappeared by 1795.

As John Murphy confirms, the plot of *The Great Meadow* derived from materials the author collected through traveling in her native Kentucky, from the archives of the Filson club in Louisville, and through the study of John Filson’s *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784), which contains ‘The Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boone’ and an account of the wars in Kentucky (1966: 110). The novel narrates the end of the adolescence of protagonist Diony Hall in Albemarle County, on the upper waters of the James river in Virginia; her marriage to the hunter Berk Jarvis; their journey to Kentucky in 1777 along the Wilderness Road through Camberland Gap; the trials and tribulations at Fort Harrod, where they stay before building their own house in the wilderness; the scalping of Berk’s mother, Elvira, by the Shawnees; Berk’s capture by the same tribe during his vengeful journey in search of Indian scalps; the Enoch Arden situation, created by Berk’s unexpected return after being given up for dead, by which time Diony had married another man, which forces her to choose between two husbands. The novel ends with the coming of peace to the frontier land and a hopeful outlook for Diony’s life in the new settlement.

*The Great Meadow* has all the traits of a Western (movement westward, hunting men, Indians, buffalo, etc.) but the protagonist is not the mythic solitary American Adam, but rather a courageous ordinary young woman intent on finding herself and participating in the civilizing project. Annette Kolodny and other feminist critics have

denounced the traditional exclusion of women from the myth of the woodland hero which necessarily involves a male and “a quintessentially feminine terrain apparently designed to gratify his desires” (Kolodny 1984: 5). Daniel Boone, who appears briefly in *The Great Meadow*, is the myth’s earliest incarnation in his irresistible seduction by the virgin land of Kentucky. In the romanticized wilderness garden of what R. W. B. Lewis calls “the noble but illusory myth of the American as Adam” (1955: 89), an Eve would always be redundant. In spite of the adventurousness which impels her to leave her known parental world behind and follow the call of the wild, Diony repeatedly acknowledges that she is not the Boone type, defining herself most of the time within domestic spaces and through domestic activities. The purpose of the present essay is to explore the collusion of the domestic discourse and the imperialistic thrust of the nation abetted by the doctrines of Manifest Destiny and its antecedents.

The beginning of the settlement of Kentucky coincided with the eight-year-old Revolutionary War. And the story of Diony, who is “past sixteen” (Roberts 1992: 15) when the novel opens in 1774, is intentionally set against the background of the Revolution. Thus the novel presents two major parallel movements: the growth and development of Diony as she tries to impose order on her internal world, and the westward movement of the new nation to bring order and civilization to the chaotic untamed wilderness. As Rovit observes, “both movements are characterized symbolically in the novel with images of birth and begetting” (1960: 49). The passage in which Diony tries on her mother’s dress signifies not only her discarding the fears of her approaching “adult being” and her identification with the “new self” (Roberts 1992: 61) she is in the process of accepting, but also the possibilities of the new nation for expansion. In fact, this is preceded by a passage about the initial skirmishes of the Revolutionary war: “There was war in Boston, the colony fighting the King’s men. Some said that all the colonies would snatch themselves free” (1992: 60). After she had agreed to wait for Berk, who returned to the wilderness to hunt and explore, “[n]ews came from Philadelphia in July: Congress had declared the colonies free” (1992: 90). Diony enthusiastically embraces Berk’s invitation to “go to the country behind the mountains and start a new world there” (1992: 110), at the end of Boone’s Wilderness Road. Berk is the frontiersman who returns in the spring to marry Diony, the man of the new season in her life. Thus Roberts deftly establishes a parallel between Diony’s movement to maturity and autonomy – by separating herself from her parents and place of birth – and the colonies separating from the parent country. The westward movement of this pioneer woman is the movement of a whole people into a new promised land or, rather, a new nation with an acute sense of its exceptionalist difference from the inherited history of the Old World. Diony challenges the authority of her father, who initially makes a futile attempt to forbid his daughter from leaving for the West, in the same way as the new independent nation challenged the authority and the greed of George III. Thomas Hall’s initial opposition expresses not only what Murphy terms “the inability of age to cope with progress” (1966: 112) but also the inability of the parent country to maintain authority in the colonies. The enterprise of migration, undertaken by men and women working side by side, was central to the shaping of the American national character and was, according to many, the moment at which the nation first began to be great.

In *The Great Meadow* Roberts implicitly endorses Frederick Jackson Turner's conception of the frontier which, according to Handley, becomes "a synecdoche for America and its exceptionalism that subsumes all stages of history and creates something new, that synchronically unmoors America from the history of the Old World" (2002: 60). Like Turner, Roberts emphasizes the significance of the frontier for all American history, and claims the West as the greatest force in American history and the shaper of American character. In a sense, her claim is that the true progenitors of the new experiment in world history were not the Founding Fathers, by establishing a nation in Philadelphia, but the western pioneers who forged a nation from the vast, implacable wilderness. Through the integration of fiction and historical fact, Roberts paints a picture of America in the process of being made simultaneously in the East (where the war is being fought) and out in the West; and she, like her heroine, privileges the latter, in an attempt to indicate that the idea of America is inseparable from the act of looking west, now that the New Jerusalem and the city upon a hill of the Puritans has given way to the promised land of milk and honey out West.

Where Roberts departs from Turner, who made it clear that what was significant was also male, is in the assignment of epic seriousness to her female protagonist, and in allowing her full participation in what Rosowski terms "the epic ambition of articulating national identity" (1999: xi). The Five Oaks Farm, where Diony lives with her parents and siblings, is on the divide between the sophistication of the Tidewater and its amenities and the rawness of the frontier, at the intersection where "the tilled land and the unbroken forests touched their parts about Diony" (1992: 17). She is not only at the geographical intersection of civilized order and wild chaos, the divide is also within her very self. She acknowledges the refinement of her Tidewater relatives (her father's side of the family) and is able to visualize "the life of brocaded gowns and powdered pompadours" (Rovit 1960: 51) that so intensely fascinate her younger sister Betty, who "denied any grace to this new country [Kentucky] that lay five hundred miles beyond mountain ranges and rivers" (1992: 67). Endowed with a creative mind, Diony feels that the West gives her the opportunity for moral influence and civilizing power. Uninfluenced by the fashion and artifice of society, she volunteers to act as handmaid in the task of rearing a nation in the wild of the West, where she hopes to find "a new country and a new way of being" (1992: 138). Her early exposure to the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley has instilled in her a strong desire for contact with the unordered infinity of the wilderness. Early in the novel she turns down a marriage proposal from the Tidewater gentleman Nathaniel Barlow, who offers a promise of elegance, gentility and a protected future. She is actually being pulled in the opposite direction: "Her whole body swayed toward the wilderness, toward some further part of the world which was not yet known or sensed in any human mind" (1992: 93-94). She prefers the freedom and the energy of the New World starting out in the wilderness, to the good manners of the old, with "folks that use all day inside of parlors and flower gardens and streets and such-like places" (1992: 74). In his largely mythical rendering of American history, Turner spoke of the growing resemblance between the Eastern border and the Old World, in contrast with the strength and the freedom of the new territories. In his essay 'Contributions of the West to American Democracy' (1903), he maintained that:

European men, institutions, and ideas were lodged in the American wilderness, and this great American West took them to her bosom, taught them a new way of looking upon the destiny of the common man, trained them in adaptation to the conditions of the New World, to the creation of new institutions to meet new needs; and ever as society on her eastern border grew to resemble the Old World in its social forms and its industry, ever, as it began to lose faith in the ideals of democracy, she opened new provinces, and dowered new democracies in her most distant domains with her material treasures and with the ennobling influence that the fierce love of freedom, the strength that came from hewing out a home, making a school and a church, and creating a higher future for his family, furnished to the pioneer. (Turner 1998: 99)

Diony wants to take part in the enterprise of creating a new nation, even a new race, through a more profound penetration by Americans of the wilderness of their continent. For Diony, progress is a matter of moving in a contrary direction to the conformity of Tidewater culture, of entering the wilderness that promises new, undreamed of possibilities for authentic regeneration. Roberts makes Diony an expression of the cultural mood of many who, like Jefferson and Jackson, identified the West with democracy and the East with the sterility of the privileged classes. They rejected the greedy commercialism of the Eastern seaboard in favor of a nation expanding through the appropriation and cultivation of new lands at exactly the time when a new nation of cultivators was replacing the mercantile commercial interests of the recent colonial past. As Kolodny observes, “[t]he wilderness was, after all, being claimed by those who pushed the agricultural frontier westward; and, both symbolically and historically, this implied the presence of women” (1984: 63). The female presence was indispensable for the propagation of the race and the cultivation of the orchards and gardens of the new world. In this context, the marriage of Diony to Berk Jarvis, the prototypical male hunter and fighter, could point toward a combination of the two impulses, or rather images, that according to Kolodny competed for prominence: one, present in the doctrine of Jefferson, that “embraced an expanding agricultural republic of small, family-sized farms” and required the female presence as cultivator and preserver of life, and the other, more anarchic and romantic, which “elevated to the status of heroic myth the figure of Daniel Boone as the solitary white hunter amid seductive and untouched virgin wilderness spaces” (Kolodny 1984: 62-63).

Diony is a participant in an imperialistic enterprise which, in *The Great Meadow*, combines classical and American mythologies, the philosophy of Berkeley, and the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny as well as its historical antecedents. In spite of her quarrel with him, Diony remains Thomas Hall’s daughter throughout. He instills in her the love of words, of philosophical speculation and the intellectual ordering of reality. In a novel which depicts the creation of a new world, Roberts takes advantage of the resonance of Berkeley’s notion of creation through knowledge (*esse est percipi*). She describes Diony as “a creature of the mind, moving always more inwardly”, in contrast with Ellen Chesser, the protagonist of *The Time of Man*, who is “more a creature of the ground” (in Rovit 1960: 51) and, as such, she is always consciously motivated to impose form on chaos. Diony’s powerful desire to subdue the infinities of chaos that she faces in the wilderness makes her, as Rovit notes, “a fitting symbol for the American frontier experience; that is, she can be both pioneer and pioneering” (1960: 52). In *The Great*

*Meadow* the meaning of the verb *to know* is remarkably dynamic and creative; to know is to impart order and design on that which lacks them. In her desire “to create rivers by knowing rivers” and “to make a world out of chaos” (Roberts 1992: 24), Diony is carrying the divine mission of the Puritans to create a ‘New Jerusalem’ in the wilderness and the creative urge of the Founding Fathers of the Republic one step further. If the reality which exists in the Eternal Mind is activated by the human mind, which creates through perception and thought, then Diony, as McDowell notes, “in essence creates that toward which she rides” (1963: 103), and by going to the wilderness she may uncover some aspects of the Divine Mind that she could not find elsewhere: “Countries stood forth then in Diony’s mind as having presence, there being many countries to be inhabited, each one different from the others” (Roberts 1992: 69).

One of the justifications for colonization has always been the God-sanctioned impulse to take the light of civilization to those living in darkness, to give men with no recognized history the benefits and order of those who have enjoyed advances and progress. Diony’s father is a firm believer in the conquest and creation of the world through the expansion of the so-called superior civilizations. In his speech to his daughter he affirms that “Civilized Man is forever spreading more widely over the earth, historic Man bringing such men as have no history to humble themselves and learn their lesson. It’s a strong mark of the hidden purposes of the Author of all things” (Roberts 1992: 115). Roberts relates the imperialistic enterprise to Berkeley’s Great Design of an Eternal Spirit. Although Berkeley’s famous verse from the 1720s, “Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way” (‘Verses on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America’ [Berkeley 1955: 373]) is not quoted in the novel, the idea clearly pervades the plot.

In the 1840s the philosophy of Manifest Destiny conflated the sacred and the secular, and the idea of moving West attained a wider, indeed a world-wide, significance. In an article for the July 1845 issue of his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, the journalist John L. O’Sullivan argued that Americans had every right to settle in western lands, as far as the Pacific. He reasoned that God Himself wanted the country to expand westward, that it was the United States’ “manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent” (qtd. in Sonneborn 2002: 256). This idea, which was already commonplace in the eighteenth century, extended far back in history as *translatio imperii*. The medieval abbot and mystic Hugh of St. Victor wrote in *De vanitate mundi* that “everything that happened in the beginning of time took place in the East when the world began, while in the progress of the ages toward the end of time, which is the end of the world, all things come to an end in the West” (qtd. in Nordholt 1995: 9). The Empire of Greece had given way to that of Rome, only for northern Europe to take prominence after the fall of Rome, then the French and Spanish empires had dwindled as Britain’s power rose. Since the beginning of the colonization of America, many felt that Americans were fated to be the next to inherit this role. The achievement of American independence was immediately followed by the belief in a continental destiny which became one of the main factors in the development of American nationalism. In 1784 the Reverend Thomas Brockaway proclaimed that “Empire, learning and religion have in past ages been traveling from east to west, and this continent is their last western state . . . Here then is God erecting a

stage on which to exhibit the great things of his kingdom” (qtd. in Stephanson 1995: 19). This notion of a fated succession of world states and powers appears in *The Great Meadow*: When the hunter-explorer Nathan Jones describes the wilds of Kentucky at Five Oaks, the listeners express a conjecture which becomes a prophecy: “Such a country would breed up a race of heroes, men built and knitted together to endure. . . . A new race for the earth” (Roberts 1992: 13).

Roberts strove to give mythic and epic resonances to her novels. In *The Time of Man* she made the Kentucky female tenant farmer a modern reincarnation of Odysseus; in *The Great Meadow* she makes Diony a modern-day female Aeneas who contributes in the advancement of civilization into the wilderness. One of the two books her father gives Diony for her journey is *The Aeneid*. He actually quotes the opening verses from this epic about the fated voyage of civilization from Troy to Rome: “I sing of arms and the hero who, fate driven, first came from the shores of Troy to Italy and the Lavinian coast, he, *vi superum*, by the power of the gods, much tossed about, *multum jactatus*, much tossed about on land and sea...” (1992: 121). Thus Diony’s journey is invested with the significance of that other mythico-epic journey to found an imperial nation, and her character exhibits the strength and the civic spirit of the Virgilian hero. In Roberts’s modern-day epic, she is the central figure who, with her endurance and her skilled performance of traditionally female activities, becomes a crucial agent of stability and order, taming the land and thus extending the dominion of civilization. Diony begins her journey with a strong sense of destiny and sees herself as part of the unstoppable progress of history, the agent of a plan, of the fate that has been impelling humankind from its birth, aware that she is taking her past into the future: “Suddenly . . . she knew herself as the daughter of many, going back through [her mother] Polly Brook through the Shenandoah Valley and the Pennsylvania clearings and roadways to England, Methodists and Quakers, small farmers and weavers, going back through Thomas Hall to tidewater farmers and owners of land” (1992: 138).

For the mission to succeed, Diony’s husband, Berk Jarvis, is a necessary element. As a hunter and Indian killer, he subdues the primitive forces which have to be tamed or eliminated to make way for civilization. The role reserved for the Indians in *The Great Meadow* does not differ from that traditionally assigned to them in formulaic western novels and movies: the racial ‘others’ against whom the new nation constructs its identity. Both the philosophers of Manifest Destiny and Turner’s mythical version of American history made use of the binary opposition of savagery and civilization in order to justify the western expansion, and made Americanness an exclusive trait of the white man. In Roberts’s novel the only dissenting voice with respect to the Indians is that of Diony’s mother, who vehemently expresses her conviction that the land in Kentucky “belongs to the Indians”, that “[h]it’s Indian property. The white man has got no rights there” (1992: 104-05). Everybody else exhibits the inferior ethical standards of the day, sharing in the racist sense of ‘natural right’. For Berk the Indians are “a poor sort, under all their paint and war-noises” (1992: 107), and in the Harrod fort, in Kentucky, there is consensus that daring white males are “better deserving than they [the Indians] of a fine caneland” (1992: 226). The Indians are always violent intractable “savages” (1992: 100, 101, etc.), “a dunce race” (1992: 332) untouched by the light of reason, treacherous, even cannibalistic. It seems, indeed, as if there are no explicitly

presented American agents of violence in *The Great Meadow*, which coincides in this respect with Turner's frontier thesis, as if the agency of American imperialism were put in the passive voice to preserve the sense of American innocence. The aggressors here are actually the Indians, who in a key passage kill and scalp Berk's mother and come very close to killing Diony herself. The colonists are the saviors who bring the light of reason and civilization, and no one is to blame since they are agents of the inevitable, fated course of history. They are part of what David Minter calls "a story in which the dispossession and the deaths of Native Americans seem to be sanctioned if not by God at least by history" (1994: 14). Roberts had read Filson, who has the Indians say, "God made the white flesh masters of the world ... and we all love rum", and speculates that the Indians represent the remnants of a fallen or degenerated race. Filson sees the Indians as racially inferior to the white Americans and therefore as a people whom it is right to displace (Slotkin 2000: 275). If the frontier is "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner 1998: 32), the westward movement is easily legitimized by suggesting that white settlers were the bearers of civilization and progress. For the second Adam to begin its history in the new world of the frontier, the first Adam (the Indian) has to be expelled from his Garden of Eden.

*The Great Meadow* is a heavily dichotomized novel, informed not only by the binary opposition between civilization and savagery but also that between male and female. The central issue is the role that Roberts assigns to woman in the project of planting civilization in the wilderness. Roberts's conception of femininity is actually very traditional. She shares the gender stereotypes of the time – a set of interrelated roles for women and men – writing, as she was, long before the emergence of the notion of gender as a socially determined and culturally constructed system. A good example is this much quoted passage, during the harsh passage through the Gateway among the cliffs, which explicitly presents a dichotomous conception of gender roles:

Together, men and women, they went slowly forward, the men to the fore, the man's strength being in the thrust, the drive, in action, the woman's lateral, in the plane, enduring, inactive but constant. They [men and women] marched forward, taking a new world for themselves, possessing themselves of it by the power of their courage, their order, and their endurance. (Roberts 1992: 168)

The spaces Diony controls are those traditionally assigned to women. In spite of her penchant for the wilderness, she does not reject the idea of a womanhood devoted to the home and the hearth, but actually makes them essential tools in the task of planting civilization. Her longing for a home of her own is actually the spring that impels Diony to action all along. Early in the novel she realizes with dismay "that Five Oaks would not be her place", as the land will go to her brothers and she will "have to marry to get a place" (1992: 18). Later she considers the possibility of going with Barlow to the Tidewater and imagines "herself settled, at home there, on land she owned for her own home" (1992: 65). But she feels that her real aim is to build her home in the wilderness. Thus the narrative of the journey is also going to be the narrative of her home.

By creating a female pioneer Roberts deviates from the romantic tradition which requires solitary flight from family and community. The myth not only excludes women from this flight into the wilderness, but also casts them as the domestic

conservers from whom the heroic Adam figure must escape. R. W. B. Lewis describes the American Adam as the male hero “untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (1955: 5). Americans have long celebrated this prototypical figure, to be found in the landscape of the American West but who never actually settled the West by himself, or even lived there in his glorious isolation. The Marlboro Man type is a social creation that embodies a profoundly asocial ideal which excludes female experience and has no appeal for the woman writer. What we find in Roberts, on the other hand, is the collusion of the ideology of imperialism with the cult of domesticity. The female is allowed mobility only after she is married and can follow along the male journey, because her role as grower, nurturer and housewife is necessary for the colonization of the wilderness. She is, after all, identified with the maternal qualities of the very land which is going to breed a new race of men. Kolodny observes that, “[l]ike their husbands and fathers, [pioneer] women too shared in the economic motives behind emigration; and like the men, women also dreamed of transforming the wilderness. But the emphases were different” (1984: xii). Women writers like Roberts make female pioneers the agents that bring with them the civilization which tames and orders the wilderness, following on after intrepid males such as Boone have blazed the trails. In his review of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), Theodore Roosevelt praised the hyper-masculine western hero who exhibited “the great virile virtues – the virtues of courage, energy and daring; the virtues which beseem a masterful race – a race fit to fell the forests, to build roads, to found commonwealths, to conquer continents, to overthrow armed enemies” (in Faragher 2000: xii). But there is no way civilization can flourish in an exclusively male wilderness, and there are many who consider the pioneer women to be the true civilizers of a rough and tumble frontier.

In her essay ‘Manifest Domesticity’, Amy Kaplan says that we should not think of domesticity as a static condition but as a process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild and the alien. As she argues, “[d]omestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery” (1998: 582). The development of domestic discourse in America is contemporaneous with the discourse of Manifest Destiny, and America was imagined as a home at the time when its geopolitical borders were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations with Indians, Mexicans and others. Roberts sets her heroine in a period prior to the heyday of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, precisely at the time when the house of America was beginning its imperialistic expansion, and Diony Hall is one of the women who, although excluded from the grand exploits reserved for the Boone kind of man, exerted the moral influence (‘the empire of the heart’) in the domestic sphere, which would become an engine of national expansion. Thus domesticity not only draws boundaries between the privacy of the home and the outside world controlled by men, it also becomes “the site from which the nation reaches beyond itself through the emanation of woman’s moral influence” (Kaplan 1998: 586). In *The Great Meadow*, the home, usually conceived of as a restricted and rigidly ordered interior space, is in collusion with its apparent opposite, “the boundless and undifferentiated space of an infinitely

expanding nation” (Kaplan 1998: 583). Rather than a merely feminine counterforce to the male activity of territorial conquest, domesticity is endowed with mobility and thus greatly contributes to the expansion of the nation. Diony is the protagonist of a traditionally male plot of the outward journey, and her story of establishing a home in the wilderness combines the contracted space of woman’s sphere with the expansion of American empire. She makes her journey into the wilderness to plant the values of an exclusively white American domesticity. Although we tend to conceive of the home as a stable center, domesticity becomes spatially and conceptually mobile, capable of traveling to the new frontiers of the nation.

Diony does not have the thrust of the male hunter, but she does have all the strengths of the female sex. She acknowledges that she is not the Boone kind, but she has a more sophisticated sense of her cultural and historic role than either Boone or her husband Berk. The latter’s strength and thrust are necessary to conquer the wilderness, but in the long run they would be futile without Diony’s tamer insight and influence. In her notes, Roberts wrote that “Diony represents ordered life and the processes of the mind, the mind life. She is not of the Boone kind. She feels lost in an indefinite universe. She wants ordered ways. She wants beauty and dignity and ceremony and the reasons of all things” (qtd. in McDowell 1963: 96-97). Diony takes active part in the creation of a new world out West; she actually “knew herself to be the beginning of a new world. All about her were beginnings” (Roberts 1992: 190). The fulfilling of this destiny in Roberts’s historical novel is not a matter of grand marches and fierce Indian fights. Her American Eve lays the foundations of the ‘new world’ through the simple everyday activities of spinning, weaving, sewing, cooking, cultivating a garden, and through the provision of those qualities that soothe and socialize the roughness of men and ensure social stability.<sup>4</sup> According to Kolodny, for the American Eve the word *paradise* denoted domesticity, whereas for the American Adam it was “an invitation for mastery and possession of the vast new continent” (1984: 54), although this is perhaps to some extent another rigid, unrealistic dichotomy. Roberts is one of those women writers who, according to Helen Levy, “understand that the American nation was made up of little neighborhoods following in the wake of Daniel Boone’s fabled demand for ‘elbow room’, neighborhoods and civilizations formed out of family recipes, wedding quilts, faithful letters from the East, and carefully preserved rootstocks and herbal remedies from dooryard gardens” (Levy 1992: 228). Diony’s contribution to the preservation and advancement of white Anglo-Saxon civilization is made clear in the passage describing the gifts that her mother and father give her before she sets out for the West. From her mother she receives “cuts of wooden cloth, the blankets, seeds for a garden, a few vessels, knives and spoons”, whereas her father gives her “two books from those on the shelf” (Roberts 1992: 134).

---

<sup>4</sup> Kolodny says that “women quite literally set about planting gardens in these wilderness places”, and that they “claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity”. Rather than engaging in the typically male exploration and massive exploitation of the continent, “[t]hey dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden” (1984: xiii).

A later passage, in the Kentucky part, makes clear how the novel fuses the chronicle of the personal development of Diony with the cultural myth of the development of American experience and a symbolic rendering of the progress of mankind. Diony has a long dream vision of “a new world, the beginning before the beginning”, in which the advance of civilization is presented as an unending series of new beginnings. It begins with “fields turned up by the plow”, in consonance with Jefferson’s ideal, and soon expands to “sheep sprinkled over a pasture or turned in on a hillside to crop the stubble and glean a fine rich eatage for themselves”. It then advances to include the beginnings of a civil society whose achievement required the collaboration of both the Boone kind and the Diony kind, with “stone walls and rail fences setting bounds to the land”, a land which “stands now, in vision, as owned, this man’s farm beside that man’s, all contained now, bounded, divided, and shared, and one sinks into the security and lies down to rest himself. Through the farms run lanes and well pounded roads, making a further happiness, ways to go to meet a neighbor at his own house”. Diony’s hopes are still innocent and her dream does not contemplate the violation of the peaceful garden or the disruption of the harmonious community by the need to turn nature into wealth. In the vision, the human mind imposes order on chaos and “[t]he wearying infinitives of the wilderness come to an end” (Roberts 1992: 207, 208, 209). This is related to the episode in which Diony, accidentally locked out of the fort, spends one night in the open and feels the frightening alien touch of the wilderness and “[t]he infinitives of life, . . . endlessly growing, [which] oppressed her, and she was afraid, less of the wolf-cries toward the south than of the indefinite earth” (1992: 273) and “[t]he indefiniteness of the outside earth, beyond herself, became a terror” (1992: 275). Diony never surrenders to the chaos around her, and she finds inside herself the power and the faith to carry on with life, and the civilization of which she has been such a powerful agent allays any fears of indefiniteness. Thus the novel merges the chronicle of colonization with one of Roberts’s major themes: the individual creation of order out of the chaos of sensation. It is as if civilization, with its potential for order and symmetry, were immanent in the wilderness, waiting for the Berkeleyian human mind to know and thus create it. A rationally controlled environment will realize, through agrarian cultivation, nature’s inherent power to sustain civilization.

In keeping with Roberts’s conviction that “the sovereign part of man is his mind” and her assertion that Diony is “a creature of mind” (qtd. in Rovit 1960: 61), the vision is crowned by the superior achievement of “knowledge, of wisdom brought under beautiful or awful sayings and remembered, kept stored among written pages and brought together then as books”, books in which one might “search the terrible pages, looking for beauty, looking for some final true way of life”. In those books “Man walks slowly down through the centuries, walking on the stairs of the years” (Roberts 1992: 212). The reverence for books as repositories of human culture that has characterized Diony all along is a powerful force that balances the anti-intellectualism of the American Boone-type male hunter represented in the novel by Berk.

Diony’s vision of a civil society is actually an implicit justification of the colonization and repossession of the Indian territories. According to the white settler’s argument, only work and improvement confer the right to ownership, not previous ownership, or ‘stewardship’, as American Indians might perhaps have expressed their

own relationship with the land. The Indian, according to the white settler, has no right to the land simply because he was there first. The rightful owner is the one who converts wilderness into settlement and land into farms. This is the point made by Tocqueville at the end of the first chapter of his *Democracy in America*:

Although the vast country that I have been describing was inhabited by many indigenous tribes, it may justly be said, at the time of its discovery by Europeans, to have formed one great desert. The Indians occupied without possessing it. It is by agricultural labor that man appropriates the soil, and the early inhabitants of North America lived by the produce of the chase. Their implacable prejudices, their uncontrollable passions, their vices, and still more, their virtues, consigned them to inevitable decay. The ruin of these tribes began from the day when Europeans landed on their shores; it has proceeded ever since, and we are now witnessing its completion. (1980: 26)

By the novel's end, Diony has already given birth to two boys, one by Berk and one by Muir. As Murphy says, "[h]er second marriage and the birth of Muir's son, Michael, had successfully tapped the resources of her womanhood, resources precious to frontier life, which would have been wasted during the [three] years of Berk's absence" (1966: 115). The white settlers needed not only to claim the land but to populate it and work it as quickly as possible, in order to hold onto it. The success of the settlements depended on the quick growth of populations there, and hence female reproduction became an essential component of the conquering of the land. The explorers and trail blazers like Boone made the physical move necessary for the initial establishment of settlements; for these same settlements to move forwards over time required marriages and descendants. Significantly, the novel closes with the image of Diony nursing her baby in her small outpost of civilization on the borders of the wilderness.

The novel's ending emphasizes once again the role of rational (that is, white) man in bringing order to chaos. It is another beginning in a novel pervaded by images of fertility and rebirth: "For a little while she felt that the end of an age had come to the world, a new order dawning out of the chaos that had beat through the house during the early part of the night. Her thought strove to put all in order before she lay down to sleep. She felt the power of reason over the wild life of the earth" (1992: 337). It was precisely reason, the "strong part" (1992: 338) of the individual, that allowed Berk to outwit the 'wild' men and avoid being cannibalized (he escaped from the Shawnee cannibals when he convinced them of the indestructibility of the reasoning part of his being). The same power later guided Diony to make the right decision when choosing Berk, who had had first claim to her. After three years as the Boone-type hunter and Indian killer, Berk is now stripped of his hunting shirt and moccasins, and ready for a new phase in the colonization, which will require a larger family and intense cultivation of the land. The new stage in his and Diony's life, and in the life of the American nation, is symbolized by their house in the settlement. Berk says that "[i]t's a very good house, ... But it's not the whole house I set out to build here. I'll make another part equal to this and a fine wide passage between" (1992: 336). He seems to have come round to her way of thinking, which had opposed Berk's revenge expedition: "I came to Kentucky to get ... What did I come here for? I came to get a fine farm in the cane . . . . A fine high house, fields all about it" (1992: 244). The latest news from the East is that "George Washington had got the King's army in a pocket at Yorktown" (1992: 335). The house

of America is indeed in the process of a dramatic expansion of its geopolitical borders. And for the building of this magnificent house, women like Diony, who raise the children and work at the spinning wheel or with the needle, and cultivate the gardens, are as necessary as the men who do the hunting and fight the battles. These women have always been precious and indispensable agents in the construction of the ever expanding edifice of America. This expansion necessarily involves the consideration of the native Indians as undomesticated aliens who are exterminated or subjugated so that the nation might be preserved as a protected domestic space. A colonization which embodies the feminine values of domesticity actually pursued the establishment of domesticity in America as exclusively white. The capacity for domesticity was thus considered an exclusive, defining characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon civilization.

The Diony who left Five Oaks because she did not have the land to build her home there, now has her homestead on the frontier, and the ephemeral fragility of the wilderness is slowly giving way to the stable rhythms of farm and family. The horizontal plane of advance and exploration has given way to the vertical one of the kind of growth that depends on roots thrust into the ground. The frontier is no longer a line to arrive at but an area inviting penetration. After Diony has fulfilled her mission to transport female influence beyond her original home and beyond the nation's original home along the Eastern seaboard, we witness a certain retraction of women's sphere, which moves back within the domestic boundaries traditionally policed by woman to prevent the threat of the wild from both outside and inside the family unit. As the frontier becomes 'civilized', Diony will become sovereign of her home, at the cost of withdrawal from the outside world.

#### Works Cited

- Berkeley, George 1955: *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*. Vol. 7. Ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop. London: Thomas Nelson.
- Campbell, Harry M. and Ruel E. Foster 1956: *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Novelist*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P.
- Eslinger, Ellen 2004: 'Introduction: Early Explorations'. *Running Mad for Kentucky: Frontier Travel Accounts*. Ed. Ellen Eslinger. Lexington: UP of Kentucky. 1-66.
- Faragher, John Mack 2000: *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Handley, William R. 2002: *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Kaplan, Amy 1998: 'Manifest Domesticity'. *American Literature* 70: 581-606.
- Kolodny, Annette 1984: *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P.
- Levy, Helen F. 1992: *Fiction of the Home Place: Jewett, Cather, Glasgow, Porter, Welty, and Naylor*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.
- Lewis, R. W. B. 1955: *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- McDowell, Frederick P. W. 1963: *Elizabeth Madox Roberts*. New York: Twayne.
- Minter, David 1994: *A Cultural History of the American Novel: Henry James to William Faulkner*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

- Murphy, John J. 1966: 'Elizabeth Madox Roberts and the Civilizing Consciousness'. *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 64: 110-20.
- Nordholt, Jan Willem Schulte 1995: *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire*. Trans. Herbert H. Rowen. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Roberts, Elizabeth Madox 1992 (1930): *The Great Meadow*. Nashville: J. S. Sanders.
- Rosowski, Susan J. 1999: *Birth of a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.
- Roit, Earl H. 1960: *Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P.
- Slavick, William H. 1982: 'Ellen Chesser: A Journey of the Mind'. Introduction. Elizabeth Madox Roberts. *The Time of Man*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky. vii-xx.
- Slotkin, Richard 2000 (1973): *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P.
- Sonneborn, Liz 2002: *The American West: An Illustrated History*. New York: Scholastic Inc.
- Stephanson, Anders 1995: *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Thorp, Willard 1960: *American Writing in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de 1980: *Democracy in America*. The Henry Reeve text as revised by Francis Bowen. New York: Knopf.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson 1998 (1903): 'Contributions of the West to American Democracy'. John Mack Faragher, ed. *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*. New Haven: Yale UP. 77-100.
- 1998 (1893): 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'. John Mack Faragher, ed. *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*. New Haven: Yale UP. 31-60.
- Wagenknecht, Edward 1952: *Cavalcade of the American Novel*. New York: Henry Holt.

Received 29 May 2008

Accepted 24 October 2008

Constante González Groba is Professor of American literature in the English Department of the University of Santiago de Compostela, where he obtained his PhD. His main research interest is the fiction of women writers from the American South. He has published essays on Carson McCullers, Lee Smith, Lillian Smith, Kate Chopin, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and others. His most recent publication is the book *On Their Own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace* (Universitat de València, 2008).

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidade de Santiago, 15782, Santiago (A Coruña).  
Tel. +34 981563100 ext. 11894. Fax +34 981574646