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Review Article
The Wide, the Shining Country of F. R. Scott

The Collected Poems of F. R. Scott.
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981. 379 pp.

This volume, though by no means a "Complete Poems of F. R. Scott," contains most of the poems from Scott's previous books, including *Trouvailles* (1967) and *The Dance is One* (1973) which, of course, post-date the *Selected Poems* of 1966. It also contains many poems which either do not appear in Scott's earlier books or have not hitherto been published, thus furnishing some surprises for all but the poet's most privileged critics. On account of its comprehensiveness, the *Collected Poems* should prove for many a very attractive and worthwhile book. The volume allows Scott's achievement as a poet to be fully registered, measured, and appreciated: its three-hundred-odd pages of poetry constitute an impressive canon, particularly when it is remembered that Scott combined a vocation for poetry with several other interests and careers, including those of university teacher and administrator, political activist and constitutional lawyer.

Now that Scott's poetic canon can be seen steadily and seen (almost) whole, it becomes clearer than ever that humanism is central to his thinking and his poetry. Explicitly in such well-known poems as "Eden" (" 'If we keep on using this knowledge/I think we'll be back...,' " p. 189) and "Creed" ("The human race is my race...The future of man is my heaven," p. 89), and implicitly almost everywhere in his *Collected Poems*, Scott reveals the tenets of his humanism: a belief in the power of right reason, of reason informed by communal values, and a belief in the community of man, a community which must be brought to recognize—and this is the imperative of the poet—for whom it is that the bell tolls. In the century of Hitler and Hiroshima, the century in which space may be "common to man and man" but "every country below is an I land" (p. 56), Scott's belief in reason

amounts to nothing less than an urgent act of faith and his belief in community to something like the affirmation of a mystery. Scott's belief in human reason, his conviction that right thinking can bring us into paradise, underpins his satirical verse, prompting him to use such devices as irony and sarcasm, parody and caricature, juxtaposition and understatement, which have always been the indispensable weapons of the thinking man in his efforts to renovate the world in accordance with a humanitarian vision. It is a belief that cements the connection in his poetry between brain and pen, a connection which, at times, makes for work that fails to rise above the level of lineated thought. By the same token, Scott's belief in the community of man, his conviction that no man should be an island, underlies many superficially diverse groups of poems in his canon: his elegies (like "For Pegi Nicol"), his expressions of personal and social love (like "Caring"), and his poems of international and world unity (like "Bangkok")—even his poems of the Canadian landscape, for surely a love of the land, though it frequently flourishes in the same wood lot as nationalism, can be considered a consistent, local manifestation of one-worldism. It is Scott's belief in the organic integrity of man and earth which prompts him to inveigh, sometimes with a lack of charity that threatens the very ground of his humanism, against all manifestations of selfishness, inversion, and mechanization. A brief anthology of quotations should suffice to point up the centrality of Scott's humanistic beliefs in reason and community to *The Collected Poems*:

> Great issues in this season
> Compel a choice,
> And to the search for reason
> I add my voice. ("Press Report," p. 86)

> Far away among my Canadian snows
> The white of my landscape was tinged with his colour,
> My mountains were taller. ("On the Death of Gandhi," p. 115)

> I see my father in the dying man
> I am his son who dwells upon the earth.... ("Last Rites," p. 169)

> Normally we do not speak to one another on this avenue,
> But the excitement made us suddenly neighbours.
> People who had never been introduced
> Exchanged remarks
> And for a while we were quite human. ("Calamity," p. 203)

> For we are each and all, not singular
> Only, not separate and distinct
> But plural, multitudes as one.
> So Crown is round and without end or start
> As each is universe though only part. ("Monarchy," p. 177)

Such quotations could be multiplied many times over from *The Collected Poems*, as could quotations which reveal Scott's extension of the moral-aesthetic of his humanism into an anthropocentric view of external nature, into a Platonic conception of language as the vehicle for ideals, into a futuristic vision based on human community, into an atheistic idea of personal absorption, at death, to the ocean and earth from which all life came.

It is part of Scott's humanistic programme to argue that the external, the lower, even the inanimate worlds, though they can be construed as things indifferent to the quest for a community based on right reason, can and must be seen as parts of an interconnected and interdependent world, as parts of a marvellous order which the power of right-seeing—the sensual cognate of the right-thinking of the loving heart—has the ability both to comprehend and to create. This is the theme of the much-anthologised "Vision":

> I am clothed in what eye sees.
> Snail's small motion and mountain's height,
> Dress me with their symmetries
> In the robing-rooms of light.
>
> Stars so distant, stones nearby
> Wait, indifferently, in space
> Till an all-perceptive eye
> Gives to each its form and place.
>
> Tireless eye, so taut and long,
> Touching flowers and flames with ease
> All your wires vibrate with song
> When it is the heart that sees. (p. 167)

By definition, creatures in the sub-human realm (see "My Amoeba is Unaware," p. 124) are unconscious of their relation and contribution to the patterns which man discovers and creates, but the humanistic poet, whose ability to effect change, like his claim to personal immortality, resides in his success in making the reader "see the world differently" (p. 149), knows very well that events can become signals, that unmotivated signs can become motivated patterns in the eye of a mind that is aware of rational order and inter-connectedness. To see the world in a grain of sand or, as Scott has it, an "ordered purpose" in a grain of rice, a "great...glory in life-thrust and mind-range," means participating in an "enlargement of wonder" (p. 126) which, by a mysterious leap of the poet's humanistic faith, leads towards a sense of the organic unity of all creation. Needless to say, Scott is far too astute and committed to allow either the ideal of a unified world or the perception of a universal pattern to eclipse the particular and pressing

problems of the twentieth century. "I am easier now,/Knowing an order in the universe," he writes in "Water," adding: "I will stay awhile with this water,/But not too long. You are not excused" (p. 123). In context these lines mark the poet's transition from escapism and generalization—the former in his contemplation of the "clean" water of the "northland" and the latter in his contemplation of the "Civilized water" of the metropolis—towards a challenging and liberating contemplation of waters elsewhere in the world, waters that are "Charged full of politics and power and race." Even the relatively trivial "Ad-Men" (the second of the "Social Sonnets" of *Events and Signals*) ends with the comment "And please—no escaping to Moscow or to Rome" (p. 253) because, for the humanist, the disparity between the real world and the glimpsed ideal must issue, not in ideological escapism or *contemptus mundi*, but in an active confrontation, through whatever means are available, with the present problems of his particular place and, beyond that, of the larger world.

It has been said that poetry does not change anything. As intimated by his praise of Pratt for "opening enormous depths/to human sympathy" (this despite the brutal indifference of certain Newfoundlanders in "Happening at Aldridge's Pond," pp. 201-202, to "the bond of presence" between two whales), Scott wants to believe otherwise. In fact, he affirms in several places, in "Poetry," with its surrealistic allusions to Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Gertrude Stein, and in "Unison," with its metaphysical analogy between poem and church as places where the heart unfolds, that the creative, connotative, and humanizing language of poetry has the power to make connections, to collapse differences, to effect transformations, to enact either satirical anger or worshipful celebration—qualities which are as uniquely valuable for the poet of humanistic vision as sympathy itself, the quality which allows the reader, as "Books of Poems" indicates, to enter through poetry into the "grief...joy...passion...and...song" (p. 131) of his fellow human beings. Despite its contemporary colouring, Scott's belief in the social function of poetry, like his notion of kinship among living creatures and, indeed, like his diction in many instances (such as "song" for poetry in the previous quotation), manifests links with the Romantic-Victorian tradition which cast into relief the fact that Modern Canadian poetry sought a discontinuity with the immediate literary past in order, not to sever itself from tradition, but to release its energies from the prison of second-rate, formulaic Romanticism. The best of Canada's post-Confederation and early Modern writers, Lampman and Smith, D. C and F. R. Scott, exhibit the expected differences of time and temperament but they also have much in common in their attitudes to poetry, to nature, and to society. "We

cannot be contained / In our fathers' houses. We...have moved / Beyond the classic pattern" (p. 136) writes the author of "A L'Ange Avant-Gardien" in "Meeting," but in the same poem the author of such poems as "Autumnal" and "North April' allows that "What has not been taken, stays, and what stays / Is shared in the not taking."

The poems in Scott's *Collected* are arranged, as the poet explains according to "categories within which the thematic and chronological relationships are generally followed" (p. 377). This is probably so that the poems may be read and studied by theme and pattern more easily than is the case, for instance, in the more chronologically arranged *Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt.* To some, the organization of the Scott volume will seem, at best, arbitrary and precarious, the more so because Scott is a poet whose work exhibits a definite development, and a poet, moreover, who produced many poems of a topical nature and who organized his earlier volumes with an eye to relations of contrast and juxtaposition between pairs and groups of poems. From this point of view, it will seem a shame that the *Collected Poems* is not divided into chronologically-ordered book sections, with the arrangement of poems in the original volumes retained. Nor will a dismayed reader derive much comfort from the fact that, in the excellent Indexes of Titles and First Lines in the *Collected Poems*, "the date of composition is included with the individual title listing, and, where appropriate, the date of revision" (p. 359), for this is an unwieldy method of determining chronology and, in any case, gives no sense of the date of original publication. (The point may also be made that only fairly major revisions appear to be noted; minor revisions, such as the change in the final stanza of "New Names" from "Let us give new names" to "I think we should give new names" that occurred with the *Selected Poems*, are not mentioned.) Nevertheless, it is useful to have dates of composition and, when all is said and done, Scott's early volumes are still available for consultation and comparison by serious students and scholars.

A few examples of the sorts of conjunctions that have been lost or, to put it differently, displaced by the arrangement of *The Collected Poems* may prove useful. In the *Overture* volume of 1945, "Surfaces"—a lyric treating of the "eternal lifeless processes" (p. 39) of nature—provides a prelude and a gloss for the early Northern poems such as "North Stream" and "Old Song" but in the *Collected Poems* this prelusive function is assumed by "New Paths," and "Surfaces" becomes the fourth poem of a gradual induction into the moral-aesthetic of the "Laurentian" section of the book, into the landscape which, for Scott, is both spiritually regenerating and poetically renovating. (Since Scott is a poet who seems especially sensitive to the

pronouncements of his critics—*Selected Poems* is divided into four sections corresponding to the "four main groups"—"poems in which nature description, love, social idealism, or social satire predominates"—which Desmond Pacey had discerned in *Ten Canadian Poets*, it is interesting to observe that "New Paths" is centred on the line—"Here is a new soil and a sharp sun"—which his biographer, Sandra Djwa, has used in the title of her fine article in *Modernist Studies* for 1975.) Another grouping that has been displaced by larger priorities in the *Collected Poems* is the pairing of "Vagrant" and "Teleological," pieces which appear back to back, like the images on the twenty-dollar bill, in the *Overture* volume and, in that context, constitute a brilliant analysis of two complementary but opposite attitudes: in "Vagrant" that of the (hinterland) individualist who moves "to spaces where no systems are/beyond the last accepted norm" (a figure for whom "the present seemed the only tense" and himself "the sole criterion," p. 55) and in "Teleological" that of the (baseland) conformist who "Avoids/Behavior that's odd—/like questioning God,/Not playing games, writing tales,/Or being natural with females" (a man who "Takes to golf" and is knocked "for a loop" by the "Oxford group," p. 250). Separated by nearly two-hundred pages in the *Collected Poems*, these pieces assume different contexts—"Vagrant" amongst the "Laurentian" poems (curiously it separates "Ode to a Politician" and "W.L.M.K." in the *Selected*) and "Teleological" in the "Satire and Light Verse" section (interestingly it appears early in *The Eye of the Needle* where "Vagrant" is the concluding poem). Although, as these examples illustrate, certain earlier and interesting groupings have been dissolved in the *Collected Poems*, other groups, such as the "Letters from the Mackenzie River," remain substantially unchanged, and some, like the elegies of the *Events and Signals* volume, gather related poems around themselves so that they become small constellations within the ten, titled sections of the volume.

A notable feature of the *Collected Poems* is the inclusion of poems which are not to be found in Scott's earlier books. These poems fall into three categories: poetic exercises, satirical or light verses, and poems of significant, personal statement. Most of the poetic exercises, poems which show Scott flexing his muscles by imitating the manners of Yeats, Stevens, Eliot, Auden and others are to be found in the opening section of the volume entitled "Indications," but "Reverie" (p. 154) and "Song" (p. 147) seem also to participate in this category, which will surely be of great interest to those concerned with matters of imitation and influence, importation and adaptation in Canadian poetry. Those concerned with Scott as a satirist and humorist will be pleased to see the inclusion in the "Social Notes I, 1932" and "Social

Notes II, 1935" groups in the *Collected Poems* of a more generous selection of the satirical squibs which he published in *The Canadian Forum* and elsewhere, and pleased, too, that the "Sweeney" poems which, as Peter Stevens has rightly observed succeed in giving a "local and personal tone" to Eliot's satirical voice, have been gathered into the main canon. "My Three Doctors" (p. 263), "The Problem" (p. 243), "School of Domestic Science" (p. 248), and "Ars Medica" (p. 269)—with its telling reference to Ogden Nash—are further additions which show Scott in a light vein, while "Hanged by the Neck" (p. 73) and "Archive" (p. 83) show the darker side of his social and satirical vision. The poems of significant, personal statement which are either published or anthologized for the first time in the *Collected Poems* include "New Paths" (discussed earlier) and "Evolution" (an explicit discussion of Darwinism), as well as several poems, "Landing" (p. 57), "In Kanbawza Road" (pp. 120-121), "A Moving Picture" (pp. 146-147), "Keepsake" (p. 149), and "Cycles," in which Scott's humanistic concerns, his emphasis on personal and social love, his idea of poetic immortality, his recognition of the necessity for continual action in the mundane sphere, make themselves clearly apparent. "To—" (p. 140), "Where Are the Children?" (p. 165), and "Will Be" (p. 180) are brief pieces which, while expressive of Scott's major themes, seem curiously trite in comparison with the other newcomers in *Collected Poems*.

Another notable aspect of the volume is its omissions. While some of these are regrettable (Burlap is certain to have his mourners), most are perfectly understandable. "Lost Syllable," "Calvary," and "Return to Dream" which languish in the *Overture* volume are intellectual and rhetorical exercises that are undistinguished by any particular mental force or poetic skill. "Ann Frank" remains in *Events and Signals*, despite its expression of empathy, probably because of its mawkishly silly premise: "Ann Frank / I do not share your fate / Because we share a common name." Also remaining behind in the *Events and Signals* volume are the jejune travel poems: "Polynesian" (with its trite moral) and "Plane Landing in Tokyo" (with its clever application of the haiku form to Japanese subject-matter). ("Plane Landing in Tokyo" does appear in *Selected Poems*, however—between "Bangkok" and "Japanese Sand Garden," Scott's marvellous handling of negative space which, though the Index of *Collected Poems* remains inscrutably silent on the matter, has been considerably revised since 1966.) The omission of approximately ten poems from each of *Signature, The Dance is One* and *The Eye of the Needle*, and of about half of *Trouvailles*, shows that Scott has subjected his poetry to close and critical scrutiny; generally it may be said that he has chosen to omit from his *Collected Poems* pieces that are too busily recondite (such as "Signature" itself), convolutedly

clever (such as "The Distance of Love") simplistically moral (such as "Christmas"), sentimentally personal (such as "Question"), or merely trivial (the trouvailles) or mistaken ("The Miniaturized Groom"). It is true to say that on the whole *The Collected Poems* represents a victory of considered opinion and aesthetic judgment over momentary impulse and—to borrow a phrase from "Pamplona, July, 1969"—"facile cleverness" (p. 176).

The various revisions to poems that are brought forward to *The Collected Poems* are as interesting as the volume's omissions and additions. In most cases the revisions are quite minor. Sometimes they can be described as merely technical, as in the breaking up of the five-line stanzas of "Lesson" (*Events and Signals, Selected Poems*) into units of two and three. In some instances fairly minor revisions bring about an enhancement of logic and meaning, as in the transposition of the penultimate and ante-penultimate stanzas of "Stone" (*Events and Signals, Selected Poems*) or in the isolation of "she" and "we" on separate lines in "The Dance is One." On other occasions very minor revisions bring about a change in meaning and tone, as in the removal of a comma from the second stanza of "To Certain Friends" so that "Sincere in their unsincerity; believing, in unbelief" (*Overture, Selected Poems*) becomes "Sincere in their insincerity; believing in unbelief" (p. 77). One poem in which very considerable changes have occurred is "Autumn Lake." It will be recalled that in *Signature* there are two "Autumn Lake" poems (numbered I and II) and that in *Selected Poems* the pair is considerably revised. In *The Collected Poems,* the two pieces have been collapsed into the one "Autumn Lake" which provides a mystical conclusion to the "Laurentian" section of the book. It would thus appear that Scott has had special difficulty with this important poem—perhaps, it may be suggested, because of an uncertainty regarding the proper means for enacting in poetry the process and quality of an experience which, in much mystical thinking, has been considered ineffable. Be this as it may (and, clearly, there is not the room here either to consider the significance of the revisions in *Collected Poems* or to embark on a collation of the differences between the various published versions of Scott's poems), the point needs clearly to be made that, though textually a conservative poet, Scott has subjected many of his poems to more or less considerable revision between publications. Unquestionably, these revisions will come in for close study, as, indeed, will the evolution of the translations from French and Italian which constitute the final section of *The Collected Poems.*

The text of *The Collected Poems of F. R. Scott* appears to be innocent of typographical errors. (In fact, the rare typographical errors in earlier printings have been corrected, an instance being the correction—or revision?—in "Place de la Concorde" of "two and fro," as it was in *The Dance is One.*) The volume is handsomely produced in a large format with wide margins and deep gulleys which not only set off the poems attractively but also provide ample space for notes. It is a pity, however, that the lines have not been numbered by units of five; the cost of this would surely not have been prohibitive and it would have added to the usefulness of the volume. All in all, McClelland and Stewart must be congratulated for a volume that does credit to one of Canada's most interesting and important modern poets.