

THE POETRY OF DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT

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THE death of Duncan Campbell Scott has removed the last surviving member of the remarkable group of poets born in the sixties of the last century whose work, which began to appear in the nineties, established a national school of reflective nature poetry and achieved a standard of formal excellence unattained in Canada before and rarely equalled since. It is no doubt true that the spirit of rather blatant national sentiment, which was characteristic of our political and economic life in the quarter century after 1890, was operating in other fields as well, and it was responsible for these poets' being overpraised or at least being praised in terms that transcended and hence failed to perceive correctly their special and limited goodness. The times seemed to call for prophecy; and a kind of transcendental national optimism, instead of being allowed to flourish in the heady atmosphere of political oratory, was sought for (and rather too easily found) in the songs of the poets. Already, a generation before Confederation, there had been a feverish effort to cultivate the national spirit in poetry, but such forerunners as Sangster and Mair had lacked the virtuosity and the scholarly equipment of the later group. It was Charles G. D. Roberts directly and Bliss Carman, Wilfred Campbell, and Archibald Lampman more implicitly, and each in his own individual way, who demonstrated for the benefit of those who wished to see Confederation cemented by the rise of a national literature that the poets at least were willing to try.

The criticism that, at any rate in Canada, has focused its attention on these poets as the prophets of nationalism has made two serious errors: it has mistaken for national what is local or universal, and it has overemphasized the value of what it has chosen to see as national. Among the older critics, only Professor Cappon, in his *Roberts and the Influences of His Time*, seems to have shown an awareness of the fact that to approach these authors as if they formed a national school was to generalize about them and to miss the point of their individual quality. Recently it has become easier to see the poets of our "Golden Age" in better perspective and to evaluate them in more significant terms. The work of such critics as W. E. Collin, Professor

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E. K. Brown, and, more recently, Ralph Gustafson has helped us to realize that we must first estimate these poets by the faithfulness and intensity of their perceptions of the precise and *local* image and then judge them as the nature of their poetry makes clear they demand to be judged—in terms of the universal civilizing culture of ideas. They take their place, it must be realized, in the main stream of nineteenth century English poetry, whether written in England or North America, a current outside of which perhaps only Hopkins and Whitman are clearly seen to stand.

Duncan Campbell Scott, whose memory I wish to honor by devoting this essay to an examination of his poetry and criticism, has been spared the excessive adulation that, directed towards the wrong things in Carman and Roberts, has done their reputations a real disservice. Some of the reasons for the comparative neglect of Scott's poetry are no doubt to be found in the special kind of excellence the poet placed before himself as a conscious aim. These are the classical virtues of restraint and precision, and along with them also are the courtly and now somewhat oldfashioned virtues of the cultivated gentleman, carried over into the realm of sensibility and art. In a sense, Duncan Campbell Scott's poetry has been saved from the wrong kind of praise by a sort of calm and isolated superiority, which has assured for it also a reception that can be described as respectful silence. Only Professor Brown has spoken out in behalf of the too long neglected poet.

I do not think, however, that the whole story of the slowness of the response to the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott is told when we have taken into account the calm, scholarly, polished quality of his verse, which in its very nature is calculated to appeal to the reflective and knowledgeable few. It is true that Scott tends towards a precise and unruffled sobriety of expression, which makes it hard for those who are easily stimulated by the flamboyant and the sensational to respond to work that is generally so much less immediately exciting than Carman's or Roberts'. Scott, in a way, must be regarded as a scholar poet, a calm and contemplative writer, whose true exemplar is Matthew Arnold or Robert Bridges, not Keats or the Pre-Raphaelites, though, like the other Canadian poets of his generation, he shows in his earliest poems influences of the most romantic sort. But what sets him apart from his friends and contemporaries—and even from the closest of all to him, Lampman—is the fact that he made so little conscious effort to be a

national poet, and the Canadian element in his work, which developed as his art matured, has grown silently and apparently almost without volition, into the very unstressed essence of the work. This has meant that Scott was to be of little use to those who were anxious to prove the existence of a political or economic national unity by pointing to the expression of a national spirit in our poetry or our art. It is this absence of an obvious and easily demonstrated Canadianism that is responsible for the comparative lack of attention Scott's poetry has received.

All of this, however, makes it easier for us today to see Scott and his contemporaries in the right perspective. With him we have not to clear away the clutter of irresponsible adulation that has grown up around Roberts and Carman. In his case, too, it is possible to discern the kind of approach that ought to have been made long ago—to him and to the other poets of the group as well. There is no particular credit in seeing this now; yet it may be helpful to put down a few elementary principles that should guide our judgment of these poets and that should help us from falling into the opposite error from uncritical adulation—the error of too complacent and hypercritical an analysis that finds fault with these poets for expressing the *zeitgeist* of their time. To attack Scott, for instance, because he does not write like Stephen Spender is to be more ridiculous, if that were possible, than the panegyrists among the older critics.

What, then, should be our approach to the poets of the Group of the Sixties, and to the last of them, Duncan Campbell Scott? Well, in the first place we must recognize that these poets brought to the practice of their art a culture and a technical accomplishment that was based on deep and sound scholarship, constant reading of the Greek and Latin classics, and an enthusiastic study of the nineteenth century romantic poets and of the exciting contemporaries, the Pre-Raphaelites and the poets of the nineties. They were, in other words, more deeply versed in the essential poetic scholarship of their time, and, technically, as far as the actual handling of language is concerned, they were superior to all but one or two of our modern poets.

II.

Duncan Campbell Scott's first book of poems, *The Magic House and Other Poems*, was published in London and Ottawa in 1893. In that year also appeared Bliss Carman's first col-

lection, *Low Tide on Grand Pré*, Archibald Lampman's second book, *Lyrics of Earth*, and Charles G. D. Roberts's third, *Songs of the Common Day*. A poetic flowering was clearly under way. The first thing that strikes one about all these books is their responsiveness to literary tradition. They are the work of responsible and careful craftsmen who found in the landscapes around them and in the emotions of their own hearts material that did not separate them from the main stream of the poetry of England and of New England. Of Scott, in his first book at least, this is particularly true. *The Magic House* is clearly the work of a sensitive and refined student of poetry and of an exact and observant lover of nature. It is very eclectic, and one can detect essays in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelites, or the Decadents, or Wordsworth, or Arnold. Sometimes a scene is painted in a way that recalls Lampman. But everywhere, too, are indications of an individual sensibility, a personal quality that reveals itself as unmistakably and quietly as the expression of one's face—and which is so hard to describe. It shows itself in Scott's early poetry as a faint flush, a strange half feverish glow that lights up the verse and gives it a curious tremulous exciting quality in sharp contrast to the "correctness" of the verse form. This quality is given the fullest play later in the long romantic ballad "The Piper of Arll," which has been justly admired as one of the finest of Scott's poems, but it is present, sometimes only in fitful flashes but sometimes more constantly in many of the lyrics in *The Magic House*. Here, to illustrate what I mean, are a few lines from "A Night in June":

There is no stir of air at all,
Only at times an inward breeze
Turns back a pale leaf in the trees.

Here the syringa's rich perfume
Covers the tulips red retreat,
A burning pool of scent and heat.

The pallid lightning wavers dim
Between the trees, then deep and dense
The darkness settles more intense.

A hawk lies panting in the grass,
Or plunges upward through the air,
The lightning shows him whirling there. . .

And here is a stanza from "A Summer Storm:"

The beetles clattered at the blind,
 The hawks fell twanging from the sky,
 The west unrolled a feathery wind,
 And the night fell sullenly.

These few verses are enough to illustrate Scott's early mastery of expression and the characteristic tremor of restrained excitement, which is one aspect of his most striking poems. This is a quality that Carman possesses more intensely and that shows itself more often in the poet of the Maritimes, but it is combined in Scott with a precision and clarity, an exactness of depiction that challenges comparison with Lampman. Some of the poems in *The Magic House*, indeed, have a Wordsworthian simplicity and a sober veracity that show the young poet could submit to influences that restrain, as well as to those that kindle. If he had caught some of the feverish glow of the Pre-Raphaelites and the poets of the Nineties he could learn also from the classic calm of Arnold and Bridges, and beside the lines quoted we can place others of a different sort, as, for instance, these from "Off Rivière du Loup"

O ship incoming from the sea
 With all your cloudy tower of sail,
 Dashing the water to the lee,
 And leaning grandly to the gale . . .

You know the joy of coming home,
 After long leagues to France or Spain;
 You feel the clear Canadian foam
 And the gulf water heave again . . .

At evening off some reedy bay
 You will swing slowly on your chain,
 And catch the scent of dewy hay
 Soft blowing from the pleasant plain.

The twofold strain, one tremulous and a little feverish, the other calm, precise, and restrained, runs through all of the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott. The best of the poems of the first type are "The Piper of Arll," "The Sleeper," "Night Burial in the Forest," and "Spring on Mattagami." Three of these are well known, though I don't know that anyone has commented on the curious effect that Scott has achieved in "Spring on Mattagami" by bringing into the Canadian wilderness an impassioned rhapsody rhythmically and emotionally in the key of Meredith's "Love in the Valley." The effect is startling,

but I think Scott's poem gains rather than loses by the association. "The Sleeper" stands apart from these other poems in that it is almost unknown. It appeared in Scott's first book, but it was not included in the collected edition and has not appeared in any anthology. It is fragile and it seems in its opening to be only another echo of Tennyson's earliest style, so the hasty reader may miss the originality and truth of the poem. Actually, a profound perception about the nature and beauty of innocence is expressed and in an imagery that is enticing both for what it reveals and for what it hides. The poem begins by telling how "Touched with some divine repose, Isabelle has fallen asleep," and the first three stanzas describe the hushed and enraptured loveliness of the sleeping girl, her spirit calmed by a happy dream:

Then upfloats a planet strange,
 Not the moon that mortals know,
 With a magic mountain range,
 Cones and craters white as snow;

Something different yet the same—
 Rain by rainbows glorified,
 Roses lit with lambent flame—
 'Tis the maid moon's other side.

When the sleeper floats from sleep,
 She will smile the vision o'er,
 See the veined valleys deep,
 No one ever saw before.

Yet the moon is not betrayed,
 (Ah! the subtle Isabelle!)
 She's a maiden, and a maid
 Maiden secrets will not tell.

This, as I have said, is a very fragile poem. It comes dangerously near to being coy, but it is saved by the essential truth of its perception (which is, I take it, that innocence is a form of arcane knowledge that cannot be revealed to the profane.) If the spirit of the youthful Tennyson is here, so is that of Hans Anderson. And so is that of Dr. Freud.

Of the poems in the calmer and more classical strain there are many, and it is hard to select a few that stand far above the rest. Any selection of them would be sure to include "Off Riviere du Loup;" "In the Country Churchyard", an elegy in memory of his father; "Variations on a Seventeenth Century Theme"; and "The Closed Door", a lovely requiem on his daughter.

III.

The most original of Duncan Campbell Scott's poems are those in which there is a union of these two qualities, emotional intensity and perfection of form; and these, as might have been expected, are the lyrics and ballads of Indian life. For the greater part of his life Duncan Campbell Scott served in the federal Department of Indian Affairs, being the Deputy Superintendent General for almost twenty years. His experiences in this post—his duties sometimes took him on arduous canoe trips into the Indian country south of Hudson Bay—gave him a knowledge of the Indian and his feelings that make his interpretations of the red man unique in our literature. His imagination in the first instance caught and communicated the feel of the vast northern land and peopled it with the survivors of its aboriginal inhabitants; and his knowledge and sympathy saw them, and his art presented them, as human beings, as *man*, capable of dramatic and, indeed, of tragic action. Poetic imagination brought as a kind of insight to dwell upon the Indian as he really is gives their unique significance to early successes like "The Half-breed Girl" and "The Forsaken" and to later, more elaborately worked out, 'modern' narratives like "At Gull Lake: August, 1810" or "A Scene at Lake Manitou." These last stand alone among Canadian poems for their union of anthropological interest and intensely dramatic power. Written in a simple, dignified, and colloquial verse, they tell stories of passion, death, and cruelty that are remarkable for the objectivity with which they are presented and the cumulative power with which they are developed. Both poems deal with a theme that has touched the poet's imagination deeply—the conflict between two cultures, the red man's and the white's, in the divided heart of the Indian or the half breed. "A Scene at Lake Manitou" tells of the reversion of an Indian mother to the ancient gods of her tribe when the prayers and holy water of the priest cannot save her youthful son from death. "At Gull Lake" takes us back more than a hundred years to a scene of passion and cruelty. It is painted in sharp raw colors; the action is quick and fierce.

The two camps were pitched on the shore,
The clustered teepees
Of Tabashaw Chief of the Saulteaux.
And on a knoll tufted with poplars
The gray tents of a trader—

Nairne of the Orkneys.
 Before his tents under the shade of the poplars
 Sat Keejigo, third of the wives
 Of Tabashaw Chief of the Saulteaux;
 Clad in the skins of antelopes
 Broidered with porcupine quills
 Coloured with vivid dyes,
 Vermilion here and there
 In the roots of her hair . . .
 Keejigo daughter of Launay
 The Normandy hunter
 And Oshawan of the Saulteaux.

The love of the half breed girl for the Scottish trader, to whom she offered her body and spirit

With abject unreasoning passion,
 As Earth abandons herself
 To the sun and the thrust of the lightning,

is etched in a few vivid strokes, and then given its intensest expression in a lyric that suggests perfectly the quality of primitive Indian poetry:

The flower lives on the prairie,
 The wind in the sky,
 I am here my beloved;
 The wind and the flower.

The crane hides in the sand-hills,
 Where does the wolverine hide?
 I am here my beloved,
 Heart's-blood on the feathers
 The foot caught in the trap.

Take the flower in your hand,
 The wind in your nostrils;
 I am here my beloved;
 Release the captive
 Heal the wound under the feathers.

Action is not long delayed, and the lyric gives way to a rapid narrative movement:

A storm-cloud was marching
 Vast on the prairie . . .
 Twice had Nairne turned her away
 Afraid of the venom of Tabashaw,
 Twice had the Chief fired at his tents
 And now when two bullets

Whistled above the encampment
He yelled, "Drive this bitch to her master."

Keejigo went down a path by the lake . . .

At the top of the bank
The old wives caught her and cast her down
Where Tabashaw crouched by his camp-fire.

He snatched a live brand from the embers,
Seared her cheeks,
Blinded her eyes,
Destroyed her beauty with fire,
Screaming, "Take that face to your lover."
Keejigo held her face to the fury
And made no sound.
The old wives dragged her away
And threw her over the bank
Like a dead dog.
Then burst the storm . . .

The poem does not end here. It is dramatic, startling, horrible; but if it ended here, it would be nothing more than strong melodrama. The hardest problem of the artist still remains—to find the tragic reconciliation of beauty and terror. The final section of the poem is a symphonic evocation of storm-tossed skies and forests, followed by retreating clouds, a rainbow, and the setting sun:

The wind withdrew the veil from the shine of the moon,
She rose changing her dusky shade for the glow
Of the prairie lily, till free of all blemish of colour
She came to her zenith without a cloud or a star,
A lovely perfection, snow-pure in the heaven of midnight.
After the beauty of terror the beauty of peace.

IV.

We cannot read these beautiful elegiac lines today without pausing to think of the man who wrote them, whose long and honorable career has so recently drawn to a close. Like his friend Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott has always in a sense been an elegiac poet. His intense and scholarly poetry every where shows a consciousness of the limitations, if not the vanity, of human wishes; and there is present in much of it an awareness of the life-enriching nearness of death. One thinks today of the lines from "In a Country Churchyard," and perhaps they

will do to end this tribute, for though they come from his earliest book they are the perfection of his calm and classical style. I shall not forget that he read them to me in the great book-lined room of his Ottawa house a day or two after his eightieth birthday.

This is the paradise of common things,
 The scourged and trampled here find peace to grow,
 The frost to furrow and the wind to sow,
 The mighty sun to time their blossomings;
 And now they keep
 A crown reflowering on the tombs of kings
 Who earned their triumph and have claimed their sleep.

Yea, each is here a prince in his own right,
 Who dwelt disguised amid the multitude,
 And when his time was come, in haughty mood,
 Shook off his motley and reclaimed his might;
 His sombre throne
 In the vast province of perpetual night,
 He holds secure, inviolate, alone.

The poor forgets that ever he was poor,
 The priest has lost his science of the truth,
 The maid her beauty, and the youth his youth;
 The statesman has forgot his subtle lure,
 The old his age,
 The sick his suffering, and the leech his cure,
 The poet his perplexed and vacant page . . .

But better for my purpose than this—distinguished and beautiful as these verses are—is the fine elegy in prose with which Duncan Campbell Scott closed his *Memoir* of his friend and fellow poet, his peer and companion, Archibald Lampman:

He rests in Beechwood Cemetery, part of the wild wood through which he was accustomed to wander speering about the chilly margin of snow-water pools for the first spring flowers. He said it was a good spot in which to lie when all was over with life. Even if there be no sense in these houses of shade, it is a pleasant foreknowledge to be aware that above one's unrealizing head the snow will sift, the small-ferns rise and the birds come back in nesting-time. And though he be forever rapt from such things, careless of them and unaware, the sternest wind from under the pole star will blow unconfined over his grave, about it the first hepaticas will gather in fragile companies, the vesper sparrow will return to nest in the grass, and from a branch of maple to sing in the cool dusk.

Here with this epitaph, which might have come from the *Greek Anthology*, let us take farewell of the last, and not the least, of our poets of the Golden Age.