

DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT *

PELHAM EDGAR

I AM privileged to say that the Royal Society of Canada has awarded the Lorne Pierce gold medal for 1927 to Dr. Duncan Campbell Scott. A choice that his recognized standing in our literature would have made natural, the publication last autumn of his collected poems made inevitable. His reputation will grow with the ability to possess him, whereas hitherto he has been the delight of a privileged few who were fortunate enough to have secured his almost inaccessible separate volumes.

Dr. Scott was born in Ottawa on August 2, 1862, and has lived there continuously since 1879. His father, the Rev. William Scott, a native of Lincoln, England, had migrated in 1837 as a young man of twenty-three to the United States. After a short experience of journalism in New York he moved to Canada, entered the ministry of the Methodist Church and devoted himself at first to mission work among the Indians. In due time he succeeded to the ordinary routine life of the itinerant Methodist parson, and in the course of his wanderings, being a widower, met and married Janet MacCallum. Those who discern the "natural magic" of the Celt in the work of their poet son are permitted to attribute this to the infusion of a Highland Scottish strain into his blood. His mother's parents had come from Killin, Perthshire, and she was born in Fort Lennox on the Ile aux Noix. Her mother was a Campbell, and stood in close relationship with the Bredalbane family. Her father at the time of her birth was superintendent of military buildings in Canada. William Scott shortly after his marriage was appointed to a charge in Ottawa, and the subject of this paper was born at Number 100, Queen Street, which was then the Methodist parsonage. The solid stone structure exists still as a Government warehouse, but has fallen into a state of disrepair.

Under the conditions of straitened means and persistent change of abode, the boy's education was in a formal sense necessarily incomplete. Whatever utilitarian merits our Canadian public and high schools possess, they lack such virtues as are the fruit of traditional association. The instruction is rigid, practical, un-

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poetic. But Mr. W. H. Briggs, the English master at Smith's Falls more than half a century ago, was a redeeming exception. He went to his grave probably unconscious of the fact that when he mechanically wrote on the blackboard two lines from *The Dream of Fair Women*, there was one boy in his class who experienced then his first "pang" of poetry,—if I may use the poignant word by which he still describes his experience of a new world of sensation and beauty. The inscribed lines were:

One seated on a crimson scarf outrolled
Brow-bound with burning gold,—

Though years were to pass before the boy who was thrilled by them was moved to imaginative expression, it is possible to detect here and there in his early verses an echo of the cadenced music and elaborated finality of the Tennysonian phrase.

The last school that Scott attended was Stanstead College. He had decided to make medicine his career, hoping ultimately to practise with his uncle, Dr. Duncan Campbell MacCallum, who was a well-known physician of Montreal and a professor in McGill University. It was necessary for him to earn enough money to prepare himself for matriculation, and on November 14, 1879, Sir John A. Macdonald, who was a warm personal friend of his father, offered him a temporary position in the public service. The subsequent offer of a permanent appointment at a tempting salary was not to be resisted. So he decided with enthusiasm, fortunately as the sequel showed, to connect himself with a branch of the Service which was then in its interesting formative stage. The Indian Department when he first joined it was attached to the Department of the Interior, but in 1880 it was made by Act of Parliament a separate Department. Scott was appointed to the accountant's branch, where the business management centres. He had no intention of limiting his ambition to the perfunctory duties of a routine clerk. Much of the work was necessarily mechanical, but its larger human aspects appealed to his imagination, and he rapidly mastered the business detail of his office in the interests of this wider scope. For many years he has been the formulating mind in the general policy of the Department, and his value was recognized by his appointment in October, 1913, to the rank of Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. He is thus, under the Minister, the permanent head of a great Government service, commanding the confidence of his chief and the utmost loyalty of his staff. He is resourceful, firm and considerate, and has the born executor's

faculty of knowing precisely what is to be done and finding the right way to do it.

Dr. Scott's successful administrative career provides an affirmative answer to two idle questions that are often put: Can a poet be a successful Government official? And can a Government official be a successful poet? Dr. Scott has been saved from the kind of worry that more often benumbs than stimulates, and his occupation, by compelling frequent visits to wild remote places and facilitating contacts with an aboriginal race in its own untravelled haunts, gives him such fresh, unspoiled material as few poets have had at their disposal.

In 1894 he married Miss Belle Warner Botsford, of Boston, Mass., and their daughter Elizabeth died in Paris in 1907 at the age of twelve.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1899. He was for many years its efficient Honorary Secretary, and was President in 1921-1922. In 1922 the University of Toronto gave him the rarely conferred honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. He was for some years President of the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra, and latterly has interested himself greatly in the "Little Theatre" movement, being at the present time President of the Ottawa Dramatic League. A play of his, called *Pierre*, has been successfully performed by this Society and at the Hart House Theatre in Toronto, where another piece is to be played during the current season. It is obvious that all intellectual community interests enlist his sympathy, however great may be the expenditure of time and energy involved.

Although Dr. Scott's interest in poetry goes far back into the period of his childhood, his creative ambition was slow to develop. "It never occurred to me", he says "to write a line of prose or Poetry until I was about twenty-five, and after I had met Archibald Lampman and heard him read his verses. The second piece I did, *The Hill Path*, was published in *Scribner's Magazine* in May, 1888. This was my first published poem, but that magazine had published a short story of mine in February, 1887. Until 1887 I was occupied with music. I had taken up the violin, but dropped it when I began to write. After meeting Archibald Lampman there was some inducement to write as we read our poems to one another. I have never had much ambition to publish, and the small interests of the literary life have never troubled me."

Would Duncan Campbell Scott have found an imaginative outlet in poetry without the incentive to expression that he owed to his friendship with Lampman? Certainly none of the common-

place vanities that lure mediocrity to its destruction would have urged him to artistic utterance. He has never known any of the vulgar egotisms of authorship; for while he has a healthy regard for recognition, his literary ambition confines itself to the desire of embodying his vision of reality with all the perfection of which he is capable. Yet while I feel that so spontaneous a talent could not have remained for ever dormant, we must allow the coincidence of this important friendship with his earliest poetic activity to have its full significance.

His methods of composition are interesting from their variety. He rarely writes under any compulsion other than his mood, and of occasional poems—in the sense of poems written for an occasion—there are but few examples in the present volume. *Lundy's Lane* was written for a prize; and meritorious though it is, we feel that it is not a natural utterance. The *Fragment of an Ode to Canada* bears also the marks of an assigned task. He once asked me to suggest some ballad theme. I referred him to Parkman's account of Dominique de Gourgues. Here his imagination caught fire, and an impressive poem was the result. I congratulate myself more on having asked him to produce an ode for the centenary of Keats's death. He has never surpassed the poem he wrote for that occasion. There are marked affinities between the younger and the older poet, and his noble verses are a revelation at once of Keats and of himself. Some of his poems have had a long germination in his mind. Two of these, that reveal much to us of his attitude towards life, are *The Height of Land* and *Fragment of a Letter*. The suggestion for these poems came during a long summer journey made in 1906 through our remote north country. The first was written nine years and the second thirteen years after the prompting occasion. That summer trip was fruitful of poetic result, but impulse and execution were usually simultaneous. *Spring on Mattagami* grew beneath his fingers during three June days as we sat side by side in a canoe which our Indians drove to the headwaters of that strong and gleaming river. Sometimes at a halt in the journey he would dive into the "pungent gloom" of the bordering forest, and there let his imagination play over the memories of Venetian splendours which he had harvested the year before, and on the contrast of that man-made beauty with the scene before him where Nature had shaped her material in her own strong and riotous fashion. *Fantasia*, that most delightful specimen of the poetry of escape, is our Canadian *Kubla Khan*, the transcription of a vision of sleep, the musical rendering of a dream whose images came stamped with the revealing words.

Scores of his lyrics must have come in this unpremeditated way—they lay hidden in consciousness to await there the favouring mood—the releasing phrase or cadence. Their origin and their execution are as much a mystery to their creator as to us who read. One of these late lyrics, *The Mower*, had an origin that can be described but never explained:

As he comes out to the morning,
The light upon his scythe,
The mower goes with a manful gait
Bold and blithe.

His heart is high and careless,
Full of the power of sleep;
His thought has no foreknowledge
Wide or deep.

When he comes home at even,
The dew upon his scythe,
His stride is weary,
Neither long nor lithe.

He walks in contemplation
Of the work that he has done,
The breast of the field and the bird's nest
Open to the sun.

There lingers in his memory,
All wistful and strange,
The scent of death in the meadow,
The odour of change.

For what is to do is hidden
In the fold of the years;
But what is done brings wonder
And longing and tears.

This poem, so charming in music, picture and suggestion, wove itself with no volition or intention of the author about the images in the second line of the first and third stanzas. The night before, he had heard an orchestral rendering of Wagner, and these two physical images had come into his mind as he listened to the music—a scythe with the light on it and a scythe with the dew on it. After breakfast the next morning he picked up a newspaper, but the images again drifted into his head. He asked for a pencil and paper, and the verses wrote themselves as you or I would write a postcard. Many of his pieces are carefully wrought and as carefully revised, but whether spontaneous or slowly elaborated they rarely fail to convey the vivid impulse that engendered

them. He does not deny his moods, but he never manufactures them.

In some phases of his work Dr. Scott is unique among the poets of his day. Poetry that strikes to the roots of our primitive instincts creates its own value by its rarity. Sophistication and naiveté are an ill-assorted pair; and when a highly civilized poet goes a-fishing for the elemental in the troubled waters of his atavistic memories, he does not usually bring much that is valuable to the surface. The elemental must be encountered by the way, and so Dr. Scott has found it, and has been stirred to a response that is refreshingly spontaneous and unforced. *The Forsaken* is an unforgettable poem for its commingled grimness and tenderness, but he is even closer to the wild heart of pagan superstition in the impressive *Powassan's Drum*. Indian passages abound in the *Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris*. "The Death of Akoose" is a superbly executed narrative fragment, in which, however, the reader's mind is not permitted to dwell on the episode alone, but is led through it to reflect on the mysteries of death and duration which are the major theme of the great poem of which it forms a part. The conception of these Indian poems is always satisfying, and we are never disturbed by slackness in the form. The idea rarely fails of its appropriate rhythm, for musical thought compels musical utterance. With him too we can take for granted that the Nature setting will be adequate. He finds values in Nature that correspond with every human mood, and he establishes his harmonies without drenching us with description. The time has come for Akoose to die:

In a little bluff of poplars, hid in the bracken,
He lay down; the populace of leaves
In the lithe poplars whispered together and trembled,
Fluttered before a sunset of gold smoke,
With interspaces, green as sea-water,
And calm as the deep water of the sea.

There Akoose lay, silent amid the bracken,
Gathered at last with the Algonquin Chieftains.
Then the tenebrous sunset was blown out,
And all the smoky gold turned into cloud wrack.
Akoose slept forever amid the poplars,
Swathed by the wind from the far-off Red Deer
Where dinosaurs sleep, clamped in their rocky tombs.
Who shall count the time that lies between
The sleep of Akoose and the dinosaurs?
Innumerable time, that yet is like the breath
Of the long wind that creeps upon the prairie
And dies away with the shadows at sundown.

Other verses of Scott illustrate better his quick appreciation of primitive impulse, but none could exemplify more completely his rhythmic sense and rich descriptive power, and they lead on to a concluding stanza remarkable in our poetry at least for its meditative depth.

It was the accident of circumstance that gave him access to his Indian material, and it is also the fortuitous conjunction in him of musical and poetic impulse that gives their characteristic form to some of his longer poems. Milton and Browning were students and lovers of music, and the latter especially has written poems that have their source in a musical idea. Dr. Scott has never endeavoured like Browning to philosophise his music, but he has done something perhaps as ambitious and as interesting. He has written several poems that simulate the movement of a musical sonata. His *Variations on a Seventeenth Century Theme* is his most systematic and successful challenge to musical method. The variations are on two lines of Vaughan:

It was high spring, and all the way
Primrosed, and hung with shade.

The theme is developed from the contrast of light and shadow, joy and sorrow, life and death, youth and age. A tender, unbiblical myth of Adam and Eve, conveyed in sufficient middle English, serves as prelude. A May-time pedlar interlude follows, and then five grave, symbolic stanzas lead up to a lyric that is the very breathing of the spirit of music,—shadow and light again its delicate motive:

The moon glows with a primrose light
To-night!
A happy vesper sparrow sings,
His wings
Are moist with dew, a wraith of mist,
Grey amethyst,
Deepens the purple in the fields,
Slow yields
Twilight to the vast shade that listlessly
Moves landward from the sea.

The fifth section is a tense, dramatic variation on the same dominant theme, and is followed by a lyric on the passing of youth, which is assured of permanence as confidently as anything that has come from a Canadian pen:

Youth is a blossom, yellow at the edge,
 All full of honeyed pleasantness,
 If you leave it, it will wither in the hedge,
 If you pluck it, it will wither none the less,
 Then pluck it—that were better after all,
 But pluck it with a sort of wistfulness,
 Yea, pluck it if you must, and let it fall
 Regretfully, with a last touch of tenderness,
 Before the colour and the honey all
 Are flown away,
 And you are holding but a withered tress
 Of passion and of loveliness.
 Now let it fall—
 Yet hold it—hold it—'tis thy youth!
 Nay, let it fall—fall—fall—
 Caress it ere it fall,
 Then let it fall and die.

Section Seven is a delicate Herrick-like interlude, *A Fairy Funeral*, and is followed by a grotesque primrose piece. Pots of these flowers in a shop window bring to the mind of a bleary-eyed old woman images of English lanes, as the Wood Street thrush reminded Wordsworth's Susan of her country meadows—and Susan, too, if we may trust the excerpted verses, was no paragon of virtue. Light and shadow dance through the next lyric, the dainty *Ecossaise*, and "a few chords" bring the poem to a sad but peaceful close with Adam and Eve at the end of days in their frozen garden.

The *Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris* are developed in similar fashion, with death and immortality as the dominant theme, and with episodic variations that flow naturally and powerfully from the main conception. The *Ode for the Keats Centenary* has also marked affinities with the mode of music. I do not know where to look in poetry for a more penetrating presentation of the great poet's spiritual identity. The theme is built round a phrase from the letters where Keats speaks of the power given to the poet of "seeing great things in loneliness"; and though the cloistral side of his nature is the more fully developed, Scott does not omit to reveal the human quality in Keats which, never wholly alien from his genius, gave promise of such ample development in the years of his failing strength. It is the alternation of these two aspects of Keats as the tremulous lover of beauty and the ardent searcher after truth that makes this poem so interesting and true.

The poem *On the Death of Claude Debussy* is a free fine rendering of the imaginative reactions which music engenders in the consenting mind. With these poems, if we add the interesting *At the Piano*,

I have named all that relate themselves closely to the world of music, though everywhere one notes our poet's thrilling response to Nature's unorganized music—the wind in the trees, the voices of birds, the intermittent roar of rapids at night.

I have been concerned with finding elements in Dr. Scott's work that give him identity. All poets who discover the depths of their own nature, if depths they truly are, encounter mystery by the way. Scott, an inheritor of the romantic tradition, is naturally aware of the value of imaginative suggestion. Poems that make their appeal from this source have been common enough for a century, but *The Piper of Arll* is more than a belated echo. It is as fresh and original as if it were the first of its type; and we have recently heard Mr. Masefield's tribute to its unique quality, a tribute that he has amplified in his introduction to the English edition of the poems. As Canadians, we must congratulate ourselves that so fine a volume is soon to represent to English readers the measure of our advance in poetry. They will find here as consistent an artistic impulse as they are accustomed to in their own writers of verse; they will have their curiosity stimulated by poems that issue from unfamiliar conditions; and they will experience the satisfaction of reading others that have the unlocalized and universal value of the poetry of any land or of any time.