

# Shadows of Indian Title

## The Territorial Underpinnings of “The Height of Land”

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 7

Duncan Campbell Scott’s poetry has been increasingly read in the light—or, one might say, shadow—of his influential career in the Department of Indian Affairs, where he worked from 1879 to 1932. Many of Scott’s northern and “Indian” poems are read as imaginative offshoots of the inspection and treaty-making trips that shaped his encounters with Aboriginal peoples and their lands.<sup>1</sup> The influence of these encounters on Scott’s “paradigmatic poem of northern Ontario” (Keith 129), however, has yet to be fully explored. Although “The Height of Land” (1916) was not composed until 1915 (Ware 14), the poem is set on the southern boundary of Treaty 9, which Scott helped to negotiate in the summers of 1905 and 1906.<sup>2</sup> This “powerful tributary to [Canada’s] northern myth” (Dragland 233) is an intensely lyrical engagement with the elusive meaning of life and poetry. Yet it is also an expression of *territory*: that is, a “designation of claim over land, of *jurisdiction*” (New 21). “The Height of Land” surveys and orders the northern landscape in ways that recall the appropriation and governance of land—the “struggle over geography”—that Scott’s work as a treaty commissioner epitomized.

The earliest discussions of the poem through to those of the early 1990s overlook this dimension of “The Height of Land,” deeming its geographical setting more or less “incidental” to the reverberations of thought and instinct that the poem explores (Keith 129). As Tracy Ware, quoting George Bornstein, reminds us, in the post-Romantic lyric tradition that served

as Scott's "point of departure," "title and setting often simply indicate the place in which an act of mind occurs, and the act itself is the true subject of the poem" (22). Indeed, Scott's poet frequently transcends his physical surroundings to "deeply brood," not on the geography that he so keenly describes elsewhere in the poem, but, rather, on "the incomprehensibility of life" in the most metaphysical of senses (Scott, "Height" 78; Ware 21). Such far-reaching themes as the "impermanence" of the universe (15), "the limitations of language" (15), "the disjunction between man and nature" (18), and the simultaneous allure and inadequacy of both "progressivist optimism" and "primitivist nostalgia" (20) preoccupy the poet and, understandably, have dominated the attention of his critics. "The Height of Land" remains "a journey through the mind of the poet" (Mezei 28).

Its geographical setting has, however, come to play an increasingly prominent role in determining how "The Height of Land" fits into the English-Canadian canon. The poem's masterful assimilation of baseland and hinterland visions into "one large geographical possibility," for instance, provides D.M.R. Bentley with his "phenomenological ground for Canadian poetry" (*Moose* 4). Don McKay, in his introduction to *Open Wide a Wilderness*,<sup>3</sup> offers "the image of Duncan Campbell Scott" standing "at a portage on the height of land" as an icon of Canadian nature poetry, reading the poem as an emblematic expression of a distinctly modern, Canadian engagement with wilderness (2-3). Behind McKay lies Stan Dragland's important study of Scott and Treaty 9, which roots "The Height of Land" "in the actual geography of the last phase of the 1906 [treaty] trip—the journey up the Pic River from Heron Bay, over the height of land, to Long Lake Post" (234). Despite these interventions, the poem's setting has yet to receive the close attention it deserves, particularly in the wake of postcolonial and ecocritical discussions that draw attention to the myriad ways in which art is embedded not just in space and place, but in territory. Bentley's "geographical possibility" is ecological, but not political. And while McKay and Dragland are each attuned both to the unnerving presence of Indigenous peoples and spirits in "The Height of Land," and to the history of treaty negotiations that undergirds the poem, neither critic considers it as an articulation of the territorial impetus of the treaty.

Yet Dragland's hesitation on the point of whether "The Height of Land" might be considered one of the "Indian" poems (252) is a particularly fertile moment in his book, one that merits further discussion. "The Height of Land" is interesting precisely because it blurs the categorical distinction between the "Indian" poems and the apparently more benign lyric and

nature poetry that characterizes Scott's work. Its setting holds more than a canoe route, intricately described; more, too, than a northern aesthetic that anticipates the theosophical landscapes of Lawren Harris.<sup>4</sup> It is also a contact zone across which colonial and Aboriginal worldviews quietly, but nonetheless significantly, shift and collide, the poet a stranger precariously poised in a landscape not fully his own. In 1906, Scott's encounter with the height of land was fraught with the task of transferring political control from its Ojibwa and Cree inhabitants to the Canadian government. His 1916 poem redefines this space as desirable poetic territory, a spiritual resource to be occupied and ordered imaginatively. From the poet's cartographic sense of north and south, to the intimations of beginnings and endings that vacillate through the poem and the unsettling Aboriginal spirit of place that haunts its setting, "The Height of Land" is shaped by a colonial desire to reinvent Ontario's north.

### **Dreams of a "Lonely North"**

Scott's poetic appropriation of space begins with the confident arrival marked by the poem's first line: "Here is the height of land." The survey that follows brings into focus a landscape that can be readily identified as the Precambrian shield of northwestern Ontario, where "The watershed on either hand / Goes down to Hudson Bay / Or Lake Superior" (1-4). The poet and his crew

. . . have come up through the spreading lakes  
From level to level,—  
Pitching our tents sometimes over a revel  
Of roses that nodded all night,  
. . . . .  
Sometimes mid sheaves  
Of bracken and dwarf-cornel, and again  
On a wide blueberry plain  
Brushed with the shimmer of a bluebird's wing. (25-35)

Layers of intricate topographical description anchor the poet's metaphysical flights in the distinctive terrain of the boreal forest. Spruce, poplar, and cedar make up its woods (19, 37, 107). Roses, bracken, dwarf-cornel, blueberries, ferns, and mosses blanket the forest floor (28, 33, 34, 120). From the "rocky islet . . . / With one lone poplar and a single nest / Of white-throat-sparrows that took no rest / But sang in dreams or woke to sing" (36-39), to the smouldering bush-fire and "lakelet foul with weedy growths / . . . Where the paddle stirred unutterable stenches" (100-103), Scott evokes a sustained encounter with a wilderness of complex beauty and texture.

These intimate details of the region's geography diversify a much wider picture that Scott also paints of a landscape that is sensed rather than directly observed:

Upon one hand  
The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams,  
And the enormous targe of Hudson Bay,  
Glimmering all night  
In the cold arctic light;  
On the other hand  
The crowded southern land  
With all the welter of the lives of men. (41-48)

Beyond the immediate scene of the camp, with its low-burning fires and encircling spruces, the poem conjures Hudson Bay looming, austere and cold, at the upper edge of the country, while crowds bustle in the cities and towns clustered along its southern border.

Far from providing “only the background” for the poet’s “sustained meditation” (Keith 130), this geographical setting embeds it in a politically significant sense of space. Like the details of the canoe route, the wider vision that “both links and divides the north and south” (Bentley, *Moose* 4) fulfills the treaty’s goals of appropriation and unification. That Scott’s height of land separates not only watersheds but also peoples and qualities of experience recalls its role as treaty boundary. But at the same time that it “partitions Canadian space into two antithetical zones” (4), it also furnishes the poet with the apparently panoptic “view” that allows him to link the “lonely” north and “crowded” south in a single cartographic image. The poet’s easy survey of the province from its northernmost to its southernmost reaches,<sup>5</sup> with the height of land stretching like a seam between them, embodies the dream of unity that Scott articulated in his 1906 essay on Treaty 9, “The Last of the Indian Treaties.” In this essay, Scott imagined Canada as “a patch-work blanket” of treaties and surrenders: “A map colored to define their boundaries would show the province of Ontario clouded with them,” he wrote, and “as far north as the confines of the new provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta the patches lie edge to edge” (83; see fig. 1). As the official means by which the Crown secured rights to Aboriginal lands, these agreements were integral to the creation of “civilized Canada” as Scott understood it (83). He continues:

Until lately, however, the map would have shown a large portion of the province of Ontario uncovered by the treaty blanket. Extending north of the watershed that divides the streams flowing into Lakes Huron and Superior from those flowing into Hudson Bay, it reached James Bay on the north and the long curled ribbon of

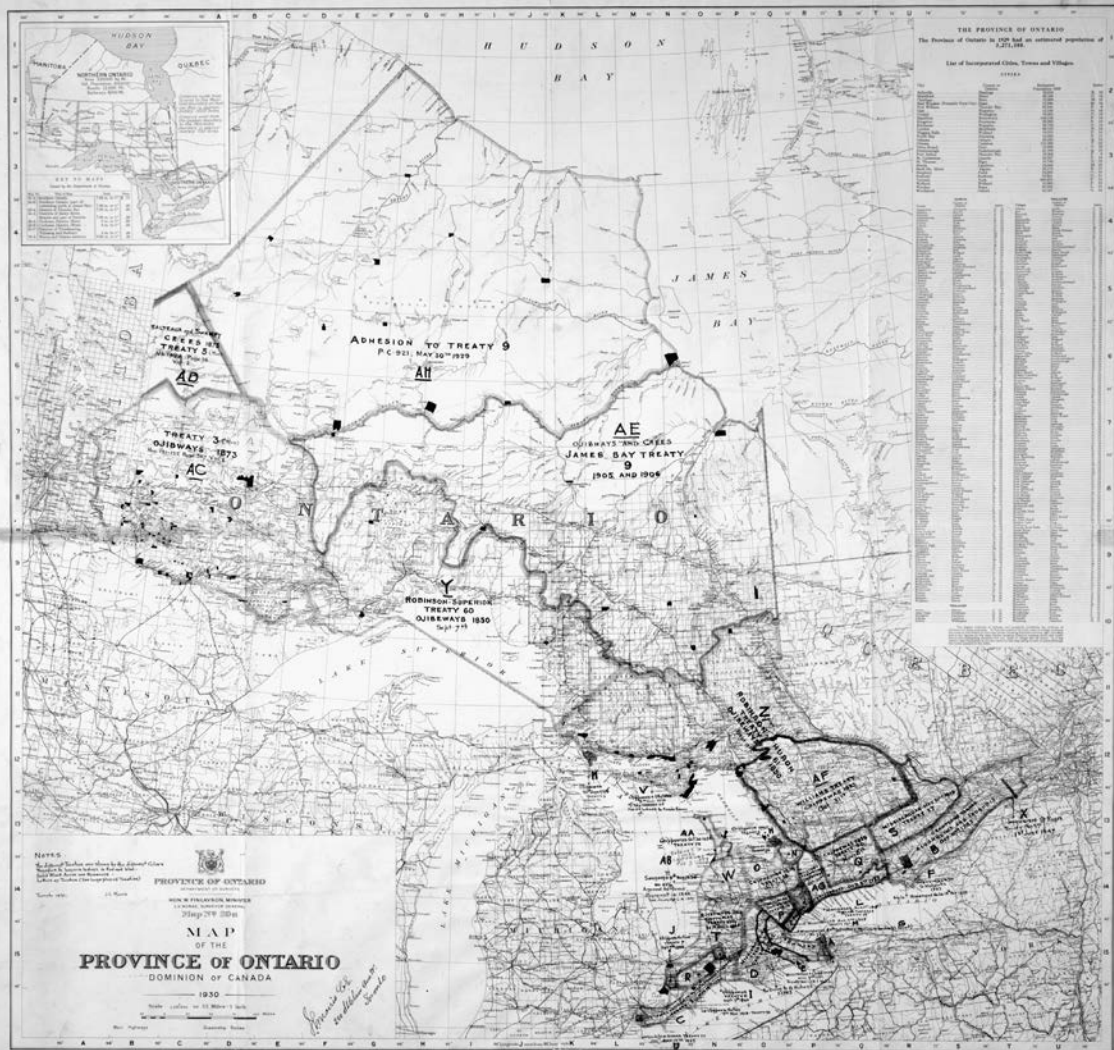


Fig. 1. Many of the spatial patterns of “The Height of Land”—particularly its cartographic sense of the province, and the “lonely north” that is at once distinguished from, and connected to, the “crowded south”—anticipate James Morris’s 1931 map of Ontario treaties, which shows the “patchwork” effect of these territorial agreements. Courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.

the Albany River, and comprised an area of 90,000 square miles, twice as large as the State of New York. (83)

Weaving together the concerns of the poet and the map-maker, the metaphor of the “patch-work blanket” casts the government’s appropriation of Aboriginal lands as a constitutive activity. Something is being added to the land rather than taken away from it, and a certain uneasiness surrounds what has been left “uncovered” and thus subject to what Scott would later refer to as “overshadowing Indian title” (“Indian” [1914] 188).

“The Height of Land” admits few vestiges of Indian title. Without going so far as to use the word “vacant” (the epithet that describes the “North” of Scott’s 1889 poem, “Ottawa: Before Dawn”), its sweeping view of the north presents a stark and apparently unoccupied geography that contrasts sharply with the concentration of people that distinguishes the south. Like the expanse of white space on Morris’ map, Scott’s “lonely north” arguably creates one of those “socially empty” spaces that are among the cartographer’s most powerful fictions (Harley 284, 303). The dearth of human habitation lends an aura of legitimacy to the poet’s presence in—and literary appropriation of—the landscape. Far from the southern crowds, he assumes visual and poetic command over the area with such apparent ease that, even if his tent temporarily “capture[s]” a revel of unsuspecting roses (Scott, “Height” 30), he appears to be no more of an invader than the bluebird or the sparrow that inhabit its woods. That the “Indian guides” fall asleep before the poet properly begins his solitary meditation completes the trope of loneliness upon which his appropriation depends.

Scott’s “lonely north” is only partly an illusion, however. Compared with the southern parts of the province, the wilderness that extends north of Lake Superior is, even now, only sparsely populated. A canoeist can still follow many of its intricate networks of rivers and lakes for days in succession “without seeing a living [human] thing,” as Scott did in the summers of 1905 and 1906 (“Last” 90), and relatively little modern resource development extends “beyond its southern fringes” (Wightman 109). Moreover, the “lonely north” also reflects the territorial shift that Treaty 9 sought to create by allocating 524 square miles of reserves for the Ojibwa and Cree who had once held title to the whole ninety thousand square miles of shield and forest. Scott became aware of the need for a treaty in 1899, when, on an inspection trip to New Brunswick House, he encountered people from farther north who were concerned about the increasing numbers of prospectors and developers on their lands.<sup>6</sup> The Cree and Ojibwa asked for the Crown’s

protection, which Treaty 9 pledged to deliver by safeguarding hunting, fishing, and trapping rights throughout the region, and allocating reserves that would ensure “a secure and permanent interest in the land” (Canada 11). At the same time, by stating that these same peoples would “cede, release, surrender and yield up . . . for ever, all their rights, titles and privileges whatsoever, to the lands” outside their reserves (19), the treaty also promoted the government’s interests in a “territory [that] contains much arable land, many million feet of pulpwood, untold wealth of minerals, and unharnessed water-powers sufficient to do the work of half the continent” (Scott, “Last” 83).<sup>7</sup> Framing Aboriginal title as “indeterminate possession” and the wilderness as “waste” and “unproductive,” the treaty text reinterprets the relationship between hunter-gatherers and their territory as a vague occupation of inefficiently used lands (11). It then circumscribes these lands in accordance with colonial ideas about how they ought to be worked and owned, promising to secure Aboriginal property only by limiting it. Treaty 9 thus redefined and opened up space that, like the *terra nullius* of the map, provided developers, settlers, and, arguably, poets with scope for dreams. It is into this space that Scott’s poet moves, exploring northern Ontario as a poetic and spiritual resource.

Scott’s own poetic and spiritual exploration of this region took place not in solitude, however, but in the company of two influential friends: the literary critic, Pelham Edgar, and the painter, Edmund Morris, who accompanied the treaty party in 1906. These men undoubtedly helped to inspire the “poetic explosion” that signalled Scott’s renewed creative interest in a landscape that, in their absence the summer before, he could only describe as “desolate beyond compare, loneliness seven times distilled—a country never to be the glad home of any happy people” (Dragland 30; Scott qtd. in Titley 70). “The Height of Land” stands in a similar relation to this landscape as did Scott on that second journey, reading with Edgar from *The Oxford Book of English Verse* as Morris sketched portraits of people they encountered along the way (see Campbell 120). Insofar as it makes the Precambrian Shield resonate with the diction of a greater Romantic lyric,<sup>8</sup> and the English language carry tones of a “long Ojibwa cadence” (Scott, “Height” 7), the poem pays homage to the beauty that the collision of “old” and “new” world elements can produce.

If “The Height of Land” recasts the “desolate” wilderness as a place conducive to deep poetic insight, where the poet can “hear / The thrill of life beat up the planet’s margin / And break in the clear susurrus of deep joy / That echoes and reechoes in [his] being” (148-51), it does so by bringing

European poetic conventions into contact with the “lonely north.” Scott’s “Something” that comes “by flashes / Deeper than peace” (50-52) resembles the “sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” that “rolls through all things” in Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (95-102), his “ancient disturber of solitude” (64) recalling the “presence that disturbs” Wordsworth’s speaker “with the joy / Of elevated thoughts” (94-5). These and other echoes<sup>9</sup> extend another “patchwork blanket”—not political so much as poetic—over the “uncovered” aesthetic terrain of northern Ontario.

### **Beginnings and Endings**

Scott’s appropriation of space in “The Height of Land” is predicated not only on the trope of vacancy, but also on a sense of primeval beginnings. “Here” on a hydrological point of origins, where “the soul seems to hear / The gathering of waters at their sources,” the poet discerns the “Something” that “comes by flashes / Deeper than peace,—a spell / Golden and inappellable / That gives the inarticulate part / Of our strange being one moment of release / That seems more native than the touch of time” (66, 50-55). Scott’s choice of the word “native” prompts Dragland’s speculation that this “release” entails a kind of spiritual “homecoming, a momentary return to origins” (249). On the one hand, these “origins” are universal: Scott appeals to a core essence of the human spirit that has no bearings in the mapped world. On the other, when considered alongside his articulation of a “lonely north,” the speaker’s discovery of a primitive spiritual “home” verges on a mythopoeic appropriation of a pre-colonial past<sup>10</sup> through which he can identify more closely with the land.

The poet remains associated with beginnings, but a consciousness of endings hangs over all things Indigenous in this poem—a contrast that further underscores the connection between “The Height of Land” and the import of the treaty as Scott understood it. The poem opens at the close of the day, and the Ojibwa guides are weary (6-7). Their voices are “long” and “mournful” as Potan “declares the ills of life” and Chees-que-ne-ne “makes a . . . sound / Of acquiescence” (7-11). Cloaked in tones of melancholy and resignation, their conversation anticipates the images of impermanence that follow it:

The fires burn low  
 With just sufficient glow  
 To light the flakes of ash that play  
 At being moths, and flutter away  
 To fall in the dark and die as ashes. (11-15)



Although the “Indian guides” are not, here, directly associated with the dying fires, a reader familiar with “The Last of the Indian Treaties” will recall its infamous simile: “[t]he Indian nature now seems like a fire that is waning, that is smouldering and dying away in ashes” (82). The echo is eerie, and while in the poem the link is only suggestive, the proximity of the guides to the waning fire involves each in the other’s atmosphere of decline. Once again we find the poem operating on two levels: one that transcends the immediate scene, catching Scott’s sense of a *fin-de-siècle* moment in Western culture, and another that resonates with his perceptions of the diminishing influence of Aboriginal peoples in a territory that was in the process of being claimed by Canada.

The connection that Scott draws between the “Indian guides” and the surrounding environment reinforces the territorial nature of this transition. The nocturnal landscape, about to yield to the new day, is heavily marked with signs of change. If the Ojibwa voices are weary, the wind is “wearier” still (7); the onset of night is conveyed by a collective fatigue that is deepened by the blending of Ojibwa voices with the landscape (and by the rhyme that links “wearier” with “Lake Superior” [4]). Even the spruces “have retired a little space,” and eventually the reader finds that “the Indian guides are dead asleep” and silence descends on the scene (19, 22). I am not the first to note that the metaphorical equation of sleep and death, here, has a sinister effect: it is an “ominous . . . way of sweeping the Indians off the stage of the poem, a way that resonates uncomfortably with the cultural pattern of, in Leslie Monkman’s phrase, ‘Death of the Indian’ (Dragland 252). Although, as I will presently argue, this death-like sleep does not entirely deprive the setting of Aboriginal significance, the fact that it occurs before the poet begins his meditation suggests that their removal from the scene is necessary if he is to experience his own spiritual “homecoming” in their territory. If “The Height of Land” does not relegate Aboriginal peoples entirely to the past, as did “Indian Place Names” in 1905, it recalls Scott’s elegiac representations of Aboriginal peoples as a “waning race” (Scott, *Selected* 37, 133).<sup>11</sup>

For Scott, as for many of his generation, Treaty 9’s articulation of new ways of governing and inhabiting northwestern Ontario heralded the end, not just of Ojibwa and Cree dominion in the vast region, but of their existence as separate peoples. During Scott’s tenure in the Department of Indian Affairs, the goal of Indian policy was the complete “absorption” of Aboriginal peoples “into the general population” and the erasure of any “lingering traces of native custom and tradition” (Scott, “Indian” 212). Along with “teachers,

missionaries, and traders,” Scott considered “treaties” as among the main influences that would eventually bring about “the merging of the Indian race with the whites” (“Last” 92). According to Armand Garnet Ruffo, an Ojibwa poet whose first collection of poems, *Opening in the Sky*, is named for his great-great grandfather who signed Treaty 9, this “destiny” underwrote Scott’s presentation of the treaty to the Aboriginal peoples (25). Ruffo’s “Poem for Duncan Campbell Scott” underscores the quiet antagonism and posturing that characterized treaty negotiations with this “black coat and tie” who came “from Ottawa way, Odawa country, / . . . to talk treaty annuity and destiny, / to make the inevitable less painful” (25).

Scott’s administrative work was motivated by the hope that, eventually, all boundaries, territorial and racial, would be dissolved between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. His poetry conveys a similar desire. The mixed-race individuals that populate Scott’s “Indian” poems are widely read as symbolic sites of the cultural dissolution that Scott anticipated.<sup>12</sup> “The Height of Land” is another of these sites, and, like the “Indian” poems, it blends the realities with the fictions of contact. Moving through spatialized patterns of order and chaos, or “peace” and “welter,” upon which the binary of north and south is based, to the unity that is symbolized by the rainbow (92), the metaphysical impetus of “The Height of Land” is toward a condition in which “oppositions” can be at least “temporarily stilled” (Johnston 261). The “ideals” that the poet seeks are premised upon a sense of things “interpenetrat[ing],” “mingl[ing],” and “merg[ing]” (Scott, “Height” 74-91). When he wonders whether the poet of the future will stand “With the deep fathomed, with the firmament charted,” and “With life as simple as a sheep-boy’s song,” these ideals assume the form of a knowable, mappable space—a space as easily apprehended as his earlier, schematic vision of north and south (138-39).

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Ultimately there is nothing “simple,” however, about either the poet’s state of mind or the setting that alternately inspires (49-92) and stifles (93-113) his ideals. In contrast with Wordsworth’s retreat from the “fretful stir” and “fever of the world” (52-3) into the familiar landscape above Tintern Abbey, Scott’s longing for restorative peace cannot be fulfilled by a setting that remains haunted by its Aboriginal history. As Bentley observes of the “Indian” poems, although Scott strives for “a harmonious union of alterities,” frequently, “what he terms the ‘Uncouth,’ the ‘pagan,’ and the ‘savage’ are not conducive or amenable to harmony but, rather, haunting spectres

that manifest themselves in alarming, threatening, and even deadly ways” (“Shadows” 753). If “The Height of Land” is not one of Scott’s “Indian” poems, it has much to reveal about the colonized spaces that produced them. Bentley does not address the Indigenous “spectres” in this poem, but they are there, muddying the clarity of its beauty.

The setting of “The Height of Land” is more intimately bound up with Aboriginal meaning than might at first be supposed. As has been suggested, the moment when the “Indian guides” fall asleep helps the poet to establish a division between the physical circumstances of the poem—its wilderness setting, the canoe trip, and whatever practical purposes have brought him here—and the philosophical meditation that follows. It has been remarked that “[t]hat the Indians . . . fall asleep and disappear from the poem implies that the guidance Scott sought from them was of a geographical rather than a philosophical nature” (Ware 15). But to characterize their slumber as a disappearance “from the poem” is to obscure the extent to which these figures remain associated with the land even after they fall asleep. At the very least, they imbue the setting with a colonial significance marked by the relationship between white traveler and Aboriginal guide. They are present in the “We” that anchors the speaker’s recollections of the journey “up through the spreading lakes” to the height of land (25). Embraced by Scott’s collective pronoun, the guides establish the poet as a foreigner unfamiliar with the route he is travelling, and dependent upon the knowledge of people with a deeper connection to the land than he possesses. As Scott recalled, during the treaty trips, “[o]ur crew of half-breeds and Indians numbered not less than twelve and sometimes seventeen” (“Last” 84). The quiet, retiring presence that characterizes the guides in his poem may not do documentary justice to their actual role and numbers on the treaty trips (although it may well reflect the exhausting physical labour they performed). Nonetheless, Scott preserves the role that Aboriginal and Métis peoples played in the reinscription of territory by generations of non-Aboriginal explorers, surveyors, and, indeed, poets, subtly reminding us that “The Height of Land” would not have been possible without them.

Moreover, the poem’s most powerful metaphysical elements suggest a lingering connection between the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. In his solitary meditation, the poet feels the presence of two apparently separate powers, both of which are touched “with a tinge of the indigenous” (Dragland 252). First, there is the “spell” that brings him in touch with his primitive essence (Scott, “Height” 51-55). Second—and even more resonant with a sense

of looming Indigenous power—there is the “ancient disturber of solitude” (63, 93) who, while reminiscent of Wordsworthian inspiration, is also closely associated, if not identical, with the “region spirit” that appears at line 68. In its first appearance, the “ancient disturber” may simply signify the wind, “Breath[ing] a pervasive sigh” through a landscape that has become animated again after a period of silence and stillness: “Now are there sounds walking in the wood, / And all the spruces shiver and tremble, / And the stars move a little in their courses” (64, 60-62). Like the “spell,” the “ancient disturber of solitude” turns the poet’s mind to origins: it is in his presence that “the soul seems to hear / The gathering of the waters at their sources” (65-66). But later on, when he “Stirs his ancestral potion in the gloom,” the “ancient disturber” brings the universal essence to which Scott appeals into contact with the land and its Aboriginal heritage (94). In his more haunting form, in fact, the “ancient disturber” strongly resembles the “lonely spirit” of the Albany that Scott describes in “The Last of the Indian Treaties”: “It is ever-present, but at night it grows in power. Something is heard and yet not heard: it rises, and dwells, and passes mysteriously, like a suspiration immense and mournful, like the sound of wings, dim and enormous, folded down with weariness” (90). The similarities between this indefinable yet “ever-present” “Something” that “haunts” the river in “The Last of the Indian Treaties,” and the “ancient disturber of solitude” that breathes his “pervasive sigh” through “The Height of Land”—not to mention the “mournful” and “weary” atmosphere that the poem also captures—suggest that the spiritual essence that inhabits his poem may, like the spirit of the Albany River, also derive from “sorcerers” and “wendigos” (“Last” 90). Scott’s “lonely north” thus comes to be characterized by a diffuse Aboriginal spirit of place that, without negating the land’s apparent loneliness, certainly qualifies its apparent vacancy.

Not unlike the “aerial pulse” of a conjurer’s drum that Scott recalls hearing, from time to time, along the treaty route (“Last” 90), and that would “throb” more threateningly in his 1926 poem, “Powassan’s Drum” (*Selected* 66), this spirit has a pervasive presence that is indistinctly but nonetheless powerfully felt at various points in “The Height of Land.” Although less nightmarish than those of “Powassan’s Drum,” the Aboriginal elements that haunt “The Height of Land” are, in Dragland’s words, “extremely ambiguous” (251). They are particularly unsettling as they merge with a landscape aesthetic that stands in marked contrast to the poem’s idealized visions. “Stir[ring] his ancestral potion in the gloom,” the “ancient disturber of solitude” interrupts the poet’s meditation on the “perfect beauty” that arises from the interpenetration of

“deed and thought,” and brings him back to earth—not to the peaceful scene of the sleeping campsite, but to a “dark wood . . . stifled with the pungent fume / Of charred earth burnt to the bone / That takes the place of air” (85-98). Here the “disturber” becomes more than just a “slightly disquieting undertone”; he is an “alien element,” trickster-like as he “prods the poet out of conventional epiphany” (Dragland 250, McKay 5). The “ancient disturber of solitude” effectively shatters the poet’s thoughts, clouding the previously “clear” air with smoke that brings back memories of a hideous landscape:

Then sudden I remember when and where,—  
The last weird lakelet foul with weedy growths  
And slimy viscid things the spirit loathes,  
Skin of vile water over viler mud  
Where the paddle stirred unutterable stench,  
And the canoes seemed heavy with fear,  
Not to be urged toward the fatal shore  
Where a bush fire, smouldering, with sudden roar  
Leaped on a cedar and smothered it with light  
And terror. (99-108)

Unique among the topographical descriptions that anchor this poem in the northern boreal wilderness, this terrain repels the speaker. The memory of it replaces his placid dreaming with a “terror” that—as the “foul” and “weedy” lake, with its “Skin” of water and “unutterable stench,” suggests—derives not from the sublime appearance of the fire so much as from an intensely earthly (even bodily) experience of decay and destruction.

Scott’s “weird lakelet” is a poetic rendering of the “marshy stream” that the treaty party paddled through on August 7, 1906; the bush fire was encountered later, on the return journey along this same route (Dragland 236). In the poem, both swamp and fire perform a metaphoric function as well as a mimetic one that resonates with the Indian Policy of Scott’s time. Pervaded by gloom and smoky devastation, the scene as a whole catches something of the “Indian nature” that Scott felt was “smouldering and dying away in ashes” as Aboriginal title was extinguished in the region. The elegiac passage that follows brings the poem back around to the atmosphere of endings with which it began: “How strange the stars have grown,” the poet muses, “the presage of extinction grows on their crests / And they are beautied with impermanence” (114-16). Could there be a link between the impermanence of stars and the impermanence of races and cultures? If this turn upward, toward the stars, pulls him out of his disturbing recollections of the swamp and the bush fire, it also amplifies their portent of

ruin. The “strange” stars with their “presage of extinction” mingle with his recollections of the “weird lakelet” and its “fatal shore” to produce a sense of something dramatic coming to a close. That the stars are “beautied with impermanence,” and will “survive the race of men,” does not entirely allay the feelings of foreboding that the previous passage builds into the poem. Awakened by the “ancient disturber of solitude,” and thus connected—at least in a loose, suggestive way—with the land’s Aboriginal history and spirit, these feelings encompass both metaphysical questions about the meaning and transience of life, and a vision of the north and its peoples. Is the bush fire’s stifling smoke destined to become “the fading smoke” that, in “Indian Place-Names,” augurs the eventual disappearance of the Aboriginal from the land (*Selected* 37)? If such a reading is plausible, then the “blush sunrise” to which the poet looks in the final lines of the poem (129) heralds the emergence of a new spirit and a new poetry of the north that has its source, not only in the “evolutionary optimism and questing heterodoxy” that has been identified here and elsewhere in the work of the Confederation Poets (Bentley, *Confederation* 239; see also “Deep”), but also in the transformation of Aboriginal lands into Canadian territory.

The sense of beginnings to which Scott appeals assumes a cartographic form, once again, as his poet imagines “the lulled earth” turning “the rich lands and the inundant oceans / To the flushed color” of the sunrise, and hears “The thrill of life beat up the planet’s margin” (146-50). Yet—despite the “clear susurrus of deep joy / That echoes and reechoes in [his] being”—this is a poem that, as Ware has convincingly argued, ultimately registers “man’s failure to comprehend” (17). Plagued by questions, the poet “is unable to maintain the sense of a benevolent and ordered universe,” and the “region spirit” remains a haunting but elusive presence that disturbs the harmony of his thoughts (15, 18). Critics have begun to suspect that the disharmony of this poem is connected to its Indigenous elements.<sup>13</sup> It surely also has something to do with Scott’s sense of the north as contested territory.<sup>14</sup> The product of oral agreements that honoured the interests of *First Nations* as well as the emerging one, Treaty 9 created a space of overlapping voices and incomplete erasures. That the Ojibwa and Cree have successfully appealed to the treaty as a promise of their continuing rights to and uses of the land highlights the fragility of Scott’s ideals.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the dramatic shift in tone that distinguishes the “sudden roar” (106) of rekindling flames of the bush fire from the waning fires of its first verse paragraph suggests a threat that would not be so easily extinguished.

Perhaps needless to say, Aboriginal articulations of territory, both literary and legal, sharpen and complicate the sense of “region spirit” to which Scott could only gesture.<sup>16</sup> Among them Ruffo’s poem, “Descent,” provides a compelling counterpoint to “The Height of Land.” Ruffo offers another nocturnal image of the northern boreal forest that, like Scott’s, brings us from water and pines to the “curve of earth”:

sky  
    descends  
        behind  
            crust moon  
spreads raven night.  
and you poised on snowshoes  
draw in the length  
of lake between the pines  
as you would  
a breath  
to notice your presence carved  
into the curve of earth. (17)

Read against the profound sense of belonging that Ruffo evokes, as breath brings body and land into easy communion, Scott’s poetic ascent seems more troubled. If he animates the land with his fleeting presence, he also remains at odds with it, a foreigner unable fully to grasp the meaning of its mysterious and ominous spirit. A reading of the territorial underpinnings of “The Height of Land” opens the possibility that both the poet’s successes and failures reflect his official, colonial relationship to the north. The land may be ripe for re-imagining, but something of its spirit and history resists the poetic and national appropriation that is taking place.

#### NOTES

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- 1 See Dragland; Salem-Wiseman; Groening; and Bentley, “Shadows.”
- 2 For Scott’s role in the history, negotiation, and terms of Treaty 9, see Titley 60-74, and Dragland 20-66.
- 3 While this is the most recent anthology to feature the poem, it can also be found in Bennett and Brown’s *New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* and Gerson and Davies’ *Canadian Poetry From the Beginnings Through the First World War*, though not in Sugars and Moss’ volume 1 of *Canadian Literature in English*.
- 4 See Bentley, *Moose* 5.
- 5 In 1912, Ontario’s northern boundary moved from the Albany River to the shore of Hudson Bay; Treaty 9 covered the new provincial territory by the end of the decade (Wightman 109).

- 6 See Titley, Dragland, and Macklem.
- 7 Hunting and fishing would be subject to federal laws and further restricted as “settlement, mining, lumbering, trading or other purposes” dictated (Canada 20); for erosions of Aboriginal treaty rights, see Titley, Dragland, and Wightman 211.
- 8 See Ware.
- 9 On the influence of Maurice Maeterlinck, for instance, see Bentley, “Deep.”
- 10 For an elaboration of mythopoetic elements in Canadian poetry, see Frye 181, and for their postcolonial implications, see Devereux.
- 11 For a discussion of this frequent trope in Scott’s poetry, see Groening.
- 12 See Salem-Wiseman, and Bentley, “Shadows.”
- 13 McKay suggests, for instance, that by calling one of his guides Chees-que-ne-ne (“in fact, a shaman”), “Scott may have been welcoming into his epiphanic poem the very element that would disrupt its basic assumptions, disturbing the aesthetic solitude of its protagonist” (6).
- 14 See Wightman 26-7, 52-4, 96-101; also Macklem. Conflict certainly characterizes the language of “conquest” and “cultural genocide” with which, in 1977, the Chiefs of Grand Council Treaty 9 described non-Aboriginal incursions into this territory (3). More recently, the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation at Big Trout Lake was engaged in a fierce dispute with the Platinex mining company over access to traditional lands protected by the treaty.
- 15 Recognizing the partiality of the government commissioners’ views of the treaty, the Supreme Court of Canada has since stipulated that its “terms are to be interpreted in a manner sensitive to Aboriginal expectations” (Macklem 100). K.I. First Nation’s recent victory confirms the strength of Aboriginal voices.
- 16 Compared with these, Scott’s uneasiness might be read as a symptom of the “relationship . . . of estrangement” that northern Ontario Aboriginal peoples have attributed to the government’s resource-based understanding of nature, wherein the land has become “spiritually disconnected fr[om] human beings” (qtd. in Ontario Supreme Court).

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