

F. R. SCOTT AND SOME OF HIS POEMS

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IN FRANK SCOTT we have a figure whom some Carlyle of Canada's second century might write about as The Hero as Canadian Poet or perhaps more soberly as The Poet as Man of Action. Politician, lawyer, teacher, scholar, and public figure, F. R. Scott has been in the forefront of the battle for civil liberties and social justice in Canada. He was one of the doctors presiding over the births of the CCF and the New Democratic Party; he fought and won the legal battles against the padlock law of Premier Duplessis and against the censorship of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; he has written studies of Canada's constitution, has been Dean of Law at McGill, and is at present a member of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. And he has, since his early days as a law student at McGill, been a poet.

The main function of a poet, of course, is to write poems, and Scott has been doing that steadily for more than three and a half decades. But his energy, his generous good will, and his natural self-assertiveness that makes him an inevitable and stimulating leader, were thrown into the battle for the new poetry in Canada as soon as it was joined in the mid-twenties. The now classic satire *The Canadian Authors Meet* was one of his first shots, while his social and editorial participation in the doings of the Preview group and the encouragement he has given to other poets in Montreal have kept up the good work to the present moment. There is hardly a poet in Canada who has not, passing through Montreal, made his pilgrimage to Clarke Avenue, Westmount, and been royally entertained and stimulated with wise and witty talk about poetry and poets; and all of them from the early days of Leo Kennedy, Abe Klein, and myself, through the time of Patrick Anderson, John Sutherland, P. K. Page, and the rest to the overlapping and hetero-

geneous groups that might include Louis Dudek, Ralph Gustafson, Irving Layton, Doug Jones, and John Glassco, felt the charm, energy and good sense that animated Frank Scott and make him one of the leaders in every group.

Ralph Gustafson has expressed in an appropriate and witty piece of verse a judgment that I think every one of the poets I have named would agree is just:

To say
that this man is fantastic
is to be
Frankly wrong.
Real
is the right root
for him.
He bears history,
the lakes
he dives under,
the cold hard sun
he walks in,
Canada perhaps. . . .

Praise
he goes into,
padlocks
he gets well out of
and piety. . . .

Mortality
moves him,
he goes for wrong-doing,
never lets bad enough
alone. . . .

Words
he gets the wear out of . . .
buried with respectable honour
goes
Scott-free.

“He bears history,/the lakes/he dives under . . .” These lines will take us into the first poem in Scott’s new book,* “Lakeshore,” one of the finest and most characteristic pieces in the collection.

* *Selected Poems*, Oxford University Press, \$4.75.

IT WILL SERVE as a gateway through which to enter into an examination of some of his most striking themes and interesting techniques.

Its theme is Man's history, which extends back into pre-history and before man. Its unifying symbol is water as the source of life. The poem establishes through a specific concrete personal experience a contact in awareness with biological history, stretching back to the primordial beginnings of life and all around to the earthbound mechanical *now* of "a crowded street."

By the edge of a lake, the poet — or, better, the sensuous mind that is the protagonist of so many of Scott's metaphysical lyrics — contemplates water, earth, and sky. There is first "the bevelled edge of land," then "the fretted sands" that the eye follows as they "go slanting down through liquid air." Now the regard is fixed on stones below the surface of the water and held too at the surface where the stones seem to be

Floating upon their broken sky
All netted by the prism wave
And rippled where the currents are.

This is exact, clear, and elegant. There is a seventeenth-century grace about these opening lines. One thinks of Cowley's praise: "His candid style like a clean stream does slide." It is a style that admits, indeed invites, Wit — as we see in the next couple of stanzas. The poet (Man-and-Mind) peers into the water.

I stare through windows at this cave
Where fish, like planes, slow-motioned, fly
Poised in a still of gravity . . .

The windows are the surface of the water and the surfaces of the eyes. Note also the hushed gravity of the last line and the gentle punning on *still*.

But the most striking object that confronts the poet is his own reflection.

I am a tall frond that waves
Its head below its rooted feet
Seeking the light that draws it down
To forest floors beyond its reach
Vivid with gloom and eerie dreams.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza the sensuous mind dives down into the depths of the water and into the pre-racial æons of the past, and for the four next stanzas we become, like the diver, liquid and loosed and silent, "Stroked by the fingertips of love,"

Too virginal for speech or sound
And each is personal and laned
Along his private aqueduct.

But this return to the all-embracing primordial womb can be only a momentary glimpse of a long-lost freedom, a long since forfeited harmony with our environment.

Too soon the tether of the lungs
Is taut and straining, and we rise
Upon our undeveloped wings
Toward the prison of our ground
A secret anguish in our thighs
And mermaids in our memories.

This is our talent, to have grown
Upright in posture, false-erect,
A landed gentry, circumspect,
Tied to a horizontal soil
The floor and ceiling of the soul;
Striving, with cold and fishy care
To make an ocean of the air.

The physical and sensuous exactness of the beginnings of the first of these two stanzas is admirable, as is the emotional and imaginative rightness of the end. The witty implications in naming our arms "our undeveloped wings" should not go without notice either. In the next stanza, the aptness of the joke in calling mankind "a landed gentry" adds to the laughter of the mind which it is one — though only one — of the functions of this poem to provoke.

But it is not with laughter, however philosophical, that the poem ends, but with wonder.

Sometimes, upon a crowded street,
I feel the sudden rain come down
And in the old, magnetic sound
I hear the opening of a gate
That loosens all the seven seas.
Watching the whole creation drown
I muse, alone, on Ararat.

Here, at the threshold of his book, Scott moves from the poetry of concrete images through wit and metaphysical imagination to myth and magic. A long cool dive into Lake Massawippi and the poet comes up with a rich hoard of racial

memories, dreams, desires and aspirations. All are perfectly fused: earth, water, air; science and mythology; mermaids, Venus, Noah; the I and All-Mankind; a crowded street and “the water’s deepest colonnades.”

“**L**AKESHORE” is an excellent starting point for a consideration of Scott’s non-satirical poetry. The themes and the motives of many of his most completely articulated poems are seen in it at their clearest and most direct. The fascination with water, as an element and as a symbol; the identification of the poet’s Self with Man and of the sensuous perceptive physical being with Mind; and the inescapable tendency to identify or interchange the language and imagery of science (especially biology, geology and psychology) with the language and imagery of religion: all these are here. And they are to be found also, in varying degrees and proportions, in such deeply felt and intellectually stimulating poems as “Paradise Lost”, “Eden”, “Journey”, “My Amoeba is Unaware”, and the best of the pieces on India and the Far East — “Bangkok”, “Water”, “A Grain of Rice”, and “On the Death of Gandhi”.

“Lakeshore” may also serve as an exemplar both of the “candid” style derived from Imagism and of the witty metaphysical style that, without being in the least derivative, recalls Marvell and Waller — or, if you prefer, Auden. Some of the earliest poems dating from the days of the *McGill Fortnightly Review* already have a simplicity of language and an exactness of imagery which are the firstfruits of conscious discipline, control, and humility. Little pieces like “North Stream” and “Snowdrift” or the much later haiku “Plane Landing in Tokyo” exhibit these qualities in miniature splendour.

A pure and naked perception alone could not, of course, satisfy Scott for more than a moment, and most of his poems that start out as an image soon become images, and perceptions soon become concepts and blossom in metaphor, analogy, and conceit. Mind comes flooding in.

Many of the early very simple verses grouped near the beginning of *Selected Poems* are nevertheless quite delightful, though their importance perhaps is mainly historical (they date from the mid-twenties) and technical (they show Scott’s later style beginning to form). “New Names” develops in a personal and indeed almost rapturous way the old thesis that writers as different as Mrs. Traill and Mr. Douglas Le Pan have united in expressing — that Canada is a country without a mythology. Scott suggests we must make our own anew. “Old Song”

finds and expresses an austere cadence in the almost-silence of the northern wilderness:

far voices
and fretting leaves
this music the
hillside gives

but in the deep
Laurentian river
an elemental song
for ever

a quiet calling
of no mind
out of long æons

.

granite lips
a stone throat

Here we are back to the purest imagism and a style that is the ultimate in simplicity and suggestiveness. This poem has a theme and a style that are irresistibly appealing to the Canadian poet, as new poets like Bowering and Newlove show as clearly as E. J. Pratt or W. W. E. Ross. Here, as in "Lakeshore", we have the sense of vast distances in space and time and a view of geological pre-history that goes back even farther than the ages of man-as-fish.

Another poem that rises naturally out of such telescopic probings into the geologic and biologic past and therefore has affinities with "Lakeshore" and "Old Song" is the strange meditation called "Mount Royal". This is a Pratt poem with a difference. One thinks of the vivifying dynamism of the description of the Laurentian Shield in "Towards the Last Spike". Here time is speeded up: the Mountain rises out of the sea; the sea subsides, leaving its deposit of silt and shells; Man walks and builds his muddled cities "where crept the shiny mollusc," and the poet or poet-mind observes it all.

Where flowers march, I dig these tiny shells
Once deep-down fishes safe, it seemed, on sand. . . .

The joke about the fishes building on sand and thinking themselves safe alerts us to the fact that irony and satire are this poet's chosen weapons. The satire

here is directed against man's vanity, pride, and blind self-confidence as in Hardy's lines on the loss of the *Titanic*, where dim moon-eyed fishes stare at the mighty wreck and query "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" The situation is reversed in "Mount Royal". It is the fish who have been stranded and passed by. Now they are cited as an object lesson that suburban and commercial man, who builds his villas on the reclaimed island of the mountain, fails to heed — blindly and foolishly, it is implied, since the forces of atomic destruction are to hand. The poem ends in angry scorn.

Pay taxes now,
Elect your boys, lay out your pleasant parks,
You gill-lunged, quarrelsome ephemera!
The tension tightens yearly, underneath,
A folding continent shifts silently
And oceans wait their turn for ice or streets.

THERE IS A CURIOUS CONSEQUENCE of this geologic view that we can observe in some of Scott's most characteristic poems. He is a man capable of — indeed unable to refrain from — taking long views, both backwards into the past and forward into the future, an idealist in the popular sense of the word. Both in his political life as a socialist and his literary life as a poet he welcomes the new, the just, and the generous — and always in the broadest and most generous terms. Poems that embrace vast cosmic distances, both of space and time, lend themselves to thinking in abstractions. There is world enough and time for all the great abstractions to come into being, to evolve and grow, to change, to grow old, and perhaps to die. The good ones we must cultivate, preserve, and nourish; the bad ones we must kill.

There is a very peculiar class of poems in which these consequences of taking large views are quite explicit. Some of its members are "Creed", "Conflict", "Dialogue", "Degeneration", poems concerned with War or with Love, and a remarkable series of what for want of a better name I will call "defining" poems — among them "Memory", "Heart", "Was", "Caring", and (with a difference) "Stone". Let us look at one or two of them.

"Conflict" is a rather Emersonian poem on the tragic paradox of war. It develops the thesis that men on both sides in any conflict fight for the good they know and die with equal courage for the opposite sides of truth:

When I see the falling bombs
Then I see defended homes.
Men above and men below
Die to save the good they know. . . .

Pro and con have single stem
Half a truth dividing them. . . .

Persecution's cruel mouth
Shows a twisted love of truth. . . .

Here speaks the defender of unpopular causes, the idealist who loves the abstract and the universal. It is the wide application of unparticularized truth that such a poetry seeks to secure. Universals and abstractions are employed with the confidence born of an utter faith in their reality and validity. Such words as *good, wrong, bravery, love, truth, prison, ghetto, flag, gun, rack, rope, persecution, sacrifice*, whether abstractions or collective symbols, are made to glow with the vitality of an individual existence — or are used as if they did so glow.

How this is done, the eight quatrains entitled “Dialogue” may demonstrate. In structure and language this poem is as taut and concentrated as “Conflict”, but its movement is in the reverse direction — from sensation and particularity (from the concrete, that is) to the universal, a universal which is equated with the spiritual — “spirit takes communion/From every living touch.” The progression is straightforward. “Sense is more than mortal.” Our bodies are the gateway to a supra-sensual world. Eye, ear, and hand contribute to the synthesis of a new form “to house a new conception.”

Desire first, then structure
Complete the balanced picture.
The thought requires the form.

The poem's rhetoric is serpentine, for we have now reached — this is the fifth of eight stanzas — the point where the poem begins:

The hour is ripe for union,
And spirit takes communion
From every living touch.

The end in the last two stanzas is surprising and unheroic. The serpent cannot rear back and strike; instead it sinks down and seem to collapse.

For us, how small the power
To build our dreams a tower
Or cast the molten need.
For us, how small the power.

So few, so worn, the symbols.
No line or word resembles
The vision in its womb.
So few, so worn, the symbols.

Truth, not wishes, hopes, or evasions, is the business of poetry; and this poem would be a lesser one if it ended any other way.

What is needed always is a new language, new images, and a new technique. Scott has been trying all his life — and sometimes with heartening success — to find these. Some of his notable successes are moving love poems that have been placed in this collection immediately after “Dialogue”. Their newness and hence their effectiveness lies in nothing more strange than an absolute fidelity to the occasion and the emotion that has brought them into being. One, called “Meeting”, begins like this:

If what we say and do is quick and intense,
And if in our minds we see the end before starting,
It is not fear, but understanding that holds us.

Here the conciseness of the syntax contributes potentialities to the meaning. It is not fear that holds us apart but understanding that holds us together.

Other poems that approach or achieve the new style are “Will to Win” — a deceptively light and witty *jeu d'esprit* in which the lightness enables the poet to keep control of the situation and the wit serves to define it; “Vision” — beautifully rhymed quatrains in which the “newness” or rightness comes from the clarity with which the sharp edge of every idea is defined; and “A l'Ange Avantgardien” — the explicit statement of a romantic view of poetic creation according to which the emphasis must always be on the making never on the made.

One of the most striking paradoxes of Scott's poetic life is that the ceaseless flow of energy which throws up poems of all kinds and in all modes should nevertheless be able to shape them with extreme care, whether the work in hand is a piece of impressionistic and typographical experiment or a closely knit web of thought, like the fine late poem “Vision” — a true metaphysical lyric that begins:

Vision in long filaments flows
Through the needles of my eyes.
I am fastened to the rose . . .

I am clothed in what eye sees.

and ends:

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.

Here is song that is as well written as prose — a poem that reiterates the validity of the “candid” style of “Lakeshore” and the earlier imagist pieces.

This style is seen at its most purely intellectual in what I have called the “defining” poems — lyrics that perhaps have developed out of Scott’s training as a lawyer. Lawyers, like poets, are involved with words, with definitions, and with subtle quibbles. Some of these pieces, as for example “Memory”, are apt and ingenious metaphor:

Tight skin called Face is drawn
Over the skull’s bone comb
Casing the honey brain

And thoughts like bee-line bees
Fly straight from blossom eyes
To store sweet facts in cells . . .

Within the waxy walls
Lifetimes of sounds and smells
Lie captive in the coils . . .

Others, like “Was” seem merely verbal, until we notice that here the universal and the abstract are made concrete and immediate, the ideal transformed before our eyes into the real:

Was is an Is that died
in our careless hands
and would not stay
in its niche of time.

We crumble all our nows
into the dust of Was . . .
forgetting Was

cannot be shaken off
follows close behind
breathes down our neck . . .

One day we shall look back
into those staring eyes
and there will be nothing left but
Was.

Another “defining” poem of the same sort is the one beginning “Caring is loving, motionless,” but the lines entitled “Stone” show an interesting difference. In these what is being defined is not an abstraction or a state but an object, a solid item, “a still of gravity”. The method is entirely different from that of imagism. The purpose of an imagist poem is to perceive and to present perception, but here we go further in an effort to grasp the idea of the thing and of its place in history. The motion too is just the reverse of that in “Was”, where an abstraction was made concrete; here a concretion is seen in the light of thought — the remarkable thing being, however, that the thought is made to seem to radiate from the stone itself:

A stone is a tomb
with the door barred.

A still picture
from a flick of motion.

A stone is a closed eye
reflecting what it saw. . . .

In these distichs we come back to the sense of time in which Scott is so deeply immersed that it recurs in poem after poem. Here the mind moves from the glacial epochs of pre-history to the bursting stone that falls on Hiroshima.

Perhaps in coming to a close I should return to the personal. But actually I have not been away from it. The old dictum that the style is the man has never been more clearly illustrated than in the poetry of F. R. Scott. All his poems, from the gayest and lightest expression of delight in life through his pointed and savage satires to the profound lyrics I have been mainly considering, are informed and qualified by a sense of responsibility and an inescapable sincerity, which is serious but never solemn and rich without ostentation.

FOUND POEMS

F. R. Scott

BRITISH INDUSTRIALIST APPROVES APARTHEID

Is the headline. Sir Francis de Guingand
Chairman of Rothman's of Pall Mall, Ltd.,
(substantial cigaret and tobacco holdings in South Africa)
said black Africans in general
are "just too immature for self-government".
While admitting
"It's an immensely complex problem, of course",
he said he was "all in favour of separate development".
Apparently the Portuguese colonies
are doing "awfully well, you know",
while black Africans
"are killing each other".
"Those Somali chaps —
they're bound to cause trouble.
Same thing in the Congo.
Awful mess.
And Burundi,
Urundi,
or whatever you call the place.
Killing each other by the thousands.
Dreadful,
just dreadful".
And as for Nyerere of Tanzania,

he is “playing far too much
into the hands
of the wretched Chinese”.

(Montreal Gazette, 10 Oct., 1966)

ONE CURE FOR LONELINESS

Noted
the recent letters
from people who are lonely
and find time hanging heavily
on their hands.

Some form of hobby
can serve to interest
such folk.
Such a hobby need not be expensive
nor demand undue space
or equipment.

News events
or stories and articles
from the press and magazines
can be clipped and pasted
in a scrapbook.

This book could be
I am told
as cheap as a five cent copy book
and a jar of paste
is mentioned
at about
19 cents.

(Montreal Star, July 15, 1965)

FROST-BITE

The term *frost-bitten*
denotes the effect produced by extreme cold,
accompanied by a sharp biting wind.
In such weather, persons are liable
to have the nose, toes, fingers, ears,
or those parts where the circulation of the blood is
scanty and slow,

frost-bitten,
without being made aware of the change by their own sensations;
often they are first informed of their misfortune
by a passing stranger,
who observes the nose becoming quite *white*,
while the rest of the face is very red.
In such a predicament it is at first startling
to see an utter stranger running up to you
with a handful of snow, calling out
“*your nose, sir: your nose is frost-bitten:*
and, without further ceremony,
rubs without mercy at your proboscis —
it being the first time, perhaps,
that anyone has ever dared to tweak and twinge
that exquisitely sensitive organ —
which some have considered the seat of honour.

If *snow*
be well *rubbed in*
in due time,
there is a chance of saving
the most prominent feature of the face;
if not,
or if *heat* be applied,
not only is the skin destroyed,

but the nose,
and a great part of the adjacent surface,
are irrevocably lost.

(From a *History of Upper and Lower Canada*, by
L. Montgomery Martin, 1837, p. 186)

ADVERTISEMENT

Thin-film decoder
for high-speed pulse code
modulation systems
converts binary pulse sequences
into analog signals.
Circuit consists
of precision resistor network
and multiple-encapsulated control diodes.
Precision resistors
generate reference currents
that are switched into
resistive ladder network.
Output voltage is proportional
to binary code
applied to diodes.
Precision sufficient for decoding
9-digit binary codes
is obtained,
at code rates up to 12 mc
(108 mb/s pulse rates).

(*Scientific American*, 1965)