

*THE MISSING FACE:
FIVE SHORT STORIES BY
DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT*

by
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Critics of Duncan Campbell Scott have focussed on his poetry. In the collection of essays edited by Stanley Dragland¹ the most interesting — the essays by E. K. Brown, Bernard Muddiman, A. J. M. Smith, Milton Wilson, and Gary Geddes — all illuminate aspects of the poetry: its musical quality, its restraint and intensity, its complexity and self-containment. Emphasis has consequently been on the landscape art of Scott, for his best poetry has been dominated by the forms and movements of nature, to the point when the human figure is diminished. Less attention has been paid to his fiction, and the best of this criticism — articles by Ross Roy and Melvin Dagg — has consisted of a side-glance used to illuminate Scott's use of Indian motifs. But the stories relevant for such illumination, such as "Charcoal," and "Tête-Jaune," like the Indian poems, such as "The Forsaken," "On the Way to the Mission," and "At Gull Lake," naturally present a vision of people dominated by place, by season, by climate. The emphasis is therefore again on nature. Perhaps Professors Mathews and MacDougall will right the balance in their full scale studies and editions. Meantime, most critics seem to think that Scott is one of those Canadian Writers over-impressed by nature. He is one of those Canadian artists attacked long ago by Hugh Kenner in "The Case of the Missing Face." Such Canadians, said Kenner (and he was writing particularly about the Group of Seven) have a "pathological craving for identification with the sub-human."²

But Scott wrote other stories, concerned primarily with men, and only minimally with the landscape. I propose to examine five of these: "Vain Shadow," "Labrie's Wife," "Vengeance is Mine," "Expiation," and "In the Year 1806." All five were published first in Canadian magazines in the years before the First World War, and all were reprinted in the 1923

¹Duncan Campbell Scott, *A Book of Criticism*, ed. Stanley Dragland (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1974).

²Hugh Kenner, "The Case of the Missing Face," rep. in *Our Sense of Identity*, ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954), 203.

collection so unfortunately titled *The Witching of Elspie*.³ These five stories focus on the drama of Scottish traders, caught in the "outlandish" North. They form an important part of Scott's total work: they represent an interesting transitional phase in the development of the short story as a genre in the pre-war years; and they represent the recognition and delineation by an important Canadian writer of something other than the immanence of nature.

All five are stories of isolates, men caught by their jobs in a remote, minimal society. "Vain Shadow" and "Labrie's Wife" are linked through the presence in both of Archibald Muir, trader at Nepigon in 1815. Central in both is the relationship of two men: Archie and daft Donald Murchison in "Vain Shadow," Archie and the younger Alec in "Labrie's Wife." "Vengeance is Mine" and "In the Year 1806," are linked by theme: each tells of a relationship between two men that spells death for one. Trade Nairn, in "1806," drives Alex Pendarvies to insanity and death, out of callousness. In "Vengeance," Ian Forbes drives Evan MacColl to a similar fate of helpless defeat, though in this case the scourger's motives are more mixed, and include repressed love as well as contempt. In both these stories our vision is that of the victim. In "Expiation" our point of view is tied not to the victim but to the ravager. Forbes Macrimmon sends his faithful hunter Daniel to his doom, and it is Forbes' attempt to atone for his deed that begins and ends the tale.

Social, psychological, and moral tensions hold our attention. Nature's impact on consciousness, and human response to natural force are of secondary interest only.

In the stories under discussion here, Indians appear peripherally. They represent possibilities of gentleness, loyalty, love and trust. These emotions seem impossible for the white men in the Northern trading posts. Daniel, the victim in "Expiation," is an Indian who exemplifies devotion and valour. The dark-eyed Julie, in "Vengeance is Mine," represents a hope of human solace for Evan MacColl, but she is sent away by the rigid Ian Forbes. In "Labrie's Wife" and "Vain Shadow," the Indians Ogemah-ga-bow and Needic play a less substantial role, while in the darkest of the five stories, "In the Year 1806," no Indians are present at all. So the face in the landscape of Scott's north is a white one, and it is a face contorted by frightening and terrible passions, or drawn by the effort to keep these passions from showing.

Frenchmen appear briefly in these stories: Labrie, Loudet, the men at Fort la Touche, as an alternative, but not a much developed one. The central figures are Scots. This fact leads to the introduction of some rather

³Duncan Campbell Scott, *The Witching of Elspie* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923).

sour play with national emblems — the porridge, the bonnet, the pipes, and of course it is in keeping with history that Scots should feature so largely in tales of the outposts. But Scott uses the Scottishness of his characters in a deeper sense. All are fatally bound by pride in ancestry, by propensity to drunkenness, and by devotion to manners and rituals. All are Scots also in theological bias, dour Calvinists, duty-ridden, set on control, determined to be canny, yet driven into fierce and ruthless actions by clash of values. The author set these Scots into situations in which the most dangerous aspects of the national character would be brought out. Perhaps we might say he brought out, through these Scottish protagonists, the most subtle and self-torturing situations in which a northern form of Puritanism might embroil itself.

The plots of these five stories do not centre on romantic tangles. There is a romance in "The Vain Shadow," but it is one distanced in memory, an affair of young love in Scotland remembered in exile. The more important affair in this story is the tense relationship between Donald and Archie, the frustration, the fury, the pity. In "Labrie's Wife" we see Archie a few months later, and again the romance, in the conventional sense, is subordinate to other feelings. Archie's feeling for Labrie's "wife" is tangled with nationalistic touchiness, business rivalries, drunkenness, and jealous teasing of the younger, more rigid boy, Alec. In "Vengeance is Mine," young Evan's gentle romantic attachment to the girl Julie is swept away by the older trader Ian Forbes, and our interest is easily deflected to the more complex strain of Forbes' feelings for the boy — wisps of gentle feelings stifled until the two men end in isolating mutual hatred. The only touch of romance in "Expiation" appears in the devotion of Daniel's wife to her mistreated, falsely betrayed husband. Macrimmon's confrontations are most powerfully directed to himself. And "In the Year 1806" pushes human cruelty to its final degree in Nairn, and human suffering beyond the limits of sanity in Alec Pendarvies, Nairn's enemy and victim.

Scott in these stories deals with men — literally men, since the feminine principle is virtually absent. And Scotsmen — with all that implies about the violence and introspection of Northern bourgeois Calvinism. Scott is concerned with power, will and action, as befits a story-teller who has grown up in the era of Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson. Yet the final actions are often symbolic and gestural: the burning of a box, the scoring of a letter, the tanning of a mink-skin, the burying of a cap. Scott was open to the post-Victorian influences which led Joyce and Lawrence from the realm of physical action into the movements of the subconscious: these stories, for all their violence and virility, are more concerned with the neurotic pressures of the inner life than with overt resolution in action.

Nature plays very little part in these stories. In his poem "Roses on the Portage," Scott had noted the inability of Indians to heed the delicacies of natural beauty. The Scotsmen in the five stories we have been considering

seem almost as impervious to natural detail. This is curious because, as noted at the outset, Scott is particularly adept at handling landscape. In his earliest short stories, the *Village of Viger Tales*, setting is touched in with a kind of prose poetry. Re-reading those stories, one is struck by the strategy of the openings: each tale opens with a poetically intense creation of a mood in nature, to reinforce or ironically offset the human drama to follow. And in the poetry written after the publication of *Village of Viger*, in *New World Lyrics and Ballads*, 1905, and in *Via Borealis*, 1906, Scott was presenting nature as a stimulus to moral reflections and to social decisions, and also, most importantly, as a stimulus to an intuitive, meditative state, a spiralling consciousness. The gift of nature, he believes, is:

Not the problems solved but just
The hope of solving opened outward thrust
A little further into the spirit air.⁴

Poem after poem, consequently, focusses on a scene in nature. Poem after poem begins with the word "Here —" "Here in the wilderness. . ." and the phrase introduces sharp vignettes which are the poetic equivalent of a landscape painting.

But in the five short stories set in the far northern trading posts, references to nature are minimal. In "The Vain Shadow," and "Labrie's Wife," the device of a journal form explains the absence of natural description. Since Scott has adopted the persona of Archie Muir, who has repressed his sympathies to a pathological point, the lack of reference or response to nature in these two stories is made technically understandable. In "Vengeance is Mine," we are given brief glimpses of Evan's earlier response to nature, but then are told that this was response to a mirage. The exception to this ignoring or repressing of responses to nature appears in "Expiation." This story begins with description of the rock, the lake and the islands at Missanabie. Again, the focus is on inter-human and intra-human tension. When we finally see Forbes Macrimmon, fixed on the rocky point of land, expiating his sin, we are given no further reference to lake, or reflecting pool, or islands. The human isolate, who has cast himself out of the huddle of buildings, fills the screen entirely. Finally, Nairn, in "In the Year 1806," cruelly drives Alec into a mist of madness, in which the forms of nature — sun, moon, water, clay soil — impinge on deranged senses, but only sufficiently to elicit a robot-like response. Alex pulls up a robe, shades his eyes, strikes water with a paddle, smoothes earth with a spade, all in reflex response to natural stimuli. In an important article in *Canadian Literature*, David Stouck once spoke of the sense of precision and of foreboding in Scott's stories, and of the

⁴"Fragment of a Letter," in *Beauty and Life* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1921).

implacable ruthless movement toward a dreadful conclusion.⁵ One most dreadful part of these conclusions is surely the loss of ability to respond to nature.

Yet in these terror-filled tales, the possibility of peace seems implied in the natural settings. In "Expiation," the lake as seen from the dark point seems beautiful. It makes music, "the dulcet sound of all its small waves ringing like the tones of innumerable lute players sounding their fairy music."⁶ Life in the huddle of company buildings is ugly, but Daniel the Indian can leave, can slip away silently in the evening mist "an intensified shadow within the shadow."⁷ There is winter peace in "Vain Shadow": "dancing cold after the storm,"⁸ a beautiful morning, the snow all sparkling in the sun and no wind to disturb the lightest of the crystals.⁹ The shoreline at Winisk, in "Vengeance is Mine," appears as a vision of peace, "absolute and virginal."¹⁰ It is a place "fabulous, secret and full of lustre" to the young Evan MacColl. Yet all these stories, even though they are set in "the beauty of peace," are centred on the terrors of jealousy, loneliness, remorse, and cruelty. None of these stories could end as "The Forsaken" does, with "then [he] had rest." The endings of these stories are frightening rather than soothing.

Why did Duncan Campbell Scott change when he wrote those five stories from the tone and the structures that were working well in his poetry? The different kind of ending, like the shift from stories about Indians to stories about white men, marks an important shift in Scott, reflecting in turn a change in contemporary conventions of literature. Scott was following his times in separating poetry from prose, leaving to poetry the romantic effects of lyrics about landscape, while using prose to probe into social science or psychology. Scott was in the vanguard, indeed, in converting the short story to new and important uses during this pre-war period. The rise of the modern novel, as we know, is associated with the sense of isolation, of autonomy, of the private mind, a sense of absence of harmony with others and with nature. The short story because of its limitation could present a less rich sense of this modern crisis of consciousness. Yet experiments such as Scott's could load the short story with power to suggest the same central modern theme.

In his new use of endings, for instance, Scott was leading away from the kind of finality and surprise and revelation which marked the close of a

⁵"Notes on the Canadian Imagination," *Canadian Literature*, 54 (1972), 14.

⁶"Expiation" in *The Witching of Elspie*, 101.

⁷*Ibid.*, 107.

⁸"The Vain Shadow" in *The Witching of Elspie*, 29.

⁹*Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰"Vengeance is Mine" in *The Witching of Elspie*, 49.

story by Kipling or O. Henry or Bret Harte. He was experimenting with the closing whose effect could be more lingering, something with a closing movement closer to the moral or aesthetic epiphany of a Joyce story.

More generally, these five short stories suggest ways of underlining the significance of a single critical moment. Scott was moving away from the old fashioned structure of the *Village of Viger* — the vignettes of nature, the chronological unfolding of plot, the direct authorial comment on character. Instead he was experimenting with evocative names, with suggestive refrains, and with talismanic items used as hinges of the plot.

A mere glance at the names in these stories suggests that they are being used as a kind of shorthand to suggest hidden meanings. Consider the curious overlapping of Ian Forbes — Forbes MacCrimmon, or the two Alocs. Or the French names Legrave and Labrie, Loudet and Fort La Touche. Such names suggest the modern fiction writer's interest in masks or in puns as devices to be exploited when characters are named.

More interesting is the use of the talismans — the physical things on which the plot is made to turn. In each of the five stories, the talisman has been brought from an earlier time. In "Vain Shadow," a true lover's knot has been tattooed on Donald Murchison's chest with the initials "H.F./M.F." In "Labrie's Wife" the green box marked "M.L." is burned, and the letter which explained that "M.L." stood for Madaline Lagrave and not Madaline Labrie remains undelivered too long. In "Expiation," the talisman is the tin pail which Macrimmon accuses Daniel of stealing. In "Vengeance is Mine," it is a bible scored by a living coal. "In the Year 1806" hinges on a cap, buried in the grave dug by Alec for Nairn, and on the mirror in which Alec, seeing himself, thinks he sees Nairn his enemy. In each of the stories the talisman is wrought from an earlier time, and in each it suggests a confusion about time or a mistake about time made by the protagonists.

This brings us to the question of refrain. Significantly the recurring word in these five stories is "now." Strikingly, when we remember the recurring "here" of the nature poetry, we see the sharp shift from place to time. "Now that Murchison has gone daft," "Vain Shadow" begins. "Free now for three days" is the repeated phrase in "In the Year 1806." Or a variant — "today something happened" begins "Labrie's Wife." This emphasis on "now," on present time, is curious considering that the stories are all very carefully set in specified past eras.¹¹ The stories are dated not merely 1815 or 1806 but tied to the very detail of day, month and hour, and yet the point of all the stories is that the characters are confused about time. The motif of time and confusion is treated ironically in "The Vain Shadow" where Donald Murchison insists on waiting out the weeks before reading year-old newspapers. Confusion of time is treated tragically in "In the Year 1806," in which three promised days of freedom for Alec Pendarvies blur into one terrible day, just as dream actions blur into a

¹¹The only poem which carries this kind of specific date is "At Gull Lake, August, 1810." Nairn in this poem has the same name as the character in the tale "In the Year 1806."

delusion of reality. Extra irony, of course, is added to all five stories by the fact that the present felt so urgently within the stories' limits is distanced for the reader of Scott's day by the lapse of a century. Further irony, also for us reading the story at a distance of seventy years! Time then, more than nature is a participant in Scott's drama. Time is a dimension of human life more significant than place. Scott, playing with time, plays with the past in the triple perspective of protagonist's time, remembered time, and reader's time. Surely this is a final mark of modernity in Scott: this concern with the fourth dimension, with time in the mind.

Scott in these short stories turns from concern with man in motion through a real, oppressing, and impressionable universe, towards acceptance of man as living most significantly within his own mind. Tangled in time and in memory he moves through a world which is impervious to his gestures.

If, as Roy Daniells has said, "only nature, and preferably nature in her most primitive and untamed aspect is capable of releasing Scott's powers as a poet,"¹² we now add a definition of what best releases Scott's powers as a prose writer. It is his sense of a past, a peculiarly Canadian past. Barker Fairley, in an article published years ago in the *Canadian Forum*, stated "the Canadian feeling for humanity is defective."¹³ Canadian artists' work was so dominated by landscape he said, not because of lack of skill but because of lack of right vision and vitality. We may counter this accusation by bringing forward the little clutch of stories written by Duncan Campbell Scott in the pre-war period, in which vision and vitality were preeminent. The Scotsmen in these stories, far from "craving for identification with the sub-human," are delineated as significant and dignified. "Nature is but one of the means by which man may penetrate to the truth of his own sensations."¹⁴ Human history, particularly Canadian history, treated with sophistication of technique and depth of vision, turned out to offer another and a better means to Duncan Campbell Scott.

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¹²Roy Daniells, "Crawford, Lampman, and D. C. Scott," in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. C. F. Klinck *et al.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 503.

¹³Barker Fairley, "Canadian Art: Man vs. Landscape," reprinted in *Our Sense of Identity*, 232. Sandra Djwa developed the same theme in a paper presented in May, 1976 at the Laval meeting of ACUTE.

¹⁴Gary Geddes, in *Duncan Campbell Scott*, ed. Dragland, 106.