

## THE SOURCE OF DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT'S "CHARCOAL"

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Among the "northern" stories of Duncan Campbell Scott is one entitled "Charcoal." Written sometime between 1898, the terminal date of the events on which it was based, and 1904, the date of its first publication,<sup>1</sup> "Charcoal" is not to be found in Scott's (second) collection of short stories, *The Witching of Elspie* (1923) but, rather, in his last book, *The Circle of Affection* (1947). That this tale was based on events which actually took place has already been brought to our attention elsewhere: "Scott wrote to John Masefield that 'Charcoal,' his only story about 'pure' Indians, was 'almost a transcript of the evidence at his trial, plus facts the Indian Agent gave me and thorough familiarity with the Indian Reserves in Southern Alberta.'" <sup>2</sup> Yet this Scott-Masefield letter reveals little of the true story of Charcoal other than what appears in the excerpt quoted above. The full details are to be found elsewhere — in contemporary newspaper accounts<sup>3</sup> and, more importantly, in those documents which, by Scott's own admission, formed his source of information, namely, the trial transcripts and letters from the Indian Agent. These

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<sup>1</sup>Duncan Campbell Scott, "Star-Blanket," *Canadian Magazine*, No. 23 (1904), pp. 251-56. The different title is explained by the fact that Scott originally gave his protagonist a different name.

<sup>2</sup>S. L. Dragland, "Introduction" to *In the Village of Viger and Other Stories*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 15. (All page references to "Charcoal" are to this edition.) The letter to which Dragland refers is dated Aug. 10, 1947, and is to be found in the D. C. Scott papers, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto.

<sup>3</sup>Because the Charcoal incident involved the killing of a Mounted Policeman, it was widely publicized. The most detailed coverage of the events is to be found in the newspaper closest to the scene of the action: the *Macleod Gazette*, Oct. 16, 1896, p. 4, cols. 2, 3; Nov. 13, 1896, p. 1, col. 4; Nov. 13, 1896, p. 4, col. 2; Jan. 15, 1897, p. 4, col. 1; Jan. 22, 1897, p. 1, cols. 3, 4, 5; March 5, 1897, p. 1, col. 3; March 19, 1897, p. 4, col. 2.

documents, which I have located,<sup>4</sup> provide us with a knowledge of the events as *Scott himself perceived them* and thereby enable us to determine more precisely the manner in which he treated the “raw material” of his narrative.

On the whole the source-documents bear out Scott’s contention to Masefield that his story adhered closely to fact. The real Charcoal had indeed (in October 1896) murdered the Indian who was his wife’s lover; he had, moreover, wounded a white farm instructor and shot to death (almost exactly as is described in Scott’s story) a Mounted Policeman. For these crimes the real Charcoal had been tried and, in March 1897, executed. Yet, granted that Scott did, on the whole, follow his sources closely, he nevertheless made certain significant changes when writing his story. These are as follows.

(1) He almost certainly invents the character of Charcoal’s grandfather, of whom there is no mention whatsoever in the source-documents. The function of this character is, obviously, thematic: to represent the “old way” — the Indian’s ancestral way of life to which Charcoal, rebelling against the white man’s civilization, reverts. (2) He attributes a motive to Charcoal for the shooting of the farm instructor, namely, a desire to make “his ‘mark’ to kill a white man” (p. 124). However, the actual shooting remains unexplained; even the trial testimony fails to shed any light upon the reasons behind it. This is not to say that Charcoal was not actually motivated by racial antagonism: we simply do not know, and neither, it is likely, did Scott. To be sure, it would have been easy to infer such an antagonism. Witness the following detail in one newspaper’s account of Charcoal’s execution: “On leaving the guard room Charcoal began a *war song* [*italics mine*] but Father Legal spoke to him and silenced him.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>For the transcripts of Charcoal’s trials, see the papers of the Department of Justice (RG 13, vol. 1431), Public Archives, Ottawa. For letters from James Wilson, Indian Agent on the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta where the incident took place, and other documents on the Charcoal affair, see the papers of the Department of Indian Affairs (RG 10, Black Series, vol. 8618), Public Archives, Ottawa. I assume that when Scott in his letter to Masefield referred to “facts the Indian Agent gave me,” he meant James Wilson’s dispatches to the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa where Scott was employed. As for Scott’s third source of information — “thorough familiarity with the Indian Reserves in Southern Alberta” — we have no evidence that Scott visited western Canada before the year 1910.

<sup>5</sup>*Macleod Gazette*, March 19, 1897, p. 4, col. 2. The *Winnipeg Daily Tribune* described the scene slightly differently: “He gave a few whoops. . . .” It may have been the *Tribune* description with which Scott was familiar since a clipping of that column is to be found in the Charcoal file (see note 4). For an official account of Charcoal’s execution, see the *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 32, no. 12 (Ottawa, 1899), p. 61.

(3) The figure upon whom Scott based his protagonist was known by several names: "Charcoal," "Wood Ashes," "the Palate," "Lazy Young Man" and "Bad Young Man." It is highly revealing of Scott's intentions that not only does he refrain from naming his protagonist by either of the last two derogatory epithets but also that he uses the second of these, "Bad Young Man," for his protagonist's *opponent* — the Indian who seduces Charcoal's wife. (This Indian was in reality called "Medicine Pipe Stem Crane Returning." Scott uses this name for a very minor character in his story.) As for the wife herself, her name was altered from the actual "Pretty Wolverine Woman" to the more vulgar "Pretty-Face." Clearly Scott wants to present the wife and her lover in a bad light so that Charcoal's initial crime would appear justified and the reader's sympathy for him would not be jeopardized.<sup>6</sup> (4) Elsewhere too it is apparent how Scott goes about endowing the protagonist of his story with positive attributes. As described by the Indian Agent (letter dated Oct. 27, 1896), the real Charcoal was "not like the man represented in the papers. He was a very quiet inoffensive person and about the last Indian on the Reserve one would think likely to commit such a crime. . . . His fears have evidently got the better of him and it will now be hard to take him alive. He has been sickly for some time back." To be sure, Scott makes use of this information but, in doing so, he turns it into the product of a limited perspective: "No one could understand how Charcoal, who wanted to be a 'good' Indian, had done this thing. He was a mild, big fellow, with sad eyes in a face rather emaciated" (p. 125). From the narrator's own privileged point-of-view, Charcoal is seen to manifest and be motivated by recklessness and bravado rather than, as the Indian Agent suggested, fear and panic.

Why Scott treats Charcoal in so positive a manner is not difficult to understand. Initially he may have been attracted to the Indian because of the latter's underdog status and because of the seeming courage and unrestraint of his actions.<sup>7</sup> But whatever his initial feelings, Scott certainly began to feel a great deal of sympathy for

<sup>6</sup>Scott did not use the same tactic in the case of the killing of the Mounted Policeman, though he did change the latter's name from Wylde (with its perhaps inappropriate connotation of wildness) to Wales.

<sup>7</sup>A sympathetic response would not have been unusual. Witness the following newspaper report which reflects the contemporary impact of the events: "Captured after one of the most remarkable records in the history of the North-West. . . [Charcoal] has excited a certain amount of admiration by the dexterity with which he has so long eluded all his pursuers, including those of his own kind, and

Charcoal once the latter had been captured. For, as he confessed in his letter to Masfield (see note 2), he “disliked intensely the scheme by which [Charcoal] was caught, a plot that seemed unworthy of both Whites and Indians.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Scott’s personal feelings are not enough to explain the fact that Charcoal is rendered not merely as a sympathetic character but also as a larger-than-life, heroic figure, a figure out of romance rather than out of documentary realism. This tendency to romance must be seen as a more fundamental habit of Scott’s imagination. Romance, says Northrop Frye, is the “tendency to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to ‘realism,’ to conventionalize content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like.”<sup>9</sup> These “forms of simile” are everywhere to be found in “Charcoal.” Perhaps the main mythical association is that of the hero as Moses searching for the Promised Land: “Sometimes he reeled in his saddle when he looked off towards the foothills of the Rockies, shining silvery in the distance, like an uplifted land of promise” (p. 126). Frye also says that in romance there seems to be “some connection between illusion and anxiety or apprehension and between reality and serenity; between illusion and the absence of identity.”<sup>10</sup> From this perspective “Charcoal” can be seen to be about a man’s search for identity, and the curious serenity of the ending of the story can be explained as a coming to terms with that identity. As Frye says, “Most romances end happily, with a return to the state of identity.”<sup>11</sup>

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for the determination with which he resisted capture. If it had not been for the last act of the tragedy in which poor Sergt. Wilde [sic] met his death, there would also have been felt a certain amount of sympathy for him (*Macleod Gazette*, Nov. 13, 1896, p. 4, col. 2). One should note, however, a remark in a letter, signed by Scott on behalf of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs: “. . . it is sincerely to be hoped that the steps being taken to secure the arrest of the murderer will be successful” (Oct. 31, 1896, Charcoal file).

<sup>8</sup>In his story Scott accentuates the aspect of treachery in the capture by having Charcoal innocently spend the night at his relative’s home before being arrested in the morning. The real Charcoal was taken into custody (by his relatives) immediately upon his arrival at his brother’s house.

<sup>9</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 137.

<sup>10</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1976), p. 54.

<sup>11</sup>*The Secular Scripture*, p. 54.

To summarize, an awareness of the source of "Charcoal" enables us to see better the story for what it really is: less an example of documentary realism than a blend of realism and romance, a blend which is characteristic of Scott's narratives, whether these be in prose or verse.<sup>12</sup> Although it has become fashionable to appreciate these narratives for their qualities of realism, such an appreciation ought not to blind us to their other qualities, those that make of them "strange lore."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>For another striking example of Scott's romanticization of source-material, see my note on "The Source of Duncan Campbell Scott's 'At Gull Lake: August, 1810,'" forthcoming in *Canadian Literature*.

<sup>13</sup>Duncan Campbell Scott, untitled prefatory poem to *In the Village of Viger* (1896; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1945).