

A NOTE ON THE PROBABLE SOURCE  
OF DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT'S  
"THE FORSAKEN"

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In 1911 Ernest Thompson Seton, the Ontario-raised naturalist, wilderness traveller, and prolific author, published an account of his 1907 exploration of the chain of lakes between Great Slave Lake and Coronation Gulf in the Barren Lands; the title, in the fashion of the day, was a long one: *The Arctic Prairies: A Canoe-Journey of 2,000 Miles in Search of the Caribou; being the Account of a Voyage to the Region North of Aylmer Lake*.<sup>1</sup> Chapter VIII is devoted to Thomas Anderson, a long-time employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, who by the date of Seton's trip was the officer in charge of the Company's Mackenzie River District. Seton met him at Smith Landing, and there was given the following story:

One winter, 40 or 50 years ago, a band of Algonquin Indians at Wayabimika all starved to death except one squaw and her baby; she fled from the camp, carrying the child, thinking to find friends and help at Nipigon House. She got as far as a small lake near Deer Lake, and there discovered a cache, probably in a tree. This contained one small bone fish-hook. She rigged up a line, but had no bait. The wailing of the baby spurred her to action. No bait, but she had a knife; a strip of flesh was quickly cut from her own leg, a hole made through the ice, and a fine jack-fish was the food that was sent to this devoted mother. She divided it with the child, saving only enough for bait. She stayed there living on fish until spring, then safely rejoined her people.

The boy grew up to be a strong man, but was cruel to his mother, leaving her finally to die of starvation. Anderson knew the woman; she showed him the scar where she cut the bait.<sup>2</sup>

Reading Scott's "The Forsaken," it is hard to believe, given his northern connections, that he had not heard the selfsame account,

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Arctic Prairies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911).

<sup>2</sup>Seton, p. 59.

perhaps from Anderson, perhaps not—stories of the sort travelled rapidly and widely in the North then. It is worth mentioning, however, that Scott's duties with the Department of Indian Affairs took him into many corners of Northern Ontario and that Anderson served at Nipigon House for ten years before the turn of the century. "The Forsaken" appeared first in 1905 in *New World Lyrics and Ballads*, pre-dating Seton's book by six years. Comparing the poem to Anderson's account, one can see how honestly Scott used the essential details of the incident. As well, of course, Scott, through his first-hand knowledge of the North and his power of sympathetic imagination, transformed this brief and bitter vignette of Indian life into a trenchant, memorable poem that will always be counted as one of his masterpieces.

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