

# Floating Voice, Troubled Waters: Stan Dragland on D.C. Scott

Dragland, Stan. *Floating Voice: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Literature of Treaty 9*. Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1994. 289 pp.

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Stan Dragland's *Floating Voice: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Literature of Treaty 9* both enriches and troubles the reader. Dragland has long immersed himself in Scott's work, as his editing of *Duncan Campbell Scott: A Book of Criticism* (1974) and *In the Village of Viger and Other Stories* (1974) attests. In *Floating Voice*, Dragland analyses the poetry and fiction rooted in Scott's journeys into Northern Ontario early in the century—material at the heart of current critical debate about Scott. Dragland centres his book on Scott's 1905 and 1906 summer journeys into Northern Ontario. Scott made these journeys as one of the treaty commissioners whose task it was to arrange the surrender of land from the Ojibway and Cree to the Canadian government, an undertaking that Dragland rightly describes as "a pinnacle of sorts" in Scott's life and work (19). From that centre, the book eddies out into a discussion of Scott's administrative career which culminated in Scott's long tenure from 1913 to 1932 as deputy superintendent-general in the department of Indian Affairs, the senior civil servant in his department, and the implications of that career for the creative writing. As the book details, many of Scott's most memorable works—"Lines In Memory of Edmund Morris," "The Height of Land," "Labrie's Wife" and "Powassan's Drum" among others—are bound up with Scott's experiences as Indian administrator in general and with the treaty trips in particular.

These are troubled waters, as Dragland is painfully aware. Over the last two decades, historians and literary critics alike have been raising difficult and important questions. Viewed from the perspective of the 1990s, was Scott racist and ethnocentric in his administrative and literary work? Was his very managerial efficiency as a civil servant (a trait about which both his defenders and detractors seem to agree) harmful to the native peoples as a

result of the culturally and socially destructive effects of the policies he administered? Is the literary work exploitative or empathetic? Is the art undermined by the work at Indian Affairs, rendering poems and stories like "At Gull Lake" and "Labrie's Wife" at best a jewel on the forehead of a sinister toad of official oppression?

Stan Dragland is a sensitive and passionate reader of both Scott's literary work and the primary and secondary material about Scott's official career. Dragland begins with an evocative narrative of the two treaty trips, bringing together all the varied documentary and ethnographic sources, sources which include the journals of Samuel Stewart, Scott's fellow commissioner on the 1905 and 1906 trips, the photographs taken in the course of the two official trips, and the letters and paintings of Edmund Morris, whom Scott encountered in Northern Ontario on the 1906 journey. Dragland is superb at tracking the documentary sources for Scott's northern poems and stories, and, even more importantly, at showing how Scott altered and varied such sources in the creation of his art. For example, he establishes how the experiences and terrain of the two treaty journeys, particularly the second trip, relate to the landscape of "The Height of Land." We learn how the landscape of the poem—with its subtle interweaving of symbolism into setting—is "rooted in the actual geography of the last phase of the 1906 trip—the journey up the Pic River from Heron Bay, over the height of land, to Long Lake Post" (234-5), and how Scott manipulated geography and journey for dramatic and thematic effect. Thanks to Dragland, we now know the prototypes in Scott's own journeys of the dying boy and the sacrificial sewing machine of "A Scene at Lake Manitou," a poem which Dragland convincingly argues has been undervalued by Scott critics.

Moreover, Dragland's reading of "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris" is impressive, thanks to his ability to dissect how Scott's imagery and technique achieve "the simultaneity of the parts of the poem, their tendency to nest one within the other" (226). Because Dragland is so good and so original at exposing much of the artistry and unity of the poem, one wishes that he had also addressed the significant painterly elements in the poem that are surely there as a tribute to Morris. This poem of Scott's about the difficulty of expressing life's "veiled . . . meaning, / So deep that none might know" is framed in terms of the struggle for expression by the painter as well as the poet. That is to say, one important reason that Scott's poem is such an apt memorial of Edmund Morris is that the visionary

pondering of its "Lines" (a word as apt for the painter's art as for the poet's) are conceptualized in terms of the representational challenge that mystic meaning and insight pose for both art forms:

How shall we transmit in tendril-like images,  
The tenuous tremor in the tissues of ether,  
Before the round of colour buds like the dome of  
a shrine,  
The preconscious moment when love has fluttered  
in the bosom,  
Before it begins to ache?

("Lines in Memory of  
Edmund Morris")

Dragland comments on how "little this elegy concentrates on its central subject. The poem is 'to' Morris much more than it's about him" (226), but this becomes much less true when one addresses the degree to which Scott's imagery is visual, bearing on painting ("Titian-like splendour") as well as poetry.

The challenges and difficulties of *Floating Voice* lie not in its rich and often rewarding readings of poems like "The Height of Land" and "At Gull Lake" but in the way some of Dragland's fundamental ideas about Scott are conceptualized and organized. The difficulties arise out of Dragland's pain and chagrin about the interrelationship between Scott's role and beliefs as an Indian administrator and as an artist. Dragland's anguish is understandable—and easy to empathize with—but it results in a text that is ahistorical, often rather diffuse and hard to follow, a text where important evidence about Scott and the wilderness, and Scott and the Indians is more than once presented in endnotes rather than in the body of the book, or refracted throughout different chapters in a curious manner.

Dragland's contention is that "the very authenticity that makes [Scott's] poems and stories [about Indians] so appealing was bought at the expense of the native people themselves" (6). Dragland believes—and with reason—that it is impossible to read Scott's poetry about native peoples, which constitutes much of his best and most distinctive work, independent of Scott's administrative career. Dragland sets Scott's bureaucratic work squarely in the centre of the dominant racist, assimilationist ideology of his day:

The attitudes and policies [Scott] is associated  
with all but guaranteed government inertia with

respect to the Indians. When your policy is to take care of the Indians until, in Scott's words, they 'disappear as a separate and distinct people' . . . , at best you abandon any incentive for encouraging the preservation and continuation of aboriginal ways; at worst you step in with educational and other policies intended to accelerate the assimilation process. (7)

Dragland, like previous commentators such as John Flood and Brian Titley, makes abundantly clear that Scott oversaw assimilationist policies which fostered residential schools, suppressed the west coast potlatch and generated many other culturally destructive activities. Dragland is able intellectually to see Scott an assimilationist white male of his time, but emotionally he seems unable to accept that Scott was a man of his time, and his traumatization is evident. This has consequences for the text.

In the documentary film version of *Floating Voice*, aired on TV Ontario in the winter of 1995, Chief Ovide Mercredi remarked of Scott that he was an efficient administrator with the values of his day, which was unfortunate for Indian peoples, as the policies he administered so competently were bad for native cultures. Dragland is not able to be so philosophical. He writes of Scott and federal Indian policy: "My argument is not that it's fair to blame Scott, just that it's necessary . . . particularly as Scott seems to have made things happen in Indian Affairs" (98). But since Dragland's point of departure is about how to "blame" rather than how to "explain" Scott in regard to this issue, the book becomes a web of arguments for the defense and the prosecution—with Dragland, with his admiration for Scott as poet, feeling forced into acting for both sides. Or, as he puts it, he feels confronted by a "difficult puzzle" to be addressed: "how to reconcile Scott's attractive and apparently humane stories and poems about Indians . . . with the dreadful legacy of his administration of Indian Affairs" (5). Dragland's distress at Scott's ethnocentrism is such that revelations in his text on the topic tend to veer off into side issues or are clouded by unconvincing attempts to soften his evidence and insights.

One partial solution to the puzzle is that some of Scott's Indian poetry is less humane than it first appears, and that the poet and the administrator are not so far apart in 'their' view of natives. It has always seemed to me that in Scott poems like "The Onondaga Madonna" and "The Half-Breed Girl," the protagonists

are not presented primarily as individuals, but rather as types of racial decline and cultural confusion. His native characters are frequently emblematic and symbolic, and one gets very little sense of empathy on a personal level: in the Indian writing, there is a distance between author and subject that parallels the sense of separation that Scott the administrator felt about those his department 'oversaw.' Interestingly, "On the Way to the Mission"—one of the poems where one does encounter individuation of the native protagonists and intimations of identification on the part of the poet—deals with bereavement, a theme which can be linked to the most painful event of Scott's life, the death in 1907 of his only child Elizabeth at the age of twelve. But Scott's Métis and native characters are for the most part, acted upon and not acting, iconic and not individual. Scott's Métis and Indians tend to be types and icons and representations (one thinks of his story "Charcoal") of what he saw as inevitable assimilation.

Some of the evidence that Dragland presents about Scott's racial attitudes is reinforced by other biographical material in the archival record on Scott which Dragland could have used to advantage, and which might have made him less tentative in his conclusions. For example, Dragland cites a letter written by Scott from the West Coast during World War II, a letter in which Scott writes of "the Jap menace" to Arthur Bourinot: "There is a justifiable, bitter feeling against this treacherous race but it is truly a difficult matter to get rid of them" (124). Dragland uses the letter as a kind of addendum to an article in which Scott uses the term "superior race" about whites in relation to natives. As so frequently in this book, Dragland presents a conclusion only to undercut it immediately: "*Racist* is not a word to be flung around lightly, but it seems to fit. It fits the words I have been discussing at any rate; how well these fit Scott, how much they belong to him, is a question more difficult to answer"(124). But when he supplies an answer in the form of the letter where Scott is virulently anti-Japanese-Canadian, widening our view of Scott's sense of racial superiority, Dragland yet again backs away from his evidence, asking "Is it Scott's ordinary self speaking those offensive words about Japanese Canadians?" (125). Dragland then speculates that the letter is "[o]ne uncharacteristically vicious letter in a long lifetime"(125). But in fact at least one other Scott letter disparages another group—French Canadians. On July 16, 1942, in a letter now at Victoria University Library, Scott wrote to his friend Pelham Edgar complaining about government waste and overspending, citing the temporary

buildings for war workers going up near his Lisgar Street home, adding caustically that he had decided to be "quiet & resigned" and "leave Canada to our French Canadian Conquerors!" It is painful and one wishes fervently that it were not the case, but Scott's attitudes on race and ethnicity were not progressive, even for a man of his generation, and no talk by Dragland of Scott's "masks" or "ordinary self" can alter that.

Other material might have made Dragland's picture of Scott less equivocal. In his discussion of Scott's relations with Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press during the 1940s, Dragland makes mention of Scott's friendliness to Pierce at the same time as Scott was testy about Pierce's "ideas and practices" to E.K. Brown and others (71). Dragland speaks of there being a "whiff of censorship" to Lorne Pierce's wish that Bourinot had shown him these letters critical of him before the latter published them in *Some Letters of Duncan Campbell Scott* (1959) but acknowledges that Scott's "expression of apparent cordiality could mask quite another attitude" (72). In fact the roots of Scott's coldness to Pierce go back to the twenties, to an incident which supports some of Dragland's hypotheses about Scott's troubled psyche. In 1927, Pierce, then becoming well-known as editor at Ryerson Press, decided to present a paper to the Royal Society of Canada on Scott's literary works. Scott's response was frigid, which is surprising given that Scott felt his literary work was not sufficiently appreciated, especially by those in the publishing world. Scott's comments on the manuscript of Pierce's paper are curt and ungracious and even at times odd. For example, Scott writes "wrong" in the margins of a Pierce comment that "Spring on Mattagami" is influenced by Swinburne and Meredith, a comment whose accuracy is obvious to any reader of the poem. But if Dragland is right—and I think he is—that Scott was haunted by a feeling that he had not taken chances or been sufficiently idealistic in his life, Pierce was likely too close to a description of Scott's own demons for Scott to be pleased. Pierce wrote of Scott:

. . . guarded on the one hand by critical detachment and urbanity and on the other by the long training of a shrewd executive, he holds on to the golden mean. . . . Never for a moment does he become an 'unemployed idealist.'

Pierce shrewdly concludes that "Much of Scott's serious work speaks of sadness and disillusionment. One gathers that he has felt

and understood life, while he may not have enjoyed it".<sup>1</sup> Scott seems to have been stung by Pierce's assessment of him, a possibility that puts his ambivalence about Pierce in a different light than that of simple authorial crankiness about a publisher, as Dragland implies (72). After all, Dragland tells us, Scott's 1929 *cri de coeur* to Elise Ayles was that "I know now that I have never fought against anything nor worked for anything but just accepted & drifted from point to point—I have dimly felt that if I worked & protested & resisted I should be wrecked—So maybe you will understand why with some gifts I have done so little" (74).

Of Scott's literary reputation, Dragland remarks that Scott "was never forgotten during his lifetime, but neither was he the grand old man of letters, a title to which he had some claim" (258). Pierce supplied one possible answer to this puzzle in a letter written to writer Roderick Kennedy in 1952. Mentioning that the sales of the *Scott Selected Poems* (1951), published by Ryerson, had been "practically nil," Lorne Pierce wrote bluntly: "You and I know that Scott was not widely read, and that his influence was not great in Canada. People, that is writers, respected him, but he was cold and remote, and they left him alone."<sup>2</sup>

The north too can be cold and remote, and, as *Floating Voice* makes clear, there was something about that landscape which both fascinated and repelled Scott. There is no doubt that the bubble of white urban culture and power that Scott enjoyed on the second treaty trip—as embodied in critic Pelham Edgar, painter Edmund Morris and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, all part of that trip—was necessary for Scott to come to terms with the wilderness. After his 1905 trip, made without such kindred spirits, Scott wrote to Pelham Edgar:

I spent day after day without seeing a living thing—  
except the Indians and our own party—the  
landscape for the most part desolate beyond  
compare—a country never to be the glad home of  
any happy people.<sup>3</sup>

*Floating Voice* has much of interest to say on the subject of Scott and the wilderness, but Dragland again introduces crucial quotations in footnotes, for example Scott's 1930 admission to Elise Ayles: "You know my feeling about being alone in the

woods. Fear of the Demon that lurks in the wilds keeps me close to the 'huts and haunts of men'" (19n.5). It is revealing to juxtapose this quotation with Scott's later revelation to E.K. Brown that, as far as the Methodism of his childhood in the manses of Eastern Ontario was concerned, he had "wandered far away and am lost in a wilderness, but I have a strong Faith of my own, you see I spell Faith with a capital" (78). Dragland's readings of the treaty poems suggest that Scott, for all the mysticism of "The Height of Land," found it difficult in some ways to come to terms with the wilderness, and that the Demon he feared there might have been in his own soul. In an audacious reading of "Powassan's Drum," Dragland plays with the idea of Scott and guilt. Official Indian policy of the time did in effect decapitate the native cultures, robbing them of ritual and education—making them, to use the necromantic imagery of the poem, "[h]eadless and impotent in power." Dragland puts it even more sweepingly:

Scott's imagination ventured north. Prophetically, it pointed in the cardinal direction of the Canadian compass. His imagination also drowned. When sinking into drowning is also going in behind the mask—as in "Powassan's Drum"—it's also the shark fin showing above the aestheticized 'drowned poet' of 'The Piper of Arll.' White guilt, yes. Also the European nightmare of nihilism, the horror of meaninglessness dissolving the dream of 'civilization.' (263)

There is no doubt that Scott objectified natives, in administration, in poetry, in non-fiction, and in fiction. One significant subtext in the Indian poetry that Dragland does not really address is the sexual repression/fascination of poet about female subject/object. So many of these poems are about women. The Onondaga Madonna is far more erotic than most madonnas with her "pagan passion" and "careless pose" and stained lips—an eroticism overlaid with suggestions of violence and miscegenation, elements also found in "The Half-Breed Girl." "At Gull Lake" is erotically charged, but the poem ends not with Keejigo's sexual union with the white trader but in her torture with a burning brand and death. Regrettably, Dragland spends little time on "Spring on Mattagami," but surely it says much about Scott's racial and sexual attitudes that the speaker fantasizes transporting a Venetian lady into the bush as sexual



partner to enact the "quintessential passion" throbbing in the northern wilderness.

*Floating Voice* should be read for its vivid evocation of the treaty trips and its suggestive readings of central Scott poems. If the reader is at times bemused by the way Dragland diffuses his discussion of the topic of Scott's racism as administrator and artist, one is also stimulated to think on many points. Scott was complex, flawed and gifted. One caption and photograph from the 1905 treaty trip, now in the National Archives of Canada, sums up the ethnocentrism of the day which Scott embodied—beliefs then so complacently valorised, now so chilling: "Indians scrambling for candies"<sup>4</sup> that the Treaty 9 expedition had brought them.

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## Notes

1. Lorne Pierce, TS. "Duncan Campbell Scott: An Appraisal," 52-3, file 9, box 37, Lorne Pierce Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario. Discouraged by Scott's negative comments, Pierce evidently did not deliver the paper to the Royal Society as planned.[\[back\]](#)
2. Lorne Pierce, letter to Roderick Kennedy, 13 May 1952, file 4, box 21, Lorne Pierce Papers.[\[back\]](#)
3. Scott, letter to Pelham Edgar, 9 October 1905, Edgar Papers, Victoria University library, Toronto.[\[back\]](#)
4. National Photography Collection, National Archives of Canada, PA 59546.[\[back\]](#)

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(Fall 1976): 50-63.

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