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The Poet as Bureaucrat

Mark Abley, *Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott.* Madeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre, 2013. 251 pp.

The scapegoat, as thinkers such as Northrop Frye and René Girard remind us, is "neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (Frye 41). That is, for better or worse, the scapegoat ceases to be an individual, who is accountable only for his own actions, and "becomes the repository of all the community's ills" (Girard 77). Duncan Campbell Scott, Mark Abley shows in his meditation on the poet-bureaucrat, clearly has come to embody all that is politically and culturally untenable about his homeland.

The demonization of D.C. Scott has few parallels in recent Canadian history. In fact, one of the rare figures who has been subjected to such opprobrium is another bearer of the same surname, Thomas Scott, the Orangeman of Red River notoriety who became infamous basically for getting himself killed by Louis Riel's provisional government (Braz 41). However, the fall of the poet Scott is even more dramatic since not so long ago he was deemed one of the giants of Canadian literature, with no less an authority on Canadianness than Margaret Atwood expressing her admiration for his "condensed tragedies," which "have a starkness and a moral jaggedness that evoke darkness" rather than the more radiant visions of other Confederation poets (xxxiii). Yet, within a generation, Scott has gone from being "considered a major poet of landscape, of the Canadian North, and of the emerging experience of modernity," to being dismissed as "a racist who condoned and actively furthered the suffering of Indigenous people" (Fiamengo 7). Tellingly, when *Beaver* magazine (now renamed *Canada's History*) decided to mark the new millennium with an issue devoted to Canada's Hall of Infamy, Scott was duly chosen as one of "the [ten] most contemptible Canadians" of all time (Bercuson et al. 31), with the novelist Will Ferguson branding him "The Rhyming Racist" (37).

The unrelenting vilification of Scott in both academic and popular discourse is the main impetus for Mark Abley's *Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott*. Despite being dead since 1947, Scott has become aware that his "name is mud" (18) and decides to pay a number of ghostly visits to earth to try to vindicate himself. He

selects Abley, since he wants "to converse with a Canadian poet who has also enjoyed some success in the field of journalism" and who "will be able to appreciate my work from the inside, as it were. I mean my real work, of course." As he underlines the urgency of his situation, "I require the help of an author capable of refuting the lies that I understand are now attached to my name. An author who, having read my work attentively and understood the calibre of man I was, will want to publish a long essay, perhaps more than one, powerful and eloquent enough to dispel the rumours and correct the mistakes" (17). Abley, who has written both poetry and nonfiction books on the state of the world's languages, would appear to be the ideal choice to undertake such a task. Unfortunately for Scott, his scripter largely shares the current dominant view that Scott was a despicable individual, if not an evil one.

While a compelling reflection on the achievement of Scott, and on the vagaries of literary reputation, *Conversations with a Dead Man* is a problematic text. To begin with, it is never clear why Abley has Scott visit him at his suburban Montreal home, for the book is not fundamentally about the older poet's impressions of twenty-first century life but about the contemporary world's judgment of him—also, Abley cannot have a series of conversations with Scott, only dialogues with his writings. More important, he shows relatively little interest in Scott's poetry, as the subject himself protests (217). Actually, given the way Abley privileges Scott's work as a bureaucrat over that as a poet, his book is testimony to the vertiginous loss of cultural capital by literature in general and poetry in particular.

Scott introduces himself to Abley as "a poet" (12), or more precisely as a former poet, and it is evident that he is most concerned about his place in the world of letters. He explains that, following his death, a national magazine had lionized him as a "'Great Poet, Great Man'" (20), and he had been "comforted by the knowledge that I had left a certain legacy—a legacy of service to Canada, and of service too, in a modest way, to the English language. In my poetry I sought to honour its traditions and its greatness" (21). Abley, though, does not appear to be persuaded that Scott's poetry remains culturally significant in our time. For one, he informs Scott that "not many people" now read either his poems or his stories, even if he tells him not to take his lack of a contemporary readership "personally. Very few Canadians today could quote a single line by Archibald Lampman or Pauline Johnson, or recall a single one of their poems" (217). More likely, he is convinced that Scott's poetry has become irredeemably tainted by his long career as a senior civil servant with the Department of Indian Affairs.

For Abley, the pivotal factor in Scott's life is his running Canada's Indian residential schools. He points out with some irony that, a century after Percy Bysshe Shelley proclaimed that poets were "'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,'" the poet Scott had emerged as "the defining voice of Ottawa, the government's stone face," to the country's Indigenous population (32). In his words, whenever Indigenous people "dared to submit a complaint or make a request, his was the declining signature crawled at the foot of the letter. His power was so great that activists today accuse him of genocide" (32-32). Although Abley does not charge Scott directly with cultural genocide, he links his name with those of "Hitler and Stalin," who also "started off as idealists of a particularly warped kind" (149). Furthermore, Abley makes little effort to distance himself from such imputations. He tells Scott that he is "appalled" by his attitude toward Indigenous people and that he has "found out things about you that strike people today as shameful. Unforgivable" (43, 45). He further lambastes Scott for having "outlawed the potlatch on the west coast," or at least for choosing "to enforce the repressive laws on the books," and for doing the same with "the sun dance on the prairies" (45). Abley is particularly baffled by Scott's actions because of the latter's vocation. As he stresses, "it's not as though you were a bishop or a businessman—you were a poet. How could a poet set out to destroy another culture?" (45). That, indeed, appears to be the reasoning behind Abley's indictment of Scott, not that his treatment of Indigenous people is indefensible for a human being, but for a poet.

Abley does divulge to Scott that "I respect your poetry" and "wish I'd read a lot more of it when I was young. I could have learned some useful lessons for my own work" (51). He also concedes that the poet-bureaucrat's political motivation may have been more complex than he implies in his manuscript, agreeing that "you often paint white men in a bad light" (170). He actually makes the provocative observation that the reason Scott's reputation "has never stood lower than it does today" is that his "beliefs were thoroughly in line with received opinion. The irony is that if he had rebelled in life, he might not be so vilified in death" (78). Most surprising perhaps, Abley admits that "Scott has become a symbol" (80). He goes as far as to have his spectral visitor state that he is "a scapegoat," a sacrificial lamb for "a series of governments whose Indian policies are said to have failed" (191). These are claims Abley does not refute, but he continues to insist that Scott is somehow responsible for the residential school legacy.

At one point Abley tells Scott, "You haunt me still" (89), which is not self-evident considering his unequivocal disapproval of the older poet's worldview. Admittedly, there are times in his book when Abley acknowledges the feebleness of his stance, such as when he has Scott contend that "you practise a form of self-censorship on yourself," electing not to speak on some Indigenous matters out of fear of "saying the wrong thing" (94). Far more frequently, though, Abley berates Scott for his cultural insensitivity, refusing to recognize that his subject lived in a very different world. For example, while discussing the residential school system, a "bewilder[ed]" Abley challenges Scott for sending "your only child off to a foreign school" in Paris (119). Or as he crudely puts it, "when your daughter was eleven, you shipped her off to a convent school in a foreign language" (121). Scott, in fact, not only sent his daughter Elizabeth to a French boarding school at the age of eleven, but she died there two years later. This was an event that devastated him, as reflected in the opening lines of his poem "The Closed Door":

> The dew falls and the stars fall,
> The sun falls in the west,
> But never more
> Through the closed door,
> Shall the one that I loved best
> Return to me . . .
> (Scott 65)

So "inconsolable" was Scott by the loss of his daughter that it would be "four years" before he "could write to any effect" (Brown 126). Yet Abley seems incapable of envisaging that an individual who would send his only child to a foreign school might have had a rather different view of the impact of the separation of school children from their parents than he does. Again, he is unwilling or unable to see the world through Scott's eyes.

Robertson Davies once remarked that he had become "very much aware when I'm interviewed by some newspaper people that what is going to appear is in actual fact a portrait of the interviewer" (64). In some ways this is what happens in *Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott*. Notwithstanding its subtitle, the book focuses as much on the author/interviewer as on the purported subject, from his house and garden to his own writings and his views on architecture, Canadian Indigenous policy, and climate change. However, toward the end of the book, Abley makes a revealing confession about an experience in junior-high school in Lethbridge, Alberta. One of his schoolmates was "a round-

faced girl" named Rosie Gladstone, whose "family came from the Blood reserve" just outside the city (171, 172). Some of the children called Rosie derogatory names and none of them "dared to befriend her. The next year she was gone" (172). Abley then confides, "I never heard her answer the tormentors. I never stood up for her" (173). Throughout the text, he chastises Scott for being blind to the fact that he "worked on behalf of a colonial system, not the Aboriginal people themselves" (90). He thus makes one wonder if he holds Scott responsible for the young Abley's inaction, or if he feels that the subsequent generations are also culpable for Canada remaining what he considers a colonial state.

The question of the political status of today's Canada is germane, since Abley glosses over one critical aspect of *The Beaver's* list of "the worst Canadians of all time" that reportedly inspired his book (196). Along with the Nazi Adrien Arcand and the turncoat Inouye Kanao, aka the Kamloops Kid, the roster of villains includes former prime ministers John Diefenbaker and John A. Macdonald (Bercuson et al.). Needless to say, whatever his faults, Macdonald is often also deemed one of the greatest Canadians who ever lived. It is certainly hard to imagine Canada without his imprint, which means that it may not be such a dishonour for Scott, or any other Canadian, to appear on a list that includes the country's founding prime minister and main architect. Furthermore, Abley frequently notes that not only were Scott's ideas widely held in Canadian society at the time but also that the socioeconomic conditions of Indigenous people have not improved measurably since then. Consequently, one cannot help but get the feeling that he is holding Duncan Campbell Scott accountable for the sins of his co-citizens—including one Mark Abley.

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