

Keith Waddington

L. Groening

Engl. 470F/4

30 3 94

**Duncan Campbell Scott:  
Civil Servant and Poet**

There is a certain simplicity and decisiveness in "The Last of the Indian Treaties"--Scott's summarising and autobiographical essay on native land settlements--which speaks with the clear voice of the austere and abusive paternalistic civil servant. There are neither ifs nor buts; issues are crystallised; problems are simplified; solutions are unified. Alternately, Scott's poetry seems, at least on the surface, to allow for rather more ambiguity, to portray real characters who really struggle against adversity and incite our sympathy. This paper will examine the contrary discourse in an effort to both understand and explain its meaning.

When Scott, in the opening paragraph of "The Last of the Indian Treaties" refers to the system of land settlements inherited by the Dominion of Canada as "a certain well established condition," (109)<sup>1</sup> the telling "certain" is symptomatic not only of Scott's general esteem for the British, from whom that "certain" system was bequeathed, but also the

---

<sup>1</sup>Quotations references follow the M.L.A. system which requires a "Works Cited" concluding page. Since all the source material came from photocopies, the source of which is unknown, this last page has been omitted.

certainty of his own opinions. This subtle association with British (and French, for their Indian policy was similar) is shortly made more overt when Scott announces that, "The Indians in the old provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had been given lands." (109) The eastern land to which Scott refers became "provinces" only with the arrival of the Europeans, and so in this context they were actually "old," but it is nevertheless clear that this statement of age is dependant upon the title of "province," and that together they imply the ownership that allows for the "giving" of lands to the natives. But Scott's exposition establishes more than ownership: his reference to the "certain well established condition" is important in that it shows a continuity made possibly by government that is impossible by the lone individual. Not only was the system inherited, but the specific deals of that system were "respected"--even when they came from a "French king." Government then--at least formal European style Government--is portrayed not only as something of a superior and supreme achievement, but also as something deeply honourable. Especially so, when we are told, in the very next paragraph, that "In the early day the Indians were a real menace to the colonization of Canada," (109) capable of "obliterating" new settlements, but that, "The Indian nature now seems like a fire that is waning." (110) The suggestion is that the present weakness of the natives means that the implicitly generous settlements of the past--born of fear--need not be upheld but for the magnanimity and honourableness of the Government. Scott later suggests his

belief that such magnanimity and honourableness come from "the sacredness of the treaty promise." (110) Its sacrosanct nature comes, to a large degree, from the fact that it was written down:

Whatever has been written down and signed by king and chief both will be bound by so long as "the sun shines and the water runs." (110)

Here we see the first indication of Scott's faith in the written word, but also the belittling of the native's oral tradition and even the poetic turn of Indian phrase, implicit in the parallel structure of the sentence and the comic effect provided by the contrast between the lofty prose and the simple poetry. We should, of course, not be entirely surprised by the depreciation of poetry, firstly because it is Indian and spontaneous and oral, as opposed to European, well crafted and highly literate; but also because these are the words of a clear minded civil servant.

It is when Scott begins his appraisal of the Indian "nature," as manifest in the past, that the colonial rhetoric blasts like an imperial trumpet. Indian nature:

was ready to break out at any moment in savage dances, in wild and desperate orgies in which ancient superstitions were involved with European ideas but dimly understood and intensified by cunning and imagination inflamed with rum. (110)

It is the abolishment of this nature that strongly points to the success of the Indian policy:

. . . where in 1790 stood clustered the wigwams and rude shelters of Brant's people now stretch the opulent fields of the township of Tuscarora; and all down the valley the Grande River there is no visible line of demarcation between the farms tilled by the ancient allies in foray and ambush who have become confederates throughout a peaceful year in seed-time harvest. (110)

The purpose of the expedition that becomes the main autobiographical material for the essay, is to continue the "treaty blanket" (111) northward into an area "nearly twice as large as the State of New York." The comparison is perfect, for what the "treaty blanket" means--much like the appropriation inherent in the use of "blanket," particularly evocative of Indian life and possession--is the exchange of land whose potential wealth is virtually inestimable for a nominal sum of money. And it is the Indian's nature, Scott assures us, that made this possible, for his "mental constitution is rooted in physical condition." (114) Clothed in scientific rhetoric, Scott simply means that the Indian is a fool. It is his childlike simplicity that prevents him understanding the meaning of the very treaties he makes. Just as land ownership is outside the cultural philosophy of the Indian, so too is that philosophy outside Scott's own understanding. The Indian's inability to comprehend one finds parallel in the European's inability to understand the other.

But it is not so much the continual patronising tone that is

most noticeable--indeed, it is so familiar and expected as to be almost unnoticeable--but the particularly strong and insensitive evaluations Scott makes without any qualification what-so-ever; thus we find: "He enriches the fur traders and incidentally gains a bare sustenance by his cunning." (114-115) This is followed by:

. . . he is a slave, used by all traders alike as a tool to provide wealth, and therefore to be kept in good condition as cheaply as possible. (115)

What follows is not an apology for such profiteering--understandable since the expedition itself is nothing more than a continuation and elevation of that exploitation--but an avowal of their intrinsic stupidity. "What could they grasp" (115) of government and land treaties? "Nothing," Scott answers.

Through out the essay, every aspect of the Indian character and culture is derided, from the etiquette at feasts, to their acceptance of British propaganda which played a strong role in the appropriation of land.

The final solution is one that was suggested at the outset: ". . . where in 1790 stood clustered the wigwams and rude shelters . . . now stretch the opulent fields of the township of Tuscarora." (110) The solution is the civilising of Indians, though their inherent savagery will not actually allow for this. There is a mocking depiction of native assimilation in the episode where they touch paper money for the first time:

. . . and soon the camp was brightened by new white shawls, new hats and boots, which latter they

wore as if doing a great penance. (117)

But it is only through absolute assimilation--not only cultural but genetic--that the Indian can attain the status of the civilised man.

Final results may be attained, say, in four centuries by the merging of the Indian race with the whites. (121-122)

Scott's portrayal of the Indian in poetry, on the other hand, is less cut and dry, black and white, less obdurate and rather more sensitive. In "At Gull Lake: August, 1890," for example, we find Keejigo, a half breed who is portrayed with delicacy. Her appearance is distinctly Indian, yet the "vivid dyes" and "vermilion" of her clothes, the "light ochre streaks" upon her cheeks contain none of the heavy derogatory diction and sentiments of Scott's essay. Keejigo speaks to her heart "In the beautiful speech of the Saulteaux." (260) Compare this to "the sun shines and the water runs" (Treaties 110) which mocks the Indian's poetic method of measuring time. And Keejigo is a captive, caught in the trap of forbidden love, who finally dies for love and is reborn by love, becoming the morning star of her name.

There can be little doubt that Keejiga is portrayed as a real human being, victim of male violence, and not merely the thread of a blanket treaty. And yet even "At Gull Lake" presents some of the black and white of Scott the civil servant. Indeed, Keejiga's whole poetic environment is in this way composed.

There is "After the beauty of terror the beauty of piece." (262) There are two opposing camps: one European, the other Indian. There is love and there is hate. Keejiga, as a half cast, is not a reconciliation but a victim of these opposites. And we should note also that where we find human qualities in Keejiga, the remaining Indians are formed of the habitual stereotypical elements: savagery, paganism--she is one of three wives--and disloyalty. After Keejiga's death, even the elements become partisan:

The setting sun struck the retreating cloud  
With a rainbow, not an arc but a column  
Built with the glory of seven metals;  
Beyond in the purple deep of the vortex  
Fell the quivering vines of the lightening.

That which is beautiful becomes refined, built in European style; that which is unpredictable and dangerous, remains organic, formed in native nature.

Most of all though, we should note the almost insidious conclusion: Keejiga is a victim of Indian justice, but a beneficiary of the highly literary, highly European poetic justice, which sentences her to immortality, both upon the page and in the heavens.

"The Forsaken" is a variation of "At Gull Lake." Here an unnamed Chippewa woman struggles against circumstance and the elements, more, we feel, for the survival of her baby than for her own sake. Certainly her predicament is more grave by virtue of the baby's demand for milk. "Valiant, unshaken,/She took of

her own flesh,/Baited the fish-hook,/Drew in a grey trout. (224) The woman is twice more "valiant unshaken," the final instance many years later--we might assume her life was lived similarly--as she meets her own death. It is at this final moment that she becomes not only valiant and unshaken, but majestic: "She smoothed her dark locks under her kerchief,/Composed her shawl in *state.*" (my italics) (225) She spends three days ". . ." without pain, or dread, or even a moment of longing," (225) awaiting the approach of death. And, just as the Chippewa woman begins by protecting her baby from the elements by hiding it to her breast, she ends when the light of her life is ". . ." gathered up by the hand of God and hid in His breast."

Besides the possibly prejudiced charge of passivity, the Chippewa woman is portrayed in superlatives. But again, as with "At Gull Lake," she is placed in an unsympathetic environment--a point made evident by the title itself, which serves to encapsulate the theme. There is clearly a black and white parallel between the first and second half of the poem, which are connected in numerous ways. In the first half, the baby is described as "the young chieftain," (224) a latent warrior who "Tugged at her breasts," (224) with all the disregard he will manifest as an adult in the second section. A similar reverse connection is made when she prepares for death by folding her hands ". . . across her breasts, spent with the nourishing of children." (225) Even as she waits for death, we see, by repetition of imagery, a replay of two days journey she previously made with her baby. The message is clear and there is

neither context nor understanding: the Chippewa woman is victim of a barbaric culture whose hallmark is heartless indifference. She recognises this and meets it with passive dignity. And so it is that her family "slunk" away and left her "Because she was old and useless," and "Without a word of farewell." (225)

"On the Way to the Mission," presents quite a different image. The protagonist is male, the antagonists white. This time the conflict comes not from within the Indian culture, but from without: the antagonists are "servants of greed"; (222) the crime's motivation typically European.

The poem is, to some degree, allegorical: "The Indian's face was calm./He strode with the sorrow of fore-knowledge." The Indian then in some way senses the imminence of his own death--the death also of his own race--at the hands of white men. "But his eyes were jewels of content/Set in circles of peace." (222) His contentment is explained in the title: both the man and his dead wife, who, "Under her waxy fingers/A crucifix was laid," have become Christians. Here the Indians receive a positive portrayal for the sake of the future promise they incorporate. They have not entirely lost their "Indianness", for some mystic quality remains, but their assimilation is well underway. They are the embodiment of Scott's final solution to the Indian problem.

In "Charcoal," and "Expiation," works of short fiction, the protagonist natives fare rather less well. Charcoal is a victim of his own primal nature: his attempt to don white habits fails as the inner savage rips them off and casts them aside. His

entire outlaw existence is begun by a "lapse to paganism" (43) which serves to awaken the beast within, and is then characterised by the success of his "cunning." And we can hardly avoid the impression that Scott treats his female characters with a delicacy appropriate to their condition--although "*On the Way to the Mission*" seems an exception to this.

Again, as in the poems, the native entourage, lurking in the background, cannot do right for doing wrong: their willingness to turn Charcoal in to the authorities is not seen as a sign of their moral sense, as a desire to act according to the law, nor as loyalty to the crown, but rather as lack of solidarity and disloyalty to their own kind. Even the law abiding Charcoal we initially encounter is less than laudable. He is described perfectly in "*Expiation*," though the words, of course, refer to Wascowin: "A fine fellow . . ." To which the reply is, "Yes, as faithful as a dog." Both Charcoal and Wascowin suffer from the same fate: they are characters drawn from well-established stereotypes. But Scott, in these two stories at least, does not discriminate: even his Caucasian characters leap off the page like cardboard cut-outs. Certainly, we should not imagine the masquerade of human contact, at the touching conclusion of "*Expiation*," to be an instance of human understanding also. For, just as the Scotsman remains in ignorance of what he has done, so too Scott seems blind to the fact that an obedient dog has been sacrificed for the expiation of his white protagonist.

Beside the similarities of character, both stories share a common didactic goal--which is evident in the clash of opposites

characteristic of their respective themes--and can be summed up in a line from "Charcoal:" "It was once more civilization against savagery." The conclusion of both stories leaves no doubt as to the winner of this struggle.

Both Charcoal and Wascowin are dealt with in a manner appropriate to the author of "The Last of the Indian Treaties." Certainly, there are shadows of sensitivity we have overlooked, the occasional disapproving diction aimed towards his exploiting European characters; but, due to both their didactic nature and possible gender bias, there seem few inconstancies. It is as if the hat that fits the "didactician" also fits the politician.

It is in the specific and individual portrayal of natives in Scott's poetry that we find a singular voice. The explanation seems to come from two areas. If we return, briefly, to "The Last of the Indian Treaties" we find one particular section that offers something of the tone we noted in the poems. The passage begins: "A word or two of the chronicle must be given up to the chief members of the crew." (112) Scott then proceeds to individualise each member by giving their names along with a short anecdote which highlights their most favourable characteristic, followed by a somewhat lengthy praise of the "half-breed" Jimmy Swain, which often trespasses into the realm of admiration. There is no moral to be made in this section. There is no blanket categorisation of those other Indians. When confronted with the individual, it seems, Scott avoids his usual propagandist rhetoric. The second explanation comes from Scott's own poetic theory, something of which is exposed in "Poetry and

Progress."

The first thing we notice is again Scott's negation of the oral tradition, here more clearly stated than the instance cited in "The Last of the Indian Treaties."

The former story telling function of history and the endless re-weaving of that tissue of tradition which surrounded and obscured the life of a people has given place to a higher conception of the duty of the historian and the obligation to accept no statement without the support of documentary evidence. (Poetry and Progress 126)

Scott's idealistic notion of science, of which history is one example, goes hand in hand with his idea of poetry which also seeks to "spread idealism" (144) Scott also insists that Keats', "The excellence of every art is it's intensity" is also an important criteria for high poetry. Such intensity, it would seem, requires something of an intimate and *sympathetic* relationship between poet and the characters he creates. Scott's postulation that Keats', had he lived, would have continued to develop is based upon the belief that he possessed "such breadth of sympathy" (135) and that the unwritten words would have been "informed with new beauty." (135) Later, borrowing from Shakespeare, Scott suggests the poetic spirit "endeavours to interpret the world in new terms of beauty . . . and anticipates social progress in terms of ideality." (137) What we find then is a high sense of aesthetics: poetry must be as intense as it is sympathetic as it is beautiful. As well as this, Scott

exposes his conservative nature when he begins, "A virus has infected all the arts" (138) and is critical of "extremist" who, amongst other things, express rebellion when they "write waltzes for the piano with the right-hand part in one key, and the left hand part in another." (139) We might conclude then that the heroic portrayal of principal characters in Scott's poems is, to some degree, an observance of tradition.

When we combine the idea of poetry spreading idealism with a heightened sense of aesthetics, an artistic conservatism and a national pride which is "a strong aid and incitement to a poet" (129) and seeks to express national character in favourable terms, what we find is the prescription for Scott's characterisation of natives in his poetic works. This is not to suggest that all Scott's poems can be in this way explained. Although defying positive proof, there seems also a certain poetic sensitivity--genuine to poetry if perhaps fabulous to Scott's actual feelings--which we might hold up as explanation for certain more problematical works.

In those we have examined, simply stated, individuals of worth who are products of an un-Christian and so virtually valueless Indian culture; and this contradiction must come from Scott's misapprehension of either one or the other. How was it the Chippewa woman, a character of such compassion and dignity, came from and gave birth to such obdurate people; whose family abandons her to die without context nor even a word of farewell? What lovely spring filled the heart of Keejiga while her kin and kind drank the dregs of bitterness and brutality? Perhaps it is

the rational, the generalising, the sardonic civil servant who paints the dark scene with its shadowy cast of extras, the poet who discovers the individual human spirit, cowering in that blackness.