Leaving the Shade of the Middle Ground: The Poetry of F.R. Scott
Selected and with an introduction by Laura Moss, afterword by George Elliott Clarke

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

I find this to be an indecisive book. Instead of a celebration of one of Canada’s first modern poets, the reader finds a picture of hesitancy in the Introduction, the actual selection of the poems, and the Afterword.

The Laurier Poetry Series tends to concision, so I’ll beg off making a case for a larger selection of Scott’s poems, yet I wonder what the criteria are for inclusion in this collection. Scott doesn’t sound dated. Thematically, “A Grain of Rice” sounds modern notes of overpopulation and war, tempered “through enlargement of wonder” (12), and “Social Notes I and II” prove their mettle by averring that pathetic end-game threats without the immediate attendant reality are not a New Age invention of oil companies. Under the subtitle “Natural Resources” we are urged to

Come and see the vast natural wealth of this mine.
In the short space of ten years
It has produced six American millionaires
And two thousand pauperized Canadian families. (20)

and ponder that the only end game being played is by corporations bankrupting both earthly resources and the social membership. Substitute tar sands for mines, and up the estimates where appropriate, and we’re looking ahead to 2022.

Scott’s communal starting point provides the right smelling salts for the punch-drunk stupor induced by the one-two combo of Big Business and right wing politics. In “Laurentian Shield” Scott traces the ruinous hunters and miners to “the bold command of monopolies big with machines, / Carving their kingdoms out of the public wealth” (2). Who speaks on behalf of public wealth anymore? We are individualized, compartmentalized, and isolated by the meteoric rise of Ego. We may banter about saving the environment, as if it were an object we merely need to pay more attention to, but we continue to sharpen up the steel jaws of our machines because it represents wealth, and wealth isn’t public domain anymore; it is individuated. Read any account of the battles over the environment. They all circle around the massive amount of money to be had or lost. Scott’s poetry humbly argues for a place on our shelves for a Canadian political poetry that is large enough to avoid the petty debate on specifics, yet particular enough not to lose local force.

The Afterword by the excellent writer George Elliott Clarke, however, disturbs me. I wonder why the Laurier series would commission a critical piece that savages their featured poet. Of course, the editor did not ask for a particular slant, and Clarke is fond of rattling what he regards as the staid and stolid streaks in Canadian poetry. Besides, I cannot refute Clarke’s well-drawn points that Scott is a lightweight, kind, and an establishment unto himself. Clarke cuts Scott without malice (I think), but with enough insight and footnotes to sound scholarly.
Looking at Clarke’s Afterword from this perspective, I’m inclined to say that he has written a fair review of Scott. Scott came from a comfortably middle-class family and was a middle-brow academic, something he demonstrated in the technique of his poetry, so saying that Scott is kind sounds quintessentially Canadian, and Scott would have worn that badge proudly. Besides, which poet among us, including George Elliott Clarke, wouldn’t gladly be seen as an establishment unto herself? ♦

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