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Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott by Mark Abley

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A Dead Poet's Society

***Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott* by MARK ABLEY**

Douglas & McIntyre, 2013 \$32.95

Reviewed by **REBECCA PHILLIPS**

Liberals in the US often have a somewhat rosy view of Canada. A lower rate of violent crime, national health care, and the “greenness” of cities like Victoria—the site of the 2009 ASLE conference—can make Canada seem idyllic. Signs in modern cities identifying First Nations territories, the creation of Nunavut, and the involvement of First Nations in public decision-making seem to signal a treatment of Aboriginal peoples different from the US experience. While Canada can seem to outsiders to have escaped the worst effects of colonialism, Mark Abley’s compelling *Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott* demonstrates the naïve inaccuracy of this view. In this page-turner work of creative nonfiction, Abley wrestles with the legacy of the major poet that a 2007 article in *Canada’s History* magazine listed as one of the “10 Worst Canadians.”

Scott (1862-1947) appears in Abley’s book as a revenant, permitted to return from the dead in an attempt to clear his name. The book alternates Scott’s appearances in these novelistic scenes with chapters detailing Abley’s research into the earlier writer’s life and times. Famed in his own day as a poet and patron of the arts, Scott spent fifty-two years of his long life in government service, during which time he was

responsible for overseeing the residential schools that removed Indigenous children from their parents in an attempt to speed up the process of assimilation. Although assimilation represented the conventional wisdom of Scott’s day, Abley documents the harm caused by this now-discredited policy and uses the results of his work to confront Scott’s ghost.

At Scott’s first manifestation in Abley’s Montreal living room, he explains his desire to restore his reputation and gives Abley the assignment of learning as much as he can about the posthumous shift in his status. Abley claims ignorance and sets out on a research project, establishing the pattern of the book: each discussion with Scott’s ghost leads to the exploration of another aspect of Canada’s history with respect to Aboriginal peoples, as well as information about Scott’s life and his role in that history.

Readers who know Scott only as a poet may be surprised at his political involvement; readers who know him only as one of the ten worst Canadians may be surprised at his complexity. The man who wrote lovingly of “Indian Place-Names” (although Abley seems unfamiliar with Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney’s earlier poem on the same topic when he asks of Scott, “[H]ow many other writers, anywhere in the English-speaking world, would have written an ode in praise on indigenous names?”) also oversaw an agency that overlooked the sexual abuse of children and attempted to eliminate cultural practices such as the potlatch. Abley the character, like Abley the journalist and poet, has difficulty understanding how

someone who could write with such seeming sympathy about Aboriginal peoples and languages could be so cavalier about the destruction of Aboriginal cultures. In his attempt to come to terms with this conflict, he explores a difference between the conventional wisdom of the nineteenth century and that of our own day—if such wisdom in fact exists. For Scott, as for most of his contemporaries, anything that increased the rate of assimilation into mainstream (generally Anglophone) Canadian society was likely a good thing. Pluralism as a cultural ideal did not yet exist.

Despite his obvious disapproval of Scott's ideas and the results of his work on the lives of Aboriginal peoples, Abley is careful to position the earlier writer and bureaucrat in the context of his time. Scott was a dedicated social servant who attempted to balance competing interests. As an advocate for what he no doubt saw as the "protection" of Aboriginal peoples, he strengthened the reserve system. As a budget watchdog, he requested funding for needed projects, but not so much funding that it would endanger Canada's World War One efforts. As a citizen aware of public opinion, he hesitated to take on the religious organizations that were ignoring the abuse of children in the residential schools they administered. As a poet, he wrote admiringly of Canada's natural beauty and certain aspects of its Indigenous cultures. At the time of his retirement, Scott was one of the most admired men in Canada.

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the book are the imagined conversations between Abley and Scott,

conversations in which nineteenth-century ideas about the "vanishing Indian" confront more recent history and contemporary ideas about cultural genocide, a concept that confuses and offends Scott's ghost. When Abley quotes a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report that describes the residential schools' purpose as "to separate children from the influences of their parents and their community, so as to destroy their culture," Scott's initial response is simply "Yes." He goes on to ask "Where is the abuse in preparing children to take their place in a modern society. . . ? Where is the abuse in giving them the opportunity to win a place in Canadian society?" Abley himself does not escape contradictions: when he laments that only 1 in 25 of Aboriginal people attend university, Scott is delighted that four percent have obtained that credential. He also points out the contradiction in Abley's criticism of giving Aboriginal children a "white" education while arguing that more should seek higher education.

Perhaps most importantly, Abley raises the question of how future generations will view those of us living today. After accusing Scott of intellectual laziness and lack of moral courage by asserting, "You carried your chains within you. . . . You believed the lies of the empire you served," Abley tells him that "I don't like to imagine what my ghost might need to ask a century from now." This awareness of his (and our) own limitations informs the book. Abley never allows the contemporary reader to become smug about our societies' increasing pluralism or other seeming advancements. A quote from a letter Scott wrote to Elise

Aylen, the young woman who became his second wife, poignantly sums up the danger facing all of us: "I know now that I have never fought against anything nor worked for anything but just accepted and drifted from point to point." As Tim DeChristopher notes in the Summer 2014 issue of *Yes! Magazine*, the baby boom generation has done little to address the environmental problems being left for younger people to face; we have only a limited right to criticize the shortcomings of the people who came before us.

Conversations with a Dead Man is obviously not a conventional academic biography, but Abley is careful to document the research that went into it. The end matter includes extensive source information so that interested readers can pursue the issues raised. The conversations, based as they are on fact, give a sense of how an intelligent, well-meaning, and well-read

Victorian might react to our world and its cultural attitudes, as well as the impasses that such conversations might reach. When Scott states, "I tried to keep faith with the highest achievements, the shining ideals of our civilization," the reader comes away with a sense of how those ideals have changed over the last century.

Works Cited

DeChristopher, Tim. "First the Anger, Then the Love: Why Climate Change is Personal." *Yes!* Summer 2014: 10-15. Print.

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