



# The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott: More than just a Canadian Poet

July 2016

## Introduction

Duncan Campbell Scott was a Canadian civil servant, poet and musician who lived his life in Ottawa, Ontario from 1862-1947. Although for many years he was best known as a famous Canadian poet, his legacy in supporting the assimilation of Aboriginal children into European-Canadian culture through the Indian Residential School system is now becoming more widely recognized.

From 2009-2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) listened to the statements of more than 6,000 witnesses and reviewed relevant historical documents in order to better understand the history and legacy of residential schools across Canada. The TRC released a Final Report in 2015 that presents their findings and includes 94 Calls to Action. The TRC focused on telling the truth about what happened in residential schools in order to lay the foundation for reconciliation in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

It is important to acknowledge Duncan Campbell Scott's role as a Canadian poet and a powerful bureaucrat who worked to "get rid of the Indian problem". This is part of truth telling that will help us on our journey towards reconciliation in Canada.

## Duncan Campbell Scott: Early Years

Duncan Campbell Scott was born in Ottawa in 1862. His father, William Scott, was a Methodist preacher and the family moved a number of times during Duncan's childhood. At a young age, Duncan Campbell Scott was intrigued by the arts, including music and literature. He became an accomplished pianist and also played the violin. Duncan Campbell Scott had hoped to become a doctor, but the family did not have the income to support him in a university education. However, William Scott was in good favour with Prime Minister John A. McDonald, and helped to secure a government job for the young Duncan who was appointed to a position as a copy clerk with the Department of Indian Affairs at the age of seventeen. Despite his lack of formal training, he was steadily promoted within

the Department over the years. As Duncan Campbell Scott was promoted to new positions, his ability to influence policy decisions that affected Aboriginal people also increased. In 1913 he was appointed as Superintendent of Indian Affairs becoming the most highly ranked federal public official on Indian affairs. He held the position for nearly twenty years before retiring in 1932 (McDougall, 2015; Titley, 1986).

Duncan Campbell Scott married Belle Warner Botsford, a professional violinist from Boston. They met when Belle was performing a violin concert in Ottawa and Duncan accompanied her on the piano. They had one beloved daughter, Elizabeth Scott, who was born in 1895 (Abley, 2013).

In the summers of 1905 and 1906, Duncan Campbell Scott took on the position as a treaty commissioner to represent the government of Canada in the signing of Treaty Nine, The James Bay Treaty. During these summers, Duncan Campbell Scott left his wife and daughter and travelled by canoe into northern Ontario. Duncan Campbell Scott reported that he found these trips through the wilderness to be lonely and depressing, and he resented the open landscape to which the Aboriginal peoples were so deeply connected (Titley, 1986).

Duncan Campbell Scott was one of three commissioners whose job was to persuade the Cree and Ojibwa (Aboriginal) peoples living across this region to sign Treaty Nine. In signing the Treaty, the governments were given access to the natural resources of the 90,000 square-mile region, including lumber, minerals and hydro-electric power. In return, the Aboriginal people were told where their reserve lands would be located, given a small sum of money, and assured that they could continue to hunt and fish across the region (although in the fine print, this right would be restricted by economic development projects). Finally, the Aboriginal people of the James Bay region were promised that their children would receive education, which would be provided through a residential school (Abley, 2013; Titley, 1986).

In 1907, back in Ottawa, Duncan Campbell Scott and Belle Botsford decided that their daughter Elizabeth should attend school in Europe for a year. When Elizabeth was eleven years old, her parents

accompanied her to a boarding school in Paris. Just a few weeks after they left her at school, Duncan Campbell Scott and his wife received word that Elizabeth had died suddenly of scarlet fever. Elizabeth's death led to a particularly dark time in Scott's life (Abley, 2013; Titley, 1986).

It is interesting to note that 1907 is both the year of Elizabeth's death and the year that the Department of Indian Affairs received the "Bryce Report" on the alarming rates of children suffering from disease and dying in the Indian Residential School system. In this report, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, Canada's Chief Medical Health Officer, documented the appalling health conditions within residential schools and outlined clear recommendations to prevent unnecessary student deaths. Duncan Campbell Scott understood the rate of preventable student deaths in residential schools, but decided to disregard Dr. Bryce's 1907 recommendations and instead continued on with the system of assimilation that had been put in place (Milloy, 1999). It does not seem that Duncan Campbell Scott was able to make the connection between his despair over his own daughter's death and the crisis of disease and death among Aboriginal children in the schools that he was responsible for overseeing.

## Duncan Campbell Scott: The Confederation Poet

During his lifetime and for many years after his death, Duncan Campbell Scott was best known to the public as one of Canada's great Confederation Poets. Numerous anthologies of Canadian poetry include his work, which has been taught to students in schools across the country.

During his early years working for the Department of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott met Archibald Lampman, who is also known as one of Canada's great Confederation poets. When they met in 1883, Lampman had already published some of his poetry and greatly influenced Duncan Campbell Scott in his own writing. It was during this time that Duncan Campbell Scott began composing and publishing his own poetry (Titley, 1986).

Over the years Duncan Campbell Scott gained numerous honours and awards for his poetry. Scott was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and in 1927 was awarded the Lorne Pierce gold medal to recognize his standing in Canadian literature (May, 2016). His contributions to Canadian poetry include many poems which reveal his colonialist perspective about Aboriginal people living in Canada (BC Teacher's Federation, 2015). The following poem, "The

Onondaga Madonna" is an example of one of Duncan Campbell Scott's early "Indian poems", published in 1898.

### "The Onondaga Madonna" by Duncan Campbell Scott

She stands full-throated and with careless pose,  
 This woman of a weird and waning race,  
 The tragic savage lurking in her face,  
 Where all her pagan passion burns and glows;  
 Her blood is mingled with her ancient foes,  
 And thrills with war and wildness in her veins;  
 Her rebel lips are dabbled with the stains  
 Of feuds and forays and her father's woes.  
 And closer in the shawl about her breast,  
 The latest promise of her nation's doom,  
 Paler than she her baby clings and lies,  
 The primal warrior gleaming from his eyes;  
 He sulks, and burdened with his infant gloom,  
 He draws his heavy brows and will not rest.  
 (Representative Poetry, 2016).

In this poem, Duncan Campbell Scott reveals his perception of Aboriginal peoples as tragic savages whose nations are doomed. It would be fair to say that Duncan Campbell Scott contributed to conditions to deepen the "doom" Aboriginal peoples experienced. Scott used his poetry to project a perilous future for Aboriginal peoples and exercised the federal power to make it happen. (McDougall, 2015). Literary critic Stan Dragland has published several studies that contextualize Duncan Campbell Scott's poetry within his work as a senior bureaucrat at Indian Affairs. Dragland explores the interplay between Scott's literature and politics and has encouraged the literary community to understand Scott's "Indian Poems" as they relate to his long career with the government and his impact on Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Betts, 2009).

## Duncan Campbell Scott: Architect of the Indian Residential School System

Duncan Campbell Scott's legacy is full of contradictions.

Acknowledged during his lifetime for his literary and musical prowess, these contributions were eventually overshadowed by the dark and long-lasting impacts of his career at Indian Affairs overseeing the residential school system. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) demonstrates, the ultimate goal of residential schools (also called industrial schools or boarding schools) was to separate Aboriginal children from their families and indoctrinate them into European-Canadian culture and in so doing, eliminate Aboriginal peoples. Duncan Campbell Scott played a prominent role in supporting the forced assimilation of Aboriginal children.

In a letter dated August 22, 1895, Duncan Campbell Scott, then Acting Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, wrote to the Deputy Minister of Justice to request authorization to force Aboriginal children to leave their homes in order to attend these schools: "I have the honour... to request you to have the goodness to furnish me at your early convenience with a form of warrant for the committal of an Indian Child to an Industrial School" (Scott, 1895).

Duncan Campbell Scott's support of residential schools was not deterred even when it became apparent that huge numbers of students were dying in schools due to communicable diseases such as tuberculosis. In Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce's 1907 report, he made it clear that the poor health conditions and death rates in residential schools were both incredibly high and preventable. The report also included practical recommendations that the government could take to improve health conditions in residential schools (Milloy, 1999).

The 1907 report was widely distributed within the Department and to church officials, and it was later shared with the press. On November 15, 1907, the front page of "The Evening Citizen" newspaper (now called The Ottawa Citizen) included an article on Bryce's report. The title on the front page of the newspaper read: "Schools Aid White Plague - Startling Death Rolls Revealed Among Indians - Absolute Inattention to the Bare Necessities of Health" (Evening Citizen, 1907).

Peter Henderson Bryce's research highlighted the dire situation of disease and death in residential schools and the need to immediately remedy the situation. Bryce worked hard to bring the urgency of this issue to the government's and the public's attention. However, Bryce's recommendations for improvements in the

schools would cost the government money, which came into direct conflict with Scott's desire to reduce expenditures of the Department of Indian Affairs. Despite Peter Henderson Bryce's repeated demands for action on this issue, Duncan Campbell Scott chose not to implement these recommendations for improvement (Titley, 1986) and launched a series of reprisals against Dr. Bryce for speaking up.

Duncan Campbell Scott wrote:

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in the residential schools and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this does not justify a change in the policy of this Department which is geared towards a final solution of our Indian Problem (BC Teachers' Federation, 2015, p.8).

Duncan Campbell Scott did not, however, acknowledge the other details that Bryce had laid out in his 1907 report: that residential schools were designed in ways that propagated disease, including conditions of overcrowding, poor ventilation, poor nutrition and inadequate medical care.

Despite knowing about conditions that made the schools "veritable hotbeds of disease" (Evening Citizen, 1907 p.1), Duncan Campbell Scott made amendments to the *Indian Act* in 1920 making it mandatory for all Aboriginal children between seven and fifteen years to attend residential school (Milloy, 1999). With these amendments, parents were unable to hold their children back from attending schools and great numbers of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their homes. Duncan Campbell Scott told the parliamentary committee, "our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 3).

In addition to the tragic rate of student deaths in residential schools, Duncan Campbell Scott was also aware that residential schools were providing a quality of education that was well under the standards of that time period. The poor quality of education and living conditions for students living in residential schools can be attributed to the underfunding and lack of oversight of residential schools by the Department of Indian Affairs (Milloy, 1999).

Throughout his time in federal office, Duncan Campbell Scott acknowledged the evidence that residential schools were enormously damaging to the lives of Aboriginal children, but failed to sufficiently improve conditions for Aboriginal children living and dying in residential schools. In reflecting on his life near the end of his career, Duncan Campbell Scott wrote, "I know now that I have

never fought against anything nor worked for anything but just accepted & drifted from point to point" (Abley, 2013, p.175-176). Rather than take action improve the lives of Aboriginal children, Duncan Campbell Scott took the easy route and followed the status quo.

## Duncan Campbell Scott: Where do we go from here?

Although Duncan Campbell Scott is still well known for his contributions to Canadian literature, these contributions are far outweighed by the consequences of his perpetuation of the Indian Residential School system as assimilation policy. Both areas of his work have left a legacy for future generations.

People in Canada are now learning more about the legacy of residential schools, especially with the recent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC Final Report provides us with evidence of the immense abuse and suffering that occurred within the walls of these schools, as well as the intergenerational impacts that residential schools have on Aboriginal families and communities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reported that the assimilation policy of the Indian Residential School system can best be described as cultural genocide, which is "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group" (p.1). It is important to acknowledge the legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott as a supporter of the assimilation policy that has impacted the lives of so many Aboriginal children, families and communities in Canada.

In November 2015, the historical plaque that stands beside Duncan Campbell Scott's gravesite in Beechwood Cemetery, Ottawa, was updated to note his literary achievements and his role in overseeing the assimilationist Indian Residential School system for Aboriginal children (CBC News, 2015). The revision of the plaque presents visitors with a more complete story of Duncan Campbell Scott and the legacies he left. It also invites readers to think critically about their role in reconciliation in ways that make visible contemporary manifestations of colonization.

As caring people who want to find our own roles in reconciliation in Canada, an important first step is truth telling. The story of Duncan Campbell Scott teaches us that the ideas, decisions and actions - or inactions - of people in powerful positions can have incredibly harmful impacts on generations of people. In hearing this history, we realize that these are ideas and actions that we do not want to see repeated in any form. Instead, we need to see actions of people

who are ready to stand up for what is right and just, even when it is difficult to do so.

By telling the truth, we are able to learn from past harms and reflect on what we need to do differently today and in the future. Both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people in Canada have a responsibility to take action to prevent the re-occurrence of harms experienced by Aboriginal children, families and communities, and to ensure that Aboriginal children are able to grow up healthy in their own homes, communities and cultures.

**Produced by:** Jocelyn Wattam

## References

- Abley, M. (2013). *Conversations with a dead man: The legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre
- Betts, G. (2009). Stanley Louis Dragland. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/stanley-louis-dragland/>
- CBC News. (2015, November 2). Duncan Campbell Scott plaque now includes his past creating residential schools. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/duncan-campbell-scott-plaque-updated-1.3299062>
- May R. (2016). *The poet and publisher: Duncan Campbell Scott and Lorne Pierce*. Historical Perspectives on Canadian Publishing. Retrieved from <http://hpcanpub.mcmaster.ca/case-study/poet-and-publisher-duncan-campbell-scott-and-lorne-pierce>
- McDougall, R. (2015). Duncan Campbell Scott. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/duncan-campbell-scott/>
- Milloy, J. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Representative Poetry Online. (2016). *The Onondaga Madonna*. University of Toronto Press. Retrieved from <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/onondaga-madonna>
- Scott, D. C. (1895, August 22). *Letter from Duncan Campbell Scott, Acting Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to Minister of Justice requesting warrant*. Ottawa, no. 151-711-10.

The BC Teachers' Federation. (2015). *Project of heart: Illuminating the hidden history of Indian Residential Schools in BC*. Retrieved from <http://bctf.ca/HiddenHistory/>

Evening Citizen. (1907, November 15). *Schools Aid White Plague*. Ottawa: The Evening Citizen.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*.

Retrieved from [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring\\_the\\_Truth\\_Reconciling\\_for\\_the\\_Future\\_July\\_23\\_2015.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf)

Titley, E. (1986). *A narrow vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.