

F. R. Scott and Social Justice in the 1930s

by Robert G. May

Between 1929 and 1932, a number of economic, political, and social events coalesced to focus F.R. Scott's attention upon the deteriorating social conditions of early twentieth-century Canada. On August 11, 1931, the attorney general of Ontario justified the arrest of Tim Buck, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), as well as that of a number of other prominent Communist Party members, by applying a long disused amendment to the Criminal Code originally designed to combat seditious revolutionaries following the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 (Horn, Headnotes 4-5). The draconian Section 98 and its blanket proscription of what it calls "unlawful association[s]" (qtd. in Scott, "Freedom" 176) was anathema to Scott because it essentially resulted in a "permanent restriction of the rights of association, freedom of discussion, printing and distribution of literature...unequaled in the history of Canada and probably of any British country" ("Trial" 512-13). For Scott, the very existence of such an oppressive piece of legislation underlines the need for a close re-examination of "the nature of our right to free speech and the extent of the present restrictions upon it" ("Freedom" 169). On December 11, 1931, the British Parliament enacted the Statute of Westminster, a piece of legislation designed to clarify the heretofore ill-defined powers of the Dominion governments and to provide the former colonies with greater legislative autonomy. For Scott, however, the statute was far from ideal because it neither replaced the Privy Council as the court of last appeal for Canadians nor provided the Canadian Parliament with the unilateral power to repeal or amend the British North America Act. "[H]andicapped by its ignorance of Canada" ("Development" 246) and its insensitivity to the intentions of the Fathers of Confederation for a strong central government (232-33), the Privy Council was often at odds with the opinions of the Supreme Court of Canada (see "Privy Council and Minority"), and thus it became a source of injustice and bureaucratic confusion ("Constitutional Law" 665). Of course the most significant event of the 1930s for Scott and his contemporaries was the Great Depression. The pre-existing maldistribution of wealth, the woefully inadequate social welfare structure, and the ill-conceived laissez-faire policies of the King and Bennett governments [Page 33] exacerbated the economic collapse in Canada and gave rise to a constellation of socialistic political reform movements (Horn,

League 10), including the League for Social Reconstruction and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. By endeavouring to educate a disillusioned citizenry about the benefits of a socialised economy, Scott and his colleagues hoped to offset the capitalist rhetoric of the nation's mainstream leaders¹ and to promote genuine social change. Scott writes:

[I]ndividual liberty [will] not be safeguarded by a return to the obsolete doctrines of our forefathers, but rather by a still greater use of the state and other public bodies for the regulation and control of the economic life of the country in the interests of the whole people. Without [such] security and some degree of economic equality, liberty cannot exist except for the favoured few.
... ("Wrong" 5)

The day of "rugged individualism" and "private enterprise" has gone, Scott adds, "destroyed as much by big business itself as by direct governmental interference" (5).

Although on his own and under the auspices of the LSR Scott published thousands of pages of letters, articles, pamphlets, and books devoted to his ideas about the constitution, civil liberties, and a socialised economy, the economic crisis of the Great Depression resulted in a dearth of poetical publications by Scott (and his contemporaries) throughout the 1930s. Scott did manage, however, to publish two important sequences of poems in the *Canadian Forum*, one of the few organs during this time that continued to provide "ample space to poetry, fiction and the best work of Canadian artists" (Granatstein 374; compare Heenan 95). "An Anthology of Up-to-Date Canadian Poetry" and "Social Notes" received mixed reviews. Although some critics applaud Scott's "sharp, controlled irony" (MacKay 97) and his prudent avoidance of the "dreary [rhetorical] apparatus" of some of his contemporaries (Brown 271), others contend that the poetry is little more than "C.C.F. propaganda...divided into irregular lines" (Burns 262). One anonymous reviewer, who disparagingly refers to Scott as "one of the C.C.F.'s chief Brain-trusters" (Rev. of *Overture* 33), is particularly uncharitable:

Ungraced by either imagination or wit, this bulky residue is undisguised propaganda for the Socialist revolution...[and] a naked fomenting of class hatred, falsified by distortions....Its feverish partisanship, however, tends to defeat its own angry ends as well as its poetic integrity.
(34-35) [Page 34]

To charge Scott with class hatred or propagandism, however, is to misread the "Anthology" and "Social Notes" and to misunderstand radically their place in the poet's oeuvre. It is much more accurate to recognize these pieces as a manifestation of Scott's growing conviction that, because "[e]verything in Canada was shifting and changing" during the 1930s, poetry too must shift

and change if it is to "reflect or deal with the dreadful conditions" of this "very formative period" of Canadian history. By dispensing with the obfuscating "*décor*" of poetry—its inhibiting "niceness," its antiquated preoccupation with rhyme and syntax—in favour of a "more stark, more direct" kind of writing—one in which "vividness and intensity" supercedes rhetorical gimmickry (qtd. in Wayne and MacKinnon 16)—Scott hoped to lay bare in the "Anthology" and "Social Notes" the often ugly social results of the economic crises infecting Canadian society, to eliminate supererogatory verbal impedimenta and "write...damn plain words nude" ("O Tempora" 12). Scott's use of satire as a "serious poetic element" (qtd. in Wayne and MacKinnon 16) both magnifies the horror of these crises and tacitly suggests a more socially just alternative. In his interview with Vincent Tovell, Scott explains:

[W]hen you satirize something you are contrasting the thing you satirize with its opposite which you would like to have instead. So you're really affirming the opposite values to those you're satirizing. It's not purely destructive that way. It was a belief in Canada. There was so much going on [during the 1930s] that seemed foolish or dangerous or just funny that it was a way of getting it off your chest. (qtd. in 66)

Scott feels compelled to call into question what he sees as the injustices of his society—in his interview with Michael Heenan he remarks, "you couldn't live in the 1930s and look at the world around you and not have some form of contrary statement to make" (qtd. in 96)—and satire enables him to do so subtly, without having to resort to propaganda or inflammatory rhetoric (see Scott and Smith xv-xvi). The "Anthology" and "Social Notes" thus complement Scott's expository writing of the 1930s by offering an amplification and distillation of the ideas he articulates at greater lengths in the voluminous letters, articles, pamphlets, and books.

That the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council did not cease to be the court of last appeal in Canada even after the promulgation of the Statute of Westminster in 1931 was a problem for thinkers like Scott because, by privileging provincial powers over Dominion jurisdiction, its unappealable decisions contradicted the intentions of the Fathers of Confederation for a strong central government. In "The Development of Canadian Federalism," [Page 35] Scott draws liberally from the *Confederation Debates* to show that "[t]he basis for the distribution of legislative powers" is "clear and definite" (232). By "consistently favour[ing] the provinces at the expense of the Dominion" (247), however, the Privy Council "forces upon Canada the American type of constitution with its state residuary power, which we carefully and particularly avoided in 1867" (240). For Scott, the Privy Council fares even worse in the complex domain of minority rights. In "The Privy Council and Minority Rights," Scott systematically reviews the Privy Council decisions of a number of landmark minority rights cases (670-

73) to show that "no additional protection has ever been secured for the minority in Canada by the appeal to the foot of the throne" (674). It is provincial rights, not minority rights, that the Privy Council seems preoccupied with safeguarding:

[T]he Privy Council has carried its protection of provincial claims so far that to-day we have in Canada a distribution of legislative powers quite unlike that which was agreed upon at Confederation, and one which by its undue enlargement of the Provincial sphere, considerably weakens the efficient and harmonious structure of our constitution. (677)

Scott contends that the Supreme Court of Canada would be a more impartial arbiter of justice, since its geographical proximity "compels a more cautious attitude and a more thorough deliberation" (677), it commands a greater understanding of Canada's complex federalism ("Development" 246), and it results in less jurisdictional confusion and fewer wasted public resources ("Constitutional Law" 664-65).

The Privy Council's declaration of Prime Minister Bennett's "New Deal" legislation—which promised substantial social reforms²—as *ultra vires* was for Scott an even more glaring example of how the Committee, "in a reactionary and stupid manner" ("Goodbye" 6), has "virtually destroyed... Dominion powers" (7) by according full recognition to "[t]he most exaggerated doctrines of provincial rights" (6). By privileging the heterogeneous rights of several provincial legislatures over those of a unified Dominion, the Privy Council "stultifies the whole development of Dominion status since the [First World] War" and prevents Canada from functioning as "a single nation in the conduct of her international relations" (485; compare "Permanent" 631). By "forc[ing] our constitution into the American mould" of "states' rights," the Privy Council scraps "[a] well-balanced distribution of sovereignty between Dominion and provinces" for a less efficient and more confusing decentralized alternative that is "exactly the opposite" of the 1867 arrangement ("Consequences" 488-89). **[Page 36]** It is time, Scott avers, for Canada to take control of its own affairs instead of leaving them to an unqualified body "three thousand miles away in England" (493):

The Privy Council is and always will be a thoroughly unsatisfactory court of appeal for Canada in constitutional matters; its members are too remote, too little trained in our law, too casually selected, and have too short a tenure.... Canada is the only self-governing Dominion that has not yet realized this fact and taken steps to restrict or abolish the appeal. (494)

In "Coming Home," a poem from "Social Notes," Scott highlights the names of two oceangoing vessels to emphasize that Canada's subservience to Great

Britain seems less inherently democratic than even the Communist system:

The Soviet ship from Leningrad to London
Was called the Co-operation,
But to reach democratic Canada
I travelled by the Duchess of Richmond.

(1-4)

Whereas the Soviets, arguably, can rely upon internal co-operation to sail their ship of state with autonomy, Canada must depend upon the good will of the Old Country to help it navigate the uncertain waters of 1930s geopolitics.

The need for Canada to make its own constitutional decisions became increasingly important as Europe drew towards another major war. The First World War was still a vivid memory for Scott, whose brother perished at the Somme in 1916 (Djwa, *Politics* 38; see Scott, "For R. A. S."), and in "The Hero" he articulates how futile an endeavour that conflict was for Canada:

Having struck several Germans with a bayonet
For Canada, the Empire, and Civilization,
This unemployed ex-service man
Surveys the fruits of his endeavour.

(1-4)

The poem ends on this line, suggesting that for his troubles the ex-soldier has only joblessness and violent memories as recompense. Scott's fear is that future conflicts will be even less fulfilling for Canadians, whose allegiance to the Empire was becoming increasingly tenuous (see "Policy" [Page 37] 406). In an article on the Canadian constitutional issues arising from the abdication of King Edward VIII, Scott shows that he was thinking about Canada's role in European conflicts as early as the mid-1930s:

[T]he King of England is not automatically King of Canada, but... his... authority in and over this dominion rests ultimately upon the consent of the Canadian and not merely of the English people. The divisibility of the Crown is thereby emphasized—a point which will have great bearing upon the question... as to whether one part of the Commonwealth may be neutral when another part is at war. ("Constitutional Issue" 4)

Although the Statute of Westminster allows Canada to enact legislation conferring upon the Governor-General the sole power to issue declarations of war and peace, and thus Canada "may be considered to have the right to neutrality," Scott points out that Parliament has yet to exercise this power, and thus "foreign countries would seem to be free to consider that... a declaration of war by Great Britain automatically makes Canada a belligerent" ("Policy"

415). Prime Minister King's ambiguous rhetoric about letting "the Parliament of Canada Decide" the extent of Canadian involvement (qtd. in "Canada's" 438-39) is "unpardonably inaccurate and misleading" ("Canada and the Outbreak" 86); by "confus[ing] the right to neutrality with the right to 'passive belligerency,'" his "language of political dodgery" does nothing more than "stave off an open fight on the issue" ("Canada's" 439; see also "W. L. M. K." 18ff). Scott argues that Canadian citizens "under a democratic form of political government...have not only a right, but a duty, to share in the decision" as to the extent of Canadian participation in future hostilities abroad ("Canada and the Outbreak" 86). Especially when Canadian companies began to profit from the sale of raw materials to the enemy for the manufacture of armaments, a practice Scott condemns in "Canada the Ammunition Dump" as "colonialism with a vengeance" (139), this duty became even more pressing:

And many a brave Canadian youth
Will shed his blood on foreign shores,
And die for Democracy, Freedom, Truth,
With his body full of Canadian ores,

Canadian nickel, lead, and scrap,
Sold to the German, sold to the Jap....

("Lest" 4-9) [Page

38]

Scott therefore calls on the government immediately to introduce legislation to give the Canadian Governor-General royal prerogative over Canada's foreign affairs. Scott points out that such a move "could take place without touching the B.N.A. Act" ("Canada and the Outbreak" 87), and thus would continue Canada's "movement towards...complete constitutional freedom" (Scott, Plaunt, and Ferguson 6-7) without "commit[ting] a gross breach of faith with Great Britain...at such a [politically sensitive] time" ("Canada and the Outbreak" 86). After all, both South Africa and the Irish Free State have made such declarations, and their respective policies of neutrality are clear ("Canada's" 430).

For Scott, one of the most pernicious aspects of Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada was the way in which most members of the public thought of it as a protective but benign barrier against the evils of illegal organisations (see Thomas 397). Scott argues that this "notorious" statute ("Trial" 512) actually "goes much farther than that" by constraining the civil liberties of Canadians in several fundamental ways. Not only does Section 98 impose "unnecessarily severe penalties" upon persons convicted under the statute, but it also places the burden on those individuals to convince a judge and jury of their innocence, thus reversing "the [basic] rule of British law that every man is innocent until he is proved guilty." By imposing equally harsh penalties upon owners of halls who allow unlawful meetings, the statute "threatens the

freedom of speech and association" of law-abiding citizens ("Civil" 7), since few landlords will risk imprisonment ("Communists" 128) to permit on their property the meetings of any new or controversial organization, however lawful. The statute gives almost limitless powers to the police to seize without warrant any property belonging to a so-called unlawful association, "so that no man's home is safe from arbitrary search" ("Civil" 7). By prohibiting industrial change by threat of force, it "endangers the workers' [democratic] right to strike" ("Civil" 7). Section 98 ranges so wide and creates so many new crimes, Scott suggests, that "[e]ven a private conversation would seem to be covered by [it]" ("Section" 476). The unjustified 1931 arrest, trial, and conviction of eight members of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC)—"a lawful and recognized political party in almost every civilized country to-day" ("Trial" 512)—convinced Scott even more completely of the totalitarian potentialities of Section 98. As Scott makes clear in "The Trial of the Toronto Communists," the eight CPC members were convicted not on the basis of evidence, of which there was none (516), but on the basis of a jury's oversimplified misinterpretations of various CPC pamphlets (521ff). The only reason the Toronto Communists were convicted, Scott [**Page 39**] concludes, was because their proletarian belief system threatened the privileged position of the bourgeoisie in Canada (526-27). Their imprisonment was a form not of justice but of political persecution (see "Political"), which for Scott sets a very dangerous precedent:

Has any Canadian bookseller ever sold a copy of the Communist Manifesto? Twenty years for him. Has any Canadian professor ever taught a class of students in political science that there are occasions when revolution is morally justifiable? Clap him in gaol with the Communists.... Has any Canadian citizen ever brought into Canada any book in which the use of force to effect political or industrial change is defended under any conditions whatsoever?.... [A] long spell in the penitentiary awaits him.

("Communists"

128)

Scott facetiously suggests that "the best thing for every good Canadian to do, if he wants to keep out of gaol, is to cling to the stock of reliable and well-tried ideas which have made Canada exactly what she is today" (129).

Scott was particularly critical of the way in which insidious pieces of legislation like Section 98 gave "statutory backing for the police" ("Trial" 513) to seize property or to break up meetings arbitrarily and without warrant. In Montreal, the law against sedition was "degenerat[ing] into an instrument for police tyranny" ("Montreal" 760): in a letter to the *Montreal Gazette*, Scott describes the "clearly high-handed...and apparently illegal" tactics the Montreal police used to disperse various orderly meetings of unemployed workers ("Criticizes" 12), and in the *Canadian Bar Review* he surveys a

number of cases in which men and women were tried for sedition "solely on the [circumstantial] evidence of semi-literate police constables who [took] down in longhand isolated remarks from speeches delivered in a language with which they [were] very imperfectly familiar" ("Montreal" 761). Scott maintains that such tactics amount to "a pre-judging of the case" ("Criticizes" 12) and represent a clear violation of the "rights of free speech and assembly" ("Montreal" 756). In an article in the *Canadian Forum*, Scott criticises the way in which the police themselves incited riots in cities like Hamilton and Sudbury by deliberately charging into crowds of people celebrating May Day ("May" 326), and elsewhere he condemns the Montreal police for their heavy-handedness in dealing with workers who exercise their democratic right to strike ("Peaceful" 8). In "British Traditions," Scott plainly and succinctly summarises this growing problem of police corruption. As in many of the poems in the "Anthology" and "Social Notes," the poet articulates the issue at hand without recourse to the potential obfuscations of metrical or rhetorical devices, but instead [Page 40] relies on the inherent violence and social injustice of the issue itself to retain the attention of the reader:

Crack this man's head open with a police baton,
And send him to gaol for sedition.
He said the present economic system was rotten,
And actually told the workers they wouldn't get a
square deal
Unless they organised and fought for their rights.
("British" 1-5)

The very idea that a worker, in democratic Canada, should be arrested and imprisoned merely for advocating peaceful labour agitation is the height of absurdity for Scott. Even more opprobrious, however, is the fact that the government would squander its resources in combatting such agitation rather than deploying those resources proactively to implement social programmes that would preclude labour unrest:

After the strike began
Troops were rushed
To defend property.
But before the trouble started
Nobody seems to have bothered
To defend living standards.
("Government" 1-6)

The effectiveness of these poems emerges not so much from clever or unorthodox phraseology, but from the righteous indignation the reader inevitably feels upon reading an unvarnished account of social injustice. Notice as well how each poem builds towards its climax and then abruptly ends, leaving the reader to contemplate the poem's message immediately

following its most forceful lines. In "Land of Opportunity," Scott uses this same technique to rebuke the federal government for the ease with which it deports immigrants who become involved in controversial political movements:

This young Polish peasant

• • •

Got involved in a Communist demonstration,
And is now being deported by the Canadian
government.

This will teach these foreign reds
The sort of country they've come to.

(1, 9-

12) [Page 41]

Scott wonders "how many converts to communism have been made by" the autocratic measures of the police and the government ("Criticizes" 12):

The labour and working class movement has come to stay, and cannot now be destroyed. To meet its every expression with violence is simply going to force every decent, sincere, and courageous worker to turn Communist.... [I]f we have more of the present police violence, arrests, and deportations, the Canadian radical movement will have no choice but to...adopt the Communist technique. ("May" 326)

The Louis-Alexandre Taschereau government's enactment of the David Bill in 1935, which revoked the right of individuals to hold "all but a limited number of meetings" and designated the chief of police "a censor of the literature and notices" that related to such meetings ("Public" 12), made matters even more authoritarian in Quebec. Scott points out that "[t]he iron heel" ("Fascist" 251) of the David Law restricts the rights to free speech and assembly even more rigorously than does the Criminal Code ("David" 294), and thus is largely responsible for making Taschereau's Quebec a "totalitarian state," a "theo-pluto-bureaucracy... illuminated by touches of fascism" ("Fascist" 251).

One of Scott's main recommendations in his four-part series on penal reform for *Saturday Night* magazine is that police be compelled to rein in their heavy-handed behaviour and treat prisoners with "decency and courtesy," since "[r]espect for law is the ultimate basis of law, and the attitude of the police very easily creates or destroys this respect." Scott reminds the reader that most crime has social causes ("Penal Reform is Not a Field" 2), and that by ignoring those causes—by consistently favouring incarceration over rehabilitation, for example—the penal system, far from eliminating crime, allows it to grow more frequent (2). Judges, because of their elevated "social status and economic security" but their only cursory "knowledge of sociology,

psychology, psychiatry [and] allied subjects," are ill-equipped competently to impose prison sentences on criminals, and thus Scott recommends that Canada discontinue the practice ("Penal Reform" 11 July 1936 4). In "Justice," Scott makes the same point, but with more precision and with far greater facetiousness. Although the judge is "totally ignorant" of the "upbringing and environment" (2) of the criminals he is "busy sentencing" (1), his so-called "qualifications" (3)—which include "membership in the proper political party" (7)—are "the highest" (3):

Who should know better than he
Just how many years in prison [**Page 42**]
Are needed to reform a slum product,
Or how many strokes of the lash
Will put an end to assaults on young girls?
(8-12)

Notice once again how Scott uses "a simple recital of fact" in the opening lines of "Justice" to create an uncomplicated but immediately compelling argument. Scott adds the element of the rhetorical question in the closing lines of the poem "to draw the reader's indignant response" (Djwa, "F. R. Scott" 197) even more forcefully than in other poems from the "Anthology" and "Social Notes." Scott was particularly opposed to the death penalty, a form of punishment that "symbolizes revenge, cruelty and horror— everything that modern penology seeks to remove from the law" ("Penal Reform" 18 July 1936 4). He cites a gruesome anecdote—in which a woman is brutally decapitated during her botched public hanging (8; compare "Death")—to emphasize this point, but also to underscore the mediaeval, ritualistic nature of executions, "like gladiatorial battles in ancient Rome" (8). In "Hanged by the Neck," analogously, Scott writes that when a society uses the death penalty its "professionals order themselves / In ritual rank" (2-3), suggesting that all levels of middle-class society, by wilfully disregarding the social causes of crime and thus abjuring their responsibilities to the criminal, are complicit in the barbarism of this kind of punishment:

Above, with the victim,
Stand the Law and the Church
To assist at the killing,
While under the scaffold
The Doctor waits
To receive his trussed patient....
(4-9)

It is no accident that Scott places representatives of the legal and clerical professions on the scaffold "with the victim," suggesting that these supposed upholders of mainstream legality and morality are just as culpable as the prisoner whose demise they are abetting. In the final instalment of the

Saturday Night series, Scott outlines in point form five "principal criticisms of Canadian penitentiaries and jails" ("Penal Reform" 18 July 1936 4), all of which also appear in the "Social Notes" poem, "Penology." In the article, Scott suggests that "[t]he selection and training of wardens and guards [is] too casual," and that too often the government "use[s] prison [Page 43] appointments as rewards for political service." He complains that "[n]o real use is made of modern ideas of segregation and classification of offenders," and that penitentiaries have an "armed concentration camp atmosphere." Prisoners have no contact with the outside world, "[l]ocked in their separate cells" and permitted to write "only one [letter] per month" ("Penal Reform" 18 July 1936 4). Whereas Scott explains these ideas at some length in the article, he distills them to their bare essentials in the poem:

We place them in charge of a governor and
guards
Carefully selected for their politics.
Uniformity of treatment for all ages and types
Guarantees the same results in all cases.
Each one has a small barred cell all to himself,
Twenty minutes exercise a day,
And full permission to write one letter a month.
("Penology" 4-10)

As opposed to employing explicitly condemnatory language in "Penology," which would merely result in an easily dismissed harangue, Scott facetiously poses as a proponent of the flawed penal system, a technique that compels even the most conservative reader to react with indignation.

As the Great Depression worsened, Scott and other progressive thinkers became convinced that only an intelligently implemented programme of public ownership could restore Canada's economic equilibrium. "Socialism," Scott writes, "offers a hope of equating consuming power and production, of spreading the available work amongst those capable of working, and thus of abolishing...the problems of unemployment and overproduction" ("Efficiency of Socialism" 216) that are characteristic of monopolistic capitalism (217). Opposition to such a scheme came from many sides, however, including the Bennett Conservatives (Scott, "Prof." 6) and the Catholic Church (Scott, "Letter to J. S. Woodsworth" 39), who did everything they could to ally democratic socialism with totalitarian communism in the minds of a citizenry unfamiliar with left-wing thought. In an article in the *Ottawa Journal*, for example, Bennett repeatedly refers to social-democratic movements like the CCF as "groups of Socialists and Communists" who "are sowing their seeds everywhere" and who are eager to foist "a Soviet administration" upon an unsuspecting Canadian populace (qtd. in "Bennett" 3). In an address reprinted in the *Montreal Gazette*, Cardinal Villeneuve similarly condemns the "frankly Socialist principles" of the CCF as being "practically the same" as those of

communism, citing [Page 44] "several fundamental errors" of the CCF programme such as "its materialistic conception of the social order." Scott found it reprehensible that the government and the Church would resort to such dishonest and irresponsible scaremongering while increasing numbers of Canadians were finding it impossible to eke out even a basic existence:

In tonight's newspaper
There were two protests:
One by an Archbishop
Against the spread of communism,
And one by an unemployed man
Who said his children were sleeping four in a bed
To keep warm.

("Observation" 1-7)

Scott needs not belabour the issue to communicate persuasively the inherent social injustice of the unemployed man's plight; the mere juxtaposition of these two newspaper articles superlatively foregrounds the misplaced social priorities of the Church. Similarly, in "Credit," a poem inspired by Bennett's wildly unpopular relief camps for men, Scott foregrounds the misplaced social priorities of the Canadian government:

This delegation of unemployed Canadians
Has just been informed
That if the government spent any more on relief
So that their children might be decently clothed
and fed
The credit of the country would suffer.

(1-

5)

Without oversimplifying the issue, Scott unambiguously articulates that the Canadian government abjures its responsibilities to its poorest and most vulnerable citizens by privileging the interests of big business masquerading as "[t]he credit of the country." In "Expert Advice," Scott returns to the hypocrisy of "members of religious orders" (2) by juxtaposing their "perpetual vows / Of poverty / And chastity" (3-5) with their defence of "private property" (6) and their encouragement of "the poor to have large families" (7). By phrasing his criticism as a rhetorical question, Scott gives the poem a conversational tone, as if he wishes to consult the reader as a peer about Church corruption. Conversely, in "Treasure in Heaven"—a poem Scott wrote upon hearing that "the Montreal Light, Heat and Power Company was in the process of being taken over from private hands [which included 'important ecclesiastical shareholders'] into [Page 45] public ownership" ("Discussing" 85)—Scott satirically employs elevated language derived from the Authorised Version of the Bible (compare Matthew 6.19-20) to call attention to the hypocritical

materialism of the Church:

Many ecclesiastics and pious persons
Draw dividends from this Power Corporation
Which underpays its workers and overcharges its
consumers.
Nevertheless the sayings of the Master are obeyed,
For verily there is no rust on a Public Utility privately
owned,
And the moth doth not corrupt its Class A Preferred
Stock.

("Treasure" 1-6)

Scott's travesty of the Bible is an unsubtle denunciation of the way in which the Church wilfully misinterprets the Word of God to make it suit its own materialistic agenda (see "Eclipses" 5-8). "It is quite clear," Scott writes, that religious leaders like Cardinal Villeneuve "would infinitely prefer Canada to be governed by a 'Christian' like Mussolini than by a 'Communist' like J. S. Woodsworth" ("Cardinal" 295; compare *C.C.F.* 2). Scott avers that it is the Church and the mainstream government, not the CCF, that indulges in base materialism.

Even more misplaced for Scott were the social priorities of the Canadian business community, which criticized the CCF's socialistic programme on the grounds that public ownership would lead to increased governmental corruption and inefficiency ("Efficiency of Socialism" 215). Scott persuasively illustrates in a series of publications, however, that it is actually the purveyors of monopolistic capitalism who are responsible for the worst excesses of systematic wastefulness and graft in Canada ("Efficiency of Socialism" 221), and that socialism by definition improves the economic life of a society by eliminating instability and waste and by addressing the problems of social injustice and the maldistribution of wealth (Scott and Wansbrough 2). In *Labour Conditions in the Men's Clothing Industry*, Scott shows that "the free play of almost unregulated competition" (Scott and Cassidy 79) in this sector has resulted in "sweat-shop" conditions in both Ontario and Quebec (20), but that "a system of control" that combines government regulation with self-regulation (83) would eliminate "the destructive and unethical competition which has gone far to ruin the industry" (87).³ This study contributed to the findings of H. H. Stevens's influential 1934 Parliamentary Committee on Price Spreads and Mass Buying (Scott and Cassidy viii), which embarrassed the pro-business Bennett Conservatives by exposing widespread corruption in [Page 46] the private sector (Cameron 2254; see Scott, "Stevens"). In *Democracy Needs Socialism*, Scott systematically examines the plights of the industrial worker (Research Committee 66ff), the farmer (83ff), the "white-collar" professional

(104ff), and the wage-earning woman (117ff) to show that "the hesitating, dilatory and totally inadequate [laissez-faire] programmes of our present governments" (vi) have fostered a "dictatorship of big business" (18) with all its accompanying "illusions and maladjustments" (vi), and that only "an ethical revolution—from the acquisitive and individualistic values which dominate our present economic society to the more humane, just, and equitable standards of a co-operative commonwealth"—will restore democracy to Canadian society (143; compare Macdonnell, Scott, and Thorson 96-97). In "Efficiency," Scott writes:

Our huge steel mills
Operating at 25 per cent of capacity
Are the last word in organization.
The new grain elevators
Stored with superfluous wheat
Can unload a grain-boat in two hours.
Marvellous card-sorting machines
Make it easy to keep track of the unemployed.
There isn't one unnecessary employee
In these textile plants
That require a 75 per cent tariff protection.
(3-13)

Scott needs recourse neither to hyperbole nor to propaganda to show how the so-called "efficiency of the capitalist system" (1) brings socio-economic "disintegration" (Macdonnell, Scott, and Thorson 97); the poem is "consistently realistic and fact-oriented" (Dudek 1), and Scott needs only reiterate the "hard, clear, [and] rational" realities of the capitalist system (Watt 62) to betray its inherent viciousness (Scott and Wansbrough 4b). Scott's facetious recommendation at the end of the poem—"So don't let's start experimenting with socialism / Which everyone knows means inefficiency and waste" ("Efficiency" 16-17)—is really, of course, an endorsement of the socialist system, since even the worst corruptions and inefficiencies of public ownership pale in comparison to the "inherent immorality of the [capitalist] system" ("Efficiency of Socialism" 222):

The great executive heads of this corporation
Follow the principles of sound, conservative finance.
By reducing wages, turning old employees into the
street, [**Page 47**]
And drawing upon reserves hidden away during
prosperity,
They have been able to continue paying full dividends.
(*"Sound"* 1-5)

In much the same way that the government misdirects its resources away from

social programmes and towards bolstering a corrupt police force, and that the Church misdirects its animadversions away from its own hypocritical dogmas and towards potentially beneficial political ideas, big business misdirects its profits away from its workers and towards shareholders, a group of people who "play no part at all in the active conduct of the enterprises in which their money is invested" (Scott and Wansbrough 2).

The monumentally important social, political, and economic events of the 1930s enabled Scott to expand and develop his ideas about the constitution and civil rights, as well as to promulgate an increasingly coherent philosophy of public ownership and the socialised economy. Although Scott formulated certain foundational attitudes about general issues surrounding politics and social justice during the 1920s while he was at Oxford and McGill—his abhorrence of political bureaucracy, his distaste for religious dogma, his objection to the maldistribution of wealth—events like the proclamation of the Statute of Westminster, the enactment of repressive pieces of legislation like Section 98, and especially the Great Depression compelled him to focus his attention upon Canada during a crucial period of its development. Throughout the hundreds of pages of books, pamphlets, articles, and letters he wrote during the 1930s, Scott articulates his ideas and philosophies with clarity and conviction, reflecting not only his unwavering commitment to those ideas themselves, but also his abiding belief that only "education and more education" can combat the "ignorance" that is "[t]he chief obstacle" to the construction of a new and more just social order (*Social Reconstruction* 30-31). Although he published very little poetry during this economically depressed decade, "An Anthology of Up-to-Date Canadian Poetry" and "Social Notes" complement Scott's voluminous expository writing by offering an equally committed and unambiguous expression of his social ideas in a succinct aesthetic form. By eschewing "abstract polysyllables, rhetorical exclamations, and all the rest of the dreary apparatus of inflated prose" characteristic of some other socially-conscious versifiers (Brown 271), Scott formulates a distinctive style that is "consistently realistic and fact-oriented" (Dudek 1), "hard, clear, rational" (Watt 62), and which "allows little room for subtle resonances, differing judgments, or ambivalent feelings" (63). Scott's liberal but sagacious use of "corrosive" satire (Collin 202), far from obscuring his social message, actually renders it all the **[Page 48]** more "clear" and "didactic" (Djwa, *Politics* 134). The upheavals of the 1930s forced Scott to realize that neither governments nor poets could any longer be "mere policemen" walking the repetitive beat of the status quo, but that they must become "creative instruments" of social change ("New Canada" 6). Scott's sophisticated but accessible pronouncements throughout the Depression years—his ability to "write...damn plain words nude" ("O Tempora" 12)—made his name, especially among his contemporaries, synonymous with insight, honesty, and forthrightness:

To be a poet, Frank, you've shown
's a harder thing. It is to be a stone,
an eye, a heart, a lung, a microphone,

a voice, but not a voice alone, a hand,
a hand to grasp a hand, a leg to stand
on, nerves to feel, and in supreme command,

the shaping mind that shapes the poem
as it shapes the man, four-square, and needle-
eyed,
and Frank.

(Smith 19-

27)

Notes

1. Prime Minister King was a proponent of correcting the "abuses" of capitalism by using infinitesimally "mild measures of 'control'" and referring all "pressing questions" to expensive and time-consuming Royal Commissions (Research Committee 25; compare Scott, "W.L.M.K." 14-15, 20; "Royal"). Similarly, Prime Minister Bennett believed that capitalism, when "freed at last from its harmful imperfections," could actually become one's "servant" rather than one's "master" (qtd. in Neatby 66; compare Scott, "Ode" 42ff). It is hardly surprising that Scott found the Liberal and Conservative programmes indistinguishable from one another (*Canada Today* 64, 64-65; "C.C.F." 166). [\[back\]](#)
2. Bennett's reforms, however, did not prevent the voters in 1935 from "turn[ing] out the Conservatives / And put[ting] back the Liberals" (Scott, "General" 5-6), and elsewhere Scott refers to the prime minister's proposed reforms as "hopelessly inadequate" and "woefully meagre" ("Mr. Bennett's" 8). For a list of the eight "New Deal" statutes that Prime Minister King's subsequent government submitted to the Privy Council, see Scott's "The Privy Council and Mr. Bennett's 'New Deal' Legislation" (234-35). [\[back\]](#)
3. Notice Scott does not advocate the immediate implementation of "large-scale socialization" ("New Gradualism" 13), but instead counsels restraint and "gradualism" (12). Despite his commitment to the principles of public ownership, Scott realizes that any sudden move to "simon-pure socialism" (13) would merely frighten the public, perhaps even into "reinstat[ing] a right-wing government with all its dangers of

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