

# Duncan Campbell Scott

## THE POET AND THE INDIANS

Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947) is best known as one of Canada's prominent early literary figures. That he was also a federal civil servant who rose through the bureaucracy to become one of the most powerful heads of the Indian Department, is not well known. From 1913 to 1932, Scott was responsible for the implementation of the most repressive and brutal assimilation programs Canada ever levied against First Nations peoples. **Duncan Campbell Scott: The Poet and the Indians** explores the apparent contradiction between Scott, the sensitive and respected poet, and Scott, the insensitive enforcer of Canada's most tyrannical Indian policies.

In the summers of 1905 and 1906, Scott was assigned to enter into treaty with the Cree and Ojibway Indians of Northwestern Ontario. The film centres on that Treaty expedition, with Scott's photographs, poetry, letters and journal entries providing the backdrop and narrative flow. Scott's more private and introspective moments are brought to life on screen by actor R.H. Thomson in a series of black and white vignettes. The historical material is juxtaposed with powerful contemporary footage, offering insight into the long-term impact of this powerful, perplexing Canadian.

Produced by Tamarack Productions in co-production with  
the National Film Board of Canada

Featuring R.H. Thomson as D.C. Scott

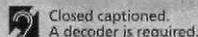
Director: James Cullingham

Producers: James Cullingham, Michael Allder (NFB)

56 minutes 28 seconds

Order number: 9195 002

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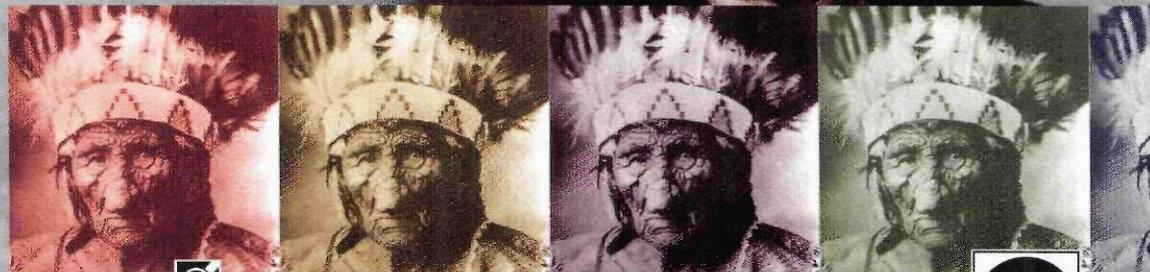
# Duncan Campbell Scott

THE POET AND THE INDIANS

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA RELEASE

# Duncan Campbell Scott

## THE POET AND THE INDIANS



VHS  
9195 002



## Duncan Campbell Scott: THE POET AND THE INDIANS

*"I want to get rid of the Indian problem. That is my whole point. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question."*

— Duncan Campbell Scott,  
Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 1920

Duncan Campbell Scott was born in Ottawa in 1862, the son of a Methodist minister. In 1879, he was hired by Sir John A. MacDonal as a clerk in the Indian Department. As he worked his way up the bureaucratic ladder, Scott spent his personal time writing poetry. His literary work gained considerable respect in Anglo-Canadian cultural circles and he soon became a central figure in the cultural life of the capital. By the opening of the twentieth century, Scott had published two volumes of poetry, one of short stories, and had been admitted into the Royal Society.

Scott's growing reputation in the world of letters was accompanied by his rise in the public service. In 1909, he became the department's first Superintendent of Education and in 1913 he advanced to Deputy Superintendent General, the highest rank in bureaucratic echelons — a position he held until his retirement in 1932.

In the summers of 1905 and 1906, Scott was assigned to enter into treaty with Ojibway and Cree peoples in Northern Ontario. That journey inspired some of his best-known Indian poetry. His depictions of Aboriginal life offer a strong window into his attitudes toward these peoples and his goals for their future. He imagined all Indians as a "vanishing race" doomed to extinction in their present form — their only hope for salvation was radical cultural transformation. According to Scott, Indians could only be saved by stripping them of their Indianness — salvation through assimilation.

As the top-ranking civil servant for Indian policy in Canada, Scott oversaw a series of policies that could only be considered cruel and harsh by today's standards. Scott supervised the administration of the residential school system where his frugal economy resulted in the deaths of countless children to tuberculosis and other communicable diseases. Scott was responsible for the imprisonment of First Nations people who persisted in practicing their religious ceremonies. Through a series of amendments to the Indian Act, Scott outlawed the hiring of lawyers and the pursuit of land claims cases by Indians. In an attempt to impose the Indian Act on resisting traditionalists, Scott engineered the overthrow of the traditional Six Nations Longhouse government in Oswegan, Ontario in 1924. He championed coercive assimilation for all First Nations peoples through a series of policies intended to undermine their cultures and autonomy and assimilate them into mainstream society. While Scott's poetry depicted the "vanishing race," his policies firmly intended their extinction.

Numerous studies speak to the historical development of Canada's Indian policies and the prevailing attitudes that shaped them. **Duncan Campbell Scott: The Poet and the Indians** takes a fresh approach by exploring the life of one of Canada's most notorious heads of the Indian

Director/Writer/Producer  
James Cullingham

R.H. Thomson  
as D.C. Scott

Cinematographer  
Rene Sioui Labelle

Editor  
Deborah Palloway

Producer for NFB  
Michael Alder

Sound Editor  
Ellen DesRues

Sound Mixer  
Shelley Craig

Music  
David C. Burt

56 minutes  
28 seconds

Order number:  
9195 002



Department. It gives insight into the seemingly contradictory yet complexly interwoven worlds of a man who had powerful long-term influence on Canadian and First Nations societies.

*The race has waned and left but tales of ghosts,  
That hover in the world like fading smoke...  
But now their vaunted prowess all is gone,  
Gone like a moose track in the April snow.*

— Duncan Campbell Scott, "Indian Place Names"

Text compiled by Winona Stevenson, Historian, Native Studies Department,  
University of Saskatchewan

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1** Examine the history of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs in terms of its original purpose, how this original aim has evolved over the decades, and its current mandate and status both within and outside Aboriginal communities.

**2** Scott vigorously enforced mandatory enrollment and attendance in the residential school system for Aboriginal children. How did this education system and its associated practices affect both these children and *their* children's concept of family and community?

**3** Scott is often referred to as "a man of his time." In retrospect, his solution for the "Indian problem" was based on racist and supremacist beliefs regarding Indian culture, values, belief systems and lifestyle. Discuss the following statement:

The implementation of policies based on racist and supremacist beliefs by people who both supported and adhered to these beliefs left profound effects on Aboriginal communities' ways of life, economies, and relationships with the rest of Canada.

**4** Scott's contemporaries speak of him as a loving father, a creative artist, a sensitive poet, and an amiable and generous host. At the same time, he is also portrayed as a man who devised and implemented brutal policies and practices. A doting parent, Scott was devastated when his daughter died, yet he forced thousands of Aboriginal children to be separated from their parents and institutionalized. Reconcile these two images of the man.

**5** Read Scott's poetic descriptions of Aboriginal women. How did he understand their role within the community? How accurate were his perceptions?

**6** Why was the Indian community such a constant theme in Scott's poetry?

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