

## Clinton Scollard (1860 - 1932)

published in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*. Eric L. Haralson and John Hollander, eds. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998.

Clinton Scollard's primary bibliography shows us a poet that published profusely throughout his life, but critical studies of the man simply do not exist. The closest we come to a thorough analysis of Scollard's poetry is his second wife's chapter on him in her book, *Younger American Poets* and her remembrance of him in her introduction to his *The Singing Heart*. Her first attempt, made around the midpoint of Scollard's publishing history, is remarkably free of the usual flaws inherent in any work on a living author. The latter, as kind as a spouse may be to her mate's art, is nevertheless the only summation of Scollard's career currently available. On the infrequent occurrences of his mention in literary histories, Scollard is usually lumped together in a fleeting reference with many other minor poets who flourished at the turn of the century.

Born in Fayetteville, New York, near Syracuse, Scollard overcame a debilitating childhood illness and became a great athlete in his youth. He also showed great interest in observing nature, a habit that would serve him well in his poetry. As an undergraduate at Hamilton College he was a pitcher for the baseball team, and is credited with introducing the curve ball to college athletics. He also excelled at public speaking, giving the commencement address at his graduation. After college, he taught English at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, but his health forced him to leave this post after a year and a half. He travelled for a year, and it was at this time that he developed his poetic skills. His early efforts, like many other young poets of the time, were based on French forms. These made up his first volume, *Pictures in Song*, published in 1884. Even in this early collection we can see his amazing

technical skill, his facility with form and rhyme. Scollard then entered Harvard for a graduate degree in Graphics. While there, he became fast friends with other poets, most notably Frank Dempster Sherman and Bliss Carman.

Scollard stayed in Cambridge after his graduation to prepare his second volume, *With Reed and Lyre*, for publication. It is from this volume that Scollard's first selection, "As I Came Down From Lebanon," is taken. This poem is Scollard's most widely recognized work, having been included in most of the American anthologies for the next fifty years. During this year, his work began to be accepted at the important literary journals, namely *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *Century*. He also struck up a great friendship with the Transcendentalist Christopher Pearse Cranch, by then an old man. After a year of special study in Cambridge, England, another tour abroad gave Scollard what was to be his most important well of experiences for his poetry. His third volume, *Old and New World Lyrics*, published in 1888, did not allow him enough time to incorporate these foreign incidents into his verse, but his next volume, *Songs of Sunrise Lands*, is almost completely informed by his experiences during this year of travel.

At this time Scollard assumed the duties of Associate Professor of English at Hamilton College. In 1890, he married Georgia Brown, who ten years later bore their only child, Elisabeth, herself a poet. In 1896, Scollard gave up his position at Hamilton to devote himself to writing, but he returned in 1911 for one more year as the chair of the English department. During this time away from the College, Scollard produced not only poetry, but also six novels, four of them historical novels of Italy. His most important volume of poetry during this time was *Blank Verse Pastels*, published in 1907. It is interesting to note that this collection contained both blank and free verse, years before the Vers Libre movement appeared. After 1912, Scollard gave up both fiction and teaching for good, turning his full attention to poetry. He was no longer

interested in creating large volumes of verse, instead producing pamphlets on related themes, mainly for his friends. *Lyrics of Summer*, *Lyrics of Life*, and *Lyrics of Florida*, small volumes revolving around the themes of their titles, are typical of his later output. After a divorce from his first wife, Scollard married Jessie B. Rittenhouse, herself a poet and critic, in 1924. After a short battle with heart disease, he died in 1932.

While it would be stretching the truth to say that Scollard was greatly admired for his poetry throughout his lifetime, he was nevertheless quite well-respected, with over 100 poems published in magazines attesting to this fact. However, Scollard recognized his strengths and weaknesses as a poet, and addressed them squarely. His title for an uncompleted autobiography, “The Adventures of a Minor Poet,” aptly sums up his self-knowledge. He knew himself to be a fine craftsman, able to fashion delicate lyrics that forbear contemplative weight for perfection in form. His verse delights in the natural world, in small incidents that are honed to perfection. It is easy to view him as a Frost without the philosophy.

Scollard’s most persistent thematic concern, a thread that connects not only his travel poems but also his lyrics and even his fiction, is memory. As stated above, he relied heavily upon his memory for subject matter in his travel poems. He was much more comfortable writing about a personal or cultural past than the present. Other poems bear out this fascination with the past. His volumes of war poetry, namely *Vale of Shadows and Other Verses of the Great War*, *Let the Flag Wave, and Other Verses Written in War Time*, and *War Voices and Memories; being Verses written During the Years 1917 and 1918*, are filled with patriotic verse calling upon good citizens to do their part for the war effort, as was the fashion of the time. As they call for a defense of cultural values held dear, they owe much to the cultural memories that carry those values. It is the type of verses found in these volumes that Wilfred Owen rebelled against in his “Dulce et Decorum Est.” Scollard’s

historical novels obviously declare their attention to memory in their genre and subject matter.

Scollard's first poem in this collection, "As I Came Down From Lebanon," illustrates this fascination with memory. Arising from his memory of a trip to the Middle East, the poem itself is a spiral downward, creating cultural, personal, and diurnal passages into the well of the passage of time. The first stanza places us in the personal gyre, for the persona comes "winding, wandering slowly down / Through mountain passes bleak and brown." It also sets up the diurnal spiral, for the day is "well-nigh done." The description of the city, worked out in more detail in the following two stanzas, prepares us for introduction to a culture that has remained unchanged for centuries, ever-dwelling within the spiral of cultural history. Finally, the first and last lines of the stanza, reiterating the title, forcefully remind us that Scollard has caught us in these descents. So that we may not forget this fact, that we may not lose our memory of these passages, Scollard brackets every stanza with this title.

The second stanza moves to a description of the land lying below his mountain descent. Utilizing a type of the pathetic fallacy, even the landscape participates in this movement. Like the sheiks that populate it, it gives off an air of inactivity, as if entropy has the persona and all he describes in its grasp. The river moves lugubriously, looking like slow-moving lava in the "dying glow" of the day. The image patterns set up in the first stanza are repeated, as the persona is drawn ever deeper into this pit of communal, cultural memory, manifested in the static inhabitants of the poem.

The inhabitants of the landscape are further detailed in the third stanza. Here the stasis of the scene is, while not abandoned, at least held not placed in the forefront. Instead, Scollard emphasizes the idea of the Other. All those who dwell here are Other, not only to the persona, but also to each other. The Magi and the Moslem are shown in opposition,

and the occupants of the seraglios are completely segregated, acting only as voyeurs of this scene. But all these people are participants in the entropy of the city, and therefore the culture. The Magi and Moslem engage in no meaningful activities, watched by the seraglio-dwellers, who are placed even deeper in this spiral by their act of watching (a static activity) others, do nothing. Indeed, the only action in the scene is the Effendi's sipping of sherbet as he observes the stasis around him.

The diurnal imagery is revisited in the final stanza, and nature moves once again to participate in this descent into memory. Here the "flaming flower of daytime" finally dies. The twilight is once again static, reveling in the finery of a bride awaiting her king. But Night itself is filled with a memory of the day, for the image of the shining moon is dependent upon the reflection of the sun, for this moon shines "like a keen Damascus blade." The land seems depopulated now, as befits a region where Nature moves relentlessly in her cycles, indifferent to human concerns.

Scollard's attention to detail in his description is as much a part of this poem as his attention to memory. In the opening stanza he uses his descriptions of his surroundings to appeal to the senses of sight and hearing. The city is "like an opal, set / In emerald." The minarets, "Afire with radiant beams of sun," produce the synaesthetic colors of "orange, fig, and lime." And all is surrounded by the "melodious chime" of the songbirds. The middle two stanzas are alive with appeals to the senses of smell and taste. The second stanza contains both olives and "precious spices." The Effendi's sherbet, as well as roses on the seraglios' balconies, dominate the third stanza. The final stanza returns to the sense of sight. Night, the king's bride, is clothed in "purple and the finest gold." Like a flower, Night does not steal upon the scene, but out-blooms over it. And the Damascus blade tells not only the brightness of the moon, but also its shape.

Scollard again utilizes personal and cultural memories in his second poem in this collection, "A Bit of Marble." Although based on a memory of a trip to Greece, this poem moves beyond memory of a concrete event to discuss the nature of poetry itself. Greece was, in Scollard's time, seen as the cradle of Western civilization. Therefore, he is able to exploit the entire cultural memory of the Athenian age in this short lyric. In the first stanza he addresses a small piece of the ruins of the Acropolis. We see the glory that was Greece in the second line, for Athens still "proudly rears / Its temple-crowned Acropolis." The final line of the stanza reminds us of the decay of time, of the salvation of memory, for this Acropolis is "hoar with years." Corporate memory is the fundamental principle of civilization, but it is not enough to wipe away the gyre of the years.

The second stanza places the sculptor before us, he who carved this bit of marble "fine and small," like a jewel. Scollard imagines it to be part of a grander scheme, "A part of base or column grand / Or capital." He places this diminished bit of ruin in juxtaposition with the larger purpose for which it was intended. What we possess are merely the remnants of a greater age. And yet he still finds a depth of meaning in this remnant. This classical notion informs the entire poem, and is drawn into an analogous relationship with the work of the poet in the final stanza.

Here Scollard breaks the frame of the poem, inserting himself into the text and allowing us to move to the present day, still informed by memory. Importantly, his prescription for poetry contains as its base (or column grand, or capital) the ardor of the poet. Only in the passion of the maker is memory forged into something valuable. This passion then creates a poem from the "firm Pentelic snow / Of lofty thought!" Pentelicus is a mountain in southeast Greece, near Athens, where the marble for the Acropolis supposedly was mined. Ironically, Scollard claims no such hardness or defense against decay for his poetry as he

clearly sees in this bit of marble. His poems are created from snow, not marble. Yes, they are fashioned from lofty thought, but they will not withstand the passage of time. In his looking backward to a Golden Age, Scollard assesses not only his own poetry, but also his entire culture. If even such glorious civilizations as the Greeks' eventually decay to small fragments, what is to be the fate of his culture?

While these poems display two of Scollard's uses of memory, perhaps his most overarching use of memory is only hinted at. Personal and cultural memories are the snow out of which he constructs his poems, but the process of writing itself contains a deeper, more important form of memory. Throughout his career, Scollard was noted for his able versification. He was not an innovator either in form or content, but rather a perfecter of the received tradition. In the final analysis, this is what makes him important, his ability to polish his lyrics to such a degree that they became jewel-like. And it is this facility with form that is his most significant use of memory. Scollard broke no new ground in poetry; his was merely a finer sieve through which to sluice old territory. His contribution to the tradition of poetry in America, the use of the memory of that tradition to create a body of work, should not be neglected.

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