

# The Bishop’s Fighting Poet: The Role of Frederick George Scott’s Poetry in the *Mitre*, 1914-1918

Frederick George Scott was one of thirty-three chaplains who set across the Atlantic with the First Canadian Contingent from Val-Cartier, on October 3, 1914. Some of Scott’s poems are found in the *Mitre*, and many students who left with him in the first Battalion appreciated his jovial personality, Sunday sermons, and general guidance common in his oral and written work. In “A Grave of Flanders”, “Last Post”, “The Silent Toast”, and “Blood-Guilt”, Scott’s narrative voice locates the reader at the front in the trenches, caught in the jarring juxtaposition between the French landscape and the nature of the soldiers’ fighting experiences. Works are marked by a careful choice of diction, often prompting questions. Is the repeated pronoun “They”, one wonders “The soldiers?”, His “boys”? “The Germans?” Those back in Canada? “The Empire?”

Scott’s published memoir *The Great War as I Saw It* (1922) and his family correspondence reveal two different sentiments. Letters from Henry Hutton convey the son’s concern for his “old man’s” presence at the front. Ironically, though his responses are sentimental, the memoir reveals the Canon’s desire to be in the trenches with his “boys.” There is an intentional de-personalization of anecdotes in the work which suggests that Scott wanted to address everyone living in Canada and create a collective account to honour them. Moreover, although many of us find it easier to connect with his son Frank R. Scott’s poetry, whose modernist style connotes socialist and independence from Britain, the Canon’s poetry reveals an omniscient role in comportsing comradeship and spiritual relief. Canteens for coffee and cigarettes, dugouts, small rooms in billets, and over-hanging trees were all places he organized services – even if there were only three soldiers and recent shrapnel present.

## Style and Form

The Laurentian poet’s works have been presented in the *Mitre* since the first issue. In Vol. 18 (3), one finds a review of “Poems” (Constable & Company, 1910): “Canon Scott attacks our susceptibility on many sides. He fires our patriotism; expresses for us the beauty of mountain and lake and stream; more than all, he impresses the heart with the mystery of God’s love” (4). During the War, Scott is the poetic voice from the frontline; the refrain “Emperor!” in “Blood-Guilt” echoes the soldiers’ unwavering belief in the Empire but also questions the moral reasoning behind war. “The fingers of a hand that write/ Inscribe your doom upon the night,/ Emperor!” Although as Chaplain it was his role to censor letters, Scott used poetry as an indirect vehicle to communicate the natural “conditions, affects, pathos, and regret” (18.3) of the war to readers. Many times, he describes the war as a glorious theatrical performance, which paradoxically evokes his positive image of the men’s actions, yet suggests they are neither natural nor belong to them. Often, Scott recited verse between puffs from his pipe to relax the men; at other times, he was desperately reciting lines under the rain of German shell-fire (Vol. 23.4).



## ROLL OF SERVICE.

Chaplains. C. M. G.

### THE SILENT TOAST.

They stand with reverent faces,  
And their merriment give o'er,  
As they drink the toast of the unseen host  
Who have fought and gone before.

It is only a passing moment  
In the midst of the feast and song,  
But it grips the breath, as the wing of death  
In a vision sweeps along.

No more they see the banquet  
And the brilliant lights around ;  
But they charge again on the hideous plain  
When the shell-bursts rip the ground.

Or they creep at night, like panthers,  
Through the waste of No Man's Land,  
Their heart afire with a wild desire,  
And death on every hand.

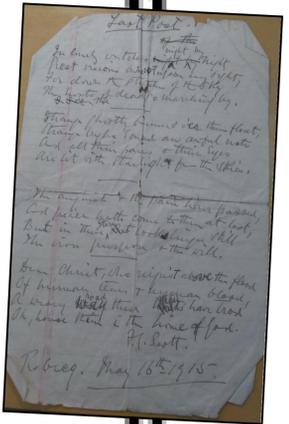
And out of the roar and tumult,  
Or the black night loud with rain,  
Some face comes back on the fiery track  
And looks in their eyes again.

And the love that is passing woman's,  
And the bonds that are forged by death,  
Now grip the soul with a strange control  
And speak what no man saith.

The vision dies off in the stillness,  
Once more the tables shine,  
But the eyes of all in the banquet hall  
Are lit with a light divine.

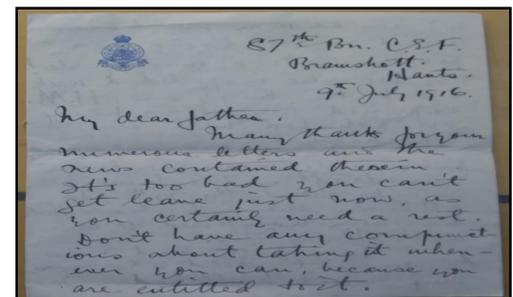
Vimy Ridge, April, 1917.

F. G. Scott.



## Rev. Canon Scott: Letters From the Front

A letter from the front found in the *Mitre*, 1918 reads: “After the service I told the Canon that I thought it the most impressive meeting that I had ever attended... He estimated that about a thousand men were present... His hold over the men is quite remarkable”. In Vol. 26 (2), a letter reads: “Ask any man who is wearing the Red Patch, “Who is Canon Scott?” The universal answer amounts to this: ‘Canon Scott is the morale of the First Canadian Division’. To see the old Canon, with a tin hat on his head and a cheery smile on his face, jogging along the front is as a rum ration to any of the boys” (23). Ironically, given this soldier’s remark, Scott was a teetotaler, always on the watch for alcohol abuse, though his policy of abstinence did not prohibit private confessions and a good ear: “it was imperative to be with [his boys] in their spiritual time of need” (McGowan).



VOL. XXII., No. 1.

Alexandre Marceau

The Rev. Canon Scott, who was severely wounded during the Cambrai fighting, is making good progress in a London hospital. Canon Scott, who went over with the First Contingent in 1914, has recently received the D. S. O. He was given the C.M.G. for distinguished services some time ago. The many friends of Canon Scott extend their sympathy to him, and hope for his speedy and safe return to Canada.

December, 1914.

The party itself was done in good ‘Old Lodge’ style, details of which you can imagine. Mirabile dictu – we had lobster! Such a treat – Father Scott certainly did us proud! (*Mitre*, 23.3)

