



Scott, Paul (1920-1978)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2009 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

One can only speculate why the two great British novelists of the Raj should both have been gay. Like E. M. Forster, Paul Scott found in India a rich metaphor for the interior distances that must be traversed as one person seeks to connect with another, and for the mysterious heart of darkness that prevents even the well-intentioned from understanding oneself, much less another person, with any certainty.

Scott's accounts of the British in India invite the reader to take part in an existential drama that questions both who does and does not belong in a social world, and how one is able to find a home as a stranger in a strange land. But unlike Forster, who became part of a tight-knit if necessarily secretive gay community, Scott married, helped raise two children, and led to all appearances a heterosexual life, all the while repressing his natural desires and sinking into the alcoholism that contributed to his relatively early death at the age of fifty-seven.

Biography

Paul Mark Scott was born on March 25, 1920, the younger of two sons of Tom Scott, a commercial artist, and Frances Mark Scott. Disappointed in love early in life, Tom Scott did not marry the socially ambitious, thirty-year-old Frances Mark until he was forty-six. He was, thus, distanced in age and by progressive deafness from his two sons, whose early years were dominated by their wildly imaginative but emotionally suffocating mother.

The Scott family order was thrown into disarray by the world financial collapse of 1929. At age 14, Paul was taken out of the private school in which he was flourishing, and apprenticed to an accountant so that he could contribute to the sadly retrenched family finances.

Scott seems never to have recovered psychologically from this jarring disruption. All his life he betrayed a sense of dispossession, which was compounded by the social insecurity that he felt in not having received a university education. Resentment of the injustice, combined with the need to defend himself emotionally from his domineering mother, forced him to retreat behind a carefully maintained surface imperturbability, however great his inner rage.

At eighteen, Scott began an affair with one of his bookkeeping clients. The middle-aged, culturally sophisticated Gerald Armstrong introduced Scott to the worlds of ballet and theater, and encouraged him to think of himself seriously as a writer. The married Armstrong also modeled for Scott how a gay man may pass for straight, treating one's homosexuality as a pleasure to be secretly indulged and, in effect, rendering it something of which one should be ashamed.

Scott's relationship with Armstrong had already run its course when Scott was called up for military service following the outbreak of World War II. A sexual indiscretion of some kind caused Scott the loss of his corporal's rank and resulted in his withdrawing further into himself.

Evidence suggests that Scott was betrayed, possibly blackmailed, by someone whom he considered a friend.

Whatever the causal event, Scott suddenly attempted to refashion himself as a heterosexual. On October 23, 1941, he married Penny Avery, a pretty but insecure and eager-to-please nurse whom he had met only six months earlier.

Not surprisingly, Scott's initial attempts to repress his homosexual desire coincide roughly with a ten-day drunken binge, the first evidence of the alcoholism that would dominate his adult life.

In March 1943, Scott was commissioned as an officer in the Service Corps and ordered to India, where-- following their defeat in Burma--the British forces were rallying to ward off the Japanese invasion of the country considered the great "jewel" in England's imperial crown. Scott's extraordinary organizational skills, iron discipline, and ability to concentrate even under the most chaotic of circumstances allowed him to organize many of the supplies essential for the decisive defeat of the Japanese at Mandalay and the fall of Rangoon.

Scott departed India in May 1946. After a stint as bookkeeper and company secretary for a failing publishing enterprise, he became a literary agent, successfully representing clients as diverse as science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke and poet D. J. Enright, and nurturing the talents of budding novelists John Braine, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles.

Doubly burdened by the needs of his own growing family (the Scotts would raise two daughters) and by financial responsibility for his aged, unemployed parents, Scott worked hard and drank heavily to relieve the resulting tension.

The pressure on him was both aggravated and eased by his determination to write. Before the war, Scott had concentrated on poetry and drama. But with *Johnnie Sahib* (1952), Scott discovered both his natural medium and great subject: the novel about India.

Retiring every night and all weekend to his study to write and to drink, Scott produced a steady stream of novels that received respectable reviews while generating mediocre sales: *The Alien Sky* (1953, distributed in America as *Seven Days in Marapore*), *A Male Child* (1956), *The Mark of the Warrior* (1957), *The Chinese Love Pavilion* (1960), *The Birds of Paradise* (1962), *The Bender* (1963), and *The Corrida at San Feliu* (1964).

Beginning with *The Chinese Love Pavilion*, however, Scott became more willing to examine in fiction the destructive nature of sexual repression. A new power evident in his work convinced his publisher in 1964 to guarantee him an income, freeing him to quit his job as a literary agent and to write full time.

The immediate stimulus for the novels that compose The Raj Quartet (*The Jewel in the Crown*, 1966; *The Day of the Scorpion*, 1968; *The Towers of Silence*, 1971; and *A Division of the Spoils*, 1975) were the return visits to India that Scott made in 1964 and 1969. Traveling widely about the subcontinent, Scott questioned everyone he met regarding the native Indian character, the nature of the British occupation of India, and the consequences of its 1947 withdrawal. These conversations led to sensitive examinations of the dynamics of power, the nature of racism, and the corrosive effects of imperialism on both the governed and their governors.

In 1964, a medical specialist diagnosed a parasitic infection that Scott must have first contracted in India during the war and because of which he had suffered fatigue, nausea, insomnia, and bouts of chronic diarrhea for twenty years. The amebiasis may also have contributed to the suicidal depression that he had

fought much of his adult life. (On one occasion, he closed himself in a garage with an automobile running; on another he swallowed his daughter's sleeping pills. Most tellingly, one night, in a drunken rage, he slashed the throat of his younger self in a portrait that hung on the wall of his study.)

Although a rigorous and painful treatment was able finally to destroy his intestinal parasite, allowing him the stamina that he would need for the ten-year ordeal of researching and writing the Raj novels, Scott's self-loathing continued so powerfully that he was unable to stop drinking.

Thus, his new found professional success--acclaim for the novels that compose The Raj Quartet, and receipt of the Man Booker Prize for *Staying On* (1977), his final novel about the British in India--was counterbalanced by the implosion of his family. While in college, his younger daughter attempted to commit suicide, in part because she did not feel loved by him. And, humiliated by his disdain and exhausted by his alcoholic binges, his wife Penny left him in July 1976.

Penny's desertion shook Scott badly. Initially, he was distracted by the novelty of a visiting professorship at the University of Tulsa in fall 1976. One year later, however, Scott was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver, the result of his drinking a quart of vodka and smoking more than sixty cigarettes a day.

Worse, his doctors discovered that a previously undiagnosed cancer had already spread from his colon to his liver. Penny returned to nurse him in his last days. He died March 1, 1978, three weeks short of his fifty-eighth birthday.

Scott's greatest success proved posthumous. In 1980, British television movingly dramatized *Staying On* with revered film icons Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson in what poignantly would be their last performances. Its success was but a prelude to the international acclaim that greeted a mini-series of The Raj Quartet initially televised in Britain in 1984 under the title *The Jewel in the Crown*, which won enthusiastic new audiences for the novels in both the United Kingdom and North America.

Opressors and Oppressed

Scott said that he wrote novels "in order to give a voice to people who would otherwise remain inarticulate." That statement can justifiably be extended to include people who are afraid to speak at all lest they reveal a despised truth about themselves.

One of the great features of The Raj Quartet is the sympathy that Scott generates for the dispossessed and marginalized. Edwina Crane and Barbie Batchelor are elderly spinsters who went to India as, respectively, a governess and a missionary. Their inferior social positions keep them on the outskirts of Raj society. Their honesty and humility, however, allow them to witness far more clearly than their more socially powerful compatriots the destructive effects of British rule and, thus, to anticipate the firestorm that occurs as independence approaches.

Edwina Crane's and Barbie Batchelor's combination of great heart and inferior social position both allows them a higher moral intelligence than those who govern the Raj and ensures that each will die tragically: Edwina sets herself on fire in sympathy for the death of an Indian colleague who died protecting her from a marauding mob, while Barbie goes mad as she sees, Cassandra-like, the fabric of the Raj unraveling.

Hari Kumar's tragedy, conversely, results from his having been raised from the age of two in England and

forced as an adult to return to India by the family bankruptcy that follows upon his father's death. His inability to speak Hindi or Urdu makes him suspect to the native population, while the British are offended that a brown-skinned person should speak English and behave socially as well as they. A man with neither a country nor a place in society, Hari is eventually reduced to writing under the pseudonym, Philoctetes--a hero of the Trojan War whom the Greeks at first abandoned and then whose favor they were forced to court.

If the humanity of Edwina Crane, Barbie Batchelor, and Hari Kumar derives from their marginalization by the class-conscious British society to which they nonetheless belong, the inhumanity of Ronald Merrick results from his determination to suppress all natural feeling in order to refashion himself as a member of a class to which he was not born. A racist, Merrick is enraged by Hari's superior speech and manners. And, a repressed homosexual, Merrick sadistically exploits the younger, more attractive men who report to him, and is himself brutally murdered, finally, by a servant, his current bed partner.

Merrick's blackmailing a homosexual junior officer repeats a scene that occurs in *The Chinese Love Pavilion*, leading biographer Hillary Spurling to conclude that Merrick is based on the officer who humiliated Scott at the outset of his military service. But Merrick incarnates as well the repressed Scott's sexual self-hatred, putting the character in a line of military officers who are sexually obsessed with, and sadistically torment, a handsome male subordinate--as in D. H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer" and Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*.

"Throughout the *Quartet*," writes Allen Boyer, "imperialism's failure is expressed by the motif of thwarted love. . . . Imperialism could have succeeded only if based upon a radically different sensibility--one as different from the actual imperial norms as homosexuality is from the heterosexual standard." For Scott, Merrick's repression of his homosexuality mirrors the Raj's suppression of all human feeling between classes and between races, thus leading inevitably to the horrific bloodshed that followed the British withdrawal from the subcontinent in 1947.

Bibliography

Aldrich, Robert. *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Boyer, Allen D. "Love, Sex, and History in *The Raj Quartet*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 46.1 (1985): 64-80.

Gorra, Michael. *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Lane, Christopher. *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

Rubin, David. *After the Raj: British Novels of India since 1947*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986.

Spurling, Hilary. *Paul Scott: A Life of the Author of The Raj Quartet*. New York: Norton, 1991.

About the Author

Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.