

Be Still, Be Silent - Reflections on the poetry of David Scott

John Mann.

Foreword by Malcom Guite

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When Ronald Blythe reviewed David Scott's collection of poems *Beyond the Drift*, he commented that: 'With this volume ... David Scott has some claim to be the Church of England's finest living poet.' Blythe was not one for exaggerated views and his perception of David Scott and his poetry was accurate and deeply perceptive.

John Mann in *Be Still, Be Silent* takes us on a journey through Scott's poetry which reflects Blyth's appraisal. But what Mann provides, which I don't think has ever been attempted before, is a window into the theology of Scott's poetry. What is clear is that Scott lived his theology in his ministry and in his poems. Each spoke of his deepest self.

Mann invites us into David's poetry and the theology infusing it by using the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as signposts. This is not a narrow focus on these great Christian events but on poems that reflect their meaning. What is very clear from the outset is how profoundly Mann knows Scott's poetry. For example, through the poem 'The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary', Mann shows Scott's theological understanding of a great event and then how simply he can relate this to the stuff of everyday life. For Scott in his ministry, theology, poetry writing and human engagement were fully integrated. Further, Mann relates a sense of understanding the annunciation to Scott's brilliant work on and love of the writings of Lancelot Andrewes, that deep awareness of Other, of something beyond the ordinary, yet reflected in it.

In the Nativity section Mann continues to take the reader instructively through Scott's poems. If we thought we knew them well then Mann lets us see how we can dig deeper and be further enriched by the theology of presence and mystery, which Scott sees so luminously in the everyday - 'love meeting Love before the house wakes up.'

Mann ends the Nativity section with 'Nine Lessons and Carols' in full, one of Scott's finest poems. Subtitled 'A theological view', it shows Scott's creative imagination at its best whilst he keeps it rooted in ordinary life. Mann's gift is to show us the fullness of Scott's pastoral ministry and poetic insight in the power of the language he uses.

Mann continues his reflections on Scott's poetry in similar vein with the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Mann links Scott's theology as 'chiming' with that of Merton's and in particular to Scott's 2010 series of sermons for Good Friday. Here Scott reminds us that in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote that 'life in Christ is life in the mystery of the Cross', pointing out that we are involved in a sacrifice which brings struggle, but which also brings peace and a sense of rightness.

Mann invites us to see how Scott, like Merton, can take a fundamental belief that we think we know and understand and show us how a contemplative perspective sheds new light on it. Scott's theology is nothing if not contemplative and through it we are able to understand how he sees and understands people in his day to day ministry.

In the section on Resurrection, Mann quotes Scott:

One of the strongest, though what might be considered one of the weakest, features of the resurrection is the gentleness with which Christ returns. We might think the resurrection would have deserved more of a flourish, trumpets and a brass band at least, but Christ returns with peace, assurance, comfort.

Peace, assurance, comfort - the real essence of Scott's ministry.

Mann's book is a genuine delight. It asks of us attentive reading and reflection. Reading it is like being on a good retreat. I found myself returning to phrases he uses again and again as they were so vibrant with meaning. I thought I knew Scott's poetry, but I never before fully appreciated the richness of the theology behind them. This is the door Mann opens for us, exposing us to a treasure trove of thoughts, ideas and feelings.

The book has a fine foreword by Malcolm Guite. He recalls when David Scott was chaplain at his school, as a fierce atheist he tried to rubbish Scott's faith. He took to quoting pieces of Beckett at him only for Scott to respond, 'Ah, Malcolm, I'm so glad you've discovered Beckett, that Desert Father of the High Modernists.'

Mann concludes his book with an epilogue which is a transcript of the 2017 first David Scott Lecture. This was given at St Lawrence's Church in Winchester by Mark Oakley then Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral and currently Dean of Southwark. David, rather poignantly, was present for this lecture though his illness was clearly progressing. When the lecture was over I sat with David for a while. David wasn't sure who I was but he

suddenly looked at me and asked, 'How do I know you, Danny?' 'David,' I replied, 'the Thomas Merton Society'. He beamed at me.

Be Still, Be Silent is an engrossing introduction to the theology of David Scott's poetry. It does precisely what it says - focuses on how the poems reflect the pastor and the contemplative. It raises the thought that a fuller reflection on David Scott's life and work and ministry would open us also to his vocation as a husband and father, and as a man who made deep and lasting friendships, a man who had a heart filled with love because he had discovered love of the Other in silence and contemplation.

I contacted John Mann and asked if he was intending to write more on David Scott. He responded:

I'm working on David's 'unpublished papers' and I hope to produce a further study of his creative writing, most of which is not currently in the public domain. It is unlikely to be a biography but will have biographical elements.

Given *Be Still, Be Silent*, I would raise a glass to that.

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