

A Portrait of James Scott

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A portrait of James Scott! I was inclined to call it a self-portrait, because in a few moments and throughout this lecture you will hear James speaking for himself, from his autobiography and poems and lectures; all unpublished. But I have, of course, had to pick and choose out of this treasury of typescript. To this extent I have coloured James Scott's portrait of himself.

No one can do him justice. He was an anatomist, poet, patriot, and Christian. No two portraits of him would be alike. But one capacity of his would appear in any portrait: his astonishing talent for accurate observation, coupled with a Midas touch to transform, by imagination, what he observed into vivid patterns of words. In short, James the poet bubbled up, often impishly, in James the anatomist, the patriot, the Christian. Impish he was – a leprechaun among intellectuals – but never frivolous. Indeed, beneath the unexpected paradoxes, the witty provocations, there was a ground base of compassion and anxiety about his profession, his politics, his religion.

Here is a first encounter with him, standing in front of Queen's, looking at the clouds over Divis.

“What are you looking at James?”

“I am watching the Irish clouds chase the English clouds”.

“How do you know which are the English clouds?”

“They run faster.”

As a boy of 8 James moved to Blackrock and (as he says) “for a few years dwelt in Arcady. When the tide went out it left a great expanse of sand . . . the seaweed floated upwards in green, brown, and scarlet locks . . . Sometimes we followed the tide as it went out and believed that just beyond its outermost retreat there was a great cliff which fell to unfathomable depths”. Forty years later, James is still the child on Blackrock sands. He sees a paradoxical virtue in truancy:

A child that does not go to school
But walks the streets or hills instead
May pierce the void beyond the stars
To share the glory of the dead.

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James fitted into the countryside as naturally as the sheep and the thorn bushes. For holidays he and his sister sometimes stayed with their nursemaid in a cottage on the southern side of the Cooley mountains. His relish for this simple living sparkles in his recollection of it:

“Our dinner consisted of a pile of hot potatoes deposited in their skins in the centre of the table, a slice from a round of bacon, fried eggs, cabbage and buttermilk, the other meals a great mass of warm home-made griddle bread and any amount of fresh butter from the churn and milk still warm from the cow. It was a satisfactory and healthy diet. For a lavatory we each had our own circuit of fern clumps or gorse bushes scattered among the small stone wall fields which sloped down to the mountain stream . . . Upstream a wrecked bridge remained as a relic of the ‘troubles’ . . . Through the woods a path led to the great Dolmen of Proleek with its huge capstone supported on three massive uprights.”

And there was the village forge, exciting with the glow of fire, the smell of burning hoof, and the shoe on the dark anvil, radiant. “A great place to hear hair-raising tales.”

Education poured into James’s mind from all he heard and saw. But school, James would tell you, was a disappointment. “Its was” he writes, “my first introduction to boredom, a new and dreadful dimension which was to envelop my succeeding days continuously for five years.” But the flame was not snuffed out. The capacity to print indelibly every experience on the cells of his brain was not impaired. Listen to his description of his student lodgings in Dunluce Avenue, off the Lisburn road:

“I had as my sitting room and study the front parlour, a room usually set aside for receiving the clergyman or parson . . . or other important visitors. ‘Family’ went straight to the kitchen at the back of the house. Here (in the parlour) the best china, coronation mugs, prizes for choir singing, family history. The fireplace was small and dark and ineffectually protected by an embroidered fire screen.”

In his first year at Queen’s James worked “for the first and last time . . . in the kind of way teachers think one should work”; by which he meant passively absorbing facts and regurgitating them at the examination. In the second year he encountered anatomy and a great teacher: Thomas Walmsley. It was a road-to-Damascus experience for the young man. Walmsley “was not concerned with telling us what we should know – that was our affair – but how to think.” James’s personality unfolded like a flower in the sun. “Doing things”, he wrote, “was somewhat tiresome, thinking was easy.” He sharpened his wits at the debating society (and met his wife there). He succumbed to the temptation of student politics, getting elected to the Madrigal Society, which was in fact defunct. At the next election he exchanged this phantom constituency for a more credible one: “I was (he wrote) returned unopposed as the representative of the Student Christian Movement. It was safer. It did exist, and I was a member.”

It was at Queen’s that poetry became his second language. He was introduced to T. S. Elliot’s ‘Waste Land’ and he saturated himself in Yeats. What a change from ‘the dead wilderness of Keats and Co. as experienced in school.’

He and a friend gained control of one of the University's journals in which they published one another's poems. Words became instruments for dissecting and demonstrating the deeper levels of consciousness. Words, James wrote, created:

... order and form
Out of the shapeless substance
Of intuition and dream.
The making of a sentence
Is a work of art
That carries not only information
But implications that escape
The obvious meaning of the isolated fact.

Some phenomena – the growth of the skull, the shape of a tooth – could be described in plain and simple prose. But even these were liable to set off a chain-reaction of imagination, ending in a glow of insight. Skulls and teeth are familiar to most of us; but how many of us see anything behind the visual image. Listen to what James Scott saw:

A skull rests on my table
Clean, bleached, with all its teeth in place,
Eye cavities intact, forehead round and smooth,
Caucasian, male, overcome by death
In middle middle age.
I ask it questions.
Did you defy a bishop in your time?
Win for yourself a wife?
Live under authority or accept obedience
From men of lesser intellect?
Was life sweet or harsh?
Did decisions come easy or hard?
Did death which stripped you of your flesh
Creep up behind you on a winter night
Or did you wrestle year after weary year
Before the ultimate capitulation?
I ask these questions but no answers come
Or, if they do, I have no ears to hear.

James's whole life is encompassed in this poem: the anatomist's precision; the Christian's struggle to reconcile obedience and conscience; the patriot's suspicion of authority; the shadow which death had already cast over him when he wrote this poem.

Yes: the portrait must include a bright badge of courage. Only in one poem of all that I read did James even momentarily complain about the disease which was crippling him. That poem was written in the year before his death:

a lament that he could not be on the march to Derry:

I curse these crippled limbs
That cannot move
Beyond the circumference
Of a tethered goat.
Nevertheless I will be there
After tomorrow,
After its four gateways
Lie open to let through
All of the four winds of Ireland!

The Midas touch with words seldom failed. Here is James, still in the anatomy department:

In medical museums one can sometimes see
A seven month foetus
Preserved in a tomb of glass;
His small hands up underneath his chin
Like Cassius Clay;
A fine intellectual face
Contemplating the life he never knew.
Medieval theologians created for him
A state called Limbo
Where he and all his unborn brothers and sisters
Must wait the ultimate salvation
Of the human race
Without the knowledge of passion
Or the hard hand of death.

Over the years James performed this magic alchemy on experience all of us shared, but which left on most of us no indelible imprint. Do you recollect the trial of the Nazi, Eichmann? Yes, of course. But did the recollection make this imprint on your minds:

Beneath the microscope
We can observe
How cancerous cells migrate
Or bacteria proliferate
Within the blood.
What of this man
Behind his cage of glass
As the hours pass
And all his deeds return.
Is he as free from blame

As a tumour in the brain
Or a bacterial growth
Upon the vital valves
Around the heart?

The anxiety-call of the ambulance is a daily event. But the poet sees beyond the siren and the case carried on the stretcher to the unique experience:

The hay still lay in the fields the day he went away,
A wretched season after a long hard winter,
Heart could not stand it,
After nearly seventy Septembers,
Ventricles dilated and for a minute ceased
Their pumping.
He must go into a hospital at once
And rest,
Who had never known any life but hard unyielding toil,
A continual battle with the stubborn soil
Among the Antrim hills.

He lay flat on his back as they drove
Carefully towards the city
Which he had never loved.
.....
It was like the first day he went to school
In a new pair of boots that hurt his feet.

Events familiar to all of us, but leaving in our minds an amorphous residue, were, in James's mind, precipitated as elegant crystals. Martin Luther King was shot. "Away down in Tennessee" wrote James, "America destroyed its conscience."

He had spoken
When too often
Church and state
And ordinary decent citizens
Had remained silent
.....
Was it for this
Rebel armies moved up the Potomac;
Was it for this
That Lincoln died, in vain?

James's daughter, Geraldine, goes to America. Her father wrote:

You and your generation have passed
Harsh judgement on America.
Rome also betrayed humanity,
Lusting for power.
And yet what are the alternatives
Unless we decide humanity
Is past caring for.
We must always begin with America
Or China or whatever nations
Take upon themselves the making of history.
And keep on saying over and over again,
People matter, people really do matter
More than any system.

But consider what people do
Not only to others but to themselves.
Humanity rat-ridden with fear
Gnaws at its own virtue.
We are a cancerous species.
Nevertheless every generation seeks the miracle
So far denied.
No one can fault your diagnosis;
You must find the appropriate treatment
That cures yet does not maim
Each fearful patient.

Continually there was a fascinating resonance in James's mind, responding to the day-to-day events of his life. He is a patient in hospital: a five page poem is his response:

Life ebbs and flows along the temperature chart,
It is impossible to forget
That curve may suddenly end
In one short stab of pain.

The poet Yeats dies. James provides an elegy, laconic like a Chinese poem:

Trinity might have given him
A Chair of poetry
But universities do not usually
Honour the arts
In such a practical fashion.
Ireland could have made him
A Minister of Education
But certain of his poems

Were not respectable
And might corrupt the children.
Now that he is dead
We can pick and choose
The bits and pieces we appreciate.
We can safely say
He was a great poet.

His friend, Eileen Hickey – and she was one of my friends – dies after a lifetime's work for reconciliation in Ulster. He writes:

Cowardice of heart and mediocrity of mind,
Contempt for greatness and satisfied self-applause
Still rule this town.
Ireland is still betrayed
By men who mouth
Meaningless platitudes and vain empty words;
Happy that you no longer hear them speak . . .

But he ends with the patriot's dream:

Nevertheless you have not lived in vain
Or died in loneliness.
Greatness is moving like a silent tide;
Tomorrow keeps for you your proper place
With Maeve of Connacht standing by your side.

Like all poets, he was – as T.S. Eliot put it –

. . . Much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin

And, like another devout Christian, Samuel Johnston, James had his moments of doubt. Here is one of them, sparked by the launching of a rocket.

Wherever I go myself goes
Into what depths?
Does death blast off
Mind from burnt-out body?
After that, what wild messages return?
Or is there only silence?

I could work more and more detail into this corner of the portrait. But I must invite your attention elsewhere. We have seen how James's eyes constantly looked out on the world and his mind spun what he saw into verse. This could, of course,

have been no more than the detached reflections of a bystander, watching events from a window in an ivory tower. But James Scott was no bystander. He was an activist, belligerent at times, incorrigible in his suspicion of the establishment, implacably opposed to shoddiness, hypocrisy and pomposity, a man who gave the benefit of the doubt to rebels, a man who in different circumstances might have fallen foul of authority. He wrote that he was born in a hospital between Dundalk Grammar School and the gaol. Listen to him: "I was later to spend some months at one of these institutions and if I had been born 20 years earlier would probably have spent some time in the other, which would have qualified me for a political career in Ireland. I never did quite make up for the loss of that particular qualification."

No. James Scott would never have made a politician. He had too little respect for the breed, and (saving their presence) he was too compassionate, too honest. He was a patriot, never a politician, though he did help to found a movement which became one of the ancestors of the SDLP.

His prime disqualification for being a politician was that he saw the justice – and injustice – of both sides. Listen to this, written in 1969:

Bloody well scared am I
Said Tom to John
Them boys with their petrol bombs,
Do they want to make out of Belfast
A great big papist bonfire,
Burning us poor Protestants
To hard black cinders?

Bloody well scared am I
Said Sean to Pat.
Them characters with their dynamite,
Do they intend to burn down all our churches
Driving us poor Catholics
Out of our homes
And shooting us down in the streets?

Good night dear children,
Good night.

It takes courage to think like that and to speak like that. James did both.

His gospel was to reconcile class differences, too. He was that unusual creature: an intellectual endowed with natural humility. Here he reflects on his colleagues in the Queen's Common Room:

Those who sit at ease
Reading the 'Scientific American'
Share in that communication of knowledge

Which in the end upholds
What hope there is
For Homo Sapiens

Those who recline in public houses
Keeping company with a high glass of ale,
Discussing the nature of women and the price of pigs
Also in their manner
Uphold the dignity of man
Against the mean-mouthed barbarian.

His attempt at political work made him a realist. His comment on one honest politician was:

Politicians must manipulate circumstances
Not towards any absolute perfection
Which is unobtainable,
But towards what is likely to be accepted
By the immediate multitude.

He knew how angrily many of the Irish people reject even talk of reconciliation. But he stuck to his faith. There were two anchors for his faith: his country's history and his religion. James was passionately attached to Ireland, its myths, its Volksgeist, its humour and gaiety and irresponsibility; attached to all but its bigotry and cant. He could hear, on every Irish hillside, echoes of history (curiously enough there was no similar resonance for him from English scenes, not even from the quadrangles of Oxford or the lanes of Surrey). Cuchulain, Queen Maeve, Cashel, Lough Derg: these and scores of other names were magic to him. Ireland's golden past carried a promise, however remote, of a golden future. Even as a child he was caught in awe by Ireland's destiny: a people chosen to suffer, to have their progress periodically obliterated:

If a child should lie on the floor
And gaze upon a map of Ireland
Hour after hour
And then go down to the shore
And draw in the sand what he had seen
Heedless of the tide and rain
And the harsh cry of the curlew,
He may return in the end
A child no more.

Everything now has changed
Utterly,
Once again

The broken sword is forged
Anew in the flame.
Seven hundred years
Have passed in vain.

The fault, he often said, lay, not only with the leaders of church and state; it lay upon the common people who would not admit into their individual lives tolerance, compassion, and respect for each other's freedom. After a mechanic had come into his office to do some repair, this is what James wrote:

A Belfast working man
Comes into my room
Armed with a screwdriver.
A large, skilful, quiet,
Friendly, easy-going man:
No better any where to be found.

There are many like him
Protestant and Catholic,
Their roots deep in the countryside,
Large feet, big ears,
Rough Palaeolithic features
And gentle hands.

What then the madness
That turns such men
To murderous hatred
Of one another;
Adding to ancient massacres
On multicoloured banners
Tomorrow's agony?

James's two anchors: Ireland's past and his religion. He was a convert to the Roman Church, but no docile disciple of the hierarchy. He wrote a sincere and illuminating testament, called *The Christian Vision*, wherein he faces frankly the issues of ethics and morality within the framework of the Church. To detach morality from religion was to sever the green stem from the root. But it must be a morality of spirit, not just of superficial behaviour. That, James believed, is why the young reject Christian ethical standards. A stern puritanical code, he wrote, 'can, through fear, impose its sanctions on all but the very strong-minded. It is a caricature of the religion of Christ It suffers, however, from the great attraction that, within limits, it works; and such measures are always a temptation to those in authority both in the Church and in the State ...'

Over trivialities of behaviour James was tolerant but he was uncompromising about the duty of the church to uphold principles. "It must", he wrote, "main-

tain its own standards of morality against the prevailing standards of the rest of the community. It cannot expect the law of the land to coincide with, or be based upon, its own moral and ethical teaching. It must stand on its own feet. And it cannot afford to stand still . . . Unless the Church can move as a body with a common purpose in a definite direction against the tide of popular opinion, it faces the great danger of falling apart in a vacuum of indifference. . . . One of the ironies of the contemporary situation is the possibility that a Communist state, unlike the neutral liberal democratic state, considers regulation of public morality as part of its function . . . Within the environment of democracy, therefore, the Church must become completely and fully herself.”

James’s incisive wit could be directed against the shortcomings of the Church as audaciously as against pedants and politicians. Indeed one of his poems lumps the lot together:

May God have mercy upon
Ineffectual people in high places,
Prelates and politicians who put prestige
Before public service and humility.
The Greeks were right who placed stupidity
Among the mortal sins.
Not the innocent ignorance of gentle and simple folk
Going their way through life with quiet dignity

What is to be rejected and utterly cast down
Is something different:
The stupidity of arrogant and little minded men
Always seeking to top tables . . .

Listen, too, to this delicious passage, from an address given to a Catholic audience:

“According to the teaching of the Church there are seven capital or deadly sins. In their proper order they are: Pride, Avarice, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy and Sloth. From the sermons one hears in our churches . . . one would get the impression that there is, in fact, as far as Ireland is concerned, only one – Lust, for which however the more usual and more comprehensive term is Sex. If that is so . . . in Ireland, alone in all the world, humanity has improved out of all recognition. Pride has become proper self-regard; Greed is natural ambition . . . Anger is the natural response to injustice done to oneself, Gluttony the sure sign of a higher standard of living . . . while Sloth is the hard working bureaucrat’s need for a rest.”

But leprechaun that he was, James Scott never mocked religion or patriotism, though he remained an individualist within a creed and a political system where it is sometimes not easy to reconcile obedience and freedom of conscience. His faith gave him hope. He wrote it down this way:

Our future, if we have any future at all,
Depends on our ability to live with one another,
To act together with the perfect co-ordination
Of cells in bone and blood, in the muscle and gut
Which makes a man.
And from a mob create society,
Which is to acquire charity
Within the body of Christ,
The Universal Church.

Let me repeat what I said at the beginning. It would take many portraits to represent the latitudes and longitudes of James Scott's mind. There is a private portrait of him to be drawn, with his family, with Olive who once challenged him at the Queen's Debating Society. There is a portrait to be drawn of James the patriot engaged in politics, launching with his friends the movement called National Unity and, inevitably, a political journal called *The New Nation*; that portrait would display his patient work for reconciliation. (We get a glimpse of it in a poem he wrote after seeing the Cardinal at Armagh:

We speak about the twist of things
Bent out of shape by evil days . . .)

But the self portrait I present today would be misleading if I did not include an impression of James the scientist. I took as my theme James the poet because his poetic mind coloured all else he did. (You recollect that he delivered his inaugural lecture as professor of dental anatomy in verse.) But he was no dilettante scientist. Indeed he was possessed from boyhood with what he himself called "that terrible desire to know the answer to every question, which caused such trouble in Eden . . . During the summer holidays back in Cork (he wrote) I would spend great reaches of time dissecting the hearts of pigs and sheep, making discoveries which had always been made before . . . What I was doing in Cork as the tips of my fingers went into ridges and grooves under the influence of preservation fluids was to retrace the history of anatomy . . . Science like any other aspect of life has its roots which must be cherished."

By nature, James wrote, "I am a speculator", with hunches and inspirations about how things happen, rather than a 'consolidator' who demonstrates "by the devising of experiments how things do, in fact, happen." This is what you would expect from in a scientist-poet, and it accounts for James's fascination with fragments of human bones from archaeological sites. Teeth, he wrote, "are essential material for any attempt to understand the . . . maze of pathways taken by human evolution." Of course he put this attitude of the scientist-as-speculator into verse:

Research is more than observation
Of natural phenomena
Or isolated events as they occur.

It begins with the calculation of what might result
If things were different.
Supposing an atom should alter its position
In the molecular framework of a particular gene:
What are the consequences that might arise
In future development?
...
And the answer given must be free of all ambiguity
Of procedure and method.

James's professional life was devoted to research and to the improvement of dental education. I must leave others – perhaps in some future James Scott Lecture – to speak about his research. As a teacher, he put on Thomas Walmsley's mantle. Indeed when I visited Walmsley in hospital – he knew he only had a few weeks to live – he told me how much he admired James's style of teaching.

As for that style, James wrote about it himself in his unpublished autobiography. Walmsley had taught him that lectures should be about how to think, not what to know. But of course students have to know something, if only to pass examinations. To meet this requirement Scott, with collaborators, wrote three textbooks to cover the scope of dental anatomy. All were – still are – successful. This relieved him of the necessity to clog up his lectures with facts. It was, he wrote, “the end of the formal lecture course and note-taking . . . Very early the lecturer must make a fundamental decision to lecture from notes or from memory. If he uses notes he will probably never get away from them and that means using the same material year after year, which is boring, or making up new notes every year, which is time-consuming.” James chose the harder, but undoubtedly the better, way. Here is what he said:

“In lecturing I believe the nearest one can get (to solving the problem of how to lecture) is to speak entirely without notes, to speak aloud as though one were trying to explain a problem or situation to oneself . . . A lecture should be a network of implications rather than a solid block of information . . . The purpose of logic is not to explain but to contain ideas in a pattern of understanding.”

It was not only in Queen's that James strove to lift the level of education in dentistry. The correspondence columns of the *British Dental Journal* are peppered with letters from him; incisive, witty, provocative, standing out like succulent raisins in the soggy puddingy prose of most contributions to that journal. He defends the teaching of comparative anatomy: “Only a comparative anatomist can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat.” “The great advantage of comparative dental anatomy is that it cannot be taught, it is useless as wisdom, and as necessary.” He teases the English over the Piltdown jaw forgery (which fascinated him): “. . . we Irish hug ourselves and hoot with mirth : the earliest Englishman – a fake.” He taunts the profession over one of its trends; writing of dentistry in the third millennium: “Fifty years ago human beings were described as having 12 permanent molar teeth. These are now referred to as temporary molars, and are usually removed as they erupt.” He inveighs against too much

technology and gadgetry, and too little science and reflection, in dental education and practise. He condemns what he calls “the British genius for cultivated procrastination” over dental education. “That is why”, he wrote, “we have a road problem, a dental school problem, and, even still after 700 years, an Irish problem”.

My time is up. All I have been able to do is to introduce you to the marvellous machine in James Scott’s mind which wove rich and exciting patterns out of everyday events. These patterns covered all his activities: scientific, political, religious. It has, as I promised, been a self-portrait. All that I have done is to put it into a frame.

Let James have – as he would certainly want to have – the last word. It was only by chance that he came from Blackrock to school and university in Belfast. His family might as easily have sent him to Dublin. He would, I think, want to assure you that he has not regretted that the choice fell as it did. He was critical of Belfast. He never (I guess) really acclimatised himself to living up the Malone Road (which for him was the “native quarter” of the establishment). But if anyone attacked his home-city, he would spring to its defence. Here he comes:

I will defend this city
Against all lily-livered hypocrites
From Bournemouth or Brighton
Who declare:
“What kind of people
Live in such an impossible place!”
What kind of people?
A damn sight better
Than those oh-so-cultured ladies
Who applaud Mr. Enoch Powell
Or call, in their high pitched autocratic accents,
For the return of the hangman.
Give me Sandy Row anytime –
Even the backwoods men
Of darkest Fermanagh!

Yeats wrote two memorable lines:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the work.

James Scott did not, of course, achieve perfection. But he strove for perfection in both life and work. And he got a long way.