

# Jack Scott: A Revolutionary Life

Bryan D. Palmer (with notes from Al Birnie and Ralph Stanton)

IT IS MAY 1927. Imagine yourself not quite seventeen years old. You have voyaged to Québec City from Belfast on the transatlantic Cunard liner, the *SS Montcalm*. Born poor and having spent a part of your youth living through the ravages of World War I, marginalized by your religious identification as a Methodist dissenter in a society torn asunder by the sectarian extremism of Orange Protestantism and militant Catholicism (meaning that you were usually being shot at from both sides), you were a person who did not quite fit in your homeland which, moreover, offered little in the way of steady wages and material security. Canada seemed a better prospect. And so you find yourself on the Québec City wharves, where the winter's snow is still piled fifteen feet high. You have barely seen snow in Ireland. "What the hell kind of country is this? Where have I come to?" you ask yourself with trepidation. There is \$20 in your pocket, but you have no idea of where to go or what to do, and not a person to turn to for help or support.

This was Jack Scott's introduction to Canada, and it was not an auspicious one. For two years and then some Jack worked in various casual employments, earning little more than his room and board. He became a loudmouth on the job, learning that it got you some respect from the boss. Eventually he was attracted to the Communist Party of Canada in the early 1930s, although, as he confessed, he could not have told you the difference between "communism and rheumatism." But he liked "the oddballs," the soapboxers who aroused the crowds with talk of revolution and rights. Moving to Toronto, Scott widened his circles of left involvement, rubbing shoulders with those who devoured theory, history, and criticism, appreciating the literary culture of revolutionary marxists, including the book collector, Robert S. Kenny. Soon he was educating himself as a marxist, attending Party schools, and, most importantly, organizing the unemployed and the unorganized. For Scott, the 1930s were an apprenticeship in revolutionary activism, and he was a Workers Unity League organizer whose territory encompassed the western Ontario centres of Sarnia, London, Brantford, Kitchener and a host of adjacent towns. He met the woman who would be his first wife, a Finnish radical whose anglicized name was Ann Walters, and was centrally involved in the Ontario On-to-Ottawa Trek, industrial organizing in Toronto, and a series of jobs that took their toll on his body: at the end of the decade Jack was a tough, but tapered, 114 pounds.

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His slight weight kept him out of the armed forces for a time when war broke out in 1939, but eventually, his persistence in volunteering recognized, he was accepted. During the war Scott distinguished himself by his bravery and was awarded the French Croix de Guerre, an honour the Communist Party celebrated publicly even though Jack's volunteering early in the war effort had gone decidedly against the Party grain. Indeed, upon his return to Canada at war's end Scott was finding the Party less and less to his liking. Unable to break from it politically, he escaped what he considered the suffocating atmosphere of the Party centre in Toronto, as well as personal difficulties associated with the breakdown of his shortlived marriage to Ann, by travelling west, and securing union work in Yellowknife and Trail. By the 1950s Jack was settled in Vancouver and remarried, his new wife Hilda having a daughter from a previous relationship. The political times were difficult, there being few openings for communist activity in the Cold War climate of post-1945 Canada, and Jack's domestic circumstances were exacerbated by a prolonged illness suffered through by Hilda.

With the upturn in radicalism associated with the 1960s, Jack shifted political gears, breaking from the Communist Party (he was actually expelled, his notification of termination dated 11 August 1964 and signed by Nigel Morgan), founding the Progressive Worker Movement, working with the Canada-China Friendship Association, and playing a forceful role in various labour struggles, the ongoing student radicalism that began to take specific organizational turns in the 1970s (in which Jack figured centrally on the Maoist trajectory), and the nationalist break-away union mobilizations of bodies such as the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers, founded in 1964.

The 1960s and 1970s were perhaps Jack Scott's highwater mark as a figure on the revolutionary left. Profiled in a *Weekend Magazine* article in 1973, Scott was described as "the most radical man in Canada." With the Progressive Worker Movement winding down, however, the 1970s saw Jack's influence shift. He became increasingly prominent as a speaker and a writer, and it was in this decade that he produced his labour history. An influential co-authored essay in what was perhaps one of the best-known New Left publications of the time, Gary Teeple's edited book, *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada* (1972), explored the issue of international unionism and class collaboration in Canada, a topic Scott would later extend to 1978 book length studies of the American Federation of Labor's influence in both Latin America and Canada. His first two New Star books of 1974 and 1975, however, were probably his best known works, precisely because they seemed to chart new paths of intellectual and political possibility. *Sweat and Struggle: Working Class Struggles in Canada* (1974) introduced the then-subterranean history of labour rebellion in 19th-century Canada, while *Plunderbund and Proletariat: A History of the IWW in British Columbia* (1975) outlined a pivotal chapter in revolutionary organization on the west coast. Scott's prodigious writing project of this period is made all the more noteworthy given his regular trips to

China over the course of the decade (on one of which, in 1974, Hilda died, her ashes buried at Peking's cemetery of the revolutionary martyrs).

Jack Scott's later years were relatively quiet. Throughout the 1980s he followed international events closely, taking a great interest early in the decade in Poland's challenge to the Soviets, and he involved himself in protests such as the British Columbia Solidarity upheaval of 1983. Now a white-haired figure known to most groups and tendencies to the left of the New Democratic Party, he remained connected to the broad left through his continued working at the cooperative outlet, Spartacus Books, but he indulged non-political passions, such as an appreciation for soccer, more. He had no real "family" to speak of, and no "party" with which to affiliate, but a contingent of "comrades," many of whom he had educated in the politics of revolution, and many of whom were young women in the 1960s whom he treated in admirably-affectionate and non-sexist ways, remained his close and loving friends.

Jack Scott outlived one of those bourgeois politicians whom he respected as a class enemy, Pierre Eliot Trudeau. The "nation," an entity increasingly constructed by the media, "mourned" Trudeau's passing with the nostalgic grandeur of a bourgeoisie ashamed of its current class program, devoid as it is of ideas and aspirations beyond a mere looting of the gains workers and their allies have wrestled from capital and the state over the course of the last sixty years. This class impotence translates into an ever-more-transparent bourgeois project of retrenchment, a backward-driving "primitive accumulation" in which all that Canada's ruling elite can offer is the cut-back and the take-back. Trudeau, at least, was made of more imaginative stuff, and for all that Scott reviled the best of Canada's bourgeois leaders, he would have regarded the Liberal statesman of the 1960s and 1970s as the tragedy of bourgeois rule, rather than, like today's Chretien, its farce. The Jack Scotts of Canada's labour past need a society that will mourn their passing with a genuine appreciation of revolutionary continuity. When we have that kind of "nation," something that Jack lived his life to build will have been accomplished.

# REVIEW

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Fernand Braudel Center  
Binghamton University  
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PO Box 6000  
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