

1999

Granite's Secret Beauty: Alexander Scott's Other Poems on Aberdeen

David S. Robb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robb, David S. (1999) "Granite's Secret Beauty: Alexander Scott's Other Poems on Aberdeen," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol31/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

David S. Robb

Granite's Secret Beauty:
Alexander Scott's Other Poems on Aberdeen

Alexander Scott's long poem, "Heart of Stone" (written in 1965 to a commission from the BBC and televised in January 1966, then again in November 1966 in a revised production), habitually regarded as a straightforward celebration of the city is, as I have argued elsewhere, more deeply divided in its assessment than is usually acknowledged.¹ The poem creates an Aberdeen which is physically unique, beautiful, and expressive of its setting in a bleak, tough corner of Scotland characterized by rock, mountains, and sea. It is also extensively and trenchantly critical of the Aberdonians, giving over much of its second half to an account of their limitations which is frequently grimly humorous but occasionally quite hurtful. The vigor of the poem's Scots utterance bathes even the most harsh judgements in a flow of enthusiasm, thereby drawing much of the sting. "Heart of Stone," nevertheless, is an amalgam of tones and attitudes resolved by the determined forcefulness of the alliterative Scots (and by the strong personality we sense behind the utterance) rather than by a genuinely unified and all-embracing vision of the spirit of the place.

The conflicts within the poem can be seen as the outcome of the discrepant attitudes towards Aberdeen which Scott had been articulating in a number of earlier poems. Although "Heart of Stone" is the only poem about the city in the *Collected Poems*, it is far from being the only poetic treatment which he accorded it. In the eleven notebooks in which Scott recorded his poems once

¹*The Collected Poems of Alexander Scott*, ed. David S. Robb (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 92-8. Henceforth *Poems*.

each had reached a satisfactory stage of development, one finds twenty-four poems which are either about Aberdeen as a whole, or which describe some aspect of the city and/or its immediate surroundings, or its inhabitants. These notebooks are currently in the possession of Scott's widow, although it is hoped that they will eventually be passed to the National Library of Scotland.

Of the twenty-four poems, all but one were written between 1938 and 1948; the exception, a seven-line poem written in Greece in 1974, jesting about Aberdonian stinginess and post-oil materialism, was never published and is ignored in the ensuing discussion. "Heart of Stone" itself, written in the mid-1960s, is (mysteriously) not recorded in these notebooks. Although Scott did not include any of these earlier Aberdeen poems in any of his collections (hence their exclusion from the *Collected Poems*) several were published in periodicals and local publications soon after they were written: these poems are now largely lost from sight, however. Seventeen of the poems in the notebooks, including the Greek example, were apparently never published or broadcast.

A closer investigation of these earlier Aberdeen poems serves to highlight what was consistent in the way Scott imagined the city and also brings out in higher relief the discrepancies built into "Heart of Stone." It makes that poem less isolated in Scott's best output, not only in the obvious sense that, in the *Collected Poems*, it is the only poem about the city but also in the sense that most of this poet's successful poems seem to fall into readily distinguishable groups related by theme or setting—for example, the pop poems, poems about war or about the problems of post-war life, poems set in Greece, or those forming a distinct sequence such as "Scotched." Scott habitually mined the material which appealed to him in poem after poem, so where, one might ask, are the other poems about Aberdeen? The answer is that they are hidden in his notebooks.

The earliest examples from this group were written when he was still living in Aberdeen, as a schoolboy or a student: these reflect the city because, simply, it was his world up to the time of writing. The later poems were written from the point of view of the man who had made the break from his place of birth and education. As the series unfolds, his attitudes to Aberdeen become more varied, as one would expect. Few of these notebook poems are direct sources of "Heart of Stone," but they do reveal patterns of response to the city which come together in the later poem. In particular, images and (occasionally) phrases familiar from "Heart of Stone" are to be found in them and in at least one instance he transforms a passage written in 1946 to form part of the later poem. These early poems also suggest that Aberdeen had something of a special place in his outlook during the 1940s; the idea of it as "my city," and the related idea of an ideal city embodying a goal of human striving and desire, are to be detected several times in them. No other city prompts in him a comparable response: Edinburgh and Glasgow are reflected in only "Haar in Princes Street" and "Glasgow Gangs."

The earliest of these poems are built around urban images upon which he hangs ideas and observations. The first poem, "Church Spires" (1938),² illustrates this:

Church spires can catch the sun,
 Enmesh its golden beams in cold grey stones;
 While crystal waters run
 Dead earth shall moisten all its musty bones
 With freshness sweet and pure;
 The church-spires grey are sure
 That they'll be dappled with the sunlight's glow;
 The wintry earth is sure
 Of moisture from the springtime brook's clear flow;
 But seeking men are sure
 Of nothing, nothing—and they nothing know.

There is no attempt here to explore the Aberdeenness of Aberdeen, though the imagery of the city's spires, and of its greyness, will be prominent in many later poems; these visual features loomed large in Scott's image of the town. One notes, too, that even in 1938, when he was eighteen, Scott is associating Aberdeen among the elements of nature, seeing it as a natural, rather than a human, organism. This city already sits, as of right, in the landscape; its citizens, however, are uncomfortable, at odds with the world in which they find themselves. Humans are "seeking" as part of their very humanness, but their goal is hard to find.

Spires and greyness occur also in "Street-Lamps" and in "From a Classroom Window" (1939), in which once again visual effects thrown up by the city are caught in words and prompt philosophical-religious thoughts. In all these poems, it is the look of the city to which the young poet responds; the city is an appearance, not a machine for living in, nor an expression of human society. A panoramic vision of Aberdeen, distantly reminiscent of "Heart of Stone," appears early in these poems in several of which he presents himself as situated above the city and looking down upon it as a whole ("Glow of Night's Sky," "Death's Mist"). In "Grey World," the greyness which is admittedly one of Aberdeen's most characteristic appearances is projected as both causing and expressing a rather self-conscious bleakness of mood in the poet, while in the ever-changing early-morning appearance of the spire of the poem "The Spire," he finds an image for his own variation of spirit. These poems project a city emptied of people apart from the poet himself; they sit amongst many more poems of this phase which draw, with the utmost conventionality, on the nature imagery of weak Romantic verse.

²Where available, the date and place of composition of each poem are provided.

In the third notebook, however, a new and more objective treatment of his Aberdeen environment is attempted in an ambitious long poem, "The River." Although not named, the river is clearly the Don and Scott imagines, still in rather callow terms, its history and the experience of the human race on its banks from the dawn of time. (The influence of Lewis Grassie Gibbon on the young writer is perhaps visible here.) He imagines the coming of the Iberians, then the Celts with their ability to smelt metal, and "the Saxon" ("he wore wings on his hat"), followed by St. Machar, raiding Highlanders, and bomb-dropping Germans. Finally, "here by the river, by the sea, I was born." All of which prompts him to adolescent anguish over the question Why? He decides that we shall know why when "the Plan that the Spirit planned" is complete at the end of Time.

This still immature effort is revealing, however, in ways which he apparently could not see himself. Each of the waves of incomers is involved in death and violence: the earliest settlers establish themselves by force, and thereafter the history of the place is imagined in terms of threats which have to be beaten off, apart from the arrival of St. Machar. Old Aberdeen emerges from history as a sanctuary and place of safety, where a wall "very thick and very high, / And built of granite" protects against marauding Highlanders. The poem, in fact, is steeped in a sense of Aberdeen as a place safe from the world's threats, a sense which permeates both the poetry he wrote in the years immediately preceding and following the outbreak of war, and also the long prose autobiography which he started on leaving school, and which he broke off in 1941. In that unexpected memoir, he communicates both his intense security in the upper years at school and in his first year as an undergraduate, and also his response to the growing threat of war both to himself and to the world he knows. The Aberdeen in which he grew up provided him with an immense sense of security. As he would write, with sad hindsight, in "Portrait and History" (October 1944; Haywards Heath, Sussex), "I lived unaware / Terror and pain could ever reach me there." When he joined the army, reality could not be avoided; so in "Leave's End" (4 November 1942; Aberdeen), near the end of a week's leave in Aberdeen, he confronts the loss of all that had contributed to that happy security:

For, almost ended, all this week of wonder
Crumbles towards the crowded dusty past;
As wrought in sand, these walls of granite sunder;
Friendship's laughter fades and will not last;
The books decay; the student's scarlet gown
Dims like an autumn leaf; the mouth's caress
Crumples, a withered rose; I stand alone
Among my littered wreck of happiness.

Yet even when wartime experience had disrupted that sense of security for ever, Scott still thought of Aberdeen's granite as a protecting fortress, at least

against the elements. As he wrote a month before “Leave’s End,” in “Homage to Grey Granite” (6 October 1942; Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey),

The splendour of her granite steadfastness,
 Outfacing ocean’s anger, stands alone;
 Though flanked by rivers, though the hills buttress,
 She is more surely bastioned in her stone;
 Man’s fortress, built against a miser nature’s,
 Forcing that hunger into teeming bounty,
 Surgeoning plenty upon those pauper features,
 Sovereign riches coins from a copper county;
 Magician garbed in gleaming stone, transforming
 Hard-won harvest wrenched from earth and sea
 Into a thousand graces, on a storming
 World she stamps her seal, civility.

History for so many years, this city
 Has gazed on the tribes of men that proudly pass,
 Has watched them flourish green, and shown no pity
 When time has scythed them down like withered grass;
 Has shown no pity, but has seized from all
 Their lust for life, and driven them out to harrow
 Harvest’s gold from earth’s reluctant fall,
 Struggling silver out of ocean’s sorrow;
 And from this toil, to strengthen and secure
 Her fight to fructify the barren minute,
 Embracing stone in passion grimly dour,
 She has conceived herself in glinting granite.

This poem is the first he wrote which is, self-consciously, about Aberdeen. Earlier poems had simply used the city as an urban landscape, even “The Child Man” which opens with an extensive description of Aberdeen’s special beauty only to denounce all the human rottenness behind “these marvellous masonries.” In “The Child Man,” Aberdeen is simply the cityscape which lies at hand to embody the gap between humanity’s capabilities and failings: the distance which might permit criticism of peculiarly Aberdonian faults is lacking. Nevertheless, “The Child Man” is the first poem of Scott’s which associates Aberdeen with human meanness and later poems such as “Devil in Aberdeen (A Satire for Solid Citizens)” (10 March 1944; Chalfont St Giles, Bucks) and its Scots language version “Deevil in Aiberdeen (2)” (19 July 1947; Aberdeen) confirm a strand of criticism which runs henceforth through the Aberdeen series.

The second stanza, however, of “Homage to Grey Granite” shows a more complex, and so more interesting, qualification of Scott’s basic approval and love of the place; he discerns there a pitiless, impersonal quality in the city which is intimately bound up with its success as a financial engine for the

North-East, a role which he explores in greater detail and length in "Heart of Stone." In his own way, he comes to a grudging admiration for the city's single-minded transmutation of regional resources into gold and silver, while the sense of beholding something both admirably awesome and uncomfortably repellent is summed up in the image of Aberdeen as an aggressively predatory female goddess bringing about her own incarnation by a forced union with granite.

After "these walls of granite sunder" when the war separates him from the city, Scott sees himself as an exile both from the place where, in his youth, he laid his head, and from the secure happiness of the life he lived there. The first stanza of "Citizen Soldier" (6 February 1943; Aberdeen) makes this explicit, along with the sensation that, for him at least, Aberdeen is no longer a protecting fortress:

Listen! The granite, gaunt and void of pity,
Speaks to an exile, back so brief a season:
'O once my son, now stranger in this city,
Logic of time destroys your dreaming's reason,
Others possess your peace, your best-loved places,
Others have built their lives where you projected
Memory's architecture, other faces
Laugh where your laughter's youth, by time infected,
Dies without an echo, unprotected.

'You have no city now except that storied
Township far across the bleeding river,
Spur of serfs and flame of freedom, gloried
Borough that all mankind have sought forever,--
Capital of content whose cherished-charters,
Written upon the hearts of men, have made
How many heroes, O how many martyrs?
Thus were your city's strong foundations laid:
Go out and claim its freedom, unafraid.'

Nevertheless, this very personal poem, written in the immediacy of painful sensations, attains a measure of impersonality which strengthens it; the title allows the poem to be read in terms of any "citizen soldier," a species with which Britain was obviously well supplied at the time. Consequently, I think it a more successful poem than the revision Scott attempted a few months later. In "I Seek a City" (9 May 1943; Catterick, Yorkshire), he produced another version of this poem, attempting to find a plainer, less poetically grandiloquent style. That he is consciously revising with the original "Citizen Soldier" in front of him is suggested by the shape of the thought and by the repetition of several key phrases. In the later version, he attempts to infuse Whitmanesque free verse with some of the impersonality of drama. The result, however, is a

more personal, self-pitying poem (though its extra spaciousness allows for another example of Scott's love of evoking Aberdeen in a single unifying visual sweep):

Against the multitudinous impersonality of history I played my personal myth,
my singular drama.

Background: a scimitar sweep of bay; an arc of sea; a green bulk of mountains
shaggy with trees; parallel twisting threads of two rivers; a gaunt city,
granite, grey, lit by the sun to flashing loveliness.

Close ups: a house with bright windows, a shining lawn and coloured gardens;
school, a dim severity later lightening to understanding; university, a still
quadrangle and a dreaming crown.

Dramatis personae: my father, keen and quick and full of hope and anger; my
mother, gentleness, and patience seldom stirred to slapping irritation;
blue eyes, brown eyes, dark and fair, the girls I loved; and the puzzled,
eager, laughing faces of my friends.

Story: the usual one, an asking infancy, a childhood man-curious or animal-accept-
ing, bewildered baffled sunlit thundery adolescence.

Here, once again, he tells himself the story of his own happy life, till "history" (that is, war) snatched him away. The off-handedness ("Story: the usual one...") rapidly gives way to a far less dry evocation of what is already for him (at twenty-three) a fabled youthful past, one in which Aberdeen is once again a vital, prominent part:

Yet in an alien place among alien faces the legend of my past was with me like
an idyll, like a song in an empty house, a well in barrenness, an oasis in
a valley of bones, remembered laughter in a fog of sorrow.

For to me there was a magic in the singular myth of my own youth, and O a
spell about the memory of my city.

When, a mental exile, he returns to Aberdeen this time, however, his parents' home has been bombed.

Till the bombs fell, loud with death and splintered of destruction, and I went
back and found my city mine no longer.

Here he is confusing, as he writes, two separate things: the transformation in his life brought about by the destruction of his childhood home, and the transformation brought about by life's moving him on from childhood scenes. As the poem moves to its conclusion, he languishes in exile, and his vision of the

“fabled city, that of which all men speak with words of longing, that capital of content” is, if anything, less effective than the more concise account of it in February. The two poems underline, however, the painful intensity with which he contemplated the pattern of a youthful life which was, in truth, “the usual one”—except of course that everyone’s youth, however usual, is equally a “singular myth.”

The twenty-two-year-old poet was trying to build a bridge to the future in the uncertainties and unfamiliarities of a dangerous present, something he does with greater surety of emotion in the concise “Forward” (30 August 1943; Catterick):

If now I should go back to my own city
The world’s tumult roaring round my head
Would wreck the stillness I have built me there.
Return is a dream of straw. The iron road
Goes forward forward into noise and darkness
Darkness that glints as yet no hope of dawn
But in the earthquake heaving under our feet
This is the only steady path to follow.

When he next returns to the theme of his personal loss of Aberdeen, in “Portrait and History,” the by now familiar sequence of thought and feeling is expressed in more poised and assured phrases, some of which are hardening into the patterns which will mark his ultimate poem about the city:

A sea as harsh as granite grips the town
Grey as the sky encased in winter’s steel

The next poem in the notebooks, “My Name is Million” (October 1944) not only contains a line which will be repeated in “Heart of Stone” but strives to reconcile his private mental world with the universality of the experience he is undergoing:

My name is million, here I lie
In France as in Thermopylae,
And weeds and grass commingled wave
Their careless heads above my grave.

Perhaps my dream was liberty,
A sea-grey town, a stone-grey sea,
Perhaps my only lust was fame,
But lost in any case my name.

There follows, in the sequence, two poems derived from the act of memory. The first, “Remembering Aberdeen” (December 1944; Veghel, Holland) is merely a six-line fragment. It signals, however a rejection of the personal

myth of Aberdeen which has possessed him for so long, and attempts to develop a new vision of realism in his attitude.

Like hourglass sand the granite sinks and crumbles
 Into a memory, a wish, a dream
 Which wavers as a shipwrecked jewel trembles
 Falsified under water's twisty gleam.

Guttural voices aping the elegant south
 Argue and chaffer under mica's dazzle...

Far more successful is "In Exile" (6 August 1945; Stolzenau, Germany). Lying awake, the poet compares the flat, harvest-covered landscape ("a docile country") soon to be revealed by dawn with his memories of "the narrow land between the sea and mountains / Shouting defiance." He portrays Aberdeen and its region as a domain of color, energy, violence, splendor, and love. The poem benefits from the paradox of the poet trapped in a world of peace but yearning for a land of conflict and natural destruction, although he does not bring out a deeper potential irony by invoking the recent fighting of his own role as a soldier. As it stands, the poem works both through the honesty of his personal response and also through its symbolizing of the contrast between a prosaic reality and a rich, untamed country of the mind. By 1945, Aberdeen's appeal was no longer based on familiarity and security but on the hard energy he now senses in the place:

I think of this and I think of my own country,
 The narrow land between the sea and mountains
 Shouting defiance, sea tearing the beaches,
 Tearing the rocks, the cliffs like hammers beating
 The tiderip back...

Six months later, back home in Aberdeen, he produced in "Laurels for Granite" (15 February 1946), a major attempt to celebrate the city in verse which avoids the personal or the autobiographical. In this, it stands alongside the earlier "Homage to Grey Granite" and "Heart of Stone" itself.

I.

Here where Scotland like a thrawn old fishwife
 Dourly shoulders the sea,
 Upon her breast this city's granite flower
 Blossoms against that salt sterility.

No mere construction of concrete, bricks and plaster,
This like a flower has grown
 Out of the rocks where all its roots are founded
 And shaped itself in stone.

Here, with the hills, the sea, the rivers meeting,
The city stands between,
Flowering out of the soil and grown completely
One with the natural scene.

2.

The natural scene? A monotone of grey,
The sea like stone, the city dull as the sea,
The hills the bleached pallor of dead lichen,
The sallow rivers drowning the dark sky.

This town is a clumsy mountain of cold rock
Harder than steel, the streets like snell ravines
Trenching the stone where walls rear up in cliffs
To block the sunlight out and guard the shadows.

Cold, colourless, bitter, bleak and grey:
This is your city! This is the town whose people
Have ears dulled by the ceaseless dirge of the sea
And eyes blunted on endless bluffs of granite.

A dull town and a dull delightless people,
Even their laughter harsh as the stone which builds
A prison round their hearts and throws a grey
Shadow across their lives in blank monotony.

3.

Whoever harps on granite's essential greyness
Has only seen the stone
In the dirt and drizzle of drab December mornings
When even the light seems dead as withered bone.

For granite holds a sudden secret beauty
Escaping the casual eye,
Out of its gloom the silver slashes of mica
Dazzle the sight like stars in a dark sky.

And in the stolid people the unsuspected
Secret is suddenly known
By a sparkle of wit, a glitter of skill and courage
That lights their lives as mica lights the stone.

In a quagmire world of queasy doubts and queries
This alone is sure:
Endurance stands like a rock when faith has crumbled:
The heart must needs be granite to endure.

This poem contains the passage which Scott adapted for “Heart of Stone”; compare the first three stanzas of the second section with the following from the later poem:

But geyan gash she lours in a gurlie gloamin
 Whan seipan swaws are graveyaird gray on the strand,
 The hills as dreich as deid lichen,
 The dowie rivers drounan the dark lift,
 The toun a cauldriife cairn o tauchie rock
 Mair steel nor stane, the streets in snell canyons
 Trenchan through craigie scaurs that sklaff the sun,
 A wersh warld, its colours aa wan-blae,
 Whaur lugs are deaved by the drantan dirge o the sea
 And een blunted on grumlie blads o granite (*Poems*, p. 95).

The formal, summative spirit of “Laurels for Granite” is expressed in the closed clarity of the dialectical structure. In a rather bald, willed fashion it attempts to reconcile the challenge which, by this time, Aberdeen seems to have been for Scott. Two years earlier, in “Devil in Aberdeen (A Satire for Solid Citizens),” he had imagined the devil (himself) trying to pinpoint the downside to Aberdeen’s associations of shining beauty and scholastic happiness. Scott as devil had to admit defeat by the third and final stanza:

The devil could not judge the case
 On simple ‘Yea’ or ‘Nay’:
 Confused by granite’s hardy grace
 Alongside hunger’s cheated face
 He scratched his head about the place
 And sighed and went away.

Now in “Laurels for Granite” he seeks to find in the granite substance of the city (as he will do more pervasively in “Heart of Stone”) qualities which will reconcile faults and virtues, both in Aberdeen’s characteristic appearance and in the communal character of its citizens. While the final assertion strives too hard to rescue him from the fate of just scratching his head about the place, the earlier parts of the poem contain effective ways of imagining Aberdeen (as a natural outgrowth of its region, as a bleak rocky landscape) to which he will return in “Heart of Stone.” “Laurels for Granite” is weakened, however, by limp or empty phrases (“grown completely / One with the natural scene”; the entire last stanza); more deeply, it is pushed too hard to finality of judgment and to complete reconciliation of the paradoxical feelings towards Aberdeen which the poet clearly feels strongly. Better to abandon the urge to judgmental closure, and the English speech which accompanies it, and to trust to a more immediately personal impulse and utterance, as in “Train til Aberdeen” (15 October 1948; “Between Glasgow and Aberdeen”)

Fowr hours awa frae the grime and glaur o Glesca,
Fowr hours o kintra droukt in October sun,
Ower birlan burns and by a drove o mountains
And shauven parks wi aa the hairst got in,
Till sudden, the sea!—he's chuckit a handfu o siller
Straucht in my een.

The lichthoose scents frae the shore, a lintwhite lassie
Luran the wealth o trawler chiels tae lan',
The waas get up, and spires o gesserant granite
Dirk at the clouds whas colour mates their ain,
Till sudden, the city!—quine wi the glamour o smeddum,
Ye've grippit me roun.

In a far shorter compass, Scott here succeeds in communicating something of the unique physical truth of Aberdeen, not just the familiar granite and spires and greyness shared between the buildings and sky, but also the proximity of the sea and the prominence of the lighthouse, integral parts of the experience of the railway journey from the south. Furthermore, he has found imagery which simultaneously conveys a strand of criticism along with the sense of surrendering even to the city's flaws. The sea throws in his eye (an image which conveys both sudden visual glory but also overtones of assault and discomfort) not "silver" (merely a color and a brightness) but "siller" (which is the color silver but also money). The sea both overwhelms the traveler with glory, and bribes him; as he nears the city, the poet is conscious of being blinded (as if by dust or sand) with a consequent loss of judgment but puts up no resistance. The lighthouse is then personified as a siren-like whore, though she is described with the utmost gentleness and affection ("a lintwhite lassie"). She is the forerunner of the city itself, whose appealing toughness is imaged not, for once, by the granite which is acknowledged in passing, but by an independent, street-wise, sexually forward "quine." As ever, the choice of Scots brings a dimension of self-dramatization which is far harder to achieve in English poems; here, the poet is a returning native, surrendering to the place even while he is conscious of its limitations. The first four lines help characterize his attitude, not just with their rejection of Glasgow but also in their communication of this city-dweller's refusal to be piously overwhelmed by the traditional blandishments of rurality; the countryside is "droukt" in sunshine, the burns and the mountains fail to inspire awe, and the harvest fields have simply had a shave. Enthusiasm is reserved for the first glimpse of the sea when the poem comes alive.

"Train til Aberdeen" seems to have been the last poem about Aberdeen Scott wrote before "Heart of Stone" itself. Although it is a less ambitious poem than "Laurels for Granite," it succeeds where that fails and (with hindsight) can be seen foreshadowing the success of "Heart of Stone." The crucial elements would appear to be the choice of language, the Scots allowing a com-

plexity and range of feeling which Scott can't seem to emulate in English, and the viewpoint of the traveler which not only avoids the judgmental structure he adopted in "Laurels for Granite" but privileges the visual and so allows judgment to be built into the imagery rather than forcing the construction of considered attitude. "Train til Aberdeen" sketches and responds to the city in a poetic experience, so, in its greater compass, does "Heart of Stone."

From this survey of the early poems Scott wrote about Aberdeen, it is clear that during the early stages of his adult phase as a poet Aberdeen was of special importance to him. The associations it held for him seem to have gone beyond that fondness which many of us feel for the place of our childhood and youth; in a peculiarly dangerous and threatening world, he had come to associate it with safety, security, and all life's graces of love, friendship, laughter, and the burgeoning of one's own talents. In his early manhood, he seems to have been extraordinarily conscious of what he called "the singular myth of my own youth" and he was aware that Aberdeen was an essential ingredient of that myth. The poems he wrote about it were rightly judged by him to be largely unworthy of publication; of the seven which did escape beyond his notebooks, none were collected by him as part of any of his books of verse. In the context of war, however, several of these poems were appropriately published and what was capable of moving a wartime readership will often prove of interest to the sympathetic scholar of Scott's work today. This is especially true of those confessional poems "Leave's End," "Forward," and "In Exile." Equally, "Train til Aberdeen" seems to me unlucky in not having been selected by Scott for more lasting availability.

As has been indicated, Scott tried twice during this period to write a more impersonal, evaluative, public poem about the city; "Homage to Grey Granite" and "Laurels for Granite" are both creditable and interesting attempts at combining a celebration of Aberdeen's unique qualities and strengths with a limiting judgment on its character and way of life. If, finally, neither is sufficiently worthy, it is because the author is still too close to this, for him, special place. So his tone is too solemn, his English utterance too elevated, the everyday reality of his so-familiar city taken for granted and replaced by abstractions. His own assessment of these poems is to be found in part of a note regarding "Heart of Stone" recently discovered in his papers:

Those earlier efforts were sentimental over-statements of the city's merits written in English, an incongruous language for a poem about a town which is as quintessentially Scots in speech as in its attitudes and appearance. A year or so later, I tried again in Scots, but the emotional tone, rhapsodic throughout, clashed with the restraint inherent in the medium.

This seems curiously harsh and overhasty, though the fact that none of these poems was given permanent status in print clearly reflects Scott's own deep dissatisfaction with them, a judgment which must be respected. The de-

scription of "sentimental over-statement" may conceivably fit "Homage to Grey Granite" which is laudatory throughout—though surely such a brief poem may be permitted to devote itself to the positive alone ("Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" is clearly not intended as a definitive summation of Wordsworth's total sense of London). Striving against sentimentality, "Laurels for Granite" systematically criticizes the town in its second section, though the willed synthesis of the final section is indeed sentimental. "Rhapsodic" is a fair description of "Train til Aberdeen," though again lyric brevity would appear to justify a single gush of enthusiasm. The comment about Scots, however, "with the restraint inherent in the medium," begs a large number of questions. Did Scott really think that poetry in Scots could or should express only emotional restraint? That would be a far cry from MacDiarmid's famous belief that "a *vis comica* that has not yet been liberated lies bound by desuetude and misappreciation in the recesses of the Doric."³ Scott's sense of "restraint inherent in the medium," however, is revealing as regards his own verse.

Despite the difficulties raised by the above quotation, it is clear that Scott desired to write a poem of final judgment and response to the city, a more permanent statement than was achieved in any of the poems of the 1940s. So one can understand that Scott must have felt that he had unfinished business on his hands and we can perhaps imagine how the opportunity to write a substantial public poem on Aberdeen, many years later, helped bring a period of poetic inactivity to an end. How much of the youthful private feelings towards the city, expressed in those early poems, he retained as he composed "Heart of Stone" is difficult to say; there was no scope in the BBC commission for a return to "the singular myth of my own youth" and, twenty years on, probably little desire to do so. Yet in this wholehearted return to the subject of some of his earliest and most deeply felt poems, he must have felt that he was returning to his own poetic roots.

DAVID S. ROBB
University of Dundee

³*Scottish Chapbook*, 1 (Feb. 1923), 183.

Appendix

Because the poems referred to in David S. Robb's article have not appeared in any collection of Alexander Scott's works (some are unpublished), it was felt that the full text of them should be supplied from Scott's notebooks. The numbers appearing in brackets refer to his notebook number and page, as well as place and date of composition when Scott noted these. I am most grateful to his widow, Catherine J. Scott, for granting permission to reproduce the poems below.

GRR

Alex Scott's poems on Aberdeen and Aberdonians (apart from "Heart of Stone")

Church Spires [I, 17; 1938]

Church spires can catch the sun,
Enmesh its golden beams in cold grey stones;
While crystal waters run
Dead earth shall moisten all its musty bones
With freshness sweet and pure;
The church-spires grey are sure

That they'll be dappled with the sunlight's glow;
The wintry earth is sure
Of moisture from the springtime brook's clear flow;
But seeking men are sure
Of nothing, nothing—and they nothing know.

Street-Lamps [I, 43]

Man has made nothing beautiful, they say,
Nothing which ever can compare
With God-born Nature's bounteous fare:
This may be true by day:
By night,
When stars are bright,
And shine from a sky of shimmering blue,
And the faint silver light of the moon glows through[,]
The clouds a-drifting over the heaven,
And rain has rattled on the roofs
And beat with wet and tiny hoofs
On street and cobble-stone,
And I stand alone,
While the bell in the steeple chimes eleven,
I know it is not true.
What find I beautiful and fair?
What find I lovely and rare?
'Tis not the spires that shoot their arrows high,
'Tis not the roofs that loom athwart the sky,
'Tis not the cold grey granite tower
I think adorable as a flower:
It is a thing that's very small,
A thing I think that not at all
Is noticed when the god of day
O'er the bright heavens holds his sway:
A lamp, a street-lamp,
When the streets are damp
And wet with rain,
Throws a golden stain
Across the wet street,
And a golden chain
Of lamps is fastened round the city's throat;
A shining moat
Dipping a-down the cobbled hills,
Glinting and glimmering on the rills
Of newly-fallen rain:
And the streets are bright
In the moist, wet night,
And gloom is expelled,

And darkness held
Panting, at bay,
The wolf-hound grey,
By the street-lamps that shine on the pattering feet
Of the rain that falls on the thirsty street:
Then I know that man has made by his brain
Something which gives the eye no pain,
Something which even can compare
With the treasures of God-born Nature fair.

From a Class-Room Window [II, 60; 1939]

The sky is full of spires—
My heart it fires
To watch them striking up into the sky,
While the grey roofs dreaming lie
In the dim and shadowy blue
Of twilight's mystic hue;
The chapel looms along the right;
Its sharp-cut sandstone walls seem dight
With some religious air;
Behind it, and across my gaze,
The Old School buildings, with the haze
Of smoke about them, like blue hair,
Creep across the window-sill:
And there behind
The searching spire-shafts find
The dimming twilit sky,
And throw a crown of thorns on high—
As if those roofs so peacefully mellow
Were even as the Lord Christ's brow.

Glow in Night's Sky [II, 82]

Night, and the sky a curtain of black:
Not a star winking from out of night's eye:
The moon is lost in the deeps of the sky:
In the great wall of darkness no single crack
Is there, through which the bright planets can spy.

A velvet mask across heaven's face:
Against the velvet the houses more deep
Loom up, and the finger-like chimneys leap
To lose their lengths in the sky's dark maze:
The town seems sprawled in shadowy sleep.

But further off, where the heart of town
Beats in the traffic's roar—for here
On the hill, we are on the outskirts mere—
A hazy glimmer of light seems thrown
Across the sky's dark canvas there.
Yet, from this hill, the town seems dead:
I cannot see the street-lamps shine
Along the cobbles in necklaced line:
No yellow gleam of light is shed
From lidless windows, as a sign

That life still flickers in the body:
Yet, though the town seems still and dark,
My eyes cannot but fail to mark
That all the velvet sky is ruddy
Above it lying lone and stark.

So may then the unbodied soul,
When the body is cold and stiff in death,
When age or accident still the breath,
A shimmering haze of radiance unroll
Across the dark sky the cold corse lies beneath.

Death's Mist [II, 84]

A February dawn: I stood
Upon the humped-up hill: the city seemed to brood
In sullen silence down below:
The sky was palely blue in the west: in the east a glow
Of strange unearthly pink across the horizon the sun did throw.

And down in the city there was a mist,
That self-same phantom hue of pink, that seemed to twist
And writhe like sinners in the hell
Of medieval artists: slowly rang the knell
Of night but newly dead from the grey church steeple bell.

I shuddered as I looked full down
On the strange pink mist wrapped round the morning-smoky town:
But when I descended the cobbled hill,
The cold damp fog that had seemed the morning air to fill
Was nothing but a filmy haze: I felt my heart-beats thrill

For so it is we look on death:
From the hill of life we stare on the strange cold mist beneath:
But shall we not find, when we go death among,

That the mist is not cold or damp that had seemed the air to throng,
And shall not our hearts with hope & gladness burst into joyful song?

Grey World [II, 86]

Grey skies, grey roof, grey river, and grey sea:
An empty greyness in the mind of me:
The river reeds of red have lost their glow,
Their rusty radiance by the waters slow:
Yes, smooth and slow the river glides among
Its pale grey trees, their leafless branches hung
Dripping with dead grey dew, above its face,
Moving with the measured, solemn pace
Of mourners, as if spring were dead ere born
And how the sullen sea-waves cry forlorn
To grey and misty skies above their swell:
The sad surf seems to shiver, as the knell
Was sounding of the spring, the promised spring
The sweet glad child of winter's mothering;
The sky weeps bitter, and the tears run down
The dull grey roofs above the smoky town.

How desolate it was! No hope was there
Among that damp and dripping, dull grey air:
The trumpets of the morning, muted low,
Far off, as in a faery world, did blow:
I looked upon the shadowed palmer, earth,
That had forgot its spring-begotten mirth,
And thought, 'The world is dead: what use are eyes
To look on dreary hell? No Paradise
Of living hues is here disclosed. And far
Better to be blind than eyes to mar
By gazing on this never-ending grey
Fore'er, while after weary day comes day [']
I blasphemed the earth: I blasphemed—a fool—the world:
I blasphemed even beauty's banner, furled
Through winter's span, patiently waiting for spring:
And then I felt my eye-balls smart and sting,
A sudden pain shoot through them: all the sky
Reeled round in wild confusion upon high:
My heart-strings trembled violently: my brain
Was seared and shivered by the shock of pain.

It passed: I took my hands down from my face,
And looked upon the world with longing gaze:
What if the skies were grey, and grey the sea?
Could beauty never in sad raiment be

Adorned a moment, ere she cast away
Disguise, and stood revealèd, happy, gay
And radiant, sparkling-eyed? The river soft
Sang o'er its pebbles to the sky aloft,
A slow, sweet chant, rejoicing that the spring
From out her jewelled basket, gold would fling
Upon the wintry earth, in streams of light:
And as it sang, the grey sky grew more bright:
I saw a faint pink radiance softly creep
Throughout the misty veils of cloud awcep,
Drawing them slow aside: and sudden—behold!
The glowing sun in its glory of scarlet and gold.

The Spire [II, 90]

There is a spire that stands against the sky,
And round its red stone shaft the seagulls fly,
Filling the cloudy air with harmony:
Each morning, when the face of heaven is dim,
I hearken to the seagulls' early hymn,
While through the mists of morning peers the rim
In paling gold, of spring's shy dawn-time sun:
One morning may the wispy cloudlets run
In diaphanous draperies: or may stun
The mind with grandeur as they pile and pile
Upon each other, ever upwards, while
The sun strides slowly down their solemn aisle:
Or may the sky be stripped all naked, bare,
Its shimmering skin revealèd, seeming to dare
Earth's virgin lips to kiss the wanton fair:
And, as the sky doth change, so doth the spire:
No morning is its hue the same: a fire
With flaming splendour, as a choir
Of angels were asinging round its stone:
Or sad, forlorn, and grey, as if the moan
Of hell-kept sinners reached it there, alone
And stately striking up above the town:
So with the thoughts that I do call my own:
The day the world has seemed to set a crown
Upon my head, my thoughts are starry bright:
But wrappèd are they in the glooms of night
When snarling sorrow saps my weakening might:
As the world changes for me, so my thoughts change,
Through all emotion's gamut wide they range,
And in my brain each day they rearrange.

The River [III, 104]

This river flowed at the very dawn of the Earth:
In the first pink flush, its waters welled in the hills
And rushed in torrents down the mountain-sides
And swept across the scarps and through the forests
And rolled athwart the green and sunswept plains
Until the sandbanks heaved and checked its speed
And, with its silver waters flecked with foam, it crept into the sea.

Here the Iberians built their huts of mud,
On the verge of the forest, where amid the gloom
The tiger lurked, with scimitar-like teeth:
They built their huts of mud, and wattle from the river,
They built them in the hollows of the dunes,
Where the wild wind whispered soft and seldom,
And here they lit their fires, when they had solved
The lightning's mystery, why the brown forests blazed
Yellow and red and smoky blue after a thunder-storm,
They lit their fires, and squatted round them on their haunches,
And cooked their venison, and tore it with their teeth,
And here they got their children, here they died, were buried;
From here they went to slay the tribe across the hill:
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

Here came the Celts, with their arrows of flint,
And built them houses of rough-quarried stone,
And hewed them hammers out of hard granite,
And hewed them coffins to hold their dead,
And reared a great burial-mound among the sand-dunes,
And tamed the ponies galloping over the plains,
And built stone dykes, and sowed them corn in spring,
And reaped gold harvest in autumn, and slept in winter,
And here they found iron, and made them charcoal,
And smelted the iron ore, and got them iron pure,
And made strong weapons out of it to slay,
Spears and swords and axes that flashed in the sun,
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

Here came the Saxon, out of the east,
Out of the Northern Sea, from the eastern horizon,
And his hair was yellow as the rising sun,
And he wore wings on his hat, and his ships were swift,
Shaped like slim fish, with rearing prows and rams,
And shields glittering on the bulwarks, and many oars:
And he ran his ships ashore in the shallows,

And he put his shield before him, his sword in his hand,
And charged the town of the Celts in the dead of night,
And slew the men, and raped the women, and burned the town,
And built him another in its stead, and lived there,
And cut the forests down to build him ships,
And voyaged looting over the Northern Seas,
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

And here there came the monk St. Machar, looking for
A river where it bent into a shepherd's crook,
For he was ordered to build a monastery there,
And he built his monastery by the river,
Where the rushes whistled in the wind, and the brown boughs sighed,
Of granite he built it, and made it with two spires
That struck into the sky above the tallest trees,
And here the monks lived, and they sang, and prayed
To a new god, Jesus Christ, and fed the poor,
And the poor were fed, and believed, and worshipped Christ,
And came to the monastery, and sang, and prayed,
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

And here there came the Highlandman, on raiding forays,
Dressed in his ragged kilt, his claymore naked,
And spulzied the cattle, and burned the houses,
And the townsmen rallied round the monastery,
Where a high wall was, and beat off the Highlandman,
For the wall was very thick and very high,
And built of granite: and the monks came out,
And thanked their Christ for having saved them,
And the smoke of the burning houses went up to the sky,
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

And here came the German, when the night was dark,
And the thick black clouds hiding the orange moon,
And he came in a monstrous bird that buzzed like an angry wasp,
And the townsmen were afraid, and put out the lights,
And crouched in their cellars, and the wasp droned on,
High above the sprawling town by the river,
And dropped its cargo of death in the forest,
And buzzed back over the heaving northern sea,
And the citizens sighed with relief, and lighted the lamps again,
And went to see the craters deep in the forest,
And look at the blasted trees sprawling dead,
And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
Crept with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

Here by the river, by the sea, I was born,
 Here by the rustling river I have lived my life,
 And here by the booming sea they will bury me;
 I often lie upon the river-bank, among the rushes,
 Among the rushes dappled rust and green,
 Or sit upon the sea-shore drenched with gold,
 And gaze upon the lifting, white-flecked waves,
 And wonder what it means—why came the Iberians,
 Brown-skinned, shaggy-haired, low-browed, jutting-jawed,
 Why came the Celts, with spears of flint and stone,
 Why the fair Saxons dared the seas in narrow ships,
 Why the old monk here should build his monastery,
 Why the wild Highlander should make his cattle-raids,
 Why the German should drop his bombs on the town,
 Why I was born here, why I was born at all,
 Why the great world was made, and the vast Universe,
 Why the gold sun is warm, and the pale moon is cold,
 Why the bright day is followed by night,
 Why men are born, and when they are born, why they die,
 And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
 Creeps with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

Here shall come peace when man is gone at last;
 When all that pitiful history is told,
 And 'Finis' written to it, peace shall come,
 And through the silent centuries the sun shall wane,
 And slowly shall the earth grow cold and cold,
 And the slow river, smiling, mysterious,
 Will creep with a whisper of foam into the swell of the sea.

—Till the End, which is the Beginning,
 Till the sun is gone, and the earth, and the moon, and the stars,
 When Space is emptiness, and Time a second,
 Then we shall know the answer,
 Then we shall know 'Why',
 Because the Plan that the Spirit planned,
 Countless countless aeons and aeons ago,
 Will be complete, will be finished, accomplished:
 Then we shall know 'Why',
 And only then.

The Child Man [IV, 142]

In frozen state the carved lion crouches,
 Whiter than snow, and gleaming under the sun:
 Behind him, striking up into the sky,
 The marble columns bar the cloudy blue:

On every side the shafts of turrets rise
And swift spires pierce the wild blue heart of heaven:
Crosses of steel and silver flash in the flames
Of the flaring sun, and sculptured granite glints
And glimmers, almost blinding the eye with brightness:
The red of brick doth glow the ruby's hue,
And scarlet towers stain the sky with blood:
Wrought by the hand of man, and by his brain
Conceived and shaped, the town lies still in the morning:
Above its sleeping breast the swallows flight,
And seagulls swoop, wings whiter than ocean's foam,
And the gold sun dreams in the drowsy sky of dawn:
The streets seem empty, but Beauty is pacing there,
A phantom bright with hair like autumn corn,
And eyes as lakes are blue on summer eyes:
Is not man marvellous, that he has hammered
Beauty and grandeur from out of the silent stone?
Shall God not look from out his haloed heaven
And bless mankind for beauty they have wrought?

No! What beauty is this, this beauty of spires
And towers and turret-shafts? This is a sham,
A delusion, a snare, as the blushing apple is
When cankered at the heart: behind all this,
This sculptured stone, this carven granite-work,
Behind this gorgeous curtain o'er the stage
There crouches low a scene of utter dark:
Among these marvellous masonries goes man
Creeping and stealthily, head across one shoulder,
With fear and terror and hate in the core of his being:
Wretchedness here is crippling in filthy rags,
And poverty goes empty-mouthed to school,
And lust is red in the eyes, and hate curls back
The snarling, covetous lips: even the rich
Know happiness not: their lives are empty, or full
Of phantoms of care: for bitter uncertainty
And fear are both in palace and in slum:—
Oh, God! If ever you deign to think on man,
What do you think of this terrified, shrinking wretch,
This maggot who feeds on dreams, who builds himself
Castles and many-towered palaces
To nourish his monstrous vanity and pride,
Deludes himself with visions of splendid greatness,
And yet is blind to all his miseries?

Great God in Heaven, I never have prayed to thee,
Knowing my prayer useless against thy will,
Yet now I pray, knowing it unavailing,

Out of the shadowy deeps of my despair:
If ever in thy knowledge and thy might
Thou lookest down upon this creature, man,
And seest all his cruelties and lusts,
His phantom-dreams of love, his hates and fears,
Strike him not off from the breast of his mother, Earth:
I pray you, knowing you will not heed my prayer,
I pray to you, who knowest naught of time,
To let man live to reach maturity:
As yet he is a child, and he must make
Mistakes, as every child will do: but yet,
If given time, will not some future day
Dawn in a scarlet splendour, when man has grown
At last to manhood, and at last is great?

Pan à la vingtième siècle [V, 227]

Twentieth-century Pan, in tennis-shirt and flannels,
Sat on a hill-top, seeing on one side the smoke
Of the city, upon the other the country's pleasant downs,
While he jazzed out syncopations upon his harmonica.

"Of what shall I sing?" said Pan. "In dreams I see the nymphs
Pale-limbed among the bearded rushes, hear the gods
Howling their drinking-songs upon the storms. But these,
Fantasies, hearts delight, can communicate nothing to those
Who hear all day the drub of machines, who watch the smoke
Coil upwards from the grim fingers of factory chimney-stacks.
I am enamoured of old swords, gold-pommelled, unearthed
At Joppa, Jerusalem. But to hands blistered by flaming rifles
Swords are mere ornaments for officers. Tales I have loved
Of bowmen, Lincoln-green. But woods are empty now,
And streets swarming with khaki's drabness. Of what shall I sing?
Shall I delight my heart with the weaving of tapestries, dim
With old tales? Or scribble shorthand notes, and learn to play
Mechanic melodies upon the typewriter's iron scales?"

So pondered Pan, hunched on a hill-top, seeing both city,
Sullen with spell of smoke, and the country's sun-drenched plains.
Meanwhile, his modern instrument lay on his knees, unplayed.

Bacchanal in Aberdeen [VI, 305; St Paul's, Hitchin, Herts; 5 Sept, '42]

My rollickin' boy's cam' roarin' hame
 roarin' hame roarin' hame
my rollickin' boy's cam' roarin' hame

at sax o'clock i' the mornin'
he's loupit Don he's waided Dee
he's drunken a' the Northern Sea
an' my roarin' boy's cam' hame tae me
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'

Broil the chucks an' broach the beer
broach the beer broach the beer
broil the chucks an' broach the beer
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'
he's set the stany Gramps on fire
he's lowsed the kye frae Geordie's byre
he's froggit ower the Toon-hoose spire
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'

Scaich the fiddles blaw the pipes
blaw the pipes blaw the pipes
scaich the fiddles blaw the pipes
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'
he's row'd up Union Street like tow
he's skelpt the Lion ower the pow
he's ca'd the Queen a feel aul' cow
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'

Sing yer sangs an' jig yer reels
jig yer reels jig yer reels
sing yer sangs an' jig yer reels
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'
he's taen King's College croon on's heid
he's dunted Provost's neb tae bleed
he's focht a' the ploomen that ever were fee'd
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'

Bring oot yer banners hing yer flags
hing yer flags hing yer flags
bring out [sic] yer banners hing yer flags
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'
he hasna ony wierd tae dree
he's kicked ower a' civility
an' my rebel boy's cam' hame tae me
at sax o'clock i' the mornin'

Homage to Grey Granite [VII, 310; 6th Oct., '42; Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey]

The splendour of her granite steadfastness,
Outfacing ocean's anger, stands alone;
Though flanked by rivers, though the hills buttress,

She is more surely bastioned in her stone;
Man's fortress, built against a miser nature's,
Forcing that hunger into teeming bounty,
Surgeoning plenty upon those pauper features,
Sovereign riches coins from a copper county;
Magician garbed in gleaming stone, transforming
Hard-won harvest wrenched from earth and sea
Into a thousand graces, on a storming
World she stamps her seal, civility.

History for so many years, this city
Has gazed on the tribes of men that proudly pass,
Has watched them flourish green, and shown no pity
When time has scythed them down like withered grass;
Has shown no pity, but has seized from all
Their lust for life, and driven them out to harrow
Harvest's gold from earth's reluctant fall,
Struggling silver out of ocean's sorrow;
And from this toil, to strengthen and secure
Her fight to fructify the barren minute,
Embracing stone in passion grimly dour,
She has conceived herself in glinting granite.

Leave's End [VII, 313; 4 Nov, 1942; Aberdeen]

Sunset tonight, that spells the death of day,
Sinks in my blood, the running down of time
Ruins my steady heart, the twilight's grey
Over my eyes of brightness dusks a doom;
Declining daylight, darkening in my marrow,
Shadows my axe-edge logic-chopping brain,
Softens my needed hardihood to sorrow,
From khaki's public glory gleaning pain.

For, almost ended, all this week of wonder
Crumbles towards the crowded dusty past;
As wrought in sand, these walls of granite sunder;
Friendship's laughter fades and will not last;
The books decay; the student's scarlet gown
Dims like an autumn leaf; the mouth's caress
Crumple, a withered rose; I stand alone
Among my littered wreck of happiness.

Too great a burden, shoulders cry, too great
To carry with you back to khaki's drabness;
Thus, though my mind tomorrow may repeat
The soaring battlecries of freedom, sadness

(That I must leave this loveliness behind)
Lays on my heart tonight a desolation,
The empty leagues of distance, khaki's blind
Compulsion, loneliness, and separation.

Citizen Soldier [VII, 331; 6th February 1943; Aberdeen]

Listen! The granite, gaunt and void of pity,
Speaks to an exile, back so brief a season:
'O once my son, now stranger in this city,
Logic of time destroys your dreaming's reason,
Others possess your peace, your best-loved places,
Others have built their lives where you projected
Memory's architecture, other faces
Laugh where your laughter's youth, by time infected,
Dies without an echo, unprotected.

'You have no city now except that storied
Township far across the bleeding river,
Spur of serfs and flame of freedom, gloried
Borough that all mankind have sought forever,—
Capital of content whose cherished-charters,
Written upon the hearts of men, have made
How many heroes, O how many martyrs?
Thus were your city's strong foundations laid:
Go out and claim its freedom, unafraid.'

I Seek A City [VII, 342; 9th May, 1943; Catterick, Yorks]

Against the multitudinous impersonality of history I played my personal myth, my
singular drama.

Background: a scimitar sweep of bay; an arc of sea; a green bulk of mountains
shaggy with trees; parallel twisting threads of two rivers; a gaunt city,
granite, grey, lit by the sun to flashing loveliness.

Close ups: a house with bright windows, a shining lawn and coloured gardens;
school, a dim severity later lightening to understanding; university, a still
quadrangle and a dreaming crown.

Dramatis personae: my father, keen and quick and full of hope and anger; my
mother, gentleness, and patience seldom stirred to slapping irritation; blue
eyes, brown eyes, dark and fair, the girls I loved; and the puzzled, eager,
laughing faces of my friends.

Story: the usual one, an asking infancy, a childhood man-curious or animal-accepting, bewildered baffled sunlit thundery adolescence.

.....

But always, off-stage, history like a tragic chorus chanted her dark song of death by land and water and the hate of generations; and suddenly sprang from the wings, wrecking my personal fairytale with human fury, clad me in khaki and groomed my mind and steeled my strength for slaughter.

Yet in an alien place among alien faces the legend of my past was with me like an idyll, like a song in an empty house, a well in barrenness, an oasis in a valley of bones, remembered laughter in a fog of sorrow.

For to me there was a magic in the singular myth of my own youth, and O a spell about the memory of my city.

.....

Till the bombs fell, loud with death and splintered of destruction, and I went back and found my city mine no longer.

There was my house in ruins, and there my people homeless; there was my mother pale with tears, my father white with unavailing anger; and there my childhood lay in dust and fragments; and there the bitter wind blew upon the ashes of my adolescence.

Strangers were in the streets, whose unfamiliar mouths were full of laughter, and their pointing fingers did not know me; the girls my love once magnified to queens had dwindled into women; the friends I had were battle-distant exiles.

.....

The well in barrenness is dry, in the valley of bones the oasis has withered to dead sticks, through the fog of sorrow rings never an echo of remembered laughter.

Others possess my peace; others say of my city, 'This is mine'; others have built their lives where I projected the dreaming architecture of memory; and I am left with dust, with dust and ruins.

.....

Exiled I wander in a waste of steel.

Outcast I am until my days' end, except I find that other fabled city, that of which all men speak with words of longing, that capital of content so far across this wilderness of blood, that town whose spires have shimmered always through the storms of time and anger, whitely miraged on a green horizon.

Nameless that city, nameless and unknown, but yet there lives no man upon the earth
who does not seek it; and the wheeling world is crowded with the graves of
countless seeking generations.

.....

What shall I say of this city, when none has ever found it?

Miraculous and legendary things, for O this city is itself both miracle and legend.

Freedom is in that city with a sound of dancing.

Joy is in that city with a sound of laughter.

Plenty is in that city with a sound of singing.

Love is in that city with a sound of adoration.

There in that city each man's dream of his enchanted past and each man's hope of his
triumphant future merge in the impossible reality of a shining present.

There in that city the singular myth is one with history's multitudinous impersonality.

There in that city is no conflict, only counterpoint.

There in that city.

.....

And of that city all are citizens.

Forward [VII, 372; 30th August, 1943; Catterick, Yorks]

If now I should go back to my own city
The world's tumult roaring round my head
Would wreck the stillness I have built me there.
Return is a dream of straw. The iron road
Goes forward forward into noise and darkness
Darkness that glints as yet no hope of dawn
But in the earthquake heaving under our feet
This is the only steady path to follow.

**Devil in Aberdeen (A Satire for Solid Citizens) [VII, 390; 10 March 1944;
Chalfont St Giles, Bucks]**

The devil searched in Aberdeen
Its every ill to find:
Glittering granite's diamond sheen

As cold as steel and twice as keen
Was dulled by money's drab routine,
 Its beauty only a blind.

The devil hunted round the town
 In every darkest nook:
Though learning built a Tower and Crown
And wore the student's scarlet gown
Yet poverty was still a noun
 Blotting the copy-book.

The devil could not judge the case
 On simple 'Yea' or 'Nay':
Confused by granite's hardy grace
Alongside hunger's cheated face
He scratched his head about the place
 And sighed and went away.

Portrait and History [VII, 400; October 1944; Haywards Heath, Sussex]

A sea as harsh as granite grips the town
Grey as the sky encased in winter's steel
Where onetime, half the dreamer, half the clown,
The jesting devotee of some ideal
(For 'some' read 'any'), I lived unaware
Terror and pain could ever reach me there.

For all that grey of sea and stone and sky
Was lit to glinting loveliness and grace
By friends whose laughter hurried winter by
In one perpetual spring, and time and space
(What centuries and suns), though dark and long,
Were yet as bright as noon and brief as song.

But still the dearest stratagems of love
Could not defeat the years that plotted rage,
The eagle pruned his claws behind the dove
Which never quite escaped the tyrants' [sic] cage
(Called History, or Fate), but fluttered tied
Tight to that iron past which love denied.

My Name is Million [VII, 401; October 1944]

My name is million, here I lie
In France as in Thermopylae,
And weeds and grass commingled wave
Their careless heads above my grave.

Perhaps my dream was liberty,
A sea-grey town, a stone-grey sea,
Perhaps my only lust was fame,
But lost in any case my name.

Remembering Aberdeen (Fragment) [VII, 405; December 1944; Veghel, Holland]

Like hourglass sand the granite sinks and crumbles
Into a memory, a wish, a dream
Which wavers as a shipwrecked jewel trembles
Falsified under water's twisty gleam.

Guttural voices aping the elegant south
Argue and chaffer under mica's dazzle.....

In Exile [VII, 417; 6 August 1945; Stolzenau, Germany]

Lying awake to-night in the close darkness,
Moths at the window blundering after moonshine
And crickets fretting their hearts in every corner,
I think of the foreign landscape dawn must shortly
Strip of anonymous shade, the sluggish meadows
That heave their slow waves to flat horizons,
Field upon field upon field of nothing but harvest
Boring the eyes with gold, a docile country
Trained like a dray to carry the peasant's labour,
Its wildness tamed away and made domestic,
Tricks and tempers soothed to heavy patience.
I think of this and I think of my own country,
The narrow land between the sea and mountains
Shouting defiance, sea tearing the beaches,
Tearing the rocks, the cliffs like hammers beating
The tiderip back, the city's stone a crystal
Echoing sunlight under the mountain's shadow,
I think of my own country and try to remember
Dawn leaping the hills with a tiger's swiftness,
Furious black and gold, I try to remember
Sunset opening out a splendid poppy
Over the granite sea, I try to remember
Moods as shifting and sudden as shadows dapple,
Twisting breaking changing, try to remember
The face of my land like the face of my own darling
And fail, my eyes gone blind with adoration.

Laurels for Granite [VIII, 434; 15 February 1946]

1.

Here where Scotland like a thrawn old fishwife
Dourly shoulders the sea,
Upon her breast this city's granite flower
Blossoms against that salt sterility.

No mere construction of concrete, bricks and plaster,
This like a flower has grown
Out of the rocks where all its roots are founded
And shaped itself in stone.

Here, with the hills, the sea, the rivers meeting,
The city stands between,
Flowering out of the soil and grown completely
One with the natural scene.

2.

The natural scene? A monotone of grey,
The sea like stone, the city dull as the sea,
The hills the bleached pallor of dead lichen,
The sallow rivers drowning the dark sky.

This town is a clumsy mountain of cold rock
Harder than steel, the streets like snell ravines
Trenching the stone where walls rear up in cliffs
To block the sunlight out and guard the shadows.

Cold, colourless, bitter, bleak and grey:
This is your city! This is the town whose people
Have ears dulled by the ceaseless dirge of the sea
And eyes blunted on endless bluffs of granite.

A dull town and a dull delightless people,
Even their laughter harsh as the stone which builds
A prison round their hearts and throws a grey
Shadow across their lives in blank monotony.

3.

Whoever harps on granite's essential greyness
Has only seen the stone
In the dirt and drizzle of drab December mornings
When even the light seems dead as withered bone.

For granite holds a sudden secret beauty
Escaping the casual eye,
Out of its gloom the silver slashes of mica
Dazzle the sight like stars in a dark sky.

And in the stolid people the unsuspected
Secret is suddenly known
By a sparkle of wit, a glitter of skill and courage
That lights their lives as mica lights the stone.

In a quagmire world of queasy doubts and queries
This alone is sure:
Endurance stands like a rock when faith has crumbled:
The heart must needs be granite to endure.

Deevil in Aiberdeen (2) [VIII, 476; 19 July 1947; Aberdeen]

The deevil socht in Aiberdeen,
 Its ilka wrang tae finn:
Gesserant granite's diamant sheen,
Caulder nor steel and twice as keen,
Stuid happan siller's coorse routine,
 Its beautie anelie a blinn.

The deevil huntit ower the toun
 In aa its daurkest neuks:
Tho learnan raised a Touer and Croun
And wavered [?] the student's scarlet gown,
Yet puirtith's slums were black aroun
 The biggans braw wi buiks.

The deevil culdna judge the case
 Wi simple 'Aye' or 'Na':
Sae fashed bi granite's hardy grace
Alangside hunger's girnan face,
He shook his heid about the place
 And swore and gaed awa.

Train til Aberdeen [VIII, 502; 15 October 1948; 'Between Glasgow & Aberdeen']

Fowr hours awa frae the grime and glaur o Glesca,
Fowr hours o kintra droukt in October sun,
Ower birlan burns and by a drove o mountains
And shauven parks wi aa the hairst got in,
Till sudden, the sea!—he's chuckit a handfu o siller
 Straucht in my een.

The lichthoose scents frae the shore, a lintwhite lassie
Luran the wealth o trawler chiels tae lan',
The waas get up, and spires o gesserant granite
Dirk at the clouds whas colour mates their ain,

Till sudden, the city!—quine wi the glamour o smeddum,
Ye've grippit me roun.

A Saving (Thassos) [XI, 863 on p. 33; 9 July 1974]⁴

'*Gratis!*' he cried
(in his foreign fashion),
and lit his fag from the focus
that glassed the magnified blaze
of the vertical sun.

The Aberdonians aren't quite all
in Scotland's Dallas-on-Dee.

Poems © Catherine J. Scott

⁴The numbering of pages and poems in Scott's eleventh notebook goes awry for a few pages, with several poem numbers being allocated to two poems.