

“AN HONORABLE, GOOD MAN?”

Review of

“PRETTY GOOD FOR A WOMAN”: *THE ENIGMAS OF EVELYN SCOTT*

by D. A. Callard

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—Reviewed by **Mary Jo Weaver**

Those interested in Merton and his father might be tempted to read pages 70-96 of this fascinating book and be done with it. From those few pages, Merton scholars can find a picture of Owen Merton to contrast with that painted by Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Whereas Mott sees Owen Merton as a “very good man . . . not safe in his goodness” (22) his mistress, Evelyn Scott, once thinly fictionalized him as “a man torn by conflicting desires; a committed artist barely able to function in the world” (Callard p. 75). Whereas Mott pictures Owen Merton as “trying to be honorable and sound and decent and a very perfect gentleman” (26) as he ended his affair with Evelyn Scott, Callard says flatly that “Owen was brutal” and that his refusal to defend Evelyn against the dislikes of his in-laws “was cowardice” (94). Readers can also decide whether Owen Merton was the austere, saintly man portrayed by Merton in *Seven Storey Mountain* or, as he was to make his way into one of Evelyn Scott’s novels, a “fumbling, brutal, fragmentary man” with “hints of a bisexual past” (Callard p. 75). Is Callard correct that Thomas Merton painted an idealized picture of his father in *Seven Storey Mountain* by omitting “the disorder, indecision and poverty” reflected in both fictional studies and in Owen Merton’s own correspondence (75)?

Having read Callard’s wonderful book about Evelyn Scott, which is able to evoke the uproar of the twenties in both intellectual and visceral terms, I am surprised that she was taken with Owen Merton at all. Mott is right, I think, in characterizing her initial interest as “patronizing” (23), though perhaps matronizing would have been a better word since she so clearly was attracted to the naive child in Owen. When that “child” climbed into her bed, forming a corner of some kind of *menage a trois* with Evelyn and her “husband,” Cyril Kay Scott, her relationship with Merton was decidedly less maternal. What this Freudian paradise—the naive waif sleeping with the mother while the



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"father"/husband was in the house; the naive waif's pre-pubescent son, still mourning his own recently deceased mother being "punished . . . for an infinite number of things" (73) including crying for his mother—did to the young Thomas Merton strains the imagination.

Evelyn Scott did not like Tom Merton and he did not like her. She described him as "morbid and possessive" and as "a constant obstacle to peace of mind" (94) and his antipathies toward her surely prevented Owen from marrying her (though the prospect of having to assume financial responsibility for a wife and two sons—a challenge he had failed earlier—apparently played its role in his decision to break off the affair). Whatever the terms of disengagement, Evelyn Scott continued enthusiastically to promote Owen Merton's painting (Callard p. 94).

While there may be few pages on Owen Merton specifically in this illuminating study of Evelyn Scott, there is an abundance of detail about his period. Callard, described on the book jacket as a "bookdealer" in West Yorkshire, has given us an entertaining, informative and altogether lucid book on the characters and events of the twenties and thirties. Evelyn Scott (born Elsie Dunn, 1893) escaped from the remnants of the Louisiana aristocracy in 1913 by eloping with a man old enough to be her father. A public life which began in scandal ended in genteel poverty in a fleabag upper Broadway hotel in 1963. At the end of her life she had exhausted the patience of her friends, faded from the memory of the reading public, and fled into a back corner of a latently paranoid imagination. Most of us have never heard of her despite the judgment of a New Yorker critic that her novel, *The Wave* was "the best Civil War novel ever written" (Callard p.159). She knew and related to the great artists and the unremembered writers of her period, recognized Faulkner's genius in 1924, decades ahead of the critics, and was repaid with a backhanded compliment: when someone asked Faulkner in 1940 if there had ever been any good women writers, he replied, "Well, Evelyn Scott was pretty good for a woman" (Callard p. 116). She participated in many of the literary colony experiments of her day—Yaddo, the Taos colony, Greenwich Village in its heyday— travelled the world with various "husbands" and lovers (she was in Algeria with Merton when he painted what his son later said was Owen's best work). And she worked: in her twenty year artistic career from 1921-1941 she produced twelve novels, two volumes of poetry, four children's books and two autobiographical works plus magazine articles, reviews and essays.

She was a puzzling woman, full of unresolved conflicts, resistant to easy characterization. Her biographer finally does not know exactly what to make of her, but shows us what this story of a "failure" can tell us about "the underbelly of American cultural life in this century" (188). In Evelyn Scott we can read the story of an impassioned woman whose "feminism" (if we can call it that) had little to do with equal opportunity and everything to do with existential liberation. We can find the story of an artist haunted by the same seamy Southern decay that obsessed Faulkner, a writer who lived through a turbulent period of experimentation and utter rejection of the past. We can find a "bad mother" who so alienated her son, Creighton, (Thomas Merton's friend at age seven, but missing in *Seven Storey Mountain*) that Creighton and his wife did not attend Evelyn Scott's funeral.

Evelyn Scott is a forgotten member of the "Lost Generation," and Owen Merton, her lover for a while, seems to have been a lost soul in his own right, one who did not need the twenties to appear out of touch with the hard realities of real life. Readers of Merton will be fascinated with another perspective on Owen and will be led to speculate about the damaging results of Owen's involvements on a sad and lost little boy. These bits of dark background help us to fill in a more detailed picture of Thomas Merton, and to appreciate the complexities involved in human understanding.