

“LOVING HANDS AND AN EYE THAT KNEW”: KATHLEEN SCOTT, SCULPTOR AND ROMANTIC

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“A wonderful woman, first rate at her job” was George Bernard Shaw’s verdict on his friend, Kathleen Scott (1878-1947). Long obscured by her first husband, Captain Robert Scott “of the Antarctic,” Kathleen Scott’s biography was recently published by Louisa Young and she is recalled in a vivid and affectionate essay by James Lees-Milne. Despite the merits of these works, neither author adequately addresses what Kathleen Scott believed was her chief claim to distinction—her sculpture. In his preface to *Self-Portrait of an Artist* (1949), her posthumously published memoirs and diaries, Scott’s second husband, Edward Hilton Young, first Lord Kennet, describes her as “an artist first; her work constantly called her back from the distractions of family and social life” (10). His article addresses Kathleen’s relationship with Scott and is complemented by a discussion of her sculpture. Fifty years after her death the latter is ripe for reassessment. What should emerge, whether in the art of making love or the love of making art, is her highly romantic and idealistic outlook.

Edith Agnes Kathleen Bruce was born in 1878, the eleventh and youngest child of an Anglican clergyman. Orphaned at seven, her disciplined and restricted—one might say “Victorian”—upbringing only succeeded in fostering a strong sense of independence. She studied at the Slade School, London (1900-1902), where she excelled in the modelling classes, and then at the Académie Colarossi, Paris (1902-1906). In her memoirs Kathleen vividly depicts her bohemian life in Paris. She writes of her early triumphs when she attained *massier* (free-place) status at the Colarossi and acceptance at the prestigious, progressive Salon de la Société Nationale, and of her tribulations in preserving her “masterful virginity” from the onslaughts of admiring male artists, who included Edward Steichen and Rembrandt Bugatti (Kennet 89). Inevitably for a young sculptor training in Paris, Auguste Rodin provided inspiration. When they met, he responded to Kathleen’s charisma and vitality, calling her “un petit morceau grec d’un chef d’oeuvre” (Young 39). Rodin’s regard for her sculpture, clearly more than flirtatious flattery, was indicated when he addressed her no longer as “chère élève” but as “chère collègue” (Young 39).

The few surviving early sculptures by Kathleen Bruce reflect Rodin’s influence in their naturalistic poses and fluid modelling. They are more conservative, however, in their avoidance of fragmentation and their lack of expressive angst. And the maternal themes of several statuettes represent themes distinctly different from those of Rodin. These reflect her romantic obsession with motherhood and the baby as a miracle of creation. Following her own rather miserable childhood, Kathleen’s driving force had been to conceive a son and this is expressed in sublimated form in these works. Her sole religious vision as a convent schoolgirl was of the baby who left the Madonna’s lap and “snuggled warmly into my yearning, immature arms” (Kennet 19-20). Concern for babies born amidst the Turkish atrocities in Macedonia led her to quit her studio in 1903 to assist with child relief there. In 1905 she again put sculpture on hold to tend her



Kathleen Bruce (later Scott), circa 1907 (source Lord Kennet).

pregnant friend, surely the world's most famous "solo-mother" at the time, Isadora Duncan.

Kathleen Bruce's emotionally charged maternal themes contrast irreconcilably with the impersonal modernism of male counterparts such as Aristide Maillol and Constantin Brancusi. Unfortunately, this has contributed to their art historical marginalisation. A less problematic early work is the portrait mask, *William Butler Yeats*. Modelled in 1907 shortly after her return to London, it compares in subject and style with Rodin's *Balzac*; the heavy sweep of hair echoing Balzac's dishevelment. In description applicable to both works Kathleen's friend, Stephen Gwynn, wrote of the Yeats portrait: "Strength is there and aloofness—and contempt of the crowd" (n. pag.). Both sculptors qualified the likenesses that portraiture demanded with romantic admiration of their subjects; the aim, consistent with symbolism, was to convey an inner realism. Gwynn wrote: "What the sculptor has seen and modelled . . . is the contemplative; dreams have softened the fluent beauty of those curves and smoothed out the traces of hungry passion. But the underlying force of resistance can be traced in the forehead" (n. pag.).

Like many artists of her generation, Kathleen was unable and unwilling to move beyond sketchily modelled "inner realism" to modernist abstraction; a parallel in painting was Augustus John who was admired "not for doing new things but doing old things superbly well" (Spalding 22). It is significant that Kathleen admired John as much as she reviled Jacob Epstein. In a diary entry of 1924 she wrote of his exhibition at the Leicester Galleries, London: "Went to see Epstein's foul eruption. It is creative however creative of great ugliness and vicious unpleasantness. God will damn him" (Young 226). The language is significant: her curse is stronger for being bestowed by an atheist, and the "great ugliness" that she decries demarcates Epstein's modern, anti-beauty aesthetic from Kathleen's more traditional idealism.

Kathleen's Parisian experiences prepared her for a triumphant entry into London society. Her new friends included J.M. Barrie, Max Beerbohm, the painter Charles Shannon, Shaw and Scott. The presence of Scott in this cultural milieu is explained by the "lion-hunting" Thursday afternoon teas hosted by the socialite Mabel Beardsley, the sister of Aubrey Beardsley, where Scott first met Kathleen in late 1906. His fame, following his Polar expedition on the *Discovery* (1901-1904) had made Scott a desirable guest at such functions; his eligibility as a bachelor was an added recommendation. Never the stereotypical naval officer, Scott would today be termed a "new age man"; sensitive, diffident, at times almost neurotically lacking in self-confidence, he was conscious of his inadequate literary and artistic education (Huntford 239). "Not very young, perhaps forty, nor very good looking" was Kathleen's first evaluation (Kennet 76). Some months later, again at Mabel Beardsley, her response was more enthusiastic:

All of a sudden, and I did not know how, I was . . . being trivially chaffed by this celebrated explorer. He was of a rare smile, and with those eyes of a quite unusually dark blue, almost purple. I had noticed those eyes ten months before. I noticed them again now . . . I had never seen their like. He suggested taking me home. . . . Not for a moment did I doubt that on leaving the house he would hail a hansom but no, he started striding forth westward at a good rate. Anxious but excited I fell in, and side by side we walked, laughing, talking, jostling

each other, as we lunged along the riverside in hilarious high spirits. Arrived at my very humble little home, I hesitated. "Mayn't I come and see where you live?" and he did. (Kennet 83)

Despite this blithe tone, the courtship between Scott and Kathleen was a bumpy one and twice she attempted to call off their engagement. Scott's negative characteristics were compounded by financial anxieties over the need to support his devout, austere, widowed mother, Hannah. And it must be asked: was Kathleen in love with Scott? Before their meeting, when confronted with eligible male companions, she had rejected them: "none is worthy to be the father of my son" (Huxley 159). Her approach of maintaining virginity until the father was chosen has been called Wagnerian, but Scott's biographer, Elspeth Huxley, is less flattering: "These young artists were unaccustomed to being judged like prize bulls" (159-60). Kathleen wrote of one of her most regretted rejects, the writer Gilbert Cannan: "Corn-coloured hair and a crooked smile, maybe, but not the father for my son" (Kennet 87). By the time the prizewinner emerged, Kathleen was twenty nine, at the time a relatively advanced age for motherhood. Scott's past, and surely his future polar achievements, were proof that, as Francis Spufford wittily states, "he possessed the eugenic right stuff: the hero as potential sperm donor" (293). In her memoirs Kathleen was naturally less clinical and more romantic: "Quite clearly this healthy, fresh, honest, rock-like naval officer was just exactly what I had been setting up in my mind as a contrast to my artist friends, as the thing I had been looking for" (Kennet 84).

Within three months of her marriage in September 1908, Kathleen was pregnant. She wrote to Scott, who was away on naval duties, "My love my dear love my very dear love throw up your hat and shout and sing triumphantly for it seems we are in a fair way to achieve my aim" (Young 105). Love notwithstanding, her choice of "my aim" rather than "our" aim is significant. Yet it would be pointless to question the sincerity of Kathleen's recollections of how she felt when Peter Scott was born:

Very large, very healthy, quite perfect was my boy baby; and then a very strange thing happened to me. I fell for the first time gloriously, passionately, wildly in love with my husband. I did not know I had not been so before but I knew it now. He became my god. The father of my son and my god. Until now, he had been a probationer, a means to an end. Now my aim, my desire, had been abundantly accomplished. I worshipped the two of them as one, father and son, and gave myself up in happy abandonment to that worship. Now my determined, my masterful virginity, sustained through such strong vicissitudes, seemed not . . . mere selfish prudery but the purposeful and inevitable highway to this culminating joy and peace. (Kennet 89)

Although this "culminating joy and peace" lasted all too short a time, it had a temporarily deleterious impact on Kathleen's artistic career: child-rearing and fund-raising for the second polar exhibition monopolised her time. In what she called "agonies and ecstasies of reciprocated love" she left "the laughing, tawny haired baby Hercules" behind and accompanied Scott on the outward journey to New Zealand (Kennet 89). While Kathleen's romantic outpourings may seem irritatingly cloying, her

memoir was not intended for public consumption. She and Scott envisaged a separation of well over two years and he faced extreme dangers. Read with hindsight, there is immense pathos in the diary that Kathleen started when they were separated in November 1910 and which she intended to present to him on their eventual reunion: “20 September 1911: I had a horrid day today. I woke up having had a bad dream about you, and then Peter came very close today and said emphatically ‘Daddy won’t come back’ as though in answer to my silly thoughts. . . . 27 November 1912: I spent the entire day making a statuette of you!! in uniform!!! rather good it is!!!! The last entry was written eight months after Scott’s death. It was not until February 1913 that she heard the news, en route to New Zealand. She wrote:

My god is godly. I need not touch him to know that. Let me maintain my high, adoring exaltation, and not let the contamination of sorrow touch me. Within I shall be exultant. My god is glorious and could never become less so. Had he died before I had known his gloriousness, or before he had been the father of my son, I might have felt a loss. Now I have felt none for myself. Won’t anybody understand that? (Kennet 121)

The second Lord Kennet, Kathleen’s son from her second marriage, sees this passage as the product of an unhinged mind and wishes it were quoted and discussed less. Louisa Young, however, regards it as reflecting Kathleen’s “patriotic idealism and mystical romanticism” (156). It was better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved and never to have had Peter. This is not to say that Kathleen’s grief should be minimised, but the joy she derived from Scott’s inspiration and achievement was ultimately stronger. Written at a time of greater mental stability, the note from Kathleen that Scott carried with him to the Pole reflects her determined self-sufficiency: “Man dear *we can do without you* please know for sure we can. . . . If there’s anything you think worth doing at the cost of your life—Do it. We shall only be glad. Do you understand?” (Young 157).

Kathleen Scott’s subsequent achievements as a sculptor indicate that she could, indeed, do without Scott, however sacred his memory. So well did she succeed that Shaw felt compelled to contrast Scott, “who had nothing wonderful in him . . . the most incompetent failure in the history of exploration,” with his tribute to the “wonderful woman” quoted at the opening of this paper.¹ Perhaps the most enduring manifestation of Kathleen’s belief in Scott’s “gloriousness” is her best-known work, the bronze statue of him in Whitehall, London. When he unveiled it, the First Lord of the Admiralty, A.J. Balfour, noted of its execution that “it was not only loving hands but an eye that knew, and a memory that recorded all that could be seen and known to her” (*Times* 6 Nov 1915: 11). Although its rugged handling distinguishes it from most predecessors, Scott is still portrayed with the late Victorian realism that such monumental statuary demanded: with his ski-stick replacing a classical standard, he stares into the distance with the determined smile recorded on newsreel films. The replica in Christchurch, unveiled in 1917, which Kathleen undertook in Italy because of war restrictions benefits from being carved from Carrara marble. A British critic, Viola Tree, enthused that “the

¹ George Bernard Shaw to Lord Kennet, 21 February 1948. Kennet archive.



Captain Robert Falcon Scott by Kathleen Scott. 1916 (unveiled 1917). Marble, overlife-size. Worcester Boulevard, Christchurch.

whiteness and stillness seem to suggest the ice and snow, the cold and loneliness of the place where he met his heroic death" (553). In 1933 Kathleen recorded in her diary that the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) had "seen my statue in New Zealand flood lit, said the people prized it tremendously."

The Scott statues and several other public monuments established Kathleen's prominence in British sculpture by the end of World War 1. Her career peaked during the inter-war years, with numerous exhibits at the Royal Academy and Paris Salons, and election to the Royal Society of British Sculptors. In 1937 the BBC's first television programme on sculpture focused on her portraits and working methods, and the following year *Homage*, a book on her sculpture, was published, with commentary by Gwynn. Her academic and critical status was matched by her popular reputation recorded in the two volumes of press cuttings in the Kennet archive at Cambridge University Library. They include newspaper and women's magazine articles, such as "Wife, Mother and Genius," "When Woman Wields the Chisel" and "Reminiscences of a Sculptress."

Kathleen Scott's works from this period belong to two main categories: carefully modelled, romanticised statues of male youths, "boys straining, taut-limbed and eager," (Gwynn n.pag.) which sometimes duplicate as war memorials; and portraits, mostly busts, of her eminent male contemporaries. The gender disparity in her work was noted even in the pre-feminist press of the inter-war years. In response Kathleen published "My Masculine Models," an article which denied claims that she avoided using women as subjects because they were "more difficult and less interesting to model." Rather, she found herself attracted to sculpting "the heads of men whose features suggest high power or intellect . . . most artists like best to produce what they know best. What they know best is commonly what they love best."² Describing her portraits as "assertions of love," she believed "one must only think of the highest people; one must work and provide only for them. One must discount the base, or there would be no art, poetry, music or devotion" (Gwynn n.pag.).

Kathleen's prominence as Scott's widow and her own personal qualities facilitated her access to "men of high power and intellect." Yet it is wrong to characterise her as a "lion-hunter" of sculpture. Her diaries, which she kept until 1946, the year before her death, indicate how sitters sought her commissions—and friendship—as frequently, if not more so, than she sought theirs. "There seemed to be no public figure with whom she was not on intimate terms," observed Lees-Milne (2). Four of her models were prime ministers: Herbert Asquith (who said she had "the best brain of any woman I know"), David Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. The sculpture of Chamberlain (1937) in the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery is one of her finest busts and casts a plausibly humane light on an often caricatured politician. Other friends included Fridtjof Nansen, Edward Mandell House, E.M. Forster, T.E. Lawrence, Malcolm Sargent and J.B. Priestley. The artistic product of such friendships are portraits which rank with those of Edgar Boehm fifty years earlier and Francis Chantrey a century earlier in their sculptural record of contemporary celebrities. Together with her statues of youths and the early Rodinesque statuettes, they establish Kathleen Scott as the most significant British woman sculptor before Barbara Hepworth.

² Clipping labelled "*Weekly Despatch*." Kennet archive.

Why, then, has Kathleen Scott been so ignored by art history? To some extent she suffered a similar fate as non-modernist male contemporaries such as William Reid Dick, Richard Garbe and Charles Wheeler. This generation had the misfortune to come between the glamorous late Victorian New Sculpture of Alfred Gilbert and the modern “masterpieces” of Henry Moore and Hepworth. In addition, Kathleen’s temperament and outlook have not attracted feminist art historians. Her preference for “masculine models” does not lessen her interest, however her opposition to women’s suffrage is another matter and led her to be labelled “sneeringly anti-feminist” by Germaine Greer (74). Incomprehensibly, even to her admirers, Kathleen “would argue by the hour of the personal inferiority of women, yet in practice can seldom refrain from confuting her argument” (Young 181). Her anti-suffrage opinions, founded partly on Victorian conservatism and partly on dislike of special pleading, have made her appear a less attractive figure than her work or her character otherwise merit. Almost half a century of neglect has, however, been redressed by Young and Lees-Milne whose biographical accounts have rescued Kathleen from the condescending obscurity of being Scott’s widow. Moreover, historical recognition of the achievement of Kathleen Scott’s art promises to receive belated attention in Delia Gaze’s forthcoming *Dictionary of Woman Artists*. Whether Kathleen would approve of the context is another matter entirely!

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