

DANTE 700: A DEAD POET'S TOUR OF THE CITY

CANTO II: PURGATORY

Written by Jen McGregor

Produced by Fronteiras Theatre Lab

Notes on how to read this script:

All characters in this audio promenade are performed by one actor (Daniel Hird).

There are four voices in this Canto:

The Narrator: a young man with a contemporary Dundonian accent.

William McGonagall: Scotland's most infamous poet, considered to be the worst of them all. Male voice, middle-aged, Dundonian accent with an old-fashioned inflection.

Captain Scott: a young-ish Englishman, a proud and brave adventurer.

Mary Slessor: a slightly older Scottish woman, a missionary, pious and calm.

MCGONAGALL

[with a hint of humour] "Traditionally it's south for Purgatory,

But budget crises being what they are

You get a compact version of the story.

Though we can't reach the southern hemisphere

Within a journey very much truncated,

We've got a seer of southern starlight here!"

[NAR] I look around at where we're now located,

Thinking to see another set of souls,
 But where McGonagall has indicated

A stately barque upon the water rolls.

[MCG] "Discovery!" [NAR] the poet cries, [MCG] "the nice-
 -est ship that ever visited the poles!

In 19-oh-2 became trapped in ice
 And two long winters she sat shivering there
 Where penguins for company must suffice.

And now she rests here in Dundee so fair,
 The finest flower of the silvery Tay,
 And doubles up as Purgat'ry's parterre –

But do not let yourself become dismayed!
 Though you might feel the afterlife's sold short,
 Two spirits wait to grant you time of day.

See Captain Scott beside his bold transport,
 In history there never sailed a better!
 And there a spirit of another sort,
 The worthy missionary Mary Slessor.
 Come, let's approach this purgatorial port."

[NAR] Of history's facts I am no great possessor –
 I worry, will my ignorance offend?
 I walk towards the spirits nonetheless, for

What choice have I, if I want to ascend?

The souls don't notice me. They concentrate
Intensely on the task to which they tend -

They're twining fibres into rope. They plait
And twist, their fingers flying, heads bent down.
But what's their sin? What can this expiate?

The missionary glances up and frowns.
She nudges her companion, points me out,
Convinces him to set their labour down.

I ask them what their presence here's about.
[SCO] "I was one Captain Robert Falcon Scott.
You'll know my death at least, I shouldn't doubt.

I strove, I sought, I found, I yielded not
To be the first to reach the Antarctic Pole,
But finally my mission came to naught -

Survival soon became my party's goal,
And in a blizzard, forty below zero,
My gallant comrade Oates said he would stroll

Awhile, and off he went and died a hero.
He bought the group a little extra time,
But sad to say, our quest ended in sorrow,

Within a fortnight we were lost to rime
And all our corpse found snow-covered.
Now, though such exploration was no crime,

When in the afterlife all lay uncovered
 I came to think pride played too great a part
 In my frenzy to be he who discovered

The southern polar route. Upon my heart
 I felt a heavy weight, for men like me,
 Adventurous spirits, always keen to start

Upon a new path, sail a foreign sea,
 Chart lands unknown – too little did we think
 Of what the impact of our acts might be.

The lives we touched, the hasty claims we made,
 The sacrifices made in progress' name...
 My actions, when with consequences weighed

Left me feeling... I wouldn't call it shame,
 As such, but some discomfort too complex
 To fit into one word. And so I came

To linger here, until I feel unvexed
 By nagging doubts, and confident my soul
 Has chosen where it shall adventure next –

And then there'll be no doubt I'll reach my goal."
 [NAR] Scott's said enough, he starts to weave again.
 Retelling his tale surely took its toll.

The missionary speaks, she tells me when

She was alive it was her greatest hope
 To bind all souls into one great "amen",

[MAR] "And to that end, I sought to interlope,
 And spread God's love where I saw greatest need –
 A task that's far beyond a mortal's scope.

I aimed to look beyond nation or creed
 And love my fellow creatures as they are.
 It wasn't just God's word I made folk heed,

But stories of my life in Calabar,
 And of the strides the people there had made
 Along a path that previously was barred,

Toward fair trade and healthcare, and away
 From practicing infanticide on twins.
 I wanted to explain why I had stayed –

There I could take abandoned children in,
 And educate them, offer them a chance,
 A life that isn't over ere it begins.

I see that there's confusion in your glance –
 How does one get to Paradise, when even
 A mission'ry stays here? Well, it's my stance.

Within my time they thought me fit for Heaven
 But come my time I couldn't leave behind
 My quest to solve the problems we are given.

While suffering endures I'll give my mind
To thoughts of how humanity can build
A better, fairer world than this we find.

Until nobody is unjustly killed,
Until fair chance is every person's lot,
I'll stay right here and use my other skills,

For history forgets that I was not
A missionary born and raised – time was
I worked in jute mills. That's often forgot,

It's overshadowed by my best-known cause.
Like Captain Scott, in death I'm questioning
My role in life. The things that give me pause

Are whether, without others meddling,
Calabar would have needed any aid.
What image of them were we peddling?

A people once horrifically betrayed,
Or childlike people, needing help and chiding?
Complexity that wasn't clear conveyed

Within my time. I cannot feel my guiding
Was wrong, yet taking the eternal view
I question what's uniting and dividing.

And so I choose this place, here to work through

The knotty problems of how to proceed,
How to unite the many with the few,

But every inch we weave furthers the deed,
Binding us all together with one cord –
A mission that I never will concede.”

NARRATOR

The spirit doesn't speak another word.

Please follow your guide to the next stop at the Dundee Science Centre.