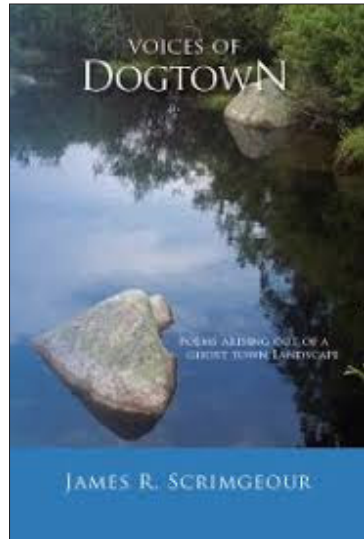


## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/3

**Voices of Dogtown**  
By James R. Scrimgeour  
Loom Press  
Lowell, Massachusetts  
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ISBN: 978-0-931507-16-8  
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*Review By Dennis Daly*

James R. Scrimgeour communes with spirits and he does it with wit and wisdom. In Scrimgeour's new poetry collection, *Voices of Dogtown*, he conjures up the denizens of a long abandoned New England village on the outskirts of Gloucester, Massachusetts. The few specters that still haunt this plot of land, called Dogtown, are not happy campers. Without any mollycoddling, the poet gives them voices and listens to their grievances, all the while working into these poems a jumble of scholarly citations, guidebook descriptions, ekphrastic commentaries, and even conjectures from an earlier eminent poet. Consider this book a topographical and historical adventure. At the end of his introductory poem entitled *Dogtown*, Scrimgeour sets the tone,

*"The settlement at Dogtown was merely something of an eddy in the... history of Cape Ann." (C&R, p.43)*

*"It is the lonely highland of Cape Ann, empty of habitation, abandoned by the dogs and even by the cows that used to find thin pasture there, left to the ghosts of its deserted village. It's where you're off to... when the world is too much with you." (Garland, p.57)*

O.K. We're off...

In short order the reader meets Tammy Younger, Queen of the Witches. Foul mouthed Tammy does not suffer fools lightly. Her five timely narrations inform and enliven the book. The first of those narrations, entitled *Thomasine (Tammy) Younger (1753-1829)*—Introduction, inserts eeriness into the landscape and reveals the onset of a relationship between Tammy and Scrimgeour's persona, whom she calls "old geezer" throughout. Here Tammy explains the soft spot she has for the poet,

*f...in' weird how I see so clearly into and through him, an' he sees into and through me—hafta admit it's kinda nice to finally have someone tell our story from my point a view—tho I wish he wouldn't clean up my language so much—all those f...in' dots—aaarrgggh!!! Whassee wanna do sell his book in the tourist shops—hmmmmm, might do the tourists some good to read somethin' a little nearer the truth—an' the geezer has an edge I kinda like...*

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The hilly area chronicled by Scrimgeour is strewn with boulders left by the last glacier as it recoiled from the sun's new warmth. They are accentuated by shrubs, bushes, new growth trees, and berry patches. Even on hot days a mysterious chill (perhaps from nearby swamps) seems to hang in the air appending melancholy inflections. Groupings of smaller rocks signify abandoned cellars, each having a story to tell-- sometimes known, sometimes unknown. Some of the larger boulders the poet imagines as self-sustaining homes, scarred with individual markings. Scrimgeour's poem *A Community of Boulders* begins this way,

*large and small, beige and grey houses  
deposited centuries ago by a retreating  
glacier—homes, rounded and smooth—*

*no doors, front or back—cracks for  
windows, rare bluebirds resting on or  
beneath the eaves—wild shrub hedges*

*here and there, bayberry bushes imported  
by colonists—with thorns and cluster  
of shiny red tear-shaped berries—guarding*

*the non-existent doors...*

A second ghost that consorts with Scrimgeour (although grudgingly) is the ill-fated Abram Wharf. Wharf, the most educated man in Dogtown and a cousin of Theophilus Parsons, Chief Justice of Massachusetts Supreme Court, played by the rules and for a while parleyed his respectability into prosperity as a shepherd and a farmer. He married young and apparently his own fortune declined as the town declined. His sheep died and his own house became "hardly habitable." Scrimgeour's piece *Abram Wharf* (1738 ca—1814) records Wharf's demise,

*... one day in 1814, Old Abram (aged 76 years)  
"sat by the fire sharpening his razor.  
'Sister,' said he,  
'do you think people who commit suicide go to heaven?'*

*"I don't know; but I hope you will never do such a thing,...'  
Was her answer. 'God forbid,' was his solemn response.*

*'Soon he slipped the razor into his shoe, ... went out," (Mann, p.54)  
and "put [the] razor to his neck and crawl[ed] under a boulder  
to die." (Dresser, p.15) Legend says no moss will ever grow  
on that rock...*

Another of the ghostly voices used by Scrimgeour to provide insight to his readers is that of Captain Jack or John Morgan Stanwood. Stanwood's silky utterances demand attention. He insists that the poet read the information embedded in dead leaves found at the site of his old cobbling shop (or boo). The leaves, turned book fragments, then reveal key background elements pertaining to the other characters and Stanwood himself. Ol'

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Abram, the suicide, for instance, believed that Tammy Younger caused much of his misfortune with her malevolent spells. Stanwood, through his leaves, clarifies the situation in Scrimgeour's poem entitled Fragments from the Book John Morgan Stanwood Kept in the Corner of his Boo,

*July 28, 1814*

*... had a talk with ol' Abram today—  
I almost felt sorry for him—a sad spectacle, so ol'  
an' feeble, so depressed—feelin' evil in the place, he said,  
silly fool, still blamin' ugly ol' Tammy for his dead sheep,—  
kinda strange, I tol' him, you believing in witchcraft,  
even though you don't believe in your religion—  
not any more than I do...*

Scrimgeour gives Tammy Younger the last say as he concludes his book. Here his Dogtown meditation take a quite serious turn. Tammy, in the piece Thomasine (Tammy) Younger—Conclusion, ponders the nature of eternity and, specifically, the hell of bitterness and spite she has created for herself amidst the boulders of her former home, now abandoned town. She seems tired of it. She says,

*I is getting' soft—beginnin' to think about thinkin' kindly  
of others—mebbe, as I said afore—it's getting' close  
to closin' time—  
mebbe... mebbe not.*

Poems of place, like Scrimgeour's Voices of Dogtown, often proffer visions, ghostly or not, of lost hard scrabbled cultures that wake readers to their own mortality and tenuousness. Delicate, hopeful perceptions need the damp cellars of historical grounding. Read this collection and it will alter, or even redeem, you. Mebbe.