

Bard of the Yukon: The Klondike
in the Poetry of Robert Service

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The Northern Review #19 (Winter 1998): 93-100.

To this day, Robert Service is known as the 'Bard of the Yukon,' though he actually spent a very short part of his 85 years there, and only half of that was actually spent in the Klondike.

It was in the autumn of 1904 that Robert Service, a rather diffident little bank clerk in his early 30s, was transferred from the Kamloops branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce to Whitehorse in the Yukon. Three years later he returned to Vancouver for three months leave, at the end of which he was reassigned to the bank's branch in Dawson.

He reported there on 8 April 1908, resigned on 15 November 1909 and after a period of frenzied literary activity, left the Klondike in April 1910. He came back, the hard way, in the summer of 1911, having travelled the 2000 miles of the Edmonton Trail from Alberta, partly by canoe, to Dawson. He left the Klondike for good in September 1912, so his actual time spent in the area was a little over three years in total.

Nevertheless, the Yukon in general, and the Klondike in particular, left an indelible mark on his poetry. Service was actually in San Francisco, virtually down and out, when he heard of the discovery of gold at Bonanza Creek, but it seems to have made no impression on him at the time. Indeed, in *Ploughman of the Moon*, the first of his two volumes of autobiography, he claims that he had absolutely no interest in the Klondike until he went to Whitehorse in 1904. However, he sent a poem from Cowichan, Vancouver Island, in 1902 to Stroller White, Editor of the *Whitehorse Star*. Entitled 'The Little Old Log Cabin,' it consisted of three stanzas each of eight lines:

When a man gits on his uppers in a hard-pan sort of town,

An he aint got nothin and he can't afford ter eat,
An he's in a fix for lodgin an he wanders up an down,
An you'd fancy he'd been boozin, he's so locoed bout the feet
When he's feelin sneakin sorry an his belt is hangin slack,
An his face is peaked an graylike an his heart gits down an whines,
Then he's apt ter git a-thinkin an a-wishin he was back
In the little old log cabin in the shadder of the pines.

Now there's nothing about the Yukon in this, and it was probably inspired by his experiences bumming around California some years earlier, if not actually written then. But Stroller White felt that it neatly captured the spirit of so many of the bums, stiffs, hoboes and no-hopers he'd seen trailing north, or more likely drifting south again from the Klondike.

Since adolescence, Service had enjoyed quite a reputation as a reciter of dramatic monologues. In Whitehorse his services were much in demand at smoking concerts and church socials, where he regaled his audiences with *Gunga Din* and *Casey at the Bat*. But eventually he tired of this and it was Stroller White who suggested to him that he should recite something of his own composition: 'Give us something about our own bit of earth. We sure would appreciate it. There's a rich paystreak waiting for someone to work. Why don't you go in and stake it?'

Service took this advice, and out of it came *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. However, he felt that the result was far too risqué for a church concert so he put the manuscript away. The second poem arose a month later as the result of a chance encounter with a mining engineer down from Dawson who told the tall tale of the miner cremating his pal. According to his autobiography, the lines simply tumbled forth as Service took his customary midnight stroll along the woodland trail. In fact he laboured long and hard on it, as the first draft of *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, now preserved in the Yukon Archives reveals:

There are strange things done after half past one
By the men who search for gold,
The arctic histories have their eerie mysteries
That would make your feet go cold.
The Aurora Borealis has seen where Montreal is,
But the queerest it ever did spot
Was the night on the periphery of Lake McKiflery
I cremated Sam McKlot.

Both of these poems, on which Service's reputation rests, both in his lifetime and posthumously, were composed at the onset of the winter of

1904. The following spring Service resumed his habit of long walks, and from these solitary strolls came *The Call of the Wild*, inspired by the stupendous scenery above the White Horse Rapids. 1905 was his *annus mirabilis*. He was deliriously happy: 'Sometimes I thought I would burst with sheer delight.' Words and rhymes came to him without any effort — 'I bubbled verse like an artesian well.' In this summer period he wrote *The Spell of the Yukon*, *The Law of the Yukon* and many others, 'a solitary pedestrian pounding out his rhymes from the intense gusto of living.'

In December 1906 Service sent a parcel of his rhymes to William Briggs in Toronto. Originally intended as a bit of vanity publishing, *Songs of a Sourdough* was released commercially in 1907 and was an immediate best-seller. It was well-named for it consisted mainly of lyrics by an experienced resident of a mining community, rather than ballads about the miners themselves. Only about half the poems pertained to the Yukon, and only a handful may be regarded as relevant to the Klondike, concentrating on human nature, its foibles and weaknesses. He wrote of the life of the mining camp, of the rough miners and the dance-hall girls. Service was fascinated by vice and set out deliberately to chronicle the 'Red Light atmosphere', but kept quiet about his racy ballads, and let the pile of manuscripts lie in his shirt drawer for more than a year before deciding to publish them.

Despite Service's claims to have written these verses within several months, it is obvious that composition was spread over a much longer period. *The Song of the Wage-Slave* had in fact been published in a Los Angeles newspaper in 1898, while *The March of the Dead* was written during the Boer War of 1899-1902 and *Fighting Mac* must have been composed in 1903, following the tragic suicide of General Sir Hector Macdonald. Laura Berton, who knew Service intimately in his Dawson days, summed it up well when she said of the Yukon ballads in his first volume that they had 'a Kiplingesque lilt written about totally imaginary events in the Klondike of '98 by a man who had never been there, and yet withal strangely authentic and true to the land'.

Service could not believe his good luck when he was transferred to the Dawson branch in April 1908. Now he could observe the Klondike at first hand. It was not till the onset of winter that year that he could get down to serious writing, labouring from midnight to dawn. 'Instead of my usual joyous exuberance, I blasted out my rhymes with grim determination. When I finished the last line my relief was enormous'.

He had grave misgivings about this manuscript when he sent it off to Briggs. 'By all precedents this volume should have been a failure. It was forced. It was a product of the midnight oil. It was that luckless effort, a second book, written to follow up the success of the first.' Unlike the random, hotch-potch nature of *Songs of a Sourdough*, this volume, entitled *Ballads of a Cheechako*, was deliberately planned and constructed. There was nothing miscellaneous about it; all of it was 'steeped in the spirit of the Klondike, written on the spot and reeking with reality'.

The hint of things to come, expressed in the first volume, was fully realised in the second. Though slightly larger, at 88 pages, it contained only 21 pieces, beginning with an address *To the Man of the High North*. Successive pieces extolled the men of the High North and some of the colourful characters Robert met or at least heard of. There were the ballads of Pious Pete, Blasphemous Bill, One-eyed Mike and Hard-luck Henry. In the Dawson monologues readers were introduced to Ole Olsen the sailor Swede, Gumboot Ben, the Dago Kid, Claw-fingered Kitty, the man from Eldorado and Muckluck Meg. The black sheep of an aristocratic family who joined the Mounties, the telegraph operator, the prospector and the woodcutter were apostrophised in turn. In *The Prospector*, which dealt comprehensively with the army of gold-seekers in the days of the great gold rush, we find the germ of the idea Service was soon to cultivate in his first novel, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*.

When told that he was about to be transferred back to Vancouver at the end of 1909, Service resigned rather than leave the Klondike. By now his royalties were earning him at least five times as much as his bank salary anyway. He took a log cabin on Eighth Avenue high on the hillside. Over the ensuing months he wrote and reworked his first novel and in April 1910 set off to deliver the manuscript in person to Dodd Mead, his American publisher, in New York.

In May 1911 he embarked on his epic 2000-mile journey overland back to Dawson. Out of this experience came his third volume of poetry entitled *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone*, a more ambitious work than its predecessors and running to 128 pages containing 51 pieces. Now, the paradox is that, although these rhymes were composed in the Klondike, they are not actually about the Klondike at all. Herein we read of such unforgettable characters as Eddie Malone of Fond-du-Lac, Athabaska Dick from Lac Labiche, Barb-wire Bill, Happy Jack, Flap-jack Billy, Tom Thorne, Chewed-ear Jenkins, the Squaw Man and Little Laughing Eyes.

The ballads were more thoughtful, more sentimental than in the preceding volume, the men of the Arctic dreaming nostalgically of home and loved ones. There was a liveliness, a sense of urgency even, about many of the verses, composed so soon after his sojourn in the Arctic.

Laura Berton summed up Robert's literary achievement of this period succinctly:

And yet of the hundreds of writers who came through the North and produced whole libraries of books about it, many of them pioneers who watched history being made before their eyes, only this quiet, colourless bank clerk succeeded in capturing the strange mixture of magic and tragedy, hope and heartbreak, of which the gold camps of the Yukon are compounded. It is a tribute to him that his books sell nowhere as well as they do in Dawson itself.

Service left the Klondike in September 1912 and never returned. Two months later he was a war correspondent in the Balkans and within a year he had settled in Paris. His time during the First World War with an American ambulance unit and later with Canadian Army Intelligence yielded two volumes, *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* and *Ballads of a Bohemian*. The period between the world wars was spent in 'divine loafing' punctuated by short bursts of activity when he produced a series of quite forgettable novels. Nineteen years elapsed before he returned to verse, publishing *Bar-room Ballads* in 1940.

As the *Toronto Globe and Mail* put it, 'Mr Service's new book of poems is packed with lore gathered during that Yukon exposure, together with other nostalgic pieces.' About half of the ballads harked back to days in the Klondike: *The Ballad of Salvation Bill*, *The Ballad of How Macpherson Held the Floor*, *The Ballad of the Leather Medal* and *A Sourdough Story*, were in the same genre, and inspired by the same characters and situations as the Sourdough songs. *The Ballad of the Ice-worm Cocktail* had, in fact, been composed by Service on his Arctic trip by canoe and taught by him to the crew of the Mackenzie River steamer. It had thus passed into the oral tradition of the Far North and even been published anonymously in several anthologies before the identity of its author was established in *Bar-room Ballads*.

The double rhymes and gory melodrama of *Hank the Finn* were inspired by a public hanging at Dawson in 1908, a spectacle seared itself in Robert's soul. *The Ballad of Touch-the-Button Nell* had much of the old rumbustiousness, from the opening lines:

They gave a dance in Lousetown, and the Tenderloin was there,

The girls were fresh and frolicsome, and nearly all were fair.

This ballad, which Briggs had rejected 30 years earlier, was just the sort of thing to delight the large and enthusiastic audience had long revelled in *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. When Robert recited *Touch-the-Button Nell* at a smoking concert in 1909, three of Dawson's leading clergymen hurriedly left the room as he warmed to his theme!

With this exception, however, the great bulk of the *Bar-room Ballads* were composed at Nice in the 1930s. Which brings me to the intriguing point, a question has never been satisfactorily answered: who wrote that most notorious parody *Eskimo Nell*? The trouble is that, within three decades, *Dan McGrew* and *Sam McGee* had passed into the folklore of Canada and the USA and inevitably gave rise to imitations and parodies. There was even a bawdy ballad entitled *Dangerous Dan McGrew*, which has earned a measure of immortality in its own right:

A bunch of the boys were whoopin it up in one of the Yukon halls
The kid that handled the music box just sat a-scratchin his balls. . .

But this pales into insignificance alongside *Eskimo Nell*, which has appeared in countless anthologies and even been distinguished by separate publication in various forms. Interestingly, an attempt to trace this classic cloaciniad back to its origins points to composition somewhere in the south of France in the 1930s. Both Noel Coward and Graham Greene have been suggested as the author, but there is a school of thought that believes that Robert Service himself was the perpetrator, although if he was, he never avowed it.

During the Second World War, Service wintered in Hollywood and spent his summers in Vancouver. From Hollywood came word that he was working on the film-script for a thriller, and this impelled one of his fans to write to his local newspaper in Whittier, Alaska, addressing Service poetically:

Write us another sheaf of poems, throbbing with dash and dare
Fresh as the wind from the new spruce cones, under the polar glare
Full of the power and punch you had when you wrote of Dan McGrew
And you painted for us on your pencil pad the scenes that we loved and knew.

The war and two volumes of autobiography intervened before Service, now settled in Monte Carlo, took up verse again. Now determined to produce at least a thousand poems before he died, he worked with manic intensity, often writing a new poem every day and out of this distilling a fresh volume every year. No fewer than eleven volumes were

published between 1949 and his death in 1958. It has to be said that this was third-rate stuff by and large and most of it has long been out of print. But it may be significant that after the philosophical pieces and ephemeral verses of *Songs of a Sun-Lover* and *Carols of an Old Codger*, he was drawn back to his old theme. One section of *Lyrics of a Lowbrow* consisted of the *Dawson Ditties*. Robert's swan-song was entitled *Songs of the Far North*. Right at the end of his very long life he gave us a reprise of the Yukon ballads, of which the song of Violet de Vere 'strip-teaser of renown,' haled before a judge for disorderly conduct, is a classic. When Judge McGraw fines her \$20, she ripostes:

Judge darling, you've been owing me five bucks for nearly a year;
Take fifteen—there! We'll call it square', said Violet de Vere.

In *The Twins of Lucky Strike* Lipstick Lou dies in childbirth, but the motherless babes are adopted by some of the roughnecks, Black Moran from Nome promising to be their Grandpa. 'I sink ze creep into my heart' says Montreal Maree who looks after the infants as 60 sourdoughs donate 'solid pokes o' virgin gold' to hang on the babies' Christmas tree in the saloon. This subject, which could have become mawkish, was handled with a deftness and assuredness throughout, showing that the Old Master had lost none of his touch.

Ironically, Robert Service's very last poem, published a few weeks before his death in August 1958, had been commissioned by Waino Hendrickson, governor-designate of Alaska, to celebrate the attainment of statehood on 1 January 1959. Service responded promptly and the poem was actually published first in *Newsweek* on 14 July 1958, though it is doubtful whether Service himself saw it in print. It was certainly a fitting end to a poetic career spanning more than half a century.

Service grew to loathe Dan McGrew and Sam McGee, irked that his fans acclaimed them and ignored virtually everything else he wrote. The trouble is that he churned out so much, but he really deserves an editor to make a selection of his best pieces. I suspect that in any such collection the pick of the bunch will be those verses written in, or inspired by, the Klondike.

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Silence: A Life of Alexander Graham Bell, and Robert Bruce, King of Scots.

Note

For references to the material quoted in this paper, see the author's *Vagabond of Verse: Robert Service, A Biography*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1996).