

# Recalling the Gold Rush: Autobiography, History, and Robert W. Service

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Few men there were who remained unaffected by the excitement of the Klondike, save for the hermits, the recluses, and the occasional hobo, winding his wastrel way down the dusty roads of the nation. One such there was in California who remained entirely untouched by the spreading delirium. . . a bum picking up food in gutters, accepting handouts from soup kitchens, begging at back doors for bread, and strumming on his guitar to verses of a sort that he composed and sang himself. As the stampedeers raced north he moved indolently south towards Mexico, scarcely aware of the frenzy that surrounded him.<sup>1</sup>

The hobo in question is Robert W. Service, who picturesquely places himself in San Francisco when the papers announced in mid-July 1897, "A TON OF GOLD COMES OUT OF THE FROZEN NORTH."<sup>2</sup> Service had emigrated to North America from Glasgow in the spring of 1896 but, tiring of farm work in the Cowichan Valley of British Columbia, he headed south in late 1897, well after the arrival of the first ship bearing gold from the Klondike in July. Writers like Pierre Berton eagerly seized upon Service's nonchalance towards fact in favour of a good story, even when telling his own life. Most recently, James Mackay has sought to establish the facts of Service's life in his biography, *Vagabond of Verse* (1995). Yet the basic conflict these writers address, that between fact and fancy, illustrates how closely connected the creative processes of fiction and autobiography were for Service. The two were particularly intertwined in his novel, *The Trail of '98: A Northland Romance* (1910).

The novel details the gold rush experiences of Scottish emigrant Athol Meldrum from 1897 to 1902. Meldrum travels north to the Klondike from California, where he has been moving from odd job to odd job, in the company of some acquaintances he has met on his travels. The various members meet different fates; one becomes a derelict amid the dance-halls of Dawson, another dies in the Yukon interior after killing the rival for his wife's attractions; a third becomes a prosperous miner

and takes Meldrum into partnership with him. The villain, Jack Locasto, is an unscrupulous womanizer and gambler, and immensely strong. Both he and Meldrum become rivals for the heroine Berna Winklestein, a Jewess with a drab complexion and character. She is the spark of romance in the novel, and a foil for the action.

*The Trail of '98* has not attracted the scholarly attention granted Service's verse. Though many reviewers, especially those in larger cities such as Philadelphia and New York, hailed the novel's scenes as faithful portraits of the Klondike gold rush, others focussed on the book's literary shortcomings. For some, Service was too accurate in his representation, and presented too many details. "It is one thing to be strong and true to the life on sees and describes; and it is quite another thing to revel in nauseous detail. There is too much of this spirit in all Mr. Service's work, and it is a serious defect," complained the anonymous reviewer in the Toronto magazine *Saturday Night*. Even the editor of the Dawson *Daily News* was cautious in his praise. He was pleased that Service had tackled the story of the gold rush, but hoped that readers would recognize the novel as the northern romance Service declared it to be rather than an accurate representation of life in the Yukon. Reviews in papers published in the cities of the eastern United States indicate there was little chance of this happening; the Philadelphia *North American* was typical in declaring, "The sentences ring with assurance, as though an eye-witness were describing what he saw and repeating what he heard."<sup>3</sup>

Service exhaustively researched *The Trail of '98*, interviewing prospectors, absorbing the sights and geography of Dawson, and reading the written record of the gold rush set forth in newspapers. But the novel is also imbued with Service's own experiences, a complex mixture of personal, literary, and historical elements. Paul John Eakin, in his studies of autobiography as a literary genre, explores the relationship between autobiographies and the autobiographers who struggle to explain in them the lives they have lived while recording the past as it occurred. At one point Eakin remarks, "What I am suggesting is that the making of fictions about the self, indeed, the making of a fictive self, is a fact and likely to be a principal fact of experience not merely in the creation of an autobiography but in the making of a life."<sup>4</sup> Memory, he explains, "is constantly revising and editing the remembered past to square with the needs and requirements of the self we have become in any present."<sup>5</sup> Past events become, collectively, referents for an inner truth that lacks

verifiable historical evidence.

Personal need and readers' expectations may prompt an author to reconstruct the past in autobiography, fiction, and autobiographical fiction. I would not suggest that *The Trail of '98* is primarily an autobiographical novel any more than Eakin argues, in the discussion just quoted, that the autobiography he considers is a novel (though it claims to be). Rather, I argue that *The Trail of '98* occupies a middle ground and sheds biographical light on Service in much the same way that Service's autobiographies must be considered, to some degree, as extensions of his fiction. *Ploughman of the Moon* (1945) and *Harper of Heaven* (1948) are each tinged with fictional elements, the first is event subtitled, "An Adventure into Memory." Service plays free with the details of his life, cloaking people and places in pseudonyms, and hinting to the reader that all might not be as he says.<sup>6</sup> One is left wondering what sort of truth he aims when he professes in the epigram to his life story,

Though names I change from time to time,  
A stickler for correctness I'm.  
To write God-honest truth I strive,  
And here, to best of memory, I've.<sup>7</sup>

There is arguably as much fiction in Service's autobiographies as there is fact in *The Trail of '98*. The novel is as much "an adventure into memory" as *Ploughman of the Moon*, yet each work is weighted more to one side than the other according to the genres it claims to represent.

Carl Klinck, Service's earliest biographer, eagerly undertook to mine the six novels Service wrote for biographical details. "The principal characters are often masks for something in Service himself," he states in the preface, later noting that the wanderings of Athol Meldrum in *The Trail of '98* "were more or less parallel to Service's experiences." Klinck, nevertheless, concluded that the novel revealed a character "only in part suggestive of Service's own nature."<sup>8</sup> Twenty years later, Dr. Mackay's *Vagabond of Verse* applied "the techniques of investigative journalism and analysis of a very diverse range of primary sources to get at the truth," and agreed that the novel exhibited "strains of autobiographical writing."<sup>9</sup> Service himself claimed, "To avoid any charge of false psychology I exploited certain phases of my own character in the person of my hero. I made him a romantic dreamer, unable to come to grips with reality and at odds with his environment. . . . like myself, he was destined to failure; but while I escaped by a fluke, I took it out on my poor devil

of a hero and gave him the works."<sup>10</sup> A broader array of elements than hitherto acknowledged gives the novel its autobiographical character, however.

The idea to write a novel came to Service in the late spring of 1909, just as he was completing his second book of verse, *Ballads of a Cheechako*.<sup>11</sup> "The Trail of Ninety-Eight," a ballad chronicling the stampede of prospectors to Dawson in 1898, suggests the novel's origins at this time. The opening stanza later appeared in the novel that shares its title without reference to its earlier appearance in *Ballads of a Cheechako*. Similarly, "The Man from Eldorado" in the collection offers a verse rendering of the wild debauch Athol Meldrum performs mid-way through the novel. But prose offered a new, virtually untapped outlet for Service's imagination. "You have the field to yourself," he recalls thinking,

It seemed a duty. My book must be an authentic record of the Great Stampede and of the gold delirium. It must be tragic and moral in its implications, a vivid scene painted on a big canvas. . . . My book would be the only fictional record of the gold rush. I would document myself like a Zola. I would work on old sourdoughs and get their stories. . . . I would re-create a past that otherwise would be lost forever.<sup>12</sup>

The gold rush had excited a great deal of interest, but no novelist of note. Jack London had written a number of short stories set in the North, and the Rev. H. A. Cody had written novels of the Northland, but no novel had enshrined in legend the events of 1898. Placing himself in the tradition of literary naturalist writers such as Emile Zola and Jack London, who relentlessly documented human response to events in an effort to create literature that presented slices cut bleeding from life, Service set about gathering his material.

*The Trail of '98* evinces Service's wide reading, and couches the fiction amid historical references. The collective "we" that prefaces many of the passages in the first half of the book renders the third-person nature of the chronicle transparent. Service writes historical fiction with greater ease than many other writers.<sup>13</sup> His experiences in California during 1897 were undoubtably valuable. The opening chapters of the novel often read as though cribbed from a notebook. Service would have heard news of the Klondike discovery during his travels and been an eye-witness to the excitement that gripped local society in 1897.

Distinguishing between the experiences of Service and those experienced only by Meldrum is difficult because Service skilfully incorporates historical reality within the fictional frame of reference to add an element

of authenticity to the narrative. The experiences of Meldrum and Service merge to supply a backdrop for the lives of both. The avalanche at Lake Lindemann has a historic counterpart in one at Sheep Camp below the Chilkoot Pass on 3 April 1898.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Service grafts his experience of the Whitehorse fire of 1905 into the closing scenes of the novel, which have a historical fire that devastated Dawson in April 1899. For the purposes of the novel, Service takes poetic licence with time and place, and ultimately invests the fire with a moral significance only partly derived from public reaction to the fire in Whitehorse. The pumphouse attendant's neglect of his duty during the Whitehorse fire particularly disturbed Service.<sup>15</sup> He would later highlight the incident in his autobiography; the destruction of one person could cause merely by neglecting his responsibility horrified him.<sup>16</sup> The novel was an early response to the event and Service was able to apply it to Dawson as a fitting end to the licentious gold rush era.

By the autumn of 1909, despite having all the facts he required, Service had apparently written little towards his novel. "My words came with difficulty, my imagination lagged," he recalled in his autobiography. "Something was wrong."<sup>17</sup> Two incidents soon renewed his desire to write. Early in November he was offered a promotion to manager of the Whitehorse branch of the Bank of Commerce; he refused and tendered his resignation effective on 15 November 1909. This enabled him to retreat from society and devote himself entirely to literary pursuits. Dodd, Mead of New York, hearing that Service proposed to write a novel of the North, supplied the decisive incentive. They were interested in securing the rights to the book, and Service, requiring a deadline to stimulate his imagination, agreed to write the story.<sup>18</sup>

Yet even after the arrival of the telegram from Dodd, Mead at the beginning of 1910, Service had difficulty marshalling his thoughts. He represents the climax of his difficulties as an imaginary meeting of the novel's several characters in which the ultimate fate of each was arranged. The summer of 1910 must have been extremely tortuous for the writer who had previously produced verse with relative ease. Nevertheless, on 6 September 1910 three chapters arrived in the office of William Briggs, book steward of the Methodist Book and Publishing House of Toronto, the company that had published Service's earlier books. He immediately forwarded them to his American counterpart, Frank C. Dodd of Dodd, Mead. Briggs undoubtedly made the arran-

gement whereby Dodd, Mead would publish the novel in the United States, and notes in Brigg's manuscript book indicate that Service would deliver the fourth segment of the novel directly to Dodd. Service left Dawson on 7 October 1910 and made his way first to Seattle, then across the continent to New York. The proofs were completed by the end of November and copies of the book were available for distribution by the beginning of December 1910.<sup>19</sup>

*The Trail of '98* ultimately incorporated many of Service's own experiences. The parallels between the hero's wandering in California and those of Service are acknowledged. What has not been discussed is the possible influence on the novel's development of C. M.—the person to whom Service dedicated *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907). Service met C. M., Constance MacLean by name, at a dance in Chemainus, British Columbia, in December 1902. It is tempting to see in Service's relationship with her an emotional model for that between Athol Meldrum and Berna Winklestein in *The Trail of '98*. The correlation is not exact but there are enough similarities to suggest that Service's relationship provided fodder for that in the novel. MacLean was an important part of Service's life as late as 1908, but by the time *The Trail of '98* was written the relationship appears to have dissolved. Its termination probably occurred as Service was working on *Ballads of a Cheechako*, and possibly encouraged Service to write the novel. Service, in exploiting his own character to create that of Meldrum, would have incorporated his reflections on the relationship and its demise quite naturally into his fiction.<sup>20</sup>

A documented parallel between the romance in the novel and that of Service is the advice given Athol when his relationship with Berna appears finished. "You were happy—then why not go back? That's your proper play; go back to your mother. . . . You'll forget it all, this place, this girl. It'll all seem like the after effects of a midnight Welsh rabbit. You've got mental indigestion."<sup>21</sup> Service was also moved to see his mother, who, with the rest of the family, had taken a homestead in Alberta in 1908. Service's father had died in April 1909 and the termination of his relationship with MacLean may have compounded his desire to visit his family. When Service left the Yukon in October 1910 to deliver his novel to the publisher in New York, he also planned to spend a few weeks with his family.<sup>22</sup> He did so in February and March 1911.

The emotional currents flowing through the novel encourage one to speculate regarding the degree to which the relationship of Athol and

Berna reflects that of Service and MacLean. Both couples were certainly prone to misunderstandings and an outstanding example, paralleled in the novel, occurred when Service moved to Vancouver from Duncan in 1903 to study for the McGill matriculation exams. MacLean, although she lived in Vancouver, spent time with cousins in Duncan. The separation gave place to rumour; and MacLean eventually heard, in early September 1903, that Service was spending time with another young woman. She subsequently seems to have been unwilling to see Service, and even refused to acknowledge him in the street. Service was deeply hurt and countered the unfounded assertions with professions of undying love.<sup>23</sup> MacLean continued to distance herself and the relationship clearly went through a tumultuous period. It is difficult to tell how long the rupture took to heal or if there were other misunderstandings or quarrels. The two were on good terms by the time Service was transferred to Whitehorse in 1904, however. When Service became aware of the success of his first book, *Songs of a Sourdough*, he bid the publisher insert a page dedicating the volume "To C. M." All copies sold subsequent to August 1907 featured this dedication.

The villain Jack Locasto employs a similar means as that which separated Service and MacLean to secure Berna for himself in *The Trail of '98*. Athol steadfastly believes in the honour of Berna and her love for him and, therefore, finds it difficult to accept or believe that she would willingly submit to Locasto when he hears, and sees, that this has happened. He is driven to despair when she does not acknowledge his greeting in the street. He finds, however, that she was told lies about him. "They told me you were too eager gold-getting to think of me; that you were in love with some other woman out there; that you cared no more for me," Berna explains to Athol afterwards.<sup>24</sup> Service, likewise, was absorbed in study when the difficulties with MacLean arose. MacLean was conceivably offended at the single-minded with which Service dedicated himself to his work. Laura Berton, who knew Service in Dawson, commented on Service's ability to divorce himself from others. While writing *The Trail of '98* in the summer of 1910, for example, "His habits became more erratic and he himself became more inaccessible. On summer nights I would often meet him rushing pell-mell down a hillside trail or see him starting out on an all-night excursion to the creeks. Then he would shut himself up for days while he wrote furiously."<sup>25</sup> This does not suggest a man easy to approach. One indication that Service may

have been criticized for this tendency appears in Berna's comment to Athol, "I saw you several times, but you were always too busy or too far away in dreams to see me, and I couldn't get a chance to speak."<sup>26</sup> Whether Service was simply reflecting himself in Athol, or incorporating a comment made to him by MacLean or another, is impossible to determine.

Tellingly, the chapter closes with Athol reproaching himself for raising "a barrier of convention" between himself and Berna. "Oh, despicable, paltering coward!" he exclaims.<sup>27</sup> The basic problem confronting Athol and Berna in the novel is one of will. The *Times Literary Supplement* described the situation as an improbable "sort of hide-and-seek."<sup>28</sup> They long to love each other but repeatedly disclaim or refuse that love. Social convention inhibits them from embracing the fullness of the love that is springing up between them. Berna is emphatic that she does not deserve the love Athol professes, while Athol, for his part, shrinks from the prospect of marriage when Berna confronts him with it because the sudden nature of the proposal offends his sensibilities. The degree to which a similar sort of problem shaped Service's relationship is unknown, but Connie MacLean's daughter, Beatrice Corbett of Kingston, Ontario, suggests that Service's own conventionality inhibited the progress of the romance. She describes her mother as an independent woman who frequently challenged the social norms of Edwardian society.<sup>29</sup> Service, by contrast, describes himself as "painfully priggish" and laments, "How often what passes for virtue is another name for cowardice. Am I sorry, I ask myself, for the slips of my youth? No, but I'm sorry for the lack of them."<sup>30</sup> His adventurous spirit never embraced the *demi-monde* of society or morality; it was resolutely rooted in middle-class values. Service could mingle with the tramp or the socialite, but he could not allow himself to be either for any length of time.

When Berna presses Athol to give solid proof of his love, asking, "Have you nothing more to give me than fine words?" he thoughtlessly replies, "Marry me, marry me." The words almost have a greater impact on himself than Berna, and he tells readers, "The suddenness of it was like a cold douche. God knows, I burned for the girl, yet somehow convention clamped me."<sup>31</sup> The scene continues as Berna bids Athol name a date for the wedding:

"Now if you wish," I faltered; "but better when we get to Dawson. Better when I've made good up there. Give me one year, Berna, one year and then—"



“One year!”

The sudden gleam of hope vanished from her eyes. For the third time I was failing her, yet my cursed prudence overrode me.<sup>32</sup>

The scene, a convention of fiction, loudly echoes Service's own experience. Service and MacLean discussed marriage on the eve of Service's return to the Yukon in 1908. Service had spent a portion of the Christmas holidays with the MacLean family in Vancouver, and the letters that he sent Connie following his return to the Yukon document the degree to which the relationship had progressed. One, dated 25 March 1908, has Service claiming that bank regulations governing employees earning less than \$1,300 per year was the sole obstacle to a wedding.<sup>33</sup> But by this time Service was certainly earning a comfortable amount in royalties from *Songs of a Sourdough*. His autobiography states that he received a cheque of \$1,000 on his arrival in Dawson.<sup>34</sup> The reliability of the figure is open to question, of course, but it indicates that he was certainly making enough to put him well beyond financial insecurity. Another source suggest that his royalties surpassed the annual salary of the bank manager.<sup>35</sup> Yet Service preferred the security of his teller's position even though he could marry the woman he loved. One wonders if he offered MacLean the same one-year promise that Athol offered Berna. That a marriage did not occur following Service's resignation from the bank in November 1909 indicates that the intervening eighteen months witnessed a change in the relationship. Connie may have had a change of heart when she saw that Service's immense success as an author made him no more assured of stepping out on his own.

Perhaps Service realized the folly of his decision in retrospect. “I had not thought but for the moment. Hopelessly ill-equipped for the struggle, I had more than my share of misery,” he recalled in 1928.<sup>36</sup> That it was equally true of his Yukon experience is reflected in *The Trail of '98* by Athol's brother Garry, who remarks, “You were never made for the fight, my brother. . . . Imagination's been a curse to you, boy. You've tortured yourself all these years and now you're paying the penalty.”<sup>37</sup> Service explored his own character through that of Athol, and the Klondike gold rush offered a convenient backdrop for the exercise. The inclusion of some actual elements from his own experience gave the novel an autobiographical quality and did nothing to diminish the belief seeping into popular lore that Service was a veteran of the trail of '98 himself. The fiction Service let grow about himself was popularly accepted and

perpetuated to such an extent that Pierre Berton felt it necessary to refute it at the close of his account of the Klondike gold rush. For him, historical fact offered an exciting enough tale. "The unvarnished story of the Klondike phenomenon is, in my opinion the best story, and it is puzzling that anyone should feel the need to embellish it," he states, confidently.<sup>38</sup>

Eakin and other scholars of autobiography make clear that histories of the self are often as difficult to discern as histories of places, events, and eras. Service, in *The Trail of '98*, combined the two, using his own personal history as a means to enter into, understand, and vicariously experience the Klondike gold rush. Yet Berton, in rightly correcting the myths surrounding Service and the Klondike, also denigrated the role of personal experience and artistic imagination in recreating and expressing historical and biographical fact. Though Service was not a veteran of the historical trail of '98, he succeeded in capturing the experience of those who were. In so doing, he opened a window through which we catch a glimpse of himself.

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#### Endnotes

1. Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899*, rev. ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 111.
2. Robert Service, *Ploughman of the Moon* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945), p. 260.
3. *Saturday Night* 24.13 (7 January 1911), p. 12; "Trail of Ninety-Eight," *Daily News* [Dawson], 1 March 1911, p. 2; *North American* [Philadelphia], 21 January 1911, p. 16.
4. Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 64.
5. Eakin, *Touching the World*, p. 67.
6. Service doubts, for example, the name of a woman to whom he claims to have written a good deal of verse (*Ploughman*, p. 82).
7. *Ploughman*, p. viii.
8. Carl F. Klinck, *Robert Service: A Biography* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976), pp vi, 47-48.
9. James Mackay, *Vagabond of Verse* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1995), pp 16, 192.
10. *Ploughman*, p. 356.
11. Robert W. Service, *Ballads of a Cheechako* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1909).

12. *Ploughman*, pp 354-55.
13. Compare to W. H. P. Jarvis, *The Great Gold Rush: A Tale of the Klondike* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1913), a novel that abounds in historical detail rooted in personal experience, but written in a pedantic and self-conscious style. Jarvis was well-known in the Klondike and had written for the Dawson *Daily News* ("Another Klondike Author," *Daily News* [Dawson] 15 May 1909, p. 2).
14. Berton, *Klondike*, pp. 256-57; Robert W. Service, *The Trail of '98* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1911), p. 107.
15. *Ploughman*, pp 318-19; *Trail*, pp 510-11; Berton, *Klondike*, p. 387
16. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
19. United Church Archives, Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Methodist Book and Publishing House, Publications Record, 1910-1913, acc. 83-061C, box 3, file 5; Archives, Bata Library, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, John Taylor Lyon Family papers, acc. 80-032, box 1, folder 3, Service to Harold Taylor, 4 December 1910. That production of the novel was complete by the first week of December 1910. That production of the novel was complete by the first week of December is evidenced in copies sent to Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Phelps of Whitehorse, and Mrs. M. A. MacLean; these now in the possession of John Scott of Whitehorse and Beatrice Corbett, Kingston, ON, respectively. A copy was received at the British Library on 12 December 1910.
20. A note from Service's daughter, Iris Davis, following the presentation of this paper in Edinburgh encouraged me not to waste time studying the relationship between Service and MacLean. "The whole thing would have bored him," she claims of her father's later interested in the relationship. "I admire your research but I feel the Corbett story is of no interest to me anyway" (Davies to the author, 25 August 1997).
21. *Trail*, pp 328-29.
22. "Service to Make a Trip," *Daily News* [Dawson], 6 October 1910, p. 3. This is in contrast to the motivation cited in *Ploughman of the Moon*—a magazine article seen in Cuba headed, "I had a Good Mother" (p. 393).
23. Queen's University Archives, Kingston, ON, Beatrice Corbett Papers, coll. 2098, Service to MacLean, 15, 29 September 1903.
24. *Trail*, p. 363.
25. Laura B. Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1954), p. 75.
26. *Trail*, p. 129.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 132, 133.
28. *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 April 1911, p. 166.
29. Author's interviews with Beatrice Corbett, by telephone 2 November 1995; in person, 29 May 1996.

30. Robert W. Service, *Why Not Grow Young?* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), pp 22-23.
31. *Trail*, pp 160-61.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
33. Queen's University Archives, Beatrice Corbett Papers, Service to MacLean, 25 March 1908.
34. *Ploughman*, p. 342.
35. Berton, *I Married the Klondike*, p. 75.
36. *Grow Young*, p. 24.
37. *Trail*, pp 470-71.
38. Berton, *Klondike*, pp 428-29.