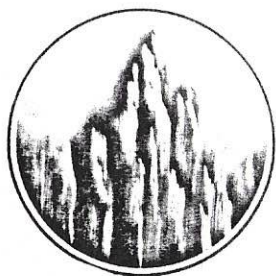

Dan McGrew, SAM McGEE

AND OTHER

GREAT SERVICE

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK SUMMERS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TAB TULEJA



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Witness To The Wild

AN APPRECIATION OF
ROBERT W. SERVICE

In the fall of 1893, the Swiss painter Karl Bodmer died at Barbizon. He was eighty-four, and he had lived in the French village for half a century, producing the forest views and peasant scenes for which the Barbizon School was well known. Most of this work was forgotten. Bodmer's enduring legacy is a body of sketches he made along the upper Missouri River when he was twenty-four years old. His renderings of Blackfeet and Mandan Indians, a small and uncharacteristic fragment of his life's work, are what we think of when we say "Bodmer."

Robert W. Service, another European visitor to the wilder shores of North America, suffered a similar destiny. In 1958, when he was eighty-four, he had been living in France and Monte Carlo for forty years. Throughout that time he had written verse almost daily; a checklist of Service first editions contains nineteen books of poetry alone. Yet his reputation rests on one volume, his inaugural *Songs of a Sourdough*, published when he was thirty-three. That book's most celebrated ballads established the author, forever, as "the chap who wrote McGrew and McGee."

This was not a fate Service deplored. Indeed, he encouraged the impression that the Yukon was his private claim. "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee," although representing only a fragment of his work, are certainly not uncharacteristic, and the poet himself, in 1949, gave this sound assessment of his fame:

...I fancy my grave-digger griping
As he gives my last lodging a pat:
"That guy wrote McGrew;
'Twas the best he could do" ...
So I'll go to my maker with that.

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It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that this new collection of Service poems should focus on the vintage Yukon period; throughout his own long Barbizon afternoon, he understood even better than his admirers that his destiny had been to sing of the wild.

According to Carl Klinck's biography *Robert Service* (Dodd, Mead, 1976), the poet was born Robert William Service to an English mother and Scottish father on January 16, 1874, in Lancashire. The family moved to Scotland when "Rubbert Wullie" was a child, and there he was farmed out to his paternal grandfather and two maiden aunts. Their household was pious, industrious, and dour, and the boy's impish nature surfaced early as a rebuke to what he called the Long Grey Town. In his 1945 autobiography *Ploughman of the Moon*, recollecting his "horror of the Scotch Sabbath," he confessed that his first poem was a mock grace that ended with the plea: "Bless the scones Aunt Jeannie makes/and save us all from belly aches."

High spirits aside, Service managed to absorb some pragmatic sense, and shortly after graduating from high school he was apprenticed in his father's profession, banking. For much of the following two decades, he was at the mercy of competing demons: banking remained his financial anchor, but his attention gravitated increasingly toward poetry and toward the open road.

The first round was won by the road; in 1896 the young teller closed up his cage and lit out for the Canadian wild. He landed in British Columbia with five dollars in his pocket, just as the Klondike was seized by gold fever. For the next seven years, as he proudly recalled later, he rubbed shoulders with various soldiers of fortune and "took a course in the College of Hard Knocks." It offered a varied curriculum. Between 1896 and 1904, as the mining towns boomed and then busted, Service wandered up and down the West Coast, picking oranges, digging railroad tunnels, running a store, teaching school, milking cows, cutting logs, singing songs, and playing to the hilt the self-styled role of hobo minstrel. In 1904, in Whitehorse, he took a job with a Canadian bank; for the following eight years, at Whitehorse and later at Dawson, he took on the part of good bourgeois, while entertaining his wanderlust by writing poetry.

Most of his verses saw only the inside of a bureau drawer. But the editor of the Whitehorse *Star* did accept a few for publication, and in the fall of 1906 he asked his contributor to write "something about our own bit of earth," to be recited at a church concert. Service produced "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." For obvious reasons, it never reached the church stage. But the budding poet's appetite had been

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whetted, and the next "bit of earth" he tackled came out as the ballad "Sam McGee." Over the next several months, during "lonely walks on the trails" around Whitehorse, he composed the rest of the *Sourdough* verses, and filed them, too, in a drawer.

They might have stayed there forever except that his landlady admired them and convinced Service to bind them into a book. Thinking that he could present such a volume "with apologetic wistfulness" to his friends, he retyped the lot, sent them to the Toronto publisher William Briggs, and tried to put them out of his mind. To his surprise, Briggs not only offered him a contract but claimed that McGee was the talk of the office and that they had taken 1,700 orders for the book on the strength of the galley proofs alone.

Perhaps it is a tribute to the early influence of his sensible aunts that, until he left the Yukon, Service kept his day job with the bank. The financial need to do so could not have been severe, for in the first year of its existence, *Songs of a Sourdough* went through fifteen Canadian printings. Royalty checks also arrived regularly from England (where the book saw twenty-three printings in three years) and from the United States, where it was published in 1907 as *The Spell of the Yukon*. Practically overnight, fame and fortune had descended.

Realizing he had struck a rich vein, Service wrote *Ballads of a Cheechako* (*cheechako* is Chinook for "newcomer"). Published in 1909, the book was, in Service's own words, a "self-conscious, premeditated volume." Written in Dawson, where the banker poet had been transferred by his employer, it played on the same themes—the allure of the frozen North and the infinite eccentricity of its inhabitants—that had made *Sourdough* a success. At the same time, with the gritty triad of "Blasphemous Bill," "One-Eyed Mike," and "Pious Pete" as its centerpiece, *Cheechako* demonstrated its author's growing mastery of his material. Service was right in assessing it as a better technical job than its forerunner and in claiming that it "expressed the spirit of the Yukon more than anything" he had done before.

The year 1910 saw a vaguely autobiographical and not very memorable Gold Rush novel, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*. Two years later came *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone*, Service's poetic farewell to the North. A more disingenuous celebration of "robustness" than either of his previous books, *Rolling Stone* was also marred by a weakness for the O'Henry style trick ending ("Soldier of Fortune," "Death in the Arctic," "Barbwire Bill") and a penchant for doggerel philosophy ("The World's All Right," "Dreams are Best"). The grit and gump-tion in this volume sounded forced, as if Service knew his vagabond

days were numbered and as if he was using a language half-forgotten. His apostrophe in "Good Bye, Little Cabin" is a fitting conclusion to the book. "How cold, still and lonely, how weary you seem!/A last wistful look and I'll go." He did go, in the summer of 1912, and it was the last he would see of the North.

Throughout Service's Yukon poems, one feels the press of three themes. The first is a raw barroom machismo—a celebration of those red-blooded Real Men who, when put to the test, will survive. Arm-chair Darwinism has always vindicated and prodded male vanity, but never more blatantly than at the turn of the last century. With Teddy Roosevelt in the White House, with Baden-Powell building "character" in the Boy Scouts, and with Kipling the most adored of English poets, it was perhaps predictable that Service's "Law of the Yukon"—an icy version of the Law of the Jungle—should have found an appreciative audience. "Send me men girt for the combat," he wrote, "men who are grit to the core." It was a typically Nietzschean demand, fit for the age of gunboat diplomacy, polar treks, and bare-knuckle boxing.

A corollary to this elevation of the Real Man is the literary man's adulation of "the folk." Bankers do not populate Service's poems. The heroes are fantasy foils: the staunchly working-class go-getters who can take a poke in the eye without flinching—and who keep their own pokes in their boots. Of the two farmhands recalled in *Ploughman of the Moon*, Service remarks: "They have never heard of Marcus Aurelius, but they can milk two cows to my one." That same bias for down-to-earth skills over "intellect" animates much of his work.

A second theme is that of the wanderer—another middle-class fantasy, but one which, in Service's case, he had actually lived. Service's protagonists do not have dreams of picket fences. They are the eternally dissatisfied, the dreamers—the rolling stones and "Restless Ones," the "Men That Don't Fit In." The theme of rootlessness, of course, had figured in North American culture since the days of Daniel Boone. In Service's hands, it acquired an honorific patina, as if being forever on the move signified not just an inability, or unwillingness, to fit in, but obedience to a vague, holy mission. Nothing shows banker Service's essentially romantic nature—or his internal sense of division—more clearly than his attraction to the Cain-marked isolato.

A third theme—the most encompassing of the three—is that of Nature itself: that untamed and untamable wilderness to which Real Men are inevitably drawn and where they are found worthy or want-

ing. If Service's affection for the rootless, indomitable male seems a garden-variety modern fantasy, the same cannot really be said of his reverence for the Canadian wild. If ever this bard of the backlands rises to the eloquence of his themes, it is in his evocations of what he called, variously, the Great Cold, the Long Night, the Great Alone, and the eternally brooding Great White Silence; the Silence, he says in "Dan McGrew," "you most could hear."

The Silence has its threatening as well as its soothing aspects, and Service shows the threat with some subtlety. If the current generation of Real Men, fed on Rambo-unctuous pipe dreams, were to put together an epic of the North, it would be filled with ravaging wolves, skydiving claim-jumpers, and exploding glaciers. No such cheap thrills from Robert Service. You get the occasional raging river, yes, but for the most part the dangers of his Long Night are the insidious, nonexploding kind. They are the temperatures that stand at sixty-nine below; the six months without sight of the sun; and a flat stretching vastness so immense that it both intensifies and ridicules our mortality. The dangers of today's heroes are supremely physical. The dangers of Service's imagined Yukon seem almost metaphysical by contrast. They are the terrible beauty of recognition, the lurch into lunacy that can happen when we see ourselves mirrored in empty sky.

"The North has got him," Service says of Pious Pete, and it is by no means incidental that the typical Service hero is a little cracked. From the hooch-crazed stranger of "Dan McGrew" to the would-be suicide of "Death in the Arctic," from the eccentric undertakers of Sam McGee and Blasphemous Bill to the electrophobic Pious Pete himself, the real risk of the Arctic is not gold fever. It is the very extremity of the place—an extremity that may lead you easily from rapture to rupture, so that you begin to see, as a lost alcoholic may see and as Blasphemous Bill's friend does see, "the ice-worms wriggle their purple heads through the crust of the pale blue snow." In Rory Bory Land, as Service wittily called the Far North, the chances are always very good that the real and the fantastic may fuse.

This peculiar sense of the wild—the sense that its very beauty can be terrible—sets Service apart from the English tradition of nature worship and makes him very much a North American poet. In *Ploughman* he cites Henry Thoreau as one of his chief early influences, and it is not a surprising admission. Not only did Thoreau, like Service, play up the "recluse" persona to dramatic effect; he also anticipated Service's deep sense of awe for nature's power, and for the tantalizing terror of being alone. Service's idea of the Great Alone was, like

Thoreau's, quite distinct from Wordsworth's conviction that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her." It is this more sophisticated, and very American, sense of wilderness that makes his Yukon scenes alluring, even today.

When he left Canada in 1912, Service briefly covered the Balkans War for a Toronto newspaper and then went to the antithesis of the wild, Paris. There he married Germaine Bourgoin, with whom he lived until he died. But there, too, the ice-worms intruded, in the form of the First World War. Service became an ambulance driver and stretcher bearer, collecting material for his fourth book of poems, the often touching *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. Published in 1916, it was received enthusiastically, especially in America. Carl Klinck characterizes it intelligently as displaying "little jingoism, but much disillusionment, and much compassion"—exactly what might have been expected from a man whose brother had been killed in action (the book is dedicated to his memory).

Rhymes of a Red Cross Man brought the chest-thumping period of Service's career to a somewhat jaundiced close. In its celebration of manly fortitude, its consciousness of the imminence of death, and its affection for oddball characters, the book shared themes with the poet's earlier work. Yet the exuberance of those themes was now muted, and the Kiplingesque hardiness was undercut by a sense of ambivalence and futility. If death north of Dawson came clean and silent, death at Verdun savaged the ears with the screaming of overhead shells and the rattle of machine guns and the moans of shattered teenagers dying. In the unnatural world of the trenches, "survival of the fittest" became a joke, and there was in the poetry of the stretcher bearer something more than the proudness of a drum. There was an awareness of the brutal and the stupid which seemed to question even as it applauded. It was as if the poet, thousands of miles from the Klondike, were beginning to see hung on barbed-wire all of those strong-willed men "grit to the core."

He stayed in France after the war, and for fifty years made Europe his home. He did make forays abroad. In the 1920s he visited Hollywood, where four of his works were set to film. In the 1942 Gold Rush melodrama *The Spoilers*, starring John Wayne and Marlene Dietrich, he made a cameo appearance as "the Poet"—scribbling "Dan McGrew" in a bar. And he did return briefly to Canada, although he got no closer to his old haunts than Vancouver. For the bulk of his life he tended his garden—turning out novels, an autobiography, a vegetarian manifesto called *Why Not Grow Young?*, and

verse collections with chummy names like *Songs of a Sun-Lover* and *Carols of an Old Codger*. Comfortably retired from the open road, he quipped without bitterness in 1949, "Though I've one foot in the grave, the other's in the gravy." He had become the quintessential Bodmer in Barbizon.

And then his mind returned to the wild. Two months before his death, he sent *Newsweek* a poem about Alaska. He called it "Sourdough Star," in reference to the forty-ninth star that would soon be added to the American flag. "And now you call me," he wrote, "O how glad I be/to join at last that jewelled galaxy." Pretty awful stuff, but appropriate. You think of the dying Thoreau, muttering "Moose" from his deathbed and then "Indians." Or Service's own "Atavist," Tom Thorne, who, seeking Peace, understands "that the Lord has hidden it in the secret heart of the Wild." So it was with Service. In the end, as roses grew in the garden, this lover of the Silence turned back to what had always been his heart's deepest strain.

A word should be said of Service's style and of the fame he achieved in spite of it. I say "in spite of" as a sop to the Poetry-as-High-Art crowd, who have always condemned his work as mere "verse." Give them their due. At his worst (the Alaska poem is an example), Service was very bad indeed—much worse than Thoreau on his dog days and nearly as bad as Wordsworth in his dotage. But to his credit, Service was the first to admit it. Nobody knew better than he did that facileness could be a deadly blessing. In *Ploughman* he acknowledged this plainly: "Rhyming has my ruin been. With less deftness I might have produced real poetry." He called himself, unabashedly, a "verseman"; it was a sound, humble assessment. More precisely, we might call him a "coupletman": virtually all of his poems are end-stopped; the vast majority are rhymed *aabb* or *abab*; and his meters are invariably clunkety-clunk—you can march to most of them with no trouble.

But the style fit his themes and his talents. He was delighted when the Irish writer James Stephens praised his work as "very good newspaper verse," and unselfconscious enough to admit, when asked why he had never visited his neighbor Somerset Maugham in Europe, "I'm scared of those big fellows." There is defensiveness and resentment in the poem "The Man Who Knew," but for the most part Service seemed content to be merely a household name. And unless you are facile yourself, there is little point in criticizing Bob Dylan for not being Shakespeare or Bach.

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Furthermore, when devourers of poetry call Service “bad,” what they often seem to mean is that he is not *difficult* enough for refined tastes. Poets are almost as notorious as sommeliers and physicians for taking themselves too seriously. There are poets, as there are physicians, who honestly believe that “tremulous and diaphoretic” is a better phrase than “shaky and sweaty.” Not Service. When his heroes get the shakes, that’s what they call them. This is half the reason his verse is called “light.” Light verse is verse that commits the unpardonable sin of being accessible to waitresses and mechanics.

Because of the elitism of poetasters in this century, poetry has become a cloistered art. Thanks largely to the influence of Eliot and Pound, it is now possible for preeners without either their diligence or their imagination to go around calling themselves poets on the strength of free verse and bits of Dante. They don’t have to prove it in public, because the ancient tradition of recitation, which sustained bards from Homer to Robert Frost, has pretty much ground to a halt. As a result, the average guy in the street is about as likely to know a poem by heart today as he is to know Sanskrit or surgery.

This was not the case in Service’s day. Even before *Sourdough* came out, he had made a reputation himself as a reciter of popular ballads like “Gunga Din” and “Casey at the Bat.” That was no anomaly for the time. In the pre-electronic era, it was possible for roustabouts and ranch hands to know their Kipling as they knew the latest vaudeville skits, because poetry was still a public art. Service’s millions of fans might not have been able to tell free verse from free love, but they damn well knew what rhymed with McGee. And they recited his rhymes—by the millions.

When I was a youngster in the 1950s, a family friend used to recite “Sam McGee.” It would take him, I guess, about ten minutes—just the amount of time that your average kid today is able to sit still between commercials. In spite of the “obvious” rhymes and the thumping meter, listening to it did not seem a burden. We may have learned something from it, too: something about death, and far places, and human laughter, not to mention the pleasures of rhyme. I am not convinced that the age of Eliot and of television has done more to broadcast such lessons than pedestrian “Rubbert Wullie” once did.

The loss of such lessons is not trivial. The patent advantages of Service over the practitioners of High Poetic Art is precisely that he is accessible. You can still read “Sam McGee” aloud, and children will listen and delight in the images and the sounds. Maybe what they’re getting is doggerel, but it’s no more so than the album lyrics that serve

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as public poetry today. Maybe, in this age of private readings and public silence, poetic *cheechakos* need doggerel—just to whet the whistle. The priests of High Art may be right in suggesting that life is too short to drink cheap wine. But that argument only works if you’ve got a choice. If you need a fifty-dollar corkscrew to open the Margaux, most of us will settle for Mountain Red.

There is another, more “political” reason to be thankful for this reissue of Robert Service. Today, more than ever before, we need to be reminded of our limitations—of the necessary boundaries to human striving. For all his robust, “stout-hearted men” puffery, there is a current through Service’s poems of enormous humor and humility—a current that is captured with great sympathy in Mark Summers’s illustrations for this volume. At times when the Big Stick gets dusted off as an answer to international tensions, it is a good thing to be reminded of the lessons of a Red Cross man. And when bureaucrats threaten to surrender what is left of the wild to their cronies in blue suits and hard hats, there are worse poets we could turn to than Robert Service. It is Service’s sense of his own human smallness, in the end, that makes him the right witness for the wild. Without that sense—without the common sense that says “I can take sixty-nine below . . . maybe,” the Silence itself can be threatened—which is to say plugged in, amplified, and milked dry.

The faith of a new breed of prospectors says that the Silence, within and without, can be tamed—that, with enough mind power and horsepower and firepower, technology can solve any problem; positive thinking can make Our Way of Life universal; and every wasteland can be turned into money. It is not the least of Robert Service’s lessons that, when you start down that high-minded, gold-drunk road, you end up seeing snakes in the snow, or watching clocks with a gun in your hand. When manly confidence becomes a national disease, look to Blasphemous Bill for a cure.

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