

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

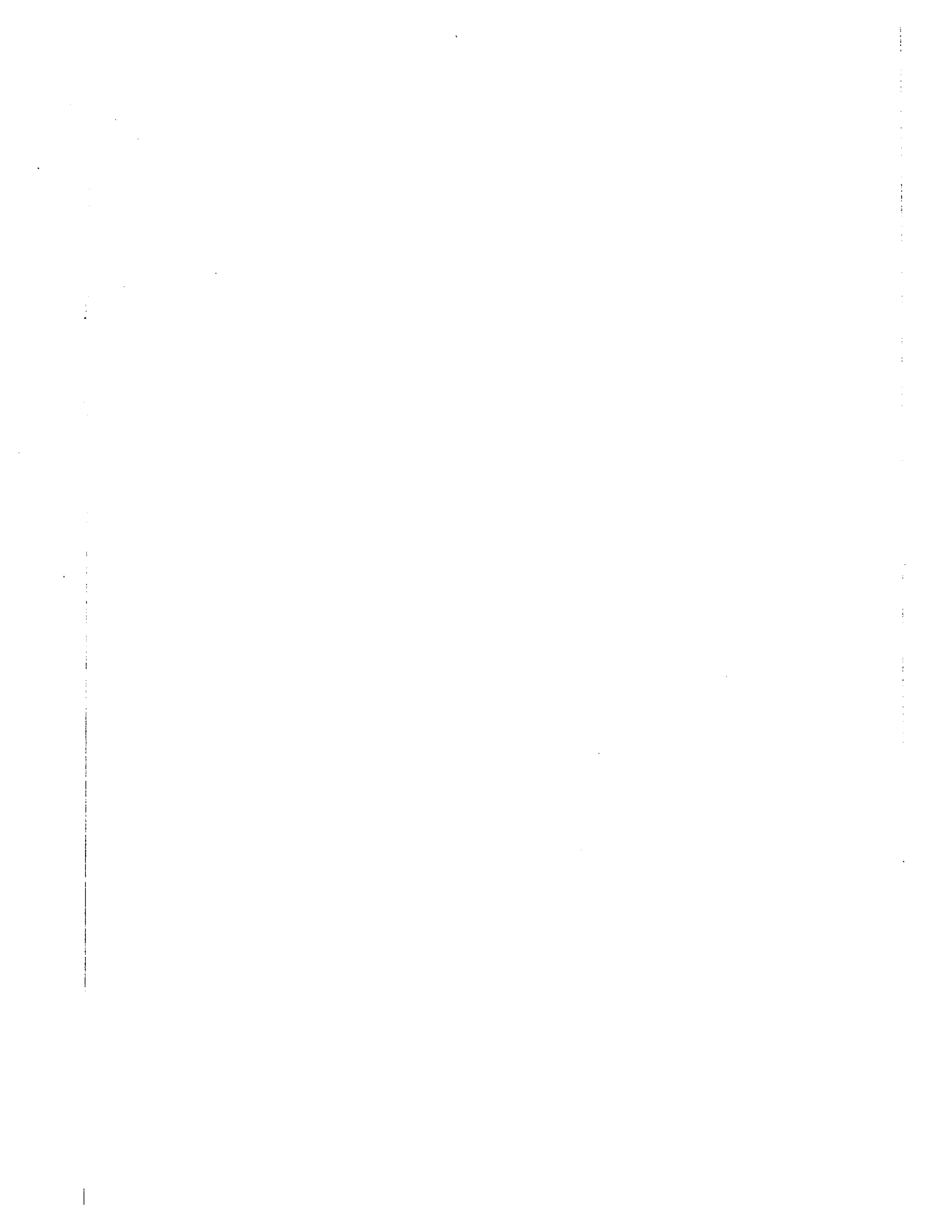
The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]



000414
cop 1

Pietro F. Migone, LL.D.

ROBERT SERVICE
poet of the Canadian North

M. A.



University of Ottawa

1949

UMI Number: EC52158

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform EC52158
Copyright 2007 by ProQuest LLC
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ROBERT SERVICE
poet of the Canadian North

F O R E W O R D

.....ye who dream
To be the poets of the land :
....nowhere found a nobler theme
Than you, ye favor'd, have at hand.

.....
So, while the boat glides swift along,
Behold above there looketh forth
The star that lights the path of song
The constant star that loves the North.

(Thomas D'Arcy McGee)

According to some literary critics, Robert W. Service, is not a poet but a mediocre vers-writer who after a period of immense popularity, decidely and definitely declined and disappeared for ever from the literary scene, leaving no greater trace than a meteor in a summer sky.

Besides, they maintain, even if he were a poet, one could hardly call him a "Canadian" poet, as he was born abroad and spent only part of his life in Canada.

The purpose of this thesis is to prove that Robert W. Service is a poet and a good one, and that his "Canadian" poems, are destined to survive and will remain part and parcel of Canadian Poetry.

A letter from

Robert Service

VILLA AURORA
64, Boulevard d'Italie
Monte - Carlo
Tél.: 013-98

21st April 1949

Mr P.F. Migone LL. D.
Ottawa

Dear Sir :

Thanks for your complimentary letter.
I am glad you like my work, and feel flattered
that you should make it the subject of your
thesis.

My suggestion is that you should
read my two books of autobiography, PLOUGHMAN
OF THE MOON and HARPER OF HEAVEN, where you
will find all the material you need.

Wishing you every success

Yours sincerely

Robert Service

I am just leaving for a months
motor tour of Italy.

C O N T E N T S

	Page
- Foreward	iii
- A letter from Robert W. Service	iv
- Contents	v
- His life	1
- The Far North in literature	11
- Influence of other writers	16
- His thought	20
- The Arctic Nature	23
- His characters	26
- Qualities and faults of his poetry	28
- Service, the Canadian poet	55
- Bibliography	77

HIS LIFE

ROBERT WILLIAM SERVICE was born in Preston, England, on January 16, 1876. His father, a Scotsman, was the manager of the local bank. His mother, Emily Parker, was a native of Preston.

Soon after his birth, young ROBERT was taken to Scotland, where he grew up. "I lived in Glasgow", he writes, "until my 21st year, being educated at Hillhead High School and attending classes at Glasgow University"(1).

He was only six years old when, asked to say graces on his birthday, he recited his first verses :

"God bless the cakes and bless the jam
"Bless the cheese and the cold boiled ham
"Bless the scones Aunt Jeannie makes
"And save us all from belly-aches.Amen".(2)

At twelve he had his first poem published in a boys column of the "Glasgow Herald"; at 14 he began to get paid for his poems.

But ROBERT SERVICE did not like school and left when he was only fourteen. He worked for a shipping company in Glasgow and eventually became a clerk of the Commercial Bank of Scotland. During this time he read Tennyson and Browning, whom he called his "big stars".

ted by Stanley I. Kunitz and Howard Haycroft in "XXth Century Authors".

om "Leading Canadian Poets" by W.P. Percival.

Later he perused the works of Owen Meredith, Coventry Patmore, Thackeray and Thomas Hood. He used to study before and after his long working hours as he wanted to matriculate.

Once he tried also his luck on the stage, but soon returned to his favourite studies and sports, since his literary ambitions did not prevent him from being a prominent member of a football team and a fairly good cricketer.

He was scarcely out of his teens when he decided to leave the Old World for Canada and managed to get some money by selling his old clothes together with his gun and camera. This is how he describes his departure from England and his arrival in the New World in 1897 :

"On coming of age I found the lust of adventure too strong for me and resigning from the bank I emigrated to Canada. (3) The Manager was the type of Scotsman who thought as highly of banking that I'd rather have asked for a raise than tell him I wanted to leave. It took a lot of nerve to enter his office and warn him he must look elsewhere for a junior clerk. All he said was :

-What do you expect to do, SERVICE? -

And before I realized the folly of telling him the truth, I blurted out my absurd ambition :

- Go to Canada and be a cowboy, Sir - I repli

- Go with you if I were your age - he said. (4)

"I travelled steerage, landing in Victoria, B.C. with just five dollars in my pocket. For the next seven years I took a course in the College of Hard Knocks, graduating without enthusiasm. I travelled all up and down the Pacific Slope, generally on freight trains and worked in a score of different occupations" (5) going as far South as Mexico.

ROBERT SERVICE picked stones, weeded fields, went on haying, baking, milking, digging tunnels, picking oranges, always on the go and always happy-go-lucky.

"I tried to get along by doing as little as possible", he wrote in Maclean's Magazine, "When the first pay day came around, I invariably resigned. Then I lived in idleness as long as my money lasted".

One day he decided to become a doctor :
"I worked night and day.... to pass the entrance examination.... then my money ran out and I gave up".

Finally he became a clerk of the Canadian Bank of Commerce in Victoria. From Victoria he was transferred to Vancouver, then to Kamloops and Whitehorse.

The writer had the fortune to meet in a small village of the Ottawa Valley an octogenarian lady,

from "Maclean's Magazine of January 15, 1941.

Montreal Witness?

Mrs. R.C. Miller who spent with her husband (then Assistant Gold Commissioner) nearly twenty years at Whitehorse.

According to Mrs. Miller, ROBERT W. SERVICE was a very fine gentleman, rather aloof and perhaps a bit shy, although a very independent character. He didn't like to be told how to do his work at the Bank and if his superiors ventured to suggest it, he would calmly answer "I'd rather do it in my own way". Mrs. Miller referred also to a romantic aspect of SERVICE'S life as it appears that before he decided to leave for Europe he was rather enamoured of a girl of Whitehorse or Dawson.

It was after his first contact with the Far North that SERVICE began to write his best poems, those that made him famous as "The Kipling of the Arctic World"(6). SERVICE speaks of this period of his life in these terms: "I went to the Yukon (in 1906) where I was employed (at Whitehorse and Dawson) by the Canadian Bank of Commerce for 8 years. There, influenced by Kipling, I began to write and was greatly surprised to find that my work was acceptable".

He published his first book of poetry "Songs of a Scourdough" (7) in 1907. This book was sent by SERVICE with a \$100.00 cheque to Ryerson Press, Toronto, but the editor, E.S. Caswell, returned the money and published

) "Montreal Witness"

) later reprinted as "The Spell of the Yukon and other verses".

the volume at the Company's risk.(8)

In 1909 ROBERT SERVICE published "Ballads of a Cheechako".

"I wrote another book", he writes in Maclean's Magazine, "my publisher refused some of the stuff; said it was too strong. I had to tone down quite a few ballads". In 1912 he published "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone"

He travelled extensively in the Sub-Arctic and became perfectly acquainted with the life of the "Sourdough". Once he went down the Mackenzie River to the Yukon in a birch-bark canoe. It took three months to reach the Yukon. His companion was a rugged trapper who rolled cigarette after cigarette. As he was getting short of paper the trapper coldly remarked that he couldn't live without smoking and said : "If we ever run out of paper I'll kill you". The same trapper, who was carrying with him a rich booty of furs, valued at 7000 dollars, gambled, shortly afterwards, all his property in a "saloon", lost everything and then committed suicide. This episode probably inspired one of SERVICE'S poems : "The Ballad of Salvation Bill".

SERVICE describes very simply and succinctly this travel of his: "I decided I'd better have a good look around the North Country. My reputation was growing

from "An outline of Canadian Literature" by Lorne Pierce.

fast, I had to live up to it. Early in Spring I embarked in a canoe at Athabaska Landing and paddled until I overtook a Hudson's Bay brigade I travelled with them to Fort McMurray, then across Lake Athabaska to the Great Slave River, from the River into Great Slave Lake, across the Mackenzie to the mouth of the Peel River.

Then I followed the Peel to Fort McPherson and went on up the Rat. I crossed the Rockies until I got into the Bell at the Divide. From there I dropped over into the Porcupine and from the Porcupine went on up the Yukon River to Dawson". And he adds jokingly "you can rhyme all this geography off in less than a minute, but it's still around 3000 miles...." (9)

SERVICE'S best novel "The Trail of '98" was published in 1910. Through his poems and this novel he has not only immortalized the historical epic of the gold-rush "through snow and blizzard, privations, suffering and even death, but he has also portrayed the glamour of those pioneer days when money was gold dust, a tawdry chorus girl a queen and a grimey prospector played like a genius on an out-of-tune bar-room piano". (10)

"Trail of '98", was later made into a movie; so were also two of his other novels, and, twice,

om Maclean's Magazine

rom "Leading Canadian Poets"

"The Shooting of Dan McGrew".

At the outbreak of the Balkan War ROBERT W. SERVICE left Canada for Europe, to report for the Toronto "Star". Thus ended the comparatively brief "Canadian" period of his life. In fact, he had spent less than twenty years in Canada, but they had been twenty years of a strenuous life and he had come in contact with true Canadian pioneers during a time which can be ranked among the "heroic" periods of Canadian history.

The rest of SERVICE'S life is not particularly interesting for the purpose of this work. It will be useful, however, to recall it, as it might help us to understand better the "man" and the poet.

As a reporter for the "Star" SERVICE spent a short time with the Turkish Army, then he visited France which he liked so much that he decided to settle there. In France he met and married his French wife.

In 1914 he published a novel "The Pretender". After the declaration of the first World War, he volunteered and served for two years as an ambulance driver. His "Rhymes of a Red Cross Man", published in 1916 belong to this period of his life.

He left the Red Cross to become once again a War correspondent for the Toronto "Star", and was briefly mistaken for a German spy. Then he retired gratefully into the comparative seclusion of the Canadian Intelligence.(11)

He remained in France after the War with his wife and daughter and published various works, mainly novels, like "Poisoned Paradise" (1922); "The Roughneck" (1923); "The Master of the Microbe" (1926); "The House of Fear" (1927). He also wrote a book on health, "Why not grow young", in 1928.

While he was writing novels in France he read, one morning at breakfast, his own obituary in the London "Times". "They said such beautiful things about me", he reported, "that I never bothered to correct the story".(12)

Apart from his work as a novelist, he continued to write verses and in 1920 published a book of Poets "Ballads of a Bohemian". In 1927 he reprinted his previous poems in "Complete Poetical Works". In 1930 another book appeared, "Collected verses", and in 1940 the interesting "Bar-room ballads", in which he often goes back with his memory to the Far North.

from Maclean's Magazine

Frederick C. Othman in "Ottawa Journal",
February 27, 1942.

In 1939 the second World War caught him in Russia and he managed to escape from Warsaw the first day of the bombardment. In 1940, when France was invaded, he escaped and returned to Canada, after 28 years of absence, leaving behind in Nice a 40,000 word manuscript and two complete novels. Between 1940-1945 he spent his winters in Hollywood and his summers in Vancouver. In Hollywood his old friend Frank Lloyd, a fellow Scot, signed him up as an actor in the film "the Spoilers" with Marlene Dietrich, Randolph Scott and other stars. SERVICE impersonated himself but as a man forty years younger. On this occasion Lloyd asked him to recite "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" in the Yukon Saloon of Universal Studios. When SERVICE read the poem he said also that "Dangerous Dan never lived, except in my head". (13)

After the end of the war he went back to the French Riviera and published two books of autobiography "The Ploughman of the Moon" and "The Harper of Heaven". Some years before he had written: "I am now in my sixty eighth year and some day may be tempted to write my autobiography. But I will wait until I am eighty, when

Frederick C. Othman in "Ottawa Journal".

something really interesting may have happened, and when most of those who are in a position to bawl me out may have beat me to the boneyard".

ROBERT SERVICE lives now in Monte-Carlo with his wife and daughter at "Villa Aurora". A small and slender man, he wants to be left alone, loves to strum on the guitar, enjoys living peacefully on the Riviera, tending his roses and looking at the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

He has a keen sense of humour and enjoys a good joke. He doesn't believe that he is a great man and hates to be called a poet. About "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" he said once that "it should never have been written by a face like mine. I sometimes wonder if it should ever have been written at all. It's only when I think of my royalty cheques that I'm consoled".(14

Very few people are his intimate friends and are allowed into the "sancta sanctorum" of his life. Perhaps the only person who could write his biography is SERVICE'S own daughter who has been always very close to him with her intelligent understanding and sincere affection.

from Maclean's Magazine.

THE FAR NORTH IN LITERATURE

The fight of man against nature is perhaps one of the oldest subjects in literature. Many and many pages, often entire books, have been devoted by the most famous poets and writers to describe man's struggle and strife against the wind, the sea, heat and cold, animals and other men.

The very history of mankind is an account of this fight and whenever a man has been able to overcome fatigue, weakness and despair, whenever his spiritual forces could give him power to hold on and win where his merely physical strength would have succumbed, poets and writers of all ages and countries have called this man a hero and told us his story, lest his deeds and achievements be forgotten. This is the story that we learn from the Ramayana and the Odyssey, from the Anabasis and the Aeneid, from the Chanson de Roland and the Popular Ballad from Tasso's "Jerusalem" and Camoens' "Lusiads" and from many poems of Victor Hugo, Tennyson and Kipling.

Strangely enough the marvellous exploits of the early pioneers and explorers in this Northern Country of Canada have not been chosen, as yet, by any major poet as

the subject of a great epic. However, the hardships of the Far North, the virtues and faults of the frontiersman, his fights and heroisms have inspired a number of Canadian writers, novelists in particular.

"Ever since the fatally fascinating chimera of the North-West passage imposed itself on the imagination of explorers the Far North of the American Continent has had an importance". (1). Eventually, the vision of the North-West passage disappeared but its romantic qualities remained and the barren wilderness of the Far North took its place.

Early in the second half of the nineteenth century, Robert M. Ballantyne - who was a clerk of the Hudson's Bay Co. - wrote "Hudson's Bay", "Ungava" and "The Young Fur-traders"; later, J. MacDonald Oxley, a Canadian, gave us "Up Among the Ice Floes" and "Archie of Athabasca"; Alan Sullivan told us romantic tales of the northern lands, among ice, snow and the Esquimaux while Agnes Laut published "Lords of the North" and "Heralds of Empire".

"The typical "dramatis personae" of half breeds, Indians and Mounted Policemen appears also in

the Sir Gilbert Parker Stories of "Pretty Pierre and his people" (2) while Durkin's "The Lobstick Trail" is a novel about the Dog Derby at The Pas. We would like to mention here a novelist who is almost forgotten in Canada but whose name is still very much alive abroad, particularly in France and Italy, where almost all his novels have been translated: James Oliver Curwood, a true Canadian writer of the North.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the population of the North centered around the Hudson's Bay area, their affairs being so largely bound up with those of the company. The literary centre of gravity was naturally situated there also. But a new economic impulse and a new region appeared with the Klondike gold rush and within a few years the new theme found its adequate literary exponent in Robert Service.

".....While the stories of the gold rush were still in current circulation, Service grasped their salient values and something of the vastness and power of the natural surroundings". (3)

from "Appraisals of Canadian Literature"

from "Appraisals of Canadian Literature"

Robert Service, however, is not only the poet of the gold-rush. If the gold-rush was responsible for his first coming into contact with the Far North, Service wrote about nature and men which might be found everywhere in the Canadian Arctic. Besides, the Yukon is not the only part of the North which he visited or the gold digger the only type of man with whom he became acquainted; he travelled not only from Skagway to Whitehorse and Dawson but also from the Athabaska to the Slave and the Mackenzie; he didn't meet only the man with the gold poke but also the trapper, the "musher" and the Indian.

He seems to have been able to tell in sonorous verses what all the writers who preceded him told or tried to tell in prose and we think that we are justified in calling him "the poet of the North", where:

"The lonely sunsets flare forlorn
Down valleys dreadly desolate;
The lordly mountains soar in scorn
As still as death, as stern as fate".(4)

In this and in other of his virile descriptive poems "the violence of the adjectives, the crude satire of the references to men of formal civilisation,

"The Land God Forgot" in "Complete Poems" of Robert Service.

give an almost visual picture of the Country's naked grandeur" (5) for violent and robust verses are necessary to describe the powerful and inexorably cruel nature of the Far North.

Service is the poet of a desolate land, where a few desperate strong men, "unthrottled by fear or defeat" fight against the elements of nature, fight "each step as they go", not only for a poke of gold dust but because their blood is red and their heart is fearless and they love to struggle and conquer and win.

) from "Appraisals of Canadian Literature".

INFLUENCE OF OTHER WRITERS

Robert Service said once of himself: "Kipling comes first with me. He is the greatest of modern writers to my mind.I only wish I could write in his class" (1)

There is no doubt about it. Service was deeply influenced by Kipling when he first began to write his Canadian Ballads. As a matter of fact the "Montreal Witness" dubbed him "The Kipling of the Arctic World". W.B. Rhodenizer (2) says of his poetry: "His work resembles that of Kipling, his avowed favourite author"; and E.K. Brown (3) : "Kipling is obviously his master - the Kipling of the early ballads". In fact, the influence of Kipling permeates all Service's poetry where we often see the Kipling idea and the Kipling method and "it is a jolly good method".(1)

This influence is particularly noticeable in some poems, like "The Law of the Yukon" which recalls

-
-) See Garvin's "Canadian Poets"
 -) "A Handbook of Canadian Literature"
 -) "On Canadian Poetry".

Kipling's "Red Gods" and "Grin" which seems to be almost an echo of "If". The same can be said about "The Little Old Log Cabin" which is almost an imitation, and is not, at any rate, one of the best poems of Service. Apart from these few examples there is nothing else we can say about Service's imitating Kipling, because our poet is no imitator. He loves Kipling and is influenced by him, but his theme, his thought and style are definitely original and perhaps more sincere than his master's.

Besides, it would be difficult to trace in Service's works the well-known "imperialistic doctrine" of Kipling. Service's "doctrine" is not for a greater Empire but for a better and more virile humanity represented by men who having discarded the pharisaic artificiality of puritanism, look at "the heart of the matter" and heroically fight for their primitive but noble ideal.

Besides the obvious influence of Kipling it is not very easy to discover which other poet or writer Service had in mind. Perhaps Jack London gave him some ideas. He wrote once about him: "Jack London has captured the public's imagination with his tough realistic romances" and Service's poetry is certainly tough and realistic enough.

It might help our research to quote here one of Service's poems, "Bookshelf":

"Shakespeare and Milton are not there
 Shelley and Keats you seek in vain
 Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning too,
 Remarkably are not in view.
Omar (4) first you see
Then Reading Gaol (5)
The Ancient Mariner (6) is next
Then Burns.....
 Brett Harte and Eugene Field are here
 And Henley, chanting brave and bold
 And Chesterton, in praise of Beer.
Kipling, to whom I bow the knee,
 Masefield, with rugged sailor songs
 And to my lyric troupe I add
 With grateful heart "The Shropshire Lad" (7)

It is clear that Service must have enjoyed reading Harte's novels and his "plain language", Henley's "Lyra Heroica", or the salty language of Masefield's "Salt-water ballads" and Housman lyrics which must have suggested to our poet economy of words and sincerity.

Strangely enough the same Shelley to whom he gave no place on his bookshelf, seems to have influenced

-
-) Omar Khayyam
 -) Oscar Wilde
 -) Coleridge
 -) Alfred Edward Housman.

some of Service's verses, like "The Pines", (8), a poem which reminds us of Shelley's "The Cloud", although only the first part of the verse recalls Shelley's rhythm:

"We sleep in the sleep of ages,
the bleak barbarian pines,
The gray moss drapes us like sages,
and closer we lock our lines,
And deeper we clutch through the gelid
gloom where never a sunbeam shines
...Pines and pines and the shadow of pines
as far as the eye can see
...Sentinels of the stillness, lords of
the last lone land".

from "The Spell of the Yukon
and other verses".

Service has more than one style. Very romantic and full of sentiment is for instance "Sunshine", from his book "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone", in which our poet describes a man's vigil on his dead wife:

" O God, how sweet ... she seems
Not dead, not dead indeed - she dreams,
she dreams".

"Barb-wire Bill", one of his best ballads from the same book, is entirely based on sentiment, on a sentiment which almost defies you, should you dare call it so.

But above all, Robert W. Service, admires courage, determination, endurance, heroism and generosity, loyalty and friendship. He believes in the more solid qualities and despises everything which sounds artificial, sweet, effeminate or - if the reader will pardon us - "sissified".

He seems to tell us "first of all be a man". A man like those he knew up North; not "foolish and feeble", but "strong and sane, men girt for the combat, men who are grit to the core...fierce as the bear in defeat, swift as the panther in triumph". They can be rascals or even murderers, but they have a code of honour, they are courageous and sincere and capable of

sacrifice for duty, friendship or love.

At the end of his "Law of the Yukon" he says:

"This is the Law of the Yukon, that only
the strong shall thrive;
That surely the weak shall perish, and
only the fit survive".

In reading these lines our thought goes very naturally to Kipling's doctrine about the "Victory of the Strong". But Service's poetry is different from Kipling's. He does not really preach a doctrine. He describes life as it is and cannot conceal his admiration for the strong men he has met. In other words he admires those qualities which are characteristic of the pioneer of the New World and particularly of Canada where man is constantly trying to keep nature at bay.

The virtues which Service praises are not supernatural but very human and they appeal not only to a restricted number of supermen but to the masses, hence the tremendous popularity which Service's poems enjoyed.

In a synthesis, we can say that Service's doctrine is more or less the same code of honour of the Crusaders, a sort of grown up Boy-Scouts' law, with a touch of wickedness and of bad language but with more solid virtue and heroism than we can find in most of the more puritanic contemporaries of Robert W. Service.

THE ARCTIC NATURE

Service doesn't love only the virile men which he describes. He loves also that nature against which they fight. Perhaps, indeed, it is that same nature that makes them noble and strong and heroic.

It is the :

"...tracking and the packing and the poling
in the sun;
It's the sleeping in the open, it's the
rugged, unfaked food;
It's the snow-shoe and the paddle and the
camp-fire and the gun".(1)

that makes these men tough and hard as a rock.

It is the "Land God Forgot" which is always trying to kill and crush everything; that land that betrays even her lovers:

"Drowned them like rats in my rivers,
Starved them like curs on my plains;
Rotted the flesh that was left them,
poisoned the blood in their veins;
Burst with my winter upon them tearing
forever their sight,
Lashed them with fungus-white faces,
Whimpering wild in the night,
Staggering blind through the storm-whirl,
Stumbling mad through the snow,
Frozen stiff in the ice-pack, brittle and
bent like a bow".(2)

"While The Bannock Bakes", in
"Rhymes of a Rolling Stone".

"The Law of the Yukon", in
"The Spell of the Yukon, etc."

Service loves this Canadian Nature of the North, sometimes so cruel and hard, sometimes so peaceful and beautiful as when :

"Fearless all the wild things are! the bank with goose-grass gleam,
And there's a bronze musk-rat sitting, sniffing at his door,
A mother duck with brood of ten comes squattering along;
The tawny, white-winged ptarmigans are flying all about;
And in that whirly, golden pool, a restless, gleaming throng,
The trout are waiting till we condescend to take them out".(3)

This is the Northern scenery in summer time,

when :

"In the velvet gloom, the fire's a-gleam
The night is ripe with quiet, rich with incense of the pine;
From Sanctuary lake I hear the loon;
The peaks are bright against the blue and drenched with sunset wine,
And like a silver bubble is the moon".(4)

All is peaceful and almost arcadian in summer but when the long, long night comes, then everything changes.

"Can you remember your huskies all going,
Barking with joy and their brushes in air;
You in your parka, glad-eyed and glowing,
Monarch, your subject the wolf and the bear
...Forest your couch, and your candle a star
(5)

"While the Bannock Bakes",
in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone".

"The Squaw Man", in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone".

"Men of the High North", in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

The Arctic Nature, a treacherous panther which has behaved for a while like a playful kitten, turns back on man with her cruel fangs and then..."there are hardships that nobody reckons", for it is "winter in the Far North!

"The Winter! the brightness that blinds you
The white land licked tight as a drum
The cold fear that follows and finds you
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.

.....
The snows that are older than history
The woods where the weird shadows slant;
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery..."
(6)

But in spite of all these hardships, the he-man of the North loves this treacherous nature as he would love a cruel and capricious woman.

No other poet before Service has ever so powerfully described this passionate love for the North Country, which is still so unknown to the general public but which is so beloved to the few who, even to-day, have chosen to live there.

"The Spell of the Yukon", in
"The Spell of the Yukon etc."

HIS CHARACTERS

The writer has met in Canada men with a college education who refused - I am using their words "to suffocate in an office" or to continue to live the life of "a sweet scented student". They went up North in the bush and mines, where their blood could run free in the cold open air. Sometimes they come back to the city, where as a rule they swallow a fair amount of drink and spend long hours in conversation with their friends or their brothers and nephews. They want to know all that has happened to everybody they knew and they make plans for the future. Sometimes they waste in a few days all the money which they have made, sometimes they give away every penny they have to a "chum" who is badly in need. Then back they go to the forests and snows with a grin in their faces and a joke on their lips.

Like these men are the characters of Robert W. Service's Poems: strongwilled, tough, rough, heavy drinkers; men who can utter only very few words of love or friendship but who would easily die for a woman or a friend; men who habitually curse and swear, men who are sharply cut, and whose soul is covered by a very rough bark but whose heart is sincere; easy to fight and to

pardon, easy to hate and love; characters of a most definite type, representative of the pioneer Canadian, with at least a pint of the mad Irish blood, a trifle of a romantic French adventurer's gallantry and a drop or two of the mystery which halos the primeval lord of the Country, the Indian.

These are the characters of Service's poems: freedom loving men, who prefer a "strong life that never knows harness" (1) to the comfort of a life in the cities, where almost every creature is the slave of another man.

The poem "A Rolling Stone" is like the song of liberty of the Sourdough. Its ending is almost a thanksgiving to God Who made it possible for man to live free and roaming in this land of the North.

" Then every star shall sing to me
 Its song of liberty;
 And every morn shall bring to me
 Its mandate to be free.
 In every throbbing vein of me
 I'll feel the vast Earth-call;
 O body, heart and brain of me
 Praise Him Who made it all". (2)

-
-) "The Spell of the Yukon".
) "A rolling Stone", in Rhymes
 of a Rolling Stone.

QUALITIES AND FAULTS OF HIS POETRY

Perhaps the greatest quality of Service's poetry is its spontaneity. His verses flow naturally just as if he didn't know how to speak otherwise. Almost always he writes the everyday language and employ the colloquialisms which we all use.

When we listen to someone read his verses we think at times that he is just talking to us, as when we hear sentences like these :

"I wanted the gold and I got it.
Came out with a fortune last fall".

One has the impression that it is natural speech that falls into poetry :

"You come to get rich (darned good reason)"

OR

" O God! how I'm stuck on it all.....
It's hell! - but I've been there before" (

and again

".....My God! but that man could play". (2)

Again he has moments that are genuinely human as when he makes the Sourdough say:

"I'm sick to death.....
I long for a whiff of bacon and beans" (3)

"The Spell of the Yukon".

"The Shooting of Dan McGrew"

"The Hearth of a Sourdough".

or

"Money was just like dirt there,
easy to get and to spend".

Service indeed has the power to express a sincere thought in a very sincere way.

"The Shooting of Dan McGrew" is a good example of a very emotional poem written in that sparkling and spontaneous slang of the people of the North; our poet knows how to use plain words and charge them with emotion:

".....The music changed, so soft that you
scarce could hear;
But you felt that your life had been looted
clean of all that it once held dear
That someone had stolen the woman you loved"
(4)

Very often his language may sound too rough to the over refined ears of his squeamish critics. But that language is used even to-day by the type of person about whom Service wrote. His poems, therefore, would not be half as effective if he didn't use a rough and strong language. Kipling does this and is praised for it. Just as Kipling speaks the real language of the cockney soldier in the Sudan, so does Service speak the slang of the Sourdough. "My rhymes are rough" (5)

"The Shooting of Dan McGrew"

"To the Man of the High North" in
"Ballads of a Cheechako".

wrote Service. They definitely are. But this roughness is part of their charm, as a log cabin looks beautiful in the forest where a stucco house would be out of place.

How sincere and yet how artistically beautiful is "L'Envoi", the last poem of "The Spell of the Yukon" :

"You who have lived in the land,
 You who have trusted the trail,
 You who are strong to withstand,
 You who are swift to assail:
 Songs have I sung to beguile
 Vintage of desperate years
 Hard as a harlot's smile
 Bitter as unshed tears".

The last two verses are charged with an emotion which could be hardly described with less words or more effectively.

Service wants to be sincere; he tries very hard to open his entire heart and soul to the reader. It takes a bit of taste for sincerity to appreciate Service and one finds such sincerity more often among the masses than among the high-browed pseudo-cultured people. Is this not the same high regard for artistic truth which led great leaders of literary movements, such as Wordsworth, to rebel against the artificialities of a worn-out poetic diction and the mannerisms of a

thread-bare convention.

Service even tells us that he wanted to say what he felt:

"God knows I have tried to be true
Please God you will understand" (6)

When struggling against Nature because he has to keep his promise to Sam McGee and cremate his corpse, the Sourdough doesn't pretend to be a holy man for whom sacrifice is a joy.

" In the days to come,.....in my heart how
I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone
firelight,
While the huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows -
O God! how I loathed the thing".

Sometimes his language becomes quite scornful talking about that life of danger, privation and hardship:

"A hunger not of the belly kind, that's
banished with bacon and beans,
But the gnawing hunger of lonely men".(7);

or it comes out with phrases like :

"A man with a foot in the grave and scarcely
the strength of a louse".

"L'Envoi"

"The Shooting of Dan McGrew".

This rough talk is found almost everywhere in his poems of the North, as for example in "The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill" (8):

"Where he died or how he died, it
didn't matter a damn",

or in the "Ballad of One-eyed Mike" (8):

"In the grit and grime of the river's slime
I am rotting at your feet";

or again in "The Shooting of Dan McGrew":

"...You don't know me, and none of you
care a damn",

or in the verses of "The Law of the Yukon" which we quoted above:

"Drowned them like rats in my rivers,
Starved them like curs on my plains,
Rotted the flesh that was left them..."

There is no doubt his poetry is realistic. "The low-down white" (9) is an awfully sad and realistic poem about a wreck of a man who has reached almost the dregs of life, realistic but very well put and with a note of sentiment and a touch of emotion. This realism we find in "The Man from Eldorado" (8) whom :

in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

The courage of his virile characters, their endurance, their scorn for danger is masterfully portrayed by Service:

"...the Wild must win, and a day will come when
I shall be overthrown.
Then when as wolf-dogs fight we've fought, the
lean wolf and I;
Fought and bled till the snows are red under
the reeling sky;
Even as lean wolf-dog goes down will I go
down and die." (12)

This is indeed a beautiful and imaginative description of the love and fear the men of the North have for the Arctic land.

Even nature sometimes becomes an image of men. This is the case when the falling pines remind us of the men who fell on the trail :

"The North-wind swoop from the brooding Pole,
and our ancients crash and roar;
But where one falls from the crumbling walls
shoots up a hardy score" (13)

A remarkable description of life in the Arctic is contained in the following verses :

"Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when
the moon was awful clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a
silence you most could hear;
With only the howl of a timber wolf, and you
camped there in the cold,
A half-dead thing in a stark, dead world, clear
mad for the muck called gold;
While high overhead, green, yellow and red,
the North Lights swept in bars?" (14)

"The Heart of a Sourdough".
"The Pines" in "The Spell of the Yukon".
"The Shooting of Dan McGrew".

The courage and doggedness of these men is repeatedly described by Service :

"Colder it grew and colder till the last heat
left the earth,
And there in the great stark stillness the
bonfires glinted and gleamed,
And the wild all around exulted and shook with
a devilish mirth,
And life was far and forgotten, the ghost of
a joy once dreamed.
.....long after hope was gone;
Grinned through his bitter anguish, fought
without let or cease,
Suffering, straining, striving, stumbling,
struggling on.
Till the dogs lay down in their traces, and
rose and staggered and fell;
.....
"The lead-dog freezes in harness - cut him out
of the team!
The lung of the wheel-dog's bleeding - shoot
him and let him lie
On and on with the others - lash them until
they scream!
Pull for your lives, you devils! On! to halt
is to die."

Sometimes Service exaggerates: he is not devoid of faults, of course. For fear of not being realistic enough he becomes crude. The "Ballad of the Brand" (15) for instance is not only crude but almost sadistically morbid. The same poem, which is far from being one of Service's best contains many other examples of bad taste,

in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

as the idea of calling "Tellus" a man of the North or of comparing a clerk to "Apollo" and "Adonis". Surely classical comparisons and references are out of place as are some of the archaic or too learned expressions that he uses. When he speaks of the "coolth of the grove" or when he thinks of "feasting with the wine of Cyprus", the artificiality is much too evident.

Service is at his best when he speaks of man and nature but becomes pretty weak when he pretends to be didactic. "Quatrains" (16) for instance is a very poor poem where modern ideas and ancient language are intermixed with very bad taste.

"One said: Thy life is thine to make or mar,
To flicker feebly, or to soar, a star;
It lies with thee - the choice is thine, is thine
to hit the ties or drive thy auto-car".

Here and there our poet writes bad verses too as in the case of the following:

"She is than white-stoled lily far more fair" (17)

Sometimes his over-enthusiastic admirers have chosen to praise poems which in our opinion are not his best, as the "Cremation of Sam McGee", which undoubtedly contains good verses but is not in itself a real masterpiece. The poem "Grin" (18), an imitation of Kipling's "If", is not

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

"Unforgotten" in "The Spell of the Yukon".

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

sincere. Service's thought was sincere, perhaps, but the poet was unable to express it properly, after having set his mind to imitate Kipling. The "Song of the Wage-slave" (19) is another example of artificiality. Here again Service uses words which are ill-adapted to him and to the subject matter, or are too archaic and far-fetched. So is "The Lure of Little Voices" (19) an insipid short poem, full of obsolete expressions.

As we said before our poet is extremely powerful in describing man and nature together, not as masterful but still good when he describes nature alone or man alone and rather deficient when he becomes didactic or philosophical, even pretending to moralize. Not very good is his poem "The Lone Trail" (20); the verses are weak and he uses a rhetorical repetition which is rather monotonous: fourteen verses in succession begin with the word "And"; and six of them with the words "And some times". "The Call of the Wild" (21) is also full of far-fetched words, with a rhythm which has no force and a series of rhetorical questions which are definitely artificial.

These are the faults which we have found in Service's "Canadian" poems and we think that our pe-

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

also in the "Spell of the Yukon".

"But, the others, the men of my mettle, the
 men who would 'stablish my fame
 Unto its ultimate issue, winning me honor,
 not shame;
 Searching my uttermost valleys, fighting each
 step as they go,
 Shooting the wrath of my rapids, scaling my
 ramparts of snow;
 Ripping the guts of my mountains, looting the
 beds of my creeks
 Them will I take to my bosom, and speak as a
 mother speaks.
 I am the land that listen, I am the land that
 broods"; (24)

"The Pines", is a valuable piece of work, that has
 something of the pure beauty of the ancient Greeks and
 the sonorous music of a Wagner Overture.

"On the flanks of the storm-gored ridges are
 our black battalions massed;
 We surge in a host to the sullen coast, and
 we sing in the ocean blast;
 From empire of sea to empire of snow we grip
 our empire fast.
 To us was the Northland given, ours to
 stronghold and defend
 Ours till the world be riven in the crash of
 the utter end;
 Ours from the bleak beginning, through the
 aeons of death-like sleep;
 Ours from the shock when the naked rock was
 hurled from the hissing deep;
 Ours through the twilight ages of weary
 glacier creep.
 Wind of the East, Wind of the West, wandering
 to and fro,
 Chant your songs in our topmost boughs, that
 the sons of men may know

"The Law of the Yukon".

The peerless pine was the first to come, and
the pine will be last to go!
Pines and pines and the shadow of pines as far
as the eye can see;
Even as now, forever, wards of the wilder
strand,
Sentinels of the stillness, lord of the last,
lone land".

These lines could'nt be written by a mere verse-maker
it takes a poet to have a vision of this sort.

One of the most widely known poems of R.W.
Service, perhaps the most widely known, is "The Shooting
of Dan McGrew". Here Service, in the sonorous slang of
the gold seekers of the North gives us a wonderful
description of the rough type of men of the Yukon and
their emotions. Here we don't see the conflict of man
and nature but men in their typical atmosphere in their
own setting. The powerful portrayal is almost breath-
taking. It is so powerful that none of those who read
it can sincerely say that he hasn't materialized in his
own mind a clear picture of the shooting of Dan McGrew.
In fact, Service has a very special faculty of describ-
ing emotions naturally and vividly.

Sometimes as in "The Rhyme of the Restless
Ones" the musical effect is remarkably good and the
verses flow with extreme ease:

The same is true throughout "The Ballad of Gumboot Ben"(28) as in the following lines:

"I rose at dawn; I wandered on. 'Tis somewhat
 fine and grand
 To be alone and hold your own in God's vast
 awesome land;
 Come woe or weal, 'tis fine to feel a hundred
 miles between
 The trails you dare and pathways where the feet
 of men have been".

In "Clancy of the Mounted Police" (28), one of his good poems, a sudden change of rhythm brings forward the song of the mad man which sounds like music out of a nightmare or a note incessantly repeated by a macabre hand.

"Sing hey, sing ho, for the ice and snow,
 And a heart that's ever merry;
 Let us trim and square with a lover's care
 (For why should a man be sorry?)
 A grave deep, deep, with the moon a-peep,
 A grave in the frozen mould.
 Sing hey, sing ho, for the winds that blow,
 And a grave deep down in the ice and snow,
 A grave in the land of gold".

From time to time Robert W. Service flies very high with genuinely lyrical touches. Very lyrical and really poetic is "The song of the Camp-fire"(29)

"Heed me, heed me, I am hungry, I am red-tongued
 with desire;
 Boughs of balsam, slabs of cedar, gummy fagots
 of the pine,
 Heap them on me, let me hug them to my eager
 heart of fire,

In "Ballads of a Cheechako".

In "Rhymes of a rolling stone".

Roaring, soaring up to heaven as a symbol
 and sign.
 Bring me knots of sunny maple, silver birch
 and tamarack;
 Leaping, sweeping, I will lap them with my
 ardent wings of flame;
 I will kindle them to glory, I will beat the
 darkness back;

Often Robert Service becomes romantic and mysterious; he seems to have assimilated some of the Indian thought and he reminds us, in a way, of a great Canadian woman-poet: Pauline Johnson.

"The moon was like a silent spike that pierced
 the sky right through
 The small stars popped and winked and hopped
 in vastitudes of blue;
 And unto me for company came creatures of the
 shade,
 And formed in rings and whispered things that
 made me half afraid.
 And strange though be, 'twas borne on me that
 land had lived of old.
 And men had crept and slain and slept where
 now they toiled for gold;
 Through jungles dim the mammoth grim had sought
 the oozy fen,
 And on his track, all bent of back, had crawled
 the hairy men.
 And furthermore, strange deeds of yore in this
 dead place were done.
 They haunted me, as wild and free I roamed
 from sun to sun;

His romanticism, in some cases, is expressed with very few words, as :

"It's the lure of the timeless things" (30),

or

"Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death
 is my sway
 From my ruthless throne I have ruled alone
 for a million years and a day".
 (31),

The Heart of the Sourdough"
 The Law of the Yukon"

or again :

"On the wild, weird nights, when the Northern
lights shoot up from the frozen zone"(32)

How simple and effective is this "Shooting up"
of the Northern lights.

The same strange mystery of primeval times may
be found also in "the Pines", already quoted above:

"Ours from the bleak beginning, through the
aeons of death-like sleep
Ours from the shock when the naked rock was
hurled from the hissing deep
Ours through the twilight ages of weary glacier
creep".

Even in a realistic poem like "The Shooting of
Dan McGrew" we find romantic passages:

"The icy mountains hemmed you in
with a silence you most could hear"

Service is particularly good in describing man
and nature in conflict against one another. In the
"Parson's Son", in a series of brief flashes, he admirably
describes toil, anxiety and fatigue:

"Twenty years in the Yukon, struggling along
its creeks;
Roaming its giant valleys, scaling its
god-like peaks;
Bathed in its fiery sunsets, fighting its
fiendish cold-
Twenty years in the Yukon...twenty years -
and I'm old".

"The Parson's Son" in
"The Spell of the Yukon".

In "The Pines" his description of the mountains is a truly panoramic vision :

"We spring from the gloom of the canyon's womb;
 in the valley's lap we lie;
 From the white foam-fringe, where the breakers
 cringe, to the peaks that tusk the
 We climb, and we peer in the crag-locked mere
 that gleams like a golden eye."

In the "Shooting of Dan McGrew", Service shows power of description of man and nature, a good deal of imagery and a realistic portrayal of emotion:

"Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the
 moon was awful clear,
 And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a
 silence you most could hear;
 With only the howl of a timber wolf, and you
 camped there in the cold,
 A half-dead thing in a stark, dead world, clear
 mad for the muck called gold;
 While high overhead, green, yellow, and red,
 the North Lights swept in bars?-

The rapidity of action of the scene that follows is explained with a few verses which are like a series of flashes :

"Then I ducked my head, and the lights went
 out, and two guns blazed in the dark,
 And a woman screamed, and the lights went up,
 and two men lay stiff and stark.

Then everything is calm and still and our poet with a simple narrative emphasizes the contrast with the

climax of the preceding scene:

"There are the simple facts of the case, and
I guess I ought to know.
They say that the stranger was crazed with
hooch, and I'm not denying it's so.
I'm not wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly
between us two -
The woman that kissed him and - pinched his
poke - was the lady that's known as Lou".

Often Service, who is a master of contrast,
keeps the reader in expectation and suspense and ends with
a dramatic finale or an emotional or humoristic surprise.
On this unexpected ending is based the poem "While the
Bannock Bakes" (33).

A good descriptive effect and an easy flow of
verses is found in the "Ballad of the Northern Lights" (34)

"We watched the groaning ice wrench free,
crash on with a hollow din;
Men of the wilderness were we, freed from the
taint of sin.
The mighty river snatched us up and it bore us
swift along;
The days were bright, and the morning light
was sweet with jewelled song.
We poled and lined up nameless streams, portage
o'er hill and plain;
We burnt our boat to save the nails, and built
our boat again;
We guessed and groped, North, ever North, with
many a twist and turn;
We saw ablaze in the deathless days the splendid
sunsets burn.
O'er soundless lakes where the grayling makes
a rush at the clumsy fly;

in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone".

in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

By bluffs so steep that the hard-hit sheep
 falls sheer from out the sky;
 By lilled pools where the bull moose cools
 and wallows in huge content.
 By rocky lairs where the pig-eyed bears peered
 at our tiny tent."

"The Ballad of Pious Pete"(35) is a very good portrayal of a man who has become insane ("the North has got him" they say in the Yukon) while the "Telegraph Operator" (35) is a realistic and musical description of emotion in the solitudes of the Arctic.

"I will not wash my face;
 I will not brush my hair;
 I "pig" around the place-
 There's nobody to care.
 Nothing but rock and tree;
 Nothing but wood and stone;
 Oh God, it's hell to be
 Alone, Alone, Alone!
 I feel as if I was
 The only living thing
 On all this blighted earth;
 And so I frowst and shrink,
 And crouching by my hearth,
 I hear the thoughts I think".

Some verses like the last one above are particularly effective. Some others are realistic in a very natural and practical way :

"The beers I didn't want
 (I wish I had 'em now),

 Oh, for a loving curse

 Oh, for a friendly fight!"

in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

The same sadness, the same horror for solitude is beautifully depicted in the "Woodcutter" (36). This poem contains also very original verses and images:

"The sky is like an envelope,
One of those blue official things;
And, sealing it, to mock our hope,
The moon, a silver wafer, clings,
What shall we find when death gives leave
To read - our sentence or reprieve?"

.....
"Impotent as a beetle pierced on the needle
of Fate";

.....
".....Oh, Death, with thy moistened thumb,
Stoop like a petulant schoolboy, wipe me
forever out!"

Similar effects appear in the poem "The Trail of '98":

"Waters that hissed disaster"
.....
"Night trailed her robe of jewels over
the floor of the sky".

A good idea of a rest after a prolonged fatigue is given in "The Rhyme of the Remittance Man".(37)

"There's a four-pronged buck a-swinging in
the shadow of my cabin,
And it roamed the velvet valley till to-day;
But I tracked it by the river, and I trailed
it in the cover,

in "Ballads of a Cheechako".

in "The Spell of the Yukon".

Deep sentiment pervades also "The Squaw Man" (41). This is true also of "Sunshine" and of course of "Barb-wire Bill", which describes one of the most "Canadian" characters of Service's books.

Typically Canadian is also the personification of the Northern Country, which we encounter so often in his verses and of which a good example is given in "Clancy of the Mounted Police" (42).

"Said the Wild: I will crush this Clancy, so
fearless and insolent;
For him will I loose my fury, and blind and
buffet and beat;
Pile up my snows to stay him; then when his
streight is spent,
Leap on him from my ambush and crush him under
my feet.
Him will I ring with my silence, compass him
with my cold;
Closer and closer clutch him unto mine icy
breast;
Buffet him with my blizzards, deep in my snows
enfold,
Claiming his life as my tribute, giving my wolve
the rest".

Typically Canadian too is the man of "the Spell of the Yukon" so happy-go-lucky, sure of himself and always on the go :

"Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting
So much as just finding the gold.
It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder",

in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone"
in "Ballads of a Cheechako"

Very Canadian is also the same freedom-loving man when he speaks of "the strong life that never knows harness" and of "the freshness, the freedom, the farness" of the wilds up North; Canadian of course is the already mentioned poem "A Rolling Stone" (43) which, as we said, is a true hymn to Liberty.

It is not rare to see Service deal masterfully with metaphors as in describing the peaks of the Rockies:

"There where the mighty mountains bare their
fangs unto the moon,
.....
There where the livid tundras keep their tryst
with the tranquil snows;
There where the silences are spawned, and the
light of hell-fire flows
Into the bowl of the midnight sky, violet, amber
and rose". (44)

A colorful symbolism decorates artistically the threads of the sonorous verses. One of the most widely known qualities of his verses is in fact their sonorousness, the easy flow, the powerful imitative harmony and the effective alliteration.

Although we do not wish to insist too much on these qualities, which could be called virtues of verse-writers and not necessarily of a poet, we would like to

in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone"

"The Heart of the Sourdough"

recall some verses from the "Heart of the Sourdough" which are indeed full of powerful sounds :

"I have clinched and closed with the naked
North, I have learned to defy and defend;
Shoulder to shoulder we have fought it out -
yet the Wild must win in the end".

The same sonorousness is in the "Law of the
Yukon" :

"Send not your foolish and feeble; send me your
strong and your sane -
Strong for the red rage of battle; sane, for I
harry them sore;
Send me men girt for the combat, men who are girt
to the core,
Swift as the panther in triumph, fierce as the
bear in defeat,
Sired of a bulldog parent, steeled in the furnace
heat",

and in the "Shooting of Dan McGrew" :

"In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt
he sat, and I saw him sway",

This verse is repeated towards the end of the ballad as a refrain, a very effective lyrical repetition which gives unity to the poem.

A very good example of easy flow of verses is the poem "Death in the Arctic" (45) which has the typical Service dramatic end.

5) in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone".

Of imitative harmony and alliteration Service's poems are full, but some verses are particularly good as:

"and the crunch, crunch, crunch as their
snowshoes sank through the crust of the
hollow snow" (46)

or

"Just think of how we've poled all day up this
strange little stream" (47),

and also:

"Featureless, formless, forsaken, scented by
wolves in their flight",

a verse which is also full of imagery. There is also:

"Crooking the toe in the trigger, trying
to patter a prayer",

or,

"Lost, like a louse in the burning....or else in
the tented town
Seeking a drunkard's solace, sinking and sinking
down"; (48)

One of the more unknown characteristics of Service is his humour which is sometimes a little sharp or grim, if not bitter:

"Have you ever sat by a frozen corpse that looks
at you with a grin,
And that seems to say: - You may try all day, but
you'll never jam me in," (49)

"My Friends" in "Ballads of a Cheechako"

"While the Bannock Bakes"

"The Law of the Yukon"

"The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill"

Very good humour is to be found in the "Ballad of Hard-luck-Henry" (50) which is a naturally flowing poem, beautifully and simply told; in the genuinely amusing tale "the Cow-juice Cure" (51) and in the slang verses of "the Baldness of Chewed-Ear".

Almost all of his "Spell of the Yukon" poems, the "Ballads of Cheechako" and the "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone" are good Canadian poetry.

Realistic and sometimes even crude, full of sentiment but never morbid, often dramatic and flashing but always simple and sincere, Service was able to describe with sonorous verses, accentuated by imitative harmony and alliteration, the tough and rough Sourdough and his toils and hardships in the Canadian North, sometimes reaching lyrical effects of real artistic value.

in "Ballads of a Cheechako"

in "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone"

SERVICE, THE CANADIAN POET

Now that we have completed our perusal of the "Canadian" part of Robert W. Service's poems, we must come to a conclusion. Is he really a poet?

Our answer is definitely affirmative. We have thoroughly examined his work and we believe that we have found that he possesses all the qualities which are necessary to a poet.

We should now enquire what the critics thought or think about his poetical qualities. Do they consider him a poet? Do they classify him as Canadian?

Lionel Stevenson seems to share our views and his enthusiasm goes very far in praising the "virile and picturesque" verse of Robert Service.

".....the temptation is irresistible to discover a Canadian Byron in Robert Service", he writes, "Not only in his chronological place in the movement, but in the nature and extent of his popular appeal, Service stands in Canadian poetry as Byron stood in the romantic revival. "Songs of a Sourdough" won an enthusiastic

audience throughout Canada and the United States....The violence of the adjectives, the crude satire of the references to men of formal civilisation, give an almost visual picture of the country's naked grandeur... In the "Shooting of Dan McGrew", "The Cremation of Sam McGee", "The Ballad of the Black Fox Skin"....the condensation enforced by the versified method and the potent emphasis of the rhyme, give the additional force that makes them genuinely pre-eminent. A touch of grim humour and a neat command of alliterative phrase are further aids to effectiveness.(1)

There seems to be no doubt that Lionel Stevenson believes that Service is a poet and a good one.

That he is a poet, "Encyclopedia Americana" seems to be certain too as Service is simply mentioned as an "Anglo-Canadian poet and author".(2)

Lorne Albert Pierce, in his "Outline of Canadian Literature" speaks of Service in the following terms:

"Whatever may be said of his poetry he made a section of the North in the pioneer days live for many people...He has limned in vivid and occasionally vulgar phrase a memorable picture of strong men, mastering passions and a malignant climate. Some of his descriptions are memorable. He sketches with a vigorous abandon and achieves some striking effects".

Pierce does not appear to be a real admirer of Service of whom he criticises many aspects, but he recognizes that:

"Service.....having to hand the popular anapestic, galloping verse-form popularized by Kipling, adds his own syncopating and barbarous alliteration. With a keen eye for the dramatic human element and a grim sense of humour and aiming at the man in the street he beats out his violent lines".

Few, however, are the professional critics who have understood and admired Service's poetry.

V.B. Rhodenizer, in his "Handbook of Canadian Literature" gives us a picture of the works of our poet which is allegedly impersonal and fair but which sounds to us to be biased by the very atmosphere of a sort of "Kulturkampf" by which the literary critic is usually obsessed:

"His work resembles that of Kipling, his avowed favourite author, in close observation with the "primal facts of life" and in the vivid, incisive diction in which he expresses his observations. Unlike his master except in the few early poems that artistically reflect the spirit of the North, he rarely rises to the level of poetry, and that for two reasons. To his material often sordidly and brutally realistic he does not apply

the principle of selection, which is necessary to produce good realistic or even naturalistic prose fiction, still more so to produce good poetry. Again, because of his fatal facility in popular metres and his lack of artistic conscience, he rarely attains formal excellence. The appeal lies in the broad human sympathy and the sense of reality that characterizes his material and in the irresistible sweep of his unpolished rhythms".

The writer would like to remark that he found some crude verses in Service's poems, but never a material which is "often sordidly and brutally realistic". We think that V.B. Rhodenizer was probably easily shocked or ignored the violent and crude descriptions of other poets, for instance the old classical poets.

As far as "artistic conscience" is concerned we can scarcely understand why Rhodenizer should say that Service is totally deprived of it, unless the critic thinks that art should never describe the unpolished beauty and the magnificent "horrid" of nature and man at grips. He admits, however, that our poet had numerous imitators and a recognition of Service's importance is implicit in the titles of the chapters of Rhodenizer's

"Handbook" :

" - Other poets, to Service"

" - Poets since Service".

We have never heard before of a bad verse writer who had the honour of being considered a milestone in Literature.

Perhaps one of the causes of Service's unpopularity with the critics is his immense popularity with the masses. Seven editions of "Songs of a Sourdough" were printed even before the book was published and he has been anthologized and even parodied perhaps more than any other writer.

The most bitter attack on Service is the one which we find in Logan & French's "Highways of Canadian Literature" where Service and his imitators are called the "Vaudeville School", a "decadent interim" in Canadian Literature, a poetry which appeals to "popular or vulgar taste".

Here again the critic resents the popularity which rewarded Service's work. Why? If we are permitted to "criticise the critic" may we suggest that in these modern times beauty and its appreciation in its various forms seems to have become the monopoly of a few.

It was not so in the old times. The ancient Greek

poets were judged and crowned by the general public in the open theatres and even today is it not the public audience which decides by its cheers and its silences (in some countries, its "boos") of the artistic value of music, drama and art in general?

Dante and Shakespeare are known and loved by the masses. Homer's poems (if Homer ever existed) were sung from city to city, from village to village, by the travelling bards of the time.

But Logan & French think that Service's poetry is a kind of "entertainment which appeals to popular or vulgar or low taste in verse", that it is a "sublimation of the technique of emotional vividness, to the exclusion of all regard for the intrinsic and aesthetic beauty and moral dignity of poetry.....Let no one call it poetry", they write about "The Shooting of Dan McGrew", and again: "As soon as Service attempts to employ another rhythm... the results are disastrous....a singular example of this kind of weakness and failure in Service is his "My Madonna" in which he aims consciously and seriously to achieve a tour de force in religious sentiment..."

It seems to us that the wish to criticize and

condemn Service's poetry blinds the eyes of the critic. In fact, it appears plainly clear to the normal reader that the poet never pretended to show, in his "My Madonna", any mystic sentiment or even religious belief. The poem might very well have been written by an atheist. What Service wanted to do was to idealize a woman :

"I painted her as she might have been
If the worst had been the best"

and incidentally may we be allowed to say that these are very effective and beautiful verses, even if Service "attempted to employ another rhythm". The results are far from "disastrous".

Logan & French say sympathetically that:"the amazing and pathetic fact about Robert Service is that he really possessed authentic poetic genius, and sometimes did write pure poetry.....some of his verse is genuinely poetical, charged with pure beauty and poetic significance. How passionately expressed in lively color-images and pervasive vowel and alliterative music, and how philosophically interpreted is nature in his poem "The Mountain and the Lake". In that poem Service has given us an arresting and memorable picture of pure beauty in Nature. It is beautiful and unforgettable because it has poetic style".

Again we disagree with Logan & French; we think that "The Mountain and the Lake" is not one of Service's best poems.

Besides, why say that a poem is beautiful if it has poetic "style"? What do our critics mean by that? We contend that a poem, a piece of music, a picture, a lake, a forest, a sunset are beautiful, or not, if they are capable, or not, to stir our own soul, if they can produce upon us a strong and lasting impression, if they can capture and keep our thought and imagination away from all other things, so much that we may forget for an instant the rest of the world. This is art.

The professional critic was invented after the great masters produced their work of art and after the crowds of common people admired these. Such artists were praised because they expressed in an original and powerful way some aspect of life and some feelings of their own souls.

The trouble is that some of the critics, who by themselves would have never been able to understand beauty, have learned from books only to discern what is artistically beautiful. This artificial training which becomes a pattern and doesn't leave anything to personal initiative and taste may not show its weakness when the

object of criticism is a master of the past, about whom other and better works of criticism are available, but whenever a modern artist is considered the system shows fissures and cracks. Actually "The Mountain and the Lake" leaves us practically unmoved. It contains a few beautiful expressions and some music, but the value of this poem can be compared to a nice "landscape" painting and doesn't possess the power and strength of a truly "creative" work.

Strangely enough one of the two authors who collaborated in the book "Highways of Canadian Literature"; Donald G. French, wrote quite differently about Service's poetical works in the Globe Magazine: "The reason of the popularity of this poetry may be summed up almost in a word - it pictures human life. For, after all, nature worship or classic lore, ethics or obtuse philosophy grow stale and flat when used continually as the basis of literary emotions, but every human being who has not become a conventionalized fossil, always will be moved by the passions and moods of the surging, restless, primitive even animal spirit of humanity that permeates Service's poems".

Perhaps the chapter on Service was written only by Logan and not at all by French. At any rate we think that the critic might have understood Service, had he cared to read the following lines, taken from his book "Harper of Heaven", in which our poet tells with great modesty and evident sincerity what he thinks of his work:

"I am a professional ink-slinger and most of my life I have made my bread and butter by my pen...I have no foolish illusions as to its importance.....We who are sprats and don't matter.....in expressing the best that is in us we are keeping alive the genius of the race".

Well, Service is definitely modest, too modest. He is, of course, a professional writer who made his bread and butter by his pen. Does this mean that he cannot be a poet? How did Virgil and Horace make the bread and butter lavishly supplied by Augustus and Moe-cenas? How did Dante pay the hospitality which he received in the Ghibelline castles?

Let us use our own reason, at least for a while. When did Service become a professional writer?

When his poems obtained such a success that he could live on the royalties. Why did he obtain such an immense popularity? Because his poems were admired and understood by the masses, just like the works of many other great poets, because he was able "by the vigorous humanity of his subjects and the simplicity of his form to attract many thousands who would not open books of lyric verses" (3).

The poets who are still understood nowadays by the lower classes tend to bring literature back to its origin and the simple and almost primitive ideas and verses are always alive: yesterday, today or tomorrow, just as Homer's poetry is still as alive as it was thousands of years ago. Some artist might experience a phase of oblivion; it is usually so in a period of general decadence. It might be that Pablo Picasso so worshipped today by the "experts" and so little understood by the masses will be completely forgotten in a hundred years, but the sincerity - even if sometimes melodramatic and impressionistic - of Alessandro Magnasco make this painter as great in the XXth century as he was in the XVIIIth.

Is Service's poetry "vaudeville"? Rossini's "Barbiere di Siviglia" was called "Vaudeville" by the critics and when the opera was booed by them he walked on

the stage and applauded. In spite of the lack of "artistic style" and in spite of its having been initially snubbed by the critics, Rossini's opera is as brilliant and gay and alive today as it was a hundred years ago.

But Logan & French insist: "When the western or Yukon poets published their verses the newness of their themes and their naive disregard of technical niceties were mistaken in the East for originality, vigor, freshness and breeziness in art and were welcomed and read by all classes of Canadians.....their verses far from being examples of genuine originality.....exemplify the total absence of art.....totally devoid of the chaste speech, lovely imagery, dulcet music and exquisite emotion which constitute the poetry".

"Technical niceties", "chaste speech", "dulcet music",....Very well then, let us all get dressed in pink and go and shed the most tender and titillating tears on a little dead canary and on his puritanic and unfortunate mistress! Poor old good poets of old, whom we loved in our youth! Dear old Homer, how did you dare to be as unchaste as to say that Laertes "never slept" with Eurycleia "for he shunned the wrath of his wife" (4). How could

the Odyssey, I, 429 et segg.

you, Virgil, write such undulcet and so horribly sonorous verses as :

".....ac venti, velut agmine facto,
qua data porta ruunt et terras turbine
perflant.

.....
Insequitur clamorque virum stridorque rudentum
(5)

How could you, Dante Alighieri, ever dare to say of the demons (Inferno, Canto 21st) :

"....first had each of them stuck out his tongue
Between his teeth, as signal to their leader
And he had made a trumpet of his rump".

How could Shakespeare pronounce such words as :

"Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-delivered by a drab"
(Macbeth, 4.1.30)

or :

"-Aroint thee, witch - the rump-fed ronyon cried
(Macbeth, 1.3.6)

Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare are indeed no poets, if a poet must - according to Logan and French - write only about "whatsoever is lovely in Nature or noble in ideas". The conclusion obviously would be that the Iliad is no work of art, being the recital of the elopmen

Verg. Aeneid. Lib. I, 1/ et segg.

of Helen and Paris, the description of the quarrels of Achilles and Agamemnon over Briseis etc., etc. Let us discard from our bookshelf Sophocles' Tragedies just because they deal with the horrible events and deeds in Oedipus' family. Let us not allow Clitemnestra's or Lady MacBeth's bloody hands to haunt any more our imagination in our lonely nights.

Besides - according to Logan & French - "there was no appeal on the part of Service to the spirit... to the religious imagination". We believe, on the contrary, that Service's poems almost always describe the victory of the spiritual forces over the weakness of merely physical strength and that most of his poetry contains -for those who can read- a moral doctrine of loyalty, honesty and generosity. There is much more spiritual appeal in "Barb-wire Bill" than in most of the pansy perfumed poems which Logan & French seem to admire. Service, of course, is not the devout puritanic type, but when Barb-wire Bill found

"No place was there to snub the raft.....
he.....served instead"

our poet says :

"Say, boys! I'm not the pious brand but - I
just tried to pray!"

and :

".....thus was Love conqueror of death,
and life for life was given;
And though no saint on earth, d'ye think
Bill's squared hisself with Heaven?"

A virile and sincere thanksgiving to God is also contained in "A Rolling Stone" when after expressing his love for the Northern Country the poet says :

"O body, heart and brain of me
Praise Him Who made it all".

We should now conclude by saying that a writer who, like Service, has a distinct message and an original thought to deliver and does it in a form which is capable of stirring up powerful emotions in our souls and of vividly portraying the Northern lands and men is definitely a writer who possesses artistic qualities to a high degree. When a writer delivers a real message and an original thought in verse, he is usually called a poet; when his verse, like music, (for poetry is also music) possesses harmony, melody and rhythm, we say that he is a good poet. There are of course different kinds of music. Sweet Gounod's Ave Maria doesn't sound like Valkyrie Cavalcade, but both are good pieces of music. Service's poetry does not resemble Carman's or Lampman's but is still good Canadian poetry.

Canadian? Can Service be called "Canadian"? Lionel Stevenson in his "Appraisals of Canadian Literature" after having praised Service's works states that "the Canadian Literature dealing with the North cannot be classified as representative of Canadian life" as it "depicts isolated conditions which prevailed at certain periods and which have a certain historic value" and goes on and on as if he were ashamed - as a Canadian - to admit that the North Land is part of Canada.

Rhodenizer states that Service "...records a phase of life not typically but only transiently and accidentally Canadian".

Logan & French insist that "these poems must not be regarded as typically Canadian - they crystallize a phase of Canadian life, but it is a phase which has become Canadian by accident of circumstances".

Let us say quite plainly that we do not agree at all. Take the "Ballads of a Cheechako", the "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone" or "The Spell of the Yukon" and read these poems to a man who has never heard of Service or of the Yukon, but has heard of Canada in general (and this is a case for the average European reader) and you will see that this man will immediately recognize Service's nature and characters as typically Canadian and that

they cannot belong to any other part of the world. Even if the natural setting might belong to some other Continent, the characters cannot be but Canadian.

Strangely enough, however, the Canadian critics sometimes resent that this Country should be identified, in the minds of foreigners, as a Northern Land of forest and lakes. It is a kind of inferiority complex for which there is no justification whatsoever. Some would like to see Canada full of old English cathedrals, of Scottish or French castles and even of Roman bridges and ruins or at least they would like to be able to say that the Canadian cities are the best of all Countries! We have even read in the Ottawa newspapers that the capital of Canada, after the Greber plan is executed, will be the most beautiful city of the world.

This is of course ridiculous. Canada is a new Country and we cannot pretend to show here the architectural masterpieces that have been accumulated in Europe by generations of artists. Let us not forget that London and Paris were cities already at the time of the Romans and that Rome was built, as we believe, in the year 753 B.C.

In due course, the Canadian cities, will be

come really beautiful and in a few centuries they will have their old monuments to witness the genius and skill of the Canadian artists.

For the time being, however, let us be proud of what we have and there is ample matter to be proud of. Here is a magnificent land, almost unlimited in space, with a luxuriant forest populated by a mysterious wild life, lakes teeming with fish, a glorious sky which sometimes displays the glory of the Northern Lights and rivers which reflect that same marvellous sky. From the misty coasts of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, through the cliffs and rocks of the Gaspé and the Saguenay, by the majestic waterways of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, through the prairies whose generous bosom could yield nourishment for almost a third of this planet, up to the heights of the Rockies and down to the gigantic firs of the Pacific slope, "a mari usque ad mare", this country of Canada displays its powerful beauty. But all along the way, North of the land through which civilization has progressed, lies the mysterious Wild, better known sometimes to the Foreigner than it is to the Canadian; the Romantic North where the sudden charging of the moose breaks the silences

of the woods, where the monstrous owl scares the bear cub, where the trout jumps in lakes never mapped by man and the famished wolves follow stubbornly and silently the track of the Caribou. It is the land of the trapper and the lumberjack, of the miner, the Indian and the Eskimo, the land which is still full of promise, the land of great expectations.

There the better part of humanity lives in constant struggle with the elements, men whose blood runs red and fast, undaunted by perils, die-hards of the North.

Let us be proud of this beautiful Country and of its marvellous men, let us be proud of what is so different from all other parts of the world, so original and so definitely Canadian.

Those who criticized Service's poems made the mistake of considering them as "poems of the Yukon" or "Of the Gold Rush" and they did not realize that they are, in fact, poems of the Canadian North even if they were written at the dawn of the XXth Century at Whitehorse and Dawson.

The North today is still the same and still wild. A few more settlements and a few thousand miles of railway tracks might have appeared since the times of Service. But what is this in comparison with the Great Wild?

No great change has occurred for the trapper and the pioneer, not merely since the gold rush, but since the times of Mackenzie and Samuel Hearne. If it is true that the missionaries and the government officials now reach their Northern destination on the wings of the winds, the man who lives permanently up North still travels with snowshoes and dog sleigh.

And what about Service's characters? Are they Canadian? The writer met the Canadian boys long before he read Service's poems and one of the reasons why he later appreciated Service's poetry was because the characters portrayed are so much like the men he met. For the men which Service describes are the same men who for centuries and with indomitable courage cut their way through the primeval forest and paddled their birch bark canoes up river to the conquest of a splendid empire. Their virtues and faults are the same virtues and faults which made the Canadian either worshipped or hated just a few years ago on the shores of the Adriatic and on the plains of Holland.

Daring, virile, full of energy, bursting with muscles and health, red-blooded, formidable drinkers, outspoken, cursing and swearing, afraid of nothing except

of looking sentimental or simply kind hearted, hiding their good qualities under their grim humour and scorn, violent in their reactions, often biased and unjust, furious in their hate, passionate in their love, but always sincere, generous and loyal and what is really important with a heart of gold and an almost unlimited possibility to love, these are the truly Canadian men which we met in Europe during the war. These same Canadian characters are portrayed with striking resemblance by Robert W. Service.

The critics might say however that Service cannot be considered a Canadian poet because he wasn't born in Canada or he didn't spend all his life here. A poet belongs to a Country if he writes in its language and about its nature and men and if that part of his poetry which deals with that Country is the most important part of his works.

Service wrote about Canada's nature and man in the language of Canada, and not the language of England; his "Canadian" poetry is not only the best part of his works but that part which makes him worthy of being called a poet and a good one. If he lived here only twenty years or so, he seems to have understood and loved Canada, far better than some of those who were born in the Dominion and spent their entire life in this Country.

We think, therefore, that we can safely say that our poet stands as a definite figure in Canadian Literature and that "because he made the raw, pioneer North live vividly for people of all kinds and classes, Service remains one of Canada's most popular poets".(6)

6) Clara Thomas in "Canadian Novelists"

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Works of Robert W. Service

- "The Complete Poems of Robert Service"
Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1948
- "The Trail of '98"
Ernest Berm Ltd. London
- "Ploughman of the Moon"
Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1945
- "Harper of Heaven"
Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1948

Biographical works on Service

- "Canadian Who's Who" 1936-37 Toronto
- "Chambers Biographical Dictionary"
Philadelphia 1935
- Frederick C. Othman in Ottawa Journal, February 27, 1942
- "Leading Canadian Poets" by W.P. Percival
Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1948
- Maclean's Magazine, January 15, 1941
- "The Encyclopedia Americana"
Americana Corporation, New York, 1940
- "Twentieth Century Authors"
by Stanley J. Kunitz and Havard Haycraft
The H.W. Wilson Company, New York, 1942
- "Who's who in Canada" 1947-48
International Press Ltd. Toronto

Criticism on Service

- A Handbook of Canadian Literature
by V.B. Rhodenizer
Graphic Publishers Ltd., Ottawa 1930
- An Outline of Canadian Literature
by Lorne Pierce
Louis Carrier & Co., Montreal 1927
- Appraisals of Canadian Literature
by Lionel Stevenson
the Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., Toronto 192
- Canadian Novelists
by Clara Thomas
Longmans, Green & Co., Toronto 1946
- Canadian Poets
by John W. Garvin
McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto 1930
- Highways of Canadian Literature
by Logan and French
McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 1928
- Leading Canadian Poets
by W.P. Percival
Ryerson Press, Toronto 1948
- On Canadian Poets
by E.K. Brown
The Ryerson Press, Toronto 1943
- Robert W. Service, the Poet of the Yukon
by D.C. French
Toronto Daily Globe, Dec. 1908