

## POET OF THE YUKON

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*Robert Service*, Carl F. Klinck. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. 199 pages. \$9.95 hardcover.

Most of us recall our teachers' recitals of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and "The Shooting of Dan McGrew". Although as youngsters we could not comprehend all the words, something magical about the ballads brought a sparkle to our eyes. But the name Robert Service was not necessarily linked with the "spell" of these poems. Even today, as adults, we neglect to recognize Canada's best-read poet. Robert Service (1874 — 1958), the man who immortalized the Canadian Klondike Gold rush of '98' has been under-explored until recently. In 1976, Professor Carl F. Klinck endeavoured to piece together the many mysteries of Service's life. He states: "This biography has been designed to find Service the man by combining evidence in autobiographies and other documents, with that which is subjective or subliminal in his novels, ballads, and songs." In other words, Professor Klinck leaves the conventional method of composing biographies, and analyses literary works to find the true character of Service. For Klinck, the three major autobiographies are *Ploughman of the Moon*, *Harper of Heaven*, and *Why Not Grow Young? or Living for Longevity*.

The life of Robert Service was one of complex concealment. But Professor Klinck unravels the story of Service to the joy of all "Service lovers". The reader can chuckle over comical stories of Service's childhood in Scotland, and then can follow the boy through his adolescent years, until he reached the land of his dreams — Canada. This country not being "quite what he expected", the vagabond adopted occupations that ranged from being a cowboy in Duncan, British Columbia, to working as a handy-man at a well-to-do brothel in San Diego, California. Klinck postulates that Service, being so versatile, led a double life, part romantic and part realistic. It is hard to decide whether Service was simply pulling pranks in his romantic escapades, or if they were a credit to his ingenuity and enterprise.

Service was transferred to Dawson City, in 1908, by the Bank of Commerce; here in the Yukon began his literary career. His Yukon verses took the fashion of vaudeville music hall rhythm, "rum-tum, rumtittytum", adding a comic framework to the frontier stories. Professor Klinck rounds up the gallery of characters who display the "compulsive rhymers'" talents: Dago Kid, claw-fingered Kitty, Windy Ike, One-eyed Mike, Gum Boot Ben, and Cannibal Joe. Klinck suggests that these romantic frontier heroes, with whom Service amused himself and his readers, embody actual characters of the Yukon.

Service did, however, present personal views in a selection of his Yukon poetry, such as "The Spell of the Yukon". In this sentiment, the reader hears an echo of the "real Service". Professor Klinck strongly defines the Yukon's profound effect on Service. Robert Service left the Yukon in 1912, deeply saddened.

Robert Service is so closely identified with the Yukon that Klinck notes, "Many do not realize he continued to lead a zestful and productive life." Hence the book follows Service for forty-six more years: through World War I; between Wars; in visits to Russia; through a prolonged stay in California; and, finally, back to France. It was in these post-Yukon years of his life that Service wrote six novels and collected thirteen volumes of poetry. Professor Klinck lightly touches upon Service's marriage to Germaine Bourgoin in 1913. "If his account in *Harper of Heaven* (1948) may be credited, he said, 'Say, why don't we take a chance? Let's get hitched.'"

In the last chapter, "Songs in Autumn", the reader beholds Service for the first time in a mood of seriousness. Perhaps, through his life, Service had concealed himself for "romantic" reasons, always wanting to be seen as comic and full of energy.

Little by little, documents appear which disclose more of the "real man". *Arctic in Colour* (Northwestern News Services), recently published an article on Service which contained an interview with Germaine Service, her daughter, and her granddaughters. Again the mask of the "romantic man" is dropped, and Service is observed as the "real man". One touching event, which Service made great efforts to hide, was brought to light in this interview by Service's daughter Iris. This was the death of his thirteen-month-old daughter, Doris. The fact that Professor Klinck did not mention this tragedy in his book affirms once again how successful Service was in concealing his private life. Service's unpublished poem on his loss ended:

My little girl, whose smile so bright  
I'll see while sight endures,  
This life of mine I'd give tonight  
Could I but ransom yours.

Professor Klinck concludes with Service's unpublished meditations, which display a proud, tired man, who treasured every breath he took. The book ends with Robert Service's death: "His body lies in 'Dream Haven', the home to which he had long given his heart." Although Klinck does not suggest that Service's soul returned to the Yukon, all those who visit his cabin today may feel his presence there. On leaving the Yukon, Robert Service said:

"As I looked my last . . . the door seemed to open and  
I saw a solitary figure waving his pipe in farewell:  
— the ghost of my dead youth."

“I will come back . . . I will be true to the North.”

The Yukon remembers Service: during summer months, a young man is employed to play the part of Robert Service in Dawson City, to appear at his cabin each afternoon at four, read poetry to anyone who drops by, and to offer a hospitable cup of tea. Carl Klinck's biography makes one long to make the pilgrimage to that rendez-vous.

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## A CANADIAN HEROINE: THE FACTS AND THE FICTION

MARIANNE MICROS

*Journey Fantastic: With the Overlanders to the Cariboo*, Vicky Metcalf.  
McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd. 1970. 159 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

*Journey Fantastic*, published in 1970, should have been a valuable contribution to Canadian literature. It should have helped to fill a large gap in knowledge: topics dealing with the history of this country and with its early heroes and heroines had been largely neglected, as had children's literature in general. It should have also satisfied those who wished to educate the public concerning the deeds of courageous women of Canada's past.

Ms. Metcalf has researched her topic well, consulting diaries, reading accounts of pioneer life and of the time, speaking with descendants of Catherine Schubert and other participants in the *Overlander* voyage. The book is carefully factual, including names of people and places, details about daily life, and even a map.

The journey of Catherine Schubert is certainly a story worth telling. In 1862, with her husband and three children, and pregnant with her fourth child, Catherine travelled across the Rocky Mountains from Winnipeg to Kamloops, becoming the first white woman to enter British Columbia. On the journey, the travellers encountered much discomfort and some danger — Indians, almost-impassable bush areas, wolves, mosquitoes, turbulent rivers, near-starvation. Yet Catherine neither complained nor expected special treatment as the only woman in the company, and arrived in Kamloops barely in time for the birth of her baby.