

1993

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### Recommended Citation

Cowan, Edward J. (1993) "The War Rhymes of Robert Service, Folk Poet," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol28/iss1/4>

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*Edward J. Cowan*

## The War Rhymes of Robert Service, Folk Poet

Those who have Imagination live in a land of enchantment which the eyes of others cannot see. Yet if it brings marvellous joy it also brings exquisite pain. Who lives a hundred lives must die a hundred deaths.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Service is one of the best known, best selling and critically most ignored English language writers of the twentieth century. Born in England, raised in his ancestral Scotland, bard of the Yukon and the Canadian North, he spent the bulk of his life domiciled in Brittany with the consequence that he is curiously unclaimed as a Scottish, a Canadian, a French—or for that matter a Breton—writer. The creator of Dan McGrew, Sam McGee and a host of memorable characters, struck gold with the publication of his *Songs of a Sourdough* in 1907, thus attracting for the remainder of his literary life the damning and dismissive label of popular poet or rhymster. He was also a journalist, a novelist, autobiographer and scriptwriter, as well as an adventurer and inveterate observer of the human predicament. This paper will argue that in at least one collection—*Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* (1916)—he displayed a profundity and originality which he has hitherto been largely denied. In a patronizing passage of *Undertones of War*, Edmund Blunden recounted the demise of a deluded, shell-shocked individual, who, believing himself to be Robert Service, spouted "cantering rhetoric about huskies and hoboos on icy trails," and who was eventually killed "in a hell more sardonic and sunnily devilish than ten thousand Services could evolve."<sup>2</sup> Blunden wrote from securely hind-sighted 1928, apparently oblivious of Service's

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<sup>1</sup>*Collected Poems of Robert Service* (New York, 1940), p. 488. Further references will be cited in the text as *CP*.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Paul Fussell *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford 1975), p. 195.

achievement some twelve years earlier in not only articulating, but also publicizing, the horrors of front-line warfare and the concomitant disillusionment of the combatants.

Service has been the victim of a strange conspiracy of silence. He is not anthologized in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979), while he is inexplicably excluded from Trevor Royle's *In Flanders Fields: Scottish Poetry and Prose of the First World War* (1990). He is completely ignored by both Bernard Bergonzi *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (1965) and John Lehman *The English Poets of the First World War* (1981) which, despite its title, includes the Aberdeen-born Charles Hamilton Sorley, who shared some of Service's early disenchantment. Robert Service is a prophet without country and thus without honor, silently edited out by the world of professional criticism which is guilty of either invincible ignorance or, more likely, of monumental snobbery, since he has continued to outsell every single poet of the First War and that without the safety net of academic prescription.

Born in Preston, Lancashire, in 1874, Service arrived in Whitehorse exactly thirty years later, departing the Yukon and Canada for Europe in 1912. During that eight-year period in the north he almost single-handedly created a genuine Canadian myth. His work not only "deserves attention as one of the earliest attempts in Canadian literary history to mythologize the environment"<sup>3</sup> but also because his depiction of the Yukon remains the sole perception of Canada held by many people world-wide. When still very young he was sent to stay with his grandfather and three maiden aunts at Kilwinning, Ayrshire. There and at Glasgow where he received his secondary education Robert Wullie was to develop a mass of contradictions in the true manner of the "Protean Scot,"<sup>4</sup> a rich broth of antisyzygies which would sustain him throughout life. Courageous to the point of foolhardiness he often claimed to suffer from chronic cowardice. He was a man who loved the good life yet who subjected himself to long periods of near ascetic self-denial and discomfort, a Calvinist atheist who detested religion but who enjoyed attending church. He was an inveterate traveller and wanderer who loved the comforts of home; he had an insatiable appetite for human experience, vicarious or otherwise, consistently demonstrating a genius of empathizing with ordinary humanity under whatever guise he should meet with it. He was a socialist who felt guilty about his investments. He protested that he had no great in-

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<sup>3</sup>Stanley Atherton, "The Klondike Muse," *Canadian Literature*, 47 (1971), 67.

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen, 1988), passim.

terest in poetry but that he wanted to write verse which would appeal to people at large—"I was always in love with rhyme . . . Rhyming has my ruin been. With less deftness I might have produced real poetry."<sup>5</sup> He was, in short, a folk-poet—the registrar of the pulse of life, and, in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, of death.<sup>6</sup>

An inescapable influence was the "idol" of his folks, Robert Burns—"one of our parlour chairs had often been warmed by the rump of the bard" (*Ploughman*, p. 15). Through time he would also absorb Tennyson, Browning, Kipling, Patmore, Bret Harte and above all Robert Louis Stevenson. From an early age he began to file away memorable characters in his personal gallery—Frank Dougan the chimney sweep who had a fondness for declaiming Shakespeare every night before he went to the pub; Jimmy Dunn the blacksmith for whom Robert recited Longfellow; his grandfather with his two enthusiasms, the Scotch Kirk and Scotch whisky, who died "like a flash with a laugh in his eyes and a joke on his lips"; and his apparent failure of a father always dreaming of unrealizable success (*Ploughman*, pp. 3-36). The latter perception was to haunt him until the publication of *Sourdough*. He could never bring himself to admit to the family his own failure after he emigrated to North America in 1896.

After leaving school he apprenticed as a bank clerk in Glasgow. During this period, according to himself, he fell under the twin spells of Socialism and music hall. He devoured Robert Blanchford's *Merrie England* (1893), saturating himself in socialist literature, to learn all that there was to know on the subject, but sensing disappointment on discovering that the workers were suspicious of him. His attachment to the cause was qualified: "Socialism would be charming . . . if one could eliminate the socialist." He was bored by "the dictature of the proletariat . . . though I was very much part of them." Towards the end of his life he described himself as a carpet-slipper socialist whose reasoning mind accepted the logic of socialism while his selfish human nature prevented him from furthering it (*Ploughman*, p. 112). He was, as usual, whether at the age of sixteen or seventy, unduly hard on himself. It is certain that *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* demonstrated his true and apparently unrepentant commitment to socialism.

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Service, *Ploughman of the Moon: An Adventure into Memory* (New York, 1945), pp. 83-4. Henceforth cited in the text.

<sup>6</sup>At least two critics have drawn attention to the folk nature of Service's output—Martin Bucio "Folk Poetry of Robert W Service," *Alaska Review*, 2 (Fall 1965), 16-26, and Edward Hirsh "A Structural Analysis of Robert Service's Yukon Ballads," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 40 (1976), 125-40.

The *Toronto Globe* of August 5, 1914, proclaimed, "War is tragedy, not vaudeville."<sup>7</sup> Vaudeville was part of young Service's education: "its rum-tum, rumtittytum inspired some of my verses and when I played at song-composing it was in the tempo of the old-fashioned music hall." Glasgow in the 1890s was "music hall city." Robert loved the vulgarity of the shows with their heady accompaniment of beer, pork pies and strong tobacco (*Ploughman*, p. 96), an ideal atmosphere in which to absorb the music, the songs, the pastiches and the contemporary ballads. He was something of a musician, playing readily by ear the piano, the guitar and the penny whistle. There is much music in his verse and more than an echo of music hall in most of it. Another trick that he learned from vaudeville was the mimicry of accent inspired by the Irish, Cockney and other assorted performers and comedians who took part. His ability to appropriate voice was stunning, a talent he shared with the classic balladeers of an earlier era, and, it might be added, with neighborhood tellers of tales everywhere. He flirted with amateur dramatics without much success. "The world has been a stage for me and I have played the parts my imagination conceived. Rarely have I confronted reality" (*Ploughman*, p. 101). One such reality was the First World War.

Robert briefly attended university but he was defeated by the suffocating tedium of academic criticism. After dabbling in politics, athletics and sports he decided to work on a farm, an ambition foiled when the New World beckoned. He sailed to the St. Lawrence River and boarded an immigrant train for the journey west—"My arrival in Canada was one of the great moments in my life and my emotions were correspondingly dynamic" (*Ploughman*, p. 141). He soon donned what he imagined was a suitable costume: a Buffalo Bill outfit, high circus boots and a sombrero that his father had bought for him at an auction. Back in Glasgow he had actually practiced sharp-shooting in preparation for his trip. However, since he had precisely \$1.95 to his name, he had to sell off various items to his fellow passengers in order to eat. On reaching the west coast he found a series of jobs, interspersed with periods as a hobo and bum, which took him through British Columbia, California and Mexico in colorful adventures which he self-effacingly detailed in his autobiography. In 1904 he resumed his clerking career in the Victoria branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce from whence he was transferred to Kamloops and from there to Whitehorse in the Yukon (*Ploughman*, pp. 139-304).

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<sup>7</sup>William D. Mathieson, *My Grandfather's War: Canadians Remember the First World War 1914-18* (Toronto, 1981), p. 7.

His inspiration during those difficult and often hungry years was Stevenson, a copy of whose *Amateur Emigrant* he carried with him, doubtless drawing comfort from the same author's "The Vagabond":

Wealth I ask not, hope nor love,  
Nor a friend to know me;  
All I ask the heaven above,  
And the road below me.

In San Francisco, he admired the recently erected Stevenson monument. "Here among strangers in a strange land was a bit of Scotland. The whaups were crying over the heather and the dew was white on the peat. This belonged to me not to the people about me" (*Ploughman*, p. 191).

Throughout his peregrinations from Glasgow to Whitehorse his appetite for human drama never slackened as he collected experiences which could well have become the germ of future ballads. On ship he met a hatter who was sailing to join his wife and family on a farm near Winnipeg. He talked endlessly of growing his own vegetables, of cultivation and the agricultural way of life, only to discover that his wife insisted upon quitting the Prairies for the city—the very institution the hatter was hoping to escape. A young soccer player was intent upon making a name for himself in Canada. He was drinking with some fellow passengers at Moose Jaw when the train pulled out of the station. As they ran to catch it the footballer fell under the train.

His face was chalky white and he was moaning 'Mither! I want my mither'. Then a man came along holding a boot and a jagged section of bone and flesh. 'Every wheel went over him' he said, 'every bloody wheel' (*Ploughman*, pp. 143-4).

In British Columbia he met an alcoholic dwarf who tortured his horse and who, in due course, was found in a snow-filled ditch with a hoof-mark on his shattered skull (*Ploughman*, pp. 159-61). So he went on meeting con-men and cutthroats, weirdos, down-and-outs and well-meaning people whose help he stubbornly and proudly refused. We cannot now be sure whether all of his adventures happened exactly as Service described them forty years later. His autobiography was subtitled *An Adventure into Memory* and it may be that memory improved upon some episodes just as it wiped out others.

When Robert Service reached the Yukon, the Trail of Ninety Eight was long since cold; the great gold rush was over. Because of the style of the ballads, the use of the personal pronoun and the immediacy of the description, it is easy to assume that Service actually witnessed the events that he described. He did not. He collected stories from informants and, with appropriate embroidery, he turned them into rhyme. It is a little difficult to imagine that while he was writing about Dan, Lulu, and the rest he was em-

ployed as a rather sedate bank clerk. He was a recorder rather than a participant, a listener rather than a doer, and above all a self-confessed dreamer who was perfectly content to keep his readers guessing as to the extent of his own involvement in the dramas he described. Later, in *Ballads of a Bohemian*, he characterized imagination as the great gift of the gods. "Given it, one does not need to look afar for subjects. There is romance in every face" (*CP*, p. 488). He also claimed that even if he became a millionaire (which he did) he would continue to write "if it were only to escape from my ideas" (*CP*, p. 522).

Service was, of course, much influenced by Kipling, particularly *Barack-Room Ballads* (1892), but while both dwelt upon common themes such as self-reliance in the face of overwhelming odds, Kipling was much more concerned with enshrining the Imperial myth. There is no trace whatsoever of a preoccupation with Empire in Service's work. Rudyard was a more complex individual than Robert, though he would have presumably agreed with the latter's conviction that "vice seemed to me a more vital subject for poetry than virtue, more colourful, more dramatic" (*Ploughman*, p. 326). Robert was much more insistent than was his senior contemporary that the language of his compositions should be accessible. He mercilessly satirized literary pretension in his novel *The Pretender* (1915), and he emphatically agreed with his literary creation, Saxon Dane, that poetry had become too exalted, was selective of themes outside of ordinary experience, while failing as "a medium of expression . . . to reach the great mass of the people" (*CP*, p. 466). Service asserted that anyone with a thesaurus and a rhyming dictionary could rival his own output, producing "Facility" to make the point; his voice sounds loud and clear in the claim, "I prefer the lesser poets to the greater, the cackle of the barnyard fowl to the scream of the eagle" (*CP*, p. 526). He wrote self-consciously in an older folk tradition, protesting that if no one was interested in his ballads, he would "hawk them from door to door" (*CP*, p. 456). That he struck a chord with his public which has continued to sound is indicated by the instant success which greeted *Songs of a Sourdough* upon its appearance in 1907. The publication went through fifteen impressions that year.<sup>8</sup> From then on Robert Wullie never looked back. *Ballads of a Cheechako* appeared in 1909 while Service was still at Dawson City. There too he produced his first novel *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*. He quit the bank in 1910. After a spell in the States, he travelled east to visit his family, who had emigrated to Canada. In 1912 he left the Yukon, never to return.

The outbreak of World War I found Service in Paris, leading the life of a bohemian with his new wife. There are four main sources for Service's

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<sup>8</sup>Carl F. Klinck, *Robert Service. A Biography* (New York, 1976), p. 39.

wartime experiences. The poetic versions are *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* (1916) and *Ballads of a Bohemian* (1921). In the latter, he adopted the unusual convention of linking his verse with passages of prose which purport to have been written by one Stephen Moore of Rue des Petits Moineux, Paris. Moore's experience as an ambulanceman closely parallels that of his creator. Service also discusses the war in his second volume of autobiography, *Harper of Heaven* (1948), but his most searing and critical accounts of the horror are to be found in a series of weekly dispatches he published in the *Toronto Star* between December 11, 1915, and January 29, 1916. He had already tasted the bitterness of conflict, as in 1912 he had been sent by the *Star* as a war correspondent to the Balkans, where he served in the Red Crescent. There he discovered that war was "Hell in a special de luxe edition with cuts, steel engravings, and the autograph of Lucifer himself." The overcrowded cholera camps seemed like "a dream, a nightmare, the fantastic acting of a diabolic drama, too realistic to be real."<sup>9</sup>

At the outbreak of World War I, Service volunteered for the Seaforth Highlanders, but was turned down on health grounds. He became a rather unsuccessful war correspondent and was almost shot as a spy at Dunkirk. Only six war correspondents were officially recognized as such in May 1915; they were subject to a censorship as severe as the suspicion and distaste with which the military viewed them.<sup>10</sup> Rejection by the Seaforths convinced him that he was a pacifist of a kind. "Though I did not want to kill I was willing to take the chance of being killed."<sup>11</sup> Consequently he joined the American Ambulance Unit in order to acquire first-hand knowledge of action. Accepted on condition that he did not write about his experiences, he nonetheless sent regular dispatches to the *Toronto Star*. His subsequent dawning sense of disgust and alienation was closely paralleled by that of John Masefield in the British Red Cross Unit, but their paths radically diverged when Masefield became a propagandist for the war effort.<sup>12</sup> To Service, war

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<sup>9</sup>His article was reprinted in the *Toronto Star*, April 5, 1992. It was originally published on February 1, 1913, dated from Constantinople in January 1913. According to Klinck (*Biography*, p. 74), Service spent Christmas 1912 at Budapest on his return from Constantinople en route to Paris.

<sup>10</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford, 1965), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Service, *Harper of Heaven: A Record of Radiant Living* (New York, 1948), p. 78. Henceforth cited in the text.

<sup>12</sup>*John Masefield's Letters From the Front 1915-1917*, ed. Peter Vansittart (London, 1984); see pp. 54, 69, 77-9, where Masefield's letters to his wife closely match in sentiment and description the *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. Vansittart (p. 18) provides a list of writers



never "ever" could "be right" (*CP*, p. 292). Yet although the dangers to which he was exposed were real enough, Service once again cast himself as observer or witness; he was part of the vicariate of war.

The communications for the *Star* undoubtedly gave a much more explicit account of the savagery and pain of battle than anything which was currently available to the English-reading public. The sentiments of his journalistic pieces would also later inform his rhymes:

And beyond the crosses are many open graves. They will not wait for long. Already I can hear the guns that are making for each mouth his morsel. They will soon be filled, these gaping graves. Then in years to come when the names on the crosses are blurred and worn, mothers and children will come here to weep. And perhaps it is well so. Peace, so precious, must be bought with blood and tears. These are the men who pay the price. Come let us honour them, aye, and envy them the manner of their dying for not all the jewelled orders on the breasts of the living can vie in glory with the little wooden crosses the humblest of these has won.<sup>13</sup>

Soon the worth of the cause is overwhelmed by the obscene agonies to which the combatants are exposed. A captain discusses fear (January 8, 1916). Daily the ambulance man picks up "shattered wrecks of blood and bone," maneuvering his vehicle to avoid the casualties littering the roadway—"Exquisite irony! to be wounded and then to be killed by the ambulance." A hospital orderly carried a pail containing "an arm with a jagged end" past "rows of naked wounded waiting for the knife." Night and day the "Red Harvest" is gathered (January 29, 1916). Small wonder the authorities favored censorship.

*Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* begins, conventionally enough, on a note of jingoism. Although men do not want to fight they are prepared to do so for King and Country ("The Volunteer," *CP*, p. 297). The Irish were celebrated in "The Convalescent" as were the Canadians in "The Man from Athabaska" while the Scots were the subject of the sentimental ditty, "The Haggis of Private McPhee." Very soon, however, the mood changes and war becomes deadly serious. Service later wrote:

. . . there is so much I want to forget. Those who went through the horror of war never want to talk about it. War does not improve on acquaintance. It resolves itself into filth, confusion and boredom. (*Harper*, p. 80).

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officially employed on war-service. It includes fellow-Scots Compton Mackenzie, John Buchan and Ian Hay, as well as the Scots-Canadian novelist Frederick Niven. Ernest Hemingway later worked for the Ambulance Unit in Italy, became a reporter for the *Toronto Star* and after the war joined the American and British expatriate literati in Paris.

<sup>13</sup>*Toronto Star*, December 18, 1915, the second article of the series.

He talked of the "sweating surgeons their bare arms gay with gore, the hospitals where one helped to carry severed limbs, unexpectedly heavy and dump them in a ditch" (*Harper*, p. 80). A similar transition to disenchantment occurs in the *Star* dispatches which dwell with bleak starkness on the plight of the wounded and the dying, but also, as in the best of Service's work, upon the often ridiculous obsessions and attitudes of individuals in such extreme situations. In "The Odyssey of 'Erbert 'Iggins" Service made a journey of discovery for himself. Erbert with a mate goes to the assistance of a wounded German who promptly shoots his friend.

Now what would you do? I arst you.  
 There was me slaughtered mate.  
 There was that 'Un  
 (I'd collered 'is gun),  
 A-snarlin' 'is 'ymn of 'ate.  
 Wot did I do? 'Ere, whisper . . .  
 'E'd a shiny bald top to 'is 'ead,  
 But when I got through,  
 Between me and you,  
 It was 'orrid and jaggy and red. (*CP*, pp. 311-2)

It was, and is, a commonplace of war propaganda to dehumanize the enemy, but in this neatly contrived passage, Erbert proves himself as guilty as his victim, equally susceptible to moral corruption.

"Fleurette" describes the despair of a man missing a leg and a face. Service confronts cowardice in "Funk." He has a rhyme spoken by a soldier impaled upon barbed wire and who prays for a bullet to relieve his agony. He writes of tough soldiers faintly embarrassed to be caught laying flowers on a dead comrade's grave. He recounts individual acts of heroism the more heroic because no one is present to observe the action of the hero. He writes of himself in what may be one of the most effective pieces in the collection, "The Stretcher-bearer." He confronts the stunned awareness of men who see themselves in the broken bodies of the dying enemy.

Oh, it isn't cheerful to see a man, the marvellous work of God,  
 Crushed in the mutilation mill, crushed to a smeary clod;  
 Oh, it isn't cheerful to hear him moan; but it isn't that I mind,  
 It isn't the anguish that goes with him, it's the anguish he leaves behind.  
 For his going opens a tragic door that gives on a world of pain,  
 And the death he dies, those who live and love, will die again and again.  
 ("Only a Boche," *CP*, p. 361).

He may have been one of the first—if not *the* first—of the War poets to speculate on the alienation of the warrior once he had returned to civvy

street, as in "The Revelation" or in "Afternoon Tea" which is as devastating as it is dramatically effective:

. . . my man was descending before me, when sudden a cry! a shot!  
(I say, this cake is delicious. You make it yourself, do you not?)  
My man? Oh, they killed the poor devil . . . (CP, p. 412)

The book was published in 1916, dedicated to Service's brother Albert, killed in action in August of that year, and it became an instant best-seller. Many of the images which he conjured have since become clichés through literature, movies and, most recently perhaps, the compositions of Scottish (now Australian) folksinger Eric Bogle, but what is to be understood is that Robert Service was very probably the first to poetically place those images before the public. His concern with the plight of the individual soldier was highly unusual, possibly even unique, at this stage of the conflict. In much First War poetry the poet does not doubt the value of the cause as, for example, in Rupert Brooke's famous effusion, "The Soldier," or in what became the best-known poem of the war—John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields":

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.<sup>14</sup>

So far as Service was concerned the entire exercise was futile. In his foreword he wrote of his own verse,

For through it all like horror runs  
The red resentment of the guns.  
And you yourself would mutter when  
You took the things that once were men  
And sped them through that zone of hate  
To where the dripping surgeons wait;  
And wonder too if in God's sight  
War ever, ever can be right. (CP, p. 292)

It is widely agreed that the first major public disenchantment with the war set in after the Battle of the Somme, July-November 1916.<sup>15</sup> Before the battle

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<sup>14</sup>John McCrae born in Guelph, Ontario, was the grandson of a Scottish emigrant. See John F. Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae* (Erin, 1985).

the poetic fraternity—Brooke, McCrae, Julian Grenfell and the young Wilfrid Owen—wrote with a certain innocence swathed in patriotic sentiment; war to them was a noble, lofty enterprise. The Somme changed minds and attitudes. The British lost 420,000, the French 194,000. Three British soldiers were lost for every two Germans. Thereafter poets such as Siegfried Sassoon (some of whose earlier compositions resemble those of Service), Blunden, and Robert Graves stressed the suffering of the trenches, "tempered only by comradeship." It may now be suggested that Robert Service not only helped foster the widespread sense of disillusionment, but that he was among the first to publish the stark reality of the wartime experience from the point of view of the non-commissioned combatant.<sup>16</sup> It is worth recalling that virtually all of the war poets were from privileged backgrounds or were commissioned as officers, or were both. Service was neither.

The chronology of the *Rhymes* is important. Service's book was published in the fall of 1916 and topped the best-seller lists for nine months, his success directly reflecting the public mood following the Somme as jingoism and patriotism gave way to fear and despair. Conscription had been introduced in January 1916; the combatants were no longer volunteers singing "Tipperary" as they marched to oblivion. Service became ill during the spring of 1916 and he was invalidated out. While convalescing, he decided to compose poems based upon his recent experience, and in five months he produced sixty pieces. He clearly began to write before battle broke out and his book appeared before the carnage was over. His disenchantment therefore stemmed from the early stages of the war. The publication can have done little to enhance the war effort. In fact it could have been regarded in certain quarters as treasonous; men in the front lines had been shot for less.

A considerable amount of war poetry was reaching print by early 1917. Two reviews among many give some indication of how Service was received. Harriet Monroe thought that *Rhymes* did not quite capture "the ultimate tragedy and mystery, the agony and wild humour and fearful rapture of war," but that it did communicate popular versions of all of those things, "versions which tell about them convincingly and pass current" though their

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<sup>15</sup>Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (Toronto, 1989), pp. 144-5; John Lehmann, *The English Poets of the First World War* (London, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup>Mrs. Cleghorn of Guelph relates that when her husband returned from the Front in 1916, he presented her with a copy of *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. "This," he said, "will give you the clearest idea of what things are like over there." "The best part of the story" says Mrs. Cleghorn, "is that I am a full cousin of John McCrae!"

author was compared unfavorably with Julian Grenfell. Florence Kelly, reviewing half a dozen books of war poetry, including Service and *Ballads of Battle* by Joseph Lee of Dundee, was moved to comment on the "spiritual bankruptcy of the age." Nonetheless she was shrewd enough to note problems to be faced by veterans as suggested in "The Revelation." Both critics sought comfort which the poets were unable to communicate, Kelly seeking a "renewal of faith, [a] glimpse of light above the smoke of battle," Monroe hoping to detect "the very heart-cry of emotion." Both also favored dead poets who articulated the patriotic ethos and the essential nobility of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> What the reviews clearly demonstrate is a split in receptivity between non-combatants and combatants, between literary sensibility and experiential verse, perhaps between elite and popular perceptions. A similar dichotomy is to be detected, to take but one example, in a recent anthology of war poems from Dundee,<sup>18</sup> in which civilians and soldiers seem to talk about completely different subjects, the folks at home clinging to ideas about valor and sacrifice and Country. The suspicion is that the battle-weary were beginning to say things that not everyone at home wanted to hear. There was no "glimpse of light" in Service because there was none to see, except perhaps the phantom glimmer of a future world totally free of war. About war he was ultimately pessimistic; it had few redeeming features. For example, the so-called "great" poets of the war, such as Graves, Blunden, Owen and the rest had a homo-erotic approach to death on the battlefield,<sup>19</sup> but Service saw nothing beautiful in the death of a young soldier and hundreds of thousands would have shared his view, as—thanks to the popularity of his earlier publications—they shared his perception of the conflict.

Not all of the ballads in *Rhymes* were relentlessly grim. There were still overtones of the Yukon humor in pieces such as "Soulful Sam" or "The Whistle of Sandy McGraw." More serious was Service's awareness that war did not exclusively concern men; women are central to the first poem and the last of the *Red Cross* sequence. He urged women to heed

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<sup>17</sup>Harriet Monroe, "War Poems," *Poetry*, 10 (Aug. 1917), 271-8; Florence Finch Kelly, "The Poets Enlist under Mars," *Bookman*, 44 (Jan. 1917), 510-13. The essay also reviewed Alan Seeger's *Poems*, without, oddly enough, mentioning one of the best-known poems to come out of World War I, his "I have a Rendezvous with Death." I am indebted to Lisa Paterson for these references.

<sup>18</sup>Hilder D. Spear and Bruce Pandrich, eds., *Sword and Pen: Poems of 1915 from Dundee and Tayside* (Aberdeen, 1989).

<sup>19</sup>Fussell, *Great War*, Chapter VIII; Lehmann, *English Poets*, pp. 10-11. This matter is complex but what is essentially at issue is the tension between the "poetic sensibility" of say, Owen, and the base proletarianism of Service.

The pitiless call of War!  
 Look your last on your dearest ones,  
 Brothers and husbands, fathers, sons:  
 Swift they go to the ravenous guns,  
 The gluttonous guns of War. (CP, p. 294)

And the final poem is dedicated to the women who face survival alone as the poet looks into "the aching womb of night" to see "a million woman-faces drift/ Like pale leaves through the sky" ("The Mourners," CP, p. 415).

Fifty-one poems were published in *Rhymes*. Another ten which for one reason or another were excluded in 1916 appeared in the first three sections of Book Four of *Ballads of a Bohemian*. The remaining five war poems in the volume, including the lengthy "Les Grands Mutiles," read as if they had been written after the Armistice. *Ballads* is really Service's valediction to the age of innocence. The carefree bohemian existence in pre-war Paris renders him "dithyrambic with delight," imbibing liquor and literary discourse in equal quantities during that last undisciplined sun-drenched summer, in the "country of the young." He formed a lifelong attachment to Brittany, grew heady on the scent of tangled hedgerows and luxuriated in the clean kiss of the sea. But during a visit to Carnac the idyll ended as the stones presaged the armies that would shortly engulf Europe,

Like soldiers they stand in rank, extending over the moor. The sky is cowed with cloud, save where a sullen sunset shoots blood-red rays across the plain. Bathed in that sinister light stands my army of stone, and a wind swooping down seems to wail amid its ranks (CP, p. 535).

The great theme of his summer had been freedom: freedom to write, to be poor, to indulge himself or to dream. That world was shattered in August 1914. Freedom now had to be surrendered to the criminal folly of war.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most memorable lines Service penned appears in the *Rhymes* poem "My Mate," "'E was killed so awful sudden that 'e 'adn't time to die" (CP, p. 329). The dying continues in the *Ballads of a Bohemian* and we may suspect that some of these poems were held over as a result of self-censorship. He returned to the *Star* dispatches with "Priscilla," his pet name for the ambulance he drove, loaded with "fierce old messes of blood and bone" (CP, p. 550). The subject of "Casualty" has lost both legs but asks for blankets because his feet are cold. The horror of the "The Blood-Red *Fourragère*" is utterly relentless. Even Service must have realized that there were some subjects which his public for *Rhymes* just could not take.

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<sup>20</sup>In the prose passages of *Ballads*, Service recycled some of his material from the *Star* dispatches.

What was the blackest sight to me  
Of all that campaign?  
*A naked woman tied to a tree  
With jagged holes where her breasts should be,  
Rotting there in the rain.* (CP, p. 554)

In this poem the French colonel has his troops march past the tree in order to instill a hatred of the enemy into their souls. Equally horrible is "The Three Tommies" which details the deaths of a painter, a musician and a writer; the fate of the first will make the point:

Yon's Barret, the painter of pictures, yon carcass that rots on the wire:  
His hand with its sensitive cunning is crisped to a cinder with fire;  
His eyes with their magical vision are bubbles of glutinous mire.  
(CP, pp. 562-3)

Joe, victim of "The Booby-Trap," ends up as a "heap of offal" (CP, p. 570). "Les Grands Mutilés" describes a trilogy—The Sightless Man, The Legless Man and The Faceless Man. The blind soldier has a dream in which he imagines his wife to be having an affair while he sits helpless, listening to the lovers whispering and lovemaking. He decides upon awakening to join The Brotherhood of the Sightless Band, his fellow military casualties. The legless victim laments that soon no one will remember when, how or why he lost his limbs. But all is not lost—he is a shoemaker, "Good luck one has no need of legs/ To make a pair of shoes" (CP, p. 588). The faceless one cannot bring himself to return home to his friends and relatives and he goes into voluntary exile, letting all believe that he has died. Faceless and despairing he cries that he suffered his hideous fate for the very people who cannot now look at him. Bathos and crass sentimentality combine in this composition to deter modern readers, but such overkill is very reminiscent of the folk tradition which seldom hesitates to overstate the obvious. Nonetheless, if the poem was in existence in 1916, it was hardly something which Service's audience could be expected to digest along with Christmas dinner. In "The Wife," Annie's husband had promised to be home for Christmas; she would gladly suffer the defeat of the Allies if only her husband could be restored to her, "one's home before one's country comes:/ Aye, so a million women say" (CP, p. 578).

Robert Service had been a socialist in his youth. At seventy he described himself as a radical with socialist sympathies. The war ballads adequately demonstrate both his radicalism and his socialism. In World War I, Service confronted his own reality, perhaps for the only time in his life.

"It's coming soon and soon, mother, it's nearer every day,  
 When only men who work and sweat will have a word to say;  
 When all who earn their honest bread in every land and soil  
 Will claim the Brotherhood of Man, the Comradeship of Toil;  
 When we, the Workers, all demand: 'What are we fighting for?' . . .  
 Then, then we'll end that stupid crime, that devil's madness—War."  
 ("Michael," *CP*, p. 577)

When America entered the war, the Ambulance Unit was disbanded and Service obtained a very comfortable job reporting the activities of the Canadian Expeditionary Force complete with guide, chauffeur and the rest. After the war, he returned to Paris. He had many more adventures and he travelled widely, flirting en route with the Parisian underworld and basking in the adulation of Hollywood. He visited Russia twice, leaving the second time just as the Germans invaded Poland. He was death-listed for his unflattering published remarks about "huns," but he left France just ahead of the invaders, who used his Breton summer home as a command post. During the latter part of his life, he lived quietly at Monte Carlo and at Dream Haven, Brittany. This likeable, caring, somewhat egocentric and slightly loveless man died peacefully in 1958. Stevenson's "Requiem" might have provided a suitable epitaph, "Glad did I live and gladly die/ And I laid me down with a will," but in fact he furnished his own envoi—"The measure of our sunshine is the brightness we can kindle in the eyes of others."<sup>21</sup>

When the sunshine was blocked out for Service in the 1914-18 war he produced his greatest work. He was not, nor did he aspire to be, a great poet but he kindled brightness in others by talking to them in their own language, free of pretension. He belonged to an older world of the ballad and the broadside, exploiting the rhythms and conventions of that world to record and articulate the feelings of ordinary women and men caught up in the greatest disaster they had known, "the maximum event in all human history," as one informant put it.<sup>22</sup> With governments intent upon orchestrating jingoism, he was not popular, yet he struck a chord which sounded in the souls of the war generation as early as 1916. His was not the poetry of King, Country and Empire; it was the voice of the victims, the mangled and the manipulated. His poetry cannot stand comparison with that of the privileged war poets, yet he anticipated many of the metaphors, images and sentiments for which they are now lauded. Criticism has failed Service because of his style

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<sup>21</sup>Harper, p. 452; for details of Service's late life see Klinck, *Biography*.

<sup>22</sup>Mathieson, *Grandfather's War*, p. 13.



and his success, perhaps also, because of his lowly social status; marginalized by the critics he remained at the forefront of popular literature.

At the end of the war, Service had been compiling a manuscript to be called *War Winners* in which he attempted to encapsulate the whole futile experience. It was progressing very satisfactorily when Armistice was declared. Robert joined in the dancing, cheering, singing, hugging and kissing on the frenzied streets of Paris:

Carried away by the extravagances of the mirth-mad mob; then I tired of it all. I thought of those out there who had given their lives for this, and for whom no one in all that cheering multitude had a single tear (*Harper*, p. 93).

He tore up his manuscript.

"That ends it" I said. "No more war. Not in my lifetime. Curse the memory of it. Now I will rest and forget" (*Harper*, p. 94).

But of course he did not forget. The unforgettable unforgotten remained to haunt him as his own rhymes remained to haunt posterity. It was for Service a long hard road from Kilwinning to the trenches of France. That experience taught him that true victory would not be gained through defeat of the enemy, but rather, as he wrote in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*

When our children's children shall talk of War as a madness that may not be;  
When we thank our God for our grief to-day, and blazon from sea to sea  
In the name of the Dead the banner of Peace . . . *that will be Victory*.  
("The Song of the Pacifist," *CP*, p. 406)

No poet who sold so many books said so much in 1916. To Robert Service, folk-poet, credit is long overdue.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>I am grateful to my daughter, Karen Cowan, for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.