

“A Man in a World of Men”: The Rough, the Tough, and the Tender in Robert W. Service’s *Songs of a Sourdough*

SHARON SMULDERS

AT THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME of his autobiography, *Ploughman of the Moon: An Adventure into Memory* (1945), Robert W. Service describes its composition “as an experiment in Escape,” allowing him “to forget the Present” while “remembering the Past” (472). His very selectivity in recollecting the past demonstrates, however, that it too required escape. Conveniently forgetting much related to the women who figured most prominently in his life, he says little in *Ploughman of the Moon* and *Harper of Heaven* (1948) about his mother, Emily Parker Service, or about his French wife, Germaine Bourgoin Service, whom he never once names. Moreover, he entirely expunges from the autobiography the existence of his grandmother, Agnes Niven Service, who presided over his early years in Kilwinning, as well as of his Canadian fiancée, Constance Mary MacLean, whose initials (“C.M.”) appear in the dedication to *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907).¹ A similar suppression of feminine influence characterizes his Yukon ballads. In fact, the absence of middle-class women from *Songs of a Sourdough* prompted “the church,” in the person of the chief deacon of the Whitehorse Episcopal congregation, to complain sourly on behalf of “the ladies of the sewing-circle” who regretted that the poet “should have written so much about the bad women of the town and said nothing about the good ones” (*Ploughman* 332).² Currently relegated to the status of children’s literature, *Songs of a Sourdough* nevertheless represents a conscious effort not only to escape the feminine piety that “the ladies of the sewing-circle” embody but also to inscribe an alternative realm that instead gives expression to the “virile,” which Service, in a 1941 interview, located in the company of “rough and tough” men (qtd. in Mackay 351).³ In other words, *Songs of a Sourdough* does not propound “the Myth of the North” nor yet the “Myth

of Man in the North” so much as it mythologizes the condition of manhood itself (Klinck 58).⁴ In so doing, it celebrates the release of fin-de-siècle masculinity from the constraints of bourgeois civility as incarnate in the ideal of Christian domesticity. Enshrining the myth of masculine individualism within the folklore of the Yukon, Service’s best-known work thus commands attention for its mediation of the cultural anxieties that beleaguer late Victorian constructions of manliness. In the process, his verse not only negotiates contemporary challenges to male power and privilege but also affirms the heterosexual imperatives that it seeks to evade.

At the height of the nineteenth century, Anglo-American men had defined themselves through success as independent entrepreneurs and middle-class professionals; but a number of factors, including industrial corporatization, urban migration, and cultural feminization, eroded the doctrine of achievement that had underwritten the ideal of self-made manhood (Kimmel 78-87; Rotundo, *American Manhood* 248-55). Leaving the Commercial Bank of Scotland, where he had worked since 1888, for North American ranch life in 1896, the twenty-two year old Service found himself entrapped in the ensuing crisis of gender identity. Seeking to prove himself as a “man in a world of men” (*Ploughman* 148; *Collected Poems* 26), he found a life that offered physical and (the illusion of) social mobility but that failed to provide financial stability or personal satisfaction. By turns a ranch hand, farm labourer, tunnel-digger, dishwasher, fruit-picker, caretaker, guitar-player, mill worker, cowman, and storekeeper, Service travelled from British Columbia to Mexico and back, drifting aimlessly from job to job up and down the Pacific coast for two years, a vagrant not unlike those later memorialized in “The Tramps,” “The Rhyme of the Restless Ones,” “The Song of the Wage-Slave,” and “The Men That Don’t Fit In.” As “The Tramps” suggests, this vagabond life initially promised autonomy, for despite “hunger, want, and weariness,” “no man was [his] master” (*Collected Poems* 71). As an unskilled labourer, however, Service had little control over his working life.⁵ Finally, in 1903, after a failed attempt to take a university degree and “mount to a profession” (*Ploughman* 284), he applied to the Canadian Bank of Commerce, Vancouver, for a job similar to the one he had fled seven years before. Belonging to a profession under siege at the turn of the century, he was, as a junior bank clerk, not “an apprentice for business leadership” but “a service worker” (Rotundo, *American Manhood* 249) —

in effect, a white-collar “wage-slave.”⁶ Indeed, even with the generous allowances granted to clerical staff in the Yukon, Service made little more than half of the \$2100 annual salary that Laura Thompson, later Berton, earned as kindergarten teacher in Dawson City (Laura Berton 13).⁷

According to Anthony Rotundo, threats to manhood such as those posed by the movement of middle-class women like Thompson into the professional arena necessitated “new forms of reassurance” — that is, “new ideas about manliness” — grounded in “strenuous recreation, spectator sports, adventure novels, and a growing cult of the wilderness” (*American* 250-51). In other words, the old ideal of self-made manhood had given place to renovated notions of “passionate manhood” or “masculine primitivism.”⁸ Best exemplified in the careers of rough-rider Theodore Roosevelt, body-builder Eugen Sandow, and scout-master Robert Baden-Powell, these new concepts of manliness galvanized Service to write *Songs of a Sourdough*, which appeared under the title of *The Spell of the Yukon and Other Verses* in the United States. The poems in this collection not only allowed him to retreat, as he later did in the autobiography, from an unsatisfactory present into a reassuringly revised past but also to dodge the spectre of “a first-class failure” that not only had clung to his father, another erstwhile bank clerk, but also haunted Service himself as one of the “race of men [who] don’t fit in” (*Ploughman* 66; *Collected Poems* 42). For Service, as for many fin-de-siècle men, this prospect of failure rested less in a lack of ambition than in “a want of achievement where achievement measured manhood” (Rotundo, *American Manhood* 179). In *Songs of a Sourdough*, therefore, he celebrates those Anglo-American men who, in “The Rhyme of the Restless Ones,” “couldn’t sit and study for the law” or stand “The stagnation of a bank” (*Collected Poems* 62); and who, in “The Rhyme of the Remittance Man,” chose to live in the wilderness rather than become businessmen, “Gilded galley-slaves of Mammon” (*Collected Poems* 46). But although he argued that his poetry, particularly his second volume, *Ballads of a Cheechako* (1909), “was steeped in the spirit of the Klondike” since “it was written on the spot and reeking with reality” (*Ploughman* 350), none of his early work actually came from direct personal experience of the world that he sought to recreate: the Yukon of the late 1890s. Indeed, more than a third of the poems in his first volume had been written before he moved north in 1904 to assume his post at the Whitehorse branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce.⁹

When Service arrived for the first time in Dawson in 1908, a year after the publication of *Songs of a Sourdough*, the rush was long over: the city had shrunk from the 40,000 residents of its heyday as the largest Canadian city west of Winnipeg to some 4,000, and the last of the dance-halls — the Floradora — which had flourished ten years earlier was on the verge of closure.¹⁰ Moreover, placer mining, known contemporaneously as “poor man’s mining” because it required “few tools and little capital” to extract “the gold found ‘free’ in the gravel beds” (Harris 375-76), had given way to highly capitalized, large-scale industrial engineering. Thus, the *Canadian Annual Review* for 1908 lamented that “the glamour of the Yukon has passed, the days of the individual miner and the romance of great fortunes picked up in a week, have altogether gone . . . Dredge-working, hydraulicking, and the efforts of applied science in quartz mining [have] replaced the placer diggers” (qtd in Morrison 87). Nonetheless, in *Songs of a Sourdough*, so compellingly did Service adapt Klondike history to the mythology of individual achievement and the romance of masculine adventure that stampeders like W.H.T. Olive, manager of the Bennett Lake and Klondyke Navigation Company, remembered the poet, though then wandering the American southwest, as coming over the White Pass during the spring of 1898 (88).

Writing himself into Yukon legendry, Service aspired as a poet of the north to be not only “its interpreter” but also “its lover, its living voice” (*Ploughman* 339, 457). As such, he had to devolve a new masculine poetic, one both passionate and primitive, and so to dissociate his work from the apparent effeminacy of nineteenth-century lyricism.¹¹ The frequency with which Service’s critics have subsequently cited his reputation as the Kipling of the north, simultaneously noting the “virile” or “manly” qualities of his verse, suggests that he achieved his aim if only in part.¹² Specializing in “the coarse and the concrete” (*Ploughman* 221), Service had a talent for what biographer Carl Klinck calls “unconventional non-aristocratic, non-bourgeois rhyming” (57). Always suspicious of “word-spinning,” he had of course come early not only “to prefer blunt Saxon speech” to “flowery language, words musically arranged and coloured like a garden,” but also to question “the subject matter of verse” as too ended with “ideals and abstractions” (*Ploughman* 102, 88). Yet, even as he reviled “poetry,” he continued to write “verse,” for, as he said, “Though I turned from nectar I still liked beer” (*Ploughman* 88). Service’s preference for “verse” over “poetry,” repeated throughout the autobiography, not

only bespeaks a kind of proletarian identification with working folk but also partakes of the anti-intellectualism that came to distinguish manliness — especially frontier manliness — in the popular mind.¹³ The speaker of “The Song of the Wage-Slave,” “A brute with brute strength to labor,” thus embraces all work but “headwork” because he has “no more brains than a kid” (*Collected Poems* 25). At the same time, while Service’s youthful experience as “an entertainer” who had been “in demand for church-halls and beer-halls” shaped the recitative quality of his work, his verse also owed something to “the tempo of the old-fashioned music-hall” as well as “its rich vulgarity” (*Ploughman* 99, 96). When he finally found his subject matter in “The Shooting of Dan McGrew,” the first of the poems written in the Yukon, he discovered a world that already pulsed with the rhythms of the dance-hall.

Rather than identify himself with bar room entertainers like the “rag-time kid” of “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” (*Collected Poems* 30), Service projected his poetic persona onto the role of gold-seeking gamblers such as McGrew himself; for the image of the card-playing prospector was one that was unambiguously suggestive of manly adventure and its risks. Just as earlier Victorian poets such as Robert Browning and D.G. Rossetti used the figure of the celibate monk to explore “varied views about self-discipline, the management of male sexuality, and the function of repression” in art (Sussman 3), Service similarly chose an identity that allowed him to fulfil a fantasy of masculine creativity released from bourgeois constraint. In his autobiography, for example, he uses metaphors drawn from gambling and mining to recount how, of all the bank’s employees, “a little junior, humped over a big ledger, was about the only one to win a sizeable stake” (*Ploughman* 303). The “little junior” was, as biographer James Mackay alleges, most certainly Service himself (149). Indeed, as “the most successful poet of the twentieth century in material terms,” Service eventually earned in excess of \$100,000 for *Songs of a Sourdough* alone (Mackay 14, 408n19). Having thus mined “the romance of the gold rush,” he was “a roughneck writer” whose work was analogous to that performed by “the rough miners” celebrated in *Songs of a Sourdough* (*Ploughman* 303, 371, 326). In this narrative of poetic and financial success, the “story of the Yukon” emerges as a “vein of rich ore” that becomes, with the publication of *Songs of a Sourdough*, a veritable “gold mine” (*Ploughman* 338, 330).

Not surprisingly, the pose of the “roughneck writer” also enters into Service’s recollections of how he wrote the poems later included in *Songs*

of a *Sourdough*. Of the composition of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," for instance, the poet remembers Stroller White, editor of the *Whitehorse Star*, facetiously encouraging him not only to "write a pome" [sic] for recitation at an up-coming church concert but also to take as his subject "something about our own bit of earth": "There's a rich paystreak waiting for some one to work. Why don't you go in and stake it?" (*Ploughman* 323). Returning from a late-night walk with a first line for the resultant "pome," Service recalled,

I did not want to disturb the sleeping house; but I was on fire to get started, so I crawled softly down to the dark office. I would work in my teller's cage. But I had not reckoned with the ledger-keeper in the guard room. He woke from a dream in which he had been playing single-handed against two tennis champions, and licking them. Suddenly he heard a noise near the safe. Burglars! Looking through the trap-door he saw a furtive shadow. He gripped his revolver, and closing his eyes, he pointed it at the skulking shade.... Fortunately he was a poor shot or the *Shooting of Dan McGrew* might never have been written. (*Ploughman* 324)

Although "apocryphal" (Mackay 164), this tale serves several purposes in elaborating the myth of the "roughneck writer." First, in its description of poetic inspiration, it allows Service to emphasize the raw, spontaneous quality of his work even though, as Peter Mitham points out in "Publication of *Songs of a Sourdough*," the poet actually spent considerable time polishing and revising his verse. Second, in its description of the material circumstances of composition, the tale puts Service's poetic practice into terms that are overtly active and concretely physical. Third, in its description of the poet who dodges bullets in the teller's cage and thereby casts off the identity of bank clerk that imprisons him during daylight hours, it positions the writer as a heroic actor within the (melo)drama of composition. Indeed, the teller's cage not merely exists as an emblem of an emasculated wage-slavery but also, in this retelling, reveals the liberating power of the manly fictions that Service created for himself as a writer. In his version of the masculine creative self, the epithet "dangerous" applies as appropriately to the poet as his subject, Dan McGrew.

Settling on the rather conventional theme of revenge in "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," Service offers "a new twist" on "the old triangle, the faithless wife, the betrayed husband," by setting the story in the Klondike, focusing on the dangerous aspects of manly endeavour, and adapting the

narrative to “musical suggestion” (*Ploughman* 323-24). Dense in colloquial allusion to alcohol, sex, and cards, the poem testifies to a turn-of-the-century elision of juvenility and masculinity, for Service treats the Klondike as a world of homosocial play where “boys” have fun, a “kid” performs on the piano, and even grown men can amuse themselves with a “game”:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
 The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
 Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
 And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known as
 Lou. (*Collected Poems* 29)

Situated at a distance from genteel convention, the Klondike liberates masculinity from the constraints of bourgeois domesticity by ascribing to adult men the physicality, the hedonism, and the savagery of boys. But although the nomination of men as “boys” works differently within the white milieu of the north than it does within the racially mixed south, Service yet uses the syncopated rhythms of American Negro music to conjure the raucous juvenility of Dawson’s entertainment district in the late 1890s. The consequent reliance on slang speech, alliterative phrases, and long heptameter lines, lengthened further by anapestic measure, clearly distinguishes “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” from, for example, the work of Alfred Tennyson and Christina Rossetti which, in its melodious rapture, Virginia Woolf typified as the best of Victorian verse (16).

A complement to the “rag-time” musicianship of the kid, the impassioned piano-playing of the stranger who stumbles into this setting also allows Service to overcome the problem of inarticulacy and anonymity characterizing those whom he describes in “The Call of the Wild” as “the silent men who do things” (*Collected Poems* 18). The resultant tension between inward emotion and its outward expression leads to the eroticization of physical action and bodily strength over verbal accomplishment or mental acuity. Using a language evocative of the prize fights that, as “intense performances of manliness” (Kasson 40), were popular northern entertainments, *Songs of a Sourdough* locates an essentialized masculinity in the stark physicality of those like the old-timer who, in “The Heart of the Sourdough,” has “clinched and closed with the naked North” (*Collected Poems* 7); the energetic work of those like the “bronzed and stalwart fellow” who, in “The Younger Son,” “is fighting might and main / To clinch the rivets of an Empire down” (*Collected Poems* 52-53); and the

quiet reserve of men like “the primitive toiler, half naked and grimed to the eyes,” who, in “The Song of the Wage-Slave,” is “Resolute, dumb, uncomplaining, a man in a world of men” (*Collected Poems* 26). Such a taciturn and elemental manhood — literally embodied in the muscular male nude — obviously demands special techniques to overcome the tension between emotion and expression, especially in the absence of stable identity.¹⁴ Indeed, as Neville Newman shows, all of the “characters, with the exception of McGrew, resist identification” in “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” (158). Yet, while the lack of names signals the characters’ lack of status and their level of estrangement, it also threatens to make them virtually unknowable. As a result, the stranger — “a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-dirty, and loaded for bear” — first appears to be more beast than man (*Collected Poems* 29); but the music that reveals the tender feelings hidden behind the tough exterior humanizes him. Understanding that his improvised performance encrypts “a silence you most could *hear*,” the narrator has, like the stranger, been “out in the Great Alone” and so has “a hunch what the music meant . . . hunger and night and the stars. / And hunger not of the belly kind, that’s banished with bacon and beans, / But the gnawing hunger of lonely men for a home and all that it means” (*Collected Poems* 30-31). Converting primitive emotion into the concrete, material terms of Dawson City during the starvation winters of 1897 and 1898, Service charts the movements of masculine subjectivity and asserts the primacy of instinctive sympathy based on men’s common experience of the north.¹⁵

The musical suggestiveness of the poem is only one aspect of the metaphors of play and performance that Service actuates in *Songs of a Sourdough* to explore masculine interiority. Another, of course, belongs to the imagery of gaming. As popular historian Pierre Berton notes, “the entire stampede . . . had been an enormous and continual gamble” (370). Similarly, Charlene Porsild, citing “sociologist John Findlay’s argument that miners and gamblers in many ways share a single profession,” observes that those drawn to the gold rush “were *all* ‘people of chance’” (78). The idea that “mining is . . . a gamble” likewise permeates Service’s view of Klondike life (*Collected Poems* 14). So just as the stranger plays a piano solo, Dan McGrew plays “a solo game,” a form of whist popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Punning on “solo,” Service suggests not only a particular kind of card game but also Dan’s solitary status, at least at first, in vying for the affections of “his

light-o'-love, the lady that's known as Lou" as well as the one-sidedness of this relationship. Moreover, inasmuch as Service probably had in mind heart solo, which, according to *Hoyle's Games* (1907), was a "solo for 3 players" (qtd. in *OED*), the game foreshadows the relationship among the three players caught in the love triangle: Dan, Lou, and the dissolute stranger. The game winds to a finale when, just before the stranger bets his poke of gold dust "That one of you is a hound of hell ... and that one is Dan McGrew," his opponent announces that he will "make it a spread misere" and the music "seem[s] to say, 'Repay, repay'" (*Collected Poems* 32, 31). French for "misery," *misère* describes a call that a card player, usually one with a very bad hand, makes to win by deliberately losing each (or sometimes just the final) trick. The poem, however, features a very different kind of *spread misère* in its final tableau: the gunfight that leaves Lou's two lovers dead.

Although some sourdoughs, like Klondike Mike Mahoney, later inserted themselves into the events recounted in "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and thereby insisted on their historicity, Service had fabricated the story from some of the most lurid and least factual aspects of Yukon life.¹⁶ In his practical guide to *Alaska and the Klondike Gold Fields* (1897), for example, A. C. Harris reassured contemporary fortune-seekers by quoting a miner who averred "with absolute truth that Dawson City [was] one of the most moral towns of its kind in the world" (454). To be sure, the North West Mounted Police tolerated illegal gambling, blatant prostitution, and an unlicensed liquor trade, but the force did so both with the connivance of the territorial government and in an effort to promote good order.¹⁷ Sidearms, as a consequence, were strictly prohibited.¹⁸ Indeed, "so many revolvers were confiscated in Dawson in 1898 that they were auctioned off by the police for as little as a dollar and purchased as souvenirs to keep on the mantelpiece" (Pierre Berton 307). Thus, the fatal gunfight that forms the climax of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" owes much more to the legendary American west than the historic Canadian north.

Similarly, the depiction of Lou, whose rouge signifies her status as a scarlet woman, draws on frontier folklore; for "contrary to popular myth, prostitution was not the primary occupation for Klondike women. The majority of women reported their occupation as 'wife'" (Porsild 19). Interestingly, Service uses precisely this character — the character of Lou as (faithless) wife — to call into question bourgeois notions of "home and all that it means": "a fireside far from the cares that are, four walls and a roof

above; / ... so cramful of cosy joy, and crowned with a woman's love — / A woman dearer than all the world" (*Collected Poems* 31). The ambiguity that characterizes Lou as both wife and prostitute crystallizes in her name, for, as Judith Butler notes, "the name, which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative" (72). While Lou's lack of a patronymic or family name thus obscures her relationship to the stranger who is her husband, the curtailment of her first name obfuscates her gender. As a result, her name signals her freedom from the dictates of bourgeois femininity. No longer sanctioned by marriage, Lou's love is now far "dearer" than even the narrator wishes to acknowledge since it is, as Service writes in "The Harpy," "for hire" (*Collected Poems* 68). Commodified, it costs two men their lives and, in the end, attaches to the "poke" that the stranger bets against Dan's *amour-propre*. The wry humour of the final line of the poem, which aligns the kiss Lou gives to the gold she takes, tempers the sentimentality that characterizes Service's idealization of feminine domesticity, however claustrophobic, and underlines the exchange of love for money that distinguishes the life of both wife and prostitute. Lou, though she loses two lovers, takes the final trick.

Like "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," "The Cremation of Sam McGee" mythologizes masculine risk-taking in the north; but in its movement from the environs of Dawson into the wilderness, it tests the absolute limits of masculine individualism and homosocial attachment. Rivalled only by "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" in its continuing popularity, the poem grew out of a tall tale that a Dawson miner, a "big ... man" both physically and socially, told at a Whitehorse party that Service crashed one evening when he decided to "call on a girl friend." Reflecting sulkily on his own littleness and lack of importance, Service did not join in the laughter that marked the climax of the story, "for I had," he said, "a feeling that here was a decisive moment of destiny" (*Ploughman* 325).¹⁹ A strenuous six-hour walk home in the moonlit woods purportedly allowed him to rework the lineaments of the tale for verse. Ironically, whereas Service's account of the poem's inspiration hints uneasily at both creative and romantic competition between himself and the unidentified miner, the monologue itself privileges homosocial cooperation over masculine individualism in the subarctic. Furthermore, while the poem's provenance is grounded in Yukon hospitality and conviviality, the famous opening stanza underscores the loneliness of the north, for it personifies the land as secret witness to the actions of men:

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
 By the men who toil for gold;
 The Arctic trails have their secret tales
 That would make your blood run cold;
 The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
 But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge [sic]
I cremated Sam McGee. (Collected Poems 33)

Repeated at the end of the poem, this eight-line stanza looks different from the rest of the piece because of the use of italics and the pattern of lines; but aurally there is no difference, for each pair of tetrameter-trimeter lines features the same number of feet and the same internal rhyme scheme as the heptameters that follow. As a result, the opening and closing stanzas function visually as well as conceptually as a frame for the action.

Modifying the action of the poem as “strange” and “queer,” the frame underlines the transgressive nature of the events that unfold at the limits of human experience — that is, “on the marge of Lake Lebarge.” Predicating his structuralist analysis of Service’s ballads on their status as monologues intended for oral performance, Edward Hirsch contends that the frame situates the tensions explored in the poem — hot versus cold, life versus death, south versus north, heaven versus hell — as supernatural and, hence, “exceptional in terms of . . . intensity,” though not “impulse” (139). By contrast, Ian Marshall argues that the frame device represents only one of several “strategies of enclosure” that Service enables “to create a feeling of comfort and safety” so as “to minimize fears of the wild and to make possible aesthetic appreciation of it” (100). In the frame, the Marlovian narrator, later revealed as Cap, naturalizes the supposed strangeness of men’s actions by suggesting an affinity to the strangeness of the north as reified in such phenomena as the midnight sun and the northern lights. By so prefacing the action, Cap contains the disturbing elements of the tale which he offers not merely as a personal experience but as one typical of the Yukon both in substance and in effect. Set in the subarctic, the story should “make your blood run cold.” To allay the chilling impact on a listener, however, Cap discloses the climax of his tale even before beginning its strange recitation. Given this unusual disclosure, the poem is not so much about the peculiarity of men’s deeds as it is about the strangeness of their desires. But while the poem belongs to the tradition of the “northern gothic” (Atherton 69), it is not a “ghost

story" (Marshall 96). Instead, the horror of the wilderness within rather than without becomes the focus of concern.

In "The Cremation of Sam McGee," as in "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," Service must again overcome the problem of passionate inarticulacy as he explores the terrain of masculine individualism. In order to do so, the poem, at least as much Cap's story as it is Sam's, witnesses a partial collapse of identities. Unable to speak of his own inner life, the narrator subjects his companion's experience to scrutiny:

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and
blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only
knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a
spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in
hell." (*Collected Poems* 33)

Reluctant to attribute motive to action, Cap refuses, of course, to admit that Sam — his alter ego — has come to the Yukon to satisfy a desire for wealth. In this respect, Service's Klondike resembles Joseph Conrad's Congo, for both serve as a locus for masculine desire. Indeed, just as Conrad uses skeletal imagery to suggest the deathly allure of the ivory trade in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Service relies on monetary language to indicate the men's fatal obsession with gold in "The Cremation of Sam McGee": to die is, for example, to "cash in" and to make a promise is to incur a "debt" (*Collected Poems* 34). But while Service frequently alludes to money in poems as different as "The Reckoning," "The Rhyme of the Remittance Man," "The Low-Down White," and "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," he does not necessarily seek in *Songs of a Sourdough* to disparage it as a measure of turn-of-the-century manhood. For example, even though "The freshness, the freedom, the farness" of the north prove more enthralling than the gold for which he had "scrabbled and mucked like a slave," the speaker of "The Spell of the Yukon" bluntly acknowledges and approves of capitalist objectives: "You come to get rich (damned good reason)" (*Collected Poems* 4, 3). In this light, Cap's inability to admit to the ambition that motivates Sam no less than himself becomes rather more comprehensible insofar as the search for gold stands in place of other desires that are unspeakable. That Sam and Cap embark on a journey that reiterates their initial northward flight from Christian community and civility on Christmas day, a holiday of social and

spiritual significance, only underscores their rejection of the heterosexual conventions of home.

Externalizing the power of individual desire in the “spell” that the Yukon has supposedly cast, Cap not only fails to accept avarice as a rationale for masculine endeavour but also wilfully ignores the fact that “the land of gold” is also “the land of death” (*Collected Poems* 34). Rhyming with “gold,” the “cold” that ultimately kills Sam (and quite literally turns desire to ashes) is so central a feature of northern experience that even the usually taciturn Cap acknowledges its bitter intensity: “Talk of your cold! Through the parka’s fold it stabbed like a driven nail. / If our eyes we’d close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn’t see” (*Collected Poems* 33). Even as his metaphoric comparisons of the cold to a knife-wielding assassin and a nail-driving hammer communicate the ruthless power of the subarctic winter, Cap derogates Sam’s complaints as unmanly since he is “the only one to whimper” (*Collected Poems* 33). In a word, Sam lacks toughness. Indeed, in “Grin,” Service counsels that the only appropriate response to life, no matter how much of a “bruiser” or “bally battle,” is to smile, for “There’s nothing gained by whining” and “there is no philosophy like bluff” (*Collected Poems* 27-28). The loquacious Sam, however, is all bluster and no bluff. In fact, in the heightened homosocial intimacy of the moment when the two men, “packed tight in [their] robes beneath the snow,” sleep together for warmth, he confesses his “awful dread of the icy grave” and so exacts from his companion a promise to “cremate [his] last remains” (*Collected Poems* 33-34). Traditionally associated with pagan ritual and biblical punishment, cremation emerged as an alternative to burial in Europe and North America in the late 1870s and, despite the best efforts of public health officials, remained unpopular because, for many Christians, the practice jeopardized the resurrection of the body. Unmoved by St Paul’s distinction between the “natural body” that “is sown corruptible” and the “spiritual body” that “is raised incorruptible” (1 Cor. 15.42-44), these believers viewed cremation as a profanity. Yet, in “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” the rule of northern fraternity binds Cap to honour Sam’s wish to be cremated, even if sacrilegious, for not only is “A pal’s last need a thing to heed” but also “a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code” (*Collected Poems* 34).²⁰

Making the dogsled journey a metaphor for masculine action, Service not only allows Sam’s death to enact a foreclosure of homoerotic possibility but also uses Cap’s promise to expose the obstacles to stable

identity that turn-of-the-century men negotiated in attempting to achieve the increasingly unachievable goal of self-made manhood. Thus, the poet refigures Cap's independence as lonely isolation; his mobility as anxious restlessness; his strength as emotional deficiency; his self-control as desperate paranoia; and his accomplishment as lunatic endeavour. As his nickname suggests, Cap is accustomed to command; but haunted by both his dead companion and his sworn pledge, he concedes that he is "horror-driven" (*Collected Poems* 34). In fact, Service brilliantly conveys the breathlessness caused by Cap's fear (as well as his physical exertion in mushing the trail) in various alliterative phrases that feature the strongly aspirated *h*: "I *hurried*, *horror*-driven, / With a corpse *half hid*"; "in my *heart how* I cursed that load"; "the *huskies* ... / *Howled* out their woes to the *homeless* snows"; "that quiet clay seemed to *heavy* and *heavier* grow"; "the *hateful* thing ... *hearkened* with a grin" (*Collected Poems* 34-35; emphasis added). This fear is stretched out over a journey that seems endless, particularly "In the long, long night, by the lone firelight" (*Collected Poems* 35). Indeed, the doubly repeated "long," related aurally to the word "lone," verbally extends a night already lengthened by the lack of both society and sunlight, for with fewer than five hours separating day-break from nightfall in much of the Yukon, December is obviously not the time of "the midnight sun."

Benighted both physically and spiritually, Cap admits to fear, but he is incapable of confiding the depth of his grief and his loneliness. As a result, he suffers from what Butler calls "*heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love" (235). Displaced momentarily on the woeful huskies, this unacknowledged grief accounts for the occasional blasphemous expletive ("God!") and the grotesque description of Sam as a corpse, as a "thing" now "loathed" rather than a treasured friend (*Collected Poems* 35). Objectified as "it," the supposedly "quiet clay" speaks to Cap, reminding him of his word: "You may tax your brawn and brains, / But you promised true, and it's up to you to cremate those last remains" (*Collected Poems* 34). Situated as a "threat" to Cap's masculinity and "an inadvertent site of eroticization," Sam emerges quite literally as a "spectral figure of abject homosexuality" (Butler 97). So while Cap engages in a parody of courtship, serenading "the hateful thing" and imagining its death rictus as a reciprocating smile, he repudiates as horrific the homoerotic properties of their relationship. Clearly no longer in

command of himself, he is more than “half mad” (*Collected Poems* 35); but instead of the madness brought on, as in “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” or “The Parson’s Son,” by “hooch,” “The Cremation of Sam McGee” focuses on the insanity inherent in the prerogatives to masculine individualism and heterosexual subjectivity. Ironically, Cap’s tragedy is too painful to treat except comically.

Relying on a humour heightened by colloquial language and facile rhyme, Service seeks, at once, to temper the horror that attaches to the achievement of self-made manhood and to enhance the performative aspects of the poem. This humour reaches a comic crescendo when Cap, casting an eye at his “frozen chum,” announces his discovery of a “cre-mator-eum” in the *Alice May* (*Collected Poems* 35). On the one hand, Service draws on local facts (in, for example, Lake Laberge’s status in the aftermath of the rush as a marine cemetery) to establish the authenticity of Cap’s account. On the other, he tests the credulity of the audience through techniques such as verbal exaggeration, ironic juxtaposition, and comic inversion. For instance, he undercuts the polysyllabic formality of *crematorium* not only by hyphenating and misspelling the word, thereby elongating it and emphasizing its pronunciation, but also by rhyming it with the slang term “chum,” which, like the word “pal” used earlier, casually diminishes (even as it signals) the closeness between the two men. Likewise, the indecorous description of how Cap “stuffed” Sam into the furnace before going on “a hike” to avoid “hear[ing] him *sizzle so*” skilfully uses low diction and onomatopoeia to detract from the solemnity of the occasion (*Collected Poems* 35-36; emphasis added).

While such wordplay on Service’s part acts as a diversion, Cap’s inability to admit his grief nonetheless testifies to the tragic limits of masculine toughness. An affect of those “hyperbolic identifications by which mundane heterosexual masculinity and femininity confirm themselves,” this toughness attends “a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love” (Butler 236). Walking in the snow, Cap notes, “It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don’t know why” (*Collected Poems* 36). This avowed ignorance notwithstanding, the reason is grief. Tears, not sweat, account for the moisture on his face. Furthermore, the bathos that attaches to the “bravely said” words prefacing his final vision undercuts Cap’s admission of “grisly fear” and “dread”: “I’ll just take a peep inside. / I guess he’s cooked, and it’s time I looked” (*Collected Po-*

ems 36). Lastly, in the hallucinatory description of “Sam, looking cool and calm” (*Collected Poems* 36), Service rather irreverently renovates Christian images related to death, resurrection, and the afterlife. At the same time, the clever pun on “cool,” which, given the heat of the fire, obviously suggests nonchalance rather than frigidity, and the forced rhyme of “Sam” and “calm” demonstrate his gifts as a comic poet. Reinscribing the killing cold of the north in terms of hellish heat, the poem ends happily with Sam warm for the first time since he left Tennessee — and sadly with Cap utterly delirious.

The deaths of Sam McGee and Dan McGrew are, of course, only two of the tragedies that Service chronicles in *Songs of a Sourdough*. Returning time and again to the perils of (as well as the possibilities for) masculine achievement in the north, he not only traces a dialectic between freedom and enslavement, success and failure, but also depicts the Klondike as a realm of Darwinian struggle in which, as he writes in “The Law of the Yukon,” “only the Strong shall thrive; / . . . and only the Fit survive” (*Collected Poems* 13). As such, the north allows Service to investigate gender ideals in crisis at the turn of the century; for, as Martin Bucco observes, this environment, in its indulgence of that mythic “need to regain a lost power,” serves as “an ideal place for dislocating ‘standard’ values, for finding the self, and for establishing a new relationship between that self and the universe” (19). Not surprisingly, Service’s verse therefore focuses almost without exception on Anglo-American men who, despite a privilege based on gender, race, and class, are marginalized and estranged because of an inability to control either themselves or their circumstances. They have, in other words, lost their power.

In addition to negotiating apprehensions about masculine privilege and bourgeois propriety, *Songs of a Sourdough* also establishes the formula that Service followed in subsequent volumes, especially *Ballads of a Cheechako* (1909), *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* (1912), and, to a lesser degree, *Bar-Room Ballads* (1940); for he chose in these works to capitalize on his success by catering to a public taste for the rough and the tough that he had helped to stimulate. So when Laura Berton told Service that she was unimpressed with “The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill,” one of the poems in his second volume, because it was “a near duplicate of the Sam McGee story,” he replied: “Exactly. . . . That’s what I tried for. That’s the stuff the public wants. That’s what they pay for. And I mean to give it to them” (70). More coherent as collections and more consciously crafted

to stress the extremity of subarctic life, *Ballads of a Cheechako* and *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* also feature with greater regularity strongly individuated characters after the manner of Dan McGrew and Sam McGee. In *Ballads of a Cheechako*, this tendency is readily evident in the titles of such works as “The Ballad of Pious Pete,” “The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill,” “The Ballad of One-Eyed Mike,” “The Ballad of Hard-Luck Henry,” “The Ballad of Gum-Boot Ben,” and “Clancy of the Mounted Police.” Arguably, Service used this technique to depict “the almost comic dependence on nicknames” in Dawson which, according to historian Douglas Fetherling, represented “a reaction against the rising level of education among the stampedeers and against the general pressures of civilized behaviour” (186-87). Yet, even though Service still venerates, as in “To the Man of the High North,” “nameless men who nameless rivers travel” in these later books (*Collected Poems* 77), his identification of characters as well as places by name sometimes confounds individuality with eccentricity.

While his later work continues to centre on Anglo-American manhood, Service also comes to capture, if only problematically and fractionally, the multicultural, international, polyglot nature of the Klondike rush in the vignettes of Native and Métis women in “Little Moccasins” and “The Squaw Man,” published in *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone*, and of European men in “The Ballad of Hank the Finn” and “The Ballad of Touch-the-Button Nell,” included in *Bar-Room Ballads*. Moreover, as the ballads featuring characters such as Touch-the-Button Nell and Montreal Maree published during and after World War II suggest, new standards of poetic candour also allowed him to treat more fully the existence of the demimonde in Dawson in his later career. Increasingly nostalgic for a world that never existed, Service romanticizes the Yukon sex trade, especially in the heavily accented, kind-hearted dance-hall queen, Montreal Maree, who makes an appearance in all but three of his final volumes of verse: “Montreal Maree,” *Songs of a Sun Lover* (1949); “Mc’Clusky’s Nell,” *Rhymes of a Roughneck* (1950); “Dance-Hall Girls,” *Lyrics of a Lowbrow* (1951); “Death of a Croaker,” *Rhymes of a Rebel* (1952); “The Twins of Lucky Strike,” *Carols of an Old Codger* (1954). Mostly comic portraits, these poems feature Maree as the heroic saviour of both big men and little children. By contrast, the real Montreal Marie Lambert lived far less glamorously as a prostitute and sometime companion to two civil servants: Yukon councillor and Registrar of Lands J.E. Girouard, whose partially clothed flight from her home during the 1904 federal election

later served as ammunition for Rev. John Pringle in his campaign against vice (Morrison 120n14; Porsild 134); and customs official H.D. Stammers, who, after acquiring a new bride on a trip to Australia that Lambert had financed, abandoned her and their two young daughters to Lousetown where the sex trade persisted beyond 1907 (Laura Berton 66-67). As the Montreal Maree poems suggest, however, Service was more interested in testing the possibilities inherent in the whore as a sentimental heroine — albeit one who curses in patois (“Jeezecrize”) — rather than as a tragic figure of exploitation (*More Collected Verse* 2:17). As a result, the emphasis in this later work seems to have shifted altogether from authenticating masculine subjectivity to offering titillating sketches of life beyond the margins of social propriety. Inasmuch as Service had thereby subordinated his art to commercial concerns, it is perhaps not surprising that he spoke, in the “Prelude” to *Bar-Room Ballads*, of his “strumpet Muse” (*Collected Poems* 601).

Despite a prolific and extraordinarily prosperous literary career, Service never entirely relinquished the fears and fantasies that motivated him to write *Songs of a Sourdough*. When he moved to Dawson in 1908, its citizens imagined him to be “a rip-roaring roisterer,” not unlike the characters immortalized in *Songs of a Sourdough*, but they “found a shy and nondescript man in his mid-thirties, with a fresh complexion, clear blue eyes and a boyish figure that made him look much younger” (Laura Berton 68). Apparently as disappointed as the citizens of Dawson with this persona, the clean-shaven, soft-spoken Service, then a virtual teetotaler, sought to reinvent himself once more. Thus, when he returned to the Yukon in 1911 after a hiatus of more than a year, he chose to follow the Edmonton trail, perhaps the toughest of all routes to Dawson. Finally leaving the Yukon in 1912, he travelled to the Balkans as a foreign correspondent and, when World War I broke out in 1914, tried to enlist even though he was too old. These hypermasculine performances became, however, increasingly difficult for the middle-aged writer to sustain. The gulf between the idea and the reality opened when Service, at age forty-one, failed his army physical because of varicose veins and widened when, at age fifty, he damaged his heart body-building. By this time, the world too had changed, and although Service’s Yukon poems remained popular, the cataclysmic violence of war had given rise to modernist redefinitions of both masculinity and poetry. But just as the verse experiments of e.e. cummings, T.S. Eliot, and E.J. Pratt offer apt expression to

a legion of “sleeping selves,” “hollow men,” and “sailors un-lifejacketed” (Cummings 520; Eliot 79; Pratt 170), Service’s reliance on more predictable forms complement his efforts to ennoble the gambler, the remittance man, the younger son, the tramp, the wage-slave, the placer miner, the whiskey soak, and the squaw man — all “The Men That Don’t Fit In.” Ending in death and insanity, the struggles of these characters to establish dominion over the north, a world geographically if not psychologically remote from the one that defines masculinity in terms of entrepreneurial and professional achievement, are struggles to reclaim their virility — that is, to reappropriate a privilege situated in antithesis to the values of feminine domesticity and Christian gentility. In his negotiation of gender aspirations and anxieties prevalent early in the twentieth century, Robert W. Service therefore retreats from the present into the past in order to establish action — not accomplishment — as the ultimate arbiter of manliness in *Songs of a Sourdough*.

NOTES

¹ According to James Mackay, Service’s account of his early childhood in Kilwinning (1878-1883) gives “the impression . . . that he was an only child, raised by his grandfather and a gaggle of aunts,” but “his grandmother was alive throughout the entire period” and his younger brother John was also part of the household (33). As for Constance MacLean, Service courted her from 1902 to 1910; but becoming aware of her existence only after the first edition of *Vagabond of Verse* appeared in print, Mackay incorporates brief references to MacLean in the second edition (12, 150). In light of such, Service’s references to Germaine as “the wife” probably owe more to the pattern of erasure that affects Service’s attitude to the women in his life than to “dreadful Scotch habit” (Mackay 229).

² Service’s account of the book’s local reception may be manufactured or exaggerated. The head deacon was Leonard De Gex, the manager of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, who had also conscripted the poet, his agnosticism notwithstanding, into service as a deacon (Mackay 156; *Ploughman* 312). Since De Gex’s wife, “the Missis,” was the one to encourage Service to publish his work as a Christmas “souvenir of the Yukon,” albeit without a few “rough things” like “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” “The Shooting of Dan McGrew,” and “My Madonna” (*Ploughman* 327), it seems unlikely that the couple would have offered the strong expression of disapproval that the poet describes a few pages later in his autobiography.

³ Ted Harrison’s illustrated versions of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* and *The Cremation of Sam McGee* attest to Service’s current reputation as a children’s poet. Various Canadian curriculum documents reveal the importance of these works as resources in developing Grade 3-5 students’ appreciation for the visual arts (Saskatchewan); Grade 7 students’ general proficiency in language arts (Alberta); Grade 8 students’ awareness of the historical development of western Canada (Ontario); and Grade 9 students’ ability to value cultural diversity and understand its construction in language (British Columbia).

⁴ Martin Bucco and Stanley Atherton are among those critics who have located Service's achievement in his mythologization of the north. Interested in Service as a folk poet, Bucco states that his work "contain[s] two strong mythic themes: Wonder and Initiation. The state of wonder ... results from Man's confrontation with environmental austerities and associations; the initiatory rites ... involve quests and tasks" (18). Adapting these motifs to the ethos of frontier individualism, Service thus supplanted "the tired myth of Outside shame" with the "inspired myth of Northern glory" (Bucco 26). Atherton, on the other hand, argues that Service's work, even though it fails to articulate "a coherent Northern myth" (69), "deserves attention as one of the earliest attempts in Canadian literary history to mythologize the environment" (67).

⁵ One of those "fated serfs to freedom" (*Collected Poems* 62), Service depended on wage labour to feed, clothe, and accommodate himself. This dependency made him prey to exploitation sharpened by economic depression. For example, when he took a job as a tunneller in the San Gabriel Canyon, California, he was tricked into strike-breaking; forced to perform dangerous and difficult work; charged exorbitant rates for room, board, and travel; and then paid with a cheque that could only be cashed for the full amount in Oakland, nearly four hundred miles away, or at a fifty-percent discount in Azusa (*Ploughman* 200-16). As a result, he came away with \$10 after working for sixteen days at \$2 per day. This amount does not factor in the cost of the stagecoach into the canyon or of several pairs of leather gloves that he wore out on the job.

⁶ Michael Kimmel notes that "by 1910 about 20 percent of the adult male population was working in such white-collar jobs in large companies, banks, and retail firms. But they remained dependent upon the corporation as paternal authority, and just as much in need of manly validation" (103).

⁷ The remote isolation of the Yukon inflated both incomes and expenses. For example, Laura Berton received more than four times the \$480 she had been paid annually in Toronto (13). Similarly, Service's income was supplemented by "a special allowance of fifty dollars a month for grub" as well as by a one-time "outfit allowance of two hundred dollars ... to buy a coonskin coat" (*Ploughman* 303). These extras, which also included a room and paid laundry, enabled Service to save "fifty of [his] sixty dollars a month" (*Ploughman* 310). Although bank clerks ranked slightly higher than teachers in the social hierarchy of Dawson (Laura Berton 46), Service's monthly income of \$110 nonetheless compares unfavorably not only with the professional salary that Berton earned but also with the wages paid to women in the entertainment sector, such as dance-hall girls, who received as much as \$200 per month (see Porsild 123). By contrast, manual laborers, mostly men, commanded wages in the range of \$6 to \$7 per day which was quite extravagant by southern standards (Porsild 64). Service, for instance, rarely made more than a dollar a day as a laborer in the south (see *Ploughman* 225, 227, 228-29, 235, 259, 261).

⁸ In "Learning about Manhood," Rotundo describes nineteenth-century manhood in terms of the Masculine Achiever, the Christian Gentleman, and the Masculine Primitive. The two former ideals are ones that, according to Rotundo, existed in a "dialectical relationship" of which the third, even though it, like the Masculine Achiever, stressed "aggression and competition," was not a part ("Learning" 42). In *American Manhood*, on the other hand, Rotundo surveys the movement from "communal manhood" in the eighteenth century through "self-made manhood" to "passionate manhood" at the end of the nineteenth century (2-6). In so doing, he charts a shift in emphasis from public service through individual achievement to personal indulgence as key tenets of masculinity. Rotundo's notions of the passionate man or masculine primitive roughly correspond to Kasson's idea of "the Revitalized Man" (19). In his discussion of nineteenth-century masculinity, Kimmel sticks with the

concept of self-made manhood even when, at the end of the century, it is “uncoupled from the more stable anchors of landownership or workplace autonomy” (9).

⁹ Mitham reproduces the poems that Service wrote in British Columbia prior to 1905 in “Mossback Minstrelsy” (107-32). Eleven of these reappear among the thirty-four later included in the expanded second edition of *Songs of a Sourdough*. “The March of the Dead” (1900); “The Rhyme of the Remittance Man” (1900); “The Younger Son” (1901); “The Rhyme of the Restless Ones” (1901); “Music in the Bush” (1901); “The Little Old Log Cabin” (1902); “The Three Voices” (1902); “Quatrains” (originally “Some Quatrains from Omar,” 1903); “New Year’s Eve” (originally “The Longshoremen,” 1903); “Unforgotten” (originally “Apart and Yet Together, 1903); “Grin” (1904). “The Song of the Wage-Slave,” first published in *Songs of a Sourdough*, was written in Los Angeles about 1898 (*Ploughman* 259).

¹⁰ The figures are Service’s own (*Ploughman* 348). Clearly, the gold rush made for a highly volatile population. The demographic tables in *Gamblers and Dreamers* show that the NWMP counted 5,162 people in Dawson in 1898; but Porsild suggests that, before the population dropped to 7,503 in 1901, it spiked at roughly 30,000 individuals (208, 8). Working with territorial figures, Morrison, on the other hand, says that “between 1898 and 1901 the population of the Yukon decreased from 40,000 (or more) to 27,219 By 1911 the population had shrunk to 8,512; by 1921 to a mere 4,157” (5).

¹¹ Rotundo notes that certain professions, such as those in the arts, were gendered as feminine (*American* 170). In a similar vein, Ann Douglas argues that the movement of clerics and women into authorship effectively feminized American literature (80-117). Indeed, insofar as several women poets, such as Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Lydia Sigourney, achieved great popular success during the nineteenth century, Victorian poetry arguably became more domestic and feminine on both sides of the Atlantic. Interestingly, while Service talks in his autobiography about the many male poets whose work he admired, such as Burns, Browning, Tennyson, Kipling, Patmore, and Hood, he fails to mention a single woman writer directly. He does, however, recall reciting Felicia Hemans’s “Casabianca,” which he identifies by first line: “The boy stood on the burning deck” (*Ploughman* 15).

¹² Comparisons to Kipling have long been a feature of Service criticism. Writing in 1921, for example, W.A. Whatley situates Service as Kipling’s successor rather than his imitator, noting that “the style of both poets is spontaneous and virile” (301). More than forty years later, Bucco attempts to reclaim Service’s “‘manly’ metrics” from critical neglect by resituating the “Kipling of the Klondike” as a folk poet (16). In his 1976 article, Edward Hirsch begins likewise with Service’s debt to Kipling but moves to investigate how Service’s manipulation of metrical form through “recurrence and opposition” gives his verse a “rugged, manly quality which corresponds to the unrefined, rugged (and definitely male), qualities of the people that the poem is talking about” (136-37). More recently, reviewer Peter Keating has called Service a “Canadian pseudo-Kipling” and located the appeal of his work in its “virility” (25).

¹³ Warren (200) and Kimmel (88) briefly discuss the association of anti-intellectualism with late nineteenth-century constructions of manhood. The elevation of action over thought relates to a new emphasis on the body over the mind. This version of manhood differs radically from what prevailed earlier in England. For example, Thomas Arnold tried to steep students at Rugby in three precepts: ‘1st, religious and moral principle; 2ndly, gentlemanly conduct; 3rdly, intellectual ability’ (qtd in Newsome 34).

¹⁴ For discussion of the significance of male nudity, see Kasson (8-10, 21-23, 33, 57-58).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Pierre Berton who points out the irony that prevailed in January 1897, less than half a year after George Cormack’s historic strike. Unable to eat their new wealth, the inhabitants of the tent city that sprang up at Dawson in 1896-1897 were in danger of starvation (Pierre Berton 70). Owing to the improvidence of the first large influx of

would-be miners in the spring of 1897, Dawson again faced famine and scurvy in the winter of 1898 (160-61, 181-83). In order to remedy the problems associated with the isolation of Dawson during the winter, the North West Mounted Police then stipulated that everyone crossing the passes into the Yukon had to have an outfit sufficient to live for a year.

¹⁶Pierre Berton underscores the power of myth in his description of how, when another former Klondike miner, Monty Snow, sought to expose Mahoney's lies at a Sourdough Reunion, "the assemblage of old-timers shouted Snow down and then gave Mike Mahoney the greatest ovation of his career" (429). Apparently, even Service was reluctant to challenge Mahoney's claims (Mackay 379).

¹⁷For more about the politics affecting the liquor trade, prostitution, and gambling in the Yukon, see Morrison (especially 18-19, 39-40) and Porsild (100-12).

¹⁸Anna Fulcomer, a Circle City teacher, observes that "one of the peculiar features of the new camp is the lack of shooting, due to the fact that the Canadian government does not permit men to carry firearms. Police disarm miners when they enter the district, so that there is not any of the lawlessness and crime which marked early placer mining in California" (qtd. in Harris 226).

¹⁹Laura Berton gives a rather different account of the poem's genesis. Describing "an old derelict steamboat, half buried in the sand" of Lake Laberge, she identified it as "the old *Olive May*, immortalized 15 years earlier as the *Alice May* in whose boiler Sam McGee was supposed to have been cremated. A man's body actually had been cremated in the boiler of the *Olive May*, by a Dr. Sugden, who was sent out from Whitehorse to give medical attention to a sick prospector. The man was dead and frozen stiff when Sugden arrived, and as he had no tools to bury the body, the doctor cremated it in the ship's boiler and brought the ashes back to town. Later, Sugden and Service lived together and this undoubtedly explains the origin of the ballad about the man from Tennessee who never could get warm enough in the Yukon" (178).

²⁰In the "stern code," Service perhaps alludes to the motto of the Yukon Order of Pioneers: "Do unto others as you would be done by" (*Yukon Genealogy*). Instituted in 1894, the YOOP, like its Alaskan counterpart, the Arctic Brotherhood, sought to protect miners' rights and to promote free circulation of information relating to recent gold strikes. According to Service, he joined the Arctic Brotherhood when he moved to Dawson. Of the fraternity, he says, "I never went very far with [it]. Brotherhood was not much in my line Among my Arctic Brothers, however, I met many who had come in over the trail of ninety-eight. I wormed their stories out of them and tucked away many a colourful yarn" (*Ploughman* 348). Service alludes more obviously to both fraternities when, in "The Parson's Son," the speaker defines himself as "one of the Arctic brotherhood, ... an old-time pioneer" (*Collected Poems* 14).

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