

THE KLONDIKE MUSE

Stanley S. Atherton

THE KLONDIKE TRAIL OF 1898, symbol of the last great gold rush in history, captured the imagination of a continent. By the time Robert Service reached the Yukon in 1904 as a teller for the Canadian Bank of Commerce, public interest in the area was widespread. Well before Service himself began to record his impressions, a "Klondike literature" was already rapidly accumulating from the numerous eye-witness reports, the travellers' accounts, and the books of advice to prospective gold-seekers. For the most part, however, these works emphasized factual events and situations, and only those that were specifically connected with the Gold Rush. While there was plenty of action recorded, little of a meditative or reflective nature could be found in such accounts. The way was open for a writer with talent enough to take advantage of the happy coincidence of event and location to mythologize the north.

Service, stimulated by the recent and contemporary events in his new surroundings, began to produce both poetry and fiction in an imaginative reconstruction of this world. What fame he has achieved continues to rest chiefly on the few volumes his eight years of residence in the Yukon yielded. These include *Songs of a Sourdough* (also published as *The Spell of the Yukon*) (1907), *Ballads of a Cheechako* (1909), *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* (1912), and the novel, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight* (1910). This body of work, rarely examined critically, deserves attention as one of the earliest attempts in Canadian literary history to mythologize the environment.

In his early poetry Service used the subject matter of the Gold Rush as a point of departure for his comments on man's relationship to the land. In "The Spell of the Yukon", for example, the Gold Rush is dispensed with in the first stanza. From here the poet moves to a description of the physical environment, using the Klondike as a representative northern landscape. The third stanza, and the remaining six, catalogue the varying responses and attitudes the narrator takes towards the North.

A number of these reactions had been articulated a few years earlier by Hamlin Garland. In a *McClure's* article in 1897 he had termed the Yukon "a cruel and relentless land," and a "grim and terrible country." Service made these and similar reactions the subject matter for a number of his best-known poems. The untitled prefatory poem to *Song of a Sourdough* is characteristic.

The lonely sunsets flare forlorn
 Down valleys dreadly desolate:
 The lordly mountains soar in scorn,
 As still as death, as stern as fate.

The lonely sunsets flame and die;
 The giant valleys gulp the night;
 The monster mountains scrape the sky,
 Where eager stars are diamond-bright.

So gaunt against the gibbous moon,
 Piercing the silence velvet-piled,
 A lone wolf howls his ancient rune,
 The fell arch-spirit of the Wild.

O outcast land! O leper land!
 Let the lone wolf-cry all express —
 The hate insensate of thy hand,
 Thy heart's abysmal loneliness.

Here one finds a number of key concepts which recur with varying degrees of emphasis in the majority of the Klondike poems: a sense of loneliness, hints of the supernatural, hostile nature, an intense and meaningful silence, and a reminder of man's mortality.

Service is rarely content simply to describe the North. A number of his poems provide effective illustrations of the constant perils to human life in such a desolate area, perils which evoke a continual fear in man of the hostility implicit in the environment. He achieves his effects in various ways, often by utilizing the supernatural element found in indigenous Indian folklore. In "The Ballad of the Black Fox Skin", for instance, he recounts an Indian belief that a particular fox was invested with supernatural powers, and that any who attempted to do it harm would surely suffer. The sceptic who laughs at the superstition and kills the fox is later murdered, and the poem traces a trail of death marked out by all those who possess the cursed skin. By the corpse of the last possessor hoofprints are found, and the skin has mysteriously disappeared.

References such as this to specific supernatural occurrences are set against

a wider background of mystery and other-worldliness which often characterizes the North for Service. The narrator of "The Ballad of the Northern Lights" views the aurora "as one bewitched" and describes its mystic beauty as "wild and weird and wan". In "The Ballad of Pious Pete" the presence of witches and frost-tyrants is recorded, adding a further dimension to the supernatural world, and relating it through the image of "cadaverous snows" to human mortality. The language of death abounds in the work, often coupled with Service's characteristic sardonic humour. This pre-occupation with morbidity may account partly for his poetry's continuing appeal. In an age when the threat of violent death is more than ever man's constant companion, the macabre humour of Service takes on a contemporary relevance. Intriguing examples of this "northern gothic" can be found in many of his better-known ballads. Besides those mentioned, they include "The Cremation of Sam McGee", "The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill", and "Clancy of the Mounted Police". In these ballads Service creates a nether world of terror in which men are driven mad or to their deaths. In "Clancy of the Mounted Police" the land terrifies and threatens: "Corpselike and stark was the land, with a quiet that crushed and awed,/ And the stars of the weird Sub-arctic glimmered over its shroud." And in "The Ballad of the Black Fox Skin" the threat is personified in a frightening and archetypal fairy-tale situation: "The Valley's girth was dumb with mirth, the laughter of the wild;/ The still sardonic laughter of an ogre o'er a child."

IF SERVICE HAD continued to react imaginatively to the North in this fashion, he might have created a valuable mythic vision. As it was, he became a magpie, randomly picking up physical or climatic characteristics of the North and using them as they suited his fancy at the time. The result is confusion, with one poem contradicting another; and it is this inconsistency that marks his failure to create a coherent Northern myth.

The point is easily illustrated by comparing "The Ballad of the Northern Lights" with the well-known "Call of the Wild". The silent North, a "land that listens", was described by Sir Gilbert Parker as a land where the silence led man to meditate on the divine power that created the universe, and which guided man in his worldly struggles. Service treats this theme in "The Ballad of the Northern Lights", where in a terrifying world "purged of sound" three half-demented men hope to gain brief respite from the elemental forces harrying them by meditating on the things they "ought to think". In the world of the poem,

however, the North refuses to allow such meditation; two of the men die, and the third is driven mad.

The ambivalence of Service's responses is seen clearly when the reader moves to "The Call of the Wild", for in this poem the silent north is revealed as the repository of truth: "Have you known the Great White Silence, not a snow-gemmed twig a-quiver?/ (Eternal truths that shame our soothing lies.)/ . . . Have you seen God in His splendours, heard the text that nature renders?/ (You'll never hear it in the family pew.)" Here Service says that only through intimate contact with the natural order can man come to a decision on the values he should use as a guide in life. The contrast with "The Ballad of the Northern Lights" is striking: in that poem the North is judge and executioner, resolutely condemning man to death for his weakness; here the north is teacher, benevolently aiding man to a more meaningful existence.

The conflicting attitudes toward the Canadian North which Service presents in his poetry are echoed in his novel of the Gold Rush, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*. The novel is first of all a chronicle of a particular time and place, for, as the title indicates, it was the product of a specific historical event. Service, like Ballantyne and other writers on the North, found the subject matter for septentrional fiction in an event which had already stimulated widespread interest in the area. In one sense he was simply exploiting interest which the Gold Rush had created by producing a work of fiction to order, and one for which he could expect to find a favourable reception.¹

The Trail of Ninety-Eight dramatically retells the story of the struggles of men to reach the Klondike gold fields and their trials after arrival in Dawson. The hero, a romantic Scottish fortune hunter named Athol Meldrum, is introduced to the other characters on the steamer which carries him north to Skagway. Meldrum meets Berna Wilovich, the girl he eventually marries, and he comes into contact with the domineering and greedy Winklesteins, her guardians, and with Jack Locasto, the coarse brute who later intrigues with the Winklesteins to make Berna his mistress.

The terrible crossing of the mountains and the often tragic hardships of the trail from Skagway to Dawson are recounted in a series of illuminating instances which bring the trail to life in a manner reminiscent of Zola.²

It was an endless procession, in which every man was for himself. I can see them now, bent under their burdens, straining at their hand-sleighs, flogging their horses and oxen, their faces crimped and puckered with fatigue, the air acrid with their curses and heavy with their moans. Now a horse stumbles and slips into one of the

sump-holes by the trail side. No one can pass, the army is arrested. Frenzied fingers unhitch the poor brute and drag it from the water. Men, frantic with rage, beat savagely at their beasts of burden to make up the precious lost time.

Service's peculiar sensibility required a complete fidelity to fact, yet at the same time he was striving to realize his world imaginatively. But the conventions of popular fiction demanded a dramatic contrast (and conflict) between a sterling hero and an unregenerate villain. So although Meldrum becomes thoroughly infected with the gold-fever on his arrival in Dawson, he is untouched by the easy virtue of a town where the "good old moralities don't apply". Aware of the mass appeal of exposure, Service made much of the immorality of those in positions of power. When Meldrum is cheated out of a claim he staked, for example, he makes a vehement denunciation of the official corruption which was widespread at the time. While such passages help to make *The Trail of Ninety-Eight* valuable as a social record of the Canadian North seventy years ago, the plot is all too often unduly contrived to admit them.

The intrigues of the evil Locasto with the guardians of the virtuous Berna are melodramatically portrayed in a sequence of incidents which take place while the hero is out mining. Meldrum's return to find that Berna has been forced to become Locasto's mistress, and has since been leading the life of a dance-hall girl, results in his own fall into the world of sin and debauchery about him. At length he is rescued from his self-destroying debauch, and he and Berna live together in a love-sanctified union. The unexpected arrival of Garry, Meldrum's brother, complicates the idyllic existence of the couple. Shocked and disgusted by the common-law union, Garry attempts to seduce Berna to show his brother her true character. The attempt fails, and in a final climactic scene Meldrum and Berna (since quietly married) are caught together in a burning Dawson hotel with Garry and Locasto. Only the lovers escape the blaze.

Although it is obviously a contrived pot-boiler, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight* is nevertheless a significant contribution to literature about the Canadian North. It is one of the earliest attempts to make a myth of the north, to capture the spirit of the land and make it comprehensible. To do this, Service comes back again and again to the idea of the North as battlefield where man tests himself by contesting with the natural environment. While the idea of man and nature in conflict is conventional enough to be a cliché, Service might have used it freshly and effectively in the Northern setting. He failed to make it work, however, because he was unable to decide whether such a conflict brings out man's nobler or baser qualities. In a number of passages, of which the following

evocation of the spirit of the Gold Trail is typical, the North clearly brings out the worst in man.

The spirit of the Gold Trail, how shall I describe it? It was based on that primal instinct of self-preservation that underlies our thin veneer of humanity. It was rebellion, anarchy; it was ruthless, aggressive, primitive; it was the man of the stone age in modern garb waging his fierce, incessant warfare with the forces of nature. Spurred on by the fever of the gold-lust, goaded by the fear of losing in the race; maddened by the difficulties and obstacles of the way, men became demons of cruelty and aggression, ruthlessly thrusting down the weaker ones who thwarted their program.

Yet elsewhere, when the North is described as a new frontier, conflict with the environment calls forth nobler instincts. The challenge of untamed nature is met, the battle is joined until "overall . . . triumphed the dauntless spirit of the Pathfinder — the mighty Pioneer."

Similar contradictory reactions to the Northern landscape were noted in the poetry, and these are also evident in the novel. On the one hand, the North is repellent to man, its inhospitable nature an unwelcome reminder of his mortality.

On all sides of the frozen lake over which they were travelling were hills covered with harsh pine, that pricked funereally up to the boulder-broken snows. Above that was a stormy and fantastic sea of mountains baring many a fierce peak-fang to the hollow heavens. The sky was a waxen grey, cold as a corpse-light. The snow was an immaculate shroud, unmarked by track of bird or beast. Death-sealed the land lay in its silent vastitude, in its despairful desolation.

On the other hand it is alluring, a compelling presence which casts its spell on the human imagination: "Who has lived in the North will ever forget the charm, the witchery of those midnight skies. . . . Surely, long after all else is forgotten, will linger the memory of those mystic nights with all their haunting spell of weird, disconsolate solitude." But here, as in the poetry, Service seems incapable of bringing the conflicting views together to create a consistent and meaningful vision of man in the north. The reader leaves his work aware of contradiction rather than ambiguity.

In the Gold Rush and the Northern setting two elements for myth-making were ready to hand. The event and the land in which it happened combined to provide the first significant opportunity for mythologizing the north. Unfortunately for Canadian literature the talents of Service were inadequate to cope with the challenge, and the opportunity was lost.