

DOCUMENTS**A Note on Some “Lost” Poems of Robert W. Service****by Robert R. Taylor**

In a 1996 number of *Canadian Poetry*, Peter J. Mitham published twenty-four of Robert W. Service’s “lost” poems, doing a great service both to scholarship on the poet and to the history of Victoria, British Columbia.¹ His purpose was to reveal works by the poet that were first published when he resided in B.C. and that appeared mainly in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* but that either had never been printed again or were reprinted later in anthologies in a slightly different form.

In my own research into Service’s poems that were published in the *Colonist*, I have found (a) one poem to which Mitham makes no reference and which was reprinted later; (b) one poem that appeared in the *Colonist* but is attributed by Mitham only to another newspaper; and (c) four poems that are not included in Mitham’s list.² Collectively, these pieces are—in Mitham’s words—some of the “fellow fugitive poems that may yet appear with further searching.”³ This note will therefore serve as an appendix and a complement to Mitham’s work.

Mitham’s article makes no reference to “My Madonna,” which was published on the editorial page (page four) of the *Colonist* on 4 February 1904⁴ and which appeared later in *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907), in the *Complete Poems* (1940), and in *The Best of Robert Service* (1953). Mitham lists “The Ballad of the Bold Bohemian and the Philistine Maid” as published in Vancouver’s *Daily World* in 1903 and later in the collection, *Ballads of a Bohemian* in 1921. However, it was also published in the *Colonist* on 10 November, 1903. Strictly speaking, these two poems are not “lost,” but this is not the case with the four others published in the *Colonist* when the poet lived in Victoria. They do not appear on Mitham’s list and do not seem to have been published elsewhere later.

These four pieces reflect Service’s lively social life in Victoria. As we know, he loved to write and sing songs and ballads (accompanying himself on the guitar). He enjoyed amateur theatricals, went to dances, and played

tennis. The four poems that I have discovered certainly suggest that he fell in love more than once, perhaps in Victoria as well as in Cowichan where he had previously lived.⁵ On 28 January, 1904, the *Colonist* again gave pride of place—the editorial page—to “Reincarnation” by “Robert Service, Victoria, B.C.”:

Don't you remember that morn in May
 (Was it five thousand years ago?)
We sat by the sea as we sit today,
 Only—the sea was blue, not grey,
 And the sands bent round like a bow.

And I think that you wore a garment of white,
 (It's so long ago, that details are blurred),
But I know it was filmy and soft and bright,
 And dazzled my senses and stupored my sight—
 Shall I tell you what occurred?

Nay, You need not laugh. (Now just let me see)
 We were but girl and boy;
And I fancy 'twas Greece—'tis no matter—we
 Were happier there than we ever will be
 In our modern civilized joy.

I remember your slim silken hand hung so,
 And a blue vein jeweled the wrist;
(Let me take your glove off only to show)
 'Twas a flower, and my lips were twin bees, and so
 I bent—in this way—and kissed.

And you, you had never a word to say,
 So swift to your side I pressed;
For I feared, O I feared some sea-god grey
 Would ravish the pearl of my heart away
 And I crushed you to my breast.

By Venus I claimed you—held you fast,
 And kissed you—as thus I do;
We have lived and loved in the sacred Past,
 And I meet you and greet you at last, at last,

O don't you remember, too.

I've crumpled your blouse, and I'm too absurd—
Nay, you wanted to be shown
How, I loved you once, and what occurred
In the past—and now not another word—
Here comes your chaperone.

In this poem, Service's image of the ancient world has something of the romantic escapism of his Yukon poems. Moreover, his sense of humour and his delight in surprising the reader or hearer in the last several lines are evident. The metre, rhythm and rhyme as well as the urge to tell a dramatic or comic story are also characteristic of his later work.

February 1904 was a stellar month for young bank clerk/poet, for the *Colonist* published four of his works within eleven days, and (as always) on its editorial page. On 4 February "My Madonna" appeared. In the same slightly sanctimonious but uncharacteristic vein is "The Guests," which appeared in the *Colonist* on 9 February, 1904:

I had a dream; a feast I spread,
While round my roof a storm made din.
"It is so dark and dreary", I said,
"Oh, for some guests", then in came Sin.

Like snow his cheek; like flame his eye;
And as I looked One joined him there.
"And who be you, new guest", quoth I.
He sighed: "Men call my name Despair".

And ere he ceased a third there came,
A guest so pale with chill, foul breath.
There was no need to ask his name,
For O I knew, I knew 'twas Death.

They sat them by the feast I spread;
They sat them down their lust to sate.
It was my blood they drank so red,
I was my warm red flesh they ate.

They mocked me, Sin, Despair and Death.

They mocked me till I breathed a prayer,
Then O they passed out like a breath,
And night was light and One stood there.

And it was Love, And though mine eyes
Still closed in sleep, how bright she shone;
Then soft and kind she bade me rise,
And I looked forth—and lo—'twas Dawn.

A hint of the ghoulish imagery of “The Cremation of Sam McGee” may be found in this work, and the gentle jolt of the last stanza is typical. The poem may reflect Service’s Presbyterian upbringing, but it is also reminiscent of the sentimental, poetic religiosity favoured by nineteenth-century newspaper editors. It is not to be found in the collected or “complete” editions of Service’s poetry published in his lifetime.

One senses the more “authentic” Service in the piece entitled “A Scandal,” that was published by the *Colonist* on 13 February, 1904 and gently tweaks the temperance movement:

He took the solemn bridal vow,
A year ago today.
To love and cherish her—and now,
He beats her—so they say.

They say he drinks, and o’er his glass,
He thrashes her each night;
It wrings my heart, and yet alas!
I know that they are right.

He drinks and beats her with his hand;
Yet bright Love’s tapers glow—
Hot lemonade’s his limit, and
They play bezique, you know.

Again, the three-stanza format is characteristic, as is the punch-line. This poem—also not on Mitham’s list—does not seem to have been reprinted elsewhere.

Again honouring Service on its editorial page, on 8 March, 1904 the *Colonist* attributed “Over the ‘Phone” to “Robert Service, Victoria”:

All day on a stool in the city
I crook my spine over a pen.
This work between meals is a pity,
But one's tailor wants pay now and then.
So I long for the blissful hour when
The day's stint is done; I'm alone.
"To the devil with Mammon and Men",
I cry and I rush to the 'phone.

"Hello there, two hundred and seven,"
I tremble 'twixt hope and despair,
Perhaps she is out—No, thank heaven
Excuse me, Miss Blank, is that you?
I say, is there anyone near?
By Jove, I've been feeling so blue—
But now... Those are kisses, my dear.

"That last dance was awfully jolly;
You looked sweeter than anyone there.
Not going next week! O what folly!
May I get you some roses to wear?
I'm expecting six dances from you, dear,
You promised. O come now, you did,
More kisses. Please just one from you, dear,
Thanks, thanks —oh great Caesar —that kid!"

I close with a bang fierce, laconic,
A word that is naughty, I fear,
As over the wire, shrill, sardonic,
A ripple of laughter I hear.
Oh Heavens! Oh don't I feel small,
To think how I jollied and kissed her;
And it wasn't my Ethel at all
But only her juvenile sister.

Service's attitude to his dull bank job is evident in the first line here, and the reference to "one's tailor" suggests the active social life of a personable young man. Both poems are works of a man who appears to have known the pangs of romantic love.

After the great success of *Songs of a Sourdough* in 1907, Service's connection to Victoria did not go unnoticed in the city. Mitham notes that the *Colonist* proudly claimed the poet as an artist nurtured locally. On 2 May, 1908, the *Victoria Daily Times* (rival to the *Colonist*) also defined him as a Victoria poet. He was representative of "Home Talent in Poetry, Fiction, Sport and History" in an article entitled "Vancouver Island in Literature." At the head of "a little coterie...unchallengably stand Robert W. Service, the literary lion of present-day Canada and Captain Clive Phillipps-Wolley, whose many contributions in poetry or in prose (often in both) have enriched literature and given lasting pleasure and instruction to the reading world." These two men were "among...the foremost popular poets of the empire today," and, claims the article, they "count themselves out and out British Columbians." Acknowledging that "Mr. Service is an Englishman," the article's anonymous writer stated that "his art developed...during his residence on Vancouver Island and he still looks upon Victoria and Duncan as roadhouses on the home trail." It was "unfair" to call Service "the Canadian Kipling" because there was much of Bret Harte, Jack London, Joaquin Miller and Eugene Field in his verses. If he had "a conspicuous fault" it was in his "missing of the spirit of western optimism."⁶

The four poems that I have found deserve to be better known to Service scholars and to the reading public. They are amusing; they may offer insight into Service's mind and art; and they are further evidence that the "pre-Yukon" Robert Service was even more prolific than we previously believed.

Notes

- 1 Peter J. Mitham, "Mossback Minstrelsy: the British Columbia Verse of Robert W. Service," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 39 (1996): 96-142.
- 2 These early poems were probably composed while the poet lived in Victoria. After two stints in the Cowichan Valley as a farm worker and postal and store clerk, he worked in Victoria between 10 October 1903 and 9 July 1904 at the Canadian Bank of Commerce, at the corner of Fort and Government Streets. As was customary with junior bank employees at that time, he lived free of charge on bank's upper floor. In the summer of 1904, he was transferred to Kamloops before being posted in the November of that year to Whitehorse in the Yukon. My research has been limited to the time that Service was living in Victoria.
- 3 Mitham 104.
- 4 I haled me a woman from of the street,
Shameless, but O so fair,
I seated her on my model's seat,

And I painted her sitting there.

I gave no hint of her heart unclean,
I painted a babe at her breast;
I painted her as she might have been,
If the worst had been the best.

She looked at my pictures and went away.
Then came with a knowing nod
A connoisseur, and I heard him say:
“ ’Tis Mary the Mother of God.”

So I painted a halo round her hair,
And I sold her and took my fee.
And she hangs in the church of Saint Hilaire,
Where you and all may see.

- 5 The story of his aborted relationship with Constance MacLean has recently been embellished by Enid Mallory in her *Robert Service: Under the Spell of the Yukon*, Victoria: Heritage House, 2006.
- 6 Phillipps-Wolley (1854-1918), like Service, was an British emigrant who lived for over twenty-five years in Victoria and the Cowichan Valley. He was the author of many verses extolling the natural environment of Vancouver Island and the glories of the British Empire.

Works Cited

- “Home Talent in Poetry, Fiction, Sport and History: Vancouver Island in Literature,” *Daily Times* (Victoria), 2 May, 1908 (special edition), 51.
- Mitham, Peter J. “Mossbach Minstrelsy: the British Columbia Verse of Robert W. Service”, *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 39 (1996): 96-142.