

ROBERT W. SERVICE, POET AND MASON
by Jim Bennie, Lodge Southern Cross No. 44

*Thank God! there is always a Land of Beyond
For us who are true to the trail;
A vision to seek, a beckoning peak,
A fairness then never will fail;
A pride in our soul that mocks at a goal,
A manhood that irks at a bond,
And try how we will, unattainable still,
Behold it, our Land of Beyond!*

You should easily see the Masonic sentiments expressed in this little verse. And no wonder. The author was .. albeit briefly ... a Mason.

While Scottish Masons around the world laud Bro. Robert Burns and English Masons sing the praise of Bro. Rudyard Kipling, Canadian Masons rarely take the same pride in referring to a Brother who was one of Canada's best known poets, penning the immortal phrase:

*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.*

Brother Robert William Service was born in Preston, England on January 16th, 1874 to Robert Service, a Scottish bank clerk and Emily Parker, the daughter of an English factory owner. He was the first of ten children.

It was in Kilwinning, at age 6 in 1880, Robert offers the blessing at supper on the occasion of his birthday; his first recorded poem.

*God bless the cakes and bless the jam;
Bless the cheese and the cold boiled ham;
Bless the scones Aunt Jeannie makes,
And save us all from belly-aches. Amen*

Service got a job at a bank in Scotland, but in 1896, at the age of 22, he decided to go Canada with the idea of ranching and arrived in Victoria later that year. The following year, he moved to Duncan, then Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The common belief Service spent his time in the Yukon during the gold rush is not true. He was in the southwestern US the whole time.

Service returned to Canada in 1903, getting a job with the Bank of Commerce in Vancouver, and then transferring to Whitehorse in 1905. One day, when he had been asked to recite at a church concert, a friend suggested that Service write a poem himself. He started thinking. Then came inspiration. As he later recollected:

"It was a Saturday night, and from the various bars I heard sounds of revelry. The line popped into my mind: 'A bunch of the boys were whooping it up' and it stuck there. Good enough for a start." Wanting a quiet place to work, Service went to his teller's cage at the bank. But he had forgotten the night guard. The startled man drew his revolver and fired. "Fortunately he was a poor shot or *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* might never have been written Anyhow, with the sensation of a bullet whizzing past my head, and a detonation ringing in my ears, the ballad was achieved"

By 1909, he has moved to Dawson and his poetry proved so popular, he was financially independent.

After a short visit to the US, he yearned again for the Yukon and decided in 1911 to return the hard way by the Edmonton Trail: By canoe down the Mackenzie River, over the Mackenzie Divide via the Rat and down the Bell and the Porcupine to the Yukon River.

Once home, he took up writing verse again, and was also at this time attracted to Freemasonry. In 1912, he received his E.A. degree in Yukon No. 45 in Dawson ... but didn't enjoy his Lodge life for long. That June, he accepted an offer to cover the Balkan War for a newspaper. When World War One broke out, he became a correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, but soon joined the volunteer American Ambulance Unit.

Following the war, Service returned to France to write, then travelled to New York and Hollywood in 1921, where he received \$5,000 for the film rights for '*Dan McGrew*'.

Somewhere during this time, Service may have had time to receive the Fellowcraft Degree. Yukon Lodge carried him as an EA through the war, then the returns for 1920 list him as a FC. There is no record in the Lodge Minutes of him ever receiving the degree, and in 1922, he no longer appears on the Lodge's roll and it is the last we hear of his connection with Freemasonry. As he was not suspended nor demitted, it's presumed he was simply dropped from membership. Service was not in the Yukon at this time; he had left Los Angeles for Paris.

Service travelled through Europe, including the Soviet Union, until the outbreak of World War Two, when he returned to Canada, and spent only a few days in Whitehorse in 1940 before deciding to live in Hollywood in the winter and Vancouver in the summer.

When the war ended, Service returned to France, then Monte Carlo with his family, where he continued to write until his death on September 11th, 1958.

Toward the end of his life, he penned:

*I guess this is the final score:
Alas! I now shall write no more,
Though sad's my mood;
Since I've been sixty years a bard,
I must admit it's rather hard
To quit for good.*

*For three-score years I've roped in rhyme,
Till weary of the worn-out chime
I've sought for new;
But I've decided in the end,
With thirty-thousand couplets penned,
The old must do.*

*So let this be the last of me;
No more my personality
I'll plant in verse;
Within a year I may be dead,
Then if my books are no more read,
I'm none the worse.*

*Far better scribes than I have gone
The way to bleak oblivion
With none to sigh;
Ah, well! My writing's been such fun,
And now my job of work is done,
Dear friends, who've let me have my run,
Good-bye, - good-bye!*

These lines from the Prelude from Bar-Room Ballads might sum up his poetic philosophy:

*I'd rather be the Jester than the Minstrel of the King;
I'd rather jangle cap and bells than twang the stately harp;
I'd rather make His royal ribs with belly-laughter ring,
Than see him sitting in the suds and sulky as a carp.
I'd rather be the Court buffoon than its most high-browed sage:
So you who read, take heed, take heed,-
Ere yet you turn my page.*

And he may have scribed his own epitaph with these simple words:

*I who have been life's rover
This is all I would ask my friend
A little space on a stormy hill...
Eternity passing over.*