

# Robert Service's War Correspondence and Poetry

by Joel Baetz

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In the winter months prior to the publication of *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* in 1916, Robert Service served as a war correspondent, supplying a small cohort of Canadian newspapers with first-hand accounts of his front-line experiences as an ambulance driver.<sup>1</sup> The seventh of these “Records of a Red Cross Man” described for his Canadian audience a particularly difficult night of shelling that resulted in a number of wounded Canadian soldiers. “I cannot turn the car in that narrow road, with the wounded lying under my very wheels, so some soldiers swing it around for me,” Service wrote; “then again two mangled heaps are lifted in. One has been wounded by a bursting gun. There seems to be no part of him that is not burned. The skin of his breast is of a bluish color and cracked open in the ridges. I am sorry I saw him” (“The Attack,” *Journal*). The *Toronto Daily Star* sanitized the account and censored Service before he had a chance to describe the wounded bodies of the soldiers. The *Ottawa Journal*, however, printed the dispatch in full and earned the newspaper’s editor, P. D. Ross, a biting admonition from chief censor Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest J. Chambers. “The more I see of Robert W. Service’s matter from the front,” wrote Chambers,

the more impressed I become that it is of a character to seriously interfere with recruiting in Canada. No one can deny that this correspondence contains a great deal of powerfully interesting writing, but it is extremely gruesome and undeniably calculated to tempt parents, friends and female relatives to try to dissuade men from facing the horrors which these letters depict in such harrowing terms. (Chambers)

The gruesomeness or “harrowing terms” of Service’s correspondence is easy enough to spot. In place of (or, more often in Service’s war writing, alongside) comforting abstractions and emotional uplift, Service’s correspondence offers images of broken bodies—bodies

with gaping chest wounds, bodies that “walk...like somnambulists,” bodies with “faces masked with dried blood,” bodies with “bloody clouts on arms and legs and heads” (“The Attack,” *Journal*). Service’s war correspondence (and [page 55] his poetry, for that matter) is concerned more with the representation of broken soldiers’ bodies than with the impervious and stalwart body of a personified Mother England, the abstract colossus that Elaine Scarry describes in *The Body in Pain* (70-72), or any other vision of national or imperial coherence and strength. Service’s war writing speaks of bodies coming apart, rather than together. The bodies that fill the pages of Service’s correspondence and, more importantly, his war poetry are very often broken bodies, only occasionally uniformed and unified, often with severed legs, dangling arms, mashed hands, or bandaged heads.

But the “harrowing terms” of Service’s correspondence are not the only reason for the chief censor’s objection. Chambers’s objection to Service’s accounts from the front is that they are both “extremely gruesome and undeniably calculated” to discourage support for the war (Chambers, emphasis mine). But where is this undeniable calculation? How does Service’s account register this strategically constructed disillusionment? In part, that “calculation” comes from the piece’s “harrowing terms,” its gruesome images of injured bodies. But I also believe that this “calculation” comes from a broader source, one that includes the tendency to offer images of physical fragmentation and breakdown. The admission that “I am sorry I saw him,” sorry I saw the wounded soldier, is exceptional in Canadian writing during the First World War, and signals the speaker’s inner conflict. He records the scene but wishes to have looked elsewhere. Later, he knows he must start back for the firing line, but hopes to be delayed. He is bound by duty to return, but celebrates every obstacle that keeps him, even momentarily, from arriving at the front.

The inner turmoil of Service’s speaker becomes a dominant feature in his war correspondence and his war poetry. The locus for disillusionment in Service’s war work and its difference from the reams of patriotic poetry that were so popular in Canada at the time is the alienated or reluctant individual, often wounded, contentious, or anxious about the consequences or even the possibility of uniform action.<sup>2</sup> Broken, delusional, conflicted, or wistful, Service’s servicemen, the wounded or conflicted selves that populate his work, are caught firmly in the grip of debilitating collective fantasies, intermittently aware that the militaristic dream is always and only a dream or hopelessly longing for the safety of a redemptive community that does not materialize. Neither as realistic nor romantic as its reputation makes it seem, Service’s poetry challenges the

presumptions and implications of both simple mimesis and grand abstraction and opts, instead, to express the difficulty of deciphering or representing the factual world and [page 56] the disappointment of dreaming of imminent, but continually postponed, transcendence.

To read both the scholarly (the few that there are) and popular (the many that there are) assessments of Service's poetry is to understand it as national work, sprawling if simple epics of the Canadian north hammered out by a man who understands the everyday work-a-day world. In these assessments, he is an artistic labourer working hard to mythologize a nation and popularize its national poetry, and, therefore, an unlikely candidate to write the sort of war poetry that is full of conflict and contention, that resists both the seduction of grand abstract ideas and the desire merely to replicate scenes of a hard and dirty war. Based on Service's critical reputation alone, we might expect that his war poetry either spins romantic and thrilling adventures of national heroes protecting their loved ones or bears witness to the type of gore and violence that happens only at the front. As early as June 8, 1907, Service was known as the Canadian Kipling, "Kipling in style of expression [with]...a distinct quality of Canadianism" (Hal 11).<sup>3</sup> He was the explorer and explainer—part cartographer, part mythologizer—of the Canadian north: the "bard of the Klondike" for Pierre Berton (162), "The Kipling of the Arctic World" for the *Montreal Witness* (qtd. in Garvin, *Canadian Poets* 450), and the poet who "found the Canadian Yukon" for Arthur Phelps (32). In large part due to, and perhaps even in spite of, the immense popular success of his earliest volume,<sup>4</sup> Service was, for a time, indispensable to the Canadian literary scene. Until the early 1940s, "[n]o anthology of Canadian verse dare[d] leave him out" (Phelps 31).

As eager as his critics and reviewers were, at least early on, to grant Service status as a Canadian, and not simply a regional, poet, they were just as eager to see his poetry as a form of popular realism, easily understandable verse interested in the commonplace subjects and spaces of everyday life. His tall tales of the north, of Sam McGee, Dan McGrew, and Fighting Mac; his fantastic stories of barroom brawls, shoot-outs, drinking parties, and untamed land were, strangely enough, praised or derided for their realism, their distance and difference from the poems read silently in private salons or studies. At their worst, such reviews dismissed Service's poems of the Canadian north because they were "sordidly and brutally realistic" (Rhodenizer 230), an almost "literal rendering of line for line from nature in fierce without atmosphere garishness" (*Sewanee* 382). At their best, such reviews praised Service's poetry because it "pictures human life" and

refuses the “stale and flat” “nature worship or classic lore, ethics or obtuse [page 57] philosophy” as sources of inspiration or subject matter (Garvin, *Canadian Poets* 449).

Service himself courted this tradition of criticism by emphasizing his verses’ difference from the stuffy ideas of traditional poetry and obliging his readers to see his poetry as documents of everyday life. His poems were, to his mind, popular precisely because they were accessible, because they took great interest in the daily life of common folk. Not surprisingly, this accessibility dovetails nicely with his stated interest in realism. Almost without fail, Service talked about his method as a form of realism, even if that interpretation confuses an interest in commonplace subjects and locales with diligent mimesis and, more importantly, flattens the complexity of his poetry by ignoring the struggle to stabilize, comprehend, and elevate what he calls the real. And more often than not, this desire to offer access to the real is, for Service, motivated by his understanding of class: “My idea of verse writing is to write something the everyday workingman can read and approve, the man who, as a rule, fights shy of verse or rhyme. I prefer to write something that comes within the scope of his own experience and grips him with a sense of reality.” The “primal facts of life,...the bedrock of things” are what is legible to the “everyday workingman” (qtd. in Garvin, *Canadian Poets* 450). So, by the time his war writing appeared, in the form of “Records of a Red Cross Man,” *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, individual submissions to *Maclean’s*, and, finally, *Ballads of a Bohemian*, critics, reviewers, and readers were all too eager to see Service’s poetry as realism, even and especially those poems intent on celebrating the front as the site for heroic adventure or presenting the war in explicitly “harrowing terms,” as Chambers’s note insists. Eager to confirm their patriotic visions of war, these critics, reviewers, and readers were keen to accept Service’s troubled poetic visions as easy representations of the real, faithful reproductions of real experiences of the front line.

If we are to find any evidence that Service was interested in offering his readers a faithful reproduction of his experiences at the front (however flawed or naïve this objective may be), these correspondences are the best place to start. If they refuse the gestures of realism, then we should be better prepared for the refusal of realism in his war poetry. At first look, these correspondence pieces offer all the trappings of a journalistic account designed to present an unflinching and objective reproduction of trench life, no matter how gruesome, no matter how unsettling. Found near the front of the newspaper, surrounded by articles that report on other happenings at the front (i.e., “MAJ. KINGSFORD WOUNDED” and “Toronto

Soldier Star Bomb-Thrower”), the first “Record of a Red Cross Man” to [page 58] appear in the *Toronto Daily Star* on December 11, 1915 promises an objective description of life in wartime France. As a record from a man at the front (as opposed to, say, his tale, his story, even his journal), the piece promises in its title to be a faithful transcription of real-life war experiences. Only slightly different in presentation from any other article in the *Star* that day (the headline’s font adds a subtle but extra flourish), the byline, the typeface, and the columnar layout help to codify Service’s personal account as objective news. The piece will, this paratextual equipment says, offer an account as straight-eyed and straightforward as Service’s war photo that accompanies the piece. Along with Service’s reproduced signature and a copyright acknowledgement of the Department of Agriculture, this picture testifies to the authority of the tale, written by a bona fide, “real live” soldier and sanctioned by the Canadian federal government. By all appearances, then, this account is official and objective, a documentation of the life of a Canadian soldier, who “Bunks With Canadian Troops” and has “Shells Burst Near Him on Hill 71” (“R. W. Service Shelled”).

But even as these correspondence pieces suggest a faithful reproduction of the so-called real world, they also work against such an easy and seductive conclusion. There are numerous ways in which these correspondence pieces are simply not straightforward wartime realism. The narrator’s reliance on false guides and bad predictions; his difficulty discovering and understanding the real war world; his frustration with language to represent the war; his emphasis on costumes, masks, poses, gestures, and performances; and, finally, the narrator’s constant desire to play not the recorder but the speculator, storyteller, or actor: all these tendencies indicate that these correspondence pieces are more about the management and comprehension of an unknowable world than about that world itself, more about the struggle to apprehend the reality of war than the reproduction of that reality. Undone not by poststructural theory but by the texts themselves, Service’s war correspondence pieces are well aware of the challenge of discovering and representing the so-called “real.” These pieces are tiny dramas, more about the process (its failures and successes) of perception than about the perception itself.

Surrounded by all the paratextual markers that signify what René Wellek would call an “objective representation of contemporary social reality” (253), Service’s first account from the front alerts the attentive reader to the difficulties of objective representation. Throughout this piece, the narrator is at the mercy of misinformed or misleading guides, and none are quite as vague as the guide who greets the

narrator and is unable to explain fully the events of war and the expectations for a soldier. But the [page 59] glaring inadequacies of these guides are matched by the narrator's admission that he, too, has trouble deciphering the world around him. After receiving notice that an ambulance is wanted over at Hill 71, the narrator drives there and is greeted by an orderly who seems an authority on the surrounding world:

'Look yonder, on the ridge of the hill,' says the orderly who has come to guide us. 'Yon bank of gravel—that's the Boches; that's their first line.'

'Why, it looks quite harmless, quite deserted.'

'It isn't though. It's alive with the pigs. They can see us quite plainly. No doubt they have their glasses on us even now. Don't linger. We must hurry over this bit of road.'

But it is difficult to believe that sun-flecked grey line means danger, and our eyes follow it incredulously. ("R. W. Service Shelled")

While we might wonder at the accuracy of this guide's claims that he knows, with certainty, that "[n]o doubt they have their glasses on us even now" and that the trenches are "alive with the pigs" or even that Boche are pigs, the shelling starts eventually and this orderly appears to have a firm understanding of his world. He can read and interpret its signs, but Service's narrator cannot. Service's narrator struggles to comprehend the message sent by the orderly and, furthermore, to convey to his readers his own understanding of the world around him. The narrator not only finds it "difficult to believe that sun-flecked grey line means danger" but even after the intense shelling he harbours a disbelief that something so sinister could come from something so distant, so empty: "As I mount the fatal hill again I cannot help looking back. There, a corrugated line against the sky is the German trench, more silent, more deserted, more innocent-looking than ever" ("R. W. Service Shelled").

Throughout these accounts from the front, we encounter a number of guides ready to take us on a tour of their surroundings and to explain the sights and sounds of their world. But as the expertise of each of these guides waxes and wanes, so too does the possibility that these pieces offer a faithful reproduction of the wartime world. Instead, Service's first piece dramatizes only the attempt to know and represent the world and the frustration that comes when that attempt fails or is proven inadequate. Throughout this account and over the course of the remaining instalments, Service's narrator has trouble deciphering his reality, gaining an objective perspective on the world

around him, and offering a faithful reproduction of that objective reality to his readers. When the shells do fall, for example, [page 60] Service's narrator again betrays his inability to comprehend and convey his world:

In a little hollow some 40 yards away there is an explosion that reminds me of a mine blast; then a sudden belch of coal-black smoke. I stare at it stupidly. It looks fresh, lively, ugly, a very black snake-head of smoke, savage, and hissing. Beside it, all luminous in the sunlight, there is a patch of poppies. That coiling smoke cloud looks deplorably out of place, I think. I resent it intensely: I— Then turning round I find I am alone. Like magic every one has vanished, dived like rabbits into their burrows. Perhaps I too had better do a rabbit act....

So I crawl beneath the motor, and just as I do so there is a second blood-curdling stream, a second smoke-burst, but this time nearer to us by 20 yards. Every shell-scream is an interrogation; the answer—what? According to my calculations the next shell is due to fall plumb on the car, on me, and lying there on my stomach in the mud I reflect sadly on the epics I shall never live to write. But a minute passes; nothing comes. Another minute, still nothing. Then the doctor hails me from the shelter. (“R. W. Service Shelled”)

The narrator's calculations are, tellingly, wrong. His ability to predict the world fails. But here too, for the first time, we notice his anxiety and struggle to describe the world in which he operates: the men are rabbits, the narrator is a magician, the smoke is “deplorably out of place,” and the shells are, at once, mines, snakes, and an unanswered and unanswerable question. Elsewhere in this article, the chateau “is an ornate affair of spires and towers, the glorified dream of a pastry cook,” “the countryside is a checkerboard,” the observation balloon has a “sausage-like shape...in the dim distance,” and each puffball of smoke from a dogfight starts to look “like an exquisite pink flower” (“R. W. Service Shelled”). Elsewhere in these correspondence pieces, “[t]he garden is a riot of roses” (“Orchestra”), the battlefield is “like...a titanic bowling alley” (“Orchestra”), the shelling is “like a pneumatic drill” (“Orchestra”), the leaden drain-pipes are “pitted like colanders” (“Emptied Town”), the lieutenant's office “is about the size of a ship's cabin” (“Valley”), the poppies gleam “like a bloody wound” (“The Attack,” *Star*), and the racket the bursting shells make “is like that of a boiler factory where the workers are Titans” (“Inferno's Edge”). These metaphors and similes are attempts to codify what is, to Service's narrator, a world that outstrips his



efforts to denote and describe it. They represent various attempts to denote or describe dangerous or unfamiliar experiences and alien landscapes, and the impossibility of denoting or describing the war world, simply and straightforwardly, without conspicuous rhetorical figures to engineer a palatable comparison. [page 61]

Metaphors are common in these articles, and testify to the narrator's desire to transform his world to make it readable. But the most frequent and conspicuous rhetorical device used by Service's narrator to codify these dangerous experiences and alien landscapes is the simile. As simile is piled on simile, each more obvious and clumsier than the one before, they reveal the narrator's struggle to produce a faithful representation of his reality. His frequent use of creative and playful similes that explain his war world by way of comparison to some sort of game or fantasy or artistic creation presents a significant contradiction and tacit acknowledgement of the fictitiousness of his own world and/or his reproduction of it. Moreover, the fact that he relies on similes more often than he does on metaphors is significant. The similes signal the narrator's attempt to codify and convey the real world and his failure to do so. He wants to tell us exactly what is in his world, but fails. He can only tell us what the things in his world look like, what they resemble but, crucially, are not.<sup>5</sup>

The tension between knowing and not knowing and the frustration that comes with knowing that you do not know run throughout Service's correspondence, turning up most conspicuously in "Emptied Town in France." Here the tension is not a result of the narrator's continued failed attempts to understand his environment, but a product of his false confidence in his new-found knowledge. For this piece, Service's narrator acts as our guide, leading us through the streets and sights of an empty town in France, "the emptiest town I have ever been in" ("Emptied Town"). He plays the consummate tour guide throughout our stay in this textual town and invites us to "Come with me for a stroll down these streets. It is decidedly interesting. See. Where we are going to turn, a shell has taken the corner of the house right out" ("Emptied Town"). Like Boz in Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, Service's narrator assumes the pose of the objective reporter, taking the reader on a tour through a bombed-out town in France dominated by absent house corners, gaping walls, shell holes, and other ruins. With great precision, the narrator notes the layout of the town, the potential dangers, and the size of a stagnant pool that blocks the path. He is, it seems, in this ruined and emptied town, its faithful recorder, detached from the scene and ready to observe the evidence of its destruction.



But this is only a pose for Service's narrator, just as it is for Boz, as J. Hillis Miller argues.<sup>6</sup> As the narrator moves through the streets of this mysterious little town in France and observes the burned and bombed-out houses, he becomes more speculative and theatrical than objective, more storyteller than reporter. As he turns the corner and takes note of "the sign that still hangs vertically across the ruin," signifying that "it has been a grocery [page 63] store," he concludes, "I am sure its aproned owner would weep to see it now" and attempts to disguise his imaginative projection as a logical and certain consequence ("Emptied Town"). Similar imaginative projections, where the narrator begins to repopulate this town with his mind, continue in rapid succession. The house next to the grocery store "is almost intact. It is a handsome edifice that looks as if it might belong to the town attorney. True, the boarded windows are smashed by concussion, and the chimneys reel drunkenly, but that is nothing.... The proprietor of this house with the stucco front may well rub his hands and chuckle when he returns" ("Emptied Town"). In another instance, when he comes across a "daguerreotype of a woman in a crinoline," she is "[n]o doubt...the grandmother of the man who slept in the tangled bed. He will be glad, I hope, if he ever returns, to find her still smiling amid the ruins" ("Emptied Town"). Moving further into the shell of this empty house, the narrator observes the contents and makes further speculations about the character and occupation of its unknown owner: "The owner, I imagine, has been a priestly recluse" ("Emptied Town").

If realism is, as John Koethe suggests, "a thesis to the effect that the world has a determinate character and nature that are independent of our beliefs and thoughts about it, our experience of it" (724) and romanticism an unabashed "affirmation of subjectivity" that "seeks to ward off the annihilating effect of its objective setting, a context which is lifeless and inert" (725-26), then Service's narrator is, paradoxically, somewhat of a romantic realist or a failed realist, openly willing to document the remains of the town's inhabitants while, at the same time, giving shape, through his imagination, to these former selves. Amid the shabby ruins of the tiny French town, the narrator constructs, and not merely reflects, the "Town Well Arranged"; he renders it a "ghastly picture of outrage and ruin," and composes "a picture of despair" ("Emptied Town"). Even as the narrator tries hard to paper over his speculations and mask them as evidence-based, indubitable conclusions, they remain his imaginings, his constructs, and his desires.

The narrator's attempts at realism are always half-hearted. His ignorance is so blatant and his failures are so prevalent that we can

only understand his investigation into the real war world as a performance of realism, full of theatrical gestures that, in part, stage the failure of such inquiries and assumptions. Watching a captain fire artillery at an unseen target, Service's narrator admits that the deafening sounds of the guns are not real in and of themselves; instead, they inspire speculation. Urged by the captain to trace the path of the shells, Service's narrator discovers that he is unable to know [page 63] what happens outside his own powers of perception. He knows that things happen that he cannot see, but he can only guess that they are there. By the sixth shot, the narrator corroborates willingly the assumptions of the captain: "a splitting head and aching ear-drums are more powerful aids to the imagination.... If he had wished me I would have sworn I saw it descend into a trench and slay a score of Boches. ("Where Grim Men Watch"). Service's narrator is willing to sustain almost any fiction the captain offers and maintains the illusion that he can see that the projectiles reach their targets. The drama that unfolds before the narrator is not the verifiable act of shelling the enemy, but the dramatization of the act of shelling the enemy and the eventual endorsement of a presumed or asserted reality. Consciously or not, in this drama, the narrator is both audience and actor.

Frequently willing to sustain illusions and carry on the performance of war, the narrator reveals, in one important episode, that this performance demands the most convincing gestures, designed to mask inner turmoil and sustain the collective fictions of Honour, Nobility, and Glory. After explaining how frightened he was while delivering a despatch to headquarters during "those hellish days of the great retreat," the captain continues:

Well, on the way back the general gave me an orderly to accompany me. This made all the difference. We came to the mud flats, still raked by that deadly fire. I felt just as afraid, but there was no hesitation, no wavering now. Why? Because this soldier was with me, had his eyes upon me, respected me. I must at least make a bluff of bravery. So I drew myself up; I marched erect; I smiled gaily. I expected every moment would be my last, but I did not show it. I do not know what his feelings were. He followed me, though, marching erect. I laughed contemptuously at that rain of fire. I lit a cigaret. I joked. And all the time I wanted to sink into the ground, to crawl, to grovel. Well, we got over the dangerous place without mishap. My reputation for coolness was made. I got the cross. But do you think I am proud of it? No; I admit I have no courage. ("Valley")

This captain is only a simile for what he understands a soldier to be. To an audience trained to recognize his apparent bravery in the face of danger, his actions look *like* a soldier's actions; his actions appear to be brave in the face of danger. But he is not a soldier. He is a confidence man, a con artist, one who performs confidence but does not have it. By implication, then, the cross is not a designation of a courageous individual but an award for a theatrical performance of "coolness." Moreover, in the above passage, this soldier is described in notably contradictory terms. He is at odds with **[page 64]** himself. He draws himself up and marches erect, but he wants to grovel and crawl.

The narrator's remarks that follow this episode offer in short form the ideas that run throughout the correspondence pieces. He says, "For it is odd how callous one becomes as regards to death—a callousness almost mediaeval. Why can we hear of the passing of our best friends and still find heart to laugh? Is it that we utterly fail to realize it all? Is it that it seems a strange and hideous dream from which we will awake and rub our eyes? Yet the day will come when we will count our losses" ("Valley").<sup>7</sup> The strange mixture of hoped-for clarity and current obscurity is emblematic of the crisis dramatized throughout these accounts. The narrator's diligent attempts at mimesis are only exercises in the limits and failures of his objectivity and perception. No matter how many or how visceral the signs of war are, life in the trenches is, at its worst, indecipherable.

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After only eight contributions, Service's war correspondence ended abruptly on January 29, 1916. And because they precede the publication of *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* by less than a year, they stand as a prescient archive, a storehouse of ideas that anticipate the issues raised in his war poetry. These correspondence pieces and his first collection of war poetry share a tension generated by injured and conflicted selves who are, nonetheless, eager to support exceedingly crippling collective imaginings. The textures and tensions in Service's correspondence foreground his war poetry's fascination with questions of reality and romance, and alert us to the frequency and manner in which his speakers and personae both sustain and struggle against the national fictions of a militaristic collective fantasy. To discover the challenges of Service's war writing, we must treat the poetry as seriously as we treat his correspondence; the revelation of the ways in which the poetry questions the real and challenges the physical and

emotional integrity of the wartime individual depends upon our ability to read his poetry (granted, poetry that he consistently labelled as “verse”) closely and deeply. We must allow his poetry to reveal its dynamic possibilities and crippling tensions, even though we might at first be suspicious of the potential for such popular verse to give voice to complex ideas.

*Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* is an anomaly in Service’s oeuvre, but for reasons slightly different from those offered by his critics whose celebration of his work often hinged on their recognition of Service’s war experience. Much like Service’s correspondent pieces, realism—a realism so [page 65] seamless, so convincing that the book appears on the nonfiction best-seller lists in Canada in 1916 and 1917—is never really a concern for *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. As in his correspondent pieces, the discovery of a reportable reality in this volume of war poetry is the discovery of the illusion of a reportable reality. *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* offers a portrayal of war vastly different from the sort of popular nationalistic poetry that dominated the Canadian literary scene. Service’s first war poetry collection is more interested in identifying collective fantasies as fantasies, more concerned with dramatizing the injurious effects of collective fantasies, and more curious about the nexus where war reality and battle romance meet and diverge than any straightforward attempt at realism can ever pretend to be.

*Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* contains only a few poems that could justifiably be called patriotic poems, and fewer still that dramatize the assembling of a united and uniform colonial and militaristic body. “The Little Piou-Piou” and “Young Fellow My Lad” are reminiscent of the popular patriotic poetry and seem out of place in this collection of Service’s war verse. They are eager to balance the emotional economy of war, eager to provide compensation for the dead, and eager to celebrate the uniformity of militaristic participation. But these patriotic gestures are not frequent nor prominent in Service’s war poetry. His poetry is rarely willing to press his soldiers, living or dead, into the mould of the militaristic community without some note, however muted or pronounced, of regret or ambivalence. Elsewhere in the collection Service is more explicit in his suspicions about the benefits of romantic collective identity or at least vague and sparing in his references to larger imperial or national communities. He makes no explicit mention of a personified Mother England, no extensive references to the inherent strength or coherence of the Allied forces, and no concentrated effort to secure a confident and coherent national identity.

Instead of incorporation and connection, Service’s war poetry

focuses on loss and separation. “The Call,” for instance, in some ways resembles the patriotic call-to-arms poems written by the likes of Douglas Leader Durkin. The poem itself is a series of catalogues, lists of people assembled in the name of war. The clarion call of war goes out—“Ringing and swinging of clamorous bells, / Praying and saying of wild farewells” (4-5)—and people respond:

Rich and poor, lord and boor,  
Hark to the blast of War!  
Tinker and tailor and millionaire,  
Actor in triumph and priest in prayer, [page 66]  
Comrades now in the hell out there,  
Sweep to the fire of War!

Prince and page, sot and sage,  
Hark to the roar of War!  
Poet, professor and circus clown,  
Chimney-sweeper and fop o’ the town,  
Into the pot and be melted down:  
Into the pot of War!

(13-24)<sup>8</sup>

The melting pot of war unifies these disparate selves and assembles a larger, unified body, one that is strong enough and solid enough to stamp out “the fire of War” and meet “the gluttonous guns of War” (18, 30). But where Durkin’s poems (such as “The Call” and “The Men Who Stood”) celebrate the apparent strength and seamlessness of the newly war-ready imperial body, Service’s war poetry focuses on the separation necessary to achieve that new-found unity. Women are instructed to “[l]ook your last on your dearest ones” as they are fed to the “gluttonous guns of War” (27, 30):

Everywhere thrill the air  
The maniac bells of War.  
There will be little of sleeping to-night;  
There will be wailing and weeping to-night;  
Death’s red sickle is reaping to-night:  
War! War! War!

(31-36)

In this poem and others written by Service, war is not merely a force that brings us together. As eagerly as the clarion call of war assembles the militaristic community and unites the imperial mother and her

colonial sons, it (the war) just as eagerly tears families apart. As much as war means unity for the men, it also means separation and eventual and inevitable loss for the women. The “guns of war” and “Death’s red sickle” are indiscriminate. The men do not wield the “gluttonous guns,” but go to them and are consumed by them (30, 35). That melting pot that unites the soldiers in the fourth stanza is also the pot that prepares them for the sizeable appetites of the “gluttonous guns.” And the sickle carries out its own red harvest without distinction and leaves the dead without a consolatory or restorative collective identity. Still, “The Call” allows Service to walk that fine line between the endorsement of patriotic sacrifice and the expression of quiet disillusionment in the form of absent or deferred consolation. The poem [page 67] makes so many gestures familiar to Canadian patriotic poetry of the First World War, poetry that confirms the confidence and coherence of the militaristic community, that its lingering emphasis on war’s inevitable consequences is easy to dismiss or overlook.

If “The Call” is the sort of poem that allows for the very interpretations it subtly works against, Service’s distaste for collective fantasies is more conspicuous elsewhere. *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* contains a number of poems that explicitly rewrite or relinquish the collective fantasies that prop up militaristic communities. And like his war correspondence, these poems pay close attention to the isolated and fragmented soldier, alienated from his fellow soldiers and internally divided, torn between his thrilling expectations for war and his harsh experiences. Emphasizing both their allure and their inadequacy, Service’s “The Man from Athabaska,” for instance, dramatizes the formulation of competing communal fantasies, one grounded in a romanticized vision of militaristic participation and the other in popular national and imperial ideals about the benevolence of nature and the comfort of family. The poem’s speaker, the man from Athabaska, is, at first, seduced by romantic notions about war, the possibility that it is a chance to, once again, prove his self-worth and honour his obligation to a larger community: “the mustering of legions,...’twas calling unto me” (4). But even as the experience of war disappoints the man’s romantic vision, he nonetheless remains faithful that he will realize a more palatable, more satisfying communal fantasy. Beset by images of men who need to be “collected...in bits” (25), Service’s man from Athabaska dreams of an alternative image of communal life. In the trenches, he gathers the “[s] even lean and lousy *poilus*” (50) and shares with them his dream of returning home, a dream defined by its reverence for nature, the presence of his wife, the possibility that his fellow soldiers will join him, and its distance from his current situation. And notably, for the

duration of this poem, this dream is only a dream, an unrealized idea, no less imaginative nor romantic than the idea that motivated his initial entry into war.

The exchange of one communal vision for another occurs elsewhere in the collection, and indicates the overall desire of Service's war poetry to avoid a celebration of the so-called real and, instead, remain faithful to communal fantasies that are often postponed or distant. As it is in "The Man from Athabaska," for instance, in both "A Song of the Sandbags" and "The Volunteer" war is not, crucially, tantamount to the achievement of some vision of greater imperial unity, the payment of some filial debt to Mother England, or the construction of some wartime colossus to defeat the beastly Hun. In these poems, the speakers articulate their disappointment [page 68] with romanticized visions of war that are fuelled by patriotic abstractions and search for and formulate more palatable communal fantasies. These poems are not dramas that demonstrate the failure of romantic ideals by way of the representation of a readily identifiable reality. Instead of puncturing romantic dreams with the sharp intrusion of details (mis) taken for reality, these poems dramatize the exchange of one communal fantasy for another. And just as it does for the various narrators and personae of Service's correspondence pieces, so-called reality remains elusive and indecipherable, and the dream of home or brotherhood or membership in a community of maimed soldiers are preferable and necessary, if not the only options available.

But for all their attention to the defence of the Empire ("The Volunteer"), the Furland ("The Man from Athabaska" 36), or "[t]he Brotherhood of Peace" ("A Song of the Sandbags" 56), Service's servicemen very often are unable to defend themselves. Their desire for solidarity is sometimes matched and often exceeded by their bodily destruction. They might dream of some utopian existence of self-directed labour and meaningful communal obligations, but they are frequently incapable of protecting their bodies. *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* is full of poems about wounds and mangled bodies: arms and legs go "soarin' in the fountain of their blood" ("The Red Retreat" 24); legs are blown "aff at the knee" ("The Haggis of Private McPhee" 43); faces become "[s]ort of gargoyle" as a result of a skirmish in No Man's Land ("Fleurette" 11); arms are "mashed to jelly in the nicest sort o' way" ("Going Home" 7); bodies are "[s]hattered so hideously" ("On the Wire" 40); and men, in general, are "horror-haunted" and "battle-broken" ("Our Hero" 21-22). In Scarry's formulation, bodily wounds such as these are challenges to the constructed national colossus; they articulate a reality beneath war propaganda that is often obscured but always present. In Service's war



writing, however, bodily injuries matter (i.e., they have figurative resonance), but they do not signify the existence of a gory and gritty real world that is glossed over by bland political rhetoric. That so-called real war world, as we have already seen and will continue to see, is often incomprehensible to Service's personae and speakers. The wounds in Service's writing instead serve multiple and distinct functions: one, articulating an observable challenge to the integrity of the individual soldier; two, testifying to the destructive nature of the patriotic nation; three, marking the soldiers as members of a community separate from the men and women at home; four, disrupting the formal integrity of these poems (i.e., their elaborate and rigorous rhyme schemes; their rolling and controlling metrical patterns) with images of corporeal destruction and [page 69] disintegration; and five, providing opportunity to confirm the strength of the individual or the restorative power of communal life.

At times, the wounds in Service's war poetry function as obstacles or tests which the strong and noble soldier must overcome or pass and thereby prove himself worthy of his heroic status. Typically, these poems are organized around some sort of quest (e.g., to return from No Man's Land to enjoy a package sent from home, to retrieve a fellow soldier's lost trinket, or to carry out a dangerous but crucial bombing mission) where the soldier sustains substantial wounds but nevertheless completes the task. "The Haggis of Private McPhee," "Wounded," "The Whistle of Sandy McGraw," "Afternoon Tea," and "Bill the Bomber" all confirm the hero-status, or at least the strength, of the soldiers because of the successful completion of their adventures, despite obvious physical hardships.

In other instances, wounds provide Service and his soldiers the opportunity to affirm the redemptive and restorative power of communal life. In poems such as "Fleurette," "Cocotte," and "Grand-père," the wounded or broken soldiers are redeemed or healed by way of human contact or integration into a larger community. Little Fleurette's kiss on the wounded soldier's "withered cheek" (104) transforms him from the "darndest picture of woe / With this Caliban mug of mine / So ravaged and raw and red" (20-22) to a picture of happiness: "Can you wonder now I am gay? / God bless her, that little Fleurette" (110-111). And in "Grand-père," the presence of grandfatherly Joffre eases the pain of a blind soldier with no hands: "You wonder now I don't mind / I hadn't a hand to offer.... / They tell me (you know I'm blind) / 'Twas Grand-père Joffre" (21-24). The wounds of these men and women are, in this initial function, sources of inspiration. They inspire soldiers and citizens to redouble their personal and collective efforts; they allow Service to tell a story of

personal glory or communal comfort.

But other wounds tell other stories in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. Service's wounded soldiers frequently demonstrate their remarkable determination to overcome nearly insurmountable odds, their commitment to doing their bit to sustain the militaristic community, and their eventual reliance on the restorative powers of communal life. But, on occasion, he allows these wounds to disturb or delay the soldiers' efforts of self-preservation or act as physical manifestations of interior conflicts. In "Only a Boche," for instance, the speaker's observation of a German soldier's wounds forces the realization of a traumatized selfhood. The poem charts the consequences for a soldier's subjectivity after his examination of a severely wounded German soldier. The poem opens by emphasizing its [page 70] intention to place the wounded German soldier in full view. "We brought him in from between the lines: we'd better have let him lie," the poem begins (1), indicating that the rescued German soldier will rest in full view of the poem's lines, even if the English soldiers try (as vain as their attempts are) to ignore the nearly dead body lying in the corner of their "dug-out dim" (9). As the poem progresses, the nearly dead body of the German soldier lies in the corner of the dug-out and is a lie, disputing the apparent truth to which these British soldiers cling: that they live in safety and comfort. As the soldiers play a game of cards, the speaker reminds his audience that "you'd never know that the cursed foe was less than a mile away. / ... / You'd never dream that our broad roof-beam was swept by the broom of death" (16-18). Of course, these denials are, in their own way, confessions that recognize the limits of the soldiers' belief in safety, security, and separation from the enemy. In fact, their card game is a metaphor for their limited beliefs. "As [they] con [their] cards in the rancid gloom, oppressed by that snoring breath" (17), they con themselves into believing that their dug-out is unassailable by the enemy and that they can maintain comfortable distance from danger.

The presence of the wounded soldier disrupts the speaker's fantasy of safety and security, highlights its inadequacy, and reveals his commitment to con artistry. These soldiers are con artists (much like the captain in Service's correspondence piece, "The Valley of a Thousand Dead," who only plays the role of the soldier) and game players, and this wounded soldier disturbs their game and deflates their confidence. As the speaker recognizes, the German soldier's wounds will continue to haunt him. Even in their absence, the memory of those wounds is present: "It isn't the anguish that goes with him, it's the anguish he leaves behind. / For his going opens a tragic door that gives on a world of pain, / And the death he dies, those who live and love,

will die again and again” (42-44). That the speaker’s observation of the German’s wounded body occurs when he is playing the “dummy hand” in a game of bridge is suggestive of the limits and inadequacy of his pose of confidence (19). To no real surprise, then, when he returns to his game of cards after his traumatic encounter, even after his acknowledgement that he will relive the death of the soldier “again and again,” he returns to his illusion of safety and separation: “I’ll be mighty glad when I’m hearing the ambulance. / One foe the less” (48-49).

Yet the poem refuses to leave the speaker alone with his comfortable vision. In the end, he is a traumatized self, haunted by his experience of war’s destruction, and now prone to error: “No trumps you make it, I think you said? You’ll pardon me if I err; / For a moment I thought of other [page 71] things...*Mon Dieu! Quelle vache de guerre*” (51-52). The shift to italics emphasizes his shift in thinking, from the game they play to the ravages of war. These lines are a typographical interruption of his staid and stable world. They are the belated experience (to paraphrase Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma) of the Boche’s wounds and the typographical performance of trauma. His final admission, that he thinks of “other things” while playing the game, indicates his inner conflict, torn between a world he can now only know as a fantasy or game and a “world of pain” full of disturbing identifications and haunting images that remains outside his grasp (52, 43).

The German soldier’s wounds in “Only a Boche” disturb the speaker’s interpretation of the world around him, but they do not cause him to exchange it for something that seems closer to so-called reality. Instead, the dramatization of the speaker’s traumatic experience and his faithful return to the card game reveals the speaker’s performance. Just like the captain in “The Valley of a Thousand Dead,” he performs what it means to be a soldier. The images of wounds in this poem do not lead to the fullfledged recognition of the material world, but emphasize the British soldier’s desire to hold on to romantic and militaristic ideals. Like the soldier who made his reputation for coolness by laughing in spite of the enemy fire in “The Valley of a Thousand Dead,” the traumatized card player in “Only a Boche” knows that he must maintain the fiction of an upbeat soldier, no matter the circumstances. He must appear joyful, even if his limbs have been blown off, even if he is bleeding profusely, even if he is exhausted or battle-weary.

The soldier, as he is so frequently portrayed in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, is not a man who unquestioningly offers himself to the melting pot of war. In contrast to the soldier who easily and eagerly

sublimates his self to the demands of Mother England, Service's soldiers here and elsewhere are rife with contradiction, forced to disguise inner turmoil with outer calm, impelled to mask their fears with the theatrical gestures of confidence, courage, and coolness. Rather than dramatize the assembly of a militaristic colossus where every man comes together to do his bit or show how that individual contains multitudes, Service raises serious questions about the construction of that colossus and the constitution of the individual soldier. The soldiers in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* are conflicted selves that see the maintenance of the militaristic communal fantasy as a vexed enterprise. These poems often express dissatisfaction with the militaristic communal fantasy, choosing to see war as the exploitation of labouring soldiers or articulating heroism as a *performance* of heroism. [page 72] And yet these objections and revisions are muted, couched in apparent romantic conventions and a deep fascination for the fantasy's promise of comfort and glory. For its part, "Funk" expresses a desire to uphold the militaristic communal fantasy through the performance of proper heroic gestures that disguise an inner dissatisfaction. In "Funk," the soldier's reluctance is located inside the body:

When your marrer bone seems 'oller  
And you're glad you ain't no taller,  
And you're all a-shakin' like you 'ad the chills;  
When your skin creeps like a pullet's,  
And you're duckin' all the bullets,  
And you're green as gorgonzola round the gills;  
When your legs seem made of jelly,  
And you're squeamish in the belly,  
And you want to turn about and do a bunk:  
For Gawd's sake, kid, don't show it!  
Don't let your mateys know it—  
You're just sufferin' from funk, funk, funk.

(1-12)

The similes indicate the speaker's trouble with categorizing exactly what that disaffection looks like, but it is clear that war has dehumanized and destabilized the soldier. He is neither controlled nor contained, but "all a-shakin'" (2). He is not a man, but like a pullet (4), like a fish (6), and as "green as gorgonzola" (6).

The speaker's proposed solution recalls the emphasis on heroic performance in previous poems. The job of the soldier is to disguise his turmoil and fashion the appearance of a valiant and determined warrior:

So stand up, son; look gritty,  
And just 'um a lively ditty,  
And only be afraid to be afraid;  
Just 'old yer rifle steady,  
And 'ave yer bay'nit ready,  
For that's the way good soldier-men is made.

(25-30)

The final line emphasizes the central paradox of the poem; the good soldier must act naturally. The good soldier is the one who constructs his heroism out of a series of theatrical gestures. Indeed, to be heroic is to play the hero, is to “grin and grin and grip your rifle by the butt, / When the 'ole world [**page 73**] rips asunder” (15-16), is, on a formal level, to maintain a rolling rhythm and strict rhyme pattern even in a poem about insufficiency and instability.

The tensions persist in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. For every moment of patriotic or romantic fervour, Service offers another moment of soldierly disaffection. For every expression of confident subjectivity, he submits another moment of radical self-doubt. His soldiers and citizens are concerned chiefly with the strength of the militaristic body, in all its forms, but are also at times aware of its notable deficiencies. Communal life, though comforting, is also often awkward, deferred, or impossible. In “The Revelation,” for instance, Service’s persona expresses serious concerns about his own ability to reconcile his war experiences with his home life. “[H]ow will I manage,” he asks, “to stick it all, if I ever get back again?” (4). He realizes that the two worlds—trench and home front—so easily and seamlessly conjoined in patriotic poetry are, potentially, irreconcilable. Forced back to his desk, “down in the same old rut” (2), Service’s persona realizes that he will be dreaming of “the Great Adventure... / ...in giddy old France” (25-26). But he will also, inevitably, be haunted by his war experience: “Don’t you guess that the things we’re seeing now will haunt us through all the years; / Heaven and hell rolled into one, glory and blood and tears”? (21-22). These potential and realized hauntings that surface in Service’s poetry, along with the eager presentation of mangled bodies, bloody gashes, missing limbs, deluded fantasies and “evil dreams...I can’t believe [are] true” (“The Convalescent” 18), separate this collection from the type of patriotic war poetry that was so popular during and after the war. Much of *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* shuttles between these two opposing, but unequal, impulses of militaristic celebration and radical self-doubt. The result is a collection that is both ambiguous and ambivalent, eagerly making grandiose romantic gestures that simultaneously overshadow and throw into relief the smaller moments of conflicted

selfhood.

After one more collection of war verse and prose in the form of *Ballads of a Bohemian* (1921), Service's willingness to pursue and define the nexus where reality and romance, fact and fiction meet, and chart the subsequent implications for selfhood would drop off sharply. Service did not publish another book of verse for nineteen years. And when he did come back to poetry, he returned to his pre-war form. Both the "Fore-Warning" and the "Prelude" to *Bar-Room Ballads* (1940) read like a renunciation of his war verse interests. In the "Fore-Warning," the persona would "rather be the Jester than the Minstrel of the King; / ...rather jangle cap and bells than twang the stately harp / ...rather make His royal ribs with belly-laughter ring, / Than see him sitting in the suds and sulky as a carp" (1-4). In the [page 74] "Prelude," he draws obvious limits for his poetic powers: "*All I can do is pipe a pot-house ditty / Or roar a Rabelaisian refrain*" (7-8). Read alongside Service's war poetry, the "Fore-Warning" and "Prelude" of *Bar-Room Ballads* signal a turning point in Service's work, where he leaves behind his rigorous rendering of broken bodies and troubled selves for brighter, more certain poetic worlds. And yet his desire to write about the war and map its consequences on the (poetic) self make his poetry something more than the easily dismissed eccentric experiments of a popular versifier. In fact, it is the eccentricity of his war verse—its difference from the other poetry in his body of work and its separation from the patriotic war poetry that was so popular, even at the time *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* was published—that makes his war work so compelling and so important. His poetry offers important articulations of fractured selves, selves struggling to free themselves from the grips of incorporative fantasies, selves mangled and wounded, selves haunted by the images of war. The central ideas of our war poetry, even and especially the ideas in Canadian patriotic poetry of the First World War, are resonant throughout the poetry of Service: the constitution of the militaristic community, the allure and necessity of war participation, the fate of the wounded and dead soldiers, and the development of a poetry to match the desired degree of solidarity and strength. But these ideas are also often met with suspicion in Service's war poetry. His war poetry, though heavily invested in the rendition of wartime communities and war-tested soldiers, is almost always conflicted, almost always willing to recognize war's attractions and its dangers, and almost always eager to support its illusions and expose the fantasies that war demands.

## Notes

1. Service's weekly correspondence pieces began on 11 December 1915 and ran until 29 January 1916; *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* was published in November of that year. For a detailed history of the publication of *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, see Mitham, *Robert W. Service: A Bibliography*. [\[back\]](#)
2. The poems contained in *Canadian Poems of the Great War* edited by John W. Garvin are representative of the sort of patriotic poetry popular during World War I in Canada. See also Lillie A. Brooks's *The Band of Purple*, Douglas Leader Durkin's *The Fighting Men of Canada*, and Rose E. Sharland's *The Maple Leaf Men and Other War Gleanings*. [\[back\]](#)
3. The relationship between Service's and Kipling's poetry is far deeper than these broad formal similarities. For starters, if we look at Kipling's war writing—both his national propaganda and his darker short stories and poetry about the war—we find a pattern that is similar to the one we can recognize in Service's war writing: a desire to search out, **[page 75]** define, and question the limits of patriotic commitment. Moreover, Kipling's and Service's reputations as nationalists overshadowed the subtleties and challenges of their war writing, which delayed (in Kipling's case) and has delayed (in Service's case) their recognition as war authors interested in something more than patriotic gestures. For a discussion of Kipling's war writing see Karlin and Bilsing. [\[back\]](#)
4. Service's widespread popularity, stemming from his most popular poems "Dan McGrew" and "Sam McGee," can hardly be underestimated. Sales estimates vary, but James MacKay offers the most detailed and concise account of the statistics for *Songs of a Sourdough*:

Fisher Unwin produced the twenty-third impression in 1910 and the thirty-sixth in 1917, but new editions continued, under the imprints of Ryerson of Toronto, Dodd Mead of New York and Ernest Benn of London, for many years thereafter. Dodd Mead claimed that three million copies had been sold by 1940; Robert himself...more modestly put the total at 'far more than a million.' This accords with the figure of a hundred thousand dollars quoted in his autobiography, although he was earlier quoted in various newspaper interviews as saying that 'Dan McGrew' and 'Sam McGee' had earned him half a million dollars. (174)



See also Mitham, "Publication." [\[back\]](#)

5. The gap between the two terms in a simile is essential. Brogan, in her study of figurative language in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, describes the simile as a figure that "sustains the interplay of the two as one at once. Invoking the gap that is both the point of fragmentation and the point of union, the simile combines both tendencies of language.... Whereas metaphor attempts to conceal that gap (with the unspoken unity of tenor and vehicle), simile attempts to reveal that gap" (125). See also Ortony. [\[back\]](#)
6. See especially 119-151 in Miller. [\[back\]](#)
7. Service makes the same point about war's strangeness and obscurity elsewhere in these dispatches by declaring that "all is quietly unreal, oddly mysterious" ("The Red Harvest"), that "it may be things are happening--horrible things. All over them is mystery and apprehension" ("Orchestra"), and that "it is all very well to tell one to descend if there is a bombardment. How is one to know?" ("Valley"). [\[back\]](#)
8. All quotations from *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* have been taken from the Barse and Hopkins edition of 1916. According to Mitham's detailed bibliography, the Barse and Hopkins edition was copyrighted on November 11, 1916; the Briggs edition (the first Canadian edition) was copyrighted a week later, November 18, 1916. [\[back\]](#)

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