

The Canadian “North”: Manufacturing a National Identity Using Robert Service’s Poetry

Despite having a combined population smaller than the province of Prince Edward Island or the city of Kelowna, the Canadian Territories of Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest have a leading role in portraying Canada as a “northern nation”. We are the “True North, strong and free”. Polar bears inhabit our two-dollar coins. Even the inukshuk, a traditional Inuit landmark, is a common sight in modern Canadian iconography, as seen in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, despite the fact that British Columbia has plenty of local Indigenous symbols and art that could have been appropriated for the same use. As a result, these conceptualizations of the “North¹” are both culturally significant and a political focal point for Canada which influences the image of Canadians both domestically and abroad. These images of the North, its landscape and its people play an indelible part in the formation of the Canadian identity.

Nevertheless, even though the northern landscape is a major part of Canadian myth-making and identity, very few Canadians have crossed the 60th Parallel to visit this region and even less people live there; for example, less than 35,000 people live in Yukon. Yet it is undeniable that this territory in particular is integral to Canadian lore as a northern, frontier nation, with its imagery of the treacherous Chilkoot Pass, the historic “sin city” of Dawson, the Midnight Sun, and the Northern Lights. With this consideration in mind, some questions arise—why are Canadians so obsessed with the North as a part of our collective identity and where did it come from?

There’s a land where the mountains are nameless,

And the rivers all run God knows where;

¹ I will be capitalizing the word “North”, as I will treat the North if it is a defined place, or character. In this paper, it is not just a direction.

*There are lives that are erring and aimless,
And deaths that just hang by a hair;
There are hardships that nobody reckons;
There are valleys unpeopled and still;
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will. (2)*

In his poetry, such as “The Spell of the Yukon”, Robert Service details an image of the Klondike and the Canadian North where the land is more than a space; it is dynamic character with a complex identity and agency—cold, beautiful, enchanting, ruthless, and mysterious. The language used by Service to describe the character of the Canadian North defines the landscape by three major aspects—as a frontier, as malevolent, and as gothic. In turn, it is artists such as Service whose creative work aides in the manufacturing of the imagery of the Klondike Gold Rush and the North that becomes a political entity, which is extrapolated to represent a major part of a uniform Canadian identity and romanticizes resource extraction industries.

English-born Robert Service grew up in Glasgow, Scotland and as a child he found pleasure in writing short poems and storytelling (Klinck 7). When Service was 21 years old, he immigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia, working as a farm hand and a bank teller at the Canadian Bank of Commerce; in 1904, after the Klondike Gold Rush, Service moved to Whitehorse when the bank transferred him up North (17-29). At this point, Service had already published some poems in *Munsey's* magazine and Victoria's daily newspaper *The Colonialist* (27).

While in the Yukon, Service discovered the North was naturally dactylic; biographer Carl F. Klinck writes, “[Service] realized the poetry of his surroundings even before he found the

words” (33). As well, Service heard stories of the glory days of the Klondike Gold Rush and these stories paired with the northern landscape inspired him to write some of his most renowned poems, such as the “Shooting of Dan McGrew” (33). Legend goes that while at a party, Service overheard a grisly and gothic tale of a prospector cremating his collaborator; that night, on his walk home under the Aurora Borealis, Service composed what might be his most famous poem, “The Cremation of Sam McGee” (35-6).

Service’s love for storytelling, poetry, and the Yukon fluidly combined, motivating him to write vivid narratives about life in the Klondike. Klinck describes Service’s work as, “rhetorical, but memorable recreations of life in the Canadian Yukon—vast, cold, hard, savage, magnificent, alluring, beautiful—a frontier of adventure for exiles from cities” (36). Klinck’s polemic description reflects the complicated image of the North that Service presents in his poetry. The North that Service writes about is not a simple, straightforward entity. Rather, it is a complex and cryptic character. The land is gothic—it manages to be horrifying yet it is romanticized; it is seductive, but cruel. These representations are difficult to reconcile together as they seem contradictory. Nevertheless, Service gives voice the Canadian North beyond being a desolate wasteland. Service’s North “lent some of its dignity and importance to the struggles of man, even of little men” (36). In this way, the North affects and facilitates the stories of the people who inhabit the space.

One of the notable aspects of the North that Service paints in his poetry is the North as seductive and alluring. This romanticized view of the North illustrates a lure of adventure and escapism that is the North as a frontier. In his article *A Northern Vision*, historian William Katerberg explains the Canadian North as a frontier within the scope of Service’s poem, “The Shooting of Dan McGrew”. In this poem, Service creates a scene in a saloon with two gunmen

that could be transposed into the American Wild West; Service, however, places this story firmly in the North within the lines of the poem,

*Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the moon was awful clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a silence you most could hear;
With only the howl of a timber wolf, and you camped there in the cold,
A half-dead thing in a stark, dead world, clean mad for the muck called gold;
While high overhead, green, yellow and red, the North Lights swept in bars? (12)*

The frontier in this poem illustrates that the North in Canada holds an analogous place in Canadian mythology that the American West holds. Both places are ripe with adventure and opportunity that were not available in the “old world”. With the words “the Great Alone”, as well as the colourful description of the region at night, Service illustrates the North not as barren and desolate, but as terra nullius, ready for adventure and prospecting. This description stands in stark contrast to the industrialized Britain that Service left. Service’s word choice in this passage suggests that he believes that while the space is undeveloped by Eurocentric standards, it is animate.

*When out of the night, which was fifty below, and into the din and the glare,
There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-dirty, and loaded for bear.
He looked like a man with a foot in the grave and scarcely the strength of a louse,
Yet he tilted a poke of dust on the bar, and he called for drinks for the house.*

Service also touches on another aspect of the romanticized frontier—the resource extraction. The North’s relevancy to Canada and the world was contingent on the discovery of gold in the Klondike. Katerberg explains the notion as the frontier as a place of resource extraction as “development, new world adaptation, and imperialist destiny” (546). Katerberg’s

argument that the northern frontier as part of imperialist destiny is backed up by government policy at the time of the Klondike Gold Rush; in fact, it was the Canadian government that managed the legal claim system in the Yukon and maintained it with the assistance of the North West Mounted Police (Vaughan 249).

Nevertheless, in the case of non-renewable resources, the lure of the frontier might outlast the resource itself. In the poem “The Prospector”, Service illustrates the story of a prospector who comes to stake out his claim a bit too late. The nameless prospector is determined to find gold, even if it kills him. The narrator declares, “You seek the last lone frontier, far beyond your frontiers now, You will find the old prospector, silent, dead” (53). The narrator suggests that the frontier and its promises of adventure and opportunity seduces long after the adventure and opportunity are gone. This line in the poem also hints toward the land as a malevolent force.

This idea of the North as a cruel force aligns with Margaret Atwood’s thesis in her book *Survival*. Atwood proposes that Canadian authors represent the natural world as an unrelenting force that likes to kill off characters by freezing them, for example (66). In Service’s poetry, many characters meet their end by freezing to death, and often Service’s descriptions are rather graphic. In “The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill”, the narrator finds Bill frozen in a manner that prevents him from fitting in the pre-arranged coffin; after thirteen days of attempting to thaw Bill out by the fire, the narrator resorts to sawing off Bill’s frozen limbs (44). In this poem, the North’s cold cruelly refuses to make it easy for the narrator to carry out his duty of burying Bill. In the second last line of the poem, the narrator reflects back on his experience as “expounding the Law” (45).

This allusion could refer to another poem of Service’s, “The Law of the Yukon”. In this work, the North acts as the narrator and she is a cruel female deity, which once again falls in line

with Atwood's description of the depiction of the natural world (Service 6; Atwood 60). The North details her Darwinian malevolence towards the prospectors,

One by one I dismayed them, frightening them sore with my glooms;

One by one I betrayed them unto my manifold dooms.

Drowned them like rats in my rivers, starved them like curs on my plains,

Rotted the flesh that was left them, poisoned the blood in their veins;

Burst with my winter upon them, searing them forever their sight,

Lashed them with fungus-white faces, whimpering wild in the night...

This is the Law of the Yukon, that only the Strong shall thrive...

only the fit survive (6-8).

These lines illustrate the North's cruel disposition, as well as elucidate the situation of the Klondike Gold Rush. In a cold, harsh climate, starvation was a viable threat. In the winter of 1897 the Canadian government only permitted potential prospectors with a one-tonne grubstake, enough food to sustain them for the year, through the Chilkoot Pass as a way of preventing starvation in the already over-crowded Dawson, for example (Vaughan 250).

Nevertheless, despite the horrors of the North's character, it still retains its allure and romanticism. These two aspects—romanticism and horror—paired together create a gothic element to the North's character in Service's poetry, almost reminiscent of the American Gothic genre where the story can only plausibly take place in the locale unambiguously articulated. Katerberg describes the notion of the gothic in Service's poetry as "the mythic power of the North" (545). In Service's poetry about the Klondike, the North is a supernatural place. The midnight sun, the Northern Lights, the hold of an icy cold land on the prospectors, and the eerie events that transpire in this space are what animate the North. The poem which best illustrates

the “Northern Gothic” is Service’s most famous poem, “The Cremation of Sam McGee”, the classic tale of the Tennessean prospector who seemingly survives his own cremation in a ship’s boiler, even after he froze to death. In this poem, Service styles the North as haunted landscape.

There are strange things done in the midnight sun

By the men who toil for gold;

The Arctic trails have their secret tales

That would make your blood run cold;

The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,

But the queerest they ever did see

Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge

I cremated Sam McGee. (15).

With the placement of the story firmly rooted in the North, and a seemingly supernatural event, the “Cremation of Sam McGee” articulates the North as a gothic landscape.

This gothic image of the North demonstrates the complicated relationship Canadians have with this entity; it is dualistic, as only an animate being can be. Author Sherrill Grace explains this complex situation in her book *Canada and the Idea of the North*, “On one hand, we love our North (however carelessly or romantically we define it) and see nordicity as our uniquely defining quality; on the other hand, we fear and loathe it” (47). Service’s poetry about the Klondike Gold Rush explicitly supports this contradictory relationship with our identity as a northern nation, whether it is through Sam McGee’s loathing of the North’s icy cold grip or the prospectors in *The Land of Beyond* gleefully embracing the adventure in panning for gold that awaits them (15, 62).

While the federal government facilitated the gold rush for eager prospectors through managing the claim system, bringing in the North West Mounted Police and enforcing supply restrictions on prospectors, it failed to negotiate with the First Nations, notably absent in Service's poetry. Unlike many other regions, Canada and Yukon First Nations did not settle any aboriginal title to land, sub-surface mineral rights or treaty negotiations, until 1993. (In contrast, Treaty Six was signed in 1876, with a final adhesion in 1898.) This was not due to a lack of trying from the Indigenous peoples. Jim Boss, a hereditary chief of the Ta'an Kwäch'än², submitted a request for land claim negotiations in 1902, asking for "compensation because of the taking possession of their [traditional] lands and hunting grounds by the white people" (Jackson 317,050). In particular, Boss requested a particular tract of land on Lake Laberge, as it "has been occupied by his people from time immemorial" (Miller 1531). Instead, the local government authorities sequestered First Nations to reserves away from valuable areas with resource development and the settler population whenever the need arose. One such example is the creation of a reserve on the other side of the river and over four kilometres from the community of Mayo in 1915 when silver and ore were discovered nearby and Indigenous people showed up, presumably to partake in the mining and associated economy (184). As Yukon-raised historian Ken Coates explains, "the possibility that another 'Eldorado' lay somewhere in the district dissuaded authorities from alienating any specific land for native use." (182)

While the displacement of Indigenous peoples from traditional territories for the sake of *colonial* economic gain is not unique to Yukon, or even Canada, it is part of the continued structure of the Canadian economy, with the resource extraction industry accounting for nearly eight per cent of the gross domestic product, the third largest sector (Statistics Canada, n.pag.). Much of this industry still takes place in Northern Canada, such as the Victor Diamond Mine

² A Yukon First Nation in the Whitehorse and Lake Laberge area.

upstream of Attawapiskat, the McArthur Uranium Mine in the Athabasca Basin of Northern Saskatchewan, the Alberta Oil Sands or Goldcorp Coffee Mine in the heart of the Klondike. By the Canadian Government removing Indigenous peoples from the land through forced migration and isolation, the government has chosen that “a human-rights matter be overlooked for the sake of the Canadian economy.” (Vowel 131)

While panning for gold is a far cry from modern mining and extraction operations, the connection between land, industry and Indigenous erasure is a part of Canadian history, as reflected in our art. In particular, Service’s poems provide a voice for a landscape that plays an instrumental role in a Canadian identity. Author Noah Richler explains this notion of landscape as character that places itself upon the reader through art (6). This vision of the North that Service displays is a political being, no matter the intentions Service had. Richler explains that reading these tales constitutes a political act (45). By reading these narratives, Richer asserts that the audience receives a political message, not unlike Lester B. Pearson’s tagline of an article he wrote during his Minister of External Affairs post. “Go North!” Pearson explains, “A whole new region has been brought out of the blurred and shadowy realm of northern folklore and show to be an important and accessible part of our modern world” (Pearson 642). In conclusion, the North, nordicity & frontierism play a disproportionately large role in Canadian identity. Still, without the imagery of the North exhibited by artists like Service, politicians like Pearson would not likely have the ability to connect the land to this vision of a Canadian identity, nor would the resource extraction industries hold quite the power or influence in the formation of the Northern, frontier identity of Canadians, which enables continued colonialism.

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