

The Simple Facts of the Case and Other Strange Things

James Mackay. *Vagabond of Verse*. Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1995. 416pp.

(Abbreviations: *HH* = *Harper of Heaven*; *PM* = *Ploughman of the Moon*; *VV* = *Vagabond of Verse*.)

Robert W. Service was a master of autobiographical obfuscation, and reticent to publicize the details of his personal life. "Let the biographer chronicle them when one is dead," he declared. "In the meantime let the writer present a fairly convincing portrait of himself and do not ask for more" (*HH* 54). Service sought to sate public curiosity regarding himself with two volumes of autobiography. *Ploughman of the Moon* (1945) and *Harper of Heaven* (1948). Notoriously imprecise, they succeeded in preserving his privacy and frustrated subsequent attempts by Carl F. Klinck and G. Wallace Lockhart to construct a reliable biography of their author. *Vagabond of Verse*, by Glasgow writer and Robert Burns scholar James Mackay, is the most recent attempt to chronicle the life of the reknowned balladeer of the Klondike gold rush. Mackay condemns Service's two autobiographical volumes as "poetic license at its most unlicensed" (13), describing his own approach as that of the investigative journalist (16). With merciless ardour, he takes issue with the failure of Klinck's *Robert Service: a Biography* (1976) and Lockhart's *On the Trail of Robert Service* (1991) to challenge and correct Service's autobiography.

Mackay's triumph lies in skilfully reworking Service's autobiographies into a coherent whole that allows Service to speak for himself, while clearing away much of the deception that led previous biographers astray. He illuminates his portrait of Service with letters, diaries, and manuscripts still in the possession of the Service family, employing a sophisticated style that offers a fresh, readable biography. The inclusion of this material makes the book a valuable reference until these sources become more readily available. Yet in penetrating the shroud that Service drew about himself, *Vagabond of Verse* fails to provide a vibrant chronicle of its subject. It may please the general reader, but it lacks the depth, accuracy, and spirit to be a truly definitive

study. Service merits a degree of attention that Mackay, in seeking facts, does not provide.

Vagabond of Verse is most valuable for the details that it provides regarding Service's life as a youth in Scotland. Nevertheless, Mackay does not bolster his discussion with any of the score of poems that Service claims to have published at this time. Although Service freely admitted to publishing poems in Glasgow periodicals during his adolescence, Mackay gives no indication of having even searched for the poems in question. Despite his repeated caveats regarding Service's autobiographical reliability he simply relates the account of Service's early literary efforts presented in *Ploughman of the Moon* (PM 78-87; VV 82-9). This tendency to paraphrase extended portions of Service's own narrative weakens the biography. Mackay regularly employs copious extracts from Service's two autobiographical volumes to carry the burden of his narrative where other evidence is lacking, and his frequent use of Service's own phrasing creates a feeling that he could have delved deeper into Service's life.

A notable example of Mackay's failure to consistently challenge Service is his treatment of the poem "It Must Be Done." Service cited the poem in *Ploughman of the Moon* as a product of his youth in Glasgow (PM 84). Mackay correctly notes that "It Must Be Done" appeared in the *Duncans Enterprise* of Duncan, British Columbia, on 5 December 1903, but he gives no reference for its supposed appearance in a Glasgow periodical thirteen years before. Mackay does not consider the possibility that in *Ploughman of the Moon* Service masked his earlier efforts with work composed in British Columbia following his emigration in 1896. This intriguing possibility might, with further development in the context of the biography, have shed greater light on why Service felt it necessary to write about himself from behind a façade of biographical imprecision. This is but one instance where Mackay fails to identify and address the questions Service's career poses, answers to which would have increased the reader's interest in Service as a writer.

Although Mackay attempts to dissolve long-standing myths and biographical inaccuracies perpetuated (and perpetrated) by Klinck and Lockhart, *Vagabond of Verse* is itself plagued with unwarranted conclusions and downright errors. Unfortunately, a lack of precise or sufficient documentation will frustrate the scholarly reader who attempts to double-check Mackay's work. The majority of the notes refer to Service's two autobiographical volumes, and points in Klinck's and Lockhart's studies that he refutes. Similarly, the bibliography of primary and secondary sources that appears at the end does not accurately reflect the breadth of material that exists to inform an

adequate biography of Service.

One instance in which Mackay's investigative skill undermines the reader's confidence occurs in the discussion of the publication of *Songs of a Sourdough*. Mackay states, "[t]he Services were living in Alberta at the time, not Toronto as Klinck surmised from the simple fact that that was where the publisher was" (169). While Mackay gives the reference in Klinck, he does not supply a source for his own assertion. Furthermore, had he consulted the Toronto city directory for 1906, the year Service's manuscript arrived on the desk of William Briggs, he would have discovered that the Service family lived at 709 Dufferin Street. Service himself, of course, was working as a bank teller in Whitehorse. Homestead records indicate that the Service family finally moved to Alberta in 1908, where members took up land in the Scotstoun district near Mannville.

Vagabond of Verse contains other significant errors, accompanied by a similar lack of documentation. Mackay states, "[t]he Yukon Archives preserve a number of Robert's manuscripts" (163). This is simply not the case. He then foists on the reader an extract from "the earliest version of 'The Cremation of Sam McGee'" (164). I was unable to locate the appalling piece of doggerel Mackay attributes to Service when I visited the Yukon Archives in September 1995, nor were the staff aware of its existence. The absence of the manuscript may be all the better for Service's reputation, but it casts a grave imputation against Mackay's research.

Mackay also displays a tendency to form conclusions that a closer consideration of existing evidence might have prevented. "Another myth," he states with characteristic confidence, "widely reported in magazine articles and emphasized in both previous biographies, is that Robert never returned to the scenes of his early poetic triumphs" (344). Advance publicity for the event, including a photo of Service with the plane and pilot scheduled to take him from Vancouver to Whitehorse in August 1940, supports Mackay's assertion. Yet the Yukon papers do not report the momentous return of Service to his old haunts, as they surely would have done had the visit occurred. For unknown reasons, it never did, although Mackay felt the advance notices were sufficient evidence to break Service's silence on the matter and revise the account given in previous biographies.

On grounds of similar strength, Mackay suggests that T. Fisher Unwin refused to publish *Why Not Grow Young?*, a treatise by Service on health and hygiene, in 1928, thereby inducing Service to adopt Ernest Benn as his English publisher (281). Yet Unwin had retired from the publishing business shortly after the publication of Service's novel *The*

Master of the Microbe in 1926, and merged his operations with those of the promising young Benn (Codell 310; Linton 35-6). Benn acquired Unwin's stock, and as a result, the second printing of *The Master of the Microbe* featured the names of both Unwin and Benn on the title page. Mackay's confusion is understandable, however; when Service's novel *The House of Fear* appeared in 1927, the title page named Unwin as the publisher. *Why Not Grow Young?* was Service's first book published wholly under the auspices of his new publisher.

Mackay's apparent ignorance of the history of Service's publishers intimates his failure to seek a full context for the intellectual milieu in which Service lived and wrote. Mackay rarely refers to the wealth of primary material available in repositories outside Great Britain, and his secondary sources consist largely of city directories, parish and local histories, and personal memoirs of those who knew Service. Scholarly articles, including Desmond Pacey's 1951 assessment relegating Service to a literary "age of brass," or Edwina Burness' studies of Service's war verse which draw parallels between Service and Burns, do not figure. The latter omission is particularly conspicuous, as Mackay is an authority on Burns.

The apparent failure of Mackay to consult books such as George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* limits his assessment of Service's literary development. Yet the young Service deemed Moore's volume "a literary landmark" (*PM* 119), and he possibly cribbed material from it for his own autobiography. Service's discussion of his taste in literature as a young man closely parallels that of Edwin Dayne. Both writers preferred the novels of Dickens, and similar reasons stimulated their interest in contemporary music hall entertainment (Moore 53-4; *PM* 50, 86-7). *Confessions of a Young Man*, among other works, bred in Service an abiding affection for Paris and the bohemian lifestyle. Since he is apparently unaware of the parallel between the autobiographies of Moore/Dayne and Service, Mackay is unable to develop an explanation for Service's ultimate decision to settle and spend the latter part of his life in France. Nor can Mackay capitalize on the parallel in *Confessions* and elsewhere to note that Service's depiction of literary bohemia in *The Pretender: A Novel of the Latin Quarter* (1914) and *Ballads of a Bohemian* (1921) bears a stronger resemblance to that of Moore during the nineteenth century than that of the Vorticists, for example, in the twentieth.

A second, paperback edition of *Vagabond of Verse* appeared in January 1996. Changes to the text reflect Mackay's awareness of Service's friendship with the Anglican rector of Whitehorse, fellow writer Hiram A. Cody (156-57), and the identity of the enigmatic "C. M." to whom Service dedicated *Songs of a Sourdough* (150). The text

is otherwise the same as that of the first edition.

Despite its shortcomings, *Vagabond of Verse* generally fulfils Mackay's aim to clarify Service's biography. Although Mackay seldom explores the reason for the autobiographical dissembling he dismantles, he lays a factual foundation for future examinations of Service's career. His work enjoys a degree of authority that the previous biographies by Klinck and Lockhart do not. While Mackay's priggish preoccupation with points of fact dispels a great deal of the fancy in which Service revelled as he wrote his life's story, it also makes *Vagabond of Verse* a welcome addition to Canadian literary biography. For the latter we must be thankful.

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