Robert William Service  
(January 16, 1874 – September 11, 1958)  

Known as “The Bard of the Yukon” prolific author, Robert William Service, spoke of his work as “Verse, not poetry ... I never wrote to please anyone but myself; it just happened. I belonged to the simple folks whom I liked to please.”

He was born in Preston, Lancashire, England, in 1874, attended the University of Glasgow, and went on to travel the world as a cook, clerk, hobo, correspondent author and poet.

He emigrated to Canada in 1894 and spent eight years in the Yukon where he wrote his best known poems *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* and *The Cremation of Sam McGee*.

Service described writing in his Yukon cabin; “I used to write on the coarse rolls of paper used by paper-hangers, pinning them on the wall and printing my verses in big charcoal letters. Then I would pace back and forth before them, repeating them, trying to make them perfect. I wanted to make them appeal to the eye as well as to the ear. I tried to avoid any literal quality.”

“I took the woodland trail, my mind seething with excitement and a strange ecstasy... verse after verse developed with scarce a check ... and when I rolled happily into bed, my ballad was cinched. Next day, with scarcely any effort of memory I put it on paper.”

In 1912 he left Yukon to become a news correspondent during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. During the first World War he was a stretcher bearer and driver with the Ambulance Corps of the American Red Cross in France. He married in Paris, returned to North America during WWII where he and his wife lived in Hollywood, California and Vancouver, British Columbia. Service and his wife returned to France after WWII and lived there until his death in 1958.
The Cremation of Sam McGee

Robert Service (1874-1958)

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil 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.

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in hell."

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see;
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe,
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, "I'll cash in this trip, I guess;
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he says with a sort of moan:
"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold, till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead — it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains."
A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail;
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he looked ghastly pale.
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his home in Tennessee;
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and I hurried, horror-driven,
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of a promise given;
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: "You may tax your brawn and brains,
But you promised true, and it's up to you, to cremate those last remains."

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code.
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my heart how I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows — Oh God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May."
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then "Here," said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared — such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.
I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with grisly fear;  
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again I ventured near;  
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: "I'll just take a peep inside.  
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked"; ... then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;  
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and said: "Please close that door.  
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear, you'll let in the cold and storm —  
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun*  
*By the men who moil 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.*
The Shooting of Dan McGrew

Robert Service (1874-1958)

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.

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.
There was none could place the stranger's face, though we searched ourselves for a clue;
But we drank his health, and the last to drink was Dangerous Dan McGrew.

There's men that somehow just grip your eyes, and hold them hard like a spell;
And such was he, and he looked to me like a man who had lived in hell;
With a face most hair, and the dreary stare of a dog whose day is done,
As he watered the green stuff in his glass, and the drops fell one by one.
Then I got to figuring who he was, and wondering what he'd do,
And I turned my head — and there watching him was the lady that's known as Lou.

His eyes went rubbering round the room, and he seemed in a kind of daze,
Till at last that old piano fell in the way of his wandering gaze.
The rag-time kid was having a drink; there was no one else on the stool,
So the stranger stumbles across the room, and flops down there like a fool.
In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat, and I saw him sway;
Then he clutched the keys with his talon hands — my God! but that man could play.

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? —
Then you've a hunch what the music meant. . . hunger and night and the stars.
And hunger not of the belly kind, that's banished with bacon and beans,
But the gnawing hunger of lonely men for a home and all that it means;
For a fireside far from the cares that are, four walls and a roof above;
But oh! so cramful of cosy joy, and crowned with a woman's love —
A woman dearer than all the world, and true as Heaven is true —
(God! how ghastly she looks through her rouge, — the lady that's known as Lou.)

Then on a sudden the music changed, so soft that you scarce could hear;
But you felt that your life had been looted clean of all that it once held dear;
That someone had stolen the woman you loved; that her love was a devil's lie;
That your guts were gone, and the best for you was to crawl away and die.
'Twas the crowning cry of a heart's despair, and it thrilled you through and through —
"I guess I'll make it a spread misere", said Dangerous Dan McGrew.

The music almost died away ... then it burst like a pent-up flood;
And it seemed to say, "Repay, repay," and my eyes were blind with blood.
The thought came back of an ancient wrong, and it stung like a frozen lash,
And the lust awoke to kill, to kill ... then the music stopped with a crash,
And the stranger turned, and his eyes they burned in a most peculiar way;
In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat, and I saw him sway;
Then his lips went in in a kind of grin, and he spoke, and his voice was calm,
And "Boys," says he, "you don't know me, and none of you care a damn;
But I want to state, and my words are straight, and I'll bet my poke they're true,
That one of you is a hound of hell... and that one is Dan McGrew."

Then I ducked my head, and the lights went out, and two guns blazed in the dark,
And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and two men lay stiff and stark.
Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous Dan McGrew,
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of the lady that's known as Lou.

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I ought to know.
They say that the stranger was crazed with "hooch," and I'm not denying it's so.
I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly between us two —
The woman that kissed him and — pinched his poke — was the lady that's known as Lou.
The Men that Don’t Fit In

Robert Service (1874-1958)

There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,
   A race that can’t stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
   And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
   And they climb the mountain’s crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
   And they don’t know how to rest.
If they just went straight they might go far;
   They are strong and brave and true;
But they’re always tired of the things that are,
   And they want the strange and new.
They say: "Could I find my proper groove,
   What a deep mark I would make!"
So they chop and change, and each fresh move
   Is only a fresh mistake.
And each forgets, as he strips and runs
   With a brilliant, fitful pace,
It’s the steady, quiet, plodding ones
   Who win in the lifelong race.
And each forgets that his youth has fled,
   Forgets that his prime is past,
Till he stands one day, with a hope that’s dead,
   In the glare of the truth at last.
He has failed, he has failed; he has missed his chance;
   He has just done things by half.
Life's been a jolly good joke on him,
   And now is the time to laugh.
Ha, ha! He is one of the Legion Lost;
   He was never meant to win;
He's a rolling stone, and it's bred in the bone;
   He's a man who won't fit in.