

The Trail of '98

Addendum

Whilst at the annual dinner of the Black and Tans Climbing Club in February 2013, the year after the above story was published, Christine Birch, wife of Eddie Birch, an old climbing friend of mine, gave me a biography of Robert Service, *Vagabond of Verse* by James A McKay. As a lover of Service's poetry, I was both surprised and pleased to find that he had done the same canoe trip as us, intending to 'pack and track like the pioneers'. According to McKay, it was 'one of the best and most exciting stories he ever wrote.... at the age of thirty seven Robert was at the peak of physical perfection... The stamina built up over the past fifteen years and the hardiness of the northern explorer stood him in good stead, without them he would never have survived the rugged hardships and dangers he encountered on this terrible overland route.' McKay wondered if perhaps 'Robert's motive in undertaking such a hazardous venture was to prove himself. He was acutely aware that although he had chronicled the Yukon in verse and prose, he was something of a fraud. He had not actually been on the Trail of Ninety-Eight and the gold rush that inspired him had been almost over by the time he got there.' On hearing of his plans, the Indian agent at Fort MacMurray said, 'Young man, you're going to your doom'.

Intrigued, I bought Robert Service's autobiography, *Ploughman of the Moon, An Adventure into Memory*, in which *Book 10 - The Spell of the Yukon* describes this trip. He bought 'one of the finest birch bark canoes in the north at Great Slave Lake from an Indian considered to be the best canoe maker in his tribe'. They then travelled north down the Mackenzie River by various boats before camping at the head of the Mackenzie Delta near the Peel River amongst some Eskimos (almost certainly Gwich'in Indians, possibly at the same site that we met them). Service writes sardonically, 'They were semi-civilised, for they had gramophones that played hymns and they punished their children'. It was here he had a chance meeting with some 'mavericks' on a scow. He teamed up with them, canoeing down the margins of the Mackenzie Delta and a short way up the Rat River before opting to load his canoe, *Coquette*, onto the scow. Together they laboriously hauled the craft upstream against the fast flowing river through 'mists of mosquitos' towards the Divide, 'twelve hours a day on the track-line, and most of the time in the water'. Ken and I were also plagued by mosquitos at our camps and as we portaged from the Rat River to Summit Lake. And like us, Robert and his companions lost their craft once in the boulder choked rapids. Robert comments that he 'laboured to the limit and kept grinning even when things were grim', also remarking that one of the men, Jake Skilly was a chain smoker, 'a cigarette fiend of the most desperate brand'. He rolled up 'every fifteen minutes using a plug of tobacco in a half-page of an old magazine. If he went ten minutes without a "coffin nail" a wild look came into his eyes and he trembled violently.'

Up near the headwaters, thinking they had taken the wrong channel, Robert was relieved to find the name of Buffalo Jones carved on a tree. 'The sight of the name of this well known Klondiker put fresh heart in him... But the worst was yet to come'. Though they eventually saw Summit Lake in the distance, the portage of the scow was onerous and it wasn't until 'after ten hours of labour our craft splashed into a sudden depth of clear, cool water'. Summit Lake had an 'end of the world feeling' and looking up at the mountains towering above, Robert felt 'crushed with awe'. Like us, they couldn't initially locate the Bell Creek that lead west to

the Porcupine River and the Yukon. Robert wrote that they 'could see no sign of it and the thought that we had been deceived made me sick'. Then he found 'a fringe of willows... concealed in a deep gully at the bottom of which brawled a lusty torrent' and he set off alone 'with my canoe and a happy heart', though 'the water seemed to seize *Coquette* with a giant hand and shake her as a terrier does a rat. It descended in a series of rapids varied by small cascades, so that often, waist deep in foam, I was forced to get out and line the canoe'. Again, later in the journey, just as we did, he 'drifted dreamily under a cloudless sky... at full length in the canoe and let the current bear me along.' He felt that if he 'had drawn a hundred mile circle around him there would not have been a human soul in its compass.'

By chance he met up again on a couple of occasions further downriver with the scow. Jake was more cantankerous than ever as he was about to run out of paper. In a previous paperless episode he had resorted to using pages from his mother's Bible, smoking it 'from Genesis to Revelation', saying he would have killed for it, such was his addiction. On the second occasion Service was persuaded by the others on the scow to take Jake Skilly with him in the canoe as he would make quicker time to the Trading Post at Ramparts Canyon so Jake could buy his papers. With his last pages of *Argosy* almost gone, Jake said, 'I ought to warn you partner, if this paper pans out, I'm liable to go bughouse'. Jake, who was in the back of the canoe, had an axe close at hand and Robert felt 'he could get me with the axe before I could swing round with the rifle. Nice messy end to a misspent existence!' On reaching the Trading Post they were unable to land as 'the Indians were down with smallpox'. Luckily, soon after, they met a launch coming up-river which was able to supply Jake with some papers that 'saved Jake's life'. Robert felt it saved his too!

A little further downstream they met a paddle steamer which took them to Dawson City, Robert writing that 'I've had enough of paddling for the rest of my life'. In Dawson, he worked hard on his third book of verse, eventually published as *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone*, pinning rolls of blank wallpaper on the cabin walls and writing on them with a stick of charcoal, all eagerly removed many years later by tourists visiting Dawson. He also got lost in a blizzard one wild winter's day, being rescued by Cannibal Joe who 'had earned his grisly epithet from the rumour that he had killed and eaten his partner when the two of them had run out of food while prospecting in the Barren Lands. ...But Joe was adamant, "I never et Bob. I never et a single slice of him... but I fed him to the dogs and I et the bloody dogs.' Meanwhile, Jake, Robert's nicotine-crazed partner on the canoe trip, 'had gambled away all his capital and was heading for the Arctic again... 'to trap and starve and suffer. ...in his lonely cabin on the Arctic Ocean, Jake went mad and shot off the top of his head.'

*On the ragged edge of the world I'll roam,
And the home of the wolf shall be my home,
And a bunch of bones on the boundless snows,
The end of my trail . . . who knows, who knows!*

*The Nostomaniac, Robert Service, from Rhymes of a Rolling Stone,
written in his cabin in Dawson after this canoe trip.*