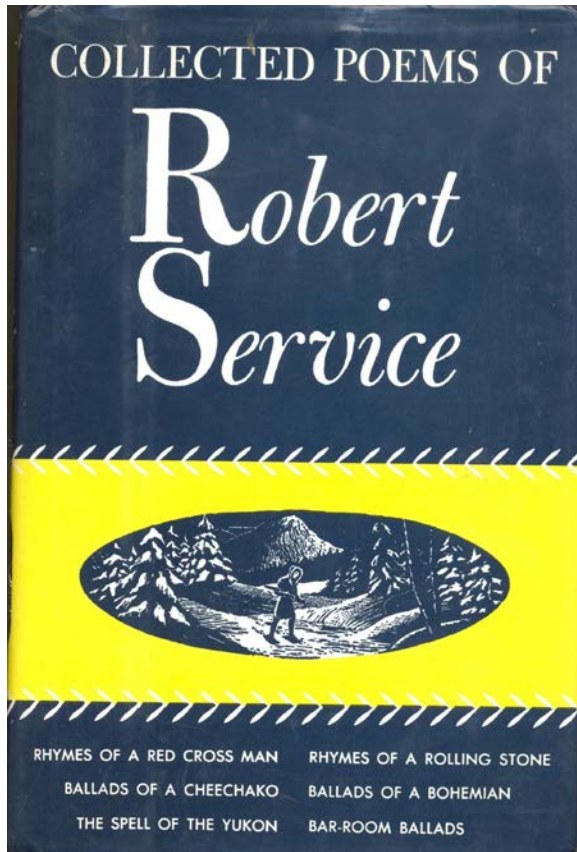
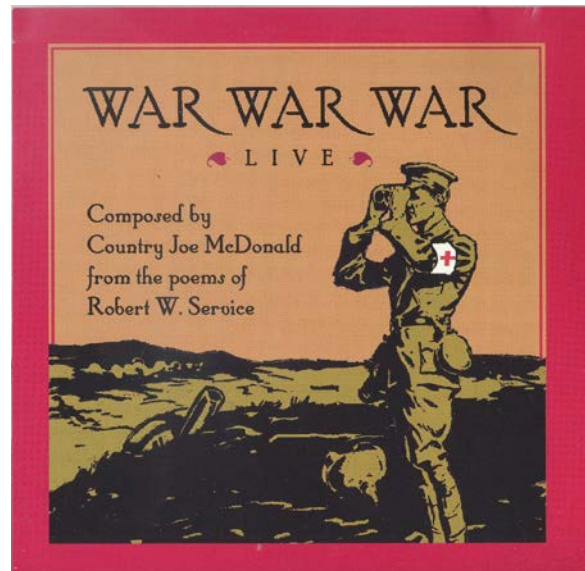


## The Man from Athabaska



At the Princeton Traditional Music Festival in August Simon Trevelyan sang this remarkable ballad, which he explained was a Robert Service poem set to a tune by Country Joe McDonald. It is one of nine poems from Service's collection *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* that McDonald recorded live in July 2007 in Castlegar, B.C., at a Vietnam War resisters' reunion festival. The CD is still available (Rag Baby 1040).



Oh the wife she tried to tell me that 'twas nothing but the thrumming  
Of a wood-pecker a-rapping on the hollow of a tree.  
And she thought that I was fooling when I said it was the drumming  
Of the mustering of legions, and 'twas calling unto me.  
'Twas calling me to pull my freight and hop across the sea.

And a-mending of my fish-nets sure I started up in wonder,  
For I heard a savage roaring and 'twas coming from afar.  
Oh the wife she tried to tell me that 'twas only summer thunder,  
And she laughed a bit sarcastic when I told her it was War.  
'Twas the chariots of battle where the mighty armies are.

Then down the lake came Half-breed Tom with russet sail a-flying,  
And the word he said was "War" again, so what was I to do?  
Oh the dogs they took to howling, and the missis took to crying,  
As I flung my silver foxes in the little birch canoe.  
Yes, the old girl stood a-blubbing till an island hid the view.

Says the factor: "Mike, you're crazy! They have soldier men a-plenty.  
You're as grizzled as a badger, and you're sixty year or so."

“But I haven't missed a scrap,” says I, “since I was one and twenty.  
And shall I miss the biggest? You can bet your whiskers — no!”  
So I sold my furs and started . . . and that's eighteen months ago.

For I joined the Foreign Legion, and they put me for a starter  
In the trenches of the Argonne with the Boche a step away;  
And the partner on my right hand was an apache from Montmartre;  
On my left there was a millionaire from Pittsburg, U. S. A.  
(Poor fellow! They collected him in bits the other day.)

But I'm sprier than a chipmunk, save a touch of the lumbago,  
And they calls me Old Methoosalah, and `blagues' me all the day.  
I'm their exhibition sniper, and they work me like a Dago,  
And laugh to see me plug a Boche a half a mile away.  
Oh I hold the highest record in the regiment, they say.

And at night they gather round me, and I tell them of my roaming  
In the Country of the Crepuscule beside the Frozen Sea,  
Where the musk-ox runs unchallenged, and the cariboo goes homing;  
And they sit like little children, just as quiet as can be:  
Men of every crime and colour, how they harken unto me!

And I tell them of the Furland, of the tumpline and the paddle,  
Of secret rivers loitering, that no one will explore;  
And I tell them of the ranges, of the pack-strap and the saddle,  
And they fill their pipes in silence, and their eyes beseech for more;  
While above the star-shells fizzle and the high explosives roar.

And I tell of lakes fish-haunted, where the big bull moose are calling,  
And forests still as sepulchres with never trail or track;  
And valleys packed with purple gloom, and mountain peaks appalling,  
And I tell them of my cabin on the shore at Fond du Lac;  
And I find myself a-thinking: Sure I wish that I was back.

So I brag of bear and beaver while the batteries are roaring,  
And the fellows on the firing steps are blazing at the foe;  
And I yarn of fur and feather when the `marmites' are a-soaring,  
And they listen to my stories, seven `poilus' in a row,  
Seven lean and lousy *poilus* with their cigarettes aglow.

And I tell them when it's over how I'll hike for Athabaska;  
And those seven greasy *poilus* they are crazy to go too.  
And I'll give the wife the “pickle-tub” I promised, and I'll ask her  
The price of mink and marten, and the run of cariboo,  
And I'll get my traps in order, and I'll start to work anew.

For I've had my fill of fighting, and I've seen a nation scattered,  
And an army swung to slaughter, and a river red with gore,  
And a city all a-smoulder, and . . . as if it really mattered,  
For the lake is yonder dreaming, and my cabin's on the shore;  
And the dogs are leaping madly, and the wife is singing gladly,  
And I'll rest in Athabaska, and I'll leave it nevermore.

# The Man from Athabaska

Robert Service/Joe McDonald

Voice

Oh, the wife she tried to tell me it was nothing but the thrumming of a wood-pecker  
rapp-ing on the holl ow of a tree. She thought that I was fool-ing when I said it was the  
drumming of the muster-ing of leg-ions calling up to me. Calling me to pull my freight and  
hop a cross the sea. 'Twas the char-i-ots of battle where the might y armies are. Then  
down the lake came half breed Tom with russ-et sail a - flying, The word he said is "War", a gain, Oh  
what was I to do? The dogs they took to howl-ing and the miss-is took to cry-ing As I  
flung my silver foxes in the lit-tle birch can - oe. Oh, the old girl stood blubbing till an is-land hid the  
view.

The musical score is written in a single system on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is simple and rhythmic, with lyrics written below the notes. There are several annotations in red: 'Voice' at the start, 'Variant end of verse 2' above the fourth line, and 'Verse 3' above the fifth line. The lyrics are split across eight lines of music, with the final line ending with a double bar line.

Transcription by Rosaleen Gregory.