

In the Dinsome Factory: Poems from the Mills

*Poems associated with the 'Literature in the Factories and Mills' exhibition
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Piston, Pen & Press

Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace, 1840-1918



Arts & Humanities
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Introduction

This short selection of poems gives a flavour of the lives and work of the many Victorian poets who had experienced, first-hand, what it was like to work in textile factories or mills, and who wrote about their experiences. We have included here a selection from some of the poets featured on our exhibition banners, with representative poems by writers from Dundee, Perthshire, the Borders, Glasgow, Yorkshire and Lancashire. Eventually, these poems and many others will be available on the 'Piston, Pen & Press' database, planned for completion at the end of 2021.

We are always happy to hear from people who know about their local poets and might be able to help us with further information, and we welcome your comments and feedback. Anyone who wishes to do some more sleuthing in their local libraries and archives can join in our search, as we uncover the rich local cultures linked to industrial workers in these regions. You can find our individual contact details on our website, or general contact details on the back of this pamphlet.

Many poems by industrial workers are written in local dialect.

Resources include:

Scots: Dictionary of the Scots Language (www.dsl.ac.uk).

Yorkshire: Yorkshire Historical Dictionary (<https://yorkshiredictionary.york.ac.uk>)

Lancashire: George Milner and John Howard Nodal, A Glossary of the Lancashire Dialect (1875-1882). Searchable full text at archive.org.

John Hall ('Johnnie Ha') (1810-1872)

John Hall, or 'Johnnie Ha', was a Selkirk stocking-maker. Disabled from birth by lameness and a crippled arm, he always lived close to poverty. He was a well-known local character and his love of Robert Burns was familiar to all his workmates. One reminiscence notes that 'Sometimes he would stop in his work to note down some bright idea in rhyme, and at other times he would amid the birr of fourteen stocking-frames recite his latest productions.' He never seems to have published a volume, and many of his poems are lost. This manuscript poem is reprinted from a notebook held by Scottish Borders Archives, Hawick.

A FAREWELL ADDRESS TO A MACHINE IN BROWNS MILL SELKIRK, THE MACHINE WENT UNDER THE NAME OF WALL[A]CE

- 1st Farewell my trusty Wallace
My worthy friend adieu,
For by a new improvment,
I'm stop'd from serving you,
- 2nd Long have we been together,
And carded many a batch,
Aye good agreement 'tween us was,
I never got a scratch,
- 3rd But mid the tide of rolling time,
Theres many a varied scene,
So that there is no wonder at,
The end of a Machine,
- 4 A winter long and right severe,

Both of us has seen past,
A spring com'd in both bleak and cold
With many a bitter blast,

5th But you are gone your duty's done,
Unto the full amount,
Unlike your erring servant,
That must give an account,

6th His time flies fast tis certain,
By death he gets the route
So may he fully be prepar'd,
Before his breath goes out,

7th In memory I'll you revere,
While I have flesh and blood,
And may the firm long prosper,
Where you and I long stood

The above was wrote while a Shifter at Browns Mill [...]

[Manuscript], c. 1849-1860, Scottish Borders Archives, Hawick.

Ben Preston (1819–1902)

After a very limited education, Ben Preston started his career as an apprentice woollorter in the same Bradford firm as his father, a former hand-loom weaver, publishing his first poems in the *Bradford Observer* during these years. Many of his Bradford poems were concerned with ‘the life of factory operatives as it existed ere legislation stepped in to put the curb on grasping, unscrupulous employers’, as an obituary in the *Leeds Mercury* noted. Preston spent twenty years in factory work in Bradford, before giving it up for his health and moving to the countryside outside Bingley. He wrote in both dialect and standard English, and published collections of poetry in 1872 and 1881. The reference in the final line of ‘Stand up, Lads’ is to George Odger, pioneering trades unionist and radical politician. The poem also references art critic and influential writer John Ruskin’s views on the dignity of labour.

STAND UP, LADS, AN’ LET’S HEV A FEYT.

THEAR’S a deal o’ things wreng’ at we mean to mak’ reyt,
So, dal it, stand up, lads, an’ let’s hev a feyt;
If we stick weel together an’ keep up wer pluck
Like a flee aht o’ t’treacle, we’s e fidge aht o’ t’muck.

Tak’ noatis, if ivver ye mean to be men,
T’furst battles an’ t’hardest al be wi’ yersen;
When ye tussle for t’wage just allah ivvry man
For his hoam an’ his wife to due t’best ’at he can.

Dunnot strike below t’belt when ye’re manfully met,
Auther lick wi’ fair feytin’ ur tak’ tul’t ye’re bet,
We’s e ne’er see mich betterness spring up i’ t’land
Wol worker can thoil to tak’ worker by t’hand.

Dunnot run after brass whol ye're blawn aht o' breetath,
Nur mak' life wi' unrest like a shuttle i' t'sheeth,
Let yer daywarks be nauther to hard nur to long,
An' yer leisure be sweetened wi' music an' song.

Let's feyt for t'poar mothers 'at addles ther scan
By weyvin fro' dayleet to dark like a man,
For a hoam lost an' dowly receives 'em at neet—
Ther husbands at t'aleass, ther childer i' t'street.

An' let's feyt for sweet hoams an' a seet o' green grass
Aht o' t'stink o' this sewage, an' brimstone, an' gas,
Wheer wer childer, let aht into t'sunshine an' t'air,
May grow graceful i' body, an' healthy, an' fair.

Nut swarmin' i' ginnels awf naykt an' awf rotten,
Bleared imps aht o' t'witches o' Macbeth by Sattan:
“Dreams, dreams,” says Old Turncog, “that Ruskin's a flat,”
Bud we've doin devil's wark 'at's as hard as all that.

Is labour an skill—that's two pairts aht o' t'three—
To be hectored an' diddled by duffers like thee?
Is a hundred poor fowk to go stinted an' bare
That a fooil may turn aht in a carriage an' pair?

For wark-fowk i' cellars a grand thing this trade is,
Upheld an' bepraized by all Europe's fine ladies;
Just nah, when poor France regged an' tattered an' bare is,
We're weyvin' silk lustres for t' harlots i' Paris.

Let trade's blesséd martyr, St. Cobden the Holy,
Sing psalms o' thenksgivin' to Feshion an' Folly;
We sal lewk up for help to no Parliament men—
They're to threng, iv'ry one of 'em, helpin' thersen.

For t'changes we're wantin' we willut long wait,
An' ye're axt to due nowt nobbut get aht o' t'gate,
An' if pahr-loom an' spinnal lords says it's no goa
They'll get pawsed aht o' t'mule hoil by Odgers & Co.

Dialect and Other Poems (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1881),
pp. 29-30.

Ellen Johnston (“The Factory Girl”) (1835–c.1874)

Ellen Johnston was born in Hamilton, Lanarkshire, and worked from an early age as a factory weaver in Dundee, Glasgow and Belfast. She became a popular newspaper poet, with a particular reputation in Glasgow’s *Penny Post*, where she carried on a lively correspondence in verse with a circle of poetic admirers. Johnston’s autobiography, published with her poems in 1869, is notable as one of few surviving autobiographical accounts by working-class women poets, and gives a dramatic, and, for its time, shocking, account of the trials of her life. Johnston often presented herself as persecuted and disliked by fellow-workers and overseers jealous of her talents, and as a suffering romantic heroine. Andrew Galbraith and his brother ran a cotton-spinning factory in Glasgow, employing over 1000 people. “Tennant’s stalk” was the chimney of the St Rollox Chemical Works, a famous Glasgow landmark at this time.

THE FACTORY GIRL’S FAREWELL.

Farewell to Galbraith’s bonnie mill,
Where long I’ve earned my daily bread;
Where many a shuttle I did fill,
With bursting heart and aching head.
The griefs I have undergone
Language hath no power to tell;
But God shall yet repay each wrong,
So Galbraith’s bonnie mill, farewell!

It was not thee, nor was it those
Who toil in thee that caused my grief;
Dark Envy wrecked my calm repose

And long I sighed to find relief.
Ah! mine were deep-dyed, countless wrongs
Which did from Falsehood's bosom swell;
I've wept whilst others sung my songs,
So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

I go not hence in grief nor shame,
Within a stranger-land to range;
I go to wear another's name—
My heart for his give in exchange.
And he hath pledged when I'm his wife,
Care's dark clouds he will dispel;
And prize me as a gem through life,
So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

I go to live in London town,
Amidst the wealthy and the fair;
I may not reach to high renown;
But if I have contentment there,
That is the love-born star of mirth,
It hath a conquering power to quell
The pangs which sorrow giveth birth:
So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

Farwell to one, farewell to all,
And those who were my truest friends;
Their memory shall my heart enthrall,
When other hearts their love extends.
Farewell to James and Thomas Locke,
And Robert Rankin I'll wish you well,
Until death draws his fatal stroke:
So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell.

Farewell, John Fairlie and James Weir,
 'Dick,' 'Tom,' and 'Jim,' and number *One*,
The Brothers Lambert, not long here,
 And likewise Samuel Sutherland,
Whose sunny smile and swelling song
 Oft bound me in a mystic spell,
And soothed me with its melting tone:
 So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

Farewell to all the works around,
 The flax mill, foundry, cooperage too;
The old forge, with its blazing mound,
 And Tennant's stalk, farewell to you.
Your gen'rous masters were so kind,
 Theirs was the gift that did excel;
Their name around my heart is twined:
 So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

Farewell, my honour'd masters two,
 Your mill no more I may traverse;
I breathe you both a fond adieu;
 Long may you live lords of commerce.
Farewell unto my native land,
 Land of the thistle and blue-bell;
Oh! wish me joy with heart and hand:
 So Galbraith's bonnie mill, farewell!

*Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, the
'Factory Girl'* (Glasgow: William Love, 1867), pp. 93-5.

William Wright ('Bill o' th' Hoylus End') (1836-1897)

William Wright was educated until age 14, when he went into the mill to learn warpdressing (preparing threads for weaving). Later, he joined a troop of strolling players as a musician, actor and acrobat. He then went into the army and was based for three years in Scotland before returning to Keighley to work as a warp dresser again. Wright wrote a play, *The Wreck of the Bella*, which was locally performed, he produced an annual comic almanac, he attempted periodical publication, and he wrote across a variety of genres, though most successfully in comic Yorkshire dialect. He was a colourful and controversial local figure.

OUR POOR LITTLE FACTORY GIRLS.

THEY are up in the morning right early,
They are up sometimes afore leet;
I hear their clogs they are clamping,
As t' little things go dahn the street.

They are off in the morning right early,
With their baskets o' jock on their arm;
The bell is ting-tonging, ting-tonging,
As they enter the mill in a swarm.

They are kapering backward and forward,
Their ends to keep up if they can;
They are doing their utmost endeavours,
For fears o' the frown o' man.

Wi' fingers so nimble and supple,
The twist, an' they twine, an' they twirl,
Such walking, an' running, an' kneeling,
Does the wee little factory girl.

They are bouncing about like a shuttle,
They are kneeling an' rubbing the floor;
While their wee little mates they are doffing,
Preparing the spindles for more.

Them two little things they are t'thickest,
They help one another 'tis plain;
They try to be t'best and t'quickest,
The smiles o' their master to gain.

And now from her ten hours' labour,
Back to her cottage shoo shogs;
Aw hear by the tramping an' singing,
'Tis the factory girl in her clogs.

And at night when shoo's folded i' slumber,
Shoo's dreaming o' noises and drawls:
Of all human toil under-rated,
'Tis our poor little factory girl's.

Revised Edition of Poems (Keighley: John Overend, 1891),
pp. 149-50.

George Watson ('The Roper Bard', 'Nostaw')
(1846–1914)

George Watson worked as a rope and twine spinner in Dundee. He was educated through a church evening school. By the late nineteenth-century, he was well-known for his newspaper verse, which he allegedly recited to fellow-employees at Lawson's Rope Works before sending to the press.

THE WEARY SPINNIN'.

I'm just a spinner to my trade,
A pair but honest roper, O;
Within yon bonnie red-tiled shed,
I hae won mony a copper, O.
My trials in life hae been severe,
A' by a bad beginning, O;
Experience has cost me dear
Sin' I began the spinnin', O.

It's by its fruit we ken the tree—
I'll never harbour booty, O
Kind Providence assistin' me,
I'll strive to do my duty, O.
The roper bard was ance unwise—
Mak' ye a guid beginnin', O;
They're sure to fa' wha try to rise
By ony act o' sinnin', O.

Dame Fortune never smiled on me
I ne'er may win her favour, O
While blessed wi' honest poverty
I've ae frien' nae deceiver, O.
She sticks to me, come thick or thin,

As doon life's sands are rinnin', O;
I'll strive an honest crust to win,
E'en at the weary spinnin' O.

Love's Task: Poems and Songs (Dundee: printed by J. Durham,
Son, and Kinnock, 1885), pp. 113-4.

James Greig (1861–1941)

James Greig was a hackler (a worker who used a hackle—a type of comb—to separate flax) in a linen factory, possibly in Abroath. It was while he was working in the factory that he wrote and published *Poems and Songs from the Hackle-Shop* (1887). He later became an illustrator.

IN THE DINSOME FACTORIE.

WE toil all day 'mid the choking dust
Of the dinsome factorie,
That we may honestly earn a crust
For our wives and bairnies wee.
Our toil's severe and our wage is small,
Yet we never fret nor sigh;
But work away with the hope that all
May be better by and by.

Chorus.

Then come ye toilers of every trade,
And join in a song with me
In praise of those who must earn their bread
In the dinsome factorie.

Amongst our ranks there are manly hearts,
Ever foremost in the strife,
When vice with all its unseemly arts
Would endanger virtue's life.
And when the tyrants of earth would try
To tread on our libertie,
We fill the air with a mighty cry,
And the cravens quickly flee.

Chorus--Then come, &c.

Within the walls (which are far from bright)
Of the dinsome factorie
Are souls lit up with the lustrous light
From the fires of poesy;
And day by day, to beguile the hours,
In a joyous mood they sing
Of love and hope and the wayside flowers,
Till the dusty rafters ring.

Chorus--Then come, &c.

Before we leave for our homes to-night
Let us toast our partners rare,
For oft their aid and their smiles so bright
Drive away the fiend Despair.
And oh! let's pray that our Maker above
May watch o'er our bairnies wee,
And fill their hearts with His wondrous love,
That their lives may happy be.

Chorus.

Then join with me in this last refrain,
To the wives and bairnies wee
Of those who labour and ne'er complain
Of their lot in the factorie.

Poems and Songs from the Hackle-Shop (Arbroath:
Thomas Buncle, 1887), pp. 8-9.

Sarah A. Robinson (1865-?)

Sarah A. Robinson, about whom we currently have little information, was a poet who published in the local Burnley press and produced a remarkable series of factory poems for the *Yorkshire Factory Times* in the late nineteenth century. From the 'Padiham' signature of her newspaper poems, it is highly likely that she is the Sarah A. Robinson identified as a 'cotton weaver' in Padiham, Lancashire, in the 1881, 1891 and 1901 census, living at home with her sisters and parents: her father was a barber. By 1911 she was married to Frederick George Poulton, possibly a co-operative shopkeeper. His signed letters to the *Burnley Express* on various political topics, and her poems, suggest that the couple had shared interests in the Labour and co-operative movements.

DISHEARTENED.

Dear mother, I've nothing but drawbacks to-day,
My duty I cannot fulfil;
My weary head aches, 'tis weaving so bad—
In truth it is making me ill.

My looms they have scarcely been running to-day,
My labour it all seems in vain;
I'm constantly drawing the ends through the reed
Which come down again and again.

From break of the morn till close of the day
O'er my fatal warps do I lean;
You'd pity your child, dear mother, I know,
If you could but witness the scene.

I've never experienced such weaving before,
My troubles I can't help but heed;

To toil all day in such a hard way
It is most cruel indeed.

But what grieves me most, ah ! really is this—
I can't meet the average this week;
I'm afraid when my wage to the master is known,
He'll bid me a new place to seek.

But this I can't do, for, mother, you know
That work is so hard to get now;
I'll try once again, and work like a slave,
Though great be the pain o'er my brow.

Yorkshire Factory Times, 19 July 1895.

Sam Fitton (1868–1923)

Sam Fitton started work in the mills, aged ten, first as a ‘doffer’, then as a ‘little piecer’. As an adult he worked as a piecer and then as a weaver until 1903, when ill-health forced him to give up factory work entirely. He then embarked on a career as a writer, cartoonist and entertainer. Between 1907 and 1917, he was a regular contributor to the *Cotton Factory Times*, providing poetry, dialect columns, and cartoons. A champion of dialect writing, Sam was a member of the Lancashire Authors’ Association (founded in 1909). In this poem, Sam Fitton ventriloquises a factory girl’s assertion of her twin rights to fair treatment at work and what we would nowadays call a good ‘work-life balance’. The reference to “Peace” in the penultimate verse suggests that this poem was written towards the end of the First World War.

A FACTORY GIRL’S PLEA.

(A mill manager has been saying that factory girls don't work so hard now they are receiving higher wages.)

When times were hard and wages low,
I own I made a splutter;
I had to toil a lot, I know,
To earn my bread and butter.

I used to rise at five o'clock,
And run off feeling surly;
I'd barely time to don my frock;
My hair was none too curly.

There was no chivalry in men,
Our cause was weak and lonely;

I didn't call it living then,
'Twas just existing only.

I've often met my daily strife
On merely bread and water,
And all those finer joys of life
Were given the master's daughter.

I've had to fight for meat and drink
Through stormy days and breezy;
Come — be a man, sir — don't you think
It's time I took it easy?

Some ladies get above their share —
You must admit it's true, sir —
Then make my load less hard to bear,
For I'm a human, too, sir.

I'm quite as loyal as the rest,
Accuse me not of treason.
If everyone will do her best,
I'll do my best in reason.

As I would live, I must confess,
Hard work may be a treasure;
There's dignity in Labour — yes,
And perhaps a bit in pleasure.

Equality in all we do
Should never be derided;
Well, let our work, and pleasure, too,
Be equally divided.

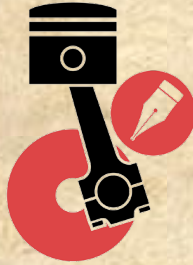
The hardest job we never shirk,

We are no factory floaters;
Unlike the men for whom we work,
We've little time for motors.

We only ask, as is our right,
That Peace shall stay our Pining;
That all the clouds of yesternight
Shall show their silver lining.

A factory girl can ne'er be free,
With mind and muscle aching;
Dead are the days of slavery,
And Freedom's in the making.

[Unattributed newspaper clipping, n.d.].



'Piston, Pen & Press: Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace, from the Factory Acts to the First World War' is a three-year, Research Council funded project which explores industrial workers in Scotland and the North as participants in literary culture, as writers, readers, and members of associations and societies. It is a collaboration between the Universities of Strathclyde and Manchester, the National Railway Museum, and a number of other industrial heritage museums and local libraries and archives. Over the duration of the project, we are hosting exhibitions, running Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on the history of industrial workers, and working with musicians and playwright on new songs and a play based around some of our findings. You can follow our schedule of events and find out more on our website (www.pistonpenandpress.org), on Twitter (@PistonPen, #PistonPen) or email us on pistonpenandpress@gmail.com.

