

Doon in the Dark: Poems from the Mines

*Poems associated with the 'Literature in the Mines' exhibition
edited by Kirstie Blair and Lauren Weiss*



Piston, Pen & Press

Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace, 1840-1918



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

What can I say? Shall I tell you I have no learning? The book itself will tell you that. Shall I whine, and say to my critic, "Have mercy on me! – think of my position in life"? No, indeed! On the contrary, I say, Weigh the book alone.

David Wingate, preface to *Poems and Songs* (1862)

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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 the mining industry, 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 Lanarkshire, West Lothian, Stirlingshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland and Tyneside. (The poets included here are all men: women were employed as surface workers in mining during our period of study, but if there were ‘pitwomen’ poets, they have not yet been found.) 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 is welcome to 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>)

North-East (Tyneside): Geordie Dictionary at England’s North East
(<https://englandsnortheast.co.uk>)

A number of these poems included grammatical errors or unconventional spelling in their published form. We have reproduced the text exactly as it appears in the originals.

James Anderson (1826–1899)

James Anderson was a Tyneside collier, poet and songwriter, who wrote popular dialect pieces and songs. He started working in the mines early due to the death of his father in a mining accident. Newspaper obituaries suggest that his reputation as a poet began when he won a song-writing competition in the Newcastle press in 1870. This poem by him is a typical example of the political poems published in *The Miner and Workman's Advocate*, in which it appeared. Anderson worked in the same pit as Joseph Skipsey, and Lewis Proudlock attended his funeral.

TO THE MINERS.

Come, all ye miners, north and south,
And join the union, in its youth—
Now advocate the cause of truth,
 And let it shine—
Now tell the world with open mouth
 That you'll combine;

And spread the union far and near,
Through north and south—through Tyne and Wear,
And from the masters, without fear,
 Demand your right;
Then truth and justice will appear,
 And conquer might.

And, when the seed is fairly sown,
The union blossoms fully blown,
Our grievances we will make known
 To all the world—
The union banner, in every town,
 Shall be unfur'd;

And, first of all, we'll let them ken
That our dwelling is an unhealthy den,
More fit for pigs than living men.
 In their present state
They can scarcely be described by pen,
 Or penman great.

The next thing we will strive to show
Is, that our wages are so low,
That we cannot to a market go,
 Or join a store;
Our wives must all for credit go,
 Which grieves us sore.

Of another evil I would complain—
A very great disgrace to men—
To allow their children aged ten
 To descend the pit;
And behind a door, in grief and pain,
 Twelve hours to sit.

There, toiling for their daily bread,
Within that dark and noisome shed,
When they can neither write nor read,
 Or spell their name;
It grieves my heart, and makes it bleed
 To tell the same.

I've known my tender mother sigh
When our early time to toil drew nigh,
And I myself would sob and cry;
 Then she would weep
When she let me out, dark, wet, or dry,
 Three-parts asleep.

I think I've almost said enough,
For my lines are rude, and very rough;
But it grieves a man and makes him gruff
 To write such rhyme.
I could fill volumes with such stuff
 In little time.

Would all unite in brotherly love,
And to the world those statements prove,
And give the wheel another shove,
 With all their might,

These evils they would soon remove,
And have their right.

So, miners, do no longer wait,
But gravely scan your present state,
And support your noble ADVOCATE
That's in the press.
And your efforts will, if ever so great,
Meet with success.

The Miner and Workman's Advocate, 7 November 1863.

David Wingate (1828–1892)

David Wingate worked in the mines in the Glasgow and Lanarkshire region from the age of nine. Like most working-class poets, he educated himself and then published poems and autobiographical pieces widely in the local press. Unlike most, he also managed to get his poetry into *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a leading periodical. Blackwood's publishing firm then issued his first collection. Wingate used the funds from his publications to study at the Glasgow School of Mines, and became a colliery manager. He continued to publish, having a relatively successful literary career and reputation.

A SONG OF "KING COAL".

[The Author's aim, while composing this song, was to imitate "The Song of the Shirt" as closely as the difference of the subject would permit.]

WITH a lamp on his dreamy head,
And a damp on his gummy brow,
A miner sat, in dusty rags,
Deep in a mine below.
He dug—dug—dug,
In the sepulchre-seeming hole,
And still, with a voice of sorrow deep,
Sang he this song of "King Coal."

"Dig—dig—dig,
'Neath the horses' clay-clad hoof,
And dig—dig—dig,
'Neath the darkly threatening roof.
Fallen spirits seem we—
Children of gloom and fire;
But ne'er an Orpheus here will come
With gloom-dispelling lyre.

"Dig—dig—dig,
Till the labouring bosom heaves,
As each clogged lung expands in pain
With the poison it receives.
Hole and tumble and draw,

Crawl and sweat and gasp,
Till the pick becomes an unwieldy weight
In the toil-enfeebled grasp.

“Lords in costly halls,
Princes on gilded thrones,
Hear ye e'er, by your cheerful hearths,
A miner's dying moans?
We dig in a starless gloom,
To be shunned as vicious crew;
And dig—untimely graves for us,
While we dig for warmth for you.

[...]

Thus, with an aching heart
And a sweating, clammy brow,
A miner, in his dusty rags,
Sang in a mine below—
A place that a ghost would shun,
A worm-detested hole;
Thus, with a voice of sorrow deep,
That might have made old Nero weep,
Sang he this song of “King Coal.”

Poems and Songs (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons,
1862), pp. 168-72.

Thomas Blackah (1828–1895)

Thomas Blackah was primarily employed in the North Yorkshire lead-mines, in the Greenhow Hill area. He emigrated briefly to the United States at one point, and tried out coal-mining in the Durham region; later, after Greenhow Mines shut down in the 1880s, he worked in Leeds. Blackah was a keen writer who published in the local press and sold his poems as broadsides. He also published the dialect almanac *T'Nidderdill Olminac* for some years: his biographer claims that this comic production sold thousands of copies. Blackah appears to have been well-known in his region in his lifetime, though his poems were not collected until well after his death. Most of his writings are not concerned with mining, but he tended to highlight his profession by publishing under the pseudonym 'A Working Miner'.

WE MAY BE LO', WE MAY BE POOR.

We may be lo', we may be poor,
An' hev' hard an' lang to toil,
Contented still we jog along,
An' we'y pleasure till the soil.
The rich may romp an' roose away,
An' be spending heaps o' treasure;
The gay their gaudy duds display,
When they 'er oot for pleasure.

Bud we are lo', an' we are poor,
An' hev' hard an' lang to toil,
Contented still we jog along,
An' we'y pleasure till the soil.

The bee may labour all't day lang,
An' be bent o'gathering honey;
The miser neet an' day be thrang,
We'y his glittering piles o' money;
The soldier in the field of strife,
He may hack an' hew his foes,
Then draw a pension all his life,
An' seaa dwell in sweet repose.

Bud we are lo' an' we are poor,
An' hev hard an' lang to toil,

Contented still we jog along,
An' we'y pleasure till the soil.

We like to see wer barns at neet,
We'y ther mothers—smile an' greet us;
We hear we'y joy ther pattering feet,
Cumin on the road ta meet us;
We hit in peace wer humble fare,
Procured by honest labour,
Unawed an' free fra' cankering care,
We're at peace we'y friend an' neeber.
 We may be lo', we may be poor,
 An' hev hard an' lang ta toil,
 Contented still we jog along,
 An' we'y pleasure till the soil.

Dialect Poems and Prose, with biography by Harald John Lexow Briff (York:
Waddingtons, [1937?]), p. 17.

Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903)

Joseph Skipsey was born into a mining family in Tynemouth. His father was shot dead while he was a baby in a bitter miners' strike, and Skipsey grew up in poverty, starting work as a trapper at the age of seven. According to his biographer, he taught himself to read and write in the mine. He published his first book of poetry in 1858, and several more collections followed, including *Carols from the Coalfields* (1888); he also published essays and worked as an editor. Famous writers, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William B. Yeats, read his poems and corresponded with him. Through his literary career, he obtained positions working as librarian for the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, and later, as the custodian of Shakespeare's birthplace. Despite his relative success, most of his working life was still spent as a Tyneside miner.

THE COLLIER LAD.

My lad he is a Collier Lad,
And, ere the lark awakes,
He's up, and away to spend the day
Where daylight never breaks;
Yet toils he on right manfully,
And when the day has sped,
He cleans himsel', and courts his Nell,
Who loves her Collier Lad.

Tho' doom'd to labor underground,
A merry lad is he,
And when a holiday comes round,
He'll spend that day in glee;
He'll tell his tale o'er a pint o' ale,
And crack his joke, till sad
Must be the heart who cannot laugh
To hear the Collier Lad.

At bowling matches on the green,
He ever takes the lead,
For none can swing his arm and fling
With such a pith and speed;
His bowl is seen to skim the green,

And bound as it were glad
To hear the cry o' victory
Salute the Collier Lad.

When 'gainst the wall they play the ball,
He's never known to lag,
But up and down he keeps it going
Till all his rivals fag;
When deftly,—lo! he strikes a blow
Which gars them scratch their head,
And marvel how it came to pass
They play'd the Collier Lad.

The quoits are out, the hobs are fix'd,
The first round quoit he flings
Enrings the hob; and lo! the next
The hob again unrings;
And thus he'll play a summer's day,—
The theme o' those who gad;
And youngsters shrink to bet their brass
Against the Collier Lad.

When in the dance he doth advance,
The rest all sigh to see
How he can spring and kick his heels,
When they awearied be;
Your one-two-three, with either knee,
He'll beat, and then, glee-mad
A summerset will crown the dance,
Danced by the Collier Lad.

Besides a will and pith and skill,
My laddie owns a heart
That never once would suffer him
To act a cruel part;
That to the poor would ope the door
To share the last he had;
And many a secret blessing's pour'd
Upon my Collier Lad.

He seldom goes to church, I own,
And when he does, why then,
He with a leer will sit and hear,
And doubt the holy men;
This very much annoys my heart,
But soon as we are wed,
To please the priest, I'll do my best
To tame my Collier Lad.

The Collier Lad, and Other Songs and Ballads (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: J. G.
Forster, 1864), pp. 5-7.

Marshall Cresswell (1833?-1889)

Marshall Cresswell was born in the pit village of Fawdon Square (now part of Newcastle). In 1842, he started working in mines in East Cramlington, and in 1844, moved to Washington (Durham), Shiney Row, South Hetton, Wingate. In the 'Preface' to his published collection of poems and songs, he tells us that 'At that time lads were to work as putters until twenty-one years of age'. Cresswell also worked at Dudley Pit in 'sinking'. In 1857, he was selected to go to Borneo as a sinker and later wrote of his adventures on the voyage. In 1859, he returned home to Dudley where in 1860, he married and had six living children. He was a well-known local singer and songwriter, especially noted for his dialect works. This poem recalls the days before the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842, which prevented women and children under ten from working underground.

THAT DAY HES NOO G'YEN BY.

Air—"The Miller o' the Dee."

The changes that's t'yun place o' late,
As we heer awd foaks say,
M'yeeks us reet glad 'twas not wor fate,
Te be lads in thor day.
They tell us bits o' bairns wis sent
Doon pits te work did try,
At six eer awd, we may be glad
Te think that day's g'yen by.

They tell us tee, lads went te wark
At two o'clock each morn;
Quite late at neet when it wis dark,
Back h'yem they wad return;
They had ne time te reed nor rite,
But i' bed compelled te lie,
Te get thor rest, for them 'twas best,
But noo that day's g'yen by.

Coal hewors tee wad work twelve oors
Aw've heerd me feythor say,
He's quite unfit g'yen te the pit,

An' slept upon the way.
Ne wundor ignorance prevailed,
For maistors waddint try
Te eddykate poor bits o' lads,
But noo that day's g'yen by.

If men thor maistors went to see
About what was thor due,
They very oft turn'd off wad be,
Which m'yed them sure te rue;
Or if ov Union they shud speak
An' men seem'd te cumply,
The maistors then wad mark thor men,
But noo that day's g'yen by.

Men often hes a hard day rowt
A livelihood te get,
An' for his wark he's gettin' nowt,
But sumtimes been i' det;
He's been se greev'd when he's g'yen h'yem,
I' bed he cuddint lie,
Te think for nowt se hard he's rowt,
But noo that day's g'yen by.

As noo a better day hes dawn'd,
Let us wi' awl wor mite
De what we can te caws each man
Wi' maistors te unite;
An' if a grievance should prevail,
Let arbitrators try
Te m'yek a cawl an' settle awl,
That strikes may be g'yen by.

Local and Other Songs, Recitations (Newcastle-upon-Tyne:
J. W. Chater, 1883), pp. 74-5.

Francis Barnard (1834–1904)

Francis Barnard was born in Clackmannanshire, in a village belonging to the Devon Iron Company. He worked in the pit with his father from a boy, and spent nearly twenty-five years continuously at Woodend Colliery, near Bathgate in West Lothian. By the late 1880s, he had moved above ground as an engine-keeper, as his second poetry collection, *Chirps Frae the Engine Lum* (1889), records. Barnard published poems in Scots and English, including a number on political topics, in the *Airdrie Advertiser* and *West Lothian Courier*. He was part of a circle of West Lothian poets that included his son, Andrew, also a collier until he was disabled in a mining accident.

TO MY ENGINE.*

While the steam is being raised for commencing the week's work, and the steam beginning to hiss through the cylinder.

Hae patience lass—jist bide a wee—
Ye're getting' fidgety, I see;
Ye're no as young as ye wad be
 When first I kent ye;
E'er the week's dune, 'tween you an' me,
 Ye'll just get plenty.

Tae dae your pairt, ye're seldom dour;
But scuddin' forty miles an hour,
Until we canna see for stour
 Your heels, indeed;
Ere Saturday anither show'r
 'S in your dam-heid.

Fill up your kyte (tho' I've a doot
Sic trash'll ever mak' ye stoot),
Meanwhile I'll tak' a brush an' cloot
 An' dicht ye clean,
An' mak' ye shine, a' roond aboot,
 Like a new preen.

When your last keeper, groom or guard,
Frae tendin' ye grim Death debarr'd,

An' I was sent your watch an' ward
Last spring, my certie,
Ye lookit as ye had been tarred—
Ye were sae dirty.

But I set tae, wi' a' my micht,
An' scoured, an' scrubbit morn an' nicht,
An' brushed until I got ye richt;
An' noo my lassie
Ye're like a button—clean an' bricht,
Trim, trig, an' gaucie.

Ye mind me o' my winsome Nell,
To me a credit an' yoursel';
An' hear me, tho' I say't mysel',
But for that lung, an'
That nasty croich, ye look as well
As ony young ane.

Speedin' along baith nicht an' day,
Nae ferlie, ye're gaun doon the brae,
Freely your lungs noo dinna play—
They're stiff an' wheezie,
Little I can, but what I may,
I'll dae't tae ease ye.

Nae doctor comes your pulse to feel,
Or see gin ye be ill or weel;
Ablins a blister or a peel
Wad make ye better,
An' send your pains a' to the deil
An' end the maiter.

But lately when ye puffed for breath
An' ye were like to come to skaith,
I sent for my ain doctor, faith—
Paid him, indeed—
He dosed ye, cured ye, on my aith
I'd swear, wi' lead.

Tae blaw sin' syne ye ne'er were kenn'd,
But will that croichle ever mend?
Were I to diagnose I'd pen'd
 As laryngitis,
An' if no seen tae it may end
 Yet in bronchitis.

An' aye sin' rauckle-handed Rab—
That foul-mouth loon wi' filthy gab—
Ance tried tae force ye ower a snab,
 What'er his drift, ye
Hae hobbled wi' an unco bab,
 An's no sae clifty.

But proper food wad they but gae,
Ye'd ablins rally yet a wee;
I dinna ken—we'll maybe see—
 'Tis useless grievin',
'Tis meant that you as well as me
 Scarce get a leevin'.

Ne'er mind ; aye dae your duty lass,
An' tho' they deem you but an ass,
An' thistles gie ye 'stead o' grass—
 Ne'er heed their vapours—
The day will surely come to pass,
 They'll rue their capers.

*No longer able to do duty in the mine, the author is now, and has for some time been attending an engine which drives a ventilating fan.

Chirps Frae the Engine Lum, Consisting of The Ghaist O' Gartmorn, (A Tale), and Other Poems (Bathgate: L. Gilbertson, Jubilee Hall, 1889), pp. 147-51.

Lewis Proudlock (1838–1914)

Lewis Proudlock started work in the mines aged seven, and worked in Whitfield, Dinnington, and elsewhere. His first collection, *Poems and Songs*, appeared in 1869: the prefatory note comments that many of these lyrics had first appeared in the *Hexham Herald*, *Newcastle Courant* and other papers. Proudlock also produced two novels and a second poetry collection, with a greater focus on mining topics, *The Borderland Muse*, in 1896. Proudlock seems to have worked in lead-mining and coal-mining on and off throughout his life, though he was also a dancing-master and musician, and well-known locally in this capacity. He was active in the trades union, as a member of the Executive of the Northumberland Miners' Association and a colliery delegate. His writings strongly focus on Border and Northumberland identity, and on the culture and scenery of the regions in which he lived.

THE MINERS' EMANCIPATION.

YE dusky sons of Toil, arise!
Unfurl your banner to the skies,
In harmony unite.
No longer cringe in abject fear,
Your cause is just, then persevere
And claim a freeman's right.
Can England boast a nobler class
When Hope's last glimpse recedes?
Or can her warrior sons surpass
The miner's daring deeds?
In reeking wars
Old England's tars
On History's pages shine,
But dare they face
Death's hot embrace
Within the fiery mine?

Deep down in earth's remote recess
We see the fearless miners press
To death, through flames of fire;
While from each chamber of the mine
The deadly flames in fury twine

Where manly hearts expire.
Now down the stythey shaft descends
A fearless, hardy band,
As from each heart the cry ascends,
“God keep them in thy hand!”
Dim burns each lamp
Midst stifling damp,
Yet on they persevere.
With throbbing brain,
They strive to gan*
Their dying comrades near.

Though dangers lurk on every side,
Those daring men still onward glide,
Impatient of delay.
Tho’ deadly fumes assail their breath,
They bravely strive to baffle death,
And baulk him of his prey.
See, helpless forms are borne along,
While moments seem an age,
Till willing hands in faith made strong
Receive them in the cage.
Quick! rap away!
They gasping say,
Whom danger lately braved.
Now, see, to light
Is born the freight,
The saviours and the saved.

Then why should England’s favoured few
Reville and taunt this noble crew
Wha thus can conquer fear?
Or why should bondage be the doom
Of those wha toil ’midst stythe and gloom?
In Freedom’s name, forbear!
They still are men, though doomed to toil
In regions dark and dreary,
Where death and danger ’roond them coil
Till limbs grow stiff and weary.

Then give the band
Warm friendship's hand,
Meet each one as your neighbour.
A nation's drudge
Wha then should grudge
A tythe to honest labour.
[...]

Then boldly look on baffled might,
Plant firm your flag on what is right,
With hearts and hands entwined.
Feel what ennobling strength affords
Those mystic, sweet, inspiring words,
The miners are combined.
That stirring cry will pierce the ear
Of *nerveless* legislators,
Who from our toil would shrink in fear,
Yet brand us agitators.
Then let us show
Fair freedom's foe
Our stern determination,
Our rallying cry
Shall be we'll die,
Or win emancipation.
*Reach.

The 'Borderland Muse' (London: O'Driscoll, Lennox, [1896]), pp. 140-4.

James Brown (1861–1931)

James Brown was born in Slamannan, Stirlingshire, the eldest of eight children. He received very little education and was sent to work in the local mines at a young age. He supplemented his schooling by taking mining classes in the evenings, earning certificates in science and mining. His songs and poems were published in the *Amateur* and the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, and his pieces were collected posthumously in *Poems and Songs* (1932). This long poem reflects, bitterly, on the conditions of labour for miners, through the traditional format of a conversation poem.

THE COLLIER'S DREAM.

'Twas in that pairt o' Stirlingshire,
Where pits are rife an' kilns spew fire,
Where hills o' dirt an' bings o' dross
Are scattered a' athwort the moss;
The sun was sinkin' in the west,
The hills wi' purple robes he drest,
The wee birds they had ceased to sing,
And to their nests they had taen wing,
And men that laboured hard a' day,
Now for their hames did mak' their way,
And wi' the lave a collier cam',
You'd hardly ta'en him for a man—
His face wi' stoor and sweat was black,
His claes wid scarce haud on his back,
For mendin' they had lang been past,
Thread wid'na' langer haud them fast.
Wi' slow and weared steps came he,
Until he was beneath a tree,
As wi' his day's wark he was strest,
He jist sat doon to tak' a rest.
He hadna' very long sat doon,
Until a voice cam' frae aboon,
And looking up a craw he spyed,
Guid evening! to ye frien', it cried.
To hear me speak you'll thing it funny,
But frien', I widna' speak to monie,

But seein' like mysel' yer black
We nicht dae waur than hae a crack.

COLLIER.

'Deed aye! my frien' yer speaking true,
I really was surprised at you;
But since the ice you've fairly broken,
I thank you for the words you've spoken;
To crack wi' you I wud be prood,
But frien' I'm in na crackin' mood,
For I've been working hard a' day,
And colliers' wark's na' bairn's play.

CRAW.

Atweel, my frien', your tired, I see,
And yer claes are just as wet's can be.
Yer claes! Ha, ha, guid gracious Jock,
You've stole them oot the Ragman's pock;
And there's yer bits they'd need a cloot.
Man, that's yer big tae stickin' oot.
Poor chiel, I'm really vexed to see ye,
But onie help I canna' gi'e ye.
Come tell me frien' aff a' yer pays;
Can you save nathing to get claes?

COLLIER.

Haud on, my frien', haud on a wee,
There's far mair for tae keep than me:
I've got a wife an' weans to cleed,
And then they need their daily breed,
Forbye on every term day
I've got a heavy rent to pay,
Snye coals, and licht, and sma' nick-nacks—
Such as road-money an' poor-rate tax,
Train-oil, tobacco, an' lamp-wicks,
Ha'e a' to come frae aff my picks.
And then there is my guid wife, Jenny,
I ne'er yet saw her waste a penny;
Yet still-an-on, to tell the truth,

We're just aye gaun frae han' to mooth.
The pay's sae sma' I get for toilin',
It hardly keeps oor pot aboillin';
But for a' that I widna' care,
But oh! it mak's my he'rt gey sair—
To see the ways I'm lookit doon on,
A mark for every ane to froon on—
Na wonder that I am dejected,
A farmer's dog is mair respected.

CRAW.

My canny frien', just let me tell
That if you would respect yersel',
You'd very soon see Collier-Jock
Would get respect like ither fo'k;
Jist work awa' where God did place ye,
Your humble trade will ne'er disgrace ye;
What tho' some senseless fo'k may tittle,
I widna' mind them, not a spittle;
Jist look at me, I work awa',
And never fash my heid ava'
[...]

COLLIER.

It's true, my frien', it's far oure true,
But then, I'm jist as bad as you—
I gan' ilk morning to my wark,
And toil a' day doon in the dark
Wi' na licht save a flickering lamp,
'Mong danger, powder-reek an' damp;
And tho' na guns need ever fear me,
Unseen death's shadow is aye near me;
And whiles when I sit doon to "hole,"
I splash 'mong water near hauf-coal;
Like mouidiworts or something waur,
We splash 'mong water dirt and glaur:
Thus we slave on frae day to day—
It is an awfu' fecht we ha'e—
It is so awfu' bad indeed,

It tak's us thrang to win oor breed.
I wonder if 'twas in God's plan
That man should be a slave to man,
And work awa' frae year to year
Wi' ne'er a kindly word o' cheer;
I sure oor maisters must be blest
Wi' siller, happiness and rest.

CRAW.

[...]

I ken it's perfect true, poor chiel,
The masters dinna' treat ye weel,
But then the measure they mete oot
They'll get it back withoot a doot;
For when frae earth they gan' awa,
They'll answer to the Lord o' a':
So Jock jist you strive a' ye can
To be a honest upright man,
And you a gowden croon will win
When a' your labour's past and dune;
But noo the sun is oot o' sicht,
So for the present, frien', guid-nicht.

* * * * *

The collier rose and rubbed his een
And look'd to whaur the craw had been,
He muttered as he gie'd awa'
"I've just been dreamin' after a'."

Songs and Poems (Glasgow: Published for Private Circulation by John
McCallum & Co., 1932), pp. 10-13.

Robert Tait (1874-?)

Robert Tait was the eldest in a family of 10 and his father was a coal miner. He attended school in Clarkston (near Airdrie) until age 11 when he left to work in the mines. He moved to Cambuslang around 1900 to continue work as a collier. According to the 'Preface' in his published collection of poems, 'Here he met with many congenial friends in the Wingate Burns Club, who gave him every encouragement to prosecute his worship at the muse's shrine, and from that time he became a constant contributor to the local papers, and other weekly periodicals.' Tait's first poem in print was in the *Dundee Weekly News*. Eventually, his health suffered due to mining, and he moved to work above ground in a steel company at Newton. This poem is concerned with the fight over Rights of Way, an important political and social movement for working men and women.

DIALOGUE.

Dispute Between Master and Man.

'Twas at the closing of a summer day,
A wearied Miner homeward took his way,
Along a rustic lane, though well 'twas known
A Master long had claimed it for his own.
Close by the woods, in nature's lone retreat,
The Master and the Miner chanced to meet.
You'll rightly guess, he taxed the working man;
And thus between them both dispute began:—

MASTER—

I say, old man, you know it isn't right,
That you should come along this way at night,
You ought to know this land belongs to me,
And all around, as far as you can see.
I'm well aware it is the working class
Who break my fences down, and spoil the grass.
And now, old man, I'll have you bear in mind,
'Tis in my power to have trespassers fined.

MINER—

Excuse me, sir; but min', I think it right
That I should tak' the nearest road at night—

An' this is no yer ain: for I maun say,
As lang's I've min' its been a Richt-o'Way.
When you cam' on the track you claimed it a',
That's hoo the worker's richts are stown awa.
I tell ye braw an' plain, I've got a richt
To come an' gang this wey baith morn an' night.

MASTER—

I think a man like you should understand
'Tis wrong to venture on another's land.
I challenge you, or any one, to say
It ever chanced to be a Right-of-Way;
'Tis mine alone, and your devoid of sense
To be so bold and give so much offence.
And if I cared to be a bit severe
I'd have you punished for trespassing here.

MINER—

Whate'er ye think, it's a' the same to me,
I maun be plain, tho' you a maister be:
I've wrocht a' day amang the pouter reek
Wi' chokin', noo I'm unco laith to speak;
I risk my life to earn my daily breid,
While you hae nocht like that to fash yer heid;
Wad you, kin' sir, noo think it worth your while
To hae a man like me locked up in jile?
For weel I wat ye'll hae tae bear in min',
If I was fined, I couldna pey the fine.

MASTER—

I don't object to listen to your plaint,
With grumbling men like you I'm well acquaint;
You've got to work—that's naught concerning me,
'Tis with trespassing here I disagree;
And any righteous man would say the same:
I'm right to guard my land and watch the game.
I don't require to toil, that's understood;
But miner's wages now, are very good.
Tho' I'm a wealthy man what's that to you—
I'm honest, and I pay whate'er is due.

MINER—

I'm peyed gay weel? na by my sorry sang;
I'll no gae roon the bush to say you're wrang,
I've wrocht to you for thirty years and mair,
I've howkéd ye sixteen thoosan' tons I'm shair;
Noo, will ye reckon that jist for the fun?—
My average price is hauf-a-croon per ton;
Wad you believe you've got as much frae me
As'd purchase a' the lan' as faur's ye see.

MASTER—

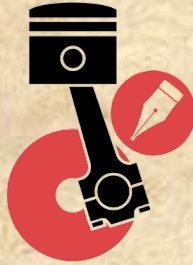
Now, just keep cool, old man, don't shake your head;
You ought to raise your cap to me instead.
And you must know I'm not the least concerned,
About the sum in thirty years you've earned.
Of course you miners laud me to the skies—
I'm righteous, when you do receive a rise;
But should the wages fall, such talk is rife;
Your agents speechifying causes strife.
Tho' wealthy, still an honest man I be:
And such, old man you must admit of me.

MINER—

Yer no an upright man, I tell ye plain;
Its gey weel kent hoo maisters get their gain.
Yer wealth's been ta'en frae honest workin' folk—
Frae oot the shouthers o' the Collier Jock.
See yon braw hoose o' yours atowre the hill;
You never wrocht for yon, nor never will.
You'll aiblins think its nocht o' my affair,
To speak sae plain to you, a millionaire.
Nor wad I wish, kin' sir, wi' you to rank,
To hae sic wealth o' gowd stored in the bank.
If I'd got justice, then a' honour due—
But justice, sir, I hae'na got frae you.

[...]

Rustic Songs of Nature (The Cambuslang Burns Club, 1919), pp. 71–5.



'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.

