**Miners’ Poetry – 12 May reading group**

**James Gordon, ‘The Famishing Miner’**

Before the rulers of his Fate,

The Miner humbly stands;

His cheek is wan, his eye is sunk,

Toil-hardened are his hands,

Care-worn his face, and deep the stamp

Of sorrow and despair;

Tho’ blasted be his faded form,

A heart is beating there!

A heart, that, spite of human foes,

Is true to Nature’s ties;

That swells whene’er he dares to think

Of this life’s destinies!

For to the Molochs of this land,

He oft hath made appeal;

Give, give to me my “daily bread” –

But no! their heart is steel.

The wife that to his manly breast,

In hopeful youth he clasp’d,

Must sink beneath the deadly blow,

By stern starvation grasp’d!

His children clinging to his knee,

Have begged of him for bread;

And in the bitterness of soul,

Sobbing, he hangs his head.

His brother worms feast sumptuously,

Their lands are broad and fair,

Of want and wretchedness like his

Why should the wealthy care?

Stern were the laws, which hist’ry tells,

Old Draco wrote in blood;

But sterner still must be the code,

That robs the poor man’s food.

How long shall toil, without its meed,

Be all his earthly doom?

How long shall life to Miner’s be,

A sunless – joyless tomb?

How long, how long! shall selfishness

And Might o’er Right prevail!

Arise! Ye Miners, at whose voice

Stern Tyrant – Cowards quail! (*The Miners’ Advocate*)

**Anon., ‘The Collier’s Worth’ (Air – ‘The Woodman’s Stroke’)**

Ye pamper’d rich ones of this earth

List while I sing the Collier’s worth,

Who, when his labour calls him forth,

He quits the smile of day:

Descends the regions underground,

Where death and danger lurk around,

And cheerful at his work is found,

He sings his fears away.

Tho’ but a woolsey suit he gains,

Tho’ one poor meal his bag contains

He never of his lot complains,

But faithful to his charge.

For labour and for sweat prepared,

His limbs, his joints are never spared,

Content is with his hardship shared;

He loves mankind at large.

The mighty prince – the pauper mean;

The beggar girl – th’ illustrious queen;

And all the various ranks between

At his coal fire regale.

Oh ye who are on dainties fed,

Think, when your table’s richly spread,

What roasts your beef, and bakes your bread,

And brews your sparkling ale.

The mighty, raging element

By man is taught a due restraint,

And oft its energies are spent

On projects well designed.

It works the forge – it turns the mill:

It lifts the beam – it moves the wheel;

And art and commerce jointly feel

Its benefactions kind.

The collier then, who health immures,

Who weary days and nights endures,

And the black sparkling coal procures

Which is so precious found,

His person and his trade should be

Regarded in a just degree,

And lauded by society,

By every neighbour round.

For me when wintry breezes blow,

When fast descends the driving snow,

At fire my freezing heart shall glow

While gratefully I think

How blest to have the coal-house stored

Such daily comforts to afford.

And when the glasses crown my board

The collier’s health I’ll drink. (Normanton, Derbyshire, *The Miners’ Advocate*)

**Jos. Fawcett, ‘The Miner’s Doom’**

(*Written expressly for* “*The Miners’ Advocate”, and recited by Mr JOS FAWCETT, a practical Miner, at a Concert held in the Lecture Room, Nelson Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, August 13, 1844, for the Benefit of the Unemployed Miners of Northumberland and Durham.)*

‘Twas evening, and a sweeter balm on earth was never shed,

The sun lay in his gorgeous pomp on ocean’s heaving bed;

The sky was clad in bright array, too beautiful to last,

For night, like envy, scowling came, and all the scene o’ercast.

‘Tis thus with hope – ‘tis thus with life, when sunny dreams appear**,**

The infant leaves the cradle-couch to slumber on a bier,

The rainbow of our cherish’d love, we see in beauty’s eye,

That glows with all its mingled hues, alas! to fade and die!

‘Tis dark, still night, the sultry air scarce moves a leaf or flower;

The aspen, trembling, fears to stir in such a silent hour;

The footsteps of the timid hare distinctly may be heard

Between the pauses of the song of night’s portentious bird.

And in so drear a moment plods the Miner to his toil,

Compelled refreshing sleep to leave for labour’s hardest moil;

By fate’s rude hand the dream of peace is broken and destroyed,

The savage beast his rest can take, but man must be denied,

And why this sacrifice of rest – did not the Maker plan

The darksome hours for gentle sleep, the day for work by man?

Yes! but the mighty gods of earth are wiser in their laws,

They hold themselves with pride to be their creatures’ first great cause.

The Miner hath his work begun, and busy strokes resound,

Warm drops of sweat are falling fast – the coal lies piled around.

And what a sight of slavery! in narrow seams compressed

Are seen the prostate forms of men to hew on back and breast.

Fainting with heat, with dust begrimed, their meagre faces see

By glimmering lamps that serve to show their looks of misery.

And oft the hard, swollen hand is raised to wipe the forehead dews,

He breathes a sigh for labour’s close, and then his toil renews.

And manly hearts are throbbing there – and visions in that mine

Float oe’r the young and sanguine soul like stars that rain and shine.

Amid the dreariness that dwells within the cavern’s gloom

Age looks for youth to solace him – waits for his fruits to bloom.

Behold! there is a careless face bent from yon cabined nook,

Hope you may read in his bright eye – there’s future in his look;

Oh, blight not then the fairy flower, ‘tis heartless to destroy

The only pleasure mortals know – anticipated joy!

Oh, God! what flickering flame is this? see, see again its glare!

Dancing around the wiry lamp like meteors in the air.

Away, away! – the shaft, the shaft! – the blazing fire flies;

Confusion! – speed! – the lava-stream the lightning’s wing defies!

The shaft! – the shaft! – down on the ground and let the demon ride

Like the sirocco on the blast, volcanoes in their pride!

The choke-damp angel slaughters all – he spares no living soul!

He smites them with sulphureous brand – he blackens them like coal!

The young – the hopeful, happy young fall with the old and gray,

And oh, great God! a dreadful doom, thus buried to decay

Beneath the green and flowery soil whereon their friends remain,

Disfigured, and, perchance, alive, their cries unheard and vain!

Oh, desolation! thou art now a tyrant on thy throne,

Thou smilest with sardonic lip to hear the shriek and groan!

To see each mangled, writhing corse, to raining eyes displayed,

For hopeless widows now lament, and orphans wail dismayed.

Behold thy work! The maid is there her lover to deplore,

The mother wails her only child that she shall see no more!

An idiot sister laughs and sings – oh, melancholy joy!

While bending o’er her brother dead, she opens the sightless eye.

Apart, an aged man appears, like some sage Druid-oak,

Shedding his tears like leaves that fall beneath the woodman’s stroke;

His poor old heart is rent in twain – he stands and weeps alone,

The sole supporter of his house, the last, the best is gone!

This is thy work, fell tyrant! this the Miner’s common lot!

In danger’s darkling den he toils, and dies lamented not.

The army hath its pensioners – the sons of ocean rest,

When battle’s crimson flag is furled on bounty’s downy breast.

But who regards the mining slave, that for his country’s wealth

Resigns his sleep, his pleasures, home, his freedom, and his health?

From the glad skies and fragrant fields he cheerfully descends,

And eats his bread in stenchy caves where his existence ends.

Aye! this is he that masters grind and level with the dust,

The slave that barters life to gain the pittance of a crust.

Go read yon pillared calendar, the record that will tell

How many victims of the mine in yonder churchyard dwell.

Hath honour’s laurels ever wreathed the despot’s haughty brow?

Hath pity’s hallowed gems appeared when he in death lay low?

Unhonoured is his memory, despised his worthless name,

Who wields in life the iron rod in death no tear can claim.

**Elizabeth Gair, Collier’s Wife, ‘The Colliery Union’**

Come all ye noble Colliery Lads,

Where’er you belong,

I pray you give attention

And you shall hear my song,

‘Tis concerning of our Union Lads

For they have prov’d so true,

They have stood fast, man to man,

We must give them their due.

Chorus: So stick unto your Union,

And mind what Roberts say,

If you be guided by his word,

You’ll surely win the day.

Little did the Masters think,

That you would stand so fast,

They thought that hunger it would bite,

You would give up at last;

But like the widow’s Cruise of Meal,

That never did run out,

The Lord did send them fresh supplies,

That served them round about.

The Masters they devised a plan,

Their Union for to break,

It only made the Colliery Lads

The firmer for to stick;

For when they thought upon the time

That they’d been bit before,

Before that they would go to work,

They would beg from door to door.

Then for to get the pits to work

They have tried every plan,

Both Scotch and Irish they have brought,

And every Countryman;

But all the Coals that they have got

Have cost them double pay,

Cheer up your hearts, ye Colliery Lads

You’re sure to win the day.

Success to your commander

And Roberts is his name,

Since he has prov’d so loyal,

We’ll spread about his fame;

Cheer up your hearts, ye Colliery Lads,

He’ll not leave you alone,

After he has eat the meat,

He will give them the bone.

Let’s not forget young Beesley,

A man of wit possessed,

He’s gain’d the Country’s favour,

For he has stood the test;

And let your day be e’er so dull,

You’ll see the rising sun,

For they will gain your victory

Without either sword or gun.

**David Wingate (‘Davie’), ‘A Song of “King Coal”’, *Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1862), pp. 168-172.**

[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.

“Yes, die!—where no children’s tears

May fall on the chilling cheek,

Where we may hear no sigh that tells

The tale that no tongue can speak;

Nor earnest prayer breathed

By the pious for our behoof,

Nor aught save our dying comrades’ cry

And the crash of the falling roof.

“The strain of racking toil

We day by day endure,

The endless gloom, were trivial things

Could we feel our lives secure.

Even now, relentless Doom

His wings may o’er us wave,

And the gloom around becomes at once

Of a hundred men the grave.

“Spurned, despised, crushed,

Like soulless things, together,

Here, in the June of life,

Like autumn leaves we wither.

Wither—unlike the leaves—

Slowly and painfully;

Wither, with scarce a gleam of hope

That thus ‘twill always be.

“Oh! to be with our hearts

In our homes on upper earth,

With loving ones that feel how much

Our lowly lives are worth!

Dear are we to the hearts at home

As life, or the light of day,

Though some may deem us scarcely worth

The weight of ourselves in clay.

“The slaves of other climes

Have a sun ‘neath which to toil—

Some snowy cloudlet’s antique form

May care of power beguile.

No sun or cloudlet here see we,

To put our cares to flight;

Eternal dread hangs o’er us still,

With the gloom of endless night: [sic]

“True, we may see the sun

Start from the east *one* day—

May hear the blackbird’s song, and see

The dew on the blossomed spray.

Ah! but the beam of joy

That scatters our cloud of sorrow,

Fades fast before the fear of what

Awaits us here to-morrow.”

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.”

**Arthur Wilson (‘Dalry’), ‘The Pit Mouse’, *Lays and Tales of the Mines* (George Robertson: Melbourne and Sydney, n.d.), pp. 122-124.**

[The following lines were written in the Ryesholm Pit, Dalry, in the year 1881. I caught the mouse inside my bread-napkin.]

YE’RE cotch at last, wee sleekit thief,

In yer attempt tae steal an’ rief,

An’, by my muse, it’s my belief

Yer doom’d tae dee;

Sic thochts will bring ye nae relief,

Nor rapture gie.

Ye needna fyke or toss aboot,

Nor bite me, tryin’ tae get oot,

For wi’ ae scud I could ye cloot,

Tae mak ye squeel;

For force o’ strength withooten doot,

Stan’s guid an’ weel.

An’ noo, my lanely, cringin’ moose,

(Yer ane o’ a damn’d thievin’ hoose),

It fa’s my lot tae fau’t—excuse,—

On yer grim fate;

The post o’ judge I’ll firmly use—

I’ll nae be blate.

Nae doot, the cheddar’s fragrant smell

Cross’d yer scent baith gleg an’ snell,

Then aff ye ran, fu’ smert, pell-mell,

Tae nip it sune;

An’ jist as quick ye toll’d a knell,

An’ ye were dune.

An’ siccan havoc ye hae made

Upon the cheddar an’ the bread

My certie! but I look dismayed

Upon the sicht;

My “cornin’ piece” ye hae clean flayed

Wi’ woefu’ plicht.

The cake is crumbled here an’ there,

The cheddar is nae hauf the share,

Carmudered is my daily fare

Wi’ crumbs an’ greice;

There’s no a bit t’ twa inch square

In a’ my piece.

The napkin that was hale yestreen

Looks like a transformation scene;

A score o’ holes an’ mair are seen

In mock array;

An’ ventilation has been gien,

Withoot my say.

My certie! but ye had a spiel—

In faith, but ye hae climbéd weel;

It’s clean four feet ‘fore ye could feel

Ye had the loot;

An’ hoo ye managed it—atweel,

My reckonin’ soot.

Awa’ my conscience! dinna dare

Tae whup my tend’rest he’rt-strings sair:

I’ll kill ye moose: ye’ll nevermair

Daur pilfer me;

I’ll crush yer banes, I’ll—no, I’ll spare

Yer life tae ye.

Nae doot in some nice cosy base

Ye hae a nest—a fam’ly place,

A wheen o’ youngsters jist tae grace

An’ mak’ ye prood;

Their hunger-squeals set ye the pace

Tae steal their food.

An’ wayward man is prone at times

Tae harshly judge an’ ca’ needs—crimes,

(Toom parritch-pats mak’s hideous chimes)

This much I ken:

When huger grups, *want* eggin’ primes

A’ beasts—an’ men[.]

Tae dae vile deeds their he’rts dae spurn,

Tae gang a gate they’d fain return,

But gien a chance—wi’ joy they’d turn

Tae better ways,

An’ sae, wee moosie, I’ll adjourn

My hate, for praise.

Yer spiel deserves guid approbation,

It daes deserve guid compensation,

My conscience checks the fierce vibration

That ruled my he’rt;

I wadna harm ye for a nation

Wi’ touch or scairt.

Hoo aft I’ve wrocht and nae ane near me,

Tae help tae wile the time sae dreary;

The hours they wad hae been gey weary

Wer’t not for thee;

Yer scamp’ring presence oft did cheer me

Right merrily.

Then aff ye gang untae yer nest,

An’ seek it wi’ a zeal an’ zest,

I did dae wrang, I dae confess’t,

Tae grup ye sair;

But noo we’ll leave on terms the best,—

Friens evermair.

An’ come, wee mousie, come each mornin’,

Aboot the happy hour o’ cornin’,

Ye’ll get your fill, withooten girnin’

O’ cheddar sweet;

We’ll leeve on frien’ship, never spurnin’

Frien’ships meet.

**Sarah Moore, ‘Down Among the Coal’ (late 1920s, related to 1926 strike), and ‘Drinking Gutter Water in the Pit’.**

(Note by KB: These poems were transcribed by a relative and are held in typescript at West Lothian Local History Centre, Linlithgow. The transcription varies the layout from stanza to stanza and is uneven in spelling, capitalization, punctuation and use of Scots: whether this reflects the original manuscript is unknown.)

**‘Down Among the Coal’**

Altho’ ye wadna think it I’m an artist dae ye see

I’m very fond of drawin just as fond as ane could be

But the only thing I get tae draw

Are hutches fu’ o’ Coal

An so I spend the sunny days

Doon in a deep dark hole

Down among the Coal

Down among the Coal

All alone and in the dark

I tell you lads it is no lark

Down among the Coal

Down among the Coal

It’s a hard job the life of a miner

The owner’s son, the age o’ me

Well housed well clothed well fed

He disna ken what it is like

Tae sleep five in a bed

He’s never worn cast off claes

Margarine he couldna thole

He leaves that stuff tae to the Collier lads

That work doon in the Coal

Down among the Coal…

The Masters they are organized

Tae capture all the wealth

We workers, we should organize

An do it for our health

The Boss will get a Pan Run then

Or else go on the Dole

For a Collier Lad could do his job

That’s worked down in the coal.

Down among the Coal…

In 1926 my lads when idle dae ye see

We had no rolls for breakfast no ham and eggs for tea

Tho’ our household Cooks were out of work

Not even on the Dole

Yet we all stood firm and backed the Cook

That stopped us digging Coal.

Down among the Coal…

The bosses they look down on us

An tramp on you an me

They think we are another class

Mere miners don’t you see

But when the last day comes my lad

St Peter calls the Roll

The Lord will say tak Colliers first

They worked down in the Coal.

**‘Drinking Gutter Water in the Pit and missing the Pownies. The clean water being no longer sent down the shaft.’**

There is an auld auld sayin boys

Ye’ve heard it long ago

If bade tae sup yet parritch

Ye’d flout it, an say “No”

An yer Mither she wad shake her heid

An tell ye, ye should try

For ye’d never miss the Water

Till the Well rins dry

An that is very true my lad

Just see ye doon this Dook

If ye want tae drink Clean Water

Ye canna get a Sook

Sae ye Drink the Dirty Gutter

Wi’ its Stinkin’ Filth an a’

While ye mind o’ that auld sayin

An the Days that are awa’

There was a Day in this same Pit

When Water it was Routh

The Boss he sent it Doon the Shaft

Tae slake the Pownie’s drouth

When Pownies left the Pit my Lads

The Water left Of Course

For ye’ll get a Collier Ony Day

Much Cheaper Than a Horse

Sae when Drinkin Dirty Water Boys

Wi’ a’ its Filth an Stink

Think kindly o’ the Pownie’s Boy

We shared the Pownie’s Drink

An now we miss the Pownie lads

Its now we have tae Cry

Ye never miss the Water till the Well Rins Dry.