

Lays from the Line: Poems from the Railways

*Poems associated with the 'Literature in the Railways' exhibition
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Piston, Pen & Press

Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace, 1840-1918



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

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Introduction

In this pamphlet of poems by railway workers, accompanying our anthologies by factory workers and miners, we explore the ways in which railwaymen represented their work and the work of others ‘on the line.’ Railway work was a new profession in the Victorian period, and these writers, active from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s, came from different backgrounds and experienced the railways in different ways, from navvies to signalmen, and from rural stationmasters to workers in some of Britain’s busiest engine factories. We have included examples from poets featured in our ‘Literature on the Railways’ exhibition banners, with representative poems from writers from Scotland and the North of England, some using local dialect. Due to Scotland’s particularly strong culture of publishing and anthologizing local poets, many of the railway authors we have been able to locate so far worked in Scotland. Their works speak of comradeship and hard-work, managing a rapidly changing industry, and reflect the tension and risk therein. From 2022 these poems and many others will also be available in our online database.

We are always happy to hear from people with further information about railway writers or who are interested in becoming involved in the ‘Piston, Pen & Press’ project, which seeks to uncover industrial workers’ contributions to literature and culture. You can follow our activities on our website, www.pistonpenandpress.org, or on Twitter @PistonPen.

John Taylor (*fl.* 1863–1875)

In his 'Autobiographical Sketch' at the start of his poetry collection, Taylor recounts his work, from 1862 onwards, as a railway labourer and as a navvy on the railways and on other major works. From 1863, he started publishing verses, including many ephemeral verses addressed to his fellow-navvies which were not later reprinted, or may have only existed in oral form. This is one of these poems, which only appears in unpolished extracts in the autobiography. It references Taylor's work on the Inverness and Perth Junction Railway (shortly to become the Highland Railway), which involved building a track through some of the most isolated and dramatic landscapes in Britain.

THE RAILWAY IS FINISHED.

The railway is finished, the engine is on,
Away from the Highlands the navvies are gone,
Right south to Auld Reek, to see something new,
So we to Kingussie, must all bid adieu!
Our hut, so delightful on dull rainy days,
Where the drivers have sung by the splendid red blaze,
Will no more be a shelter, when lodgings are scant,
For the traveller, hungry, and drowsy, and faint.
The navvies are hardy, and reckless, and bold,
But Badenoch is weary, and dreary, and cold,
And the bare lofty mountains are mantled in snow
O'er the wastes of Drumtochter, where hurricanes blow.
In the lands of the stranger, wherever we rove,
There is comfort and happiness, friendship and love;
But few feel or care for the navvies so bold,
Unless they have pursefuls of silver and gold.
When first to the railway I wandered away
From my home and my garden and roses so gay,
My aunty advised me, and told me 'beware,'
For the rough ones would teach me to gamble and swear.
But my thoughts and my notions she could not control,
For hardship and danger was life to my soul;
And nothing could conquer the bent of my mind,
For to search and discover I still was inclined.

So I left my own valley, where soft waters shine;
I joined the wild navvies to work on the line.

**

A navy is constant, whatever may blow,
His heart ever kindles with charity's glow;
He sticks by his mates when their pockets are bare,
And of his last shilling he gives them a share.
Our feelings are bright as the moon's gentle form,
And strong are our hearts like the oak in the storm;
Compassion and loyalty beat in our breast,
And surely poor navvies are men like the rest.
Then steam up your waggons, "drive on lads, I ho!"
We fear not the tempest, we heed not the snow;
The pick and the shovel shall conquer the sword,
Independence and honesty reap their reward.
Conducted by heroes like dauntless Mackay,
And trusty McDonald, with strength in his eye;
And Gowns, a champion steadfast and true,
Like the "Iron Duke" in action at hot Waterloo.
We can level the mountain and tunnel the rock,
And scatter their fragments like ashes and smoke,
Till civilization and commerce shall run
And bless every nation beneath the hot sun.

Excerpted in *Poems, Chiefly on Themes of Scottish Interest*
(Edinburgh: Andrew Stevenson, 1875) [Extracts].

Alexander Anderson ('Surfaceman') (1845–1909)

Anderson was born to a working-class family in Dumfriesshire. In his teens he became a surfaceman or platelayer for the Glasgow and South-Western Railway Company, building and maintaining the track. Largely self-educated, Anderson began to enter and win poetry competitions in the *People's Journal* in the late 1860s, and was able to publish four poetry collections, including the 1878 *Songs of the Rail*. He became one of Scotland's best-known working-class writers. Many of his poems, like this example, deal with accidents or disasters and railway workers' part in these.

Patrons eventually assisted Anderson to leave railway work for a librarian post in Edinburgh University, though he published little after this career change.

DREW THE WRONG LEVER.

This was what the pointsman said,
With both hands at his throbbing head:—

"I drew the wrong lever standing here
And the danger signals stood at clear;

"But before I could draw it back again
On came the fast express, and then—

"There came a roar and a crash that shook
This cabin-floor, but I could not look

"At the wreck, for I knew the dead would peer
With strange dull eyes at their murderer here."

"Drew the wrong lever?" "Yes, I say!
Go, tell my wife, and—take me away!"

That was what the pointsman said,
With both hands at his throbbing head.

O ye of this nineteenth century time,
Who hold low dividends as a crime,

Listen. So long as a twelve-hours' strain
Rests like a load of lead on the brain,

With its ringing of bells and rolling of wheels,
Drawing of levers until one feels

The hands grow numb with a nerveless touch,
And the handles shake and slip in the clutch,

So long will ye have pointsmen to say—
"Drew the wrong lever! take me away!"

Later Poems of Alexander Anderson (Glasgow, 1912).

William ‘Inspector’ Aitken (1851-?)

Aitken was born in rural East Ayrshire: his father was the village shoemaker, but as a young man Aitken decided not to follow his profession. He took a junior position with the Glasgow and Southwestern Railway and worked his way up to become Inspector on the Greenock Branch. He published two collections of poetry largely concerned with the railways, *Lays of the Line* and *Echoes of the Iron Road*. Many of Aitken’s poems were concerned with tragic railway accidents, real or fictional.

WIDOW MORGAN.

And she’s gone, poor Widow Morgan, to the Poor-house after all,
Gone to die a helpless pauper, propped against its cold damp wall,
Better far, had God so willed it, death had made his destined call.

All those years of toil and labour, ceaseless labour spent in vain,
Weary days of constant working, eerie nights of constant pain:
Life, wasn’t really worth the living, was there anything to gain?

Eighteen years ago John Morgan, coming homeward from the mine,
In the dark was struck and mangled, as he made to cross the line,
By an empty pilot engine coming off the steep incline.

Friends he had, but what about them, none of all his kith and kin
Ever lent a hand to help her, more than it had been a sin;
Like a slave she toiled and struggled, wore out life to keep it in.

Sickness came and sorrow with it, now at toil and now in bed,
Still she trusted, still she triumphed, to her credit be it said,
All those eighteen years she nobly kept a house above her head.

Came the fever, and the children one by one were taken ill;
One by one they drooped and faded, busy went her needle still;
One by one she laid them decent in the churchyard up the hill.

All but he, her last and youngest, blue-eyed, laughing little Jim,
Like a very hare he scampered, light of foot and lithe of limb,
All the life that left the others seemed to concentrate in him.

Time went on, and old age hoary dimmed her eye and dulled her ear,
But with Jim to watch and tend her nought of trouble did she fear;
She grew weak as he grew stronger, till he reached his twentieth year.

Slowly, quietly, wearing downwards, moving thro' life's final stage,
She had been his all in childhood, he would be her all in age,
To her faithfully he carried, week on week, his hard-won wage.

First, a lad with book and parcels, through the town his toil he plied,
Then a porter on the platform, yardsman, pointsman all allied,
Last, he wrought the Junction cabin, near to where his father died.

There he sat and did his duty, caged aloft and bird alone,
Sending up and getting signals from Tom Cruikshanks further on;
He and Tom were very brothers, long they had each other known,

Till they both got into trouble, how Jim never could explain
Some mistake was made between them in the signalling of a train;
Both were fined a day, and cautioned never to offend again.

Fined! Jim did not take it kindly, fined for what, he could not tell,
Some confounded screw or other had got loose about the bell.
Fined! For such a paltry trifle, he who'd wrought so long and well.

Fined, he thought, while many a shadow flitted o'er his mind and brow;
Never since he started labour as a parcel lad till now
Had she missed a single shilling, he must make it up somehow.

And he did, when she had thought him slumbering peacefully in bed,
He had slipped away unnoticed to a night of toil instead,
To a night of busy labour in the noisy transfer shed.

Backward promptly in the morning to his signal work again,
Wearied out, and dull and heavy with the long continued strain,
Now and then a drowsy numbness creeping o'er his eye and brain.

Up against the dreamy monster all the day he bravely bore,
Never in his whole experience had he felt so press'd before,
Till he could no longer battle, down he sat and toppled o'er.

Scarce a minute had he slumbered, when the shrieking whistle blew,
Up he sprung in dreamy blindness, pulled a lever ere he knew;
Heavens! the hapless lad had shifted number three instead of two.

Then the piercing wail of anguish rose upon the calm, still air,
From a hundred helpless victims, maimed, and bruised, and bleeding there –
Strong-toned voices breathing curses – weak ones moaning in despair.

Down the quiet street they took him, as the shades of evening fell;
Through the prison gates they bore him, he whom they had known so well;
“Poor young lad!” the stony warder muttered, as he locked the cell.

‘Twixt poor Jim and Widow Morgan miles of sea now intervene,
Want comes peering in the window, no kind helper comes between;
All her hopes in life were shattered, when he smashed the four-fifteen.

And she’s gone, poor Widow Morgan, to the Poor-house, after all –
Gone to die a helpless pauper, propped against its cold, damp wall –
God of heaven, help the helpless, when life’s night begins to fall.

Lays of the Line (1883), and *Dundee Courier and Argus*,
27 January 1882. Signed ‘St Enoch Station, Glasgow.’

James Stewart (1841-?)

According to his biography in D. H. Edwards's *Modern Scottish Poets* (volume 6, 1883), Stewart was born to a farming family, and after years working in various professions, joined the Caledonian Railway Company in the mid-1860s as a porter. Edwards noted that his career saw him 'rapidly advancing from guard to stationmaster at two important junctions', and that at the time of writing in the 1880s, Stewart had 'bright prospects' of further advancement. Stewart published widely in local newspapers, and included several poems on railway themes in his one collection.

THE PUSHING RAILWAY MAN.

WHEN first I started on the line,
I thought it something fine;
I began work as a spareman—
A good job at the time.
I ran about and did odd things,
And swept the platform clean,
And I sometimes helped the porters
Odd sixpences to glean.
Chorus—Sound the gong, a train is coming,
And see the line is clear,
Wire it forward to the cabin,
And flash it to the rear.

The master soon took note of me,
I looked so very smart;
To be a regular porter,
I early got a start.
A new life now burst on my view,
'Twas quite too jolly nice,
The tips I got were something new—
Worth wages more than twice.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

I was useful and quite handy,
And kept working about;

I was always there and ready
 Commands to carry out.
A pointsman soon they made me think
 Was just what I should be;
I took the job, thought it the pink,
 And best of posts for me.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

With increased responsibilities
 Life did not go so well,
With the rushing of express trains
 And ringing of the bell.
With the whistling and the fizzing,
 And the puffing about,
And the danger of collision,
 And the constant look-out.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

With the crossing up to down line,
 And blocking of the road,
For safety of the passengers,
 Shunting trains heavy load.
With the long hours and the watching,
 And nerves in constant strain,
With the shunting and the switching,
 It nearly turned my brain.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

The nervous strain I could not stand,
 I asked for a change;
They put me on to be a guard,
 Which gave a wider range.
In this new job I got on well—
 I set myself to please,
I tipped my hat to every swell,
And felt quite at my ease.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

The ladies all grew fond of me,

I did the quite “too too”;
I was often treated by the gents
 To whatever I would do.
I sometimes liked to take a dram
 The weary road to cheer,
 And very often could enjoy
 A sparkling glass of beer.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

I aye took care to keep quite straight,
 And pushed and worked again;
My first thought was the railway’s good,
 It’s interests to maintain.
Ah! it’s long now since I was guard—
 I’ve mounted higher, up;
Through several grades I’ve pushed my way,
 Till now I’m near the top.
Chorus—Sound the gong, &c.

I know quite soon I’ll be looked on
 As quite the coming man;
Chief manager I’m sure to be,
 Deny it no one can.
I know the work from bottom up,
 And all the traders too,
The public I know how to serve,
 The la-de-da I do.

The Twa Elders and Other Poems (Airdrie: Baird and Hamilton, 1886).

James Roger (1841-?)

James Roger was another Ayrshire poet. He started work full-time aged eleven, finding employment in the mid-1860s with the North British Railway Company. By 1870 he was a station-master, possibly the first to serve at Roslin (Rosslyn) Castle on the Penicuik Railway, Midlothian. His later career is unknown, though this poem suggests he continued to work for the NBR. He never published a collection, and is only known through newspaper pieces. This poem celebrates the lively company rivalries of the late Victorian period.

THE GREAT NBR.

Last year, when here we friendly met, I sung a simple rhyme
O' the ups and downs, the lights and shades, o' oor wee line;
But now I take a bolder flight, a grander theme by far
To sing a sang in praises of the glorious N.B.R.

'Twas like the mustard seed of old, the smallest of the small,
But planted, now has grown a tree that overshadows all;
So like the birds which seek the shades where bield and comforts are,
We shelter find in the branches of the glorious N.B.R.

The great N.B. was sore oppressed for many a weary year,
And the crafty Cal, which never spake of her but with a sneer,
Now speaks her name with bated breath, like powerful foes at war,
And owns a rival to be feared in the glorious N.B.R.

From North to South from East to West she spreads her iron nets,
She welcomes England's burley sons at Lordly Carlisle's yetts;
While on the heights of Hexham hills they meet, but not in war,
The great N.E. in rivalry with the glorious N.B.R.

Her steeds of iron by banks of Tyne, Newcastle's sons oft see,
Her whistle scared the muirland grouse by the banks of bonny Dee,
Or with the flying Scotsman ride unchecked by rude Dunbar,
Till Berwick's sons in burring tones welcome the N.B.R.

She cleaves a way through mountains high, she spans the valleys deep,

She rears her giant arms, and hangs a highway o'er the deep,
Plants aerial piers o'er stormy seas, and from Greenland's coast afar,
Come Mammoth whales, and wondering sails round the piers of the N.B.R.

This night, then, while around the board the wine-cup circles free,
And pleasure beams on every brow, 'mid joyous revelry,
Fill up your glass, and let your voice be heard both free and far,
And drink success, in a bumper glass, to the glorious N.B.R.

Aye roose her weel and praise her still, tae us she's house and ha',
She cleeds and feeds oor bonny bairns and busks oor wives fu' braw;
Oh may her shadow ne'er grow less, her stock ne'er sink to par,
But upward rise and still increase, oh glorious N.B.R.

Dalkeith Advertiser, 7th February 1884.

Thomas Allardyce (1859–1916)

Allardyce was born in Kilwinning, Ayrshire, and first appears in the 1891 census records as a ‘Railway Signalman.’ His oldest son seems to have followed him into the industry, as the 1911 census listed him as an ‘engine cleaner’ for a railway company. He published one collection of poems in the 1890s. Stevenson No. 1 Signal Cabin was on the Ardrossan and Johnstone Railway, near a line junction and in an area with significant industries, such as Ardeer Foundry and Ironworks.

INSCRIBED WITH PASSING REGARD TO STEVENSON NO.1 SIGNAL CABIN.

Farewell, farewell, dear No. 1,
Five years we’ve been thegither;
At last the welcome hour has come,
We pairt frae yin anither.
Light is the heart, and dry the face,
For till life’s day be done,
Nae sweeter joy our lot shall bless,
Than leaving No. 1.

‘Twas plainly but a trick of fate,
To marry such a pair;
A black mischance, a huge mistake,
And naething less or mair.
Fate kindly bent, noo that she sees,
That naething else has come,
But bitter strife the word decrees,
That pairts frae No. 1.

‘Tween pilot engines dribblin’ thrang,
And goods trains busy shunting;
‘Twas tug and pull the hail day lang,
Wi’ glowerin’ and wi’ gruntin’.
And aye the guards wad growl and girn,
And aye “detentions” come;
Till yince the very soul wad burn
To flee from No. 1.

A Christian character to show,
Has still been my intention;
How far I have succeeded, though,
‘Twere, better no’ to mention.
Wha wad the graces cultivate,
And to perfection run;
Had better gang some ither gait,
Than owre to No. 1.

Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 16th April 1897.

John McDonald (1863-1946)

John McDonald spent his whole career “on the line”, as a porter, signalman and then stationmaster in Perthshire and the Highlands. At the time of writing these poems he was based in Dalguise, Perthshire. He published this pamphlet to raise funds for the Red Cross during the First World War, and it contains a number of war poems as well as railway poems. He wrote in Gaelic, as well as Scots and English. As yet we have not located his poems elsewhere, but he may well have published them originally in the local newspaper press. This poem celebrates the Highland Railway locomotives designed by David Jones.

THE LOCHS.

Hail, handiwork of one that's gone,
That oft-times pass my door,
While some would fain your worth eschew,
Thy prowess I adore;
Though late or early be your luck
In snowstorm, wind, or rain,
You merrily go swinging by
Though heavy be your train.

Some sing the praise of “little Bens”
Who stagger 'neath their load,
And others of the “muckle Ben”
Who wobbles o'er the road.
I've heard some talk of “Barney” fame
Who's cough is shy and weak,
While some do back the “Castles”
As the best from Perth to Wick.

But we all know the driver's pet
Is just a sturdy “Loch,”
Who climbs the bleak Drumochter crest
With clear and hearty cough;
And if you wish a heavy goods
Run anything like time,
Attach to it the “special class”
Of one-nought-eight, or nine.

We know that men are sometimes praised
 Long after they are gone,
And other men are over praised
 Who worthy are of none,
But we would sing the praise of one
 Well known in many homes,
And of the engines he designed –
 The good old “Davie Jones.”

Poems by a Roadside Stationmaster (Coupar Angus: William Culross, 1918).

Patrick MacGill (1889–1963)

Patrick MacGill was born in Donegal, Ireland. Running away from a life as a farm labourer, he worked as a navvy on the Caledonian Railway in Scotland where he began writing about the wandering, hard-scrabble, life around him. MacGill became a well-known writer of prose, poetry and drama, as well as a journalist. One of his best-known works is the autobiographical *Children of the Dead End: The Autobiography of a Navvy* (1914).

RUN DOWN.

In the grim dead-end he lies, with passionless filmy eyes,
English Ned, with a hole in his head,
Staring up at the skies.

The engine driver swore as often he swore before –
“I whistled him back from the flamin’ track,
An’ I couldn’t do no more.”

The gaffer spoke through the ’phone “Platelayner Seventy-one
Got killed to-day on the sixfoot way
By a goods on the city run.

“English Ned was his name,
No one knows whence he came,
He didn’t take mind of the road behind
And none of us are to blame.”

They turned the slag in the bed
To cover the clotted red,
Washed the joints and the crimsoned points,
And buried poor English Ned.

*In the drear dead-end he lies
With the earth across his eyes
And a stone to say
How he passed away
To a shift beyond the skies.*

Songs of a Navvy (Windsor: Patrick MacGill, n.d. [1911]).

George Gresswell (1855-?)

Gresswell, born in Lincolnshire, worked much of his life as a driver in and around Hull. He was a prolific writer, publishing 26 volumes of poetry (many in pamphlet form), much of which appeared in local newspapers. His work was often satirical but could also be heartfelt, as this poem shows.

THE ENGINE DRIVER POET.

When first I tried to write as a poet
I didn't think I could do it
I wrote the rhymes in a pocket book
Allowing only friends to see it

It was they who kindly hinted
Why not have these verses printed?
But I thought they were not good enough
No one cared to read such stuff

At last I thought with good intent
I'd try just one experiment
To see if anyone would buy it
It was my friends who said
You can but try it
And so I mixed my wits together
Thinking I would soon see whether
Anyone would care to look
At my products in a book

I think it was John Bunyan said
(A good man – long been dead)
A pearl does in a toad's head dwell
Another in an oyster shell

And lessons too are found in stones
And meat is sweetest near the bones
Then rhymes might be a 'soul reviver'
Though written by an engine driver
Who writes his thoughts down in a rhyme

To please himself when he has time.

Some think his rhymes are too elastic
Some say too dry, some too sarcastic
Some say, These rhymes are not his own
Others, His senses all have flown
Some say, His truths are very trying
Others, His thoughts? – not worth buying!

I've done my best without a murmur
To give some 'home truths' with good humour
Believe me if you will – or doubt it –
All may go, or go without it.

(c. 1910s).

James Jeffrey (*fl.* 1920s)

James Jeffrey worked as an engine-painter at the London, Midland and Scottish Railway works at St. Rollox in Glasgow: he dedicated this 1924 poetry collection to his workmates there. Little is known about his life, though local newspaper records indicate that he was a well-known local poet, religious speaker and community organizer in Bellshill (North Lanarkshire) and Glasgow, becoming a popular Glasgow councillor in the late 1920s. He published frequently in newspaper poetry columns, though few of his poems were concerned with railway work.

AMONG MY MATES (L. M. S., ST. ROLLOX RAILWAY WORKS) .

In the mornin' when I rise,
In the early oors o' mirk,
I fling on my hamely guise,
Toddle on tae reach my work.

Ilka ane lands through the gate,
Hear the patter o' their feet;
Some are early, ithers late,
Some are singin', ithers greet.

Hear the Horn blaw oot the hint,
For the men tae mak' a start;
See the "Gaffer" keek an' glint
Roon a Wagon, Pug, or Cairt.

Cronies wear a bonnet braw,
But the "Gaffer" dons the "Hat";
Prentice laddies ca' awa,
Wearie for the time tae quat.

See a squad aroon a Pug,
See a Driver a' alane,
See him wi' a can an' jug,
Gantin' like a wearit wean.

Lots o' men are like the lark, —

Ithers never speak ava,
Gi'e a glow'r, an' whiles a bark,
Whit's aboot it,—ca' awa.

Let me whisper in your ear,
“Prood am I, for auld lang syne,
Whit aboot it when you hear,
“Cronies a’,” we're on the Line.

Memory's Bells (Glasgow, 1924).

Walter Hampson (1866-?)

Walter Hampson was born in Rothwell, near Leeds, the son of a shoemaker. His childhood was split between some formal schooling and a number of small factory jobs to help support his family. Once the family had moved to Normanton, he entered the service of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway as a locomotive cleaner, working his way up to driver. His poetry, described in a profile in the *Leeds Mercury* as “homely and forceful”, addressed issues of employment and hardship like this one, the first two stanzas only, but could also be playful and pastoral.

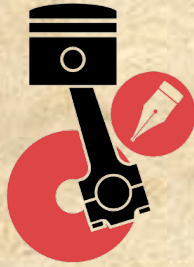
THE A.S.R.S. BROTHERHOOD.

Come gather round, ye Railwaymen,
And listen to my story;
I tell no tale of savage war
Of battles red and gory;
A higher, nobler theme is mine,
Deny it no one can,
I sing of a great brotherhood, -
A brotherhood of man,

This brotherhood is known right well
On every line and station,
It tries to bind all Railwaymen
In one amalgamation,
In which all men shall work for each,
And each man work for all,
And altogether proudly stand,
Or just as proudly fall.

**

Songs of the Line and Other Poems (London, 1905).



‘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) or email us on pistonpenandpress@gmail.com.

