

THE SMELTER POETS:

The Inspiring Role of Worker Poetry in a BC Labour Newspaper during the “Age of the CIO”

RON VERZUH

NOT LONG BEFORE CHRISTMAS 1942, a poem appeared in the *Commentator*, a trade union newspaper published in Trail, British Columbia. The paper’s mandate was to appeal to more than five thousand workers at the giant smelter-cum-munitions factory that gave birth to the smoke-clogged city on the Columbia River. Using poetry as part of their arsenal, the editors were determined to expose what they viewed as the exploitative practices of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada (CM&S Company). In a thinly veiled reference to company president Selwyn G. Blaylock as “none other than ‘Canada’s Citizen Kane,’” the poet weaved a tale of greed and heartlessness in his rhyme schemes. As the captain of industry is entering heaven, the poet suggests that God should bring Satan into play and: “Have him stir up the fires and brimstone, / Mixed with sulphur from the smelter at Trail; / Then feed it to Kane plenty and often, / Then give it to him by fits and by jerks.”¹

It was a poem seething with rebellion, and some of Trail’s smelter workers, the majority of them Italian immigrants, might have thought it too harsh a characterization. After all, Blaylock had provided a livelihood for them and had come to their defence when authorities wanted to deport them or ship them to internment camps as enemy aliens during the Second World War.² Other Trailites saw him as a benevolent father figure who ensured that the town would prosper. For the organizers of Local 480 of the International Union of Mine, Mill

¹ “Poets’ Corner – Death of a Captain of Industry,” *Commentator*, 14 December 1942.

² Patricia K. Wood, *Nationalism from the Margins: Italians in Alberta and British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 53, cites Blaylock’s public statements in support of his Italian workers. Lynne Bowen, *Whoever Gives Us Bread: The Story of Italians in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2011), 238, in a chapter on enemy aliens states that Blaylock promised his Italian workers that they would keep their jobs even after Italy entered the war on the Axis side. She quotes the company president: “If, however, just one of them committed an act of sabotage, everyone would be fired.”



Figure 1. CM&S Company president S.G. Blaylock, known by one smelter poet as "Canada's Citizen Kane," is shocked by the arrival of a CIO union in Trail. *Source: Commentator*, 6 February 1939. Reprinted with permission from USWA Local 480.

and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill), however, the poet's words were not too harsh. Indeed, they were just the boost their flagging organizing drive needed. In their view the unnamed smelter poet was performing the same awareness-enhancing service that poets and songwriters had rendered working people and their organizations since the earliest days of the trade union movement.

Like the infectious pro-union lyrics of American labour troubadour Joe Hill, rumoured to have once sought refuge in the nearby Rosland Miners' Hall, the smelter poet's words would echo through the West Kootenay region.³ Other smelter workers, preceding and following this one, penned lyrics to herald the coming of the union and to shun the company's treatment of their fellow workers. They represented

³ Rosa Jordan, "The Struggle: A Brief History of Local Labour Movements and the Rosland Miners' Union Hall," appendix to Al King, *Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local* (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing, 1998), 168-76, provides a brief history of the hall. Rosa Jordan and Derek Choukalos, *Rosland the First 100 Years* (Rosland, BC: Harry Lefevre, the Rosland Historic Society, and the BC Heritage Foundation, 1996), 16, write that Hill "met with union organizers here." But with such flimsy historical evidence, the Wobbly singer's visit may fall under the category of rural legend.

the views of the working class of Trail and the surrounding mining communities, offering inspiration not only to build a union but also to sustain a working-class culture. Indeed, the style and content of this worker poetry hearkened back to earlier times when working people were creating an alternative culture to the mainstream, one that was so often hostile to trade unionism and the struggle for workers' rights. Part of building that culture was the development of a working-class, or proletarian, literature. In fact, at least as far back as the eighteenth century, workers were writing poems and reading them aloud or sending them to union newspapers like the one in Trail. They expressed their views and concerns, their anger and frustrations, and they proffered solace to other workers and their families through their rhymes.

This article explores examples of that historical literary tradition as exemplified in the smelter worker poetry found in the *Commentator* from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. It was poetry that urged smelter workers to stand up for their rights, and it bolstered the labour activists who were striving to rekindle a union spirit at the CM&S Company smelter, then the world's largest lead and zinc smelter and a key munitions manufacturer during the First and Second World Wars. Did the smelter poets consider themselves contributors to a broad span of proletarian literature? Were they aware that they were part of a larger cultural front or movement blossoming momentarily across North America? Were they conscious that they were writing of and for the working class? Did they believe they were righting some historical wrong or correcting some historical inaccuracy through their poetry? Did they have a sense of the historical moment in which their poetry played a part, however minor, in the making of literary history? These and other questions are addressed below as I attempt to evaluate the importance of such writing in the formation of a Communist-led local of the radical Mine-Mill union at Trail.

* * *

Whether or not they were aware of it, Trail's smelter poets were scribbling their rhyming lines at a key historical juncture in the forging of literary history, one that dominates studies of the cultural scene of the 1930s and 1940s, and the Trail paper's editors, with their connections to a small but continent-wide community of cultural activists, many of them communists, would have been conscious of the highly politicized writing revolution that was percolating in literary circles across Canada

and the United States. Some scholars of that period considered such literature obscure at best and imminently forgettable at worst. In Canada, for example, Ruth I. McKenzie concluded in 1939: "Since few members of the labouring classes are articulate in the literary sense, practically no literature of that origin exists in Canada or in any other country."⁴ In the United States, Charles D. Halker and George Korson claimed that worker song-poems disappeared after 1900, and they blame the rise of popular culture and mass media for the paucity of worker writing. "By removing the need for self-amusement," argued Korson in his 1964 study *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*, "they have deprived the miner of his urge toward self-expression."⁵ Yet the appearance of worker poetry in little left-wing magazines and labour newspapers like the *Commentator* suggests otherwise. In fact, there is a surprisingly wide range of critical and analytic material on what is called proletarian literature, some of it devoted to rediscovering the once dismissed "canon" of worker poetry.

In Canada, historian Frank W. Watt led the way into almost uncharted territory with his seminal 1957 doctoral dissertation on what he dubbed the literature of protest, venturing as far back as 1872 when the *Ontario Workmen*, Canada's first labour newspaper, begrudgingly published some of the earliest worker poetry. Decades later, Watt suggests, the Depression "was like an intense magnetic field that deflected the courses of all the poets who went through it." Although not in its direct arc, since Trail was somewhat insulated from the worst of the Dirty Thirties through steady employment at the smelter, the magnetic field attracted some workers who would later become smelter poets.⁶ More recently, historian James Doyle produced a study called *Progressive Heritage* that explores worker writing but only peripherally touches on the labour and union press where the smelter poets often found an outlet for their work.⁷ Add to these the memoirs of communist poet Dorothy

⁴ Dean J. Irvine, "Among Masses: Dorothy Livesay and English Canadian Leftist Magazine Culture of the Early 1930s," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 38 (1999): 183, quoting from Ruth I. McKenzie, "Proletarian Literature in Canada," *Dalhousie Review* 19 (1939): 49. Reference to McKenzie's study is also found in Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature and the Left in 1930s Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 179. Irvine also quotes literary historian Samuel Hynes, who agreed with McKenzie. In his 1976 study of the British literary scene, he stated: "Virtually no writing of literary importance came out of the working class during the decade [i.e., the 1930s]. The poor did find symbolic ways of expressing their needs and feelings ... but these were not literary ways."

⁵ John Marsh, ed., *You Work Tomorrow: An Anthology of American Labor Poetry, 1929-41* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 7.

⁶ F.W. Watt, "Literature of Protest," in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 472.

⁷ Some of the titles that address the making of a literary culture in Canada from the 1930s through the 1950s, of which the smelter poets were a nominal part, include: Frank William Watt,

Livesay, whose *Right Hand Left Hand* offers a revealing autobiographical account of her life as a poet and alternative journalist.

In the United States, critical literature on this topic is even more plentiful and detailed, and sometimes as partisan and passionate as the worker writers it covers. Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left*, published in 1961, served as a gateway for much of the scholarship that appeared in later decades. Michael Denning's much later study of the 1930s, *The Cultural Front*, has also proved influential, as have Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* and Douglas Wixson's *Worker Writer in America*. Among the many anthologies, James Marsh's *You Work Tomorrow* is another important contribution to recognizing this literature.

These scholars and many others help to situate the smelter poets in the historical context of the prolific proletarian writing period spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s.⁸ A review of this literature, however, also reveals that many scholars have in the past absented themselves from any serious study of bona fide worker poetry such as that written by Trail's smelter poets. In fact, until relatively recently many academic literary scholars and critics have chosen to avoid such studies altogether. For anthologist Marsh, worker poems "constitute a regrettably neglected moment in the history of modern American poetry and the history of the American labor movement." Moreover, he blames literary critics for mistakenly characterizing the poetry as "slightly embarrassing or amateurish sloganeering" and suggests that the "moment" was "ceaselessly inventive, oftentimes unexpectedly funny, [and] wickedly satiric."⁹

"Radicalism in English-Canadian Literature since Confederation" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1957); Frank William Watt, "Literature of Protest," in Klinck, *Literary History*, 457-73; James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2002); Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*; Irvine, "Among Masses"; Peggy Kelly, "Politics, Gender, and New Provinces: Dorothy Livesay and F.R. Scott," *Canadian Poetry* (canadianpoetry.org) 53 (2003); and Dorothy Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand: A True Life of the Thirties* (Erin, ON: Press Porcepic Ltd., 1977).

⁸ Some of the significant American studies include: Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961 [1977]); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Caren Irr, *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada during the 1930s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*; Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Alan M. Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994); Douglas Wixson, *Worker Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁹ Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, 5.

Despite that positive assessment, as we shall see, the study of worker poetry was anathema to critics and scholars in mainstream literature from the 1940s into the 1970s. Even the early twentieth-century labour press seemed to disinherit the labour poets at times. As one early Canadian labour press editor muttered: "We have no particular desire to pick any quarrel with working-class poets, but we think that straight plain prose is about the best form in which our views can be presented to the proletariat." Still, Watt argues, "in the area of the shorter lyric a large number of proletarian poetasters were active."¹⁰

Numbered among the poets and "poetasters" of Trail were communists, socialists, and fellow travellers who would defy those who argued that their poems were irrelevant and valueless as literature.¹¹ Despite Watt's view that "much of the literature of the Hungry Thirties has little purely aesthetic value," the worker poets grappled with the issues and stridently took sides in the many political arguments that raged from the 1930s into the Cold War-riddled 1950s. These battles to reshape society resonated with them as much as with other worker writers, and they formed an active part of the radical literature tradition. In fact, as Watt adds: "To ignore it [worker poetry] is to ignore work." Indeed, work was a topic that had been viewed as unworthy of literary treatment, but it was one that the smelter poets knew intimately, and they wrote about it with mounting passion and concern.

* * *

The *Commentator's* inaugural edition appeared on 2 November 1938, stating that its editorial purpose was to "fill the need of a local organ through which the various questions regarding the union and its policies and their application to the different problems confronting the smeltermen, can be discussed."¹² It was to be made available to Trail workers every other week, and on alternate weeks they could read Vancouver Mine-Mill Local 289's publication, the *Union Bulletin*, which was launched in July 1938 to serve as the "real mouthpiece of those who produce the mineral wealth of British Columbia."¹³ The *Commentator* welcomed contributions from "any and all smeltermen who wish[ed]

¹⁰ Watt, "Literature of Protest," 467, quoting the *Western Clarion*, 9 February 1914.

¹¹ Poetasters are said to be inferior poets, a definition that many scholars might have applied to the smelter poets and their ilk, thus failing to consider the value of these literary voices.

¹² "Editorial," *Commentator*, 2 November 1938.

¹³ "An Editorial," *Union Bulletin*, 4 July 1938.

to take advantage of the opportunity to discuss unionism pro or con.”¹⁴ By its sixth edition on 6 February 1939, worker poems began to appear regularly in the four-page tabloid-sized paper. By its fifteenth edition on May Day 1939, it was boasting the “Largest Interior Circulation,” and readers were said to be receptive: “There is, for example, a vivacious lady in East Trail who rushed to the door with the words, ‘A Commentator’ and then, as she whirled back into the house she remarked over her shoulder, ‘I am going to sit right down and read about how we are being gypped.’” Then there was the labour gang worker in Warfield, British Columbia, who “walked a half mile” to tell circulation manager Gordon Martin that “there were six men with him who ‘needed’ Commentators.” Martin, also the union’s outspoken recording secretary, enthused: “Even the dogs are getting more friendly or else our social approach to them is improving. There is only one in the district that is vicious and I presume that he is a reactionary dog.”¹⁵

It was too early to tell whether Martin’s enthusiasm was an accurate reading of what Trail workers and their families would want to see in the new publication. It was also too early to gauge reaction to the poems that were beginning to appear, sometimes on the front page, some of them raising highly charged local political issues. But the absence of public opinion did not prevent the editors from running smelter poems until 29 April 1944 and then again in the early 1950s. Indeed, volumes 1 through 6 of the union paper regularly printed poetry with a sometimes strident political message. To be sure, some volumes contained more poetry than others. For example, no poetry was retrieved from the 1941 editions, but 1942 was a bumper year for worker poets. Undoubtedly, poetry was a noticeable presence in the nascent union newspaper, and it supplemented the paper’s unbridled attacks on the union’s foes.

Of course, poetry was not new to Trail residents. Readers of the *Trail Daily Times* were accustomed to seeing the traditional literary fare – Wordsworth, Longfellow, Byron, and the odd Canadian Confederation poet.¹⁶ The work of these and other established poets appeared daily under, or adjacent to, the frequently anti-union editorials. The conservative *Times’s* editorial page also included regular rebukes to readers who might be thinking of switching their vote to the newly formed socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) or even the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), a vocal rival to the CCF. Often the

¹⁴ “Editorial,” *Commentator*, 2 November 1938.

¹⁵ “I Deliver the Commentator,” *Commentator*, 1 May 1939.

¹⁶ The daily published poems by Confederation poets Archibald Lampman, Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott.

poetry was reprinted from other newspapers or conservative magazines like Toronto's *Saturday Night* and often it was by a male poet.¹⁷ In spite of its lack of attention to worker poetry, *Times* readers got an ample supply of Kipling, the Brownings, and the Rosettis, suggesting that there was an apparent thirst for verse in the smelter city. Rarely, however, did the daily grace its pages with locally written poetry, and never would *Times* editors such as former CM&S Company public relations director Lance Whittaker have published a poem critical of the company.¹⁸

The *Times* policy regarding political poetry left the *Commentator* as the smelter poets' main publishing venue, and it welcomed contributions that lambasted the company. Not surprisingly, one of the first smelter poems came from the creative pen of the multi-talented Arthur H. "Slim" Evans, the Mine-Mill organizer sent to Trail in the fall of 1938 to start a union local under the auspices of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Evans needed to demonstrate to the smelter workers that they had nothing to fear by joining the union, and he chose poetry as one of the vehicles to help him do it – sarcastic, bombastic, humorous, and often irreverent poetry.¹⁹ "Music Hath Charms," for example, set the tone for future smelter poems with its "Oh Suzanna" melody, its fierce support of the CIO, and Evans's scoffing approach to the bosses:

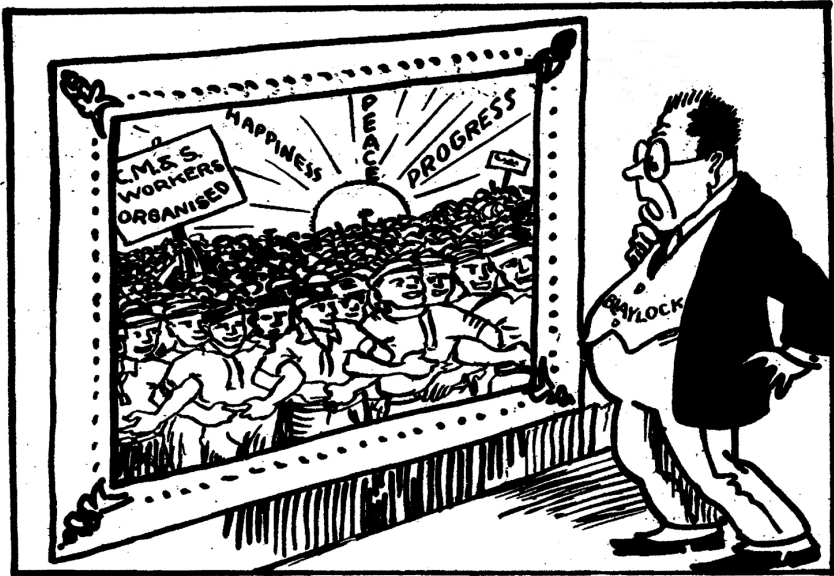
Oh, Mister Bray-a-lot, oh, don't you
 cry for me
 The CIO's the union that will set
 us workers free.
 O'l Guillaume says we'll close the
 plant if you join the CIO.
 But that's a gag the bosses pull
 When the workers want more
 dough.²⁰

¹⁷ Among the exceptions was the Nanaimo-born Audrey Alexandra Brown, a celebrated classical poet whose work was buried under the anti-classical weight of the age of modernism.

¹⁸ Lance H. Whittaker's "All Is Not Gold," unpublished manuscript commissioned by S.G. Blaylock, Trail, British Columbia, 1945, is a glowing history of the company and a fawning portrait of the company president.

¹⁹ King, *Red Bait*, 39, explained that the union was able to start the paper with a fifty-dollar subsidy from the international union, although it may not have been aware that Evans would spend some of it on poetry.

²⁰ "Music Hath Charms," *Commentator*, 6 February 1939.

BUT THIS GIVES HIM JITTERS!

Ye Gods! Now we'll have to pay!

Figure 2. CM&S Company president S.G. Blaylock witnesses his workers rebelling to form a union. *Source: Commentator, 27 January 1939. Reprinted with permission from USWA Local 480.*

Mr. Bray-a-lot was, of course, the feared and respected Blaylock mentioned earlier. A larger-than-life figure in Trail, he would often bear the brunt of smelter poets' rhyming taunts. The other reference is to Blaylock's thoroughly disliked personnel manager C.W. Guillaume, but shift bosses, plant foremen, and particularly company loyalists would also receive regular poetic lashings.

Much as workers might have sniggered at the sarcasm, it would take much more than rhyming couplets to shift the smelter workers out of years of complacency. Still, the poems were one weapon in Evans's organizing arsenal, and he needed all the help he could find to push the union drive forward. Despite his proven abilities as an organizer, Evans had his work cut out for him in Trail, given the history of the CM&S Company as an anti-union firm owned by the equally anti-union Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Following in the wake of socialist Albert "Ginger" Goodwin, who led a bitter strike for the eight-hour day in Trail in 1917, Evans knew that the loss of that strike and the animosity that it had generated towards the company was still a strong

memory among smelter workers.²¹ He knew that, since that failure, the company had worked hard to stop further unionization efforts. He also understood the catalytic power that had accompanied the labour martyr's death in 1918.²² It was a bitter and enduring memory that the CIO man sensed could spur smelter workers to action – sometimes in the form of poetry.

By the time he came to Trail, Evans had earned a national reputation, first as an organizer of relief camp workers in the early 1930s, and then by leading the historic On to Ottawa Trek in the summer of 1935 to protest the abominable camp conditions and pay. Evans's hand-delivery of that message to Conservative prime minister R.B. "Iron Heel" Bennett became legendary, and his exploits on behalf of the jobless made the headlines in Trail. During the Spanish Civil War, Evans had visited the Kootenays to raise funds for the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of Canadian volunteers fighting against the fascists. As an outspoken communist, he was no stranger to controversy, nor was he unaware of the kinds of barrier that he would have to overcome if he was to successfully form a union at the Trail smelter.

Among those barriers, Evans had to confront a long-standing company union called the Workmen's Co-operative Committee (wcc) that had been formed not long after the First World War ended. Blaylock, then the company's general manager, established the wcc purportedly to avoid future strikes like the one in 1917. Blaylock, who would rise to the company presidency in 1939, never ceasing to be adamantly opposed to a union, silently controlled not only the wcc but also the local media represented by the *Times* and radio station CJAT. As a top company official he also had the resources to produce company propaganda like the glossy company magazine *Cominco*, which was sent directly into

²¹ See Stanley Scott, "A Profusion of Issues: Immigrant Labour, the World War, and the Cominco Strike of 1917," *Labour/Le Travail* 2 (1977): 54-78; and Mary L. McRoberts, "The Routing of Radicalism: The 1917 Cominco Strike," *Ascendant Historian* 3 (1983): 66-107. Both provide solidly documented accounts of the 1917 strike for an eight-hour day and its influences on local smelter poets. Eric A. Christensen also adds detail in "Labour History in British Columbia and the Right to Strike: A Case Study as Portrayed by the Labour Dispute between the International Mine, Mill and Smeltermen's Union and the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Co. Ltd. on November 15, 1917 in the City of Trail, BC" (MA thesis, Notre Dame University, Nelson, 1976).

²² Ben Swankey and Jean Evans Sheils, "*Work and Wages*!": *A Semi-Documentary Account of the Life and Times of Arthur H. (Slim) Evans, 1890-1944* (Vancouver: Granville Press Ltd., 1977), 294, quote Mine-Mill's Harvey Murphy stating that Evans's had met Goodwin. Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story* (St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2004) is but one of several accounts of Goodwin's life.

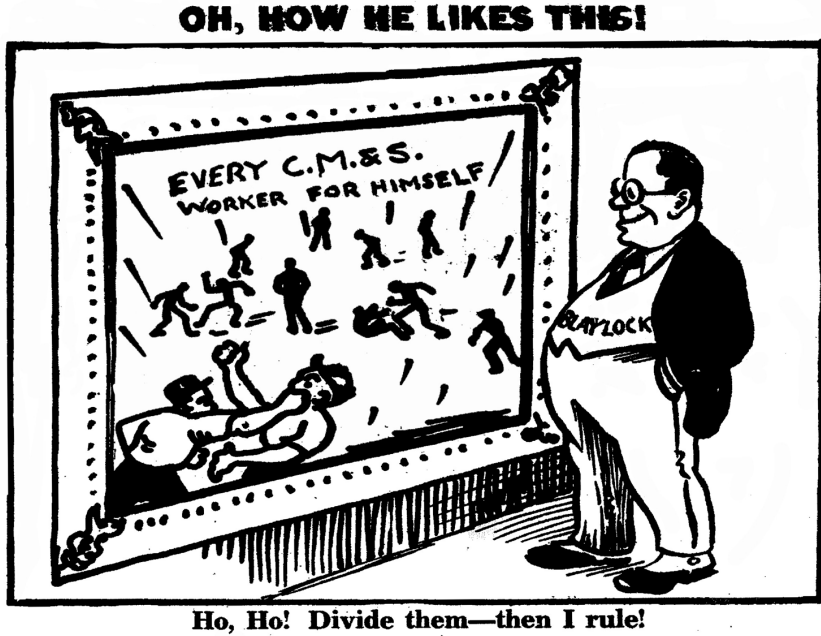


Figure 3. CM&S Company president S.G. Blaylock gloats over his divide and conquer strategy of worker control using his Workmen's Co-operative Committee system. *Source: Commentator*, 23 January 1939. Reprinted with permission from USWA Local 480.

workers' homes.²³ Following the style of mining industrialists before him, Blaylock had created a company town that provided many benefits to the workers and their families, including a company store, mortgages, a health care scheme, and a pension plan. His patriarchal nature and his total dominance over the lives of smelter workers made a union, least of all a CIO union, seem almost impossible.²⁴ Those who dared to speak out sometimes chose poetry as a suitable and perhaps safer vehicle with which to express their discontent about Blaylock's company town schemes. Their poems shouted support for Evans's organizing drive and railed against working life under Blaylock and his "phony" union.²⁵

²³ A scan of wartime issues reveals that the publication of poetry was not a priority for company magazine editor Lance Whittaker. The occasional exception came from the pen of "Ettrick," aka Harry Hogg, "an old Consolidated man." Editor Whittaker considered him "one of the best known and best loved poets of the Kootenays," *Cominco Magazine*, Volume 4, Number 12, December 1943, 18. Ettrick's poetry was devoid of political or union content.

²⁴ John Stanton, *Never Say Die!: The Life and Times of a Pioneer Labour Lawyer* (Ottawa: Steel Rail Publishing, 1987), 31, speaks of the "feelings of helplessness among the workers, which Blaylock had encouraged for years through a carefully nurtured company union."

²⁵ The term "phony," or "phony," among even nastier terms, appeared frequently in union newspapers to describe company unions. The international Mine-Mill newspaper, the *Union*,

* * *

By encouraging smelter workers to express their views in the form of verse, the *Commentator* was emulating a Mine-Mill literary tradition that stretched back to the *Miners Magazine* published by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) in the first years of the twentieth century. In fact, the WFM's first Canadian local was founded in Rossland in 1895, and Trail smelter workers would no doubt have seen copies of the magazine.²⁶ In a detailed study of WFM poetry, literary historian Dan Tannacito categorizes the poems under six "genres." According to Tannacito's methodology, many of the *Commentator* poems lend themselves to a similar treatment. Using his first genre, for example, we find several smelter poems that strive to "elicit shared emotions about real-life experiences among workers."²⁷ One "Poet's Corner" example describes a rebellious situation in the smelter:

There's confusion in the Refinery;
 And the boys are pretty sore.
 A bombshell had been dropped there;
 It had them on the floor.
 Up spoke one brave tester:
 To - - - with this *%!*\$*! stuff,
 We'll band ourselves together
 And call their darned old bluff.²⁸

The second of Tannacito's genres covers poems that "commemorate the heroic deeds of model individuals or important past struggles from which the community of workers takes its lessons." Again the smelter poets qualified. At least two of their poems featured the Scottish working-class poet Robbie Burns, who, through his poems, "showed

often used it in the battle against these so-called "fake" unions.

²⁶ Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 71. The Western Federation of Miners, predecessor of Mine-Mill, was instrumental in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. It changed its name to Mine-Mill in 1916, arguably to play down its former radical image under outspoken leaders such as Wobbly founder Big Bill Haywood and others.

²⁷ Dan Tannacito, "Poetry of the Colorado Miners: 1903-1906," *Radical Teacher* 15 (1980): 2-3. All references in this article to Tannacito's genres are covered by this single note.

²⁸ "Poets' Corner [There's Confusion in the Refinery]," *Commentator*, 18 May 1942.

his ken / Of the struggles and hardships of / common men.” The poem stresses Burns’s criticism of the powerful and his praise for the “people oppressed and denied.” Here was a poet that smelter workers could look up to, for “He wrote in Freedom’s cause his verse to say, / At last the worker would have his day.”²⁹ In a second example, “The Farmer’s Life,” another smelter poet praised farm workers, many of whom worked seasonally at the smelter, and explained “why the boys off the farm joined the union,” noting that “some folks say there ain’t no hell, / But they never farmed, so they can’t tell.”³⁰

Tannacito’s third genre identifies poems of censure and condemnation that “lash out at the perfidious conduct of scabs, owners, police, and other groups of enemies aligned against the workers.” This was a particular favourite for smelter poets who were determined to condemn the wcc as a company union and to curse all those who would refuse to join a real union. In two separate editions, the *Commentator* published very similar critiques of the wcc. In “Why Should You?” the poet describes the worker who is “afraid to join the union” because “the company is good to me.”³¹ In a later edition, readers are offered an almost identical version, but this time it’s called “The Company Union Song”:

We never speak of workers’ rights,
 We vote for the Company union.
 They tell us that it leads to fights,
 So I vote for the Company union.
 The Company has always said
 That men who talk like that are
 “Red.”
 We listen to the boss instead
 And vote for the Company union.³²

Another favourite target for poetic criticism that fits into this genre is the media, particularly the *Times*, which was considered by Local 480 leaders to be little more than a “vicious” pro-company rag.³³ In an

²⁹ “Poets’ Corner: Ode to Robert Burns,” *Commentator*, 22 February 1943.

³⁰ “The Farmer’s Life,” *Commentator*, 29 February 1944.

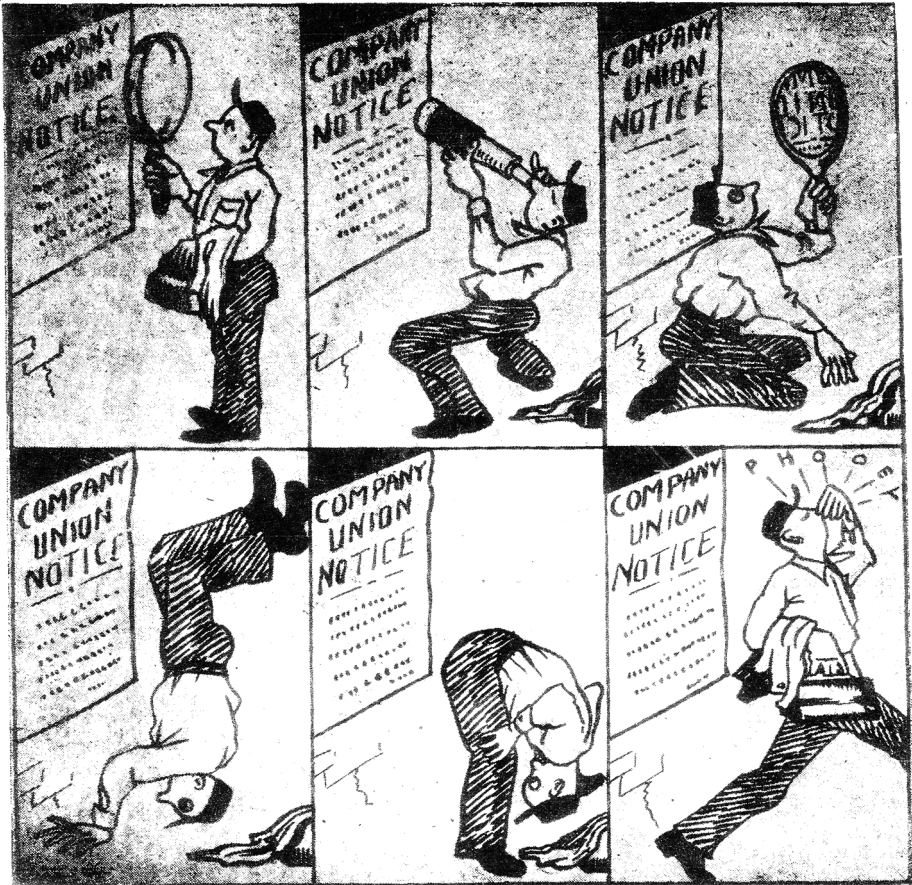
³¹ “Why Should You?” *Commentator*, 4 April 1940.

³² “The Company Union Song,” *Commentator*, 19 May 1943.

³³ King, *Red Bait*, 37.

... Post this up for reference ...

Any Way You Look at It .. It Smells



Here's Why It Smells!

It was formed by the Company to prevent organization by a real union.

It is favored and dominated by the CM&S because they know the Company policy will be carried out by such a set-up.

It can be destroyed by the CM&S at any time, since they rule it and pay for its upkeep.

It cannot secure higher wages, better and healthier working conditions, maintain or control seniority rights.

It is not a collective bargaining agency, because it does not consult with the workmen collectively and does not enjoy their confidence or respect.

When the Company Bargains With the Workmen's Committee It Bargains With ITSELF!

Figure 4. Smelter poets dwelled on the evils of company unionism, arguing that it undermined any hope of fair collective bargaining. *Source: Commentator*, 6 March 1939. Reprinted with permission from uswa Local 480.

untitled ditty that accompanied an article condemning the right-wing daily for its anti-union reportage, the *Commentator* ran a mock epitaph for an editor who “lied for a living, so, he lived / while he lied, / When he could not lie any longer / he lay down and died.”³⁴ In an Evans poem entitled “In Appreciation,” he mockingly calls the media “our best allies” and writes: “We laugh at the pitiful barriers / That you in our way have downcast. / Your efforts but add to the torrent / That will overwhelm you at last.”³⁵

Two other local media outlets were also targets for poetic rants in the Local 480 paper. The *Communicator* and the *Cooperator* were short-lived publications whose editorial mandate seemed to be solely to launch attacks against the CIO and Evans.³⁶ There was no sign of poetry in either pro-company-union publication. Nor did the *Amalgamator*, a pro-independent, anti-CIO union paper that moved to Trail from Ontario in 1946, grant a space for poetry.³⁷ It fought vigorously against Local 480 becoming a Mine-Mill local and thus would have been fair game for the pro-Mine-Mill smelter poets.³⁸

Many of the smelter poems serve as strong examples of Tannacito’s fourth genre, being poems of struggle that “exhibit a determination to stand, fight, and win, using legal or illegal forms of united action.” In “The Polka,” the poet borrows the tune from a popular song of the day, “The Beer Barrel Polka,” to stress the need to “all get together and boost, for a raise in our pay; / Work for job security, improved conditions./” The poem presses workers to join the CIO because “we must have freedom, liberty and / the right to say.”³⁹ A “Poet’s Corner” contribution encourages workers to “fight for the things that are good and true, / Along with those who are fighting for you.” In a later stanza

³⁴ “Times Hooks Self on Phoney Story,” *Commentator*, 3 April 1939.

³⁵ “In Appreciation,” *Commentator*, 13 March 1939.

³⁶ The *Communicator*, which published its first and perhaps only edition on 25 February 1939, claimed to be “paid for and circulated by a group of bona fide workers.” It argued that “the truth has been handled carelessly.” The first edition of the *Cooperator* appeared on 7 March 1939, contending that it “was not afraid of the truth” and denigrating Evans as “cunning” and “communistic.” Quotes are from “Editorial – No Thanks, Mr. Evans!,” *Cooperator*, 7 March 1939.

³⁷ The *Amalgamator* became the chief organ of the independent union movement when company unions were declared illegal in the early 1940s. At that time, workers were encouraged by employers to form independent unions. In Trail, the Independent Smelter Workers’ Union was an important player in attempts to undermine Local 480. See Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Remember Kirkland Lake”: *The Gold Miners’ Strike of 1941–42* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983) for a detailed account of the legal changes that both helped and hindered trade union development in Canada.

³⁸ A search of available editions of the three papers revealed no poetry, but the extant numbers are not extensive for any of the publications.

³⁹ “The Polka,” *Commentator*, 14 December 1939.



Figure 5. An anti-union *Commentator* rival supported schemes like the CM&S Company's co-op meat store. Source: *Cooperator*, 21 March 1939. Reprinted with permission from USWA Local 480.

the poet concludes: “And when the workers do succeed / In ending poverty, want and greed, / Industrial peace shall then arise / And with it a ray from paradise.”⁴⁰

The fifth genre – poems of solidarity that “express their sympathy with the plight of [workers] ... and identify with their cause” – was a steady preoccupation of the smelter poets. In the same “Poet’s Corner” entry quoted above, the writer summarized the plight of workers: “Upon this earth with struggle and strife / We cultivate land for a home and wife. / Above us there are those so strong / That fight we must, just to get along.” The short poem “Civilization!,” which appears at least twice in the paper, describes how “savage tribes, where skulls are thick” rid themselves of old people. But it continues:

We in this enlightened age
 Are built of nobler stuff,

⁴⁰ “The Poet’s Corner [Upon This Earth],” *Commentator*, 10 June 1940.

And so we look with righteous rage
On deeds so harsh and rough.
For when a man grows old and gray,
Leaded and short of breath,
We simply take his job away
And let him starve to death.⁴¹

The final genre – aphorisms that “summed up and condensed their common experience” – was also well represented in the *Commentator*. Poverty was a common fear among smelter workers in spite of the relative job security that existed in Trail, and it was a favoured subject for the poets since many had experienced it during the Depression. “Thanksgiving” is typical:

Thanksgiving! The word is a godless taunt
From the house of HAVE to the
house of WANT.
I am what I am but I will not be
At one with the smug-lipped Pharisee,
Who praises God for his earthly gain
While misery peers through the window-pane.⁴²

Poverty was also a concern given Blaylock’s unwillingness to grant pay increases during the war, calling the demand unpatriotic.⁴³ Coupled with monetary concerns, smelter workers had the even more immediate worry of being injured or killed in a filthy workplace rife with hidden hazards and dangers. The smelter poets tackled the issue of workplace health and safety with compassion for those who had suffered from lead poisoning or from having been “leaded,” a common and debilitating affliction among smelter workers in Trail.⁴⁴ “The Golden Stairs” offers a graphic example:

⁴¹ “Civilization!,” *Commentator*, 20 February 1939.

⁴² “Thanksgiving!,” *Commentator*, 23 March 1939.

⁴³ “Editorial,” *Commentator*, 14 December 1939, took umbrage at Blaylock’s comment, arguing that “true patriotism goes a little deeper than securing the profits of the CM&S Company.”

⁴⁴ Workers in the lead production plants were susceptible to lead poisoning, which made the men tired and threatened to do permanent injury if left to accumulate. King, *Red Bait*, 20–21, notes:

Up the gold stairs I go,
 My breath comes fast, my feet go slow;
 I decide to rest upon a bench
 And deeply breath[e] the exhilarating “stench” ...

The old man resting on the other stair
 With the grade A cough and greying hair
 Tapped the furnaces as long as he could
 Till the fumes started measuring him
 for a box of wood.

The poet’s narrator laments his “creaking joints” and scoffs at the “small pension” he’ll get if he doesn’t die first. As the worker prepares to “get on my way,” he says: “But these damn steps are getting too tough / For us old-timers leaded to the cuff.”⁴⁵

The smelter poems are also marked by several elements that fall outside the parameters of Tannacito’s analysis. For example, the local context for *Commentator* poems is different from those he examined in the *Miners Magazine*. The worker poems that Tannacito uncovered were about the experiences of mine workers, and, although some of the smelter poets would also have worked in the mines of the Kootenay district, particularly at the CM&S Company’s Sullivan Mine in Kimberley, British Columbia, their work experiences in the smelter and in the comparatively urban setting of Trail influenced their poetry in different ways than did the camp experiences of the Colorado miners in Tannacito’s survey. Further, the different timeframe of the two groups of poets is significant. The poetry that Tannacito examines appeared between 1903 and 1906, a decidedly different era politically, culturally, and economically from that of the smelter poetry. In the early years of the twentieth century, WFM poets could write about horrifying mining disasters; violently anti-union employers like J.P. Morgan, the

“Of course, the company never called it lead poisoning. They called it stippling ... And then they’d ship you out to a cleaner plant outside the lead area of the smelter. In the meantime, to offset the lead poisoning, they handed out free milk to those working in the lead areas. Milk was supposed to overcome the lead in our bones, but we only found out much, much later that it actually made it worse because all the cows were leaded too.”

⁴⁵ “Poets’ Corner: ‘The Golden Stairs,’” *Commentator*, 17 August 1942.



Figure 6. Health and safety hazards, particularly the risk of getting leaded, were a key concern of the smelter poets. Source: *Commentator*, 1 April 1954. Reprinted with permission from USWA Local 480.

Dunsmuir, Andrew Carnegie, and the Rockefellers; and the founding of the IWW. The smelter poets were inspired to write about the woes of the Great Depression, the terror of the Second World War, the arrival of women war workers to replace the more than twenty-three hundred male employees who had enlisted,⁴⁶ and the power of the CIO.

* * *

The Tannacito study set a high-water mark for other scholars attempting to categorize and analyze workers' literature, but they would also find new and different ways to assess it. American anthologists Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles, for example, argue that worker poetry falls under three broad themes. In the first two, they contend that it is "set within the larger context of 'a life' among other lives ... in the rhythms and stages of working life."⁴⁷ In the third theme, they signal the importance of the writer's relation to work and ask "who is writing these poems, from what points of view, and for what purposes?"⁴⁸ The work of the smelter poets can be measured using all three themes. For example, in

⁴⁶ S.G. Blaylock, Director's Report, CM&S Company Annual Report for 1944, recorded 2,359 enlistees. It also notes: "During the first five years of war, 61 had been reported lost on active service, 24 were missing and 19 were prisoners of war."

⁴⁷ Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles, eds., *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), xxiii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.



"I don't take a cent out of it until I'm home. My husband gets a big kick out of opening it!"

Figure 7. Smelter poets supported equal pay for equal work when women joined the workforce to replace men who had enlisted. *Source: Commentator*, 1 May 1954. Reprinted with permission from uswa Local 480.

"To the Ladies" the poet welcomes women war workers into the smelter workplace but with a proviso:

For equality we claim,
Women's pay should be the same
As the men whom they replace;
Equal pay for equal work should be the
case.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ "To the Ladies," *Commentator*, 20 October 1942.

In a second example, a “Poet Steward” claiming authorship of “Bull-Headed Joe” expresses the view of a worker who shuns the union and who, later in the poem, is chastised for it:

Joe is a man in the plant today,
Who rambles on in his own sweet way.
He’s not very bright, but he thinks he’s wise,
His sole contribution is to criticize.

“I’ve no use for the Union,” says he
“They’ll get no monthly dues from me.
Anything granted by Management,
Is given to all, including me.”⁵⁰

It was a typical expression of the exasperation union supporters felt towards the naysayers “on the Hill.” The subject of anti-unionism was a constant theme during the long years of organizing, and the smelter poets were at their caustic best in that they wrote critically and at times sarcastically or disparagingly about the evils of company unionism and employment cooperation committees. The Local 480 organizing drive lasted from 1938 until 1944 when the local was finally certified, and, during that time, the smelter poets were called into action in the struggle to get workers to sign up. Several of the potential union members were reluctant, and the poems often addressed this concern. In an untitled poem accompanying an article promoting the sign-up, the poet urges smelter workers to

Join our local union, boys,
We’ll sing another song,
Everyone is needed now.
So bring the girls along.
Soon we’ll get the right to bargain,

⁵⁰ “Bull-Headed Joe,” *Commentator*, 20 August 1943. The same poem appears in other Mine-Mill publications. In the *Sudbury Beacon*, organ of Mine-Mill Local 598, a poem by the same title appeared on 31 August 1943. So the “Poet Steward” may not be a Trail smelter worker.

Full two thousand strong
 For we are working for victory.⁵¹

Rather than themes or genres, James Marsh describes some of the characteristics of worker poetry in what he calls “The Turbulent Poetics of 1930s Labor Poetry.” Some of the poems in his anthology address the problems created by mass media and popular culture, some celebrate nature, some praise personal achievement, some are elegies memorializing workers who have died, and some document suffering caused by the Depression, unemployment, war, poverty, and even starvation. Like others, Marsh also points to the themes of work, working conditions, and company unionism. And Jim Daniels, in his foreword to Marsh’s anthology, adds “the simple notion of solidarity” to the list.⁵² All were covered by the smelter poets.

Anthologists Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy note that two “ideas that animate this writing, have been the value of solidarity and the tradition of struggle.”⁵³ They add that worker poets don’t limit their sense of identity to economic factors. They also write from

lived experience, a set of relationships, expectations, legacies, and entitlements (or the lack of them). Literature illuminates these experiences and relationships, revealing how class as a shaping force is inseparable from other markers of identity: gender, sexuality, race, religion, and ethnicity.⁵⁴

Some of the smelter poets may have challenged Coles and Zandy’s assertions for they did not always live up to the non-sexist, non-racist tenets of the Mine-Mill constitution. Nor did many make overt references to class in their poems, but there was evidence that Local 480 organizers, some of them communists like Evans, were engaged in class warfare, as shown in poems like “Death of a Captain of Industry” mentioned at the beginning of this article.

In his study of the challenges facing political poets of the 1930s and 1940s, American literary historian Michael Thurston seeks out “partisan poetry” that is “committed to a specific activist agenda, poetry that addresses a specific political question or issue and takes sides, presses its

⁵¹ “300 New Members by February,” *Commentator*, 13 January 1944.

⁵² Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, viii.

⁵³ Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xx.

claims, and seeks to move its audience to action.⁵⁵ This clearly describes many of the smelter poems discussed here. In “Tout au contraire,” for example, an unnamed smelter poet analyzes Russia’s chance of surviving Hitler’s deadly Barbarossa campaign:

From three to six months we gave Hitler
 To crush the Russian Bear,...
 That invincible Nazi army,
 Moving with precision and speed,
 Would mow down these ignorant communists,
 As a sickle would a weed.⁵⁶

Smelter poets also showed a strong commitment to the various *causes célèbres* associated with left-wing politics throughout the 1930s, among them the Estevan, Saskatchewan, miners’ strike; the On to Ottawa Trek and Regina Riot; the Vancouver Post Office sit-in; the Italian invasion of Ethiopia; and the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁷ And when the Second World War escalated, the *Commentator* also worried about corporate profiteering and “profitable patriotism,”⁵⁸ pledging the union’s support to the federal government in the fight against the “brutal beast of Fascism.”⁵⁹ Smelter poets also increasingly commented on it. In “Now Is the Time,” for example, the poet calls for Allied support of the Russian “Red Bear [that] stood in his [Hitler’s] way”:

There’s a race of men who are fighting
 hard
 With their backs against the wall.
 Their native land is waste and scarred
 As their cities slowly fall.

⁵⁵ Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 13.

⁵⁶ “Poets’ Corner: Tout au contraire,” *Commentator*, 13 July 1942.

⁵⁷ Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 15, notes that many American poems included commentaries about the Scottsboro, Alabama, rape trial and hangings in 1931; the Lincoln Brigade of American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War; the growth of fascism in Europe; and concerns over workers killing workers in the Second World War.

⁵⁸ “Editorial,” *Commentator*, 9 May 1940, pointed a finger directly at Blaylock with such comments.

⁵⁹ “Union Declares Position on War,” *Commentator*, 16 September 1939.

Against the power of the Nazi might
 They are holding the Volga's banks.
 Strafed from above, both day and night,
 Continually hammered by tanks.⁶⁰

In this and other poems, we can see an emerging subtheme of praise for the Soviet Union and communism. Perhaps the praise was fostered by the communist leaders of Local 480 as it strove to adapt to the shifting wartime policies of the Comintern in Moscow, but fighting fascism usually trumped ideological wrangling for the smelter poets and their editors. In adding its voice to the growing call for a second front to take the pressure off the Soviets, the newspaper scolded those who “spend their time debating whether communism is an evil or a blessing.” Instead, wrote the editorialist, “it is time to realize that these people in the Soviet Union are accepting the full fury of the Fascist machine.”⁶¹ In keeping with such patriotism, Thurston notes that worker poets, many of whom could be numbered with the partisan poets of the period, could be “memorializing an event or individual, criticizing social institutions or forces, encouraging readers to act in concert for social change.” At heart, Thurston concludes, the worker poet’s intention was always to “participate in very public and externally focused struggles.”⁶² They emerged from the working class and “became radicals because they thought the economic system had gone kaput, because they saw too many hungry and desperate people, and because men and ideas they detested seemed in the ascendant.”⁶³

Dorothy Livesay, in her reminiscences of the 1930s, agrees, adding that there is the need for poets to side with the common people and attack the excesses of the ruling elites. “Poetry would never be popular until it was close to the people and for the most part Canadian poetry was sadly lacking in this quality,” she writes in exasperation.⁶⁴ Equally frustrated by the lack of political content in Canadian poetry, her contemporary Leo Kennedy states the case more starkly: “We need poetry that reflects the lives of our people, working, loving, fighting,

⁶⁰ “Poets’ Corner: Now Is the Time,” *Commentator*, 16 November 1942.

⁶¹ “Editorial: A Second Front for Victory,” *Commentator*, 17 October 1941.

⁶² Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 35.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, quoting from Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 391.

⁶⁴ Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand*, 223, quoting herself from “Writing Too Obscure for Common Man,” *Calgary Albertan*, 17 April 1936.

HEADING FOR THE COLUMBIA



“It’s great what a good organization behind you can do.”

Figure 8. Pollution of the Columbia River was a major concern of the International Joint Commission and in 1939 it fined the CM&S Company for dumping effluents that polluted Washington State farmland. *Source: Commentator*, 20 February 1939. Reprinted with permission from uswa Local 480.

groping for clarity.”⁶⁵ Though it may not have been exactly what the leftist intellectual community wanted, the smelter poets were doing just what Kennedy demanded. “The Exploiter,” written in the voice of an industrialist, is a pointed example:

Oh, I’ll fatten on the farmer,
And I’ll skin the working man,
Yes, I’ll trim them to a finish,
And enslave them if I can.
And their silly agitation,
I would stop it sure for fare,
I’d put meters on their windpipes,
And impose a tax on air.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 229, quoting Leo Kennedy, “Direction for Canadian Poets,” *New Frontier*, 1936.

⁶⁶ “The Exploiter,” *Commentator*, 16 February 1942.

While not identifying specific categories of worker writing, several other scholars have observed some typical characteristics. Ruth I. McKenzie, for example, describes it as a “literature in which the worker is regarded as the victim of capitalistic exploitation; as the instrument of revolution by which a new social order will be ushered in.”⁶⁷ American scholar Paula Rabinowitz describes worker writers having a “common urge ... ultimately to change the world.”⁶⁸ Caren Irr, in a cross-border study, recounts Canadian poet A.J.M. Smith’s requirements for poetry as stated in *New Provinces*, a 1936 anthology of Canadian writers. Smith was “seeking a ‘useful’ poetry that ‘[would] facilitate the creation of a more practical social system,’” she notes, and he disdained “pure poetry” that is “unconcerned with anything save its own existence.”⁶⁹

Candida Rifkind offers another set of criteria for analyzing worker poetry, noting that some of the communist verse of the 1930s was inclined to cite “common experiences among labour organizers: mass demonstrations, police attacks, and arrest for sedition under the infamous Section 98 of the Criminal Code.” She further discerns a notable shift in Canadian poetry of this genre from praise of established authority figures and events of past glory to figures of oppression and themes of emancipation.⁷⁰ Literary historian Florence Boos, arguing for a fuller appreciation of the literary value of workers’ poetry, calls it “a preferred form for the expression of collective protest.”⁷¹ Like earlier worker writers, Trail’s smelter poets “believed that literature could influence people’s behaviour,” as literary scholar Martha Vicinus suggests of worker poets, and “they wrote to persuade readers to adopt particular beliefs.” She further asserts that, because working-class writers were concerned about social injustice, they wrote “to arouse and focus social tension in order to channel it toward specific political actions” and to “reaffirm the merit of their class in the face of the cultural domination of the upper classes.”⁷²

Coles and Zandy stress that class was a pivotal aspect of worker writing and that the worker writers wrote to defend it and out of respect for it. Paraphrasing British social historian E.P. Thompson’s definition

⁶⁷ Ruth I. McKenzie, “Proletarian Literature in Canada,” *Dalhousie Review* 19 (1939): 49.

⁶⁸ Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 79.

⁶⁹ Irr, *Suburb of Dissent*, 172.

⁷⁰ Candida Rifkind, “The Hungry Thirties: Writing Food and Gender during the Depression,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 78 (2003): 176–78.

⁷¹ Florence Boos, “Working-Class Poetry,” in Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Anthony H. Harrison, eds., *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 204.

⁷² Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 2–3.

of the concept, the anthologists argue that working-class literature is part of working-class culture and tradition.⁷³ “Working class literature reproduces, in literary form, the conditions of the working class,” write education theorists Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson.⁷⁴ When work is the topic, they continue, worker writers “attempt to reproduce the boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition of humans acting as machinery,” and “to portray a place where individuality is not only not valued, but suppressed.”⁷⁵ This is true of the smelter poets, but they also portray the workplace with a certain sense of pride and a respect for their fellow workers. Moreover, they exhibit “a distrust of authority and an aversion to paternalism.”⁷⁶ Paul Lauter agrees, arguing that “much working-class art has its being in group situations – not in the privacy of a page read in a study, but in the church, the hall, the worksite, the meeting, the quilting bee, the picket line.”⁷⁷

On a more technical level, some scholars might approach the study of worker poetry through the lens of orature, or a blending of art forms both oral and written. Others may apply theories of audience reception – the relationship of the reader’s experience to the interpretation of the text – in examining worker poetry.⁷⁸ Experiences in a smelter-dominated company town would undoubtedly have had an influence over how workers received the poetry. The smelter poems might also lend themselves to a study focused on the use of parody to satirize figures like company president Blaylock, anti-union company men, or hated government officials.⁷⁹ Finally, folklorists such as Edith Fowke examine worker poetry with an eye to its rhythm, cadence, and setting, but the poems are often devoid of political content.⁸⁰ Some of the work

⁷³ Coles and Zandy slightly modify the definition of class that appears in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 9-10.

⁷⁴ Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson, “Toward a Theory of Working Class Literature,” *NEA Higher Education Journal* 71 (1999): 73.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁷⁶ Christopher and Whitson, “Toward a Theory,” 75.

⁷⁷ Paul Lauter, “Working-Class Women’s Literature: An Introduction,” *Radical Teacher* 15 (March 1980): 18.

⁷⁸ Several works explore reception or reader response as part of the literary process and the study of literary history. Two of particular note: James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, eds., *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *New Literary History* 2-1, (1970): 7-37.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the use of parody, see Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁸⁰ Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin: University of Texas Press and the American Folklore Society, 1970).

of American folklorist Archie Green is perhaps more in tune with the smelter poets, particularly his compilation of Wobbly songs.⁸¹ However, these forms of literary analysis are beyond the scope of this article.

The smelter poets summoned up many of the above qualities and characteristics as determined by literary scholars, but they seemed less concerned about the style of their poetry or where it might fit with regard to literary form; rather, they seemed satisfied to adapt Victorian traditions of poetry writing instead of engaging the modernist movement of the day. As Marsh notes, they chose “thoroughly standard – even conventional – forms,” their goal being to “strive to remain as accessible as possible.”⁸² They were engaged in a struggle in the here and now, and they used their poems to support the cause of their fellow smelter workers with vigour and imagination. It was a struggle that had long occupied a place (albeit often unsung) in Canadian and American literary history.

* * *

Writing about working-class women’s literature, Lauter suggests that, “from the earliest moments of history[,] it would appear that ordinary working people produced a variety of works of literary art” without much regard for innovative form.⁸³ Coles and Zandy point out that “workers have been singing, reciting, performing, telling stories, writing, and publishing since the beginning of the settlements that became the United States – and they are still doing so.”⁸⁴ They trace poetry similar to what the Trail smelter poets produced back to the Knights of Labor, the industrial trade union that doubled as a social movement in the late 1800s. Thus, they argue, “working people, especially those who were active in struggles for democratic and labor rights, have often turned to poetry and songs to communicate their vision.”⁸⁵ In the same vein, Marsh argues that, “as long as workers have earned wages, worked under compulsion, or tried to form unions, they have tended to compose songs and poems about their experience.”⁸⁶ By the time the smelter poets became active in Trail, then, working-class writers had established the cultural groundwork for such poetry to exist and even

⁸¹ Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *The Big Red Songbook* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2007).

⁸² Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, 15.

⁸³ Lauter, “Working-Class Women’s Literature,” 17.

⁸⁴ Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, xix.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁶ Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, 5.

flourish throughout the 1930s and beyond. Indeed, poetry was part of the making of a local working-class culture.

Michael Denning, in his probing analysis of what he calls the “cultural front” of the 1930s, helps to situate the Trail smelter poets within the movement that witnessed the blossoming of proletarian literature. For Denning, the American “Popular Front” was much broader than what Soviet leader Joseph Stalin proscribed in 1934 in declaring the so-called “Third Period” over. Like communists everywhere, Trail’s handful of reds had to shift from thinking capitalism was on its last legs to realizing that a united front was the true path to a communist world and democratic industrial unionism for North America. Within the Popular Front strategy, communists would work with socialists and other left-wing activists rather than condemning them as “social fascists,” as they had done during the Third Period. By Denning’s reckoning, the Popular Front engaged a wide swath of so-called “fellow travellers” in the arts, journalism, trade unions, and socialist-minded communities of the time, including the likes of the smelter poets. It was, he argues, “the central popular democratic movement” in the United States from 1929 to the late 1940s.⁸⁷

Trail’s smelter poets might not have been fully aware of this momentum as it unfolded in what Denning suggests was “the age of the CIO.” But some would have heard about it from border-hopping hardrock miners and smelter workers seeking jobs in Trail. From the beginning of the drive to create Local 480, “Slim” Evans promoted the CIO, although the local press and radio often attempted to censor him. With the advent of the *Commentator* he redoubled his promotional efforts, at times using poetry to raise awareness of the new industrial unionism and thus inspiring others to contribute their literary works in the spirit of the Popular Front. Smelter poets who followed in Evans’s sizeable wake also wrote about the CIO. As one of the earlier smelter poems notes:

The market’s roaring! Stocks are soaring!

My rent has gone up, too.

Yet they won’t raise the workers’ wage

That’s not the thing to do.

⁸⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), xvii-xviii.

Even the Mouse Doesn't Like the Smell of the Bait



Figure 9. The CIO was heavily red-baited by the company union press, but here it is depicted as a trap while the company union offered many workplace benefits. Source: *Cooperator*, 7 March 1939. Reprinted with permission from uswa Local 480.

The smelter sages, said "Cut wages."

"Production then will flow."

But now they cry, for when they try

THEY'RE STOPPED BY CIO.⁸⁸

Laudatory comments supporting the CIO continued throughout the 1930s, a period sometimes dubbed the "Red Decade" of worker or "proletarian" literature.⁸⁹ Poets on the left found homes for their

⁸⁸ "Market Up: Not Wages," *Commentator*, 23 March 1939.

⁸⁹ Eugene Lyons, *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941) and others have characterized the 1930s as a golden age of communist and left writing.

outspoken poetic views (such as the above) in communist, socialist, social-democratic, and labour papers like the *Commentator*. The *Partisan Review*, for example, was a favoured venue in the United States, as was the *New Masses*.⁹⁰ However, at the latter, editors Mike Gold and Granville Hicks spelled out their main editorial goal as providing a publishing venue for real worker writers. As Gold put it, he wanted his “revolutionary organ” to provide most of its space to “the working men, women, and children of America.” To that end, he called for the “sobs” of stenographers, the poetry of steel workers, the “wrath of miners,” and the “laughter of sailors.” He wanted “strike stories, prison stories, work stories – Stories by Communist, iww and other revolutionary workers.”⁹¹

Daniel Aaron somewhat cynically refers to Gold’s “vision of a Shakespeare in overalls.”⁹² Other critics scoffed at the notion of turning workers into bards, but Gold’s magazine became the place to publish for worker writers, among them the smelter poets of North America.⁹³ For anti-communist critics like Eugene Lyons, the publication was yet another communist front taking its marching orders from Moscow. In *The Red Decade*, his angry denunciation of left writers in the United States, he charges that they (e.g., Gold, Hicks, and others) were inspired by a slavish adherence to Stalinism that led to the creation of a phony “proletarian culture” or “Proletcult” and an equally phony “proletarian renaissance.”⁹⁴

Trail’s smelter poets and other worker poets probably didn’t get embroiled in the ideological blustering of the New York left magazine set: they were too busy fighting injustice on the workplace front. Nevertheless, they would be the cannon fodder in a kind of literary civil war within which the charge of “tendentiousness” was regularly levelled.⁹⁵ The battlefield “reflected ‘a basic division of attitude toward the creative process’ and revolved around the relative importance of

⁹⁰ Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 554–55, note that *New Masses* (1926–47) re-emerged as *Masses and Mainstream* (1948–56). The *Encyclopedia* also contains entries on the *Partisan Review*, which was published from 1934 to 2003 (583–84); proletarian writers of the 1930s and 1940s (637–41); and radical poetry from the 1930s to the 1960s (671–79).

⁹¹ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 205.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹⁴ Lyons, *Red Decade*, 128.

⁹⁵ Murphy, *Proletarian Moment*, 1, defines tendentious writing as “the stereotyped portrayal of workers and capitalists as heroes and villains, the insertion of abstract propaganda into fiction, poetry, and drama, and the general distortion or coloring of reality for political ends.” Dictionaries define it as a tendency to press an extreme viewpoint.

form and content,” according to historian James F. Murphy.⁹⁶ Quoting Walter Rideout, a former *Partisan Review* editor, Murphy explains that the *Review* “opposed ‘the “placard” or “slogan” method in fiction,’ and insisted the proletarian writers learn technique from bourgeois writers.”⁹⁷ *Review* editors agreed with some academic critics, saying that such poetry, especially that associated with the Communist Party, was “degraded, reduced to banal evocations of the mythology of the barricades.”⁹⁸ The *New Masses*, on the other hand, encouraged tendentiousness and downplayed form.⁹⁹ Somewhere in between was *Anvil*, a US quarterly in which worker writer Jack Conroy intended to “let the masons speak for themselves.”¹⁰⁰ Presumably he meant to include smelter poets. Marxist literary historian Alan M. Wald describes the scene as “internecine warfare on the issues of style and technique” between the Communist Party and “its most talented literary allies.”¹⁰¹

In Canada, the debate took on only a slightly less war-like hue. As with their American counterparts, communist poets like Dorothy Livesay and Joe Wallace were often ostracized from the mainstream poetry world, partly because they wrote about the realities of working people’s lives and supported their struggles, partly because they offered noisy critiques of capitalism, and partly because they were victims of a diminishing political poetry scene similar to what was occurring below the Canada-US border. Livesay, Wallace, and others found a publishing outlet in Communist Party publications, including the *Worker*, the *Daily Clarion*, the *Labour Defender*, and *Masses*, the latter title being borrowed from an earlier US magazine that also published working-class voices.¹⁰² Oscar Ryan, in his unsigned editorial to the first edition, lamented that Canadian writers did not “try to understand the sufferings of the workers, their struggles, their hopes.”¹⁰³ More specifically, regarding poetry in *Masses*, Maurice Granite argues:

⁹⁶ Murphy, *Proletarian Moment*, 228–29.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁹⁸ Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 8.

⁹⁹ Murphy, *Proletarian Moment*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Wixson, *Worker Writer in America*, 294, notes: “In the *Anvil* and his own writing Jack’s aim was to let the masons speak for themselves.” Wixson provides many examples of worker poetry and other writing that challenged the status quo of the 1930s.

¹⁰¹ Alan Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 14.

¹⁰² Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 554–55, note that the *Masses* published revolutionary writers like John Reed from 1911 to 1917 and that it was succeeded by the *Liberator*.

¹⁰³ Irvine, “Among *Masses*,” 188.

Poetry must become the inspiration of the masses; it must be a powerful weapon in the hands of the workers ... The poet of today must sing about the demonstrations of the workers in such a way that workers will want to repeat his poems and march the streets to the beat of their rhythm ... Poems of miners, and strikes, and the sufferings and triumphs of the working class.¹⁰⁴

Masses folded in 1934 after only twelve issues, and two years later *New Frontier* was founded. Again the parallel between the American and the Canadian left literary magazine scene is evident. Just as the *Partisan Review* had established a rivalry with *New Masses*, *New Frontier* distanced itself from the more sectarian cultural views of *Masses* and the Communist Party. Through the 1930s and into the 1940s, then, communist and other radical poets (like the smelter poets) published their proletarian verse in leftist magazines and labour newspapers as they worked to cultivate a Canadian proletarian literary tradition.¹⁰⁵

* * *

Not everyone viewed the proletarian literature revolution in a positive light. Some literary critics and literature teachers dismissed the notion of worker poetry outright, to the chagrin of scholars like Canadian anthologist Tom Wayman. He suggests that the subject of work should be added to the three traditional subjects of “imaginative writing.” In so doing, he argues, stridently at times, that critics and educators could see that “writing about the job demonstrates how a person’s attitudes to love, death, and nature are in large part shaped by the kind of daily work he or she does.”¹⁰⁶ He concludes: “Any literature, then, which omits this governing experience of daily life is a literature with an enormous hole in the middle of it.”¹⁰⁷ Arguably Canada’s best known work poetry anthologist, Wayman looks critically upon any literature that refuses to make a legitimate place for worker poetry. If literature does not deal with the problems, aspirations, failures, and successes of the majority of men and women, Wayman continues, that “literature becomes one more means by which people are kept confused as to what

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 197; Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, 133, suggests that Maurice Granite is a pseudonym for Oscar Ryan.

¹⁰⁵ Among the few publishing options was *Canadian Forum*, a magazine that was founded in 1920 and that supported the goals of the social democratic left.

¹⁰⁶ Tom Wayman, *Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1983), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 13.

is important and what is possible in their lives.”¹⁰⁸ He adds that much of contemporary Canadian writing does not bother to examine “the economic realities of workers’ lives.” He suggests that,

instead, the writing offers escape: either escape into a narrative usually situated far removed from the reader’s day-to-day existence, or else escape into the world of high art – play with interesting, astonishing or boring arrangements of words and images. Most contemporary Canadian writers display no interest as to why people in our society want to escape from their daily lives.¹⁰⁹

Interestingly, though, and unlike some of the American historians and anthologists discussed above, Wayman prefers not to use the term “working class” to describe worker poetry. He criticizes some American working-class literature anthologies for having “very little in them about the work experience,” arguing that “focus on class also lets academics ... distance themselves from the topic, if not consider it irrelevant.” Wayman is clearly interested in worker activism, and he acknowledges the importance of employing worker poetry in the battle for worker and human rights. As he states in *Inside Job*, a key aspect of industrial culture is “what we do in *response* to the work world established by the bosses, and also what we *initiate* ourselves, to try to make tolerable and to humanize the workplace and the working life.”¹¹⁰ The smelter poets took that role seriously as they struggled to build a union that shared the notion of humanizing the workplace, the community, and the world.

Wayman’s lament about the dismissive treatment of worker poetry by literary scholars and teachers is shared by others. The smelter poets wrote partly about difficult and often dirty physical labour, and that topic sometimes meant that such poems would be “hidden or not deemed appropriate subjects for literary expression,” note Coles and Zandy.¹¹¹ Such writing “has been subject to questions about literary quality and to assumptions about the limitations of writers’ abilities.” The anthologists argue that this is a sign of class prejudice: “Working-class literature – both within the historical contexts in which it was produced and as we read it today – is as lively, engaging, and ‘well written’ as one would find in standard literature textbooks. But it is also unfamiliar and, to some, unsettling.”¹¹² To support this view, they cite no less a literary figure

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 66 (emphasis in original).

¹¹¹ Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, xxii.

¹¹² Ibid., xxiii.

than Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck, who states: “The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement which cannot be destroyed.”¹¹³ Coles and Zandy further state that worker writers, like the smelter poets, share “a conviction that their writing will be useful to the people they belong to and represent, as well as an awareness that they are writing within an honorable tradition that is different from the literary mainstream.”¹¹⁴

Thurston also critiques the academic shunning of worker poets. Such writers may have been somewhat conscious of poetical demands such as “the organization of words into metrical feet and broken lines, the emphases on language’s materiality through rhyme and alliteration, the arrangement of images into a metaphorical or symbolic economy of meaning,” he observes.¹¹⁵ But he explains that the evaluative terms used by academic literary scholars “simply do not fit . . . [for] much of the partisan poetry published between the world wars (or ever published).” To judge such poetry “on the basis of formal perfection opens the door to a quick dismissal of partisan poetry as formally flawed (to say the least).”

Like Thurston and Wayman, literary historian Cary Nelson shuns the academic unwillingness to take worker literature seriously. He argues forcefully that the academic community suffers from “literary forgetfulness” about the “opposition poetry” that urged revolutionary social change in the 1930s. He also states that to dismiss such poetry leads to a “suppression of history.” Furthermore:

Working-class and radical traditions are no less innovative in their forms and genres than are works in the “high modernist” tradition. As writers on the margins gave shape to the new content and new awareness engendered by the struggles of working-class people, they rewrote conventions, crossed genre boundaries, and created new experimental forms, such as blues poetry, the proletarian portrait, and the revolutionary sonnet.¹¹⁶

Alluding to writers like the smelter poets, Nelson adds: “Over several decades, the labor movement used poetry not only to build or unify

¹¹³ John Steinbeck, “Foreword,” in Alan Lomax, *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, compiled by Lomax, edited by Pete Seeger with an introduction by Woody Guthrie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 78. Also quoted in Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, xxiv.

¹¹⁴ Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, 210.

¹¹⁵ Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 19.

¹¹⁶ Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, xxiv.

membership but also to educate workers and to restate core beliefs and values."¹¹⁷

Anthologists David Shevin and Larry Smith cite Nelson's views to buffer their argument that working-class literature has been systematically silenced by a "cultural bias" in the academic community and that any reference to class is often dismissed or avoided in classroom discussions. For Nelson, they note, working-class writing "had the power to help people not only come to understand the material conditions of their existence but also to envision ways of changing them." They further agree with Nelson when he says: "Seeing writing as a necessary alternative to the status quo and as a means of changing it, as a power that should be shared rather than contained, turns writing into a vital and exciting action."¹¹⁸ This may not have been how the smelter poets viewed it, but it fairly summarizes what their poetry was meant to accomplish.

* * *

When the *Commentator* ceased publication in late 1945, its poetry contributors lost an outlet for their work, but the labour newspaper's temporary disappearance also coincided with a cooling of interest in worker poetry if not a complete blackout. After the war ended and the Cold War began, positive evaluations of worker poetry and praise for those editors who were sympathetic to workers, their politics, and their writings diminished. Thurston describes how proletarian poetry disappeared in the late 1940s, succumbing to the battle between the poets' poets and the people's poets, in which the former won. The result: worker poetry, along with other forms of protest and political poetry, ceased to exist for mainstream educational and cultural institutions. Thurston dates the demise from the advent of the "New Criticism," an academic school of thought led by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in the United States that disallowed political poetry, considering it sentimental and unprofessional. The New Critics reject poems that "speak in a common and comprehensible language, allude to contemporary events rather than to classical literature, and seek to involve their readers emotionally." According to Marsh: "For roughly fifty years the literary 1930s remained taboo to a discipline still influenced

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 210.

¹¹⁸ David Shevin and Larry Smith, eds., *Getting By: Stories of Working Lives* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 1996), 11.

by the anti-Communist zeitgeist of the Cold War and by poetic and political prejudices of the New Criticism.”¹¹⁹

American literature scholar Brian Reed provides a specific and dramatic example of this death of political poetry by academic discipline. In an in-depth critique of Carl Sandburg’s powerful poem “The People, Yes,” he quotes from a famous negative commentary by American poet William Carlos Williams, who, along with poets like Ezra Pound, espoused a “precise versecraft.” Williams, who was a contemporary of Sandburg’s and dabbled in similar left-wing literary circles – arguing with them vociferously – viewed Sandburg’s poem with derision and savaged it for its lack of canonical quality. He claimed that it reduced poetry to crass political propaganda.¹²⁰ With “the 1950s depoliticization of poetry in the academy,” a development that Reed notes was a convenient if unwitting aid to the perpetrators of McCarthyism, Sandburg’s 1930s work was to fall victim to “powerful formalist-leaning literary circles.” For them, he was “the author of a handful of sincere but clumsy 1910s lyrics best appreciated by readers uneducated in subtleties of form, technique, and tone.”¹²¹ With regard to “The People, Yes,” Reed suggests that it “bluntly, madly defies such demands.”¹²² If such a wildly popular long poem of the Popular Front period is considered bad poetry, as Reed and Williams conclude, then the smelter poems studied here are hopelessly lost non-canonical causes.

Historian James Doyle comments: “Working people with only a casual interest in literary activity ... might try their hands at doggerel”;¹²³ however, regardless of its literary quality, and though they may not have been fully aware of the existence of a radical literary tradition or have been directly influenced by the internecine poetry wars of the 1930s, they, too, made a contribution. As Jim Daniels explains:

If some of these poets sounded like cheerleaders, they are not the traditional cheerleaders from the sideline; they are voices from the

¹¹⁹ Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, 3.

¹²⁰ Milton A. Cohen, “Stumbling into Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, *Partisan Review*, and the Left in the 1930s,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, 2 (2009): 145, offers some explanation of why Williams disliked worker poetry or, more pointedly, revolutionary poetry about the working class. “He did not believe in a Communist revolution nor did he believe in proletarian literature that promoted that revolution,” argues the American poetry scholar. Instead, “Williams was quite sure that poetry had nothing to do with politics, only with words.” Clearly, the smelter poets would have disagreed with the celebrated author of “Paterson” and other important poetical works.

¹²¹ Brian Reed, “Carl Sandburg’s ‘The People, Yes,’ Thirties Modernism, and the Problem of Bad Political Poetry,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 46, 2 (2004): 189.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 190.

¹²³ Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, 132.

front lines of the union and labor movement. Veterans of the picket lines, and the assembly lines, and the unemployment lines, they are smart, articulate and compassionate cheerleaders who often express their feelings with a hint of desperation, for there is more than the outcome of a game at stake – It's their lives, their livelihoods that are on the line.¹²⁴

During a literary era that one historian refers to as “stunning, mystifying, and semi-mythical,”¹²⁵ these voices were heard and heeded by workers, if not by literary critics, and the smeltermen of Trail were definitely listening.

* * *

In January 1945, with the signing of the first collective agreement in more than a quarter century, Local 480 had established itself as a strong Mine-Mill union that was prepared to do battle with a company anxious to preserve its hitherto unchallenged authority over the smelter city. Early in May 1945 the war ended in Europe, and in August the bombs, possibly the ones that had been tested using heavy water produced by CM&S Company workers in Warfield, British Columbia, were dropped on Japan, abruptly ending the war in the Pacific.¹²⁶ Throughout the war, smelter poets had appeared regularly in the *Commentator* until it suspended publication for three months on 1 June 1944. That November it resumed publishing and restated its role as “a champion of the cause of the workers for their democratic rights.” Referring to the *Commentator* and other Mine-Mill publications as “indispensable literary weapons,” the newly elected Local 480 president Fred W. Henne, who chaired the editorial committee, vowed somewhat melodramatically to “devote all space available to rid ourselves of the enemy of Darkness.”¹²⁷ This pledge evidently did not include increased space for poetry, which was noticeably absent from many editions in 1944. While boasting that the Mine-Mill organ would stop the “spread [of] vile mistruths,”¹²⁸ Henne clearly did not envisage the smelter poets as part of the union's literary

¹²⁴ Marsh, *You Work Tomorrow*, viii.

¹²⁵ Wald, *Writing from the Left*, 103.

¹²⁶ “Trail Helped in Atomic Bomb: Heavy Water Made in C.M.&S. Plants,” *Trail Daily Times*, 13 August 1945; Pierre Berton, “How a Red Union Bosses Atom Workers at Trail, BC,” *Maclean's*, 1 April 1951, later drew attention to the secret heavy water plant, known as Project 9, that the CM&S Company had built to provide the ingredient used in testing atomic weaponry.

¹²⁷ “Editorial: Your Paper,” *Commentator*, 27 November 1944.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

weaponry. Apparently he did not appreciate their previous efforts to fight the “enemy of Darkness” because nary a single smelter poet was published in the three editions of the *Commentator* that appeared in 1945. The following year the paper entered a long publishing hiatus, disappearing for almost ten years, thus forcing the poets to seek new outlets elsewhere, including other Mine-Mill organs.

Before the founding of the international Mine-Mill publication the *Union* in the spring of 1942, boasting that it was “America’s newest champion of labor’s cause,”¹²⁹ the *CIO News* published a Mine-Mill edition that would have reached BC audiences, and it ran the occasional poem. Certainly, the international’s paper was providing considerable space to the issues facing the new Trail local, but, regrettably for the Trail smelter poets and their readers, not nearly as much space was allotted to the poetry corner. The *Union Bulletin*, mentioned earlier, may have included some poetry in its role as the Mine-Mill organ that would “reflect the life and outlook of the workers of our industry.”¹³⁰ However, a scan of the available editions from the first volume reveals no poems published under editor Tom Forkin. The odd edition of the *Sudbury Beacon*, the Northern Ontario newspaper founded in 1943 by Mine-Mill Local 598, might have made its way to Trail in migrating workers’ pockets, some of them carrying worker poems. There was also Mine-Mill western district director Harvey Murphy’s *BC District Union News*, which began publishing out of Vancouver in June 1944. It was doing an excellent job of covering issues with regard to the Trail situation, but the choice of poetry was probably not appreciated by the smelter poets. The feisty, fact-spewing Murphy seemed to have a taste for short ditties or well-worn anthems like “Joe Hill” rather than for serious local worker poems. However, he also found publishable material from a Trail smelter poet named W. Gordon Coombs, whose poem “They Also Serve,” in praise of wartime mine workers, appeared in the twice-monthly *News*. The connection to the struggle to found a CIO union in Trail was clearly on the poet’s mind when he penned these closing lines: “When will the minds of common men see clearer, / The grandeur of our aim in this crusade[?]”¹³¹

¹²⁹ “It’s Your Paper,” *Union*, 6 April 1942.

¹³⁰ “An Editorial,” *Union Bulletin*, 4 July 1938.

¹³¹ “They Also Serve,” *BC District Union News*, 27 November 1944. The smelter poet indicated that he was from Trail in a letter published in the 15 September 1944 edition of the *BC District Union News*.

* * *

By the early 1950s, Local 480 had suffered a series of attacks both from within and without the smelter plants. With the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in the United States in 1947, the political climate for unions took a massive shift to the right. In a legislative move designed to counter the union gains made under the New Deal Wagner Act, Taft-Hartley required labour leaders to sign affidavits swearing that they were not members of the Communist Party. It was the beginning of an anti-red siege in North American society in the forefront of which was the established labour movement. The fury of the Cold War was about to intensify, and the leaders of Local 480, among them several long-standing communists, were vulnerable to witch hunts. The attack in Trail came from the remnants of the old Workmen's Co-operative Committee that had taken over the local and turned against Mine-Mill to promote the United Steel Workers of America (USWA). Sanctioned to raid Mine-Mill by the American Federation of Labor, the Steel Workers had orchestrated a well-financed campaign of red-baiting and disruption to persuade Local 480 members to switch unions.¹³² Mine-Mill eventually won the day in Trail at least and proceeded to rebuild the local after the internecine strife caused by the raiding.

The postwar era had an impact on the world of poetry as well, and whether or not the smelter poets knew it, there was a change in the wind that would create "a decisive depoliticizing" of literary institutions and lay waste to their attempts to promote a cause,¹³³ appeal to people's emotions to take action, or, to paraphrase influential poet W.H. Auden, to write poetry that "tries to make something happen."¹³⁴ For Thurston, the era "dissociates poetry from praxis."¹³⁵ He argues: "This decoupling of poetry and politics was brought about by the confluence of national politics, especially the anti-Communist inquisition ... and literary politics, where new, formalist methodologies wrought deep changes in the institutions that publish, recirculate, evaluate, and preserve literary work."¹³⁶ Literary historian Edward Brunner, focusing exclusively on Cold War poetry, argues that poetry produced in the 1950s was "deemed inconsequential," noting: "For poetry that was seriously engaged with important issues, the times were just not congenial."¹³⁷ Literary

¹³² King, *Red Bait*, 76-92, offers his version of the raids.

¹³³ Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 41.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁷ Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001), ix.

historians, he adds, determined that the postwar era was marked by “a quietism” among political poets and that those of the 1930s and 1940s had disappeared or gone underground.

As that quietism was taking root in the United States and Canada, forced by a new anti-left politics and the New Criticism, which stated that poetry must be apolitical to be good, the *Commentator* was revived on 1 July 1953, and, though it didn't seem inclined to publish as much poetry as its predecessor, smelter poets did begin to reappear. With C. Kenny chairing the editorial committee, the odd poem popped up amidst the lengthy details about union elections, bargaining information, committee reports, and photographs of leadership events. The occasional pithy comment or comical dialogue also appeared, then worker poetry reappeared in the September 1953 edition with a poem entitled “Salt of the Earth” by E.M. Nobes. It focuses on technology and the need for workers to join together to “Do whatever you can to help your fellow man / 'Cause we're all common salt of the earth.”¹³⁸ Nobes, a member of Local 480, was the most prolific of Trail smelter poets published in the union paper in the early 1950s. From 1 September 1953 to 1 November 1954, his working-class poetry appeared at least five times.¹³⁹ Nobes's second “Salt” poem, published on 1 September 1954, comments on the blacklisted Mine-Mill-sponsored film *Salt of the Earth*. In it he praises the miners, who, with their wives, struck the Empire Zinc Company in Bayard, New Mexico, in the early 1950s: “For there you see reality / And what it's like to fight / For things held dear both far and near / Where workers know what's right.”¹⁴⁰ If 1953 had brought only one poem to *Commentator* readers, 1954 brought a relative flood of ten smelter poems, one appearing in almost every edition, and new opportunities to publish began to appear as well.

In 1955, at a national convention held in Rossland, British Columbia, an autonomous Mine-Mill union for all of Canada was established along with a new national publication called the *Mine-Mill Herald*. In the January 1956 edition, Harvey Murphy, the editor, reprinted the popular Merle Travis tune “Sixteen Tons,” with this note: “This oldtimers[] song comes from the early days of struggle in the coal fields when the

¹³⁸ “Salt of the Earth,” *Commentator*, 1 September 1953.

¹³⁹ Nobes's other smelter poems included “The Square Deal” (1 February 1954), a statement about an “unpretentious man”; “Bargaining Time” (1 May 1954), a poem supporting “the whole Mine-Mill” in negotiations for a fair share in company profits (“20 million ... Their profits clear in just one year”); “Discrimination” (1 August 1954); and a poem supporting the Bluebell miners' strike (“Discrimination is our fight; / We only want what's fair and just”); and “Unity” (1 November 1954), a call to Local 480 members to “make the union strong.”

¹⁴⁰ “Salt of the Earth,” *Commentator*, 1 September 1954.

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Western Federation of Miners – forerunners of Mine-Mill, were organizing miners in the USA and Canada.” Was it meant as an encouragement to workers to submit poetry to the new publication in the spirit of one of its early editorials calling for contributions?¹⁴¹ Perhaps not, especially given Murphy’s earlier reluctance to publish worker poetry in his *BC District Union News*. Still, the *Herald*, based in Toronto, did run poetry, and some of it was from British Columbia. One Vancouver poet refers to Rossland’s boom town era in reminiscing about the early days of union struggle.¹⁴² Another, this one from Kaslo, British Columbia, comments on gold mining in the Kootenay region: “MY share was the DUST, the rich got the GOLD, / I’m left wheezing and shivering out in the cold.”¹⁴³ A third, from a Sullivan Mine worker, laments shift work: “But what’s a working stiff to do? / Though this shift work leaves you beat / You do it if you want to eat.”¹⁴⁴

Clearly, the *Herald* provided some space for the rhymes of worker poets around the country, but would greater union stability bring a different kind of worker poem to the *Commentator* in the later 1950s and in the mid-1960s? Would the communist leaders of the local, many of whom somewhat miraculously survived the red-baiting terror of the Cold War, move the local further to the left on public issues? And would the chosen poetry reflect such a shift? Would the poetry they published after the mid-1950s have the fire in the belly notable in that of its ancestors in the 1930s and 1940s? Would the smelter poets continue to appear after Mine-Mill finally merged with the Steel Workers in 1967? These questions remain for a future study, but judging from this assessment of their role, the smelter poets surely must be counted among those “examples of courage” that Local 480 president Al King praised in the first editorial of the revived *Commentator*. Surely they must be counted among the “men who worked in the Smelter eight hours a day and who wrote, printed and folded the *Commentator* and then stood, rain or shine, heat of the summer and freezing blast of the winter, to bring to their fellow workers [the union news].”¹⁴⁵ Surely the smelter poets, through their protest poetry, their solidarity, and their songs of the CIO, had played their part in the quest to convert the smelter city of Trail from a company town into a union town.

¹⁴¹ “The Herald and Its Aims,” *Mine Mill Herald*, February 1956.

¹⁴² “Old Jim,” *Mine Mill Herald*, January 1957.

¹⁴³ “Where’s That Gold,” *Mine Mill Herald*, April 1957.

¹⁴⁴ “Shiftworker’s Lament,” *Mine Mill Herald*, June 1956.

¹⁴⁵ “The President[’]s Corner,” *Commentator*, 1 July 1953.