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WORK POETRY/ POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

The Industrial Verse of 'Slim' McInnis

Don MacGillivray

"Doscomocracy"

My back is bent from a lifetime spent
In the dirt and steam and snow —
In the General Yard, where the work is hard
And the wages mean and low.

My hands are swelled from the spades I've held
In the depths of a dirty ditch
And my shoulders sprung from the picks I've swung
In the toils of the idle rich.

My eyes are dimmed from the years spent in
The glare of the Open Hearth
And my lungs are shot from gasses caught
In DOSCO's¹ hell on earth.

My heart is strained and my legs are sprained
And a din roars in my ears
From toiling in moulds and greasy holes
That has shortened my life by years.

¹Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation was incorporated in 1928, taking over the old BESCO operation which included Dominion Iron and Steel and Dominion Coal.

And many a time I came out to find
 That I'd only come out on spec.
 When jobs were few and old Bruno's crew
 Were all old Peter checked.²

For times get hard in the General Yard
 When steel goes in a slump
 And Saunders friends are thankful then
 For the checkers and the dump.³

While my hair has greyed I've begged and prayed
 For a job I might enjoy
 But I leaned on luck while the plumbs were plucked
 By the bosses' fair haired boy.

Then the war came on and my boy has gone
 And his mother's heart must fret.
 Who pays the tax on the gun he packs
 While they're working his Dad to death.

Now my health is ruined and I'll soon be doomed
 To a cold dark debtors grave
 Is a few cents raise in my last few days
 Too much for a lifetime slave?⁴

A FEW DAYS AFTER this verse was published in the *Steelworker & Miner* on 9 January 1943 Sydney steelworkers went on strike.⁵ It was not a complete surprise to anyone; a strike vote a few months earlier in the "Steel City" had resulted in a 3,074 to 38 count in favour of such action. The issues were many and included opposition to wage controls and a desire for a fair wage — Sydney steelworkers, at 45 cents/hour, were far removed from the 78 cents/hour paid to their American counterparts.⁶ They were recently organized and as "Doscomocracy" suggests they were determined to improve their condition during the expanding war economy.

John J. "Slim" McInnis had been back working at the steel plant in Sydney for about three years when he wrote "Doscomocracy". It was the first of a small number

²Bruno was an Italian cement worker brought in during the 1923 strike; Peter McLachlan was a general foreman in the General Yard.

³Saunders was a superintendent in the General Yard.

⁴Pro Bono Proletariat, *Steelworker & Miner*, 9 January 1943.

⁵They were joined by others in Trenton, N.S. and Sault Saint Marie, Ontario.

⁶See Laurel S. MacDowell, "The 1943 Steel Strike Against Wage Controls," *Labour/Le Travail*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 65-85.

of verses composed over a fifty year period dealing with and coming directly from the experiences of a Sydney steelworker. Whatever their literary qualities, they read well and a couple of them have become relatively well known within the working class of industrial Cape Breton. Two at least were retyped and circulated — anonymously — for years; one was read out at a labour rally in the Steelworker's Hall in Sydney some years ago. Recently they surfaced again.⁷

Slim McInnis' literary output was not large. But his industrial verse captured the attitudes, practices, experiences and feelings of two generations of steelworkers in Sydney. His sparse output and his inclination to use pseudonyms ensured a lack of recognition. He was a reserved individual although many workers knew him and some of them were aware of his literary bent. Only on a couple of occasions however were his contributions along this line directly linked to him.⁸ Yet they continued to circulate and to be appreciated. One suspects this is at least partly due to the scarcity of steelworkers' songs and verse in the area. Mind, there is that second verse of "The Dosco Boys" — to the air of the "Notre Dame March" no less — which is contained in a song sheet put out by the Industrial Relations Department of Dosco in the 1950s:

We are the boys who roll out the steel
 Give 'em the stuff with lots of appeal
 We make billets, bars and rails
 The coke, the wire and the rails.
 After we get the coal and the ore
 Begins the rest of all our chores
 Domcos, Discos, Doscos too
 I'd bet you'd like to join us too.⁹

Tripe aside, there seem to be only jocular albeit not inaccurate ones such as "Dumping Slag over to the Steel Plant," which describes the initial impressions of someone coming to live and attempting to sleep in close proximity to the plant, or more recent plaintive, quasi-militant ones like "Let's Save Our Industry" from the 1960s.¹⁰ Few have come from within the plant gates. The substantial amount of

⁷The two, "Dosco's Inferno" and "Steelworker's Lament," were brought to my attention by Peyton Chisholm, a researcher with the Steel Project.

⁸A special thanks to retired steelworkers George MacEachern and Wally MacKinnon for their information and insights.

⁹"Song Sheet," Industrial Relations Department, Dosco, Sydney, n.d. See Don MacGillivray, "Glace Bay: Images and Impressions," in B.H.D. Buchloh, R. Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures* (Halifax, 1983), 183 for the equally inane verse for the miners.

¹⁰The first night in Sydney I heard an awful bang

The windows rattled and the rafters rang
 I jumped three feet, was half out of my bed
 When Patrick grabbed me by the ankle and he calmly said:

verse and song which came out of the working class struggles of industrial Cape Breton — one thinks especially of the writings of Dawn Fraser and pieces such as “Arise Ye Nova Scotia Slaves” and “The Yahie Miners” — have concentrated little on the situation of the Sydney steelworkers.

Yet the strength of local traditions in industrial Cape Breton, the richness of the sources from which it draws, has been recognized.¹¹ A recent article makes it clear that the “country of coal” is well represented.¹² The same cannot be said of the steel-making portion of the industry. Even Dawn Fraser makes only fleeting reference in his work, mentioning the provincial police charge on church-goers in 1923 or an ode to Foreman Waye, a steelworker leader of the 1920s.¹³ McInnis is himself unaware of other steelworkers using the pen as an industrial weapon.¹⁴

“Slim” McInnis was born in the Ashby area of Sydney in 1911. At eighteen he started at the steel plant. Six months later, in October 1929, he was laid off. That winter he managed two more months on the plant but after a thirty day period without a shift “I threw my lunch can and cheque number away and gave it up.” Like many single, young men he “rode the rods” for much of the next decade. It was “the most interesting period of my life....”¹⁵ Ten years later he returned, initially

They're dumping slag over to the steel plant,
 They're dumping slag in the middle of the night
 They're dumping slag over to the steel plant
 Go back to bed mama, everything'll be all right.
 Celtic Investments Ltd., *Cape Breton's Greatest Hits*, College of Cape Breton Press, 1005;
 It brought us joy, it brought us tears
 It's been here over fifty years
 It built our hopes and built our fears
 And made this island what it is.

Let's save our industry....Charlie MacKinnon, *Songs of the Misty Island*, Cabot Music Publishing Distributing, Sydney.

¹¹David Frank, “Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century,” in K. Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200* (Sydney 1985), 203-18; Charles, W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto 1974[1953]).

¹²An excellent introduction to this still neglected area is David Frank, “The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton,” *Canadian Folklore Canadianien*, 8, 1-2 (1986) 21-42. See also Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (Ottawa 1979); John C. O'Donnell, *The Men of the Deeps* (Waterloo 1975); Ron MacEachern, ed., *Songs and Stories from Deep Cove, Cape Breton* (Sydney 1979); Alphonse MacDonald, *Cape Breton Songster* (n.p. 1935); Stuart McCawley, *Cape Breton Come-All-Ye* (Glace Bay 1966[1929]).

¹³Dawn Fraser, *Echoes From Labor's War* (Toronto 1976), 57, 77-9.

¹⁴John McInnis interview, 20 April 1990. Other rhymesters made frequent appearances in the *Steelworker & Miner*. See, for example, Scotty, “Workers, Unite!,” 8 January 1944; “Dosco's Steelworkers,” 13 July 1946; “To John L. Lewis,” 7 December 1946. They lack the precision and personalizing aspects of Slim's efforts.

¹⁵During that period he did work for close to a year on the “Black Diamond” boats carrying coal and rails. Interview, 20 April 1990.

working for a contractor dismantling No. 8 Blast Furnace. When the job was completed he again joined the Dosco work force. He had not forgotten the lost decade and his first attempt at writing verse occurred in this transitional period from the depression to the war economy. It was published by M.A. MacKenzie in the *Steelworker & Miner* and immediately subjected to the scrutiny of government officials. They were not amused.

From Breadlines to Battlefields

For years in vain we fought to gain,
 We of the workless mass,
 A chance to work though our struggle irked
 The idle and wealthy class.

Deprived of a home we were forced to roam,
 A hungry and ragged throng.
 And few were the friends we encountered then
 To lighten our war along.

Though mill and mine of every kind
 With idle goods were stacked,
 And vaults were stored with a golden horde
 Still we of the workless lacked.

Nor statesmen cared at the way we fared,
 Though poverty seared our souls.
 We had only the jail and the hungry trail
 To a flophouse dark and cold.

While pompous priests, from their pulpits screeched
 Of heaven and love and truth.
 We lived in a hell and learned too well
 The curse of a squandered youth.

They paid scant heed to our grievous need,
 Though pledged to uphold His word.
 They shared the best and they cared the less
 For the sheep of the common herd.

In vain we fought to improve our lot
 But our rights they refused to give.

Though all we asked was an honest task
That would make life fit to live.

But never a cent could be had or spent-
No "hunger fund" was raised.
The workless class — we were only trash,
Unworthy of help or praise.

But today in fear as danger is near,
From a source they helped to build,
They look to us when they find they must
And our blood would ask us spill.

What right, we ask, have this useless class
To demand we engage a foe
They helped maintain with the selfish aim
Of saving the "status quo?"

Why should we band in a far-off land
And wealth for another wrest,
If here at home we have only known
The fate of the dispossessed?

What's left to lose if we should refuse
To fight for De-mockery?
In the name of Christ what a costly price
They should ask for our poverty.¹⁶

Inspired, enthused, or just content to get the phrases out of his head and down on paper, McInnis immediately wrote two more: "I don't know if you call it writing or not, but that's just a source of annoyance to me now because a phrase will pop into my mind and then I feel I got to put it into a rhyme or some damn thing or another. That's pretty well how they started."¹⁷

These initial efforts were however thwarted. As the editor of the *Steelworker & Miner* soon explained on the front page:

¹⁶Beachcomber, "From Breadlines to Battlefields," *Steelworker & Miner*, 17 August 1940. "And they were out asking me to be a sucker to go out and get shot — Christ — for \$30. a month. Imagine." Interview, 20 April 1990.

¹⁷Family tradition has his grandfather, also John, as a writer of songs and verse. Interview, 20 April 1990.

A WORD TO "BEACHCOMBER"

We are forced to inform "Beachcomber," the local poet, that we cannot publish his two last contributions because we have been officially informed that his poem "From Breadlines to Battlefields," which we published the week before last, contravenes the 'Defence of Canada Regulations.'

We have reason to believe that certain potential fascists holding high positions, whom we have occasion to castigate from time to time are constantly 'drawing the attention' of the authorities to items in the 'Steelworker and Miner' which are not to their fascist tastes.

Our readers can guess who they are.¹⁸

McInnis was little concerned about the attention and he continued to write although only his "romantic" verse made it into the newspapers for the next couple of years.¹⁹

Early in 1943 he began his industrial verse with "Doscomocracy." He followed this up with his most popular work, "Dosco's Inferno," a personalized account of work in the Open Hearth department.

Oh! tired am I of the ceaseless toil
 And the endless cares and woes
 Of the paupered years and the deathless fears
 That a low paid worker knows.
 All my toil filled life has been fraught with strife
 And all that I have to show
 Are the callused palms of these workworn hands
 And a faltering step and slow.
 From my early youth like a soul-less brute
 In a Godless way I've slaved,
 In Dosco's mills where the labour kills
 And hastens an early grave.
 I've shovelled ore thru a furnace door
 In the heat of the boiling steel
 Where the stink and glare of the poisoned air
 Makes a man feel faint and reel.
 Oh! I've grown sick of the look of brick

¹⁸*Steelworker & Miner*, 31 August 1940, 1.

¹⁹"M.A. MacKenzie was informed from Ottawa that if he printed any more of that 'tripe' as they called it that they'd shut him up. It didn't bother me." Interview, 3 May 1990. "Wishful Thinking," "Only a Hobo," and "The Isle O' My Dreams" were all written by "Beachcomber" and published in the *Steelworker & Miner* on 2 November and 14 December 1940, and 15 March 1941.

And the paddles and tongs and pails
 Of the mud and the mire and McIntyre
 And the flame that never fails.
 The checkers so hot and Foreman Watt
 And Ritchie who'se always there
 Like a Simon Legree he seems to me
 With a cruel and crafty stare.
 The charging cars and the hammer and bars
 And the smoke of the metal trains
 The ladles and pans, the barrow and fans
 And the screech of the hoisting cranes.
 Oh! weary am I of the few who try
 To scab and pamper the boss
 Confidential men and those who pretend
 A concern for production lost.
 For the many must work for the few who shirk
 The high paid few who prize
 The money and ease and the luxuries
 Of private enterprise.
 Those hypocrites who rack their wits
 And worry and scheme and plan
 For a christian way to lower the pay
 Of the honest working man.
 But bear in mind there will come a time
 And come it soon, I pray
 When the stooge and boss aside we'll toss
 And build for a better day.
 Then we'll produce for the common use
 For the man in field and ditch,
 And we'll liquidate the profit rate
 Along with the idle rich.

So for better or worse I'll end this verse
 On a note of hope my friend
 "There's a crimson star that shines afar,
 And the longest night must end."²⁰

²⁰*Steelworker & Miner*, 13 October 1945. The pseudonym he used this time was "Little Twisted." MacIntyre was a foreman with the bricklayers, as was Watt: "He wasn't a bad head...he had a sense of humour." Ritchie was a labour foreman at the Open Hearth. "Ritchie was always there...he was always on your back, put it that way." Interview, 20 April 1990. George Watt retired as brick superintendent in 1973 after 47 years at the plant. *Cape Breton Post*, 3 July 1990.

"Dosco's Inferno" was an immediate hit at the plant. According to the author:

The only one that ever got any kind of recognition was that Open Hearth one. I was pointed out by nearly every god-damn guy in the mill. 'That's the guy that wrote it, that's the guy.' Ritchie was talking to Watt one day: 'That's him over there,' you know, that sort of stuff. That went all through the mill. Didn't bother me.²¹

It continues to circulate.

The following months were turbulent ones in the Canadian steel industry. There were several walkouts at the Sydney plant in early 1946 and it culminated in a general walkout on 15 July. Slim immediately wrote "The Steel Strike."

If you'll listen friend for a moment then
A brief account I'll give
Of a worker's woe when the rates are low
And the struggle it is to live.

Sure the plant's on strike, you can say what you like
Or think what you like as well;
But for years we've tried for a raise denied
While Dosco's profits swelled.

We played the game and were not to blame,
We pleaded from board to board,
But never a cent for the sweat we spent
Would they give from their greedy hoard.

I live in a shack but the rent fell back
And the landlord threatened then
That he'd get rid of my wife and kid
While I was at work, my friend.

So each day in the mill, my heart was filled
With a dread that was always hell;
For the law was strict and they might evict
The ones I loved so well.

²¹Interview, 20 April 1990.

How I've lain awake and my heart has ached
Through many a lonely night,
And I cursed and swore as I paced the floor
With no relief in sight.

Oh: I prayed to the saints in heaven, friend,
And I cursed to the IMPS in hell
Till my nerves were frayed, but it didn't aid
The hurt in my heart that swelled.

No hope could I see in my misery
But only a life of want,
Tho' I scrimped and saved, and I toiled and saved
Until I grew thin and gaunt.

How we pleaded in vain again and again
While the cost of living soared,
On our failing rate we lost all faith
In government labor boards.

But at last there came an end to the pain
And my heart no more could feel,
Then the talks were stalled and the union called
For a national strike in steel.

So we're struck at last and all we ask
Is a forty hour week
So our brave young sons who fought the huns
Can find the work they seek.

And a slight increase that will give release
From the worry we long have known,
And a chance to pay for the right to stay
In the hovel we call our home.

That's our well-won right and we're proud to fight
Till we all lie dead or jailed,
For we just can't live on the wage they give —
We've tried for years and failed.

So now my friend my tale I'll end,
 Well, we know our cause is just,
 And God pity the scab that our pickets grab
 Who tries to betray our trust.²²

The Sydney steelworkers finally went back to work in October. The decline of the steel and coal industry in Cape Breton continued.



In 1970 as Slim McInnis was preparing to retire after more than thirty years at the plant he wrote "Steelworker's Lament." He was fifty-nine. Most of that time he had operated out of the General Yard and, as his verse suggests, had worked throughout the plant during those decades. Dosco had disappeared in 1967 and the Sydney plant was now operated by the Nova Scotia government (Sydney Steel Corporation/Sysco). The legacy, the costs, were still being added up. Perhaps this continuity is one of the reasons why "Steelworker's Lament" also continues to circulate.

²²*Steelworker & Miner*, 27 July 1946. It was dated 21 July and was signed "Slim." In the *Steelworker & Miner*, 7 April 1945 he wrote a saucy, general verse, "Down Where the East Begins" and signed it John McInnis.

I've worked on the steel plant all my life
 Since the time I was just a lad,
 The hours were long but my back was strong
 And I gave them all I had.

I've shovelled their snow at ten below
 From tracks piled high and white
 While the city dozed I worked and froze
 There many a winter night.

I've shovelled their coal to a boiler old
 And just as hot as the grates of hell,
 Just useless trash most stone and ash
 That the coal mines couldn't sell.

I've loaded their rails and packed their nails
 And bundled their rods and bars,
 And I've gasped and choked in the poison smoke
 And the fumes of their hot coke cars.
 I've swung a sledge on the crumbling edge
 Of a furnace wide and tall
 With my vision blurred with the dust it stirred
 And a man just dared not fall.

I've shovelled their ore from the stinking floor
 Of Ships from beyond the seas,
 And my stomach turned with the gas was churned
 From shovelling manganese.
 I've burned my feet in the hellish heat
 Of a slag-pit's fiery glow,
 And I've froze my ears at the scrap yard shears
 On a night that was ten below.
 I've swabbed their sewers where a man endures
 A stench that's beyond compare,
 In air so foul that the rodents who prowl
 Have all abandoned there.

Now my nerves are frayed and my hair has greyed
 And slowed are my work-worn hands,
 And my back is bent from the youth I've spent
 At Sydney Steel's demands.
 For a man that toils in a steel mill spoils
 His chance for a ripe old age
 For the hazards to health are early felt
 And he's old at middle age.

Now these are but few of the jobs I do
 That briefly I've made mention
 And I feel in my heart that I've played my part,
 And I've earned an early pension.²³

Slim McInnis' last published work appeared in a local newspaper in 1988, forty-four years after his initial, upsetting to some, "From Breadlines to Battlefields." The verse, "Tramping Down The Highway," is a comment on the contemporary conditions now prevalent in the industrial Cape Breton area.

When you've used up all your pogeey
 And can't pay your room and board
 And you're tramping down the highway
 Dreaming dreams you can't afford.

....

And the whole darn Constitution
 Wouldn't buy a single meal
 When you're tramping down the highway
 Or laid-off at Sydney Steel.

....²⁴

Not much had altered in sixty years. The workforce at the plant is now settling at a little over 700 and the out-migration has increased. In his writings Slim McInnis had come full circle. He has also left a small but valuable record of impressions and comments in verse of working at the steel plant in Sydney.

²³*Highlander*, Sydney, 19 August 1970. It was anonymous.

²⁴The entire poem is in *The Northside Tribune*, North Sydney, 10 August 1988. See Joan Bishop, "Sydney Steel: Public Ownership and the Welfare State, 1967-1975," in K. Donovan, ed. *The Island* (Sydney 1990), 165-86; James P. Bickerton, *Nova Scotia, Ottawa, and the Politics of Regional Development* (Toronto 1990).

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