

Poems from *Idle Hours: Belfast Working-Class Poetry*, by Robert Atkinson and Robert Atkinson Junior (1993) Island Pamphlets

Robert Atkinson was born in 1894, near the shipyards in Belfast. He became a ship's plater, but was unemployed for long stretches during the 1920s and 1930s. He turned to music and writing, and became active in promoting education for workers. He earned a little money from time to time by publishing poems and articles in local journals.

Locum Tenens

She's away all day, an' I'm sittin' here,
After puttin' the childer to school,
Thinkin' the whiles that it's strange an' queer,
Me, sittin' here like a fool.

Thinkin' I could have been at my work,
Had there been any work to do,
Slashin' at rivets, aye, just like a Turk,
An' grumblin' like one too.

It's her goes out in the mornin's now,
She's back again in the mill,
I can't get used to the thing, somehow,
An' don't think I ever will.

It's not what both of us bargained for,
When we made up to marry,
An' young we were, both me an' her,
With never a care or worry.

Her cheeks are palin', her hair's turned grey,
Her han's are worn an' rough,
An' me with mine as soft as clay,
I don't think it's good enough.

To hear her singin', and sing she can,
You'd think she hadn't a care,
An' one not able to turn a han',
Me, sittin' here on a chair.

She's away all day an' here I stay,
Talkin' like some big caddy,
Knowin' there'll be the Divil to pay,
If I haven't her dinner ready.

Belfast 1932

The Outdoor Relief Workers' Strike: a Shared Heritage

The logo for Green Shoot productions features a stylized white plant or shoot icon above the text "Green Shoot" in a serif font, with "productions" in a smaller, lowercase serif font below it.

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Only An Apprentice

I'm only an apprentice, I'm just started to my trade,
In the shipyard where they make them iron boats,
I'm mating with a fella by the name of Mick McDade,
An' he told me I'd be safer keepin' goats.

He took me to some fellas an' he said "just luk at this,
Isn't little Joey, here, a lovely child?"
The squad all gathered roun' me yellin' "give yir mates a kiss",
But I just stuck out m' tongue, man I was wild.

They asked me would I rather be a gaffer or a boss,
A leadin' han', a foreman, or a ganger,
"Ye need no brains for these" they said, an' had me at a loss,
But I said I'd rather be an angle-ironer.

They sent me with a bucket for a half-a-pint o' steam,
Some putty nails with paper points an' heads,
A hammer wi' a leather face, an' some red leader's cream,
A quart o' striped paint for the ocean beds.

They sent me to the store to get a yardstick four fut wide,
A roun' square, an' the longest two fut rule,
"Oh dear, another one of these," the storeman sighed,
"Would you like them parcelled up and tied with wool?"

I'm thinkin' when m' time is served, I'll not know what I'll be,
But I'll have to take what Missus Fortune sends,
Ah'd make a brave good boiler for a ship that goes to sea,
For I'm doin' nothin' else but boilin' kens.

The Labourer

"Six days shalt thou labour" God spoke thus for the best,
When he ordained that Adam, whom he had put to toil
For ever and for ever upon the earth's bare soil,
Go ploughing, sowing, reaping, and on the seventh, rest.

Six days he did labour, and God was in his Heaven,
Adam became contented and happy with his lot,
Then, lo, the Gods of Commerce commanded "Thou shalt not
Go ploughing, sowing, reaping" — so now he's resting seven.

Belfast 1932

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Idle Hours

Time was when we grudged other folk their measure
Of Idleness — Oh! most exalted niche,
Wherein the hours are spent pursuing pleasure.
Ne'r stopped to ponder one grave problem, which
Was better for our kind — service, or leisure.

Time came when we gained access to this sphere,
And basked in leisure's sanctuary, light with care.
But found, when for a time their course did steer,
It lured us to the vaults where souls despair,
And now we face the days in dread and fear.

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