

Poems from *Poverty Street and Other Belfast Poems*, by Thomas Carnduff (1993) Lapwing Publications

Thomas Carnduff was born in 1886 on Little May Street in Belfast, and worked variously as a shipyard labourer, engineer and constable. He came to be known as the Shipyard Poet. Carnduff developed socialist politics as he lived and worked (and didn't work) through periods of recession. He published *Songs of an Out-of-Work* in 1932. It was collected with *Songs from the Shipyard* (1924) as *Poverty Street and Other Belfast Poems*.¹

The Road Gang

We gathered round in a circle.
A motley, unshaven crowd;
The clerk of the works nigh fainted,
The gaffer just swore out loud –
“Give ‘em a pick an’ a shovel
An’ a place fur to lay their head,
'Cause I reckon afore the evening
The most of this bunch is dead.”
We felt like kicking the gaffer –
But we tackled the job instead.

The picks were heavy and awkward,
The ground as brittle as glass;
With splinters skinning our knuckles,
And blisters trying to pass
A broadcast up to our armpits
That stiffened the joints in pain –
The gaffer, rocking with laughter,
Just counted us all as slain;
So we spat at the soulless loafer,
And tackled the work again.

It was weary and worrisome labour
Digging about in a fog,
Ofttimes grinning in humour,
Most times sick as a dog.
Fitter, and plater, and plumber,
Men of the trowel and hod,
Builders of ships and mansions
Chained to a navvymen's nod –
It was back to the land with a vengeance,
But land that was minus the sod.

¹ Information on Carnduff from www.irishwriters-online.com/carnduff-thomas/ and www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/literature/thomas-carnduff, accessed 27th October 2016.

The more that you work as a navvy
The less you will measure the waist,
There were some of us slaughtered our dinners
The others had none to taste;
But we didn't think less of the gaffer
As he raced for the nearest pub
While a couple of dinnerless hobos
Sat down to some decent grub –
It's funny that gold don't glisten

Till the dross gives way when you rub.
Back to the pick and the shovel,
The barrow and concrete bed,
Our hands as tender as oysters,
Our feet like buckets of lead.
And this that your roads be level,
And this that your motors ply
As safe as a duck on the waters
As swift as the falcons fly –
Shaped by the hands of workmen
Who didn't know how or why.

Back to Work

We were kicking our heels on the kerbstones,
Smoking our final "cig",
With the boots on our feet like sandals
And a patchwork quilt for a "rig".
Out of a job through the winter,
Waiting to sign – and then
Came a message that lifted our sorrow –
Ould Larry was back again.
Larry Mulholland, the ganger,
Searching around for his men.

The stoop departs from our shoulders,
The gloom has gone from our eyes;
We are going back to the shipyards,
Back to the ships and skies,
Where the gantry hovers above us,
And the stage-poles sway to the breeze;
Where gangways creak on their pulleys
And the tide creeps up to our knees –
Back to the tankers and coasters
And tramps of the seven seas.

Belfast 1932

The Outdoor Relief Workers' Strike: a Shared Heritage

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

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And what of our days of waiting,
And what of our sleepless nights,
The scorn of the powdered flapper,
The butt of their vulgar slights?
On the Bureau for a winter,
Down and out for a term,
Taking our gruel with the weather,
Never as much as a squirm –
You of the gilded jazz-room
Study our ways – and learn!

Work – and with Larry Mulholland,
Out on the boats again,
Sweating and swearing and growling,
But mating with masculine men.
Eating our grub in the bilges,
Playing at “nap” in the hold –
What if our baccy is pungent,
What if our language is bold?
In Larry Mulholland’s opinion
Our virtues are manifold.

The Song of the Unemployed

We built you graceful structures from a heap of clay and stone,
We fashioned out of nothing yonder proud and stately dome;
The steeples rising skywards bear the hallmark of our skill,
And the hands that shaped your mansions have the cunning in them still.

We levelled fields and ditches to the city’s outward stride,
And now you boast its greatness yet we do not share your pride;
Our picks have ranged the hillside and our shovels smoothed the plain,
That your children might have shelter, though your good was not our gain.

You flattered us in labour when our labour brought its due;
The fruits of all our sweat and toil we shared alike with you;
But now our hands lie idle and our hearts are sore with grief.
Comes the clamour of your curses – while your praises grow more brief.

Belfast 1932

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The Out-of-Works

What have we done to you,
What have we said,
That you should take from us
Our daily bread?

Are we not just as you,
Made after God,
Made in his image, if
Truthful His word?

Have we not made for you
Palace and hall,
Mansion and church for you,
At beck and call?

Fashioned the roads that you
Ride at your ease
Over the surface we
Smoothed on our knees!

Deep in the earth have we
Sweated and bled;
Slaved for your comfort while
Mourning our dead.

Spade, pick and shovel you
Loaned us, and we
Bartered our souls so that
You might be free.

What have we done to you,
What have we said,
That you should take from us
Our daily bread?

Belfast 1932

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