The Smelter Poets
Worker poetry found in a Canadian trade union newspaper in the “Age of the CIO”

By Ron Verzuh

When celebrated Wobbly troubadour Joe Hill purportedly visited the Rossland Miners’ Hall in the early 1900s to lend his support to the first Canadian local of the rugged Western Federation of Miners (WFM), he no doubt shared some of his inspired verses with the mine workers who are said to have protected him.¹ Claims of his visit are unsubstantiated, but if he did get to Rossland, British Columbia, he likely would have sung them some of his most popular tunes about struggle, resistance, and the dream of a workers’ paradise, and in so doing he would have been performing the same service that poets and songwriters had rendered working people since the earliest days of the trade union movement. The powerful corporate enemies of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Hill’s union, would succeed in having him executed in Utah in 1915 sometime after his supposed Rossland stopover.² But whether he visited the ore-rich West Kootenay region or not the Wobbly singer’s cunning lyrics would live on in the minds of Rossland miners and in those of the smelter workers of nearby Trail, B.C. Long after his death they would be reminded of his dying comment that workers everywhere should not agonize but

¹ Jeremy Mouat, Roaring Days: Rossland’s Mines and the History of British Columbia (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), p. 71, notes that Rossland miners formed Local 38 of the Western Federation of Miners in 1895. The WFM was instrumental in the founding of the IWW ten years later.
² Hill’s visit may fall under the category of ‘rural legend.’ The only references I could find to it were Rosa Jordan, “The Struggle: A Brief History of Local Labour Movements and the Rossland Miners’ Union Hall,” as an appendix in Al King, Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing, 1998) p. 170, and Rosa Jordan and Derek Choukalos, Rossland the First 100 Years (Rossland, B.C.: Harry Lefevre, the Rossland Historic Society and the BC Heritage Foundation, 1996). Jordan writes that Hill “met with union organizers here.” She adds that “America’s most famous lawyer, Clarence Darrow, came to Rossland in search of evidence for the defense of an Idaho miner” and “Labour organizers from throughout western North America, being pursued by the notorious, company-employed Pinkerton detectives, were given refuge in the Hall.” Interestingly, there is a Joe Hill Coffee House now established in Rossland and it regularly features singer-songwriters.
organize. Some of them would pen lyrics of their own for their fellow workers, thus joining Hill, Woody Guthrie and other travelling singer-poets who represented the working class across North America in the first decades of the twentieth century. The style and content of their poetry and songs 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 the local trade union newspaper where they could be shared. They expressed their views and concerns, their anger and frustrations, and they proffered solace to other workers and their families through their rhymes.

This paper explores examples of that historical literary tradition through a study of smelter worker poetry found in the pages of The Commentator, a trade union newspaper published in Trail by Local 480 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill) in the late 1930s and early 1940s as labour activists were striving to rekindle the union spirit at the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada (CM&S Company), 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 writings? Did they have a sense of the

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historical moment in which their poetry played a part, however minor, in the making of literary history? These and other questions are addressed later in the paper.

Whether they were aware of it or not, Trail’s smelter poets, as I will call them, 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 Communist community of cultural activists, would have been aware 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, Ruth I. McKenzie, for example, concluded in 1939 that “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.” In the U.S., 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.” Yet the appearance of worker poetry in little left-wing magazines and labour newspapers like the Commentator suggested 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.

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4 Irvine, “Among Masses...” p. 183, quoting from Ruth I. McKenzie, “Proletarian Literature in Canada,” Dalhousie Review 19, 1939, p. 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), p. 179. Irvine also quotes literary historian Samuel Hynes who agreed with McKenzie. In his 1976 study of the British literary scene, he stated that “Virtually no writing of literary importance came out of the working class during the decade [1930s]. The poor did find symbolic ways of expressing their needs and feelings...but these were not literary ways.”

In Canada, historian F.W. Watt led the way into almost unchartered territory with his seminal 1957 doctoral thesis 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 field probably encompassed some workers who would later become smelter poets. More recently, historian James Doyle produced a series of articles culminating in the publication of *Progressive Heritage*, a book-length study that explores worker writing but only peripherally touches on the labour and union press where the smelter poets often found a home for their work. Add to these Communist poet Dorothy Livesay’s *Right Hand Left Hand*, a collection of autobiographical accounts of her life as a poet and alternative journalist. In the United States, critical literature on this topic is even more plentiful, 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, John Marsh’s *You Work Tomorrow* is another

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important contribution to recognizing this literature. These scholars and many others help to situate the smelter poets in the historical context of the 1930s-1950s proletarian writing period.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 the smelter poets. In fact, many academic literary scholars and critics have chosen until relatively recently to avoid such studies altogether. For anthologist James 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 characterising the poetry as “slightly embarrassing or amateurish sloganeering,” and suggests that the ‘moment’ was “ceaselessly inventive, oftentimes unexpectedly funny, [and] wickedly satiric.”⁹ Despite that 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 labor poets. 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 proletaire.”

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⁹ Marsh, You Work Tomorrow, p. 5.
Still, Watt argued, “in the area of the shorter lyric a large number of proletarian poetasters were active.”

Numbered among the poets and “poetasters” of Trail were Communists, socialists or fellow travellers who would defy the views of those who would argue that their poems were irrelevant and valueless as literature. Despite Watt’s view that “Much of the literature of the Hungry Thirties has little purely aesthetic value,” the worker poets engaged with the issues and arguments that raged throughout the 1930s, 1940s and into the Cold War-riddled 1950s. These resonated with them as much as with other worker writers and it will be argued that they formed an active part of the radical literature tradition. In fact, as Watt quickly added, “to ignore it is to ignore work.” As shall be demonstrated below, work was a topic that had not been viewed as worthy of literary treatment, but it was one that the smelter poets knew intimately and they wrote about it with mounting passion and concern.

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The Commentator’s inaugural edition appeared on November 2, 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.” 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. The Commentator welcomed contributions from “any and all smeltermen who wish to

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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 In addition to The Commentator and Union Bulletin, Trail workers would also have had access to CIO News – Mine Mill Edition and later The Union, the international Mine Mill paper. In the mid-1940s, the B.C. District Union News began appearing in Trail as well. While not all editions provided a poet’s corner, the odd poem did appear.
take advantage of the opportunity to discuss unionism pro or con.”13 By its sixth edition on February 6, 1939, workers’ 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, B.C., who “walked a half mile” to tell circulation manager Gordon Martin that “there were six men with him who ‘needed’ Commentators.” Martin enthused that “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.”14

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 April 29, 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.

14 “‘I Deliver The Commentator’,” The Commentator, May 1, 1939, p. 2.
Of course, poetry was not new to Trail residents. Readers of the *Trail Daily Times* were accustomed to reading the traditional literary fare – Wordsworth, Longfellow, Byron, Shelley and the odd Canadian poetry giant such as Confederation poets Archibald Lampman, Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts or Duncan Campbell Scott. Their work and that of other established poets appeared daily under, or adjacent to, the frequently anti-union editorials that the *Times* published along with regular rebukes to readers who might be thinking of switching their vote to the newly formed socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation or even the Communist party, a vocal local rival to the CCF. Often the poetry was reprinted from other newspapers or conservative magazines like Toronto’s *Saturday Night* and often it was by a male poet. 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 Trail. 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 staff member Lance Whittaker have allowed a poem critical of the company to appear.

The *Times* policy regarding poetry left the *Commentator* as the smelter poets’ main publishing outlet and, not surprisingly, the first of the smelter poems came from the creative pen of the multi-talented Arthur H. “Slim” Evans, the organizer sent to Trail in the fall of 1938 by Mine Mill to start a union local under the auspices of the newly christened 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 –

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15 Among the exceptions was the Nanaimo, B.C.-born Audrey Alexandra Brown, a celebrated classical poet whose work was buried under the anti-classical weight of the age of modernism.
16 Lance H. Whittaker, “All is not Gold,” unpublished manuscript commissioned by S.G. Blaylock, Trail, B.C., 1945, is a glowing history of the company and a fawning portrait of company president Selwyn G. Blaylock which prove the point.
sarcastic, humurous and often irreverent poetry. “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 sassy, in-your-face 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.

Mr. Bray-a-lot was feared and respected company president Selwyn G. Blaylock, a larger than life figure in Trail who would often take the brunt of future smelter poets’ rhyming taunts. The other direct reference is to Blaylock’s thoroughly disliked personnel manager J. W. Guillaume, but shift bosses, plant foremen, and particularly company loyalists among the workforce would also receive regular poetic lashings.

Of course, poetry was only one weapon in Evans’s organizing arsenal – clearly, it would take much more than rhyming couplets to shift the smelter workers out of years of complacency – but the poems might have helped to push the drive forward or at least allow Evans to vent his frustrations. 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 shop. 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 it generated toward the CM&S

17 Al King, Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing, 1998), p. 39, explained that the union was able to start the paper with a $50 subsidy from the international union, although it may not have been aware that Evans would spend some of it on poetry.
Company was still a strong memory among smelter workers.¹⁹ He knew that since that failure the company had worked hard to avoid another union.²⁰ He also claimed to have met Goodwin and his own charismatic personality undoubtedly led him to an understanding of the catalytic power that had accompanied the labour martyr’s murder in 1918.²¹ It was an enduring memory that he sensed could spur smelter workers to action...and sometimes to poetry.

By the time he became a CIO-paid organizer in Trail, Evans had earned a national reputation first as an organizer of relief camp workers in the 1930s, and then by leading the historic On to Ottawa Trek in the summer of 1935 to protest the abominable camp conditions and pay directly to Prime Minister R.B. “Iron Heel” Bennett. Both events made the headlines in Trail. Later during the Spanish Civil War, Evans had visited the Kootenay area to raise funds for the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of Canadian volunteers fighting against General Francisco Franco’s 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 in the smelter city. Among those barriers, Evans had to confront a long-standing company union called the Workmen’s Cooperative Committee (WCC) that had been formed by company president Blaylock at the end of the First World War purportedly to avoid future strikes like the one in 1917. Blaylock was adamantly opposed to a union in Trail and he silently controlled not only the WCC, but also the local media represented by the Times and radio station CJAT. As


²⁰ As mentioned in a previous footnote, several scholars have written accounts of the 1917 strike. The excellent work of Stanley Scott and Mary L. McRoberts is complemented by Eric A. Christensen, “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, B.C.” MA Thesis, Notre Dame University, Nelson, B.C., 1976.

president he also had the resources to produce company propaganda like the glossy company magazine *Cominco* which was sent directly into workers’ homes.\(^{22}\) Like 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. 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 also spoke out in support of Evans’s organizing drive and the trials of working life under Blaylock and his “phony” union.\(^{23}\)

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By encouraging smelter workers to express their views in the form of verse, the *Commentator* was following in a long-practiced Mine Mill tradition that would flourish for a time in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. For Mine Mill, that tradition stretched back to the printing of workers’ poems in the *Miner’s Magazine* published by the Western Federation of Miners in the first years of the twentieth century.\(^{24}\) In a detailed study of the WFM poetry, literary historian Dan Tannacito categorized the poems under six “genres.”\(^{25}\) Using Tannacito’s methodology, many of *The Commentator* poems fit into his categories. Considering his first genre, for example, we find several smelter poems that strive to “elicit shared emotions about real-life experiences among workers.” One “Poet’s Corner” example describes a situation in the smelter:

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\(^{22}\) A scan of war-time issues revealed that the publication of poetry was not a priority for company magazine editor Lance Whittaker.

\(^{23}\) The use of the term “phony” or phony, among even nastier terms, was used frequently in union newspapers to describe company unions. The international Mine Mill newspaper, *The Union*, often used it in the battle against company unionism.

\(^{24}\) The WFM changed its name to Mine Mill in 1916 arguably to play down its former radical image under outspoken leaders like Wobbly founder Big Bill Haywood and others.

\(^{25}\) Dan Tannacito, “Poetry of the Colorado Miners: 1903-1906,” *Radical Teacher*, 15, March 1980, pp. 2-3. All references in this paper to Tannacito’s genres are covered with this single note.
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.26

The second of Tannicito’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 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.”27 In a
second example, “The Farmer’s Life,” another smelter poet praised the farm worker 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.”28

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 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

26 “Poets’ Corner [There’s confusion in the Refinery],” The Commentator, May 18, 1942, p. 4.
company is good to me.”29 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. 30

Another favourite target for poetic criticism that fits into this genre was the media, particularly the Times considered by Local 480 leaders to be little more than a “vicious” pro-company rag.31 In an untitled ditty that accompanied an article condemning the Times 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.”32 In an Evans poem called “In Appreciation,” he mockingly calls the media “our best allies” and writes that “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.”33 Two other local media outlets were also targets of rants in the Local 480 paper. The Communicator, which published its first and perhaps only edition on February 25, 1939, claimed to be “paid for and circulated by a group of bona fide workers.” It attacked Evans and suggested that “The truth has been handled carelessly.”34 The first edition of The Cooperator appeared on March 7, 1939, saying that it “was not afraid of the

31 King, Red Bait!, p. 37.  
33 “In Appreciation,” The Commentator, March 13, 1939, p. 3.  
truth” and denigrating Evans as “cunning” and “communistic.” There was no sign of poetry in either pro-company union publication. Nor did The Amalgamator grant a space for poetry. The pro-independent, anti-CIO union paper moved to Trail from Ontario in 1946 and fought vigorously against Local 480 as a Mine Mill local.

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 borrowed 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 pressed workers to join the CIO because “We must have freedom, liberty and/ the right to say.”

A “Poet’s Corner” contribution encouraged workers to “fight for the things that are good and true,/ Along with those who are fighting for you.” In a later stanza 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.”

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

35 “Editorial – No Thanks, Mr. Evans!,” The Cooperator, March 7, 1939, p. 1.
36 When company unions were declared illegal in the early 1940s, 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.
37 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 Poets’ Corner [Upon this earth],” The Commentator, June 10, 1940, p. 4.
appeared at least twice in the paper, described how “savage tribes, where skulls are thick” rid themselves of old people. But it continued:

We in this enlightened age
    Are built of nobler stuff,
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.\textsuperscript{40}

The final genre – aphorisms that “summed up and condensed their common experience” – was also well represented in the \textit{Commentator}. In “Thanksgiving,” Poverty was a common fear among smelter workers that the poets decried since many them had experienced it during the Depression. This poem, with its anti-religious views, is typical:

\textbf{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.\textsuperscript{41}

Poverty was a continuing concern in spite of the relative job security that existed in Trail, but the smelter workers had an even more immediate worry of being injured or killed on the job in a filthy workplace that was filled with hidden hazards and dangers. The smelter poets tackled the issue of workplace health and safety with passion and compassion especially when it concerned lead poisoning or being “leaded,” a common and debilitating affliction among smelter workers in Trail.\textsuperscript{42} This stanza from “The Golden Stairs” makes the point:

\textsuperscript{40} “Civilization!,” \textit{The Commentator}, February 20, 1939, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{41} “Thanksgiving!” \textit{The Commentator}, March 23, 1939, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{42} 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, \textit{Red Bait!}, p. 20-21, describes leading this way: “There were various ways you knew if you were leaded. I ached and was very tired. Some guys said it affected your sex drive,
Up the gold stairs I go,
    My breath comes fast, my feet go slow;
I decide to rest upon a bench
    And deeply breathe 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 gets set to “get on my way,” he says, “But these damn steps are
going too tough/ For us old-timers leaded to the cuff.”

The smelter poems are also marked by several elements that fall outside the Tannacito
analysis. For example, the local context for these poems is different from those he examined in
the Miners’ Magazine. Like the worker poems that he uncovered about the experiences of mine
workers, the Commentator poems often stay close to their Canadian home but they also differ in
that they express strong views that deal with the specific concerns of smelter workers as opposed
to those of mine workers. 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, B.C., their work experiences in the smelter and in the comparatively urban setting of
Trail influenced their poetry in different ways than the camp experiences of the Colorado miners
in Tannacito’s analysis. Further, the different timeframe of the two groups of poets is significant.
The poetry that Tannacito examined appeared in the Miner’s Magazine between 1903 and 1906,

but I didn’t ever hear of anybody with that symptom. They used to test for it with blood tests – taking stipple counts.
A sample of your blood was put on the field to see how many of those red things – corpuscles – weren’t red
anymore. That was lead poisoning. Of course, the company never called it lead poisoning. The called it stippling.
‘You’re stippled,’ they’d say, ‘so there’s a danger of your becoming lead poisoned.’ 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 pointing, 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.”

a decidedly different era politically, culturally and economically from that of the smelter poetry. Other differences would surely surface if we compared the key events effecting the lives of each set of WFM and Mine Mill poets. In the early years of the twentieth century, WFM poets could write about horrifying mining disasters, violently anti-union employers like J.P Morgan, 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 smelter workers to replace the soldiers, and to hail the founding of the CIO.

Other scholars have followed Tannacito in attempting to categorize workers’ literature. American anthologists Peter Oresick and Nicholas Cole argue that it falls under three broad themes rather than six genres: the value of work, its effects on life outside work, and the writer’s stance when considering his topic. In the first two themes, they argue that work “set within the larger context of ‘a life’ among other lives: in the networks of family and community, for example, or in the relations between men and women, or in the rhythms and stages of working life.”\(^{44}\) 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.”\(^ {45}\) The work of the smelter poets can be measured using all three themes. For example, in “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 they men whom they replace;
Equal pay for equal work should be the case.\(^ {46}\)

\(^{46}\) “To the Ladies,” *The Commentator*, October 20, 1942, p. 4.
In a second example, a “Poet Steward” claiming authorship of “Bull-Headed Joe” expresses the view of a worker who shuns the union and 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.”47

It was a typical expression of the anger unionists felt towards the naysayers ‘on the Hill,’ as the smelter workplace was called. The subject of anti-unionism was a constant theme during the long years of organizing, and the smelter poets were at their caustic best when writing about it. The organizing drive lasted from 1938 until 1944 when the local was finally certified. During that time the smelter poets were called into action in the struggle to get workers to sign up and many of the published works reflect 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,
Full two thousand strong
For we are working for victory.48

Rather than themes or genres, Marsh describes some of the characteristics of worker poetry and what he calls “The Turbulent Poetics of 1930s Labor Poetry.” Some of the poems in his anthology of worker poems addressed the problems created by mass media and popular

47 “Bull-Headed Joe,” The Commentator, August 20, 1943, p. 3. The same poem appears in other Mine Mill publications. In The Sudbury Beacon, organ of Mine Mill Local 598, a poem by the same name appears on August 31, 1943, p. 4. So the “Poet Steward” may not be a Trail smelter worker.
culture, some celebrate nature, some praise personal achievement, some were eulogies, memorializing workers that have died, and some documented 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, added “the simple notion of solidarity” to the list. All were covered by the smelter poets.

Coles and anthologist Janet Zandy also identify several characteristics that mark working-class literature, noting that two “ideas that animate this writing, have been the value of solidarity and the tradition of struggle.” 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.

Some of the smelter poets may challenge Coles and Zandy’s characteristics of working-class literature 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 or class consciousness in their poems, but there was evidence that Local 480 organizers, many of them Communists, were engaged in class warfare as shown in poems like “Death of a Captain of Industry.” Referring to company president Blaylock as “none other than ‘Canada’s Citizen Kane’,” the poet weaves a tale of greed and heartlessness towards workers. As the captain of industry is entering heaven,

The Lord said to his good friend Saint Peter,
“Release that man, Satan, from jail,
Have him stir up the fires and brimstone,
Mixed with sulphur from the smelter at Trail;
Then feed it to Kane plenty and often,

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49 Marsh, You Work Tomorrow, p. viii.
51 Coles and Zandy, American Working-Class Literature, p. xx.
Then give it to him by fits and by jerks,
And make sure that, no matter what happens,
SEE TO IT THAT HE’S GIVEN THE WORKS!”

Many workers, the majority of them from Italian immigrant families, would have disagreed with this negative characterization of a man who supported them during the war, provided a livelihood for them, and came to their defence when some authorities wanted to deport them or put them in internment camps as enemy aliens. “They are working peacefully,” he reported. “As long as they continue to do so they can do just as much good toward Canada’s cause as anyone else.” Local 480 leaders, anxious to gain the support of Italian workers, were not prepared to discourage smelter poets from criticizing him in spite of such public statements of support for those workers.

American literary historian Michael Thurston avoids establishing genres, themes or categories in his study of the challenges facing political poets of the 1930s and 1940s; rather, he sought out what he called “partisan poetry” that was “committed to a specific activist agenda, poetry that addresses a specific political question or issue and takes sides, presses its claims, and seeks to move its audience to action.” This clearly describes many of the smelter poems under examination here. In “Tout au contraire,” for example, an unnamed smelter poet analyzed Russia’s chance of surviving Hitler’s Barbarossa campaign in this way:

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.

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52 Poets’ Corner – Death of a Captain of Industry,” The Commentator, December 14, 1942, p. 3. Note that Blaylock died on November 19, 1945.
The poet finishes with praise for Stalin who “is still in the Kremlin,/ The papers tell us so.”55 It was this strong commitment to various *causes célèbres* that marked the work of many worker poets throughout the 1930s. As Thurston notes, 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.56 Canadian poets focused on the Estevan, Saskatchewan, miners’ strike, the Regina Riot, the On to Ottawa Trek led by Slim Evans, the Vancouver Post office sit-in, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and the Spanish Civil War. As the Second World War escalated, smelter poets increasingly commented on it. In “Now is The Time,” for example, the poet calls for the allies to open up a second front to support 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.

Against the power of the Nazi might
They are holding the Volga’s tanks.
Strafed from above, both day and night,
Continually hammered by tanks.57

In this and other poems, we can perhaps see an emerging subtheme of support for the Soviet Union and communism growing out of the Communist influence of the Local 480 leadership as it strives to support the shifting war-time policies of the Comintern in Moscow.

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56 Thurston, p. 15.
Such support was among the various goals of the smelter poets. Like other worker poets, many of whom could be numbered with the partisan poets of the period, Thurston notes that they 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.”

In her reminiscences of the 1930s, Livesay agrees, suggesting 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 wrote in exasperation. Equally frustrated by the lack of political content in Canadian poetry, her contemporary Leo Kennedy stated the case more starkly: “We need poetry that reflects the lives of our people, working, loving, fighting, groping for clarity.”

Though it may not have been exactly what the left intellectual community wanted, the smelter poets were doing just what Kennedy demanded. “The Exploiter,” written in the voice of the 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.

While not identifying specific categories of worker writing, several other scholars have observed some typical characteristics. Ruth I. McKenzie, for example, while denying above that

58 Thurston, p. 35.
such writing exists, nevertheless defined it as “literature which describes the life of the working class from a class-conscious and revolutionary point of view. It is 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.”  

American scholar Paula Rabinowitz describes worker writers having a “common urge to document, to record, to report, and ultimately to change the world.”  

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 ‘will facilitate the creation of a more practical social system’,” she noted and he disdained “pure poetry” that is “unconcerned with anything save its own existence.”  

Candida Rifkind offers another set of criteria for analysing 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 describes the poets’ stress on collective action, “the great indignity of the Depression,” and 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.  

Literary historian Florence Boos, arguing for a fuller appreciation of the literary value of workers’ poetry in her study of nineteenth-century working-class verse, identifies the “expression of desires of everyday life and hopes for democratic reform” as general motivations for the poets. It was, she further argues, 

a preferred literary form for the expression of collective protest as well as oral narration, humour, satire and individual inspiration, and offered as such a uniquely valuable mirror on the imaginative life and aspirations

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The smelter poets couldn’t possibly have summoned up all of the above qualities and characteristics defined by literary scholars, but 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 some imagination. It was a struggle that had long occupied a place in Canadian and U.S. history, albeit often unsung. But what place did the poets themselves hold in historical terms?

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Marxist playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht provided a simple answer when he asked rhetorically, “Who built the seven gates of Thebes?” In his 1935 poem, “A Worker Reads History,” the creator of such theatre masterpieces as The Threepenny Opera and Mother Courage, continued with more rhetorical questions: “The books are filled with names of kings./ Was it kings who hauled the craggy/ blocks of stone?” With that poem, Brecht captured some of the essence of why it was critically important to encourage a working-class perspective of history through all literary forms, including worker poetry. Though many of the smelter poets in Trail may not have read the famous poem, they were aware that working people were often left out of accounts of historical events. Poetry was one way to correct the inaccuracy.

Depression era American writer Meridel Le Sueur, perhaps most well known for her early feminist novel The Girl, shared Brecht’s sense of misshapen history. “Who will be the future singers and writers of America?” she asked in a booklet written to encourage worker writers. “Who in the past have written the songs and told the stories of the building of America?” Like Brecht, she goes on to answer her questions with yet more questions:

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How many thousands of timber workers told the many stories of Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox after a hard day’s work over the campfire? How many thousands of negro and white workers in the South made up the work songs, the chain gang poems, the mourning chants that tell of the life of the Black and white worker below the Mason-Dixon line[?]....America is finding out that the most vital song, poetry and literature, has long been produced by the worker building railroads lover vast empires, hewing trees, plowing the prairie, planting the wheat.

Le Sueur then advises her readers to take heart from reading “The People, Yes,” the book-length 1936 poem by Carl Sandburg that celebrated working people and saluted their role in history.68 She also turns to the great American poet Walt Whitman, praising his chastisement of writers who have not “absorbed the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies” of ordinary working people (“mechanics”) “which so far remain uncelebrated, inexperienced.” For Le Sueur, all workers can be poets. Poetry does not have “to be something pretty high, about the moon, and English heather,” she argues. “[H]igh poetry can be made out of the things we say every day.” And all workers can write history.

Who knows the fires, emotions, love, the deep glow and courage of our people? The rich spiced talk of men at night riding over the dark prairie to look for a job; the talk of steelworkers and of women knitting socks for another war? More and more we need words to write the true history of the past so that we may create a true history of the future. History is a thing that everyone feels and some of us make and many of us are living it right now. It is only YOU who are making this history and can write the true story of it.69

Michael Denning in his probing analysis of what he calls the “cultural front” within the broader “popular front” of the 1930s and 1940s examines the historical space in which Le Sueur’s proletarian literature appears and thus helps to situate the Trail smelter poets in historical context. For Denning, the American popular front was much broader than that proscribed by the 1934 Communist party political dictums of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. That policy postulated that a “Popular Front” should succeed the so-called “Third Period” when Communists were instructed to condemn socialists and other left-wing activists as “social fascists.” It engaged a wide swath of so-called “fellow travellers” in the arts, journalism, trade union and socialist-

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69 Meridel Le Sueur, *Worker Writers: A manual on writing developed by the author for the Minnesota Works Progress Administration, 1939* (Minneapolis, MN: West End Press, 1982), no pagination.
minded communities of the time. Denning describes the Popular Front as a “broad social movement” that formed the “ground on which the workers theaters, proletarian literary magazines, and film industry unions stood.” He adds that it was “a radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO.” It was, he argues, “the central popular democratic movement” in the U.S. from 1929 to the late 1940s.⁷⁰

Trail’s smelter poets might not have been fully aware of the sweeping events occurring south of the border during what Denning dubs “the age of the CIO,” but some would have heard about it from the border-hopping smelter workers of the day. From the beginning of the organizing drive to create Mine Mill Local 480, “Slim” Evans promoted the CIO in the local press and on local radio. With the advent of *The Commentator* he led the way as the newspaper’s first smelter poet with rhymes of his own, as we have seen, castigating the company president as “Mr. Bray-a-lot” and shunning all those who would distance themselves from the CIO because of its “Red” taint. His verse inspired others to contribute their works in the spirit of the popular front. Smelter poets who followed in Evans’s sizeable wake, wrote about the boss, the low wages, the health and safety dangers, the war, Hitler, the company union and the CIO. They wrote about scabs, women, history and their hopes for the future. Perhaps most prominent among the various topics deemed suitable for poetry, though, were poems about the CIO and the local drive to build a CIO union. As one of the earlier smelter poems noted,

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.  
The smelter sages, said “Cut wages.”  
“Production then will flow.”

But now they cry, for when they try
THEY’RE STOPPED BY CIO.⁷¹

Working-class poetry was not new in the 1930s, of course. Paul Lauter, writing about
working-class women’s literature, suggests that “from the earliest moments of history it would
appear that ordinary working people produced a variety of works of literary art.” He further notes
that “working-class art like other elements of working-class life is highly traditional, even in a
sense conservative; certainly innovative form is not a primary consideration.”⁷² 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.”⁷³ They trace poetry similar to what the Trail smelter poets produced back to the
Knights of Labor, the early industrial trade union that doubled as a social movement in the late
1800s. Thus, Coles and Zandy 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.”⁷⁴ James Marsh argues in the same vein 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.”⁷⁵ 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
flourish throughout the 1930s and beyond.

Historian Martha Vicinus stresses in her study of nineteenth-century British working-
class literature that it “helped to shape individual and class consciousness by clarifying working
men’s relationships with those who held cultural and political power.” She adds that it also

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⁷⁴ Coles and Zandy, American Working-Class Literature, p. 209.
⁷⁵ Marsh, You Work Tomorrow, p. 5.
“imbued a sense of class solidarity that encouraged working people to fight for social and political equality.” 76 Indeed, poetry was part of the making of a working-class culture. Like the earlier British worker poets, Trail’s smelter poets “believed that literature could influence people’s behaviour,” and “they wrote to persuade readers to adopt particular beliefs.” Vicinus asserts that working-class writers were concerned about social injustice “that prevented the full development and recognition of the positive qualities of working people,” so they wrote “to arouse and focus social tension in order to channel it toward specific political actions. Their literature was an assertion of new class values” and a way to “reaffirm the merit of their class in the face of the cultural domination of the upper classes.” 77 Boos shares some of Vicinus’s views in her essay on “Working-Class Poetry” of the Victorian era in Britain in which she defines the poetry as comprising “a broad range of verse written and read by ‘the poor’: manual labourers, autodidacts and other members of ‘the working classes’, as well as their natural political allies, radical activists and editors.” 78

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As poets emerged from the working class in the early to mid-twentieth century, writes Aaron, writers like the smelter poets “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.” 79 Put another way they wrote in defence of their class and, as some scholars of modern-day working-class literature have argued, an understanding of and respect for class is a pivotal aspect of the writing. Coles and Zandy

77 Vicinus, Industrial Muse, pp. 2-3.
78 Boos, p. 204.
especially stress the class connection of worker poets to their class. Paraphrasing British social historian E.P. Thompson’s definition of the concept, the anthologists argue that working-class literature is part of working-class culture and tradition, and who better to know it than Thompson whose own meticulous study of working-class literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shed much light on how the working class formed and fought for its rights with weapons that included songs and poems read aloud to a largely illiterate audience.\(^8\)

“Working class literature reproduces, in literary form, the conditions of the working class,” write education theorists Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson. “Working class writers attempt, in various ways, to record the realistic speech patterns of people who do not speak standard English nor conduct conversations along intellectually analytical lines.”\(^9\) Some of the smelter poets made attempts to copy speech patterns, and sometimes it could be denigrating to a particular ethnic group. In “Tony the Fish Peddler,” for example, there are some possible undertones of racism. It is not clear whether a smelter poet penned the lines, but the use of a pronounced Italian accent probably struck Italian smelter workers as a slight:

I sella da feesh, an’ I sella da crab,
I’m notta so good, an’ notta so bad
I leve on da beach where da seagull she screech,
I’m Tony Pelloni, a sonna da beach.\(^10\)

When work is the topic, Christopher and Whitson 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.”\(^11\) This is true of the smelter poets but they also portray the workplace with a certain sense of pride and a respect

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82 “Poets’ Corner – Tony the Fish Peddler – A Son of a Beach,” *The Commentator*, January 25, 1943, p. 3.
83 Christopher and Whitson, “Toward a Theory,” pp. 73-74.
for their fellow workers. Moreover, they exhibit “a distrust of authority and an aversion to paternalism”\textsuperscript{84} and a recognition of the “interdependence of units of people: family, community, friends, unions.”\textsuperscript{85} 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.”\textsuperscript{86}

Canadian work poetry anthologist Tom Wayman 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 literary critics and teachers 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.”\textsuperscript{87} He concludes that “Any literature, then, which omits this governing experience of daily life is a literature with an enormous hole in the middle of it.”\textsuperscript{88}

Arguably Canada’s best known work poetry anthologist, Wayman invokes the spirits of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Joe Hill’s Wobblies to bolster his critique of any literature that refuses to make a legitimate place for worker poetry. If that place is not recognized, he asks, who will question

“how daily life is organized, or the wisdom of the self-appointed managers of our destiny? When voices of protest or opposition do arise, who is skilled enough at critical thinking to prevent these voices from being co-opted, perverted, led back into the paths the corporations choose for them to go?”\textsuperscript{89}

For Wayman, “There can be no meaningful social change until in our daily working lives we rebuild the world into freer, less exploitative patterns than we did formerly.”\textsuperscript{90} If literature does not deal with the problems, aspirations, failures and successes of the majority of men and

\textsuperscript{84} Christopher and Whitson, “Toward a Theory,” p. 75.  
\textsuperscript{85} Christopher and Whitson, “Toward a Theory,” p. 76.  
\textsuperscript{86} Lauter, “Working-Class Women’s Literature,” p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{88} Wayman, \textit{Inside Job}, p. 13.  
\textsuperscript{89} Wayman, \textit{Inside Job}, p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{90} Wayman, \textit{Inside Job}, p. 19.
women, Wayman continues, that “literature becomes one more means by which people are kept confused as to what is important and what is possible in their lives.” He adds that “there is a social aspect to this art with implications for social change” that is largely ignored in contemporary Canadian writing, much of which does not bother to examine “the economic realities of workers’ lives,” nor “the attendant effects of these realities on their loves, hates, appreciation of nature, and so on.” 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. Oresick and Cole, in calling forth their experience of collecting and assessing American work poems, agree with the Canadian anthologist’s views on the importance of adding work as a major writing subject. Others anthologists also agree.

Interestingly, though, and unlike some of the American historians and anthologists discussed above, Wayman prefers not to use ‘working class’ to describe worker poetry. He criticises some American working-class literature anthologies for having “very little in them about the work experience,” arguing that “the moment the issue turns to class,…the focus on work is lost.” He adds this clarification:

My interest is in how the work experience is represented by people who have actually done or are currently doing the job described, the effect of that employment on life off the job as well as at work, and what can be concluded from these writings (poetry, prose, work memoir) about how our society organizes work and the effect of that organization on the individual, family, community. Focus on class also lets academics, in my experience, distance themselves from the topic, if not consider it irrelevant.

This is not to suggest that Wayman has no interest in worker activism or in the importance of employing worker poetry in the battle for worker and human rights. As he states in Inside Job, a

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91 Wayman, Inside Job, p. 43.
92 Wayman, Inside Job, p. 60.
93 Wayman, Inside Job, p. 60.
95 Email correspondence with the author, May 10, 2012.
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.”96 It was a role that the smelter poets took seriously as they engaged in the work of building 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 hard 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.97 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.”98 To support this view, they cite no less a literary figure than Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck who, in a foreword to the collection *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, made this commonsense point about the value and importance of working-class literature:

The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement which cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing...You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than in any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.99

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Woody Guthrie seconded that notion in his introduction to the same volume. “These are the kind of songs that folks make up when they’re a-singing about their hard luck,” wrote the man Steinbeck said embodied the “American Spirit.”\(^{100}\) Coles and Zandy further state that worker writers, like the smelter poets, shared “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.”\(^{101}\)

Thurston also critiques the academic shunning of worker poets who take partisan stances on public issues. They 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 observed.\(^{102}\) But Thurston 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.\(^{103}\)

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\(^{102}\) Thurston, p. 19.

\(^{103}\) Coles and Zandy, *American Working-Class Literature*, p. xxiv.
Explains Nelson: “Over several decades, the labor movement used poetry not only to build or unify membership but also to educate workers and to restate core beliefs and values.”

Anthologists David Shevin and Larry Smith cite Nelson’s views to support 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 that formerly “what poetry does to and for people, what people do for themselves with poetry’s assistance reshaped the political arena itself.” They add that “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.” This may not have been how the smelter poets would have put it, but it fairly summarizes what their poetry was meant to accomplish.

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Not everyone agrees with these positive evaluations of worker poetry or lauds those editors who were sympathetic to workers, their politics, and their writings. Thurston describes how political or proletarian poetry disappeared in the late 1940s, succumbing to the battle between the poets’ poets and the peoples’ 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 that

disallowed political poetry, considering it sentimental and unprofessional. The New Critics rejected poems that “speak in a common and comprehensible language, alluded to contemporary events rather than to classical literature, and seek to involve their readers emotionally.” Marsh argues that “for roughly fifty years the literary 1930s remained taboo to a discipline still influenced by the anti-Communist zeitgeist of the Cold War and by poetic and political prejudices of the New Criticism.”

Guthrie, too, would have scoffed at the New Critics. With a generous dollop of his earthy wit he turned on those who don’t appreciate worker songs and poetry: “you get lost in so-called arts and sciences and all sorts of high fangled stuff like ‘intellect’ and ‘inspiration’ and ‘religion’ and ‘business’ and ‘reputation’ and ‘pride’ and ‘me’ – and you say, talk, live, breath, and exercise everything in the world, except that real old song that’s in your heart.”

American literature scholar Brian Reed adds a less folksy, more scholarly view in providing a specific and dramatic example of this death of political poetry by academic discipline. In an in-depth critique of Sandburg’s powerful poem “The People, Yes,” he cites 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. Reed also argues that Sandburg’s poem lacks the accepted literary qualities that were institutionalized following the Second World War. With “the 1950s depoliticization of poetry in the academy,” 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

106 Marsh, You Work Tomorrow, p. 3.
clumsy 1910s lyrics best appreciated by readers uneducated in subtleties of form, technique, and tone.”¹⁰⁸ As regards The People Yes, Reed suggests that it “bluntly, madly defies such demands.”¹⁰⁹ If such a widely 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.

Williams, a poetic luminary after the war but keen to be seen as ‘on the Left’ in the 1930s, was not enamoured of worker poetry or, more pointedly, revolutionary poetry about the working class. Williams did not believe in a Communist revolution nor did he believe in “proletarian literature that promoted that revolution to the exclusion of aesthetic considerations,” argues American poetry scholar Milton A. Cohen. Instead, “he continued to support the concept of ‘pure poetry’ and the supreme importance of ‘the word’ long after these ideas had faded in popularity and signaled to leftist writers and critics a hide-bound and bourgeois twenties modernism.” In short, Milton concludes, Williams “was quite sure that poetry had nothing to do with politics, only with words.”¹¹⁰ Clearly, the smelter poets would have begged to differ with the celebrated author of “Paterson” and other important poetical works.

The Sandburg-Williams debate was preceded and followed by many similar discussions during what some writers call the “Red Decade” of worker or “proletarian” literature.¹¹¹ Throughout the 1930s in Canada and the U.S. poets on the left found homes for their outspoken poetic views in Communist, left, and labour papers like the Commentator. The Partisan Review was a favoured venue in the U.S. as was the New Masses which had replaced Max Eastman’s

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¹⁰⁹ Reed, “Carl Sandburg's The People Yes...,” p. 190.
¹¹¹ Eugene Lyons, The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941) and others have characterized the 1930s as a golden age of Communist and left writing.
much praised *The Masses*, the publisher of revolutionary writers like John Reed from 1911 to 1917. At the *New Masses*, however, where left writers like Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser published their scathing reports on America’s wrongs, 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.” His publication would be home to “the raw materials of the workers’ art.” In his appeal for those materials he called for

The sobs of driven stenographers –
The poetry of steel workers –
The wrath of miners –
The laughter of sailors –
Strike stories, prison stories, work stories –
Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other revolutionary workers.

Aaron somewhat cynically called it Gold’s “vision of a Shakespeare in overalls.” And the *New Masses* editor’s “sardonic critics” scoffed at the notion of turning workers into bards but nevertheless his magazine became the place to publish for worker writers, among them the smelter poets of America. 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 U.S., he charges that they [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.”

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114 Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, p. 205.
And so a kind of literary civil war raged wherein the charge of “tendentiousness” was regularly heard.\textsuperscript{117} The battlefield “reflected ‘a basic division of attitude toward the creative process’ and revolved around the relative importance of form and content,” according to historian James F. Murphy.\textsuperscript{118} Quoting Walter Rideout, a former \textit{Partisan Review} editor, Murphy explains that the \textit{Review} “opposed ‘the “placard” or “slogan” method in fiction,’ and insisted the proletarian writers learn technique from bourgeois writers.”\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Review} Editors, agreed with the New Critics, saying that such poetry especially that associated with the Communist party was “degraded, reduced to banal evocations of the mythology of the barricades.”\textsuperscript{120} The \textit{New Masses}, on the other hand, encouraged tendentiousness and downplayed form.\textsuperscript{121} 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.”\textsuperscript{122}

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 ostracised 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 international boundary. Livesay, Wallace and others found a publishing outlet in Communist party publications, including \textit{The Worker}, the \textit{Daily Clarion}, the \textit{Labour Defender}, and \textit{Masses}, the latter title being a clear grab from the U.S. magazine. Like its

\textsuperscript{117} James F. Murphy, \textit{The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature} (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1991), p. 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.
\textsuperscript{118} Murphy, pp. 228-229.
\textsuperscript{119} Murphy, p. 231.
\textsuperscript{120} Thurston, \textit{Making Something Happen}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{121} Murphy, p. 7.
American counterparts, *Masses* saw its mandate as publishing working-class voices. Oscar Ryan, in his unsigned editorial to the first edition, lamented that Canadian writers did not “go among the workers, try to understand the sufferings of the workers, their struggles, their hopes.” More specifically regarding poetry in *Masses*, Maurice Granite argued that

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. Poems against police terror, against section 98, against the imprisonment of workers, against deportation.

Two years after *Masses* folded in 1934 after only twelve issues, *New Frontier* was founded to provide a home for worker poets. Again the parallel between the American and 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 Communist and other radical poets also published their proletarian verse in leftist magazines like *Canadian Forum*, a magazine founded in 1920 that supported the goals of the social democratic left, and *Anvil*, a U.S. quarterly where worker writer Jack Conroy intended to “let the masons speak for themselves.” And just as the Communist party had funded the John Reed Clubs in the U.S., it also supported the Progressive Arts Clubs of Canada from which base Livesay, Wallace, Ryan, A.M. Klein, Leo Kennedy and others would work to cultivate a Canadian proletarian literary tradition.

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126 Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 294, notes that “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.
Historian James Doyle has commented that “Labour journalists, or working people with only a casual interest in literary activity, might try their hands at doggerel,”¹²⁷ and perhaps it is an appropriate category for most of Trail’s smelter poets. But though they may not have been fully aware of the existence of a radical literary tradition or be directly influenced by the internecine poetry wars of the 1930s that pitted traditionalist against modernist poets, they too made a contribution. As Jim Daniels explained,

If some of these poets sounded like cheerleaders, they are not the traditional cheerleaders from the sideline; they are voices from the 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 us more than the outcome of a game at stake – It’s their lives, their livelihoods that are on the line.¹²⁸

During a literary era that one historian called “stunning, mystifying, and semi-mythical,”¹²⁹ these voices were heard and heeded by workers if not literary critics.

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Early in May 1945 the war ended in Europe and in August the bomb, possibly one that had been tested using heavy water produced by CM&S Company workers in Warfield, B.C., was dropped on Japan abruptly ending the war in the Pacific.¹³⁰ Throughout the war, smelter poets had appeared regularly in the *Commentator* until it suspended publication for three months on June 1, 1944. On November 27 it resumed publishing and restated its role as “a champion of the cause of the workers for their democratic rights.” Referring to itself and other Mine Mill publications as “indispensable literary weapons,” the newly elected Local 480 president Fred W. Henne, who headed the editorial committee, vowed somewhat

¹³⁰ “Trail Helped in Atomic Bomb – Heavy Water Made in C.M.&S. Plants,” *Trail Daily Times*, August 13, 1945, p. 1; Pierre Berton, “How a Red Union Bosses Atom Workers at Trail, B.C.,” *Maclean’s*, April 1, 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.
melodramatically to “devote all space available to rid ourselves of the enemy of Darkness.”

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,” Henne clearly did not envisage the smelter poets doing battle with the union’s “enemy of Darkness.” Apparently their previous efforts were not appreciated by him and the editorial committee for nary a single smelter poet was published in the three editions of the Commentator that appeared in 1945. For the rest of the decade, their access to the union paper would be cut off entirely when the paper entered a long publishing hiatus, disappearing for almost ten years. To be fair, the stoppage may have been due to the local being overwhelmed with the responsibilities of dealing with grievances, addressing badly neglected health and safety hazards, preparing for bargaining rounds in the late 1940s, and continuing to fight off threats from the company and raiding unions. Also, Commentator editors may have felt that other Mine Mill organs could hold the fort.

Before the founding of the international Mine Mill publication, The Union, in the spring of 1942 as “America’s newest champion of labor’s cause,” the CIO News published a Mine Mill edition that would have reached B.C. 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 province-wide Mine Mill organ that would “reflect the life and outlook of the workers of our industry.” However, a scan of the available editions from the first volume

133 “It’s Your Paper,” The Union, April 6, 1942, p. 3.
revealed 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 the carrying worker poems, including some by radical American black poet Langston Hughes. *Commentator* editors may also have felt that Harvey Murphy’s *B.C. District Union News*, which began publishing out of Vancouver in June 1944, was doing an acceptable job of covering issues with regard to the Trail situation. His choice of poetry, on the other hand, was probably not appreciated so much 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 serious local worker poems. For example, one of his editions in 1945 contains the following untitled item: “She isn’t quite efficient./ She’s a dowdy little dame,/ We’ve often thought of firing/ Her,/ But keep her just the same.” Some readers might have thought it referred to the women war workers who temporarily occupied male soldiers’ jobs. With the return of thousands of veterans, the women would in fact be ‘fired’ and sent back to the home. However, Murphy also found publishable material from a Trail smelter poet named W. Gordon Coombs, whose poem “They Also Serve,” in praise of 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[?]”

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135 “They Also Serve,” *B.C. District Union News*, November 27, 1944, p. 6. The smelter poet indicated that he was from Trail in a letter published in the September 15, 1944, edition of the *B.C. District Union News* (p. 4). The letter, entitled “St. Peter and Me,” included a poem by Australian writer Henry Lawson (1867-1922) that Coombs had first read while in New Zealand and that he said “expressed the thoughts and feelings of the men ‘out back in the Never-Never,’ as Robert Service portrayed the life of our own North in the gold rush days.” The poem was originally written in 1893 with the title “St. Peter.”
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. Company president Blaylock died that November, removing a long-time barrier to collective bargaining, and with the 1946 and future agreements, the local won respectable wage gains and improved working conditions. By the early 1950s, however, 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 U.S. 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-hunting attacks. 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 which orchestrated a well-financed campaign of red-baiting and disruption to persuade Mine Mill members to switch unions.\textsuperscript{136} Mine Mill eventually won the day in Trail at least and proceeded to rebuild Local 480 after the internecine strife caused by the raiding.

The post-war 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”\textsuperscript{137} of literary institutions and lay waste to their attempts to promote a cause, appeal

\textsuperscript{136} King, \textit{Red Bait!}, p. 76-92, offers his version of the raids.
\textsuperscript{137} Thurston, p. 41.
to people’s emotions to take action, or, to paraphrase influential poet W.H. Auden, to write poetry that “tries to make something happen.”

For Thurston the Cold War era “dissociates poetry from praxis.” He argues that “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.” Literary historian Edward Brunner, focusing exclusively on Cold War poetry, argues that poetry produced in the 1950s was “deemed inconsequential,” noting that “For poetry that was seriously engaged with important issues, the times were just not congenial.”

Literary historians, he adds, determined that the post-war 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 U.S. 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 July 1, 1953, and, though it didn’t seem inclined to publish as much poetry as its predecessor, the 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 focused 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

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138 Thurston, p. 8.
139 Thurston, p. 5.
140 Thurston, p. 7.
Nobes, a member of Local 480, was the most prolific of Trail smelter poets published in *The Commentator* in the early 1950s. From September 1, 1953, with the publication of his first “Salt” poem, to November 1, 1954, his working-class poetry appeared at least five times. Other poem titles included “The Square Deal” (February 1, 1954), a statement about an “unpretentious man”; “Bargaining Time” (May 1, 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” (August 1, 1954), and a poem supporting the Bluebell miners’ strike (“Discrimination is our fight;/We only want what’s fair and just”), and “Unity” (November 1, 1954), a call to Local 480 members to “make the union strong.” Nobes’s second “Salt” poem (September 1, 1954) was about the blacklisted Mine Mill-sponsored film *Salt of the Earth* in which 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.”[^143] 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, an autonomous Mine Mill union for all of Canada was established and with it a new national publication called the *Mine Mill Herald*. In his January 1956 edition, 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 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?\textsuperscript{144} Perhaps not, especially given Murphy’s earlier reluctance to publish poetry in his \textit{B.C. District Union News}. Still, the \textit{Herald}, based in Toronto, did run poetry and some of it was from B.C. One Vancouver poet referred to Rossland’s boom town era in reminiscing about the early days of union struggle.\textsuperscript{145} Another, this one from Kaslo, B.C., commented 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.”\textsuperscript{146} A third, from a Sullivan Mine worker, lamented 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.”\textsuperscript{147}

Clearly, \textit{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 \textit{The Commentator} in the later 1950s and in the mid-1960s? Would the Communist leaders of the local, men like King, 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 of its ancestors in the 1930s and 1940s? Would the smelter poets continue to appear after Mine Mill merged with Steel in 1967? These questions remain for a future study. But judging from this examination, the smelter poets surely must be counted among those “examples of courage” that Al King praised in the first editorial of the revived \textit{Commentator}. Surely they must be counted among the “men who worked in the Smelter eight hours a day and who wrote, printed

\textsuperscript{147} “Shiftworker’s Lament,” \textit{Mine Mill Herald}, June 1956, p. 4.
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.\(^\text{148}\)

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Like Joe Hill, then, the smelter poets penned heartfelt and sometimes angry words in support of the workers’ cause. Indeed, some of his famous resolve, if not his talent for the perfect phrase, must have stuck to the smelter workers of Trail long after he had come and gone from the West Kootenay region, for his legacy and that of the workers who fought to build Mine Mill Local 480 lives on as does the spirit of the smelter poets whose verses were infused with some of Hill’s fire in the belly of old.

END

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\(^{148}\) "The President[‘]s Corner,” *The Commentator*, July 1, 1953, p. 2.