

Session 5: Answering Back

Links to songs mentioned in the lecture

- Which Side Are You On: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iAIM02kv0g> (Pete Seeger)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbddqXib814> (Billy Brag UK)
- Mrs Thatcher's Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJh0m0E7Ozg>
- Four Green Fields: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsaQPobUZiM> (Tommy Makem)
- Follow the Drinking Gourd: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjBZEMkmwYA> (Eric Bibb)
- Blackleg Miner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FdpCC9Hprk> (Steeleye Span)
- Poverty Knock: https://www.cambridge.org/files/4615/4514/4754/Poverty_Knock.mp3
Watts & Morrissey

More Songs

The Shuttle Rins

traditional Scots song about independent weavers (19th century)

♩ = 80

The weaver's wife sits at the fi-re and_ ca's the pirn_ wheel_

She likes tae hear her ain guid man_ drive_ on the shutt-le wheel

The shutt-le rins the shutt-le rins the shutt-le rins wi' speed

Oh sweet-ly may the shutt-le rin that wins the bair-nies bread

This song was published by Henry Syme in 1849 and refers to the independent weavers, who often lived in a rural setting, growing some of their own food and basically were free to organise their own work. They were paid by the 'ell' i.e. by length of cloth. What is being extolled here is this independent lifestyle, which of course was doomed once industrial production of cloth became prevalent as a result of the Industrial Revolution. See also <http://sangstories.webs.com/shuttlerins.htm>

The weaver's wife sits at the fire
And turns the pirn wheel
She likes tae hear her ain gude man
Drive on the shuttle weel

Thread after thread makes up the claith
Until the wage he wins
And ilka weaver maks the mair
The mair the shuttle rins

Chorus: The shuttle rins, the shuttle rins
The shuttle rins wi speed
O sweetly may the shuttle rin
That wins the bairn's breid

He rises early in the morn
He toils fu late at night
He fain wad independent be
He kens what is his right

Although he has nae dainty fare
His wages being sma
Yet he can wi his thrifty wife
Keep hungry want awa

He fondly soothes a neebor's grief
Or shares a neebor's glee
And fain tae gie his bairns lair
He gars the shuttle flee

State cormorants may crawl fu crouse
And haughty be an' prude
But were they paid by "ells o keels"
They wadna laugh sae loud

The proudest o the land wad pine
Without the weaver's wark
The pampered priest, the haughty peer
Wad gang without a sark

Then cheer your hearts ye workin' men
An' a like brithers be
Rouse up against restrictive laws
And set industry free.

The Carpet Weavers' True Tale

This song refers to the Kidderminster carpet weaver's strike, which lasted from March to August 1828, called as a result of the proposal by the employers effectively to dock workers' wages by 17%; in order to raise money ballad sheets were sold to support the strikers. The strike ended with the workers being forced to accept the new conditions, but it also showed that the notion of solidarity among workers could have an impact. What the song shows is the discourse of the employers that basically suggests that inequality is a fact of life, which did not go down well with workers on the breadline, especially because at the time the former began to emerge as a new ruling class with aspiration to the trappings of the landed gentry of earlier times.

The musical notation is for a song in 4/4 time, with a tempo of 110. The melody is written on a single staff. The lyrics are: "The day was dark and sad and drear, The midst of March the present year, the masters of the carpet trade to their poor journey men thus said". The chords are indicated above the staff: Dm, Am, C, G, C, Am, Dm, Am, G, Am.

The day was dark and sad, and drear,
The midst of March, the present year,
The Masters of the Carpet trade
To their poor journeymen thus said:

"In the 'Evening Mail' we do declare
That you both drunk and idle are,
Therefore we have resolv'd, and say,
We'll have more work and give less pay.

"It takes us now full twenty years,
Of close attention, anxious cares,
To gain a fortune, which in ten,
we'll get by grinding journeymen.

"Potatoes, oatmeal, you must eat,
Nor dare to think of butchers meat."
While they to noblemen aspire.
In equipage and rich attire'.

"So Pharaoh to God's Israel said
 'You're idle, idle, earn your bread'
 So Greece and Rome, we find, did have
 In ancient times their Lords and slaves."

Their business now is at a stand,
 And we will go throughout the land.

The masters made a great mistake,
 We'll die before their pride we'll take.

Give to our families in distress;
 Left for a season fatherless,
 Your kind relief, a pittance give,
 And you shall our best thanks receive'.

Jute Mill Song

Written by Scottish poet Mary Brooksbank (1897-1978), who was a mill worker, unionist, and member of the Communist Party in the 1920s. She was jailed three times for her political work.

<https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/songs/thejutemillsong.html>

Oh dear me, the mill's gannin' fast
 The puir wee shifters canna get a rest
 Shiftin' bobbins coorse and fine
 They fairly mak' ye work for your ten and nine

Oh dear me, I wish the day was done
 Rinnin' up and doon the Pass it is nae fun
 Shiftin', piecin', spinnin' warp weft and twine
 Tae feed and clad my bairnies affen ten and nine

Oh dear me, the world is ill divided
 Them that works the hardest are the least provided
 I maun bide contented, dark days or fine
 For there's nae much pleasure livin' affen ten and nine

Oh dear me, the mill's gannin' fast
 The puir wee shifters canna get a rest
 Shiftin' bobbins coorse and fine
 They fairly mak' ye work for your ten and nine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX-EKVTcrMs> Karan Casey

Pound a Week Rise

Song written by Ed Pickford. Lord Robens was a Labour minister and in charge of industry in the 1960s; the BBC refused to broadcast this song for its potentially libellous content.

https://www.cambridge.org/files/1715/4514/4741/Pound_a_week_rise.mp3 Watts & Morrissey

Come all of you colliers that work in the mine
 From England to Scotland, from Tees unto Tyne.
 I'll sing you a song of the pound a week rise
 Ana the men who were fooled by the government lies.

And it's down you Jack
 Where you never see the skies
 And you're working in your dungeon
 For a pound a week rise.

In nineteen and sixty, now many years ago,
 The mineworkers leaders to Lord Robens did go,
 Saying, "We work very hard. Every day we risk our lives,
 And we're asking you now for a pound a week rise."

Then up spoke Lord Robens and made this decree,
 Saying, "When the output rises, then I'll agree
 To raise up your wages and give to you fair pay,
 For I was once a miner myself in my day."

So the miners went homeward, they worked hard and well
 With their lungs full of coaldust in the bosom of hell.
 Then the output rose 15 percent, then eighteen and more
 Till after several months had past it rose above the score.

Then the mineworkers' leaders went for their hard-won prize,
 To ask Lord Robens for their pound a week rise.
 But Robens wouldn't give a pound, he wouldn't give ten bob.
 He gave them seven and six instead and said "get back to your job."

So come all of you colliers and heed what I say.
 Don't believe Lord Robens when he says he'll give fair pay.
 He'll ask you to work hard to make the output rise,
 But you'll get pie in the sky instead of a one pound rise.

Durham Lockout



Words: Tommy Armstrong (1848-1919); tune: *Tramps and Hawkers*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP5VrgM7h5Q> (Ian Campbell Folk Group)

In our Durham County, I am sorry for to say
 That hunger and starvation is increasing every day
 For the want of food and coals, we know not what to do
 But with your kind assistance, we will stand the struggle through

I need not state the reason why we have been brought so low
 The masters have behaved unkind, as everyone well know
 Because we won't lie down and let them treat us as they like
 To punish us they've stopped their pits and caused the present strike.

The pulley wheel have ceased to move which went so swift around
The horses and the ponies too are brought from underground
Our work is taken from us now, they care not if we die
For they can eat the best of food and drink the best when dry

The miner and his marra, too, each morning have to roam
To seek for bread to feed the hungry little ones at home
The flour barrel is empty now, their true and faithful friend
Which makes the thousands wish today the strike was at an end

We have done our very best as honest working men
To let the pits commence again, we've offered to them ten
The offer they will not accept, they firmly do demand
Thirteen and a half percent or let the collieries stand

Let them stand or let them lie to do with them as they choose
To give them thirteen and a half we ever shall refuse
They're always willing to receive, but never inclined to give
Very soon they won't allow a working man to live

With tyranny and capital they never seem content
Unless they are endeavoring to take from us percent
If it was due, what they request, we willingly would grant
We know it's not, therefore we cannot give them what they want

The miners of Northumberland, we shall forever praise
For being so kind in helping us, those tyrannizing days
We thank the other counties too, that have been doing the same
For every man who hears this song will know we're not to blame

The Strike

Newcastle/Geordie music hall performer Joe Wilson – 1841-75 – who wrote this song in support of a strike whose historicity would have to be explored. Its orthography is meant to index the Geordie dialect, the way Tynesiders are said to talk. The strike was meant to support a nine-hour day, albeit in a six-day working week. It is remarkable that Wilson critically questions the hegemonic discourse of the day, that industry as a virtue was fostered by long hours of work – and that by implication idleness was evil as in 'The devil finds work for idle hands' – but Wilson's point is that the ones who preach this form of virtue do not practice it themselves and they profit from the labour of the workers. Also note the last two lines: that if masters want to be regarded as masters they have to accept that working men are to be regarded with respect in turn.

Come me canny Tynesiders and lissen
Tiv a sang aw's sartin ye'll like
And aw'll whisper a word kind an' cheerin'
Te the many poor fellows on strike.
Let 'em keep up their hearts as they hev deun
Thor's a day for the true an' the brave
And the time will come when the maistors
'Ull find oot a mechanic's no slave.

Is nine oors an unreasonable movement?
Is't not plenty te labour for men?
Let them that condemn't hev a try on't
And see if they'll not alter their plan.
And if lang oors industry increases,
have they found oot with the oors that they've tried?
Their capital grows through wor labour,
Wey, it's mair te their shyem, that they'll find.

But cheer up, thor's good friends that support us,
Aye and England depends on us a'
An' we'll prove that we're true te the movement
An' vict'ry shall let the world knaw
That Tynesiders'll nivor be conquered
By maistors that care nought fer them;
and if maistors is meant te be maistors,
Let 'em find oot thor's men meant te be men.