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Joseph Skipsey, the ‘peasant poet’, and an unpublished letter from W.B. Yeats

Gordon Tait

The ‘peasant poet’, Yeats boasted in *The Boston Pilot* in August 1889, ‘is less common in England than with us in Ireland, but I did meet the other day an Englishman who was a true specimen of the tribe’.¹ The true specimen of the peasant poet tribe to whom Yeats referred was Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), a self-taught poet who had also been a coal miner. ‘Mr. Skipsey’, Yeats continued, ‘is from the coal country – a strange nursing mother for a poet –... [but] in the depth of a mine hundreds of feet under the earth he has written many sweetest and tenderest songs’.² The coal country may well have been a strange nursing mother for a poet, and coal itself a strange substance to act as a poet’s muse, but in ‘the gloom of the deep, deep mine’ Skipsey did compose many sweet and tender songs of the lives and loves of Victorian mining communities.³ I will argue that Yeats, who was at this early stage of his career constructing an ideal of the Irish peasant, saw in Skipsey and his poetry a vestige of a simpler, purer way of life, a noble savage unsullied by the tribulations of commerce and metropolitan English life, an archetype of a peasant poet who, as both Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Basil Bunting found, embodied and became the mining communities about which he sang. I reveal further connections between Skipsey and Yeats, two poets working at opposite ends of their careers and, in an unpublished and uncollected letter from Yeats to Skipsey, uncover a lost connection between one of the most important writers of the twentieth century and a working-class poet known largely for his association with the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones.

Ever since the publication of Martha Vicinus' *The Industrial Muse* (1974), there has been a steady rise in the study of working or labouring-class writers and the ongoing work of the Recovering Labouring-Class Writing project run by John Goodridge has identified almost 2,000 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century published poets from working-class backgrounds.⁴ As a result of this rise in scholarship, and Goodridge's important project, it is clear the English 'peasant poet' was more common than Yeats supposed in the *Pilot*, and today it perhaps less surprising that a poet emerged from the darkness and danger of the nineteenth-century northern coalfields. Despite this recent exposure, however, the literary outputs and ambitions of miners remain relatively unexplored and, metaphorically at least, largely underground. As Bridget Keegan argues, in her essay "'Incessant Toil and Hands Innumerable": Mining and Poetry in the Northeast of England' (2011), the work of recovering the writing of miner poets began in Gustav Klaus' *The Literature of Labour* (1985) but stalled thereafter.⁵ Keegan's essay, which provides an excellent survey on how miners were represented in literature prior to the twentieth century, concentrates on the poetry written by two lead miners, Thomas Blackah (1828-95) and Richard Watson (1833-91) and aims to re-energise the process of bringing literature, and in particular poetry, written by miners to the surface.⁶ My article is part of that process.

The Recovering Labouring-Class Writing project has had a 'significant and sustained impact [... and caused] a major shift in public understanding and appreciation for labouring class writers', and raised the profile of many.⁷ While Joseph Skipsey has benefitted from this rise in exposure, he has long been among the most noted of nineteenth-century working-class writers.⁸ Skipsey's status as 'one of the few working men taken up by a literary circle' has ensured he is remembered for his connection to other artists, and his poetry, which at its best intimately reflects the parlous nature and immediacy of life in a mining community, is written with a direct affectivity that has ensured he is remembered by sympathetic anthologists.⁹ The parlous conditions Skipsey's poetry describes clearly comes from personal experience and the story of his life, as Keegan expressed it, is 'one of the most heroic in the annals of autodidacticism'.¹⁰ Skipsey's biography, however, is easily sensationalised and romanticised

in a post-industrial and (in the United Kingdom at least) post-coalmining world, but the preface of the most recent work on Skipsey, two editions of *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (2012; 2014) by R. K. R. Thornton, William McCumiskey, and Chris Harrison, presents an excellent and scholarly biography which renders more than a brief account superfluous.¹¹

Skipsey was born on St. Patrick's Day 1832, but these were turbulent times in the Great Northern Coalfield as pitmen and coal owners were engaged in a bitter strike. Within months of Joseph's birth his father, while trying to 'make peace between rioters [striking pitmen] and the constables', was shot dead.¹² Without the family's main breadwinner even the 'little weekly sum [... he] could earn was of importance' and Joseph went to the pit at the age of seven, where he worked as a trapper-boy twelve hours a day opening and closing a wooden door to allow tubs (corves) of coal to pass through the mine.¹³ In the midst of this unforgiving world, and without access to formal education, Skipsey taught himself to read and write. By the light from discarded candle ends he would copy playbills onto the back of his door and on Sundays he learned to read The Bible. As he developed as a reader *Paradise Lost* 'entranced' him, Shakespeare 'altered the aspect of [his] world', Burns provided a template for him to follow, and the German Romanticism of Heine and Goethe's *Faust* became lifelong studies.¹⁴ While Skipsey was reading classic literature overground, in the underground realm his older peers whistled and sang traditional ballads and popular songs as they went about their work. Through the oral transmission of this folk culture Skipsey absorbed many ballads and songs, and it was in 'the lilt of the[se] old ballads' Skipsey found the 'music [his] verse may be supposed to possess'.¹⁵ In his early twenties Skipsey began to commit his poems to paper and his first self-published work, *Lyrics by J.S., a Coal Miner*, appeared in 1858. This volume garnered sufficient attention and sales to justify a second edition, *Lyrics*, the following year.

Skipsey's early volumes were well received and widely reviewed in regional presses across England and Scotland, but it would be the publication of *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* (1878) that brought him significant national attention. The catalyst for this exposure was Skipsey's friend Thomas

Dixon (1831-80), a cork-cutter from Sunderland who famously corresponded with John Ruskin. He was an enthusiastic and prodigious letter writer who had a passion for sharing his interests with anyone he felt might benefit from them. Upon meeting Skipsey in 1878, Dixon immediately began to promote his new found friend and sent his work to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁶ In June 1880 Skipsey travelled to London where he and Dixon met Dante Rossetti as well as Thomas Carlyle, Holman Hunt, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones. The contacts Skipsey made in London would enlarge the possibilities of his life beyond any conceivable expectation. He left mining permanently soon after meeting Rossetti and when the post of custodian at Shakespeare's Birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon, became vacant in 1889 Skipsey applied. His application, supported by testimonies and references from among others Browning, Tennyson, W. M. Rossetti, Thomas Burt MP, William Morris, Edmund Gosse, Edward Dowden, Oscar Wilde, Henry Irving, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, proved irresistible and Skipsey was appointed.¹⁷

By the time Skipsey moved to Stratford, Yeats had already published *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1887) and *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) and was supplementing his income with columns for both the *Providence Sunday Journal* and *The Boston Pilot*. Yeats published fourteen articles in the *Pilot*, the first of which, 'Irish Writers Who Are Winning Fame', appeared on 3rd August 1889. In the article Yeats concerns himself with his major preoccupation at the time: the relationship between literature, nationality, and Irish nationalism. While Yeats's contributions to the *Pilot* have been noted and collected the following, his first reference to Joseph Skipsey, has been overlooked:

Apropos of poets, the peasant poet is less common in England than with us in Ireland, but I did meet the other day an Englishman who was a true specimen of the tribe. He is a Mr. Skipsey. [...] He talked to me about Clarence Mangan a good deal.¹⁸ Mangan is a great favorite of his. He recited, for the benefit of a Saxon who stood by, Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen.' Himself a peasant, he [Skipsey] turned for the moment's inspiration to the country where poetry has been a living voice among the people.¹⁹

Yeats placed the peasant poet, a simple and unsophisticated being whose folk culture was unsullied by the dominant English, at the centre of his desire for the rejuvenation of Irish literature and culture. This idea of a 'living voice' of the people and the interrelatedness of music, song, and poetry were, as Ronald Schuchard writes, a constant preoccupation for Yeats throughout his life.²⁰ To Yeats, the living voice found in the poetry of Ireland's peasant culture and the 'life of the villages, with its songs, its dances and its pious greetings, its conversations full of vivid images [was] shaped [...] by life itself', it had evolved orally in a closed environment free from pollutants.²¹ As a result, the peasant poet effectively carried the genetic coding of an ancient Celtic living voice with which a literary tradition could be constructed and around which a national identity could be formed. On the surface it seems remarkable that Yeats would co-opt the work of an English writer into his 'tribe' of peasant poets, a central tenet of his nationalist vision. But in Skipsey's turning to Mangan, an inheritor of Ireland's 'living voice', for inspiration, Yeats finds a common heritage and universality of experience that reaches beyond national boundaries into a mythical past.

In co-opting an English writer in this fashion, Yeats seemingly dilutes the Irishness of his conception of peasant poetry but in the notion of a 'living voice' being passed through the generations, he envisages an ancient and elemental unity of the human spirit which elevates his own Irish culture beyond the moralising he saw in Victorian poetry. In the assertion that Skipsey is part of a tribe of peasant poets Yeats detaches both from the majority into, as the *OED* defines a tribe, a 'group of people forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor'.²² While this separation from mainstream literary culture suggests a purity of voice, it also implies a measure of isolation from the wider community from which the peasant poet emerges. In this partitioning of peasant poets into a 'tribe' of their own can be observed the beginnings of a tendency James Pethica argues came later:

[Yeats's] writings of the late 1890s begin to credit the vital imaginative core of folklore to the literary genius of a few pre-eminent makers of folk poetry, rather than to the imaginative sensibilities of the country people in general.²³

To pronounce that peasant poets are a 'tribe' is an intricate sociological insinuation that provides Yeats with the means to both distance himself from a perceived primitivism, while simultaneously conjoining himself with the living voice of an ancient tradition of purity, simplicity, and earthiness far removed from the rationalism of late-Victorian culture. In this, Yeats is tying himself to a primal and spiritual folklore suggesting his own lineage from a race of peripatetic troubadours, poets, and songsters emerging from the soil with a shared heritage and from a common progenitor.

In his *Pilot* column, Yeats is undoubtedly laying the foundation for a mythology of his own while scoring political points, but the appreciation he gives of Skipsey's 'sweetest and tenderest songs' of mining life is an echo of the sentiments Rossetti gave of Skipsey's poems when he revelled in their unification of 'poetic form with deep pathos'.²⁴ Yeats makes a further, albeit brief, reference to Skipsey's poetry, which illustrates the esteem in which he held him in an anonymous review of James Dryden Hosken's *Verses by the Way*, in the *Speaker*, August 26th, 1893. In the review Skipsey is utilised as a paradigm by which poetry originating from the common man can be evaluated. Yeats writes that Hosken is 'now a Customs Officer at Albert Dock, [...] now a "super" at a theatre, [...] now a postman at a little town in West Cornwall, besides several other things between-whiles' and despite finding that Hosken:

really does know how to write... [Yeats concedes he does so] not so well as Mr. Skipsey, the northern miner, despite a better mastery over metre and rhythm; for Mr. Skipsey has sung of the blackness of the pit and the loves and tragedies of the pit-mouth.²⁵

While Yeats acknowledges Skipsey's deficiencies in metre and rhythm his simplicity of purpose, voice, and storytelling elevates his poetry above that of more constructed and considered poems that perhaps lacks the weight of a sympathetic soul at their core. To Yeats, Hosken has no permanence of spirit and no connection to the 'living voice'; 'poet' could well be just another job to add to the list of employments that have gone before. Yeats uses Skipsey as an exemplification of the potential heights poetry originating from the industrial working classes can reach. In doing so, Yeats illustrates the extent to which Joseph Skipsey's poetry had permeated Victorian society, where, as Martha Vicinus

indicates, 'reading Tennyson assumed a familiarity with classical myths, reading Skipsey implied a recognition of the English working man and his place in society'.²⁶ Skipsey had become a representative artisan embodying the lives, loves, and tragedies that befell the English working classes; his poetry allowed his readers a vicarious experience of the hardships and dangers facing a respectable and deserving poor.

While this documentary evidence of Yeats's knowledge of Skipsey as a man and poet exists in various collected works, I have found no other discussions or investigations of connections between the two poets, their lives or their careers, and there are many overlaps and shared interests. A letter I discovered in the *Robert Spence Watson Papers*, held at Newcastle University, provides the foundation for further investigation.²⁷ I reproduce the letter for the first time here with Yeats's own deletions, his corrections are included in superscript:

3 Blenheim Road
Bedford Park
Chiswick
London

Oct 7 [1889]²⁸

My Dear Mr Skipsey

Ever since I saw you in spring I have been saying to myself "I must write & thank Mr Skipsey for his book & send him mine" But some how I have put off & off.²⁹ At first I did not know where you were & then when I did some how I ~~left~~^{let} week after week go by. A copy of "Oisin" has been lying in this corner ready addressed to you for a month or more. Please do not think I have neglected ~~reading~~ your book. I have read most of its poems several times & have twice made paragraphs about it in papers. Indeed I really began to forget that I had not written to you.

I think I like best of all – among the longer poems – the Hartley Calamity – the last 8 or 9 verses are among the finest ballad verses I know – and then Bereaved & I like very much also "Thistle & Nettle" all through these poems you show such careful & industrious observations – they are full of little touches that bring the people you describe ~~&~~ before ^{one} in a minute. Then I like, as I suppose every one does, your little songs of mining life – above all "Mother Wept" "get up" "The Fatal Errand" and "A golden Lot" I think too that "Meg Goldlocks" is very fine indeed – a real song.

"Young Fanny" is quite as good – sometimes I prefer one sometimes another.

I had almost forgotten "Nanny & Bessy" I think this one of the very finest of all – as fine as "Bereaved" – and full of the little ^{touches} of observation which give such weight to your poems.

Among the poems on more general subjects – I like very much “A lucky Hour” and “The Secret.”³⁰ Indeed all through the book are things that could not be better – ~~like~~ “Lotty Hay” for instance – things which are an abiding pleasure to one. The book grows constantly on one – and will I believe on men generally.

Yours very Sincerely

WBYeats³¹

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In Joseph Skipsey it is possible Yeats saw an embodiment of the poet imbued with the living voice of the land, a poet with an umbilical connection to the earth, and a member of the peasant poet tribe and in whom, to quote Yeats’s 1937 poem ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, ‘All that [he] did,.../ [came] from contact with the soil, from that/ Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong’.³² In this letter to Skipsey, Yeats expresses an appreciation of 13 poems, all of which concern themselves with ‘the blackness of the pit and the loves and tragedies of the pit-mouth’, ‘the soil’ that proved so fertile for the poetry he wrote. To Yeats, Skipsey’s poetry plainly and simply, as Rossetti wrote, ‘describes what he knows and mixes in’, and has the ‘little touches’ and power to bring the people he describes to life, his ‘careful & industrious observations’ summon up their spirits and bring them ‘before one in a minute’.³³ Yeats finds Skipsey a ‘poet of the people’ as Rossetti had before him, or, as Basil Bunting enigmatically put it after him, it was as if ‘he was the [pit] village itself composing’.³⁴ In the eyes of some of the critics who have investigated Skipsey’s work, however, ‘Antaeus-like’ his poetry succeeds only while he maintains contact with the mining communities, while he keeps his feet on the ground. To many when his poetic ambition took him to the more elevated slopes of Mount Parnassus to address a universal, humanistic subject such as the nature of man, the meaning of art or the movement of the spheres, in an attempt to ‘produce a series of lyrics that would constitute a legacy worthy of the acceptance of my country’ he moved away from the subject matter he knew best, he lost ‘contact with the soil’ and lost his power.³⁵ This critical attitude, an affliction common to working-class poets as a whole, led Basil Bunting to conclude those poems ‘in which [he] abandons the life he

knew for a life he saw only distorted and on paper... [he] “tries to be clever” and produces poems that, according to Bunting, ‘seem arch or irritable when he probably meant to be witty’.³⁶

In 1889, however, Yeats was of the opinion that poets should ‘make poems on the familiar landscapes we love not the strange and rare and glittering scenes we wonder at’; the poems of Skipsey’s he mentions are all written with the familiar at their heart.³⁷ The familiar to Skipsey in these poems is indeed ‘the blackness of the pit and the loves and tragedies of the pit-mouth’ Yeats noted in the *Speaker* in 1893. It is unsurprising that, having been reared in a community where ‘a man may meet his end in so many diverse ways’, loss becomes familiar and a sense of impending loss, whether of life or of love, permeates much of Skipsey’s poetry.³⁸ This foreboding produces, in the poems where the miner is the subject, the ‘deep pathos’ Rossetti spoke of, but, where the loves of the community are brought into view the poems are energised by a way of ‘looking at the world as if it were but an hour old’.³⁹ The sense of loss invigorates courtship rituals with a sense of wonder and makes unions more necessary and immediate. The poems Yeats selects for his appreciation reveals a simple, uncontaminated, innocent community, possessing a spirit and *naïveté* much like his own west of Ireland peasantry.

The first of Skipsey’s poems in Yeats’s selection, ‘The Hartley Calamity’, tells the story of the single greatest loss of life that befell the Great Northern Coalfield. The incident occurred on 16th January 1862 at Hester Pit in the village of New Hartley, when 204 men and boys, aged between 10 and 71, were trapped underground when the single pit shaft, the workers’ only means of ingress or egress, became blocked. After six days, in which the Queen and national media were gripped by the rescue efforts, the shaft was finally opened only to discover all had perished.⁴⁰ Disasters such as Hartley were all too frequent an event in mining communities and in their aftermath poems and songs were often written, frequently anonymously, expressing personal and communal sorrow.⁴¹ The poems would be printed and, appearing as penny ballads, sold to aid the families of the departed miners. Although there is no record of Skipsey’s ‘The Hartley Calamity’ being sold in this manner for the

disaster relief fund, Robert Spence Watson notes 'Skipsey was called upon to read it in public at many different places where meetings were held for the purpose of obtaining relief for the survivors' and:

in reading his own ballad he entered so evidently into the spirit of the thing and brought out the terrible, tragic nature of the slow death creeping over father and son, carrying away brothers side by side... that it was impossible to listen without being greatly affected. The scenes in certain of the places where he read it were almost too painful.⁴²

This was performance poetry at its most affective and would, presumably, have been effective in encouraging greater donations from the audience.

Reading 'The Hartley Calamity' now remains an affecting experience; one gains an insight into the frantic desperation of the rescue efforts and the fraught clinging to any small hope of recovering the men. Skipsey achieves this through employing the traditional devices of the alternating tetrameter and trimeter and the sombre subject matter commonly found in balladry. In adopting this traditional metre, the affective force of the poem is intensified as it acts against the sombre subject matter and defies the dramatic irony of the piece. In the attempts to rescue the men the metre, for example in the repeated stanza:

And hark! to the blow of the mall below
Do sounds above reply?
Hurra, hurra, for the Hartley men,
For now their rescue's nigh.⁴³

chases the reader along with a sense of desperation for the recovery of the trapped Hartley men. Despite being aware all 204 perished the enthusiasm of the rhythm gives hope they might yet be recovered alive; the rescue referred to, however, has a more eternal conclusion as Skipsey, in the 'last 8 or 9 verses' Yeats adjudged 'among the finest ballads' he knew, imagines the underground scene as fathers, sons, and brothers comfort one another as they are slowly asphyxiated:

[...] one by one the lights are smote,
and darkness covers all.

"O, father, till the shaft is cleared,
Close, close beside me keep;
My eye-lids are together glued.
And I—and I—must sleep."

"Sleep, darling, sleep, and I will keep
Close by—heigh-ho !"—To keep
Himself awake the father strives—
But he—he too—must sleep.

"O, brother, till the shaft is cleared,
Close, close beside me keep;
My eye-lids are together glued,
And I—and I—must sleep."

"Sleep, brother, sleep, and I will keep
Close by—heigh-ho!"—To keep
Himself awake the brother strives—
But he—he too—must sleep.

[...] they slept—still sleep—in silence dread,
Two hundred old and young,
To awake when heaven and earth have sped,
And the last dread trumpet rung.⁴⁴

Where Yeats previously found deficiencies in Skipsey's use of metre and rhythm, in 'The Hartley Calamity,' he accentuates the slowness of the deaths of the miners as repetitions force the reader's pace to slow as the trapped men and boys, stoically accepting their fate, close their eyes and, one-by-one, draw their final breaths. Skipsey's blend of melodrama and tragedy ennobles the poem's subjects as Skipsey leaves his audience in no doubt that 'The Hartley men are noble'.⁴⁵ As with Tennyson's six hundred, the deaths of the Hartley men are tragic in their futility and, although there is no explicit accusation here, the audience is incriminated by implication in the tragedy; the reason the pit only

had one means of escape was that to sink a second shaft would result in 'each ton coal/... cost[ing] one penny more'.⁴⁶

Very few of Skipsey's poems are set underground but the inferred culpability of the audience, in the difficulties and dangers associated with keeping the cost of coal down, is contained within the pathos and loss haunting the life of mining communities in poems such as 'Bereaved', "'Get Up!'", 'The Fatal Errand', or 'A Golden Lot'. In another of Yeats's selection, 'Mother Wept', Martha Vicinus finds this tacit accusation to be a direct result of the effective use of propaganda by mining unions throughout the nineteenth century. The nation knew the conditions in which coal was removed from the bowels of the earth and, as a result all 'England knew why Mother wept':

Mother wept, and father sighed;
With delight a-glow
Cried the lad, "To-morrow", cried.
"To the pit I go",

Up and down the place he sped,—
Greeted old and young.
Far and wide the tidings spread,—
Clapt his hands and sung.

Came his cronies some to gaze
Wrapt in wonder; some
Free with counsel; some with praise;
Some with envy dumb.

"May he", many a gossip cried,
"Be from peril kept;"
Father hid his face and sighed.
Mother turned and wept.⁴⁷

Where Keegan and Goodridge find the boy's joy at the impending rite of passage into adulthood contrasted against the fears of his parents, in his Mother's tears and his Father's sighs the reader is

also brought face-to-face with the reality of poverty in the industrial regions and the very real human cost of the roaring fire in the hearth of every the middle-class family.⁴⁸ The poem, the tears, and the sighs reveal the hypocrisy of middle-class hand wringing at the conditions of the working class, who are yet unable to recognise their own culpability and complicity in their exploitation; it is no wonder Rossetti found 'Mother Wept' 'very striking'.⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, however, went further and found an 'intellectual as well as a metrical affinity with [William] Blake' in Skipsey's poetry.⁵⁰ Blake was an important influence on both Yeats and Skipsey, and in Skipsey's case this influence is easily observed here when one considers the opening to Blake's 'Infant Sorrow':

My mother groaned, my father wept!
Into the dangerous world I leapt[.]⁵¹

Skipsey's 'Mother Wept' opens up this couplet and gives a back story and context to Blake's lines. The gleeful anticipation the 'lad' at his impending entry into the 'dangerous world' of 'the pit' juxtaposed against and parenthesised by the fear-gripped observers, his mother, father, and the local gossips, is in itself a microcosm of Blake's own *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

Joseph Skipsey represented both himself and his community in his poetry and, as Basil Bunting suggests above, it is as if 'he was the village itself composing'.⁵² His poetry draws on his personal experiences as a miner, but in his poems on courtship he reveals the social life and innocence of a community unsullied by the tribulations of commerce or metropolitan life. To the young Yeats, the courtship rituals, the wooing and idealising of the female, which Skipsey reveals represent a vestige of a simpler, purer way of life. A way of life analogous with Yeats's own father's belief, and a view the young Yeats seems to have shared, that could only otherwise be found:

in the peasants of the west [of Ireland], who 'can enjoy themselves in solitude, poetized,... by their religion, by their folk lore, and by their national history, and by living under a changeable sky which, from north to south and from west to east, is a perpetual decoration like the scenery in some vast theatre.'⁵³

Here the peasants of the west of Ireland are an insular, ancient, and self-perpetuating community, sustained by their oneness with nature and existing within a system of mutual respect between the aristocracy and the peasant. When Yeats recognised Skipsey as a peasant poet, much as is shown here in Ireland's peasants, he ennobled both Skipsey and the 'North Counties' he represented. The innocence, unblemished and uncorrupted by industrialisation, is evident in the 'abiding pleasure' Yeats found in a poem such as 'Lotty Hay':

As I came down from Earsdon Town,
A-lilting of a lay,
Whom did I meet but she, the sweet,
The blue-eyed Lotty Hay.

A crimson blush her cheek did flush.
Nor sin did that betray;
The pearl is sure a jewel pure,
And so is Lotty Hay.⁵⁴

This extract displays both the simplicity of life in the colliery village with the narrator happily 'A-lilting of a lay' as he comes 'down from Earsdon Town' and the purity of courtship, along with the anticipation of a possible romantic encounter, is revealed in the 'crimson blush' of Lotty Hay's cheek. Similar sentiments are revealed in 'Meg Goldlocks', and in the spikey verbal jousting, reminiscent of Beatrice and Benedick, of the courtship ritual in 'Thistle and Nettle.'

Viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, a letter from W.B. Yeats to Joseph Skipsey is now an important example of a canonical writer in communication with a minor one. As such it is easy to lose track of the original context of the letter, in which we see a young writer forging a literary reputation and interacting with a poet with a national reputation whose poetry 'the most sensitive of ears [Rossetti's]... have heard'.⁵⁵ To Yeats, the older man had made a significant enough impression on him that, after meeting Skipsey in spring, he remained in his mind until October and he needed to write to him. In the comments that he had not laid Skipsey's book unconsidered, to one side, and, most importantly, he had 'twice made paragraphs' about the poetry in his journalistic work Yeats is

obviously eager to ingratiate himself to his elder.⁵⁶ Yeats's generous comments that he supposes 'every one' likes the 'little songs of mining life' and that the book will grow 'on men generally' are loaded with an assumption that Skipsey's poetry had created and obtained the 'legacy' worthy of the 'acceptation' he sought from his nation. Again Yeats is trying to flatter Skipsey, perhaps aware of his recent association with Walter Scott, and the potential of future commissions Skipsey might be influential in securing.⁵⁷

To Skipsey, that a letter was received from Yeats, a younger not yet fully established poet, is an important indicator of the significance of the relationship between the two men. In the retention of this letter can be observed the importance Skipsey invested in fostering his network of contacts and, most significantly, the value he stored in remaining in touch with writers of all ages. Skipsey must have received correspondence from some of the most important cultural figures of the late nineteenth century yet few of the letters he received remain in existence. The simple fact a letter from an author such as Yeats to a poet who had been a miner, has survived and remained undiscovered for over a century is remarkable. While it is of great interest to read Yeats's opinion of Skipsey's poetry it would be fascinating to read how Skipsey himself responded to *The Wanderings of Oisín*; unfortunately, it appears that any response from Skipsey to Yeats is lost. Joseph Skipsey is not mentioned in Yeats's own *Autobiographies* (1935) and their relationship has not been picked up by any subsequent biographer. Yet, an item in Yeats's library suggests further communication between the two men: Edward O'Shea's *A Descriptive Catalogue of W.B. Yeats's Library* (1985) lists a copy of Skipsey's *Songs and Lyrics* (1892), signed 'J.S.' and inscribed on the flyleaf

To W.B. Yeats,/ With the Season's Greetings/ and the best regards of his sincere
Admirer/ and friend,/ The Author/ New Year's Eve, /1895.⁵⁸

Skipsey was very careful to keep in touch with critics, friends, and acquaintances, and while this inscribed copy of his own work may have been from a friend and admirer, in all probability it seems the gift was a gentle reminder to a poet whose star was ascendant from one, even at the end of his career, striving to keep alive his network of contacts.

Joseph Skipsey's association with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones is already well established but this letter allows his poetry to be read outside of that Pre-Raphaelite circle. Furthermore, his contact with the fledgling writing career of Yeats and the fulsome praise the young man gives suggests Skipsey's influence deserves to be considered beyond that context. While Skipsey was undoubtedly a recipient of assistance from some of the most important cultural figures of the Victorian age he was, by no means, passive in his acceptance of it. Much work needs to be done to explore the life and work of Joseph Skipsey and the network of contacts he developed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century; a connection between a working-class poet and a canonical one is an important starting point in the advancement of that work and to be able to discuss the poetry of Skipsey alongside that of Yeats is to open up a whole new context within which his work can be understood. The significance of this letter from W.B. Yeats to Joseph Skipsey, reproduced and examined here for the first time, is important in terms of developing a deeper understanding of the early career of Yeats, but it is of far greater consequence to the understanding and appreciation of the life and work of a working-class poet. This letter reveals Skipsey to have been a writer whose work was appreciated in far wider circles than had previously been thought, whose contacts spread far further than the Pre-Raphaelites, and the beginning of understanding that a working-class writer could be an active agent in the development of his own career rather than the passive recipient of charitable aid provided by an altruistic and philanthropic cultural elite.

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¹ W. B. Yeats, 'Irish Writers Who Are Winning Fame', in George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer (eds.) *Letters to the New Island* (London, 1989), pp. 9–12, p. 10. The article was written in London on July 10 and published 3 August 1889.

² Yeats, 'Irish Writers', p. 10–11.

³ Joseph Skipsey, 'A Golden Lot', in *Carols from the Coalfields*, (London, 1886), p. 224, line 6. All subsequent references to Skipsey's poems are to this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

⁴Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: a study of nineteenth century British working-class literature* (London, 1974). The Recovering Labouring-class Writing Project has run in different ways since 1993 and resulted in two three-volume anthologies of poetry: *Eighteenth Century Labouring-class Poets, 1700-1800* (2003) and *Nineteenth Century Labouring-class Poets, 1800-1900* (2005). A by-product of these anthologies is *A Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets and Poetry, 1700-1900* (on-line) which has recorded biographical details of 1,973 poets (latest count, March 2016) who published work between 1700 and 1900 and can be identified as coming from a working-class tradition. Of the 1,973 poets identified, ninety are described as having been miners, colliers, or pitmen; of the ninety miner poets, twenty six were born or lived in the Northeast of England.

⁵ Bridget Keegan, “‘Incessant toil and hands innumerable’: Mining and Poetry in the Northeast of England”, *Victoriographies*, 1:2 (2011), 177-201; Gustav Klaus, *Literature of Labour: two hundred years of working-class writing* (Brighton, 1985).

⁶ cf. John Goodridge, ‘Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry’, *Criticism*, 47:4 (2005), 531-547; Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge, ‘Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-Century Mineworker Poets’, *Philological Quarterly*, 92:3 (2013), 225-250.

⁷ Peter Scott, *Nottingham Trent University D29 English Language and Literature Impact Case Study: Recovering Labouring-class Writing* (Ergo Consulting, 2013), p. 3.

⁸ A measure of Joseph Skipsey’s importance, and how well read his poetry was in his own lifetime, is provided in the fact that his original entry into the *Dictionary of National Biography* came in 1912, long before the widened scope of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* from the 1990s onwards.

⁹ Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse*, p. 169.

¹⁰ Bridget Keegan, ‘Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903)’, in *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1800-1900: Volume III 1860-1900* (London, 2006), pp. 211–240, p. 211.

¹¹ The last deep-shaft coalmine, Kellingley Colliery in South Yorkshire, closed on December 18th 2015, ending centuries of underground coal extraction in the United Kingdom. The only book-length biography of Skipsey, *Joseph Skipsey: his Life and Work* (London: 1909), was written by his friend, the educationalist and solicitor, Robert Spence Watson; this work is reasonably comprehensive but not without errors. R. K. R. Thornton, ‘Biographical Notes’, in R. K. R. Thornton, Chris Harrison, William McCumiskey (eds.), in *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014), pp. 11-88. This second edition was augmented by the research of Skipsey’s great, great grandson Chris Harrison who has also set his ancestor’s poetry to music, a CD of which was included with the edition; examples can be heard here:

<http://www.chrisharrisonmusic.org/musical-activities/carols-from-the-coalfields/song-list>.

Further information is also available in Skipsey’s entry into the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and on a website ‘dedicated to the life and work of the Chartist, poet, author, and free thinker, Gerald Massey, and to comparable poets and authors of his era, a number of whom by their protests were to influence social reform in Victorian Britain’: <http://gerald-massey.org.uk/skipsey/index.htm>. This website gives comprehensive information on Skipsey including family documents and provides links to digital copies of his writing.

¹² Pall Mall Gazette, ‘A Poet from the Mines. An Interview with Joseph Skipsey’, 11 July 1889, pp. 1-2, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Stone Gallery, Burford, Oxfordshire, Joseph Skipsey, ‘Letter to Thomas Dixon’, 26 September 1878.

¹⁷ Thornton et al, ‘Biographical Notes’, p. 60.

¹⁸ The reference to Yeats having spoken to Skipsey about Clarence Mangan ‘the other day’, suggests the pair met at a lecture Yeats delivered on Mangan to the Southwark Irish Literary Society on May 29 1889. This lecture is recorded in John Kelly, ‘Chronology’, in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* (Oxford, 1986), pp. xi–xxv, p. xiv.

¹⁹ Yeats, ‘Irish Writers’, p. 10–11.

²⁰ Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: 2008).

²¹ W. B. Yeats, ‘Samhain: 1906 – Literature and the Living Voice’, in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Volume VIII: The Irish Dramatic Movement*, (New York, 2003) pp. 94-107, p. 96.

²² ‘tribe, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 27 April 2016

²³ For a discussion of Yeats’s use of folklore refer to James Pethica, ‘Yeats, folklore, and Irish legend’, in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 129–43; for discussion of Yeats’s role in the construction of a noble Irish Peasant, see Edward Hirsch, ‘The Imaginary Irish Peasant’, *PMLA*, 106:5 (1991), 1116–33.

²⁴ The Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, SW1/16/44, *Spence Watson Papers*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Letter to Joseph Skipsey’, 29 October 1878, p.2.

²⁵ W. B. Yeats, 'Two Minor Lyrists', in *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, John P. Frayne (ed.) (London: 1970), 288–91, p. 288–89.

²⁶ Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse*, p. 60.

²⁷ I discovered the letter on 3 July 2012; at this time it was in an uncatalogued section of the *Spence Watson Papers*. The collection has subsequently been fully catalogued and the archival details are given below; the letter is not included in the collected letters of W.B. Yeats.

²⁸ Yeats gives no year in the date of this letter but, as it was sent with a copy of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, the earliest year it could have been written is 1889. As the letter was kept in an envelope addressed to 'Joseph Skipsey Esq^{re}' at 'Shakespeare's Birthplace', it seems likely it was written and received during the period in which Skipsey was custodian there: July 1889 to October 1891. I have discounted the year 1891 as letters written on 4 September and 11 October, in *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume One* (1986), place Yeats in Dublin at that time. There is no evidence to prove or disprove the letter was written in 1890, but there is little potential for the described meeting in the spring of that year. Based on the reference to *Oisín*, and reading that Yeats saw Skipsey 'in spring' in conjunction with the *Pilot* article where Yeats states he met Skipsey 'the other day', it is my assertion the letter was written on 7 October, 1889.

²⁹ The book for which Yeats thanks Skipsey must have been either *Carols from the Coalfields* (1886) or its successor *Carols, Songs, and Ballads* (1888), as these are the only publications containing all of Yeats's selection. *Carols, Songs, and Ballads* is effectively a reprint of *Carols from the Coalfields* with some emendations, omissions, and shuffling of order. Neither volume is listed in Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalogue of W. B. Yeats's Library* (New York, 1985).

³⁰ In listing the titles of the poems Yeats makes some errors: "get up" is "'Get Up!"; "Nanny & Bessy" is 'Nanny to Bessy'; and "A Lucky Hour" is 'The Lucky Hour'.

³¹ The Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, SW1/21/1, Spence Watson Papers, W. B. Yeats, 'Letter to Joseph Skipsey', 7 October [1889]. The letter is reproduced here by kind permission of the Librarian, Robinson Library, Newcastle University.

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³² W. B. Yeats, 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', in Richard J. Finneran (ed.) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (Basingstoke, 1991) pp. 319–21, lines 42–4.

³³ Rossetti, 'Letter to Joseph Skipsey', 29 October 1878, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2; Basil Bunting, 'Preface', in *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (Sunderland, 1976), pp. 7–14, p. 14.

³⁵ The Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, SW1/17/53, *Spence Watson Papers*, Joseph Skipsey, 'Letter to Robert Spence Watson', 8 February 1871, p. 7.

³⁶ Bunting, 'Preface', p. 14.

³⁷ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life; I: The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1997), p. 78.

³⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford, 1993), p. 255.

³⁹ Yeats, 'Literature and the Living Voice', p. 95.

⁴⁰ *The Times* covered the story extensively and on 28 January (p.9) printed a telegram sent by Queen Victoria who shared 'her tenderest sympathy [...] with the poor widows and mothers, and that her own misery [Prince Albert died December 14, 1861] only [made] her feel the more for them'.

⁴¹ Numerous poems were written about events at New Hartley, including those by working-class poets: 'Janet Hamilton, Joe Wilson, and Matthew Tate, the popular Liverpool-born Newcastle songwriter Ned Corvan, and [...] John Harris', Keegan and Goodridge, 'Modes and Methods', 241.

⁴² Spence Watson, *Joseph Skipsey*, p. 43; Skipsey revised his poems between volumes and 'The Hartley Calamity' Yeats read, is likely to be quite different from that which Skipsey recited in public. In the first published version of the poem, in *The Collier Lad* (1864), there are notable differences from those printed in either *Carols from the Coalfields* or *Carols, Songs, and Ballads* not least that there are two extra stanzas in the earlier version.

⁴³ Joseph Skipsey, 'The Hartley Calamity' (21–4), lines 45–8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 71–88 and 97–100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, line 1.

⁴⁶ In the aftermath of the accident at Hartley, Parliament decreed new pits should be sunk with at least two shafts; James Henry, 'Two hundred men and eighteen killed', in Jay Parini (ed.) *The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry* (Andover, 2005), pp. 492–4, lines 3–4.

⁴⁷ Vicinus, *Industrial Muse*, p. 60; Skipsey, 'Mother Wept' (3).

⁴⁸ Keegan and Goodridge, 'Modes and Methods', 237–8.

⁴⁹ Rossetti, 'Letter to Joseph Skipsey', 29 October 1878, p.3.

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- ⁵⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'Minor and Minor Poets', in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 February 1887, p. 5.
- ⁵¹ William Blake, 'Infant Sorrow', in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (Oxford, 2001), p. 40, lines 1–2.
- ⁵² Bunting, 'Preface', p. 14.
- ⁵³ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York and London, 1999), p. 18.
- ⁵⁴ Skipsey, 'Lotty Hay' (178), lines 1–8.
- ⁵⁵ Yeats, 'Irish Writers', p. 11.
- ⁵⁶ While Yeats claims to have 'twice made paragraphs... in papers' on Skipsey's book I have only located one article before 7 October 1889, the letter in the *Pilot*, in which Yeats makes reference to Skipsey.
- ⁵⁷ Skipsey was the founding editor of the 'Canterbury Poets' series of cheap volumes of the work of noteworthy poets, with a critical and biographical introduction; his edited volumes of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and Poe in 1884 and two on Burns in 1885 were the first in the series. Despite resigning the position after the first six volumes, Skipsey remain influential at Walter Scott's Tyneside-based publishing house.
- ⁵⁸ O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalogue of W. B. Yeats's Library*, p. 253.