

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Mat Callahan, Yvonne Moore, eds., *Working-Class Heroes: A History of Struggle in Song*, book and cd (Oakland: pm Press 2019)

Mark Leier

Volume 87, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078663ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0017>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Leier, M. (2021). Review of [Mat Callahan, Yvonne Moore, eds., *Working-Class Heroes: A History of Struggle in Song*, book and cd (Oakland: pm Press 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 87, 214–215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0017>

**Mat Callahan, Yvonne Moore, eds.,
*Working-Class Heroes: A History of
Struggle in Song*, book and CD (Oakland:
pm Press 2019)**

MAT CALLAHAN and Yvonne Moore have put together an inspiring collection of American labour songs, ranging from 1WW classics by Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin to less-known songs from the 1930s by Sarah Ogan Gunning, Aunt Molly Jackson, and others. The book contains lyrics, chords, and sheet music, the last especially important when few people can be counted on to know the gospel and Tin Pan Alley melodies many of the songs were based on. The authors provide insightful notes on the songs and useful biographies of the writers. Pictures and newspaper clippings illustrate events such as the murder of National Miners Union organizer Harry Simms, itself the subject of one of the songs. Two essays outline the broader history of events, the role of the Communist Party in the 1930s, the blacklist, folklore, and historical memory, drawing on recent scholarship and the authors' deep knowledge. The result is a publication useful to researchers, teachers, and its primary audience, activists.

Most of the songs come from *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, a book first put together in the 1940s by folklorist Alan Lomax and musicians Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, but unpublished until 1967. This puts some constraints on Callahan and Moore, and they are forthright about the limitations of the collection. Apart from the 1WW songs, many of the contributions are by white men and women from coal mining communities in the eastern United States. While African-Americans are represented by John Handcox and Paul Robeson, there is nothing from "Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican agricultural workers on strike in California... autoworkers in Michigan

and Ohio, sharecroppers in Alabama, or maritime workers on the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts." (5) This reflects the experience, sensibilities, and limits of the original collectors. Folklorists today cast their net more widely and inclusively, but then and now the songs of coal miners may be taken as metaphors for the struggles of other groups, while the vision of "The Commonwealth of Toil" has lost none of its power.

This is an important collection. As Callahan and Moore note, there are "striking similarities" (5) between the period these songs were written, that is, between about 1909 and 1939, and today. These similarities include years of systemic economic crisis, the rise of fascism and related movements, and the threat of war. We need these songs. As Joe Hill observed from his prison cell in Utah a year before he was executed on a murder charge,

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over; and I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress the facts up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science.

But the labour movement does little political and economic education either, and it rarely sings. That is no accident. Certainly the labour bureaucrat looking to be appointed to government boards such as those of BC Hydro and Canada Post, win an ambassadorship to Ireland like Dennis McDermott, or line up to receive the Order of Canada is unlikely to encourage the singing of all the verses of "Solidarity Forever," which includes lines such as "Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite who would lash us into serfdom and would crush

us with his might,” and “All the world that’s owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.” Nor would they appreciate the verse in Joe Hill’s song “Mr. Block,” a song that might have been included here, where a mistreated worker turns to “the great AF of L” for help, hoping Samuel Gompers would “fix that foreman right.” Instead, “Sam Gompers said ‘You see, you’ve got our sympathy.’” As another Wobbly songwriter, Al Grierson, used to say, “You know, you can sub in the name of every AFL and CLC president from Sam Gompers on in this song and it scans perfectly. Coincidence? I think not!” These songs remind us that the labour movement has a rich, militant, and radical history. They are also one way to help invigorate a movement that has been throttled by sclerotic leaders for decades and is only recently showing signs of new life. Sarah Ogan Gunning’s “I Hate the Capitalist System” is a good place to start.

Callahan and Moore have also recorded these songs in an accompanying CD. Their sparse arrangements and strong vocals evoke the origins of the songs and deliver them with power and verve. They remind us that singing together is itself a small exercise in solidarity: a few people start off, others join in, and if it is a little rough in places, we get it more or less right by the end as we support and lift each other. We need more collections, notably from those groups omitted from this collection and from contemporary workers and struggles, but this is “a history of struggle in song,” meaning it is neither “the” history nor an attempt to gather up the music of people today. It fulfills its function as history with the precision of the scholar, the engagement of the folksinger, and the hope of the activist.

MARK LEIER

Simon Fraser University

Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019)

DESPITE DECADES of effort by Africanist historians, Africa remains perennially misunderstood, falsely disconnected from the stream of history. Historians of the Atlantic world and early modern globalization have made some advances bringing Africa into their accounts, but a longstanding reductive approach remains in place. West Africa is commonly understood through the Atlantic Slave Trade and reduced to being a victim of external depredation, or set apart as a place waiting to be awoken from stasis. Toby Green’s book not only pushes non-Africanists to think afresh about how they locate African in history, but does much to push Africanists and suggest paths they might take.

Two ambitions shape this wide-ranging and sweeping treatment of Atlantic Africa from the late 14th century to the mid 19th century. Part I asks how Africa’s engagement in the Atlantic economy, initiated on largely favorable terms by sovereign states, eventually put Africa at an entrenched disadvantage which has persisted since. Green presents five case studies ranging geographically from Senegambia to the Kongo, and chronologically from the 15th to the 17th centuries, to illustrate variations on a common theme. Africans largely welcomed Atlantic trade. Indeed, Green shows how the early trade with Portugal was built on goods, business arrangements and state systems already connecting West Africa to global markets across the Sahara, contrary to common notions that European trade brought West Africa out of isolation. African rulers, merchants and workers not only managed these Atlantic connections well, they shaped how the early Atlantic world developed. They traded