

## Kipling Gets a Red Card

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## Kipling Gets a Red Card

Mark Leier

IN 1908, THE WOBBLY newspaper the *Industrial Union Bulletin* published a poem entitled "The Cry of Toil." Better known as "We Have Fed You All for A Thousand Years," the poem was originally credited to Rudyard Kipling, then in later editions to "an unknown proletarian." When it was reprinted in an anthology edited by Marcus Graham in 1929, the editor noted that it was a parody of a Kipling poem.<sup>1</sup> This is in fact the case, for the IWW poem borrows the structure and rhythm of a fragment of Kipling's "The Song of the Dead." The original, published in 1893, is a tribute to the seamen of the British navy:

We have fed our sea for a thousand years  
And she calls us, still unfed,  
Though there's never a wave of all her waves  
But marks our English dead:  
We have strawed our best to the weed's unrest,  
To the shark and the sheering gull.  
If blood be the price of admiralty,  
Lord God, we ha' paid in full!

There's never a flood goes shoreward now  
But lifts a keel we manned;

<sup>1</sup>*Industrial Union Bulletin*, 18 April 1908. For the history of the IWW poem, see Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Chicago 1988), 27-8. Strictly speaking, the poem is not a parody of Kipling's poem but a re-working of the words based on the original verse and meter.

There's never an ebb goes seaward now  
 But drops our dead on the sand —  
 But slinks our dead on the sand forlore,  
 From the Ducies to the Swin.  
 If blood be the price of admiralty,  
 If blood be the price of admiralty,  
 Lord God, we ha' paid it in!

We must feed our sea for a thousand years,  
 For that is our doom and pride,  
 As it was when they sailed with the *Golden Hind*,  
 Or the wreck that struck last tide —  
 Or the wreck that lies on the spouting reef  
 Where the ghastly blue-lights flare.  
 If blood be the price of admiralty,  
 If blood be the price of admiralty,  
 If blood be the price of admiralty,  
 Lord God, we ha' bought it fair!<sup>2</sup>

The IWW version is strikingly similar in format and sentiment:

We have fed you all for a thousand years  
 And you hail us still unfed,  
 Though there's never a dollar of all your wealth  
 But marks the workers' dead.  
 We have yielded our best to give you rest  
 And you lie on crimson wool.  
 Then if blood be the price of all your wealth,  
 Good God! We have paid it in full!

There is never a mine blown skyward now  
 But we're buried alive for you.  
 There's never a wreck drifts shoreward now  
 But we are its ghastly crew.  
 Go reckon our dead by the forges red  
 And the factories where we spin.  
 If blood be the price of your cursed wealth  
 Good God! We have paid it in!

<sup>2</sup>Rudyard Kipling's *Verse, Definitive Edition* (London 1940), 171.

We have fed you all for a thousand years —  
 For that was our doom, you know.  
 From the days when you chained us in your fields  
 To the strike of a week ago.  
 You have taken our lives, and our babies and wives,  
 And we're told it's your legal share;  
 But if blood be the price of your lawful wealth  
 Good God! We have bought it fair.<sup>3</sup>

Kipling's more famous ode to the common soldier, "Tommy," was the inspiration and model for another IWW poem. Kipling's verse established the tone and meter again:

I went into a public-'house to get a pint o' beer,  
 The publican 'e up an' sez, "We serve no red-coats here."  
 The girls be'ind the bar they laught an' giggled fit to die,  
 I outs into the street again an' to myself sez I:  
 O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, do away";  
 But it's "Thank you Mister Atkins," when the band begins to play—  
 The band begins to play, my boys, the band begins to play,  
 O, it's "Thank you, Mister Atkins," when the band begins to play.

I went into a theatre as sober as could be,  
 They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;  
 They sent me to the gallery or round the music-'alls,  
 But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls.  
 For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, wait outside";  
 But it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide—  
 The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,  
 O, it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide.

Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep  
 Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;  
 An' hustling drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit  
 Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.  
 Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?"  
 But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll—  
 The drums begin to roll, my boys, the drums begin to roll,  
 O it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll.

<sup>3</sup>*IWW Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*, facsimile reprint of the 1923 edition (Chicago 1989), 28.

We aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too,  
 But single men in barricks, most remarkable like you;  
 And if sometimes our conduct isn't all your fancy paints,  
 Why single men in barricks don't grow into plaster saints;  
 While it's Tommy this an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, fall behind,"  
 But it's "Please to walk in front sir," when there's trouble in the wind—  
 There's trouble in the wind, my boys, there's trouble in the wind,  
 O, it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when there's trouble in the wind.

You talk o' better food for us, an' schools, an' fires an' all:  
 We'll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.  
 Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face  
 The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.  
 For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"  
 But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot;  
 And it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;  
 An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool you bet that Tommy sees!<sup>4</sup>

The IWW version was entitled "The Timber Beast's Lament":

I'm on the boat for the camp  
 With a sick and aching head;  
 I've blowed another winter's stake,  
 And got the jims instead.

It seems I'll never learn the truth  
 That's written plain as day  
 It's the only time they welcome you  
 Is when you make it pay.

And it's "blanket-stiff" and "jungle hound,"  
 And "Pitch him out the door,"  
 But it's "Howdy, Jack, old-timer,"  
 When you've got the price for more.

Oh, tonight the boat is rocky,  
 And I ain't got a bunk,  
 Not a rare of cheering likker,  
 Just a turkey full of junk.

<sup>4</sup>*Kipling's Verse*, 397-8.

All I call my life's possessions,  
Is just what I carry 'round,  
For I've blowed the rest on skid-roads,  
Of a hundred gypso towns.

And it's "lumberjack" and "timber-beast,"  
And "Give these bums a ride,"  
But it's "Have on one the house, old boy,"  
If you're stepping with the tide.

And the chokers will be heavy,  
Just as heavy, just as cold,  
When the hooker gives the high-ball,  
And we start to dig for gold.

And I'll cuss the siren skid-road,  
With it's blatant, drunken tune,  
But then, of course, I'll up and make  
Another trip next June.<sup>5</sup>

That Kipling's poetry served as the inspiration for IWW ballads tells us something about both the IWW and Kipling. For those who have not read him, it confirms that though Kipling was at least an apologist for British imperialism, he was not just an apologist. Much of his work, especially his verse, sought to uphold the rank and file soldier. In Kipling's defense of the common soldier we see a kind of military *ouvrierisme*, a respect for those who must do that actual dying. This belief in the virtue and the indispensability of the common worker struck an obvious chord with the syndicalists of the IWW. Like the British Tommy, they too died unwillingly and without choice for the sake of someone else's profits. And like Kipling, the IWW had a great deal of scorn for the middle and upper classes who depended on those beneath them on the social scale for the necessities of life and for protection. The line from "Tommy," "makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep," might easily be changed to "making mock of overalls that feed you while you sleep" and thus reflect the IWW belief that all wealth is created by labour.

I do not want to make too much of Kipling's respect for the soldier, for he was no socialist or friend of the working class. Even in poems such as "Tommy," the narrator speaks in a semi-literate comic Cockney accent, presumably to suggest inferiority. And certainly Kipling included the left and unionists in those classes that benefited from the empire even as they laughed at it. But he was virtually the

<sup>5</sup>Cited in Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices*, 270. The author is unknown.

only poet of his generation to write realistically of the experience and culture of the common soldier, and therefore it is not surprising that when IWW poets looked for models, they turned to Kipling.<sup>6</sup>

The application of the "folk process" to Kipling also tells us something about the IWW. Obviously enough, it shows that some members of the radical union were familiar enough with his work to borrow from it, in some instances almost word for word. This suggests that some Wobblies were not so far removed from certain kinds of mainstream culture. It is easy to overstate this argument: Joe Hill used Tin Pan Alley and hymn tunes for his work and still remained sufficiently alienated from "respectable society" to warrant a death sentence in Utah. The use of commercial tunes and Kipling's poetry does however suggest an acquaintance with parts of the larger culture. This should not be surprising. But in light of the claims of some historians to the effect that radicals were social deviants, completely alienated, and removed from "normal" social discourse, this knowledge and ability to improve upon mainstream culture suggests that it was class experience rather than pathology that created radicalism.

Finally, the tracing of IWW poems to other roots suggests that workers can adapt the tools they are given for their own purposes. If even Kipling can be rehabilitated, perhaps there is still hope for the left.

<sup>6</sup>See George Orwell, "Rudyard Kipling," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, Volume Two, *My Country Right or Left* (Harmondsworth 1982), 215-29. Orwell defends Kipling's verse and applauds his understanding of the common soldier, but correctly maintains that if Kipling was not a Fascist, he was certainly "a jingo imperialist ... morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting," 215. Robert Graves comments on Kipling's poetry in "A Note on Kipling's Verse," in *Rudyard Kipling: The Man, His World, and His Word* (London 1972), 99-112. See in particular 103, where he cites Chesterston's remark that Kipling was the poet of "railwaymen or bridgebuilders," and quotes C.S. Lewis who wrote that Kipling was "first and foremost the poet of work." Wobblies were not the only leftists to draw upon Kipling. So too did Bertolt Brecht, who on occasion put unattributed direct translations of Kipling in his own work, including the bathetic poem, "If." For an appreciation of the relationship of Brecht and Kipling, see James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht and Rudyard Kipling: A Marxist's Imperialist Mentor* (Paris 1975).