

Blackleg Miners in Cape Breton

by John C. O'Donnell

O bury now the blackleg nine feet below the dirt,
And pile up plenty on him of pick and shovel dirt;
And heap the stones upon him, put all these under seal,
For fear the devil rises to plague the world to come.*

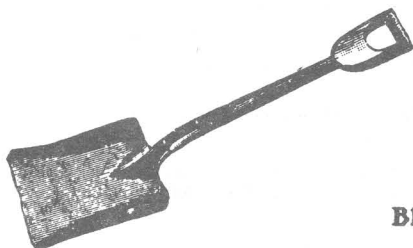
This song, quoted from Roy Palmer's *Poverty Knock*, (1) gives some indication of the contempt with which British coal miners held non-unionized workers in eighteenth century Britain. To our ears the British term "blackleg" sounds less harsh than the more popular label "scab" used on this side of the ocean, but it has conjured up the same contemptuous emotions in the hearts and minds of British workers since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

Songs about "scab labour" are common in mining communities throughout the world. Perhaps the most popular of all such songs emerged when, in early nineteenth century Britain, Welsh, Irish and Cornish miners were imported to Tyneside (an area in Northeast England on the river Tyne) to help break the strikes that were hampering the coal industry there. The song *Blackleg Miners* has been collected by numerous folklore enthusiasts, most notably A. L. Lloyd,(2) and it has been recorded by Louis Killen on Topic 12T86 as well as by the contemporary folk-rock group known as Steeleye Span (RCA SF8113).(3)

In the early part of this century, George Korson collected "blackleg" songs in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania,(4) and in West Virginia he discovered that the term had given way to *A Little Black Train*:

There's a little black train a-coming,
The conductor he's a crab;
The engineer a Progressive
Get on, if you're a scab.(5)

The migratory nature of coal miners has always fascinated me. Throughout the nineteenth century, while labour problems were plaguing the British coal industry, the ever-expanding industry in North America welcomed large numbers of immigrant workers from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and other European countries. Many of the singers recorded by



Blackleg Miners

Oh it's in the eve-ning af-ter dark The black-leg min-ers gan to work With their
mole-skin trou-sers and their dir-ty shirt There go the black-leg min-ers___

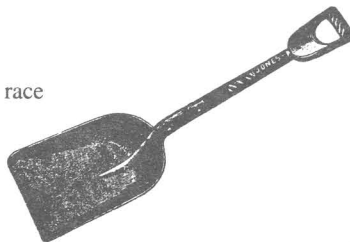
Oh it's in the evening after dark
The blackleg miners gan to work,
With their moleskin trousers and their dirty shirt
There go the blackleg miners.

They take their picks and down they go
To hew the coal that lies below
And there's not a woman in this townrow
Will look at a blackleg miner.

Oh Delavel is a terrible place,
They rub wet clay in a blackleg's face.
And round the pitheaps they run a foot race
To catch the blackleg miners.

Oh divn't gan near the Seghill mine,
Across the way they hang a line
To catch the throat and break the spine
Of the dirty blackleg miners.

They'll take your tools and your duds as well
And throw them down in the pit of hell,
For that may not be very far away,
You dirty blackleg miners.



George Korson and his contemporaries were direct descendants of these immigrant workers, and through their song they formed a link in the musical heritage of Europe and North America.

The coal industry on Cape Breton Island began in 1720,(6) and in the mid-1800's the industry underwent frenzied expansion. Scores of new mines were opened and to meet the demands for labour, workers were imported from Great Britain and Ireland. Some even came from the U.S.A., although these were often seasonal workers. By far the largest group of immigrants came from Northeast England(7) and Scotland, so it is not surprising that songs modeled on the British blackleg theme would appear in Cape Breton.

The following song first appeared in Stuart McCawley's *Cape Breton Come-All-Ye*,(8) although McCawley's version, which was also published by George Korson,(9) omitted verse eight.

THE YAHIE MINERS

Early in the month of May, when all ice is gone away,
The Yahies, they come down to work with their white
bags and dirty shirts,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Chorus:

Bonnie boys, Oh won't you gang,
Bonnie boys, Oh won't you gang,
Bonnie boys, Oh won't you gang,
To beat the Yahie miners.

They take their picks and they go down
A digging coal on underground,
For board and lodging can't be found
For dirty Yahie miners.

Into Mitchell's they do deal
Nothing there but Injun meal.
Sour molasses will make them squeal,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Join the Union right away,
Don't you wait till after pay,
Join the Union right away,
You dirty Yahie miners.

Mrs. McNabb, she keeps the Hall
Where the Yahies they do call,
You'll see them flock around the Hall,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Don't go near MacDonald's door
Else the bully will have you sure;
For he goes 'round from door to door
Converting Yahie miners.

Jimmie Brinick he jumped in,
Caught MacKeigan by the chin,
Give me Maggie though she's thin
For I'm no Yahie miner.

Donald McAulay's got a nose
Where the boarders hang their clothes
And if you go there I suppose
You'll see some Yahie Miners.

From Rocky Boston they do come
The damndest Yahies ever found
Around the office they do crowd
The dirty Yahie Miners.

The Lorway road it is now clear,
There are no Yahies on the beer,
The reason why they are not here,
They're frightened of the miners.(10)

Miners in Cape Breton claim that the term *Yahie* refers to the "Yankee" miners who descended upon Cape Breton when the mines reopened each spring. The fact that the song is specifically about seasonal workers ("Early in the month of May, . . .") would seem to support this opinion.

An even more interesting version for me, however, is the following song which I acquired from Mrs. D. J. MacDonald of Glace Bay as the result of a search conducted by the Cape Breton Miners' Folk Society in 1966.

KELLY'S COVE

When Kelly's Cove began to work
The happy miners came like dirt.
White backs and dirty shirts,
The yappy, happy miners.

Chorus:

Join the union or you'll die,
Join the union or you'll die,
Join the union or you'll die,
Among the happy miners.

And when a vessel will come in,
Burchell will be on a pin.
He will make the miners spin,
The yappy, happy miners.

Big Flora she keeps a hall
Where the miners always call,
When their coming in the fall,
The yappy, happy miners.

Young Charlie Sutherland went 'round
Hauling coal from underground.
He swore he'd never haul a pound
For the yappy, happy miners.(11)

The striking similarities of both Cape Breton songs with the British *Blackleg Miners* would seem to indicate that the Cape Breton composers were familiar with the British version.

Kelly's Cove is today known as New Campbellton and is located near the foot of Kelly's Mountain in Cape Breton. People there today still recant stories of Big Flora and the house in which she raised her two illegitimate sons, Albert and Duncan Flora. It is interesting to observe that in the British version "not a woman in this townrow will look at a blackleg miner" (v. 2). The mention of "Big Flora" (or Mrs. McNabb in *The Yahie Miners*) seems to imply that this was not the case in Cape Breton.

All three versions sing of "dirty shirts," but an interesting discrepancy occurs between the two Cape Breton versions: Whereas *The Yahie Miners* sings of "white bags and dirty shirts," the *Kelly's Cove* version mocks the "white backs and dirty shirts" (v. 1). Many a retired coal miner in Cape Breton today will speak of the shiny black skin of their fathers and uncles. It was not all that long ago that coal miners were forced to work shifts of 15 to 18 hours per day in order to earn enough to pay off the Company Store and to support their families. The men barely had time to wash properly; consequently, their skin took on a shiny black, ebony-like, aura. So imbedded was the black that even their clothing remained unaffected by the dirt when they donned their street clothes at the end of a shift. Seasonal workers, having toiled long or hard enough to have acquired that protective black aura, were noticeably different with their "white backs and dirty shirts." I suspect that "white bags" is a misrepresentation of "white backs."

During the era of mine expansion of nineteenth century Cape Breton, most of the mines were owned and operated by foreigners. Immigrant and seasonal workers, consequently, were offered much better salaries than the locals. The Cape Bretoners found a unique way to show their distaste for such

unfair practices by borrowing from the blackleg song tradition inherited from their ancestors.

Footnotes

1. Palmer, Roy. *Poverty Knock*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 59.
2. Lloyd, A. L. *Come All Ye Bold Miners*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd., 1952), pp. 99-100.
3. Dallas, Karl. *One Hundred Songs of Toil*. London: Wolfe Publishing, Ltd., 1974), p. 228.
4. Korson, George. *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*. (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1964), pp. 204-239.
5. _____. *Coal Dust On the Fiddle*. (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1965), pp. 328-329.
6. *The first operational coal mine in North America was opened in Cow Bay (now Donkin), Cape Breton in 1720. The coal mined there was shipped to Louisbourg to assist the workers in building the famed French fortress.*
7. *Many stayed on, joined the union (indeed, one of the funders of the union in Cape Breton, J.B. McLachlan, was himself an immigrant from Scotland) and became Canadian citizens, while others returned to their native land when work opportunities improved. So warm was the feeling for Nova Scotia by the Durham miners that they affectionately referred to the Harraton Colliery in County Durham as the "Cotia" Mine until its closure. The song "Farewell to the Cotia" is still sung as a tribute to the English Nova Scotia mine today.*
8. McCawley, Stuart. *Cape Breton Come-All-Ye*. (Glace Bay, N.S.: Brodie Printing Service, 1929), pp. 46-47.
9. Korson, George. *Coal Dust On the Fiddle*. pp. 334-335.
10. MacDonald, Alphonse. *Cape Breton Songster*. (Sydney, N.S.: n.p., 1935), pp. 39-40.
11. I have also heard a second interpretation: The Scottish Gaelic word for homeward is "dhachaidh" (home = dachaidh) and is pronounced (g)ackay -- the "g" being softened to a somewhat guttural "y"! Because the seasonal workers were constantly talking of home and the better life there, they were castigated as the "(g)ackay" (here spelled "Yahie") miners.
12. O'Donnell, John C. *The Men of the Deeps*. (Waterloo: Waterloo Music Co., 1975), p. 33.