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Resistance Through Song

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Abstract

Concentrating primarily on the so-called ‘Navvies,’ this paper interprets the songs of metal workers among casual labourers in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain as an expression of shared values and aspirations. The term ‘Navigators’ or ‘Navvies’ was first used of Irish refugees of Celtic origin, though some were of ‘English settlement’ origin, who came to Scotland and England in the 19th century to take part in manual work. This study focuses first on songs which concentrated on working conditions, and later discusses songs (which have usually been neglected) in which the workplace features more than one singer. The last part of the study examines a Scottish demonstration and march to London in the 1980s when metal workers resisted the planned closure of their rolling mill with a ‘sung’ march to London that echoes the resistance of the early Navvies and others. In an article in *Imagined States* (2001), written in collaboration with the present writer, Reimund Kvideland made a study of ‘rallar(e)’ (navvies) in Norway and Sweden between 1880 and 1930. He wrote, ‘the railway navvies constructed a new genre of narrative song and employed it to give voice to a unique and positive occupational worldview [...] This occupational group created a compensatory and imagined state in which inverted and opposing values prevailed.’ This process is what I aim to investigate in relation to the material described above.

Keywords: Navigators; Navvies; ‘Rallar(e)’; metal; group consciousness

I'm a navvy, you're a navy
Working on the line,
Five-and-twenty bob a week,
And all the overtime.
Chorus Roast beef, boiled beef
Puddings made of eggs;
Up jumps a navy
With a pair of sausage legs.
(Summerfield 1968: 138)

1. Introduction

The population of Ireland doubled in the eighteenth century, but the crushing of the 1798 uprising by the English, followed 40 years later by the Potato Famine, led to literally millions dying or leaving the country.

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As a result, the population fell to 6.5 in 1851, and to 4.7 million in 1891, which is close to the Republic's population today. The men and women who had crossed the Irish Channel in desperate search of food soon transferred to heavy occupations like digging canals, laying the tracks of the first railways, and later roadbuilding and bricklaying. Others were drawn to the sheep farms of New Zealand and Australia (and the infamous labour camps of the latter), others to India, Argentina, South Africa and the Crimea, and above all to Canada and the new United States. This has led today to a diaspora of nearly 90 million Irish (including the present writer) across the world. Today they outnumber by 18:1 the population of modern Ireland, 5 million.

The labour of the first Navvies in England and Scotland was effective, with their experience of moving land and working with metal. In 1839, Peter Lecount made elaborate calculations to show that the labour involved in building the London to Birmingham Railway was greater than that involved in building the Great Pyramid. However, their early years were ones of great poverty, and songs from that time, often dreaming of a square meal, have continued to be sung ever since. Many studies of work songs have concentrated on those of men engaged in heavy collective labour this masculinist discourse strongly characterised the early years of the Folk Revivals in Britain and the United States—but some songs recorded from Irish families in recent year, often the only versions surviving from that time, usually involve only one or two workers rather than a large team.

Concentrating first on the so-called 'Navvies,' this paper interprets the songs of metal workers among casual labourers in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain as an expression of shared values and aspirations. The term 'Navigators' or 'Navvies' was first used of Irish refugees of Celtic origin, though some were of 'English settlement' origin, who came to Scotland and England in the 19th century, some even before the 1798 insurrection, to take part in manual work. This study focuses first on songs which concentrated on working conditions, and later discusses songs (which have usually been neglected) in which the workplace features more than one singer. In 'Working the Railways, Constructing Navvy Identity,' an article published in *Imagined States* (2001) and written in collaboration with the present writer, Reimund Kvideland, President of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, made a study of 'rallar(e)' (navvies) in Norway and Sweden

between 1880 and 1930. He wrote, ‘the railway *rallar(e)* constructed a new genre of narrative song and employed it to give voice to a unique and positive occupational worldview [...] This occupational group created a compensatory and imagined state in which inverted and opposing values prevailed.’ As I will show, this applies not only to the songs discussed in this study but equally to a Scottish demonstration and march to London in the 1980s when metal workers resisted the planned closure of their rolling mill with a ‘sung’ march to London that echoes the resistance of the early navvies and others.

In my early study, *The English Occupational Song* (1992), I repeated the common assumption that songs about the Navvy’s work and his (even more rarely, her) life are rare, and that Irish migrant songs are solo performances and therefore not true ‘songs of labour.’ These are exaggerations that I have myself seen broken. I started studying singing by more than one performer on building sites in Europe. My first experience was in fact of men building a wall on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland in 1983 where they were singing ‘Boolavogue,’ a revolutionary song from 1799 that was written by a Catholic churchman. I soon found out that the workplace where builders ‘performed’ might include the spots where they were building a wall or a ‘facade,’ the track of a road or a railway. I heard Greek builders sing while at work in the Troodos mountains on Cyprus in 1984, and once again I saw wall builders singing on four occasions during a British Council tour of five universities in Hungary and Rumania in 1993. I have documented bricklaying gangs in settings in Vasa/Finland (Egnahemsgatan Klemettila): once more four labourers from Eastern Europe were playing Polish songs on the radio as they worked on the walls of a house (2017). It is therefore gratifying that Korczynski, Pickering and Robertson (2013: 290) have drawn attention to the neglected study of the role of song and music among both men and women in the workplace, whether indoors or out. Navvies, who had long had a strong singing culture in Ireland, had an easily identifiable audience, each other, since they were often comparatively isolated in areas like remote railway sites or concentrated venues like canal pubs. They added that, although recording solo performers was the easiest way for a song collector to make clear sense of a tune and words, the ‘evidence shows that singing at work is “overwhelmingly a collective process” in all but the noisiest environments’ (Korczynski et al. 2013: 94).

A similar process was taking place in Scandinavia from the middle of the eighteenth century. As I pointed out above, Kvideland wrote of the use of song in the building of the railways in Norway from 1880 to 1930 as a way for the *rallar(e)* (navvies) to bridge the rift between their real and their socially acceptable life, something that also applies to the image of the Irish navvies of the same period and earlier:

This imagined cultural space fundamentally transformed the harsh reality of working and living conditions into an idealized cultural identity, recasting stigmatized cultural traits into positive cultural values consonant with the itinerant and marginal world. [...] In this idealized existential space, positive emic [*local*] values of generosity were substituted for the etic [*socially accepted*] label of spendthrift ways, just as vagrancy was re-interpreted as freedom. (2001: 86-7)

Kvideland continued by emphasizing how counter-cultural values and a fierce sense of solidarity gave Norwegian *rallar(e)* a social survival strategy as they attempted to bridge the rift between their real and their socially acceptable life. Their songs were limited to a dimension of illusion and unreality, for they did not express a longing for real places, and they were remarkably free of place-related nostalgia: ‘this was probably why they did not attract the interest of other occupational groups to any great extent, and why they certainly did not interest the middle classes.’

I continued his discussion at the time by pointing out that ‘This dimension of illusion and unreality was not confined to Norwegian navvies. It contested the actuality of conditions working on the cuttings, tunnels and viaducts, and in the overcrowded shanties’ (Kvideland and Porter 2001: 89). For example, in Northamptonshire (England) in the 1880s, a labourer was being charged fourpence a night for a bed, a penny to sleep on a table, and a halfpenny for the floor (Coleman 1969: 85).

By 1851 200,000 Navvies were working on building the railroads in Britain alone (Burnett 1974: 25). Despite the great differences in working conditions between gangs on the Erie railroad in the USA and those battling against subsidence on the Leeds to Selby railroad in Yorkshire, England, laborers were working on both, and ‘Paddy Works on the Railway’ was being sung on both lines (Porter 1992: 66-70). The most famous Navvy song of all, ‘John Henry,’ spread so rapidly through the United States, despite segregation, that classifying it as a ‘black’ or a ‘white’ song has no meaning (Cohen 1981: 61-89).

Special status was also derived, almost supernaturally, from their material culture, and in particular their distinctive clothing, moleskin trousers, felt hat, rainbow waistcoat and above all the hobnail boots needed for the rough terrain. In ‘Navy Boots,’ widely sung in Scotland and Ireland, the labourer visits his lover at night (a common topos, of course, in traditional song), but refuses to remove his boots. The significance of this is emphasized by the way they form a refrain to every verse:

I am a young navvy, I works on the line,
And the places I live are no palace of mine,
And well I remember the night of the fun,
Twas the night that I slept with me navvy boots on. (Dawney 1974: 42)

He does not represent his shanty as a castle of freedom like his Norwegian counterparts. Instead, he endows his boots with both a metonymic and a fetishistic significance, transferring the physical strength and endurance of the boots to himself. At least one Navy song extended imagined space to include heaven in the same way as his Norwegian counterparts. The song projected it as an ideal worksite, a Utopian version of a very different life.

‘Poor Paddy Works on the Railway,’ collected in the loco sheds of Hellifield in West Yorkshire, describes an Irish Navy’s experiences on various sites, from the Erie Canal in New York State to the Leeds and Selby Railway in Yorkshire. Although these projects were completed in the 1830s, each stanza opens with a date in the 1840s, the years of large-scale emigration from Ireland. The sequence of events has the marks of a personal narrative, an insider’s view of the work involved:

I was wearing corduroy breeches,
Digging ditches,
Dodging hitches, pulling switches
I was working on the railway. (MacColl [1954]: 20)

The refrain is far less ebullient, and indeed gives the song its commonest title in America, ‘Weary of the Railway’:

I’m weary of the railway,
Oh, poor Paddy works on the railway. (MacColl [1954]: 20)

The shift from the first person pronoun to the generic ‘Paddy’ shows how the individual has become generic, speaking for the tens of thousands who identified with his plight. However, full resolution is only found in the last verse, which shifts the conflict to another arena altogether where he had a chance of surviving:

In Eighteen hundred and forty seven
 Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven
 Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven
 And working on the railway. (MacColl [1954]: 20)

It did not escape the navvies, however, that, wherever the line might be going, its route ran through a very different landscape from their own ballads. No one but the Navvy imagined his own way of life, and his constructed mental space, as anything but unappealing. By creating an imaginary space, the navvies attempted to build a bridge across the insuperable abyss between their real life and the socially accepted ideal—after all, construction was their work region where, as ‘Poor Paddy’ had put it, ‘Me belly was empty, me hands were sore, /With working on the railway’ (MacColl [1954]: 20).

This ‘vain world,’ as the broadside put it, was a territory more like hell. In America, a locomotive was routinely described in songs of the time as ‘some fettered fiend of hell’ or a ‘death-fiend’ (Cohen 1981: 43, 45). Ultimately, therefore, the imagined state of the Navvy was an aspect of personal identity: As the sexual adventurer in ‘Navy Boots’ sang, ‘the places I live are no palace of mine’ (Dawney 1974: 42). The migrant railway workers were and remained a stigmatized group.

2. Labour, Collective and Isolated

Although music culture brings to the fore collectivist values and experiences, it is often mediated and presented as individual expression. Those forms of popular culture which have represented, and still celebrate, communal lives, have become marginalized. For example, the first English folk music revival was predicated on the solitary individual singer, usually in a rural context, rather than on social singing such as occupational songs, sports anthems or communal carol singing in pubs (Porter 1992). In fact, the earliest accounts of navvies that defined their lives made the discrimination against them clear. This description is from an early account:

These banditti [sic], known in some parts of England by the name of 'Navies' [sic] or 'Navigators,' and in others by that of 'Bankers,' are generally the terror of the surrounding country; they are as completely a class by themselves as the Gipsies. Possessed of all the daring recklessness of the Smuggler, without any of his redeeming qualities, their ferocious behavior can only be equalled by the brutality of their language. It may be truly said, their hand is against every man, and before they have been long located, every man's hand is against them; and woe befall any woman with the slightest share of modesty whose ears they assail. (Peter Lecount, 'The History of the Railways Connecting London and Birmingham,' London, 1839, quoted in Palmer 1978: 21).

Negative stereotypes like these are also found in contemporary songs written from the point of view of those whose lives were disrupted by the building of the railways. In 'The Oxford and Hampton Railway,' for instance, a woman whose home has been demolished to make way for the line, complains that she has not only lost her vegetable garden but that her daughter has run off with a Navvy (Raven 1978: 52). The creation of such a body of songs was in part a necessary response to the way Navvies were treated as outcasts by bourgeois discourse of the early 19th century. They were accused of being terror to respectable citizens. A parliamentary commission in 1846 had confirmed in more measured terms the havoc wrought by the Navvies:

The great amount of outlay already thus made, its suddenness, its temporary concentration at particular localities, often spots before but thinly inhabited, have created or developed evils (touching both the welfare of the labourers employed, and the interests of society) the taint of which seems not unlikely to survive their original cause. (Report of the Select Committee on Railway Labourers, 1846: 94).

It was only in later years that brighter songs appear: 'Navvy on the Line' was published as a broadside in Preston near Manchester. Describing himself as 'Happy Jack,' the Navvy offers his life as a version of Utopia:

I've got a job of work in the lovely town of —,
And working on the line is a thing that makes me merry.
I can use my pick and spade, likewise my old wheelbarrow;
I can court the lasses, too, but don't intend to marry.
I'm a navvy, don't you see,
I'm a navvy in my prime;

I'm a nipper, I'm a tipper,¹
And I'm working on the line.
(Madden Collection 18/1107, Cambridge University Library)

'Navy on the Line' suggests a person securely anchored, in lifestyle and culture, within a group that is itself not threatened. This hardly applied to the fractured, discontinuous life of the migrant labourer. However, the presence of Navy jargon in the refrain ('I'm a nipper, I'm a tipper/ And I'm working on the line') shows an inwardness that one associates with the development of group consciousness and assertion. This became increasingly the central aspect of songs of migrant labourers.

3. *Collective Performers*

The study of genres allows the cultural history of oral forms to be coordinated with the evolution of social life. Several studies (for example, Korczynski et al. 2013) have suggested that those working together, whether in small workshops (nailmaking, lacemaking), manufacturing industries (potteries, textiles) or in largely exposed, outdoor occupations like the migrant labourers, are more likely to sing at work, and to sing together rather than to themselves. It was specifically work songs like these that were both empowering and mutual, and, as often happens in occupational songs, love, labour and money are part of the same discourse. This paper has sought to identify such a collective dynamic in the development of an aspect of occupational song. Music frequently functions in this way, not only at work, at union meetings or in the pub but, as the last example indicates, in public demonstrations. Such social practices could exist only in a tightly-knit community that shared long hours of work and bursts of shared free time such as in a pub.

There were very few such examples of group singing actually collected in the early period because such singing of any kind was difficult to follow by collectors and therefore ignored. When Cecil Sharp was collecting folk songs in the county of Somerset at the turn of the twentieth century, the area was the centre of a domestic industry for making up shirts at home:

¹ A *nipper* was a navy's assistant, while a *tipper* carted earth to an embankment, usually from a nearby cutting.

The sewing of the shirts called for no great powers of concentration, so the women and girls used to meet in one another's cottages to sew, chat and sing, and you could walk down the village street and hear through the open windows snatches of song mingled with the hum of the machines. A singer with a good repertoire was a great asset at these gatherings, for time passed quickly and pleasantly as song followed song in unending succession. (Newall 1993: 14)

However, Sharp did not collect any of these communal songs, led by a gifted singer, but passed by and concentrated instead on the singing of a single older informant, Louie Hooper. It is impossible now to recover the songs that he missed, or even to know whether the words of the songs were random or related to the women's work in any way. It was only later in the century that songs were collected among women and children in the mills of Belfast by Betty Messenger (1978), in the middle of the twentieth century

Several studies (e.g. Korczynski, et al. 2013) have suggested that women working together, both in small workshops and in manufacturing industries are more likely to sing at work than men. At the same time, it is precisely these groups that have been neglected by song collectors, who have generally privileged solitary singers. Among women it has taken three distinct forms (in roughly chronological order): establishing rhythm for work processes (lacemaking in Bedfordshire, England), constructing social unity (London matchmakers), and defining group identity (doffers or cotton spinners in Belfast). Women's songs often created a discursive environment where they spoke rather than were spoken for, one in which they carried the bulk of the symbolic meaning to encourage a personal identification with the 'I' who was speaking.

The example of the women of Somerset is also a reminder that singing in a group is not necessarily synonymous with group singing: frequently one woman took the lead and the others joined in at will. It is unlikely too that they used their singing to maintain a regular work rhythm—it hardly suited shirtmakers—but this has often been regarded as one of the defining elements of the (male) work song (Thomson 1980: 15-19). In an analysis which owes much to Marx's provisional description of culture and ideology as reflexes in the brain of real life-processes, George Thomson showed how work contributed to the rise of poetry, since 'human rhythm originated from the use of tools' (1980:15). He summarised his case in this way: 'The three arts of dancing, music and poetry began as one. Their source was the rhythmical movement of

human bodies engaged in collective labour. This movement had two components, corporal and oral' (1980, 19). Thomson's approach is a functional one in which work songs are regarded as 'primary' (and by implication, superior) and all other occupational songs as in some ways secondary. This view has been very influential. In her study of oral African poetry, Ruth Finnegan considers that only songs that can be shown to have actually accompanied work are true occupational songs (1970: 230), a definition accepted in Ådel Blom's study of Norwegian working songs (1977). The privileging of work songs has been further sustained by seeing in them the origins of folk song (Palmer 1980, 10). Studies of English traditional song have not generally adopted the strictly functional approach favoured by Thomson and Finnegan, for the transparent reason that very few motion songs have survived. However, only one contextual account of singing activity corresponding to Thomson's description has been preserved in England, that of the women and child lacemakers of the south Midlands in the nineteenth century (Porter 1994).

Work songs exist in what Bakhtin calls 'jolly relativity' (1965: 94) with the work process. They create the moment of carnival in the stronghold of its antithesis, the workplace. They are fused with their setting in that for some singers, the working milieu is an essential condition for performance. As a Suffolk singer commented,

'Just as I'm setting here I couldn't think of a song, but [if] you walked out of that door and I got a screwdriver in me hand, then I'd start.'

(Reg Jay, of Blaxhall, Suffolk, 1975, recorded by Ginette Dunn 1980: 147-148)

They are serviceable in that the rhythm, of course, eases the work, but in the presence of an employer or a supervisor they also have an appropriating and a transforming function: appropriating in that they put the work into the workers' framework rather than that of the employer (Jackson 1972: 30), so that the work seems to be nothing more than the auxiliary of the song, and transforming in the sense that the work becomes a dance, a game, a ritual (Zumthor 1990: 66-7). They are exceptional in that they have no audience apart from the performers themselves. This is also true of a very different example, involving a huge army of steelworkers from Gartcosh in Scotland. Roy Palmer wrote afterwards:

To protest at the planned closure of their rolling mill by the Conservative Party, which was a minority party in Scotland, led by Margaret Thatcher, a group of steelworkers from Gartcosh, near Glasgow, trekked to London in January 1986 through snow, strong winds and freezing rain. On the third day of January nineteen eighty-six,

We went off to London to put Maggie in a fix.
 We didn't take a jet plane, we didn't take a car.
 We walked it all the bloomin' way with the lads of Castlecarr.
We're the Gartcosh commandos, we're down from old Gartcosh;
We haven't got a gaffer (boss), wee Tommy is the boss; (Tommy Brennan)
And we'll cause the biggest rally you've ever come across;
Just remember we're the Gartcosh commandos. (Palmer 1988: 84)

In relation to this song, Palmer also points out in a note that 'The Castlecary (sic) viaduct arches'—which are mentioned in one of the lines—'were built by the Navvies in 1842 on the Glasgow to Edinburgh Railway.'

When the marchers arrived in London at the Houses of Parliament they sang 'The Braes of Killiecrankie' (a traditional ballad printed by James Hogg in *The Jacobite relics of Scotland*, Edinburgh 1819), about the defeat of the English in 1689. The steelworkers lost the battle, and the works were closed a few months later, but the situation in the Glasgow area was heard by a wide audience in radio news bulletins as a result of the march (Palmer 1988: 314). The song that they sang had probably been composed by Robert Burns (1759-96; see Burns 2011: 431), Scotland's national poet, and therefore spoke for the country as a whole:

Whaur hae ye been sae braw, lad?
 Whaur hae ye been sae brankie (*gaudy*) o?
 Whaur hae ye been sae, braw, lad?
 Cam' ye by Killiecrankie o?
An' ye had been whaur I hae been,
Ye wad-na been sae cantie (cheerful), o;
An' ye hae seen what I hae seen
 On the braes o' Killiecrankie, o. (Burns 1971: 431)

This song is still being sung in Scotland today, by Travellers and others (Stewart 2010: 154; ROUD 8187). On the long march of 1986, many of the steelworkers adopted the parodic versions sung by Scots throughout the 19th and twentieth centuries:

When I was young and eesed [*used*] to be
As sweet a chap as ye could see,
The Prince of Wales he wanted me
To gang [*go*] and join the army.
Tooril ooril ooril oo
Fal de riddle aldi doo
She's as sweet as honeydew
The lass o' Killicrankie. (Greig-Duncan 1990: 4.51.)

Some also sang the parody of the song where the lass of Killicrankie 'stole my hankie,' made familiar by the most famous traditional singer in Scotland, Jeannie Robertson:

For on a thistle I sat down,
I nearly jumpit tae the moon;
I nearly jumpit tae the moon;
For the lass that stole my hankie.²
For Jean she began tae curse,
Her bloomers fell down and her stays did burst,
She gied her aul 'erse a twust
An she caa'd it through a windae (Porter and Gower 1995: 201)

The marchers thus made use of both the heroic and the parodic versions, since recordings show that both served their role. The 'original' James Hogg version is more repetitive than the others, but less contemptuous and scornful of the government's threat to the industry. This striking example of the use of traditional (regional) material in a modern industrial setting is not the only link with the Navvies, because after the 1798 uprising, tinkers and farriers with skills in metalwork had left Ireland and established themselves not only in England laying railway lines, but more significantly in Scotland as the basis of a metal industry. The Gartcosh walkout was therefore not by any means the first indication of iron and steel activity in Scotland.

Conclusion

This brief overview has shown how traditional and improvised songs are known to have been performed together by workers in the iron and steel industries of England, Scotland and Wales over a period of over 200

² 'For on a thistle I sat down, I nearly jumped to the moon (x 2) for the lass that stole my handkerchief.'

years. Like the other examples from the slender repertoires of steel labourers, they each break in some way with earlier assumptions about what a folk song is—many things, but not least as part of a challenge to a Conservative government—nor were there any more songs of praise on ‘He was their boss,’ lines that were prevalent in 1780. Since that time more research has been done in Britain and Ireland to recover examples sung together outside as well as inside factories, from the children in the street mimicking the women in a biscuit factory to the men from the steel plant at Gartcosh keeping vigil in London outside the House of Commons. This account has drawn attention to the fate of songs which have been neglected through being performed in many cases far from the iron and steelworks, and suggests a diverse trawl which is not confined either to buildings or to individuals.

Like food, and like sport today, singing has always been a paralanguage, a means of communication that accompanies, or often replaces, speech, and, as such, one of the best bridges between cultures and between social groups. Song can incorporate language and meaning explicitly, and yet because of its musicality it is always acknowledged as exceeding its semantic value. The direction of the working songs in this paper are increasingly parodic, directed against the occupational discourse of the petty official who implements the dictates of a system that discriminates against the dispossessed, or the employer who refuses to deal equally with the men and women in his employ.

Performing a worksong like those of the Navvies is, of course, participating in the productive process itself where class and race factors are central. However, work songs are not purely songs about work, which is not, and can hardly be, literally represented in song. As John Fowles wrote, ‘One cannot describe reality, only give metaphors that indicate it’ (1977: 139). For the last pull on the sheet rope which hauled out the corners of the sails to the ends of the yard beneath, it would be absurd for the shantyman to describe an action that was already being realised both performatively and in the dynamic of the song. The work provides only a kinetic subtext to the song. Bruce Jackson (1972: xvi) remarked that the songs sung by the Afro-Americans on the prison farms he visited had as their central themes the signs of alienation, ‘things like unlove and unfreedom and unimportance.’ Their themes were part of the text of meanings produced by any subculture like the Navvies,

attempting to form a cohesive version of what is realised incompletely in the authoritative discourse.

Work songs often progress by means of refusals and of negatives. Stuart Hall defines his concept of articulation in performances where class, race and gender factors are central in the following way: 'articulate means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another' (1996: 93). This was precisely the situation among black prisoners in the prison farms of the southern United States during the 20th century, which John A. and Alan Lomax, who were the major collectors of the call and response songs among the prisoners, called 'the closest modern equivalent to the conditions of slavery' (1997: 2).

It can be maintained that from the earliest days work songs have presented the very act of working itself, not merely the representation of it. Work thereby initiated poetry, since human rhythm originated from the use of tools. In this hierarchy, worksongs are regarded as 'primary' (and by implication, superior) and all other occupational songs as in some ways secondary. Yet the study of the repertoire of this occupational group, the Navvies, suggests that their work songs, far from being primary, overlapped with the reach into both an already-established stock of songs, including ballads, and the language of the modern street (such as demonstrating). They are allusive and evanescent in a way that undermines the whole notion of the ballad 'genre.' The tendency of worksongs to take sides, to interpret as well as describe, puts them inside the tradition of the occupational song, but not end-to-end in the sense that they represent an earlier stage that was superseded. They seem to spring into being when called for, often drawing on existing songs, such as the traditional ballads just quoted, but leading a much more ephemeral existence than these. They represent a specialisation of the song for functional purposes, and as such show precisely the same tendencies to metaphorical extensions of the work process.

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