

TOMMY ARMSTRONG: HEWING THE LEGEND

Between 1988 and 2001, the Council offices in Stanley were officially titled The Tommy Armstrong Centre. There is no small irony in emblazoning the name of the “pitman poet” on a building where the casualties of post-industrialism go to sort out their housing benefit. This Centre was eventually relocated as the building fell into disrepair, and the failure of the Council to move Armstrong’s name along with their offices appears testimony to the fickle nature of political fashion. RE—INVENTED CVS During the 1980s and early 1990s, as Thatcherism bit deep into the coalfield, remembering Armstrong was an issue of urgency. Indeed, the whole post-1950 revival of interest in this particular pitman poet (for many singers and writers laid claim to that title) could be seen as symptomatic of a need to fill the chasm left by the decline of heavy industry in the region. As Joe Ging suggested:-

In the 1960s Geordie folksinger Bob Davenport used to bring dude mines into his act, comparing them with dude ranches in American cowboy country. Now we have one for real at Beamish Museum. Soon there will be more dude mines than there are real ones at the present rate of so-called ‘progress’. the whole area could be one big museum.

This chapter will discuss the songs of this pitman poet within such a context and show that, while it is significant that Armstrong’s fame has (along with industrial heritage in general) received a boost in troubled times when local identity required underlining, his songs have never entirely receded from the public memory. The title is deliberately chosen: like the coal, the legend of Armstrong was already there from the moment he began making songs. Sometimes this legend was submerged. At other times, it has been mined and shaped to fit the needs of those who brought it to the surface, but the man and his songs remain the primary seam. Like the other forms of North Eastern music already discussed, this is not a purely invented tradition. But, in order to understand the balance between conti-

nunity through generations and the mythologizing of a legend, it is first important to gain a picture of the man himself and his relationship with his community around Stanley, County Durham.

Tommy Armstrong was born at Wood Street, Shotley Bridge on 18th August 1848, the second of five children born to Timothy Armstrong, a labourer who is said never to have earned more than 18s a week. Timothy and his wife had moved into the area from Whitehaven in Cumbria, and this pattern of immigration into the burgeoning Durham coalfield was typical of the time. Since the 1821 sinking of the Hetton Lyons Blossom pit, the first deep mine in the world, exploitation of the 'concealed coalfield' expanded into new areas and brought with it new pits and new jobs. Geographically, Tommy's family had moved into roughly the centre of the great Northern coalfield, and Tommy's life spanned the end in 1872 of the near slavery of the miners' Bond, the growth of trades unionism in Durham, and the coalfield's expansionist heyday. Huw Beynon succinctly explains the circumstances in which Armstrong worked: "Stanley was like the Klondyke". This placed Tommy at the ideal vantage point to chronicle his times and surroundings – the fact that he had the talent to bring the minutiae of the pit rows to vivid life through sharp observation and pungent phrases is a happy accident.

During the 1850s and 1860s, the Armstrong family moved gradually eastwards into the more industrial areas of Greencroft, South Pontop, Annfield Plain, East Tanfield, and Eden Place. As the notes below explain, the precise dates of these moves are uncertain, and several contradictions in the various accounts of Armstrong's life show that the unreliability of memory can come into play even when it is not influenced by the need to uphold a myth. A further move "freh Eden Plaice / Up te little Tanfield" was well documented by the poet himself in "Corry's Rat".

By the age of nine, with little education, Tommy started work (probably as a trapper boy) in East Tanfield Colliery. His son stated that Tommy worked in just three Joicey-owned collieries all his life, and

*He was just over five feet tall and very bow-legged caused through pains in fact his eldest brother had to take him to the pit on his back. He **ALLEGIDLY** once went to the Coop. Society, West Stanley and asked for a pair of bow-legged pit stockings. Needless to say the girl who was serving had to go and see the manager.*

*It is in stories like this that the mythologizing begins. Somewhere along the line, this tale of Armstrong's mischievous humour became mixed into the story of the writing of "Dorham Jail". This song was reported to have been based on Tommy's personal experience as a guest at Her Majesty's pleasure. **Hard evidence of this jail time is unforthcoming, as the Quarter Sessions calendars of prisoners available between the likely dates of 1867 and 1900 do not list any T Armstrong of the appropriate age. However, this does not disprove the story, as records of men from Tommy's lowly background were patchy and, without a vague idea of the date of conviction, the search for a fleeting newspaper report is near impossible. The best primary proof that Tommy did serve time (as opposed to simply adapting existing prison songs) comes from his eldest son, W H "Poety" Armstrong, quoted in "Come All Ye Bold Miners":-***

My father was wrongly sent to Durham Gaol for six months, and while in there he composed the song "Durham Gaol". When the authorities saw it, they reduced his sentence.

If this story has disquieting echoes of Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene", this was also noted by A L Lloyd, who attached to the quote the comment that, "Reduction of a prison sentence following the composition of a ballad by the prisoner is a persistent piece of international folklore". Where the legend acquires a further twist is when these two possibly apocryphal stories become stirred into the same pot, as in the following extract from a North Eastern internet site:-

It was during a period of drunkenness that the incident occurred which resulted in his imprisonment at Durham. According to his plea he had stumbled into the Co-operative in the town of Stanley and pinched a pair of stockings which had a bow legged appearance that would have fitted him perfectly.

This could be seen as another example of tradition at work, shaping the available material and subtly altering it. No matter how appropriate this would seem when applied to “the pitman poet”, it adds an extra layer of complexity for the historian to deconstruct.

Probably more reliable are reports of how Armstrong began writing. A L Lloyd has noted that “In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the making of rhymes and songs was very common in the Durham pits.” Some reasons for this will be explored below when considering dialect writing. As it was, Tommy’s first known encounter with music and verse (till then, his main hobby was quoits) illustrates the reach of Tyneside’s Music Hall into the pit villages. A newspaper reminiscence by “An Acquaintance” (see Appendix 8) portrays the sixteen-year-old Armstrong being inspired to write a poem about the performance at an Annfield Plain soirée of comics Mr McMillan and Joe Wilson. And while still sixteen, he composed his first complete song, the highly original interpretation of his own birth: “Th’ Borth E Th’ Lad”. The trademark keen observation of pit row speech is already there (“Nan Watson shooted tive aud Betty Lee, th’ mid-wife, ‘Stop that child from crien, or I must cease praying.’”), as is Armstrong’s penchant for a rousing chorus.”

Henceforth, Armstrong was noted as a writer and performer. He formed a concert party who toured the local soirées and published broadsides in order to raise funds for reading rooms and for “his fellow men and women to rise above penury and want.” – as well as to earn beer money, for, as “Poety” put it, “Me dad’s Muse was a mug of ale”. The “Acquaintance”’s description of the concert party again high-

lights the fact that competitions – often associated with gambling - were native to North Eastern music, and not simply a middle-class attempt to standardize notions of excellence. One of Armstrong's party, Tommy Gray, "won a gold medal given by Mr Christopher Barrass, proprietor of the Oxford, Newcastle, for the best Pitman singer of Northumberland and County of Durham", singing Armstrong's "Dorham Jail". (This also demonstrates that the flow of music between Tyneside and the outlying areas was not one-way.)

The competitive spirit found another natural outlet in the famed impromptu "cutting contest" held in Beamish's Red Row pub, where Tommy saw off the challenge of rival songwriter, William Maguire by creating – "off the cuff" - "Oakey's Strike Evictions".

As has been noted above, such bardic legends abound. A particularly enduring tale, of which primary source proof is yet to surface, appears to have originated from another newspaper reminiscence, "By one who knows him". This involves Tommy being brought before the Magistrates by "Oakey's Keeker", "Maiden Law" Joe Elliott, who complained the song brought "ridicule upon him":

Mr Granger, the Clerk to the Bench at that time, read the print and handed it to the chairman They commenced to smile. The Clerk asked Mr Elliott what part of the poem he complained about. Elliott said Tommy called him a 'hairy-faced rascal.' 'Well, you still have your whiskers' said the clerk. At which the magistrates joined in the laughter.

This illustrates both the workers' dislike of a harsh overseer, and patrician distaste for the "jumped-up little man". It also shows a level of indulgence of the talented "character", the archetypal "daft-lad" full of drink, jokes and generosity so evident in publications like "Allan's Tyneside Songs". A L Lloyd showed his amusement at what he termed "the working of this 'holy daftness'":

he blew him up by throwing some sticks of dynamite into a bucket fire that Maiden Law Joe was squatting at, one frosty morning; Of their father's temper, Tommy's sons said, 'He was a fiery man, fiery.'"

It would appear many preferred Bob Cranky to the miner who wished to climb the social ladder.

However, Armstrong also wrote serious material, produced to raise funds and public awareness at times of strike and disaster. "Trimdon Grange Explosion" is an iconic piece, and the powerful opening lines have become heavy with symbolism of the indeterminacy of life in the mines:-

*Let us not think of tomorrow,
Lest we disappointed be;*

Tommy took his responsibility to record major events seriously, as attested by "Poety's" recollection of his father saying, "When you're the Pitmen's Poet an' looked up to for it, wey if a disaster or a strike goes by wi'oot a song from you, they say: What's wi' Tommy Armstrong? Has someone druv a spigot in him an' let oot aal the inspiration?" Which makes it all the more surprising that no Armstrong song survives on the subject of the massive West Stanley explosion in which 168 men and boys died. Huw Beynon suggests:

Perhaps this is one of the many verses and songs that have been lost forever. Perhaps too, by this time, Tommy was past his prime. His letters to the papers in his later life lack the sparkle of his earlier writings.

It is known that "Poety" exercised considerable editorial licence in selecting songs for his father's collection of songs, and this (like the rather stilted "A Sewing Meeting", reproduced in Appendix 6) may have not passed quality control. Perhaps it was controversial, and failed to connect with the public be-

cause it “hit the wrong note”, or he may have written it in a way deemed inappropriate, maybe in dialect. Derrick Little has heard rumours that Tommy produced a song on this subject. However, this may simply be another layer of local myth: as Appendix 4 shows, there are many examples of Stanley-related memorial poems extant. It would be surprising if not a single copy of the “Tanfield Poet’s” song had survived – if he actually wrote one.

Even more than his disaster ballads, Armstrong’s writing about strikes was particularly analysed and mythologized by revivalists, and this will be discussed later. Such songs were common enough in the coalfields, but Tommy’s had a special verve. Lloyd tells of him “acting as ‘court minstrel’ to William Patterson, the miners’ leader” during the great Durham strike of 1892. Whether Lloyd gleaned this from “Poety” is unclear, but newspaper reports of the strike show no clear record of Tommy’s link to Patterson other than the obvious one, that he wrote “Durham Strike”.

*This particular song and its choice of tune (**Figure 5**) highlights another aspect of Armstrong’s song-writing: his notorious lack of musicality (“He knew nothing of music and was often a puzzle to the musician playing for him.”). He tended to use the tune “Castles in the Air” repeatedly as his rhythmic template, whether or not it was melodically appropriate. “Castles in the Air” is a major key tune now better known as the melody for rugby favourite, “Four and twenty Virgins”. This clearly jars with lines such as “In our Durham County, I am sorry for to say / That hunger and starvation is increasing every day;”. The anomaly was noted by revivalists, who substituted the more melancholy “Tramps and Hawkers”, the tune with which the song and its subject are now associated. Although this is an obvious improvement, meaning and memory have again been adjusted to fit the revival’s needs.*

Armstrong’s songs (with the notable exception of “Nanny’s A Maisor”) were published during his lifetime in word form only, occasionally quoting the name of the melody, usually music-hall or traditional, to which they could be performed. This suggests that there remained in the pit villages – no matter that Tommy couldn’t tell a musical key from a “bed key” - a shared musical language which later generations could only access through conscious effort.

Much of this melodic language arrived with the influx of Irish labourers and their “*come all ye*” tunes in the mid-nineteenth century. But it also fed from the dominant Tyneside music-hall, and Beynon compared Armstrong to another contemporary music-hall songwriter:

Armstrong's songs are immensely more complex than [George] Ridley's being both more humorous and more bitingly sardonic in texture. That they are remembered less well and sung less frequently is a matter of some sadness and concern.

This not surprising phenomenon appears to typify the Tyneside bias of much that signifies the region. Even when Topic records released an album dedicated solely to Armstrong's work, A L Lloyd advised that “Tommy Armstrong of Tanfield” would not have any resonance for people outside of the North-East, so the title became “Tommy Armstrong of Tyneside”. More striking are the efforts subsequently made to celebrate a man outside of the Tyneside mainstream: perhaps, by remaining a miner, he was perceived as saying something the Newcastle professionals could not.

However, one area in which Armstrong might be considered typical of his era is in his attitude to women. Tommy fathered seventeen (or fourteen, depending on which account you choose) children, and seemed to split his time between pit, concert platform and pub. The question arises as to how his wife coped. Not much is known about Armstrong's family life, yet census returns and parish records showed that some information was readily accessible. Perhaps it was deemed irrelevant for inclusion in the heroic worker-bard's biography. But trust Sid Chaplin to cast his acute authorial eye onto the mining village and observe:

The very nature of pit work made most women slaves, wives and daughters all. Shifts split up the family so that men would be coming in at all hours of the day, waiting for the bath-tin and

the water and a woman to wash their backs. Then clean the boots and wash and/or dry the duds the shine and glitter of the colliery house must have concealed many a fathomless hell of sexual, spiritual and mental deprivation. But not, I suspect, much. That sort of thing comes through.

Tommy had two wives: Mary Ann, who died aged forty-four in 1898, and Ann Thompson, a widow who he married in 1901. These women would have needed to withstand a lot, particularly Mary Ann, who bore Tommy's children. Census returns show only eight children surviving, which means that Mary Ann must have grieved for at least six and maybe nine children. This is gently touched upon in "Th' Skeul Bord Man":

So he tornd te wor Bess, en sais, "What family have you had." She sais, "We've ad two deed en three elive; if thae'd aul been liven, that wid be five. Is th' setesfied noo?"

And there must have been many other tribulations. The women would have to cope with Armstrong's drinking, his famed temper, perhaps his imprisonment; with strikes, and with little enough money when the pits were working (given Tommy's physical condition, he was unlikely to have earned the superior wages commanded by hewers). The fact that Tommy's wives have not been celebrated for holding the family together in the face of these odds – for surely he could not have exercised his talents had he not had a reasonably accommodating partner - is highly significant. It appears to illustrate Beatrix Campbell's controversial assertions that the legendary miner's solidarity was built upon the subjugation and exclusion of women, so that even the commemoration of this solidarity appears to be tainted.

A L Lloyd's comments are particularly jarring in this respect:-

Human history is work history; and many of the songs that working men have evolved for their own use are valuable documents for understanding what has made men move in the past and what will make them move again.

Huw Beynon's Introduction to "Polisses and Candyman" includes commentary on tied housing cheaply built above shafts, a sentence about domestic work and Market Day, plus, "it is clear that the muse lay in a pint of beer. Certainly his wife and family suffered for this." Amongst all the detail of union disputes and working conditions in the mines (the history of the Durham Miners' Association is a specialism of Beynon's), these two brief lines do little to fill out the picture. Of course, women's lives in the pit villages went largely unrecorded: unlike their husbands, they did not have an Association to document their grievances.

Armstrong's own words (see Appendix 7) flesh out the lives of the feisty women around him in greater detail, albeit from the viewpoint of a man who cannot have spent much time in the family home. In the recitation, *"Jack's Reckoning"*, Meg's reaction to the offtakes from Jack's pay give a good picture of domestic circumstances, especially of the woman taking care of the housekeeping and desperately balancing the books. Meanwhile, *"Durham Strike"* portrays how lockouts affected the entire family, and women are regularly seen in Armstrong's songs as victims of circumstance, either comically, as in *"Sheel Raw Flud"*, or tragically, as in *"Trimdon Grange Explosion"*. Where Armstrong struck his richest seam, however, was in portraying women as comedy figures, clucking over *bairns* (as in *"Th' Borth E Th' Lad"*), drinking, and brawling. *"Th' Row I' Th' Gutter"* is a fine example.

The tale of "Bobby and Bet" shows that, even in drunkenness, women missed out on the main action: *"For if Bob gets drunk it th' public hoose, Their Betty gets drunk it yem...."*. When drunken Bet acci-

dentally serves drunken Bob a dischcloth instead of meat, Armstrong's words illustrate that Bob's violent reaction of cutting off her hair would be seen, not as unacceptable, but hilarious. And in "Nanny's A Maisor" the audience are encouraged to laugh along with the poor man embarrassed by his stout, drunken wife. Clearly, by revelling in such farcical portrayals of women, Tommy would appear no more or less chauvinistic than was typical in the era, but his poking fun at local women was tempered by the fact that he dished out equal amounts of ridicule to the men, and that local popular culture frequently lampooned men hopelessly out of their depth in domestic situations.

Whichever sex he wrote about, the passages above show that dialect was a key component of Tommy's humour – the rhythms and peculiarities of *pitmatic* carrying their own wordplay. For instance, in "Sooth Medomsley Strike" Armstrong used the names "Fisick" (physic/laxative) and "Postick" (the stick that stirred washing in the tub) as jeering euphemisms for the master and his candyman. The references would be instantly recognizable to the strikers (and the targets of Tommy's wit), while the avoidance of specific names avoided legal complications like those reported over "Oakey's Keeker".

Stokes notes that ethnic identities are based upon "the construction, maintenance and negotiation of boundaries, and not on the putative social 'essences' which fill the gaps between them." This would seem equally appropriate to regional and class identities, and what better wall between "them" and "us" than one built with language? Furthermore, as Joyce has noted, dialect provided workers with a sense of stability and rootedness in a rapidly changing world where homogeneity loomed:

The simple fact that dialect developed among roughly similar sorts of workers at roughly the same time needs emphasis: the micro-local is in fact a phenomenon of international significance. ... Like so much in popular culture, dialect endowed the poor with knowledge and a kind of control over the circumstances of their lives.

However, there were times when it was not wise to repel outsiders, and the duality between the writer of strike and disaster ballads and the humorous “character” who was indulged by all classes is echoed in the dialect of the songs themselves. The serious issues in “*Trimdon Grange Explosion*” and “*The Blanchland Murder*” are rendered in standard English, while comic creations such as “*Th’ Hedgehog Pie*” and “*Funny Nuaims It Tanfeeld Pit*” are unashamedly *pitmatic*. His choice whether or not to use dialect in strike and protest ballads reflects their different purposes, as well as indicating that perhaps the poet himself thought of *pitmatic* as the lesser language, to be reserved for comedy. “*Durham Strike*” does not use dialect and, despite its vengeful chorus, is clearly aimed at raising public sympathy and funds for the strike. The tale of evictions during “*Oakey’s Strike*” is written in commemoration within the community of a *fait accompli*. It is in *pitmatic* perhaps because general public opinion could do little to help after the evictions; perhaps because it was improvised during the Red Row songwriting contest and Tommy knew the popularity of his dialect material.

However, dialect could be a double-edged sword: while fencing off the locality from outsiders, it was also used by the more privileged to imply affiliation or simply to raise a laugh. Harker commented on the dialect songs of the early nineteenth century:

Who would need the dialect written down, perhaps partly as a guide to pronunciation? Typically, the songs were also about, rather than for, working women and men.”

However, he adds that, by Corvan’s time, dialect song had been adopted to great effect by the working-class themselves. Clearly, Tommy’s dialect songs fit the latter case, as they were written within the mining community for their own entertainment and, as noted above, his songs destined for an external audience were written in standard English. This aspect is further clouded by occurrences such as John

Buddle's regular performance of a lively dialect song at the annual bonding dinners. This might be viewed as parody. Or, because mono-industrial communities' cultural boundaries were defined by occupation, Buddle may have been attempting, however patronizingly, to show empathy with his charges. Vicinus argued such cross-class use led to the impotence of dialect material as it necessarily became uncontroversial. However, perhaps dialect was here perceived as an indicator of regional rather than class solidarity and this straddling of the social strata was a sign of North Eastern particularity. As noted earlier, Catcheside-Warrington's arrangement of "Nanny's a Mazer" was available to all who could afford the songbook. This meant the song became a popular encore for operatic bass, Owen Brannigan (a sure sign of expropriation in Harker's terms), but also that the song was retained in the coalfield repertoire. In the first edition of "Come All Ye Bold Miners" Lloyd reported the words of a miner: "You'll find a Catcheside-Warrington on every other piano in these coalfields". Evidently, however it was mediated, miners and their families saw dialect as a valid way of expressing themselves and marking their territory.

The major study of song's interaction with colliers' identity is by Robert Colls, who delineates the characteristics and clichés ("a self-celebration that bordered on mockery, whose humour was integral to the dialect, whose dialect stood for a cheeky patriotism") which songs about North Eastern colliers and keelmen have lodged so firmly into local iconography. Colls places emphasis on the role of reception - an audience made up largely of those lampooned revelled in these self-mocking songs. However, the regional specificity of these caricatures has been challenged by Deacon, who argues that "Bob Cranky" characters were based upon ballad archetypes prevalent in comic songs throughout the country, and the adoption of such portrayals as a regional emblem is akin to an Irishman acknowledging himself as the butt of an English joke. Yet Armstrong songs such as "Th' Ghost Thit 'Anted Bunty", "Bobby and Bet", and "The Cat Pie" clearly celebrate this self-image ("Bunty lives not far fra here, He's e terrible

chep for drinkin' beer,"), and it is a characterization that has carried through to late twentieth-century creations such as Bobby Thompson's "Little Waster" and Oz in "Auf Wiedersehen Pet".

There was, Colls stresses, a converse of this iconography and this was the worker dedicated to self-improvement after the cultural revolution brought about by Methodism and its influence on the trades unions. The identity of colliery villagers was forged out of the dialectic between these different cultures - a dialectic worked out in microcosm in the relationship of pub-man Tommy with his chapel-going son, "Poety Billy", who used Tommy's story to illustrate the evils of drink to young members of the Temperance Guild. Ironically, it was Billy who was to make the editorial decisions in compiling Tommy's posthumous 1930 songbook. Tommy was the quintessential pub man, as a 1914 pamphlet, quoted by Lloyd, shows:

Me aad sangs hev kept me in beer, an' the floor o' the public bar hes bin me stage for forty years. Aw'd sing, we'd drink, aw'd sing, we'd drink agen, sangs wi'oot end, amen.

But this made for lonely and infirm latter years, as his self-penned letters to the newspapers in 1916-17 imply. On 30th August 1920, after several strokes, Tommy died in poverty at the Ramsay family home at Havelock Terrace, Tantobie, having been thrown out by his own family for drunkenness. Even so, he was deemed worthy of a lengthy obituary in the Stanley News and his brother's contribution to this shows that Tommy was still held in affection:

Not many days ago a friend gave me a favourite coin to hand to Tommy, and when I did so, he placed his hand in mine, and said, "Harry, I'll never forget till the day aa dee, the folk of Tantobie and their kindness to me."

Enough money was raised for a headstone, stating it was “erected by a few friends”, but the report of the funeral suggests that no labour leaders or other people of note attended.

When Tom Gilfellow was researching Armstrong’s songs in the early 1960s, he found few people willing to talk about the man himself:

Well, they knew him as the man – he was part of the community ... and an outlaw. That’s the impression that I got – I never knew the man. But the doors slammed - people clammed up. They didn’t want to know, chapel folk especially, and Stanley was very chapel.

This hard-drinking, quoit-playing man who fathered seventeen children was apparently too dissolute a figure for the people of Stanley. This is not to deny the resilience of his songs, some of which were still popular enough to be performed in local pubs by the people of Stanley. However, a 1960 “Stanley News” report (see Appendix 3) inaccurately named “Poety Billy” as the pitman poet: that a journalist on so parochial a newspaper was ignorant of this implies memories of Tommy the man were not as longstanding as his songs. The subsequent rehabilitation of the poet’s memory, to the point where he became “bard of the coalfield”, must owe a considerable debt to the work of the revivalists.

Nowadays Armstrong has an iconic status above and beyond other pitmen poets. He has entered the collective memory through such lieux de mémoire as the naming of buildings; a new headstone (ceremonially re-dedicated by nationally famous figures); major recordings and publications dedicated solely to his memory; and broadcast documentaries. No less than eleven of his songs are included in the huge recorded overview of regional music, “The Northumbria Anthology”; and other songwriters, such as Jez Lowe and The Whisky Priests have paid tribute to his talent. Another pitman poet, Alexander Barrass, lived only a few miles from Tommy, in Consett. His work is not forgotten but it has not received

the same popular attention. This may be due to the special wit and verve of Tommy Armstrong's writing, and this will be discussed later. But it may also be due to how closely the man, his background and his writing fit the definitions of miners' song laid down by such luminaries as A L Lloyd.

Lloyd's interest in industrial, and particularly miners', song grew from a combination of factors: a youth spent listening to the worksongs of Australian sheep-shearers; his research into the folklore of other nations; and the conviction of a faithful CPGB member that Britain must have a vibrant proletarian culture just waiting to be unearthed. This was a new departure from the rural folklore favoured by EFDSS, though, as will be discussed later, it retained some of the first revival's mythological baggage. It was hugely influential, and Raphael Samuel explains the powerful imagery associated with mining and its almost symbiotic relationship with the second folk revival:-

The Martyrdom of the Mines was an ancient image, descending from those line drawings of juvenile entombment which illustrated the Children's Employment Commission of 1842. No less archetypal was the pithead confrontation of masters and men. The discovery of the coalfield ballads, a phenomenon of the 1950s, and the very basis of the Folk Club movement, powerfully renewed these memories, and cast them in epic form (Arthur Scargill's first job, when he joined the Barnsley Young Communist League, was to be made 'Ballads and Blues' secretary).

This renewal of memories had been long in the gestation. Comments dating back to 1940 show that Lloyd was seeking something different to the bucolic ideal:

Nobody, to my knowledge, has been around the mines and the mills and among the fettlers and the professional footballers, collecting the stories and sayings which must certainly abound in such jobs Comrade Cleverdick might tag along.

By 1951, "Comrade Cleverdick" was part of a joint venture with the recently nationalized Coal Board to present miners' songs as part of their contribution to the Festival of Britain. The articles which he wrote in "Coal" magazine, announcing a competition for the best unpublished mining song, illustrate how sketchy was contemporary knowledge of this vast area of song – which would eventually stretch "Come All Ye Bold Miners" to nearly four hundred pages. In 1951, Lloyd needed to look for answers which to-day we take for granted:

We know a few of these old mining songs which somehow got into print, usually in local publications not very widely read.

Where are these songs now? Are they still sung? Are new ones being made up? Or had they quite disappeared? That is what we want to find out.

The project's aim was not simply antiquarian: "it might stimulate British miners to return to making up their own songs. They have as much ... to sing about, as the Americans or the Russians". This comment situates the search for miners' song firmly within the post-war world. As one of the Communist faithful, Lloyd drew inspiration from mass songs coming from the Eastern bloc; while, as a folklorist, he revelled in material produced in America since the agitators of the 1930s found their voice. The wider second folk revival was in its nascent stages, with the transatlantic influence of Alan Lomax, and the possibility that folk clubs might provide greater vitality than the stuffy atmosphere of EFDSS events. Boyes summarizes the redefinition of culture in this fully-enfranchised post-war Britain:

Reflecting the changed status of the people, Folklore research emphasising the role of named individuals, historical record and uncensored material came to the fore ...

... A demotic culture, more broadly defined and contemporary than Leavis's artisanate, pre-industrial middle England, less rosily arcadian than Morris's world of handcrafts and milkmaids, excited scholars and public alike.

At the same time, nationalization in 1946 meant that, effectively, the mines and their mythology now belonged to the nation.

It seems that these influences came together to produce a need for a miner-worker-bard, like those described by George Korson in 1930s America:-

except for those chosen by the Welsh at their Eisteddfods, miner bards were not elected; but there they were in many coal camps, functioning as if anointed for their literary tasks. The mine workers recognized an authentic voice when they heard it ... A local bard did not merely identify himself with his audience; he was part of it. All the influences of the mining environment were embodied in his consciousness, and he gave expression to them in notes natural and spontaneous.

This book featured in the bibliography of Lloyd's 1967 "Folk Song in England", but it had probably influenced him from much earlier. Lloyd must have rejoiced in locating in Tommy Armstrong a shining example of this type of poet, just as Jack Common and the Ashington (painters') Group were achieving national recognition. Korson's bardic vocabulary points yet again to a tendency to see songs as survivals from simpler times, with a persistent mysticism and primitivism (also evident in the contemporary fascination with "The Big Hewer" myth). This is not to deny considerable evidence that remnants of ancient customs had indeed carried through to miners' song, but it does highlight the fact that emphasis would be placed on anyone who fitted the portrait of noble savage, a role Burns fulfilled in eighteenth century Scotland. Tommy Armstrong's personality slotted into this space ideally.

Lloyd evidently also viewed Armstrong as one of the links he so keenly sought between rural folksong and its industrial counterparts. His closing comment on the sleeve notes to "Tommy Armstrong of Tyne-side" romantically stated that

It was once said, by a foreign scholar, that folk song represents the handsome starlit night of the labouring people, and mass songs represent the raw and realistic light of day. If that is so, Tommy Armstrong might be seen on tiptoe in the half light crowing like a cock to herald the dawn.

Though Lloyd's archaeology of industrial song was part of a different revival from that which rediscovered morris dancing and rural ballads, his work was subtly shaped by the studies of East European folklorists and very much by the Sharpian definition of folk music which, superficially, he was challenging. While professing it was wrong to think that folk song could not "be lurking in the shadow of a factory chimney or the headgear of a mine", Lloyd nevertheless adhered to the belief that industrial song only remained folkloric so long as it retained some of its more ancient characteristics and sprang from the mouths of those with little education. Speaking of the large numbers of injured mineworkers who had turned to the music halls as an alternative source of income, Lloyd commented, "the miners' musical repertory might have become entirely urbanized and lost what still remained of its folksong character were it not for an accident of history". This was the mid-nineteenth-century influx of Irish labourers who carried into the coalfield "a rich stock of Irish folksong that merged with the existing pit village repertory and helped to restore some of the folkish character just as that character had begun to fade".

Tommy Armstrong's songs certainly borrowed from the Newcastle music hall: "Nanny's a Maisor" was originally Joe Wilson's "The Sunderland Trip!" (see Appendix 5); "The Row Between the Cages" clearly derives from Ned Corvan's "The High Level and the Old Bridge". By frequently setting his lyrics to Irish "come-all-ye" tunes, he matched Lloyd's prescription. However, it appears that Lloyd stretched this argument beyond its limits. In "Folk Song in England", he asserted that, although the words of "Trimdon Grange Explosion" were more "Victorian sententious" than was typical for Armstrong, the sombre nature of the piece was enhanced by the fact that Armstrong "chose a good sol-mode come-all-ye tune to carry the words, and that has ensured the song's present vitality". Clearly the tune does influence the

meaning and the vitality of the song, however, as noted above, Tommy's melodic sense was never well-developed. His stated choice of tune was "Go and Leave Me if You Wish It", apparently a jaunty Victorian brass band march. Louis Killen considered this melody inappropriately cheerful and substituted his own tune, which has been used by singers since the early 1960s and is the one Lloyd quoted. It appears that Lloyd's desire to find authentic industrial folklore could lead him into wishful thinking, and it is disturbing that this inaccuracy has since travelled down through several other studies, such as Karl Dallas' "One Hundred Songs of Toil". Thus, folklore gains another mythologized layer.

Ironically, such inaccuracies echo the process of oral transmission. Benny Graham recalls how the tune for "Corry's Rat" had remained obscure until he realized that Armstrong had quoted the one line he could remember to indicate the song whose tune he had selected.

"Corry's Rat" had never been recorded before ... because people couldn't find a tune called "The Knickerbocker Line", which is what Armstrong had set it to. Except he didn't. He'd set it to a tune called "Sailing Over The Dogger Bank" but he didn't know it was called that, because all he could remember out of it was a line in the last verse "Sally, she's a flash girl and doesn't she cut a shine, Because she can do the double shuffle on the Knickerbocker Line".

Interestingly, two other of Tommy's tune recommendations which were taken up by the revivalists were those for "Marla Hill Ducks" ("Wild Hills o' Wannie") and "Dorham Jail" ("Nee Gud Luck about th' Hoose"), both established parts of the Northumbrian piping repertoire and favourites of Billy Pigg and Tom Clough. This raises the question whether the new generation had a subconscious bias towards what they knew to be indigenous folk heritage, although this may overcomplicate matters: these tunes were far more appropriate to the words than the previous examples cited.

Before Lloyd championed him, Armstrong's only song published as a musical score (which would appeal to the "educated" classes) was "Nanny's A Maisor". This was safe, comic ground without a hint of resistance and fitted the notion of the "canny Toon" which Catcheside-Warrington promoted in his songbooks. However, the song appealed to a diverse range of people, as shown by its inclusion (clearly very soon after Tommy wrote it) in a songbook handwritten by a gamekeeper in Weardale, complete with the kind of verbal mutations one would expect in oral transmission (see Appendix 5). Armstrong's obituary in the "Stanley News" (in Appendix 8) lists Armstrong's most popular songs as "Durham Jail", "The Schule Board Man", "The Cat Pie", and "Bunty's Ghost". Although an edition of "Coaldust Ballads" compiled on behalf of the Workers' Music Association by Lloyd, includes "Durham Gaol [sic]" among its three Armstrong songs, the other two ("Row Between the Cages" and "Trimdon Grange Explosion") are industrial rather than comic: the shift in emphasis is obvious. This collection's arrangements for choir and piano are intended for concerts to further proletarian solidarity: once again, the selectivity of each different interest group adapts song to serve their particular collective memory. As Confino puts it,

It is obviously important to avoid essentialism and to reject arguments that impose cultural homogeneity on a heterogeneous society. Conflicts over memory exist. Differences are real.

However, the revival's shift in emphasis towards the political should not be overstated: some of the industrial songs had retained currency in local pub singalongs, as recalled by Benny Graham:

the first one I ever heard was "Wor Nanny's a Maisor" but the one that followed it through was "The Row Between the Cages", which is a kind of serious subject couched with a bit of comedy.

And by the late 1950s, the local knowledge of musicians such as The High Level Ranters would lead to the songs being presented less romantically. But Lloyd's analysis of industrial folklore was far-reaching:

it was frequently disseminated nationwide by the BBC. In one programme he compared “the literary rhetorical pieces produced as official labour songs of the time” unfavourably with this “tense, fierce and dynamic” new hybrid of industrial song and modality. Instinctive rather than educated composition was clearly preferable in this version of industrial folk verse. Consett poet, Alexander Barrass’s “The Pitman’s Social Neet” was described by his local MP as “those sweet wild notes of an untutored Durham miner” but its literary references display the writer’s conscious effort to educate himself. Evidence of book learning would be sufficient to disqualify Barrass’s writing from the study of folklorists, yet the man remained a part of the community which he described. The Durham miner whose songs were most celebrated on a national scale was not the studious literary man but the gregarious pub character. For all the sincerity of their search for genuine workers’ song, Lloyd and his contemporaries may have – through years of conditioning by earlier folklorists – accidentally raised the profile of the unschooled, hedonistic Bob Cranky over and above the self-improving industrial worker.

However, this hypothesis may ascribe too much power to the metropolitan revivalist. For one thing, Armstrong’s songs were readily accessible, performed by the man himself in local pubs and clubs. Barrass did not frequent these places, so his work did not achieve the same degree of circulation. And there was always that famous Catcheside-Warrington arrangement to keep Armstrong’s memory alive even when his other songs were receding into the memories of a few old people, continuing the “recurrent cross-fertilisation” between oral and print transmission discussed in the Introduction.

Another quite obvious reason why Tommy Armstrong’s reputation has overtaken those of at least some other pitmen poets is the nature of the songs themselves. As noted above, no matter that the songs were disseminated by the printed page, the main means of transmission remained oral – through performance in the pubs and soirées. As E P Thompson has argued, printed matter in this case was often

“subdued to the expectations of oral culture”. It was the performances of these songs that gave them their fame and they were carried down into the next generation by singers. Ivan Garnham, Benny Graham, Jez Lowe, and Tom Gilfellow all recall that their first contact with Armstrong’s songs was through hearing older people, sometimes members of their own families, singing them. A 1947 recording made at the High Force Hotel in Teesdale features Mark Anderson singing Armstrong’s “Durham Jail”. This is evidence of continuity before cultural mediators from outside of the coalfield showed interest in Tommy’s work. Even in a literate culture, for a song to enter into this more oral tradition it must be, above all else, memorable. An 1887 song by Mr F McKay of Throckley was published in the Tyneside Echo under the title of “A Pitman Poet’s Lay” with the instruction that it be performed to the favourite tune of “Castles in the Air”. It concisely recounts the causes of that year’s strike in Northumberland:-

*The conduct of the masters is shameful, I declare;
They are seeking a reduction which is anything but fair.
We are working at starvation point. And yet
They’re not content
And request another reduction at 12¹/₂ per cent.
The landlords get large royalty rents and pay for wayleaves too.
And thus the profits all go to a certain wealthy few.
But we’ll stand for this no longer
And we’ll let the masters know
When they’re wanting a reduction to the landlords they must go.*

Armstrong’s 1892 song, “Durham Strike”, also to be sung to “Castles in the Air”, similarly states the miners’ case:-

*We have done our very best as honest working men,
To let the pits commence again we’ve offered to them “ten”.
The offer they will not accept, they firmly do demand
Thirteen and a half per cent, or let the collieries stand.*

but laces its chorus with vicious imagery:-

*May every Durham colliery owner that is in the fault,
Receive nine lashes with the rod, then be rubbed with salt;
May his back end be thick with boils, so that he cannot sit,
And never burst until the wheels go round at every pit.*

Whatever the role of external influences in raising the profile of Armstrong, his place in the regional collective identity is also influenced by how his songs and performances were received within his own community at the time. The man wrote songs that were, literally, memorable.

However, Armstrong's relevance to radicals has been a key factor in his enduring popularity. Harker views the chorus of "Durham Strike" as an example of "brutal class hatred". Bill Griffiths reiterates this in a more measured way: "The satire in these compositions is a carefully whetted weapon against the modes of a society whose aggression and greed would seem provocation enough", and this would appear to fit the case more precisely. Meanwhile, Lloyd sensed a general shift in consciousness at work:

The last years of the nineteenth century were filled with bitter struggles between the miners and the pit owners to the extent that, as the mood of the miners became more militant and their political ideas clearer and the trade union organisation consolidated, their songs began to change fundamentally. in these miners' strike ballads of the last years of the nineteenth century one can clearly see the forerunners of modern political song of struggle.

But Armstrong's work, particularly "Durham Strike" and "Marla Hill Ducks: Imprisoned for Trespassing" seems to incline more towards a call for natural justice in the manner of E P Thompson's concept of the "moral economy" than a Marxist class-consciousness. It would be hard to interpret anything in his work as calling for revolution rather than retribution, as Beynon acknowledges:

Armstrong's radicalism ... was rooted not in abstract political thought but rather in the direct experiences of village life. ... reference to politics in any formal sense is absent from his writings.

Lloyd conceded much the same point, though he added that this could be because openly revolutionary statements would be unwelcome in ballads intended to raise funds.

However, Tommy's hatred is not reserved for the capitalists – he deals equally harshly with “jumped-up” lackeys (candyman, keekers and all), who are the direct carriers of pit row misery. So, while Armstrong's songs punctured the pomposity of both the masters and their willing accomplices, this does not seem a position of radical ideological consistency. As Joyce emphasizes, “it is perfectly possible to have a culture which can be defined as ‘working class’ but yet for the consciousness associated with this culture to have little or nothing to do with class.”. Austrin and Beynon, Colls and others note that much radical consciousness in the coalfield sprang from the links between Primitive Methodism and unionism. Tommy the drinker was outside of this, and though he might rail against injustice he would also (as Stedman Jones similarly noted in the London music hall) write patriotic, indeed jingoistic, songs denouncing the Kaiser.

Furthermore, he would at least nod to the charitable gestures of coal owners:

*Thare's credit due te Mistor Goice,
He's lent e helping hand;
Hi sais his honist workin' men
Dis disarv e band*

Though acknowledgement of Joicey's contribution to the inauguration of "Tanfeeld Lea Silvor Modil Band" is hardly gushing, it nevertheless reflects the paternalistic tradition in the Durham coalfield, and reveals a core resignation that local people and the infrastructure of their villages were ultimately subject to the charity (or otherwise) of the masters.

Whether Tommy was a class warrior or not, the mediation of his songs during the second folk revival was heavy with radical meaning, as left-wing thinkers sought to alter folk music's conservative associations. During this wave of interest in him, Armstrong was a signifier of class and occupation: and this symbolism was even more powerful with a further revival of the "pitman poet" in the 1980s, with Margaret Thatcher busily dismantling the structure of the unions. But Tommy's songs also became a clearer indicator of regionality.

In Armstrong's locality, Consett Steelworks closed in 1980, adding to the desolation left by the dwindling of coalmining in the area. Around the time of Tommy's death in 1920, those employed in coalmining in County Durham totalled over 150,000. By the time of the 1951 Lloyd/NCB collaboration in the Festival of Britain, this number was reduced to 107,100, and the industry haemorrhaged a further 80,000 jobs throughout the 1960s and 70s. When Ian MacGregor was appointed NCB chairman in 1983, it was clear that the few pits which remained were heading for severe rationalization, and that the miners would be so reduced that they could never bring down another government. This dramatically precipitated the last great national Miners' Strike in 1984/5, after which there was precious little Durham coalfield left to fight for. Bill Williamson saw how heritage was mobilized during the strike,

with its slogan 'SAVE OUR PITS! SAVE OUR COMMUNITIES!' In such an atmosphere, memories of a bitter past were deployed actively to articulate the goals of the National Union of Mineworkers The miners played on an image of themselves as the most violently oppressed sec-

tion of the working class. The bitterness of their memories of the 1920s shaped their understanding of their experiences of the pit closures and redundancies of the 1980s.

It became even more important to celebrate these meanings after Scargill's epic defeat.

The Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust was founded in March 1986 in response to Derrick Little (GMB convenor and history student) noticing the poet's headstone lying askew and dilapidated in Tanfield Cemetery not far from the sturdier tomb of Joicey. Echoes of the neglected mines must have been deafening. The project celebrated Stanley's own poet with a new headstone, a revised printed collection and recording, and the professed aim of providing financial backing for young people to "create their own 'culture' in the radical Armstrong tradition." Beynon further connected this celebration of heritage with the present:

At this time, when people in the North East have taken such a hammering as a consequence of industrial decline, it is important to take a hold of the traditions of the area and the culture that working people have produced.

Tommy's songs and biography were now being consciously used to symbolize a way of life that had passed. Derrick Little, one of the chief organisers of the Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust, recalls:

well, it was just after the miners' strike The reason really that we got it going was because we were all interested in the history of the coalfield. ... there was no other coalfield like it anywhere in the world when it started. And all the radical songs of the coalfields came out of America until in the nineteenth century this little fella who was born at Shotley Bridge ... started writing these songs. And we thought, at that time, it was high time now that this fella had some sort of recognition.

As well as fundraising concerts, much of the money for the new memorial came from the trade unions. The symbolic link between Armstrong and the coalfield's radical history was made even more explicit by the timing of the headstone rededication. Arthur Scargill was able to unveil the new monument because on the same day he would attend the Burnhope Gala. This was held in remembrance of the sixtieth anniversary of the alternative Miners' Gala held there when the 1926 General Strike prevented a Durham big meeting.

So the new £1700 headstone was unveiled by Scargill on Saturday 9th August 1986, and newspaper reports highlight the way in which Armstrong was thus linked with radical history and more contemporary issues:

Miners' leader Arthur Scargill today vowed to fight the closure of Seaham Colliery speaking shortly before attending a dedication ceremony at St Margaret's Church cemetery in Tanfield Leading a delegation of regional union leaders, including Joe Mills of the TGWU, he said the pitman's songs and poems highlighted the hopes and aspirations of the working classes in Durham.

Tom Gilfellow recalls:

I sang "The Miners of South Medomsley" at the grave. That was very funny. Ewan [MacColl] and Peggy [Seeger] had come down I sang, and Arthur Scargill gave his oration and I could hear the rural dean's top-set snapping as he ground his teeth – he was furious.

This ceremony, with its media coverage and attendance by major figures from folk music and the left, must have been in stark contrast with Tommy's actual funeral. The old headstone from "a few friends" was passed to the people of Trimdon in commemoration of the Trimdon Grange Explosion, so adding Tommy's name to a further site of memory.

The "Polisses and Candyemen" book and recording were part of this same project. The songs performed by Bob Fox, Benny Graham and Chuck Fleming, were recorded by Consett Music Project at the time of the Miners' Strike, and a big publicity launch was planned. However, perhaps because the book and tape were published after the major political coup of the headstone rededication, interest waned and the publications virtually disappeared from view without ever making the planned profit. A related local television documentary, "Songs of Tommy Armstrong", was shown in 1987, but then the project subsided until it was brought into service at the opening of the new council offices at Stanley in 1988.

The decision to name this building The Tommy Armstrong Centre was a facet of the council's new interest in the area's past. As the area's traditional jobs disappeared, heritage's importance increased – not just symbolically, but also economically. Derwentside Council's Minutes show the formation of a new tourist committee and its plans to emphasize industrial heritage. Meanwhile, the new offices at Clifford Road, Stanley, were nearing completion. Councillors wanted the building to have a name that would represent the people of the area, and Tommy's was chosen as the voice of the locality. This effect would be emphasized by playing Aaron Copland's "Fanfare to the Common Man" at the opening ceremony on 4th July 1988. One hundred invited guests were given specially annotated copies of the "Polisses and Candyemen" book, and framed copies of Tommy's songs, such as "Stanla Market", were hung inside the building to remind the public of their local poet. The programme for the opening ceremony proudly stated:

Tommy Armstrong, through his poems and through his music, reflected the hopes and fears of the Stanley people during the late 19th Century. This building, in assuming his name, seeks to continue that tradition; to reflect that same service to the people of Stanley by its Council in the changing fortunes of the late 20th Century.

In the space of four years Armstrong went from representing radical resistance to good council service, echoing once again the awkward juxtaposition of agitation and paternalism in the area. It is significant that this grafting of the name onto a local government building has been the least longstanding of any revival associated with Tommy. The political usefulness of the man and his songs will doubtless be put to service again when the time is right. Meantime, the words and music are kept alive by the same singers and enthusiasts who have carried them through other periods where fashion has not favoured him, as strands of continuous tradition hold steady regardless of consciously constructed sites of memory.

Tommy Armstrong has been portrayed in whatever image fits those who use his songs – radical bard, dialect-comic, drunk, local “character”. At times he was all of these things; at other times, he was none of them. To focus on certain aspects belittles the agency of the man and his admirers – he was not merely a symbol and to portray him as such detracts from the process of drawing history from below – where real people lived real multi-faceted lives. There were times when his songs were used to impose a hegemonic invented tradition. However, the processes by which his work has been used by subsequent generations – and especially the acceptance or rejection of such uses - are themselves clear illustrations of another kind of history from below, in which people actively bind themselves to a collective identity, symbolism and heritage.

The street name is given in Beynon, H, "Introduction" to Forbes, R, (ed), "Polisses and Candymen: The Complete Works of Tommy Armstrong – The Pitman Poet", (Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust, Consett, 1987), p9

Undated, unsigned typescript, presumed to be the work of Michael Dodd, with a copy of biographical details given by W H Armstrong Memorial Collection, Box file containing Songbooks of Tommy Armstrong, Ref 784.494281, p1

Written Statement by W H Armstrong, compiled in Michael Dodd's typescript, *ibid*, p2

A very similar path was trodden by the family of Jack Lawson, later Lord Lawson of Beamish, see Lawson, J, "A Man's Life", (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1932), pp1-28

Beynon, H, and Austrin, T, "Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation", (Rivers Oram, Ipswich, 1978), p16

Beynon, H, "Introduction" to Forbes, R, (ed), "Polisses and Candymen: The Complete Works of Tommy Armstrong – The Pitman Poet", (Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust, Consett, 1987), p11

Wade, F J, "The Story of Tanfield and Beamish", (bound typescript, Annfield Plain, 1968), p104)

Gilfellow, T, "Foreword" to "Tommy Armstrong Sings", (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1971), p3, gives the date of this move as when Tommy was sixteen years old, presumably 1864.

Armstrong's brother, Henry, stated, in apparent contradiction of 5. above, this move was also in 1864, Stanley News and County Chronicle, 2nd September 1920, "Demise of the Tanfield Poet", p3

ibid – gives this move as 1866, when Tommy would have been eighteen, yet it is stated that he began work as a trapper boy at East Tanfield when he was nine.

Undated, unsigned typescript, presumed to be the work of Michael Dodd, containing biographical details given by W H Armstrong Memorial Collection, Box file containing Songbooks of Tommy Armstrong, Ref 784.494281, p1

Forbes, R, (ed), "Polisses and Candymen: The Complete Works of Tommy Armstrong – The Pitman Poet", (Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust, Consett, 1987), p44

ibid

Tanfield Moor and Tanfield Lea were the others

