

[Page 53 - Work Poetry of John J. "Slim" MacInnis](#)ISSUE : [Issue 64](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1993/8/1

Work Poetry of John J. "Slim" MacInnis From an Article and Interviews by Don MacGillivray "Doscomocracy" My back is bent from a lifetime spent In the dirt and steam and snow • In the General Yard, where the work is hard And the wages mean and low. My hands are swelled from the spades I've held In the depths of a dirty ditch And my shoulders sprung from the picks I've swung In the toils of the idle rich. My eyes are dimmed from the years spent in The glare of the Open Hearth And my lungs are shot from gasses caught In DOSCO's' hell on earth. My heart is strained and my legs are sprained And a din roars in my ears From toiling in moulds and greasy holes That has shortened my life by years. And many a time I came out to find That I'd only come out on spec. When jobs were few and old Bruno's crew Were all old Peter checked.* For times get hard in the General Yard When steel goes in a slump And Saunders' friends are thankful then For the checkers and the dump.* While my hair has greyed I've begged and prayed For a job I might enjoy But I leaned on luck while the plumbs were plucked By the bosses' fair haired boy. Then the war came on and my boy has gone And his mother's heart must fret. Who pays the tax on the gun he packs While they're working his Dad to death. Now my health is ruined and I'll soon be doomed To a cold dark debtors grave Is a few cents raise in my last few days Too much for a lifetime slave? • Pro Bono Proletariat A FEW DAYS AFTER THIS VERSE WAS PUBLISHED in the Steelworker & Miner on 9 January 1943, Sydney steel workers went on strike. (They were joined by others in Trenton, Nova Scotia, and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.) It was not a complete surprise to anyone; a strike vote a few months earlier in the "Steel City" had resulted in a 3,074 to 38 count in favour of such action. The issues were many and included opposition to wage controls and a desire for a fair wage • Sydney steelworkers, at 45 cents/hour, were far removed from the 78 cents/hour paid to their John J. MacInnis cracy suggests they were determined to improve their condition during the expanding war economy. John J. "Slim" MacInnis had been back working at the steel plant in Sydney for about three years when he wrote "Doscomocracy." It was the first of a small number of verses composed over a fifty year period dealing with and coming directly from the experiences of a Sydney steelworker. Whatever their literary qualities, they read well and a couple of them have become relatively well known within the working class of industrial Cape Breton. Two at least were retyped and circulated • anonymously • for years; one was read out at a labour rally in the Steelworker's Hall in Sydney some years ago. Recently they surfaced again. Slim MacInnis' literary output was not large. But his industrial verse captured the attitudes, practices, experiences and feelings of two generations of steelworkers in Sydney. His sparse output and his inclination to use pseudonyms ensured a lack of recognition. He was a reserved individual although many workers knew him and some of them were aware of his literary bent. Only on a couple of occasions however were his contributions along this line directly linked to him. Yet they continued to circulate and to be appreciated. One suspects this is at least partly due to the scarcity of steelworkers' songs and verse in the area.



Mind, there is that second verse of "The Dosco Boys" • to the ' Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation was incorporated in 1928, taking over the old BESCO (British Empire Steel & Coal Corporation). Bruno was an Italian cement worker brought in during the 1923 strike; Peter was a general foreman in the General Yard. John J. MacInnis: "Every Sunday (Peter) had a chicken that the Ukrainians brought out to him, and they kept him in cigars. That was the time they all paid for their jobs." Saunders was a superintendent in the General Yard. The checkers were a latticework of brick under the stacks in the Open Hearth. They had to be replaced often. Both the checkers and the slag dumps were always a source of work. 270 GEORGE ST. SYDNEY, N. S. B1P1J6 BRETON BEAUTY COLLEGE Locally owned & operated • Qualified MHI instructors ' Limited student enrollment • 8-month course ' Student aid available • Licensed by Province of N. S. ' U.I.C. sponsored program available ?? Modern training facilities ' 3 enrollments a year January, June, & September APPLY EARLY FOR OUR NEXT COURSE 562-1208 (FAX 562-4104) RJLL HAIR CARE SERVICE Instructors: MARGARET McVICAR/GERRY CONDON Danena's Restaurant and Take-Out LICENSED OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK (Home Cooked Meals * Home Baking) 383-2118 SOUTH HARBOUR on the Cabot Trail near Cape North