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**'port-lights/Of a ghost-ship': Thomas Carnduff and the Belfast Shipyards**

Belfast, as a city, has come to be represented in recent years by the shadow of its industrial heritage, and so the ghost of the Titanic permeates contemporary Belfast. A tourist icon, now manifested in a visitor centre, the Titanic has become central to the city's attempt to give cultural and economic purchase to its contemporary identity. Usefully for policy makers, the Titanic's recognition value, with a little effort and selective myopia, can be imagined as a way of bypassing the history of the Troubles and pointing to a new future for Belfast. There is, of course, an irony in using a well-known symbol of disaster as a sign of the city to come. Equally, the notion that the Titanic, or shipbuilding more generally, represents a collective history, which all in Belfast can identify with, needs to erase the sectarianism which often characterized life in the shipyards. But in a contemporary Belfast which, like the rest of the western world, is uncertain about the future nature and shape of its economy, it is the experience of the labour which is embodied in the history of shipbuilding which must be ignored, as tourism stands in for more solid and stable forms of economic activity.

If they are remembered as a place of work, rather than a brown field site on which a new visitor centre has been built, the shipyards become a contemporary conscience of the city – they are an echo of full employment in a time of austerity, a fragile, man-made sign of peace holding back a messy tide of urban memory. The shipyards were never actually the beating heart of the city. They were always more likely to be out of synch with the city, an awkwardly dark place which was constantly and anxiously hauled back into the city's identity. The shipyards began, quite literally, as an *island* inside and barely attached to Belfast; their constant recuperation for the city's image is the evidence of their detachment from, rather than attachment to, the city. And so the current Belfast Titanic-obsession is a mere fig leaf covering something more substantial which the yards represent. The concentration on the ship hides the work which went into it, in

exactly the way in which any commodity in capitalism squirrels away inside itself and then carries off the human labour which produces it.

The historically proper name for the site of the shipyards is Queen's Island. In recent years the Island has become the site of leisure activity and entertainment – taking the area at its broadest, as a 'quarter', it houses the Titanic 'Visitor Experience', an ice hockey arena, the old paint hall of the shipyards which has been converted into a film studio, an historical curio of a park, apartment blocks, and a technology hub. And so it seems as if heavy industry has been converted, in a story typical of the Western economy, into service industries, contemporary urban living and digital existences. As it happens the origins of Queen's Island were actually in leisure rather than work, and so today Queen's Island has, arguably, merely returned to its former use. Shipbuilding was just a long interruption in an ongoing urban carnival.

Queen's Island is a man-made landscape in every way. By the 1830s Belfast was a thriving port, but the sloblands which stretched out into Belfast Lough choked the channels for shipping, and large ships with heavy loads had to transfer their cargo to and from the smaller boats which could negotiate the shallow, silted, tidal river. In 1785 the Chamber of Commerce had lobbied the Irish Parliament for money to straighten and deepen the river. The result was the setting up of 'The Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Belfast' (later known as The Ballast Office). The proposed works were held up for many years, partly because the Marquis of Donegall, who owned the foreshore, was reluctant to hand over control of the land. When James Walker proposed a straightened channel in 1830, it was a test of the strength of Belfast's mercantile classes, pitted against the old and increasingly out-moded landed gentry. The proposal was delayed in parliament 'by the Marquis of Donegall's representatives', and *The Northern Whig*, a voice for Belfast's less compliant middle-classes, used the occasion to question how the city was represented in the Westminster Parliament. The inevitable force of bourgeois commerce finally got its way in 1839 when William Dargan was employed to make the first 'cut' in the bends of the river. Dargan's Channel was finished by 1841. By 1849 a second cut (to be called Victoria Channel) was completed, leading to the straight channel which runs today from the motorway bridge out to the sea.

Dargan's Cut made a nine-foot deep shipping lane. The materials dredged up during the works were moved to the County Down side and formed Queen's Island, a seventeen-acre, geometrically precise island. Thompson and Kirwan shipbuilders took over the corner nearest the city, and this was the point of origin for what would become Harland & Wolff. A large timber pond was dug near the shore, but most of the island was sculpted as parkland for the people of the city, accessible by boat.

Setting aside this land for leisure-time seems like a good example of Victorian civic-mindedness. However this endeavour was not entirely philanthropic. The Easter holiday had become something of an anarchic time in Belfast in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Cave Hill was the favoured holiday destination and was notorious for the drunkenness of its Easter revellers. The churches campaigned to restrict the excesses of the working classes at Cave Hill, and eventually, as Eileen Black notes, the 'real successor to Cave Hill was Dargan's Island, later Queen's Island'. So Queen's Island began, to use the contemporary developers' jargon, as a mixed-use site. In one corner was the expanding shipbuilding industry. The rest of the island was parkland. Looking out to sea was a gun emplacement from which canon salutes were fired. In 1851, a modest 'Crystal Palace' was built in imitation of the London version but on a much smaller scale, and never actually completed. At Easter-time there were bazaars, fêtes, and other quirky Victorian entertainments: on the opening of the unfinished Crystal Palace a model swan was pedalled up the Lagan by a boy who was hidden inside; there were charity Easter sermons to keep moral order; there were failed fireworks displays and disappointing balloon exhibitions; there were boat races for women. Eventually there was a menagerie of birds, racoons and monkeys. But the shipyards then gradually took over the site in the early twentieth century, as the organized strangeness of Victorian leisure retreated to the city, in music halls and then cinemas, and the numbers employed in the yards increased.

To get what we might regard as an insider's view of work in the yards in the early twentieth century the best place to turn is the poetry of Thomas Carnduff. Carnduff was a sometime shipyard worker, born in 1886. His poetry was published, in the 1920s and 30s, wrapped in the assurance that his was an authentic voice of the Belfast working classes.

Carnduff's verse is beset with a nagging desire to find a way in which to particularise his verse to the shipyards in Belfast, and this becomes manifested in his writing in a separation of the yards from the city. This makes Carnduff fascinating because his poetry then contains within it the awkward recognition that the yards are culturally *of* the city but that the experience of working in them is akin to their geography, or their perceived geography; that is, *as an island*. Carnduff's poetry continually detaches the yards from the easy coincidence of civic identity and industrial identity. In this he gives us a way in which to resist that very collapsing of industrial history into post-Troubles city heritage which takes place in contemporary Belfast. And more than that, Carnduff's verse reminds us that the simple division of labour and leisure is too easily made nostalgic, so that the actual effects of industrial work, that which lies beneath the materiality of the yards, is neutralized and sentimentalized in contemporary, post-industrial versions of the heritage of shipbuilding.

Carnduff's first collection of poetry, *Songs from the Shipyards and Other Poems*, published in 1924, is prefaced with an apologetic introduction by William Moore of Belfast Public Libraries, comparing Carnduff to Patrick MacGill and arguing that if MacGill could write successfully of the navy, then Carnduff is his shipyard equivalent. Moore, ventriloquized partially by Carnduff's own mixture of uncertainty and assertion, it would seem, notes that Carnduff is both an ex-shipyard worker (in Workman and Clark's yard, the smaller of the two main shipbuilders' yards in Belfast at the time) and that Carnduff served in France during the First World War.

The twin identities here, soldier and labourer, are crucial, and not just for Carnduff. They signify the intertwining of work and national identity (and thus sectarian affiliation) in a clash which is often muffled in the discourse of the yards. Carnduff's specific politics are difficult to discern; sometimes veering towards the socialist, at other times he unconditionally praises the imperial grandeur of Belfast's Britishness. In both cases his sensibility seeks its rootedness in a sense of homosocial camaraderie. So in poems in the later parts of *Songs from the Shipyards*, he celebrates, for example, the khaki and bayonets of the Ulster Volunteers who, in his poem, are dreamt into existence out of a vision of O'Neill warriors standing on the grounds of Clandeboy estate, to be replaced with Carson's Volunteers carrying out their training on Lord Dufferin's land. Carnduff's sense of loyalty to his fellow men, whether soldiers or workers, finds its most fervent outlet in his poem 'Graves of Gallipoli' in which he threatens revenge on Turkish Muslims in the event that they should desecrate the graves of the Christian dead who fell at Gallipoli.

These monoglossic, jingoistic poems are important because they represent the baseline of Carnduff's consciousness, and for all their apparently unbending ideology, the sense that he desires a security found in a masculine collective becomes a point of tremulous uncertainty when it seems to be on the point of disappearance. To be alone, in a place of collective work, is, for Carnduff, both the occasion for writing a poem and a terrifyingly lonely, out-of-sorts moment which fissures the material world.

The first poem in *Songs of the Shipyards* ends with a tribute to the 'shipyardmen', and an intertwining of loyalty and firmness on the national stage with the physicality of work.

All honour to our shipyardmen,  
And may their tribe increase,  
With loyal hearts in time of war,  
With ready hands in peace;  
With muscles taut, and brain alert,  
They heed not wind or rain,

With one resolve, one earnest hope,  
Our prestage to regain.

While actual labour and political resolve anchor this honouring of the male workers, it is already evident that there is an insecurity in Carnduff's version of the yards in that desire to recuperate a prestige that is fading. The effects of this in his verse and his thought are several. For example, the focus on 'muscles taut and brain alert' neatly, and to be clear, coincidentally, overlaps with Karl Marx's assertion in Chapter Six of Volume 1 of *Capital*, that under capitalism labour-time is stretched so that, as Marx puts it, 'a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, &c., is wasted'. Carnduff's wish that the exertions of labour find a true focus and end is a hopeful but forlorn desire, and his aim for an esteem which holds together bodily labour and the ideology which it serves frays both in individual poems and across his work.

In the previous stanza to that just quoted there is an early manifestation of exactly this unravelling of the taut cloth of Belfast's identity.

There's finer arts and neater crafts  
Than building ocean tramps,  
There's cleaner jobs, I have no doubt,  
Than screwing oily cranks;  
More healthy is the down-town shop,  
Feet firm on Mother Earth,  
Than rigging up a liner's mast --  
The elements in mirth.

The modest defense of shipyard work as artisanship is important here, but even more so is that final contrast of mercantile shopwork with shipbuilding, since the parallel is not just of work but of environment. The shopworker is on (Mother) earth (and therefore feminised if not feminine), while the shipyardworker is imagined as elemental and, above all, actually above all, detached from the earth. Throughout Carnduff's poetry the shipyard comes to be understood in this way, as a place unhitched from the city, an island, a place of air and water.

So while *Songs from the Shipyards*, and Carnduff's other verse, is full of doggerel written on the occasion of the launching of ships, those poems too are haunted by the severance of the island and its work from the stability of the city – the launchings of ships become occasions for metaphors of detachment and lead Carnduff into a resigned superstitious fear of the sea and its hidden fates. A surprising early poem in *Songs from the Shipyards* is 'The Shipyard Fairy', a poem which catches the tones of Allingham's Fairies rather than Yeats's:

O say, little stranger, and who may you be?

Are you from the river or in from the sea?  
I have seen you most often, so solemn and grave,  
Come creeping up here on the crest of a wave.

In your bonnet of white and your cloak of pea green,  
And the diamonds that fall from your garments just stream  
At our feet in a cluster, then vanish at sight,  
Like the lamps on the gantry that peep out at night.

Carnduff's apparently straightforwardly authentic version of working-class life, which often enough asserts itself as mere materialism, here finds itself drifting from the city. While in many poems this entails an almost unwilling movement upwards to the sky or out into the sea, here the fairy which, as the poem later says, gives 'comfort' to 'the men on the ships', is a water sprite, understood through a simile which uses the gantries at night-time as a point of comparison. And so the industrial machinery of the yards, and the gantries as their most extrusive architecture, are not just emanations of the city, but are, instead, held in place and comprehended through an immaterial world derived inexactly from faery lore and popular literature, but which is, crucially, a sign that the economic and worldly is not enough to give shape to the experience of work in the yards.

In Carnduff's poem 'The Great Gantry', in which the Gantry speaks for itself, there is a final flourish in which the gantry sees itself as the 'pinnacle of a city's fame'. So here civic, official pride persists, but only as an easy and unsatisfactory resolution of a disjunction which starts the poem. The Gantry begins its own poem with the words: 'Alone I stand in a vastness of space/'Twixt earth and sky', and this floating position, and the uncanny personification of the gantry itself, are the most important aspects of Carnduff's strange vision of the yards, because, as his collections of poetry progress they turn the land of the yards, the nature of work, and the products of labour into things which are, to use a word which Carnduff is fond of in its archaic sense, 'weird' – that is, ghostly, haunted, uncanny, spiritfule. Carnduff renders this uncanniness, not surprisingly, through a heavy-handed version of the pathetic fallacy, often using storms, but he also sets these poems at significant times – the darkness of late night and the blariness of early morning, and it is in this that we can return his vision to earth, or at least see more clearly why his wish to convey the experience of manual labour detaches itself from the context of the city and ascends to actual and metaphoric heights or geographies which tear themselves away from urban gravity, from Belfast's civic identity, into a dematerialized, spectral, watery space and time.

Carnduff searches for a time of reflection within the workspace, and so his poems find themselves being articulated on the night-shift or in early morning, at those hours of work which are essentially unnatural. It is sometimes lost in versions of Marx's writing and thought, that Marx's sense of human capacity, that 'nerve, muscle and brain', found its limit in capitalism's expansion of the hours of the working day. As it happens the only mention of Belfast in Marx's *Capital* comes in

Chapter Six of Volume 1, exactly the section which I quoted earlier, the section entitled 'The Working Day'. Here Marx savours, with characteristic sarcasm, the philosophical difficulties encountered by Judge Otway in 1860 when, in the Hilary Sessions of the Belfast Courts, he was asked to 'give a legal decision as to what was night and what was day'. 'Capitalism was celebrating its orgies' writes Marx, in his colourful way, and Chapter Six of Volume 1 of *Capital* is notable for one repeated metaphor of the night which Marx recurrently deploys, that of capitalism as a vampire, with its 'thirst for the living blood of labour'. Carnduff equally, writing, largely unconsciously *at* and *about* the times of labour which occur outside what Marx thinks of as the old 'rustic simplicity' of day and night, finds himself reforming the material world as a haunted world, understanding the means of production (the gantries) and the products of labour (the ships) as fairy lights, weird shapes in the night, metal objects which become animate, and spectral entities cast off from the land. As Antonio Negri puts it succinctly in *Time for Revolution*, his book which considers Marx's version of capitalism's temporality, Marx shows that under capitalism we become 'temporal beings', and our being, which equates to the product of our labour, is measured in impossibly disjunctive versions of time.

This colonization of time by twenty-four hour work forces Carnduff's verse into considerations of the immaterial, a world unbounded by the clock, while his resentment at the city of Belfast, and the very reason why he continually draws a distinction between the yards and the city, is that the time of the city is grounded in what he calls the 'motion and stir' of commerce, while the time of the yards is of endless, unceasing, immeasurable labour. Being *is* work in the yards. And so in his later volume *Songs of an Out-of-Work* (1932), a cycle of unemployment and re-employment means that there is a wild veering between the non-time of the dole and the sleeplessness of the night-shift. Carnduff resents that the unemployed are scorned by the city's 'flappers', while in his poem 'On the Night-Shift' a 'weary week' of work leads to him hearing sounds which are 'uncanny and ghoulis', and a strange game of cards is played between Carnduff and two other workers who may be ghosts. The poem ends with these lines:

But out in the night a lone bird  
    Will cry in the marshlands drear,  
And out on the lough the port-lights  
    Of a ghost-ship disappear,  
And up in the sky a starlight  
    Will fade like a passing tear.

This turning out to sea, away from the city, into a watery, insubstantial landscape, again reveals that Carnduff's version of the shipyards is one haunted by the disruptive processes of industrial labour, the wrench of physical and mental activity put into manufactured products which are then cast out to sea, in a melancholy and near-literal version of Marx's notion of the labour which is embodied in the commodity; so for Carnduff, the yards are a place where, in the



most heightened of ways, the effort and time of human work are detached from the humans who undertake that work, and the launching of each ship sees the men who made it watch part of themselves sail away. It is hardly surprising then that Carnduff's version of the yards is both emphatically that of an island beside but *not in* the city, and a place in which temporality and the material world suffer tears in their logic, strains on their reason.

By the end of the 1930s the 'Small' or 'Wee' Yard, officially Workman and Clark, which Carnduff had worked in, had folded and the work of the yards was effectively nationalized as part of the war effort. Queen's Island had prefigured its own part in the war in a strange masquerade played out on the airstrip there in May 1938, an episode which took the island back to its carnivalistic origins while also projecting it forward into the immediate and long-term future. The British government organized an Empire Air Day pageant on Queen's Island at which crowds watched preposterously outdated biplanes making smoke bombing runs on fake civilian buildings in the new Harbour airport. Many in the crowds watching this event would experience the real thing in Belfast a few years later. And the war was to signal the protracted ending of shipbuilding's dominance of Belfast industry and of Queen's Island, as aircraft took over, and then the island returned to its origins in entertainment.

Just as Carnduff's verse is beset by anger at the city's easy moments of leisure, and is written out of the delirium of the senses brought about by round-the-clock working hours, so today's Queen's Island and today's Belfast is nagged at by the very icon it has used to promote itself. In Carnduff's poem 'Ghost Ships', 'ships of long ago' come into Belfast harbour at night, the decks peopled with 'Pale spectral forms'. The phantoms of labour, that immaterial humanness which resides in man-made objects, returns to its point of origin in Carnduff's imagination. And in our time too, we would do well to remember that the Belfast shipyards were not just places where global brands were born, but where hard work was done.

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