

Joe Corrie in his miner s working clothes,1923

The Common Man

I am the Common Man,
I am the brute and the slave,
I am the fool, the despised,
From the cradle to the grave.

I am the hewer of coal;
I am the tiller of soil;
I am the serf of the seas,

Born to bear and toil.

I am the builder of halls;
I am the dweller in slums;
I am the filth and the scourge
When winter's depression comes.

I am the fighter of wars;
I am the killer of men;
Not for a day, or an age,
But again, and again, and again.

I am the Common Man;
But master of mine take heed,
For you have put in my head,
Oh! many a wicked deed.

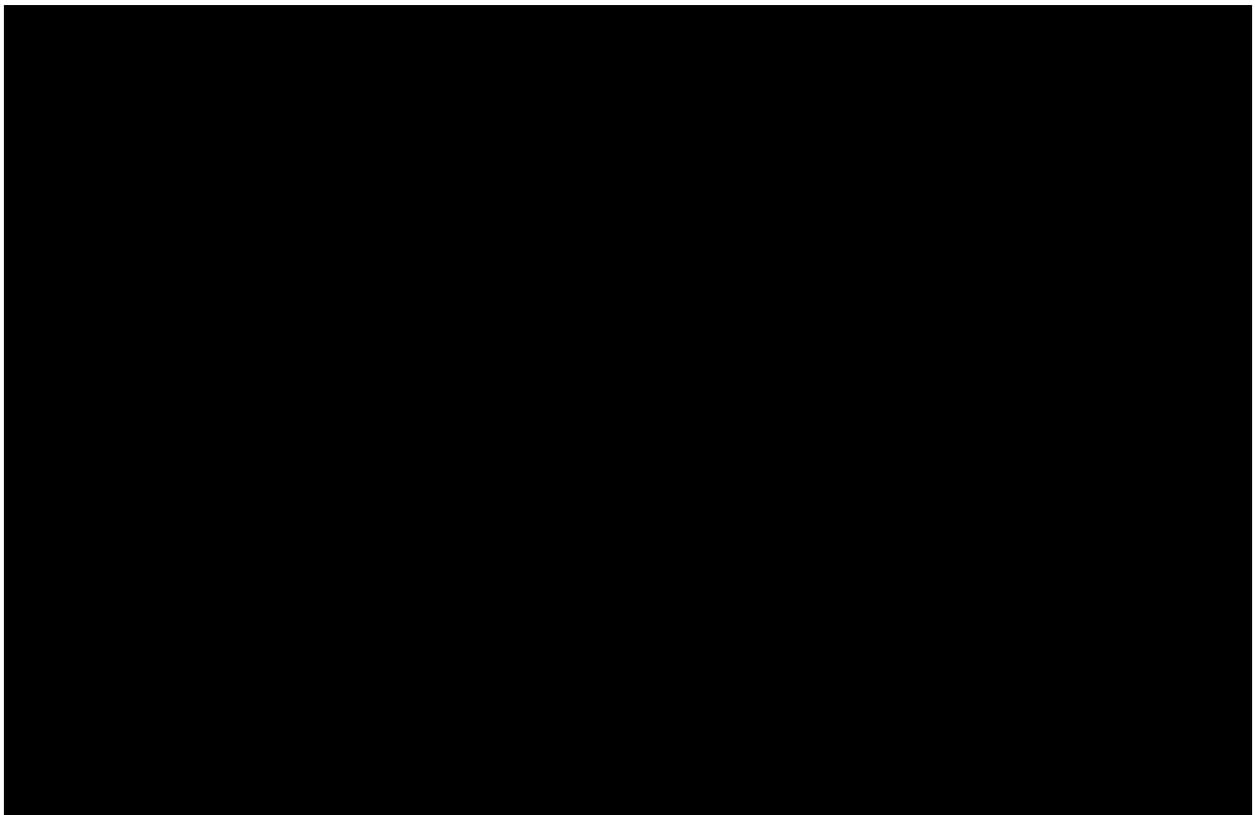
MacDiarmid's distinction between harns and hairt, and later insistence on a modern poetry of facts purged of all hints of kailyard sentiment, can be seen to have led to a kind of intellectual poetry which was concerned with ideas rather than emotions – a clever kind of poetry that was aimed at a bookish elite. The work of the poet and playwright Joe Corrie does not belong here. Corrie was the first Scottish writer since Burns to produce work which, in the words of Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, belonged in the factories and towns and fields. While he had an equal facility for writing in English, Scots, the language of the working class and the carrying stream of the Folk Tradition, was his natural medium. Corrie used it to express human concerns and dilemmas.

Corrie's name is revered still among a passing generation of folk who grew up in the former mining communities of Central Fife. Corrie died in Edinburgh in 1968, by which point his literary fame during the troubled political times of the twenties and thirties had long faded – like the once thriving coal industry he had set his plays in. Today he is thought of proudly as one of our ain by the Fife grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the General Strike generation (though he was actually born in Slammanan in 1894). They grew up hearing about him from an older generation but they might be the last ones to remember him. It is easy to assume that Corrie's considerable success and influence as a radical writer were the result of the historical and political conditions and contexts that

produced him.

Yet he is much more than a left wing firebrand stereotype. It is true that he had a difficult start in life. He was forced down t ownHe He t gt f

Corrie wrote the three-act *In Time O' Strife* at the end of the gruelling Miner's Strike/Lockout in 1926. As a miner himself, he was one of the unemployed. The play deals with how the Smith, Baxter and Pettigrew families fare during the hardships imposed by the Strike and how their ethical, political and humanitarian ideals are stretched to the limit. He submitted the work to the Reading Committee of the Scottish National Players which was made up of many of the Scottish literary establishment of the day including John Brandane, William Jeffrey, and O.H. Mavor (James Bridie). They turned his play down in favour of a work by Neil Gunn, perhaps because of its grim realism (Willie Pettigrew's wife starves to death during the play and, grief-stricken, he turns to alcohol).



The original Bowhill Players on tour in 1929

Corrie then formed his own theatre company, The Bowhill Players, to perform his plays. The Bowhill Players included his sister Violet and brothers Jimmy and Bobby along with friends and neighbours from the miners' rows. They performed in the mining village halls of West and Central Fife and you could get in by paying a nominal shirt button if you had no money. When the theatrical agent Hugh Ogilvie saw *In Time O' Strife* performed at the Gothenburgh Hall in Bowhill he recognised its potential at once. A tour, including performances in Aberdeen, Ayr, Coatbridge, Dundee, Dunfermline, Edinburgh, Falkirk, Glasgow, Greenock,

Hamilton, Kilmarnock, Leith, Paisley, Perth and Stirling played to packed houses as well as huge critical acclaim. The Bowhill Players turned professional but Corrie, who could be a thraven man, never forgave what he saw as a betrayal by the Glasgow bourgeoisie and Bridie in particular.

In Time O' Strife continues to be a relevant play. In the 1980s, during the last miner's strike against Thatcher's pit closures, the play was revived by the 7:84 Company. In 2013, a version revised by Graham McLaren and The Scottish National Theatre toured across the UK. The 2012 Theatre Workshop Scotland film *Happy Lands* was greatly influenced by it and it was a moving and memorable experience for this author to see the play performed in the debating chamber of the Scottish Parliament.

Donald Campbell, no mean playwright himself and dramatist of the Scottish Literary Renaissance and the Heretics group in the 1970s, explains Corrie's importance to Scottish literature:

Howkin awa neath a mountain o stane,
Gaspin for want o air,
The sweat makin streams doon my bare back-banes,
And my knees aa hauckit and sair.

Strainin and cursin the hale shift through,
Half-starved, half-blin, half-mad,
And the gaffer he says, Less dirt in that coal
Or ye go up the pit, my lad.

So yad. myiaf -seup thNima heqo lal

She s deid, of course, deid wi her seevinth wean.

Corrie s work is full of humour, another important coping strategy during tough times below and above ground, as we find in songs like *The Gaffer* or the following hilarious satire which indicates clearly why Corrie could never be a party-joining man:

Rebel Tam

When Rebel Tam was in the pit
He tholed the very pangs o Hell
In fectin for the Richts o Man,
And ga e nae thought unto himsel .

If I was just in Parliament,
By God! he vowed, They soon would hear
The trumpet-ca o Revolution
Blastin in their ear!

Noo he is there, back-bencher Tam,
And listens daily to the farce
O Tweeledum and Twedledee,
And never rises off his arse.

Corrie writes and speaks for a whole community, trapped in a cycle of material and cultural poverty by an economic and political system that crushes the spirit of the individual. His work is about keeping that spirit alive and this is why he is still relevant:

Cage Load of Men

Just like a truck load of cattle,
Sixteen crushed on at a time,
The yawning abyss beneath them,
Awaiting the bottomer s chime,
To leave all the glories of nature,
And toil in the muck and the grime.

Today we find ourselves in a more individualistic society that has moved further to the right in terms of its political outlook. Margaret Thatcher, who began her

rise to power in Corrie's twilight years, famously said 'There is no such thing as Society'. For Corrie, society was everything. Communities and families were the foundation that his humanitarian beliefs were built on. Corrie was a great poet, a ground-breaking playwright but most of all an eloquent proponent of this traditionally Scottish idea.

A few years ago, in an attempt to keep Corrie's legacy to the fore, with permission from Morag Corrie, Joe's daughter and with funding from Fife Council, I reconvened the Bowhill Players as a folk music ensemble. A CD of Corrie songs and poems was recorded and performances took place at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. [Free downloads of educational resources](#) suitable for senior secondary level based on Corrie's work and the film 'Happyland' are also available. In 2018 an exhibition will be held in the Lochgelly Centre in Fife to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Corrie's death as well as further performances and readings from the expanded Bowhill Players, which now includes a drama division.

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