ED FINN

What We Can Learn from Poets of the Past

An anthology of famous (and some not-so-famous) poems

There was a time when poetry was as widely read as prose — a time when the latest poems of Keats, Shelley and Coleridge were as eagerly anticipated and acclaimed as the latest novels by Dickens, Trolloppe, and Hardy.

This was partly because of the ability of the best poets to distill their wit and wisdom into much briefer but more vivid language.

As Elizabeth Drew noted in her book *Poetry: A Modern Guide to its Understanding and Enjoyment*, "The poets find the right words in the right order for what we already dimly feel, and fertilize (in us) responses which had been lying inert."

In that sense, the poets of the past have much to tell and teach us about the human condition. They were as preoccupied in their time as we are today with the concepts of life and death, good and evil, kindness and cruelty, war and peace, greed and giving, and individualism and co-operation. And their incisive assessments of the hopes, fears and beliefs that these fundamental concerns engender are as insightful today as they ever were.

Poets have always been the most eloquent social critics and satirists. Their rhymes are all the more striking and memorable because they can encapsulate in a few lines a critique of human flaws and failings that would require thousand of words in prose.

Injustice

The first poem in this collection, *Jerusalem*, provides a good example of the power of concise verse. Composed by William Blake (1759-1827), it was a searing indictment of the mistreatment of workers — men, women and children — who were forced to toil from dawn to dusk in the huge, unsafe factories of the early Industrial Revolution. It was often quoted by Tommy Douglas, the "father" of public health care in Canada.

And did these feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariots of fire!

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

In her book on poetry, Elizabeth Drew compares this passionate fulmination against social injustice with an editorial pleading the cause of civil rights, which might say: "We shall not lessen our efforts nor cease to struggle for human happiness and moral welfare until our objectives have been clearly obtained."

She asks: "How has Blake transformed and enriched the effect of this prose statement? It is a deeply moral poem, but it is created in images of concrete, physical action. The poet is a fighter; his weapons are a bow and arrow, a chariot, a sword. But his fight is a spiritual one

… His bow is created from the fire and glory of his dedication; his chariot glows like that of Phoebus, the sun god … And these are not only weapons of destruction against the darkness of evil; they are also instruments of creation. They will build Jerusalem, and all that name implies, and the English countryside can become charged with that burning vision of hope and joy."

Blake, if he were writing his poem today, probably wouldn't choose Jerusalem as his model for Heaven-on-Earth. But his stirring call to arms against the abuse of working people continues to move us with its power and purpose.

His bitterness at the mistreatment of underpaid workers and the poor was more strikingly expressed in another of his poems, which he titled, simply, *London*. It is a fiery castigation of the class-based injustice that blighted that city's streets at the time:

I wander thro' each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning church appalls;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

Blake was far from alone among the poets of the past in exposing and decrying social injustice. One of his contemporaries was Thomas Hood (1780-1842), an editor of the *London* magazine who penned

several poems deploring the brutal oppression of the poor. The most memorable is *The Bridge of Sighs*, composed after he witnessed the body of a young woman taken from the Thames. (She was one of the many girls employed as maids in the mansions of the wealthy — girls who were often raped by the master or his sons, then thrown out on the streets penniless when they became pregnant.)

Hood's poem blazes with outrage:
One more unfortunate
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate
Gone to her death!

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;
Fashion'd so slenderly,
Young, and so fair!

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanely;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly.

Who was her father?
Who was her mother?
Had she a sister?
Had she a brother?
Or was there a dearer one
Yet, than all other?

Alas! for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun!
O, it was pitiful!
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none.

The bleak wind of March
Made her tremble and shiver;
But not the dark arch,
Or the black flowing river.

Mad from life's history,
Glad to death's mystery
Swift to be hurled —
Anywhere, anywhere
Out of this world!

In she plunged boldly,
No matter how coldly
The rough river ran!
Over the brink of it:
Picture it, think of it,
Dissolute man!
Lave in it, drink of it
Then, if you can!

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) is not well known as a champion of working people, but in 1812 he delivered an impassioned speech in the House of Lords against a Bill that would impose harsher punishment on the Luddites. These were the workers who had been displaced by machines in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, and in their rage and desperation they broke into factories and smashed them.

The new law was mainly aimed at the weavers of Nottinghamshire, who had destroyed some of the new machine-looms that had deprived them of their livelihood. The government's response to the Luddites was to hunt them down, shoot them, hang them, or ship them off to penal camps in Australia.

After his speech defending the displaced workers, Byron wrote a furious *Ode on the Framers of the Frame Bill*:

Oh well done, Lord Eldon! And better done, Ryder!
Britannia must prosper with councils like yours;
Hawksbury, Harrowby, help you to guide her,
Whose remedy only must kill ere it cures;

Those villains: the weavers, are all grown refractory,
Asking some succor for charity's sake —
So hang them in clusters round each manufactory,
That will at once put an end to mistake.

The rascals, perhaps, may betake them to robbing,
The dogs to be sure have got nothing to eat —
So if we can hang them for breaking a bobbin,
"Twill save all the government's money and meat;
Men are more easily made than machinery —
Stockings fetch better prices than lives —
Gibbets on Sherwood will heighten the scenery,
Shewing how commerce, how liberty thrives!

Justice is now in pursuit of the wretches,
Grenadiers, Volunteers, Bow-Street Police,
Twenty-two Regiments, a score of Jack Ketches,
Three of the Quorum and two of the Peace:
Some Lords, to be sure, would have summoned the Judges,
To take their opinion, but that they ne'er shall,
For Liverpool such a concession begrudges,
So now they're condemned by no judges at all.

Some folks for certain have thought it was shocking,
When famine appeals and when poverty groans,
That life should be valued at less than a stocking,
And breaking of frames leads to breaking of bones.
If it should prove so, I trust, by this token,
(And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)
That the frames of the fools may be first to be broken,
Who, when asked for a remedy, sent down a rope.

One of the most irate poems of social protest was written by Edwin Markham, an American teacher born in 1852 in Oregon. Appalled by the ruthless exploitation of workers, he was inspired by Millet's painting of a bowed, broken peasant, leaning on his hoe, and made him the symbol of all oppressed working people. Here's an abbreviated version of his poem, *The Man with the Hoe*:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes at the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world...

There is no shape more terrible than this —
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed —
More filled with signs and portents for the soul,
More packed with danger to the universe…

Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
Cries protest to the powers that made the world,
A protest that is also prophecy.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will you ever straighten up this shape,
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

How will the future reckon with this man
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores?
When this dumb terror shall rise to judge the world,
After the silence of the centuries?

Inequality and Mortality

A recurring theme of poets down through the ages has been the unfair distribution of wealth, the stark disparity between rich and poor — and the seeming unawareness of the rich of their own mortality. They act as if their wealth and power somehow give them immunity from death. Or else they believe their fame and fortune will ensure that their names will be emblazoned in the pages of history long after they are gone. Perhaps some will be accorded that recognition, but, unlike the great poets, most will be forgotten.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) most famously captured the hubris of the élite in *Ozymandias*:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Shelley vividly portrayed the vanity of human pride and power, as well as the evanescence of human life.

The rich and powerful were also reminded of their mortality by two poets in the late Middle Ages: Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) and James Shirley (1596-1666). They warned that epidemics such as bubonic plague made no distinction between the nobility and the masses in claiming their victims. Shortened versions of their poems follow:

In Time of Pestilence

Adieu, farewell Earth's bliss!
This world uncertain is:
Fond are life's lustful joys,
Death proves them all but toys …

Rich men, trust not in wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health …
Physic himself must fade,
All things to end are made …

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour.
Brightness falls from the air:
Queens have died young and fair.

—Thomas Nashe

Death the Leveller

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate,
Death lays his icy hand on kings;
Sceptre and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

The garlands wither on your brow:
Then boast no more of your mighty deeds!
Upon Death's purple altar now
See where the victor-victim bleeds.
Your heads must come
To the cold tomb:
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.

— James Shirley

Another British poet who pondered the limited span of life for even the most eminent of men and women was Edward Fitzgerald. His epic *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* should be read in its entirety, but here are a few of the relevant verses:

The worldly hope men set their hearts upon
Turns ashes — or it prospers; and anon,
Like snow upon the desert's dusty face,
Lighting a little hour or two — was gone.

Think, in this battered caravanserai
Whose portals are alternate night and day,
How sultan after sultan with his pomp
Abode his destined hour, and went his way.

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every hyacinth the garden wears
Dropped in her lap from some once lovely head.

Would that some winged angel ere too late
Arrest the yet unfolded Roll of Fate,
And make the stern Recorder otherwise
Enregister, or quite obliterate!

Ah, love! could you and I with him conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bit s — and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire!

The limits of time and the human condition are shared by all of us — and with that understanding should come a resolve to make the very best use we can of the time allotted to us. The tyranny of time was perhaps best depicted by a more recent poet, Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982), in his memorable *You, Andrew Marvell:*

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon Earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night

To feel creep up the curving east
The earthy chill of dusk and slow
Upon those under lands the vast
And ever climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange
The flooding dark about their knees
The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kermanshah the gate
Dark empty and the withered grass
And through the twilight now the late
Few travellers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge
Across the silent river gone
And through Arabia the edge
Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street
The wheel rut in the ruined stone
And Lebanon fade out and Crete
High through the clouds and overblown

And over Sicily the air
Still flashing with the landward gulls
And loom and slowly disappear
The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore
Of Africa the gilded sand
And evening vanish and no more
The low pale light across the land

Nor now the long light on the sea
And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on …

To see the inspiration for MacLeish's poem, and understand its title, you have to recall the 17th-century lines of Andrew Marvell's poem, *To His Coy Mistress*:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

The great poets of the past were always aware that, although they were doomed eventually to die, most of their compositions would live forever. So their inspirational messages were directed as much to the readers of future generations as to their own.

A more recent poet, James Elroy Flecker (1886-1915), fated to die all too soon at the age of 29, prophetically wrote a poem *To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence*. It serves as a collective dispatch from all the poets who predeceased him:

I who am dead a thousand years,
And wrote this sweet archaic song,
Send you my words for messengers
The way I shall not pass along.

I care not if you bridge the seas,
Or ride secure the cruel sky,
Or build consummate palaces
Of metal or of masonry.

But have you wine and music still,
And statues and a bright-eyed love,
And foolish thoughts of good and ill,
And prayers to them who sit above?

How shall we conquer? Like a wind
That falls at eve our fancies blow,
And old Maconides the blind
Said it three thousand years ago.

O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,
Student of our sweet English tongue,
Read out my words at night, alone:
I was a poet, I was young.

Since I can never see your face,
And never shake you by the hand,
I send my soul through time and space
To greet you. You will understand.

Inhumanity

Despite the brevity of life, some people misuse their limited time to oppress and exploit their fellow humans. The persistence of "man's inhumanity to man" made some poets cynical. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-1680) expressed his disgust in *A Satire Against Mankind*, in which he compared humans (unfavourably) with other animal species:

Which is the basest creature, man or beast?
Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey;
But savage man alone does man betray.
Press'd by necessity, they kill for food;
Man undoes man, to do himself no good.
With teeth and claws, by Nature arm'd, they hunt
Nature's allowance to supply their want:
But man with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise,
Inhumanly his fellow's life betrays,
With voluntary pains, works his distress:
Not through necessity, but wantonness.
For hunger, or for love, they bite or tear,
Whilst wretched man is still in arms for fear:
For fear he arms, and is of arms afraid;
From fear, to fear, successively betray'd.

Thomas Gray (1716-1771), in his sublime *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, praised the many people who live quiet but productive lives and die in obscurity. They may have failed to gain fame and wealth, but neither did they give vent to their greed and aggression as did most of the nation's political and business leaders. Here are the relevant verses from Gray's epic:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village Hampden that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his field withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their history in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

A later English poet, John Betjeman (1906-1972), captured the snobbery and selfishness of that country's upper class in his satirical poem, In *Westminster Abbey*, originally published in the now defunct *Punch* magazine. It purports to be the prayer of a wealthy noblewoman kneeling at a service in Westminster Abbey during the Second World War:

Let me take this other glove off
As the vox humana swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here where England's statesmen lie,
Listen to a lady's cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.
Spare their women for Thy sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
Don't let anyone bomb me.

Keep our Empire undismembered,
Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,
Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
Honduras and Togoland;
Protect them, Lord, in all their fights
And, even more, protect the whites.

Think of what our Nation stands for,
Books from Boots' and country lanes,
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
Democracy and proper drains.
Lord, put beneath Thy special care
One eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Although, dear Lord, I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
And do not let my shares go down.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy Word,
Where the bones of leading statesmen
Have so often been interred.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was another poet who was disgusted by the arrogance and pride of the privileged plutocracy. He scathingly stripped them of their pretensions in *For A' That and A ' That*:

Is there, for honest poverty,
That hangs his head, and a' that?
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, and a' that,
Our toils obscure, and a' that;
The rank is but the guinea stamp;
The man's the gowd for a' that.

What tho' on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden-gray, and a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
A man's a man for a' that.
For a' that, and a' that,
Their tinsel show, and a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king of men for a' that.

Ye see yon birkie, ca'ed a lord,
Wha struts, and stares, and a' that;
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a coof for a' that.
For a' that, and a' that,
His riband, star, and a' that,
The man of independent mind,
He looks and laughs at a' that.

A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, and a' that;
But an honest man's aboon his might,
Guid faith he mauna fa' that!
For a' that, and a' that,
Their dignities, and a' that,
The pith o' sense, and pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.

Then let us pray that come it may
As come it will for a' that,

That sense and worth o'er all the earth
Shall bear the gree and a' that;
For a' that, and a' that,
It's comin' yet for a' that,
That man to man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

The persistence of poverty, injustice, war, and the pollution of the planet can be dispiriting. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) probably reflected this melancholy when he wrote in *Things Fall Apart*:

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Other poets, however, urge us to keep struggling for a better world, no matter how dismal the prospects may seem. Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-61) was both cynic and optimist. His cynicism is reflected in *The Last Decalogue*, an updated rendition of the Ten Commandments:

1. *Thou shalt have one God only; who*
   Would be at the expense of two?
2. *No graven images may be*
   Worshipped, except the currency.
3. *Swear not at all; for by thy curse*
   Thine enemy is none the worse.
4. *At church on Sunday to attend*
   Will serve to keep the world thy friend.
5. *Honour thy parents; that is all*
   From whom advancement may befall.
6. *Thou shalt not kill, but need'st not strive*
   Officiously to keep alive.

7. *Do not adultery commit;*
   Advantage rarely comes of it.
8. *Thou shalt not steal — an empty feat*
   When it's so lucrative to cheat.
9. *Bear not false witness; let the lie*
   Have time on its own wings to fly.
10. *Thou shalt not covet, but tradition*
    Approves all forms of competition.

Isn't it amazing that a satirical poem written more than 150 years ago could still be so bitingly germane today? But Clough did not succumb to despondency. His *Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth* still rings with hope and resolve. It should be framed and mounted on the walls of every social justice organization:

Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been things remain.

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;
It may be, in yon smoke concealed,
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,
And, but for you, possess the field.

For, while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light.
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright!

War and Peace

What about a poem for peace activists? *The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred*, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) could be a contender, with its implied denunciation of senseless military slaughter:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward.
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
"Forward, the Light Brigade!
"Charge for the guns!" he said"
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

"Forward the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why.
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thundered;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air,
Sabring the gunners there,

Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but
Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them.
Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

Tennyson wrote this poem in 1854 shortly after learning of the Light Brigade's mad charge during the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War. He was unaware that the ensuing slaughter (nearly 200 of the horsemen were killed) had been the result of rash and reckless orders by the brigade's commanding officers. With the "valley of death" ringed by some 20 battalions of Russian infantry and artillery, the brigade was hopelessly outnumbered. So much for the "glory" of combat!

To more effectively expose the folly and horror of warfare, I prefer *The Battle of Blenheim* by the less well-known Robert Southey (1774-1843). Southey was a friend of a more renowned poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Kublai Khan*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), with whom he joined in promoting an early form of socialism, which they called "pantisocracy."

The Battle of Blenheim, fought on August 13, 1704, was an especially ferocious clash between a European alliance commanded by the Duke of Marlborough and the French forces of Louis XIV. Southey captures the glorification of this brutal and needless battle in his poem:

It was a summer evening;
Old Kaspar's work was done,
And he before his cottage door
Was sitting in the sun;
And by him sported on the green
His little grandchild, Wilhelmine.

She saw her brother Peterkin
Roll something large and round,
That he beside the rivulet,
In playing there, had found:
She ran to ask him what he'd found
That was so large and smooth and round.

Old Kaspar took it from the boy,
Who stood expectant by;
And then the old man shook his head,
And with a natural sigh,
"'Tis some poor fellow's skull," said he,
"Who fell in the great victory.

"I find them in my garden,
For there's many hereabout:
And often, when I go to plough,
The ploughshare turns them out;
For many thousand men," said he,
"Were slain in that great victory."

"Now tell us what 'twas all about,"
Young Peterkin, he cries;
And little Wilhelmine looks up
With wonder-waiting eyes;
"Now tell us all about the war,
And what they fought each other for."

"It was the English," Kaspar cried,
"Who put the French to rout;
But what they fought each other for

I could not well make out;
But everybody said," quoth he,
"That 'twas a famous victory.

"My father lived at Blenheim then,
Yon little stream hard by;
They burned his dwelling to the ground,
And he was forced to fly;
So with his wife and child he fled,
Nor had he where to rest his head.

"With fire and sword the country round
Was wasted far and wide,
And many a childing mother then,
And new-born baby died;
But things like that, you know, must be
After a famous victory.

"Great praise the Duke of Marlborough won
And our good Prince Eugene."
"Why, 'twas a very wicked thing!"
Said little Wilhelmine.
"Nay, nay, my little girl," quoth he,
"It was a famous victory.

"And everybody praised the Duke
Who this great fight did win."
"But what good came of it at last?"
Quoth little Peterkin.
"Why, that I cannot tell," said he,
"But 'twas a famous victory."

In a much later and even less justified international conflict, the First World War, many more thousands of young men were killed in the trenches and on the beaches of Europe.

One of the survivors of that carnage — for just a few more years — was Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), a teacher in a poor country parish in Shropshire, England. After enlisting in the army, he suffered a severe

concussion and "shell-shock" while fighting in the Battle of the Somme in 1917. His shattering experience with the brutality of warfare became the recurring theme of the poems he later wrote before he died in 1918. Typical of these sombre verses is this one:

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs —
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Gender Imbalance

Readers may have noticed and deplored the absence (so far) of poems by women in this compendium. I assure you that this unfortunate deficiency is not the result of wilful neglect. There were many gifted female poets — Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emile Bronte, Christina Rosetti, and Emily Dickenson, to name a few — but, so far as I can tell, their most celebrated poems do not tend to focus on social injustice, which is the central theme of this admittedly personal collection. (If it's any consolation, I've also overlooked the celebrated sonnets of Shakespeare for the same reason.)

Another important cause of the dearth of female poets before the 19th century is that most women were denied the freedom to nurture and develop their artistic talents.

Living as they were in a brutally restrictive patriarchal society, most were deprived of the education and opportunity afforded their more liberated male counterparts.

A few of the earliest feminists, however, did manage to overcome the restraints imposed on them and give vent to their anger and frustration in poetic form. One of them was Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710), who valiantly educated herself to break free of the

shackles of patriarchy. Her stirring poem, *To the Ladies*, fiercely attacked the injustice of male domination:

Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name:
For when that fatal knot is tied,
Which nothing, nothing can divide,
When she the word "Obey" has said,
And man by law supreme has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state and pride.

Fierce as an eastern prince he grows,
And all his innate rigor shows:
Then but to look, to laugh, to speak
Will the nuptial contract break.
Like mutes, she signs alone must make,
And never any freedom take,
But still be governed by a nod
And fear her husband as her god,
Him still must serve, him still obey,
And nothing act, and nothing say
But what her haughty lord thinks fit,
Who, with the power, has all the wit.

Then shun, oh! shun that wretched state,
And all the fawning flatterers hate.
Value yourselves, and men despise:
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.

Another early feminist and a contemporary of Lady Chudleigh was Esther Johnson (1681-1728). She was a lifelong friend of Jonathan Swift, the famous Irish author of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift, for some reason, chose to call her "Stella," and paid tribute to her in his well-known *Journal to Stella*, really a series of his letters to her.

Ester was always overshadowed by Swift, mainly because, as a woman in that bleak anti-feminist age, she lacked his freedom and experience. However, despite these socially-imposed constraints, she

did compose several excellent poems, some of them still included in modern anthologies such as the *Folio Society's Golden Treasury*.

The following untitled poem poignantly reflects Esther's heartache and frustration:

If it be true, celestial powers,
That you have formed me fair,
And yet in all my vainest hours
My mind has been my care;
Then in return I beg this grace,
As you were ever kind:
What envious Time takes from my face,
Bestow upon my mind.

Striving for a Better World

In the struggle against powerful business and political adversaries, it is sometimes difficult to remain resolute. One way to ward off dejection is to memorize and recite the valiant poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley (1849-1903). Henley suffered from a tubercular disease of the bone which necessitated the amputation of his left leg while he was still a young man. Despite this and other "bludgeonings of chance," he pursued a productive literary career, sometimes collaborating with Robert Louis Stevenson.

If Henley could maintain a strong and indomitable spirit despite his severe infirmities, surely we can try to match his courage. His *Invictus* inspires us, as it did Nelson Mandala during his long imprisonment by the apartheid-practising government of South Africa:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears

Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

The ongoing endeavour to build a better world calls for — among other things — true and reliable information: facts and figures that both expose the evils of unfettered private enterprise and offer viable alternatives to the unjust society created by its adherents.

The development of such soundly-based studies is the mandate of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and other progressive research organizations. For a poem that could be considered a tribute to all such strivers for truth, I turn to another composition by Robert Southey. It's a fond paean to *His Books*, which any researcher (or bibliophile) will appreciate:

My days among the dead are passed;
Around me I behold
Where'er these casual eyes are cast,
The mighty minds of old:
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom I converse day by day.

With them I take delight in weal
And seek relief in woe;
And while I understand and feel
How much to them I owe,
My cheeks have often been bedew'd
With tears of thankful gratitude.

My thoughts are with the dead: with them
I live in long-past years,
Their virtues love, their faults condemn,
Partake their hopes and fears:

And from their lessons seek and find
Instruction with an humble mind.

My hopes are with the dead; anon
My place with them will be,
And I with them shall travel on
Through all futurity —
Yet leaving here a name, I trust,
That will not perish in the dust.

ED FINN was the former editor of the CCPA *Monitor* where the original version of this collection appeared. Most recently he edited the book *Canada After Harper: His ideology-fuelled attack on Canadian society and values, and how we can resist and create the country we want*.

JIM STANFORD

Why Study Economics?

Never trust an economist with your job.

Most people think economics is a technical, confusing, and even mysterious subject; a field best left to the experts: namely, the economists.

But in reality, economics should be quite straightforward. Ultimately economics is simply about how we work. What we produce. And how we distribute and ultimately use what we've produced. Economics is about who does what, who gets what, and what they do with it.

At that simplest, grass-roots level, we all know something about the economy. And so we should all have something to say about economics.

Moreover, because we interact, cooperate, and clash with each other in the economy, economics is inherently a *social* subject. It's not just technical forces like technology and productivity that matter. It's also the interactions and relationships between people that make the economy go around.

So you don't need to be an economist to know a lot about economics. Everyone experiences the economy. Everyone contributes to it, one way or another. Everyone has an interest in the economy: in *how* it functions, how *well* it functions, and in *whose interests* it functions. And everyone has a grass-roots sense of where they personally fit into

the big economic picture, and how well they are doing (compared to others, compared to the past, and compared to their expectations). This is the stuff economics should be made of.

Unfortunately, most professional economists don't think about economics in this common-sense, grass-roots context. To the contrary, they tend to adopt a rather superior attitude in their dealings with the untrained masses. They invoke complicated technical mumbo-jumbo — usually utterly unnecessary to their arguments — to make their case. They claim to know what's good for the people, even better than the people themselves do. They take great pleasure in expounding theories that are counter-intuitive and puzzling to the rest of us. They present themselves as interpreters of a mysterious realm which average people cannot hope to comprehend. And since they study things that are measured in billions or even trillions of dollars, their sense of importance grows — in their own eyes, and in others'.

That's why we see economists on the television news every night. We almost never see educators, social workers, nutritionists, or architects on the nightly news. Perhaps we should hear more from those other professions, and less from the economists. Their advice might actually be more important to our long-term economic well-being than that of the economists.

Nothing better exemplifies economists' know-it-all attitude than debates over free trade. Conventionally trained economists take it as a *proven fact* that free trade between two countries always makes both sides better off. People who question or oppose free trade — trade unionists, social activists, nationalists — must either be acting from ignorance, or else are pursuing some narrow vested interest that conflicts with the broader good. These troublesome people should be lectured to (and economists love nothing better than expounding their beautiful theory of **comparative advantage**), or simply ignored. And that's exactly what most governments do. (Ironically, even some conventional economists now recognize that traditional free trade theory is wrong, for many reasons. But that hasn't affected the profession's near-religious devotion to free trade policies.)

Most economists are wedded to a particular, peculiar version of economics — called **neoclassical economics**. This kind of economics is as ideological as it is scientific. It was developed in the late nineteenth century to defend capitalism, not just explain it. And it still goes to

great lengths to try to "prove" a whole portfolio of bizarre, politically loaded, and obviously untrue propositions: like claiming that merely owning financial wealth is itself productive, or that everyone is paid according to their productivity, or that unemployment doesn't even actually exist.

And the arrogance of economists is not neutral. Outside the academic world, the vast majority of professional economists work for organizations with a deep vested interest in the status quo: banks, brokerages, corporations, industry associations, and governments. Inside academia, too, the ideological influence of business and wealth is increasingly apparent over curriculum and research in economics — enforced partly through corporate and major donor funding of economics and business schools. Whether in universities or in the real world, therefore, most economists accept that competition, inequality, and the accumulation of private wealth are inevitable, natural, and even desirable features of a vibrant, efficient economy. This value system infuses their analysis and their recommendations.

I think we need a more democratic economics, a more grass-roots approach. I think we need an economics that's not based on abstract assumptions, but instead starts from the concrete circumstances of average people's lives. We need an economics for everyone.

I think we need a more democratic economics, a more grass-roots approach. I think we need an economics that's not based on abstract assumptions, but instead starts from the concrete circumstances of average people's lives. We need an economics for everyone.

My approach is not motivated by an "anti-expert" mentality. I would not want to be operated on by an untrained medical student. And people who make important economic decisions, and give important economic advice, should be formally trained in economics.

But debates over economic issues are not technical debates, where expertise alone settles the day. They are always *political* debates, in the broad sense of that word: distinct groups of people have distinct interests, they know their interests, and they naturally work to promote

them. This occurs everywhere in the economy — and economics shouldn't pretend that it doesn't.

A hard-working labourer has very different economic interests from a red-suspendered currency trader. And the labourer has as much to say about economics as the trader. (In fact, in hard economic terms, the labourer produces far more real value than the currency trader — despite the enormous sums of money passing through the trader's computer every business day.) But the elitism of economics disempowers and silences the voices of non-experts, and devalues the economic contributions of working people.

My main goal throughout my career as an economist has been to encourage non-experts — workers, union members, activists, consumers, neighbours — to develop their natural, grass-roots interest in economics, by:

- Studying the economy, and learning more about how it functions.
- Thinking concretely about their personal role and stake in the economy (rather than abstract indicators like gross domestic product, stock markets, or foreign exchange).
- Recognizing that the economy embodies distinct groups of people with distinct and often conflicting interests, and that economics itself reflects those distinctions and conflicts. Economics is not a neutral, technical discipline.
- Being ready to challenge, when necessary, the way "expert" economists explain the economy and (even more dangerously) tell us how to change it.

The economy is too important to be left to the economists. Ordinary people have valuable economic knowledge — knowledge that's usually ignored by the experts. More importantly, the analysis and advice of the experts is all too often compromised by their position in the economy they are telling us how to manage. Everyone has a stake in the economy. Everyone has economic interests they need to identify and protect. Learning about economics will help them understand where they fit into the bigger system, and help them fight for a better deal.

An economist may tell you that your job depends on the central bank raising interest rates to control inflation (in the long run, anyway).

An economist may tell you that free trade will increase productivity and hence increase incomes (although you may lose your job in the process). An economist may tell you that eliminating unions and minimum wages will make society richer (although, just as with aerobic exercise, it might hurt at first … no pain, no gain!).

Never trust an economist with your job. Learn about economics yourself. And make up your own mind about what might protect your job — and what might destroy it.

A society in which ordinary people know more about economics, and recognize the often conflicting interests at stake in the economy, is a society in which more people will feel confident deciding for themselves what's best — instead of trusting the experts. It will be a more democratic society.

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Capitalism: the economy we know

So far, we've been speaking very broadly about "the economy." But in fact I'm talking about the workings of a particular kind of economy, called capitalism. "Capitalism" and "the economy" are not the same thing — even though many economists pretend capitalism is a natural, permanent state of affairs, and hence the only economy. However, there were other economies that existed before capitalism. And I tend to think there will be other economies that come after capitalism, too.

Capitalism has particular features and forces that need to be identified, just to understand how it works. This is true regardless of how you feel about capitalism. Just to understand what's happening in capitalism, we need to identify and study its crucial facts:

I once attended a dinner speech given by the then-Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is an international association of developed capitalist countries. He was promoting the concept of "economic literacy." He argued that if more people in society understood the fundamentals of economic theory (like supply and demand, competition, and free trade), then they would more readily accept policy "reforms" implemented by their governments — even if those reforms were painful.

As an example, he referred to the dramatic (and successful) protests that occurred in France in the mid-2000s against government efforts to weaken labour protections. These changes would have made it easier for employers to fire workers, especially young workers. If the French understood that these seemingly painful "reforms" actually make the labour market function more "efficiently," he argued, they wouldn't have protested.

This kind of "literacy" sounds to me more like brainwashing than education.

During the question period, I took issue with the OECD chief's assertion that the French do not understand economics. Compare France to the US — usually held up as the prototype of an efficient, flexible, market-driven system. On average, a French worker works 300 hours per year fewer than an American (that's seven extra weeks off per year). Yet they produce nearly as much value added with each hour of labour as Americans. Unemployment is higher in France — yet most unemployed French receive more income (from social benefits) than millions of *employed low-wage* Americans. As a result, the French have enough money, and lots of time, to eat in restaurants, make love, and attend protest demonstrations (and not necessarily in that order!)

In America, meanwhile, there were almost 11 million *employed workers* in 2013, aged 18 to 64, whose incomes left them below the official poverty line (a standard which is still based on the standard of living in 1964) — and that does not include their children and other dependents. Their hard work is not taking them far. Economic mobility between income groups in the U.S. is much less common than in other countries (where income is distributed more evenly), yet the ideology that anyone can get ahead In life as long as they work hard still exercises incredible sway. For example, one survey found that 39% of Americans believed either that they already ranked within the wealthiest 1 percent of society, or else soon would make it there. The mathematical impossibility of this bizarre worldview has not (yet) undermined the American mythology of "upward mobility" — a myth which inhibits hard-working, poor people from standing up and demanding a better deal here and now, rather than waiting for the day they finally make it rich (or else win the lottery).

Ironically, the OECD itself subsequently published abundant economic evidence indicating that employment protection laws (like those French regulations) actually have no visible impact whatsoever on unemployment rates.

So who really understands economics? I think it's the protestors in France.

- Most people have to work for others, in return for a wage or salary.
- A small proportion of society owns the bulk of wealth, and use that wealth in an effort to generate still more wealth.
- Competition between companies, each trying to maximize its own profits, forces them to behave in particular, sometimes perverse ways.

It seems bizarre, but conventional economists mostly ignore these central facts (with the partial exception of the third). They don't even use the word "capitalism." Instead, they call our system a "market economy." The fact that a few people own immense wealth, while most people own almost nothing, is considered accidental or even irrelevant. They claim, incredibly, that the economy would be exactly the same whether capitalists hired workers, or workers hired capitalists.

These central and unique features of capitalism impart particular kinds of behaviour and motion to the economy. They explain why capitalism is *dynamic*: flexible, creative, and always changing. They explain why capitalism is *conflictual*: marked by ongoing struggle and conflict between different groups of people. They explain why capitalism is unstable: exhibiting periods of growth and prosperity, followed by periods of stagnation, recession, and even breakdown.

Economists who ignore the key features of capitalism will be less able to understand and explain how capitalism actually works. So purely from a scientific perspective, it's important to be frank about what we are dealing with.

Of course, economists of all political stripes carry political baggage. I certainly do. It's impossible to name and analyze capitalism without passing judgement on it. (Conventional economists pretend that the "positive" science of describing the economy can be separated from the "normative" practice of evaluating and trying to improve the economy — but this phony distinction has never been very convincing.)

Capitalism has been immensely successful, on many criteria. It ushered in the industrial era, and the prosperity (for some people, but not everyone) that came with it. It ruthlessly undermines old-fashioned restrictions and taboos, and probes endlessly to find new ways of generating private profit (some of which are socially useful,

some of which are not). It harnesses immense energy, creativity, and discipline from many of its participants.

On the other hand, capitalism has patently failed to live up to many of its promises. Billions of the world's people endure hardship, poverty, and premature death, even though humanity possesses abundant wealth to abolish these afflictions. Vast resources — like the talent and energy of hundreds of millions of unemployed and underemployed individuals — are chronically misused or wasted. The natural environment is being deeply, perhaps critically damaged by the profit-maximizing, cost-shifting imperatives of private profit; global climate change is just the most catastrophic symptom of this failure. And even on its own terms — the rapid investment of private capital to generate profit — capitalism may be running out of steam.

I am critical of capitalism's failings — but I am also respectful of its flexibility and its staying power. I am utterly convinced that there are many obvious changes that would help the economy meet human and environmental needs, without breaking fundamentally from the underlying logic which drives the whole system. I also believe that it is ultimately possible to build an alternative economic system guided directly by our desire to improve the human condition, rather than by a hunger for private profit. (Exactly what that alternative system would look like, however, is not at all clear today.)

But quite apart from whether you think capitalism is good or bad, capitalism is something we must study. It's the economy we live in, the economy we know. And the more ordinary people understand about capitalism, the better is the economic "deal" they'll be able to extract from it.

It's up to you

People have to fight for whatever they get from the economy. Nothing comes automatically, via the magical workings of supply and demand. Rather, it comes to them through education and awareness, organizational strength, action, and power. Knowing this basic fact of economic life, and identifying where and how to fight for a fairer share of the pie, will allow you and your fellow workmates, activists, and neighbours to make the most of economics.

In this sense, it really is up to you: to take your grass-roots knowledge

of the economy, and translate it into economic action, and economic change.

The overarching goal of this book is to make economics accessible and even entertaining for non-specialist readers. That's why we've kept the book short, used plain language, illustrated it with Tony Biddle's awesome cartoons, and avoided (wherever possible) the use of academic-style citations and references.

For those who want to continue their study of grass-roots economics, however, we have provided additional information and resources. These are posted, free of charge, at a special website, generously hosted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Canada's major progressive think tank, and the co-publisher of this book): www.economicsforeveryone.com

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JIM STANFORD is Economist with Unifor, the union formed in 2013 from the merger of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Communication Energy and Paperworkers (CEP). Jim received his Ph.D. in Economics in 1995 from the New School for Social Research in New York, and also holds economics degrees from Cambridge University and the University of Calgary. He writes an economics column for the *Globe and Mail,* appears regularly on CBC TV's "Bottom Line" economics panel, and is the Vice-President of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. He lives in Toronto with his family.

This is an excerpted and lightly edited version of the *Introduction to Economics for Everyone*, 2nd ed,. The complete, unedited introduction (along with other sample material) is available at http://economicsforeveryone.ca/book-excerpts/.

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