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ANDY IRVINE'S NEW SONGS FOR OLD MINERS

The National Association of Mining History Organisations (NAMHO) annual meeting included a conference dinner. Everyone present at that was privileged to witness a performance following the dinner, by the legendary singer Andy Irvine. His repertoire for that concert was most apt for the event, including the sadness of 'He fades away' about the blue asbestos miners in Australia through to the humorous take on gold rush miners in 'The close shave'. For fans of Andy's music the highlight of the evening was two new songs written for the occasion. The lyrics of these are reproduced here, with the sleeve notes. For best effect though, it is recommended that you buy and listen to the music itself!

Matthew Parkes

HARD TIMES IN 'COMER'S MINES

(Andy Irvine)

Another song I wrote for the NAMHO concert in 2016. Nixie Boran was a union man and a local hero of his time who worked tirelessly for the rights of the miners and their families in Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny in spite of strong opposition from the Church and the State. Many thanks to John Coffey who provided the information needed to write the song, to Seamus Walsh and his dad Joe, miners in Castlecomer whose book, "In The Shadow of the Mines" told the whole story and to Joseph Kavanagh who first brought Nixie Boran to my attention. -Andy

In 1930 my Daddy said he
Stay out of the mines take a warning from me
With dust you'll be choked and a pauper you'll be
And you'll wheeze like the bagpipes of Patsy Touhey
It's hard times in 'Comer's mines
It's hard times we know
To dig out the coal you must lie on your side
For the seam it is just eighteen inches high
Eight hours a day for pie in the sky
Your pay so low your expenses so high
Nixie Boran was invited to go
To a Union Congress held in Moscow
The Department of Foreign Affairs it said No
For Red Russia we'll never allow
But Nixie stowed away on a ship
And he landed in France and continued his trip
Says he in old Ireland we must get a grip
And we'll form a union for miners now
The huts that we live in are built very poor
The holes in the roof let the rain in go leor
To keep ourselves warm you can be very sure
With mud we have plastered the walls
The rain washes it off all over the floor
My wife she sits weeping what can she do more
On a wet winter's night how the children they bawl
And the Captain in comfort at luxury Hall
The money we earn well it is very slight
And we pay for our tools which doesn't seem right
The detonators and the gelignite
The candles the fuses the fittings
The rent for our hut is a half crown out
And we pay for the new church five bob a shout
By the end of the week you can have little doubt

We are sick of these wrongs for the slimmest of pickings
We voted to strike without further delay
For a small increase in our miserable wage
And coal for our families for which we would pay
The cost of its production
So Nixie our demands conveyed
We were ignored no offers were made
And the Church it stepped up its holy crusade
For our militant union's total destruction
Peadar O'Donnell he entered the fray
And he went to the bakers in Dublin they say
Two carloads of bread were delivered that day
And supporters doled out more
Street meetings in Dublin were held every night
Urging support for the miners on strike
But after six weeks we were losing the fight
And we wondered how long we could hold out for
On Sundays at Mass our bold parish priest
Compared our union to the mark of the beast
And some of our neighbours they shared his belief
That Nixie was Satan invested
They tried to stop Nixie attending at Mass
And they stationed themselves to not let him pass
But we all stood beside them like snakes in the grass
And Nixie and family went in unmolested
We found it too hard to endure all this hate
From the Might of the Church and the Power of the State
Our only desire was to better the fate
Of the men who worked in the mine
So we joined up with Larkin in Thirty-Three
And the coal mine owners at last did agree
Our victory was small but t'was still victory
For we felt like we'd struck a blow for mankind
Well I've finished me song and I'll go away
But now in conclusion I'd just like to pay
Homage to Nixie there's much more to say
'Bout the times that came to pass
John Fitzgerald Jimmy and Tom
Walsh was their surname but now they are gone
And all those brave men that their names may live on
For they fought for the rights of the Working Class

HERE'S A HEALTH TO EVERY MINER LAD

(Andy Irvine)

Written for a concert I gave at Dublin City University for the National Association of Mine History Organisations (NAMHO) in 2016. I wanted to point out that Ireland has a long history of various kinds of mining and that, along with "Cousin Jacks" (The name given to Cornish miners), they formed a large part of the early coal mining community in Pennsylvania and the copper mining in Butte, Montana. The reference to Frank Little is in memory of the dreadful murder of this IWW organiser, lynched from a railroad trestle by six 'vigilantes' who were never identified. Many thanks to Matthew Parkes. -Andy

As I roved out one morning one morning in the Spring
I spied a pretty fair maid these words I heard her sing
The miner lives a hard life never knowing what's in store
May Providence protect him and keep hardship from his door
So fill your glasses up
Let the toast go merrily round
Here's a health to every miner lad
That works down underground
She sang about the union men who fought for better pay
To escape the poverty that dogged them night and day
And then averse she did disburse of men from Erin's Isle
How they had travelled round this world for many's a weary
mile
She sang of some from Cushendun

and some from Carrick town
And more who strayed from Bantry Bay
that place of great renown
She said they were the finest that ever you could behold
For they could turn the hardest rock to silver or fine gold
She told how many years ago they worked out in West Cork
And when the copper seam ran out they sailed for old New York
And out in Pennsylvania they dug the Anthracite
And they joined the Molly Maguires
for to fight for what was right'
And next in Butte Montana they wore the wooden shoe
For they joined that mighty union
called the eye double double u
But standing up for workers rights they quickly lost their jobs
And they couldn't save Frank Little from that vigilante mob
She sang a stave about the brave coal miners in South Wales
How they were paid short measure
on the crooked weighing scales
She told of how Nye Bevan in nineteen forty five
He set up the National Coal Board and stood by the miners side
And finally the Miner's Strike of nineteen eighty four
And tears ran down her hollow cheeks
and she could sing no more
That ruthless Iron lady in the song she featured not
May her name be never mentioned but her deeds deeds be ne'er
forgot

SITES VISITED BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONFERENCE

WORKING MINES

Tara Mine (zinc, lead)
Curraghinalt Mine Core Store (gold)
Drummond Mine (gypsum)
Kilroot Mine (salt)
Cavanacaw (Omagh) Mine (gold)

DISUSED MINES

Co. Donegal

Crohy Head Mine (talc)
Drumkeelan Mines (sandstone) and Civil War Hideout

Co. Leitrim

Bencroy Mine (coal)
Gowlaun fireclay trials and Creevelea Furnace (iron)

Co. Roscommon

Aghabehy Deep Level (coal)
Derreenavoggy Mine (Arigna Mining Experience) (coal)
Greaghnageeragh (Noones) Mine (coal)

Co. Sligo

Abbeystown Mine (zinc, lead)
Ballintrillick Mill (barite)
Glencarbury Mine (barite)
Streamstown Saltworks

Co. Wicklow

Avoca Mines (copper)
Glendasan Mines (lead)
Glendalough Mine (lead)

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About to enter Abbeystown Mine, Co. Sligo



In a Core Store for Curraghinalt Mine, Co. Tyrone