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THE POET AND THE ENGINEER

By J. L. KELLEY

From an Article by C. E. Jeffery in the Nov., 1935 Journal of the Australian Institution of Engineers

GENERALLY speaking, the artistic temperament will find beauty even in engineering subjects, providing these objects are old enough. Thus the sailing ship which is essentially an engineering work is generally regarded as a thing of beauty. H. G. Wells, with a vision which sees beyond the grace and beauty of the towering canvas, calls the same ship a floating slum.

Keat's *Grecian Urn* was after all a product of an engineering device—the potter's wheel. The potter has perhaps the most unpoetical name of any craftsman, with the possible exception of the indispensable but much derided workman, the plumber. One could wish that those who see glory in old crockery, when it is old enough, could see the beauty in that marvelous piece of glassware—a radio valve.*

“Be eloquent in praise, of the very dull old days
Which have long since passed away.
And convince 'em if you can, that the reign of
good Queen Anne
Was culture's palmiest day.”

“Of course you will pooh pooh
Whatever's fresh and new
And declare it's crude and mean,
And that Art stopped short
In the cultivated Court
Of the Empress Josephine.”

William Courthrope wrote some amusing verses on the subject of *The Obsolete*.

“If this my song its theme should wrong,
The Theme itself is sweet,
Let others rhyme the unborn time,
I sing the Obsolete.”

He, at least, was one poet who had the grace to admit this peculiar tendency. Most of them use in their imagery the works of bygone engineers. The potter's wheel, the anchor, the anvil, the lodestone and all those implements of past ages.

Dryden (1631-1700) made some rather uncomplimentary references to mining engineers and to the two metals which are the most important elements in the structure of our civilization. Even G. K. Chesterton, the modern apostle of Medievalism, would hardly go so far as to banish gold and iron from the world.

* Australian English for tube.

“Hard steel succeeded then,
And stubborn as the metal were the men:
Truth, Modesty and Shame, the world forsook;
Fraud, Avarice and Force their places took,
Then landmarks limited to each his right,
For all before was common as the light;
Nor was the ground alone required to bear
Her annual income to the crooked share;
But greedy mortals rummaging her store,
Dig'd from her entrails first the precious ore,
Which next to hell the prudent gods had laid,
And that alluring ill to sight display'd;
And double death did wretched man invade;
By steel assaulted and by gold betrayed.”

Pope (1688-1744) on the other hand found inspiration in the work of the engineer. He wrote these lines, much quoted by Samuel Smiles.

“Bid harbours open, Public Ways extend
Bid Temples worthier of God ascend;
Bid the broad Arch the dang'rous flood contain,
The Mole projected break the roaring main.
Back to his bounds their subject sea command,
And roll obedient rivers through the land.
These honours Peace to happy Britain brings
These are imperial works and worthy Kings.”

Kipling sings in McAndrew's Hymn.

“Lord, send a man like Robbie Burns to
sing the Song o' Steam.”

It is a little-known fact that Burns himself had an unique opportunity to sing the song of steam but did not do it. Nasmyth, the great engineer, who is perhaps best known by his steam hammer, tells us in his autobiography that Robert Burns was one of the party at the trial on Dalswinton Loch, in 1788, of the first vessel which was driven by steam. This was a small craft, twenty-five feet long, designed by Taylor and engineered by Symington to the order of Patrick Miller.

The party at the trial included Mr. Nasmyth's father, a celebrated portrait painter who made a drawing of the immortal little vessel, which has fortunately been preserved. The engines also are preserved at South Kensington museum. It seems to an engineer a thousand pities that Burns did not write a song about that epoch-making event, but no doubt he regarded it merely as an uncomfortable and somewhat dangerous experience. Burns did not live to see the steamship become a prac-

licable means of transport, as many years elapsed between the Dalswinton experiment and the commercial development of the steamship by Fulton and Bell.

Burns found no inspiration in this experience, but, nevertheless, he appears to have been interested in engineering and, with a friend, Nicol, called at the Carron Iron works, the first great engineering works established in Scotland. They were for some reason refused admission. They returned to their inn and Burns scratched the following lines with a diamond on a pane of window. The lines are possibly not poetry but they appear to have been his only reference to the engineers of his time.

"We can na here to view your works,
In hopes to be mair wise,
But only, lest we gang to hell,
It may be nae surprise:
But when we tirl'd at your door
Your porter dought na hear us;
Sae may, shou'd we to Helle yetts come,
Your billy Satan sair us!"

Burns thus likened iron workers to the companions of the Devil. Burns was almost wholly preoccupied with his fellow man and woman. When he did write a poem on *The Brigs of Ayr*, which he inscribed to his patron, Mr. John Ballantyne, who was Provost of Ayr, when the "New Brig" was being erected, he had to put it in the form of a dialogue between the two bridges.

Lord Tennyson does not appear to have found inspiration in machinery, although in *In Memoriam* he uses the metaphor of an engineering craft.

"Life is not an idle one
But Iron dug from central gloom
And heated hot with living fears
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom,
To shape and use.

The blacksmith, like the potter, is of ancient lineage, and is therefore admitted to the most exclusive poetical circles. Longfellow of course found direct inspiration in *The Village Blacksmith* although no doubt the village grocer might have served equally well as a model of integrity and piety.

When Rudyard Kipling wrote *McAndrew's Hymn* he should have been immediately elected an Honorary Member of every English-speaking engineering institution in the world. No poet before, nor since, has done anything to appeal to the heart of the engineer comparable with this great poem, excepting always Kipling himself. His mastery of technical terms is a never-ending wonder to engineers. Most literary men who venture to touch on science or engineering do so with a certain timidity, as those who speak in a foreign tongue. They handle

technical terms with the apologetic air of a husband doing his wife's shopping. Even when they are at ease in their temporary environment they write as onlookers. Kipling, on the contrary, writes as an engineer using the jargon of the profession. He goes further than this. In *The Night Mail*, a prose tale of aerial navigation in 2000 A.D., he uses with complete ease and familiarity the technical jargon of a class of men who have not yet been born. This quality of Kipling is apparent not only when he writes of engineering; it is characteristic of his genius when he writes of many different classes of men. This genius for the common speech of common men is in Kipling indeed "an infinite capacity for taking pains." This is illustrated by a little slip he made in the first edition of *McAndrew's Hymn*, which was published in SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE of December, 1894. Here he uses the phrase "the *slide* o' yon connectin' rod." Having found out that "slide" does not quite correctly describe the motion of the connecting rod he altered the word in later editions of the poem to "stride" which anyone who is familiar with the reciprocating engine will admit is a much better word.

Although Kipling has written much about engineers and engineering, he does not single out the engineer in himself as a person of any particular importance. Kipling writes mainly about the men who do the hard work of the world. The setting for his poems and prose stories may be "McAndrew's" engine room, the barrack-room, the officers' mess, the bridge of a tramp steamer, the river bank where prehistoric man first ventured into deep water on a hollow log, the scaffold of a medieval cathedral, or the control room of the airship of the future. His heroes are,

"the men who do the work,
For which they draw the wage."
