

<b>Institution:</b> University of Strathclyde		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D27 – English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Embedding Victorian working-class poetry, literature and song into education, heritage and the arts		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2016 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Prof Kirstie Blair	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 01/08/2016 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Professor Kirstie Blair’s research uncovered a rich history of industrial workers’ engagements with literary culture and demonstrated the cultural importance of working-class poetry in Victorian Scotland. Blair’s wider activities have enabled the public to connect with these works, through the development of educational, heritage and cultural resources. Ultimately, this has raised awareness of little-known literary cultures, promoted pride in the local poetic productions of Scotland and Northern England, and inspired the creation of new cultural artefacts. Collaborators, such as the National Railway Museum and Stanley Mills, benefited from wider audiences and new resources, and changed their practice as a result.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Professor Kirstie Blair joined the University of Strathclyde in 2016 to lead a research strand on literature and industrial heritage in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, strengthening the School of Humanities’ existing reputation for the study of working-class cultures. Blair’s research on Scottish and Northern working-class writers began at Stirling University in 2014 and continued at the University of Strathclyde from 2016–19 with funding from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals and the Carnegie and Leverhulme trusts. In researching local archives, Blair found transformative evidence of industrial workers’ engagements with literary culture, as writers, readers, and participants in networks of ‘literary’ and mutual improvement societies. In <i>Working Verse in Victorian Scotland</i> [R1] Blair demonstrates how important and influential this culture of local poetic production was, as a major component of ‘Victorian literature’ and in the everyday lives of writers and readers. Her invited contribution to a new <i>Cambridge Companion</i> [R2] explores little-known dialect poetry by working-class women in Scotland and the North of England. These publications highlight new methodologies for reading working-class writing and suggest the need to revalue ‘local’ and ‘provincial’ literatures.</p> <p>From 2016, Blair worked with museums, libraries and cultural organisations including the National Railway Museum (NRM), the National Trust for Scotland, the National Library of Scotland, Culture North Lanarkshire and Dundee Heritage Trust on collaborative PhD supervisions, miner-poet projects, and public engagement events linked to the anthology <i>Poets of the People’s Journal</i> [R3]. High-level conversations with creative practitioners, senior museum staff and archivists at these and other organisations led Blair to develop 3 key questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can intangible literary heritage be understood and represented as central to British industrial heritage?</li> <li>2. How can museums and archives incorporate this heritage into their work with local communities, particularly in post-industrial regions?</li> <li>3. How can academic researchers recover these materials and ensure that they reach a wide public audience?</li> </ol> <p>These questions formed the core of the AHRC-funded project ‘Piston, Pen &amp; Press: Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace’ with Dr Oliver Betts (NRM) and Dr Mike Sanders (University of Manchester) as Co-Is, and 15 official project partners that included those mentioned above and</p>		

others such as the New Lanark World Heritage Site and Dundee Central Library. Together, the team identified over 500 previously unknown industrial workers who authored poetry or fiction [R4], and over 200 subscription libraries and societies with literary aims.

The findings demonstrated that large numbers of industrial workers in Scotland and the North were active as writers, as readers, and in associational culture; that they were strongly engaged with literature and culture; and that their activities were seen not as separate to their industrial labour, but as integral parts of their identity as workers in 'new' professions. Indeed, as well as discovering that Victorian industrial workers produced verse for a variety of political, social, cultural and personal reasons such as activism, literacy promotion, or establishing their literary bona fides [R4], Blair uncovered commercial motivations in her investigation of advertising poetry and regional newspaper verse [R5]. Transforming understandings of the scale and sophistication of local grassroots literary culture in Scotland and the North, her research has already brought several unknown writers, such as millworker Sarah Ann Robinson, to scholarly and public attention.

### 3. References to the research (Strathclyde affiliated authors in bold)

**R1 Blair, K.** (2019), *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford University Press). ISBN: 9780198843795. [REF2]

**R2 Blair, K.** (2019), 'Dialect Poetry: Region, Class, Work', in Hughes, L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (Cambridge University Press). ISBN: 9780521646802. [Available from HEI]

**R3 Blair, K.** (2016) ed., *The Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies). ISBN: 9781906841287. [REF2]

**R4 Blair, K.** (2019), 'The Piston and the Pen: Poetry and the Victorian Industrial Worker', *Journal of the British Academy*, 7, 123–39. DOI: [10.5871/jba/007.123](https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007.123)

**R5 Blair, K.** (2018), 'Advertising Poetry, the Working-Class Poet and the Victorian Newspaper Press', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 23(1), 103–18. DOI: [10.1093/jvc/vcx003](https://doi.org/10.1093/jvc/vcx003) [REF2]

**Notes on the quality of research:** This body of research has been funded by several peer-reviewed grants, including a Carnegie Collaborative Research Grant (MacDonald (University of Glasgow, PI), Blair (University of Strathclyde, CI), Carruthers (University of Glasgow, CI); The People's Voice; GBP49,500; 2016-2018), a Field Development Grant from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (Blair (PI); Mutual Improvement Society Magazines and Victorian Periodical Culture; GBP21,756; 01/01/18-30/06/18), and an AHRC Standard Grant (Blair (PI); Piston, Pen & Press: Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace; GBP659,816; 01/09/18-31/01/22). All referenced outputs were peer-reviewed ahead of publication. **R1** was awarded the Saltire Society Research Book of the Year and the Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Prize, with the announcement stating: 'The judges found its accessibility in subject and in its writing profound. The fact that it is an important, significant piece of research did not discolour its enjoyability'.

### 4. Details of the impact

Using literary and historical texts identified in her research alongside archival material from collaborating partners, Blair produced educational resources, in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), school workshops, and museum exhibitions, in the form of banners and collated materials. Through effective sharing and employment of these resources, Blair's research has:

- Raised public awareness of the lives and experiences of the Victorian working class and promoted engagement with little-known literacy cultures;
- Influenced practice in industrial museums to include more literature, creative writing activities and online education in their learning programmes, collaborate more with other local archives and digitize archive material and research;
- Increased pride in the local poetic productions of Scotland and the North of England;
- Inspired the creation of new cultural artefacts.

### Raising public awareness of the lives and experiences of the Victorian working class and promoting engagement with little-known literacy cultures

In collaboration with museum staff, Blair developed three 4-week MOOCs hosted on FutureLearn, a major online learning platform with international reach:

- ‘Working Lives on Britain’s Railways’ (with the National Railway Museum);
- ‘Working Lives in the Coal-Mines’ (with Scottish National Mining Museum, National Coal-Mining Museum for England, Big Pit, South Wales, and Arthur Mclvor, Strathclyde);
- ‘Working Lives in the Factories & Mills’ (with Quarry Bank Mill, New Lanark, Verdant Works and Stanley Mills).

Blair embedded poetry, song and fiction identified in the Piston, Pen & Press project into these industrial history courses, prompting learners to reflect on the lives and experiences of the authors. Each course ran multiple times throughout 2019–2020, with 13,700 enrolled learners from 85 countries across the courses [S1]. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive - 97% of respondents said they had gained new knowledge and 73% said they had shared what they learned with others. Several heritage professional and volunteers reported that the courses had helped them in their work, and many learners – including those from overseas – either visited or planned to visit the museums involved in MOOC development. Several learners were inspired to undertake their own research, and many gained a real sense of their ancestors’ working lives: one with forebears ‘*in all three industries [mills, mines and railways]*’ now felt ‘*I have a much better understanding of their work and family lives*’. One person movingly described the course as ‘*priceless... When I started, my 3rd great-grandfather, Simeon, was an image on a cabinet card from the later third of the nineteenth century. This course has brought him to life and I can clearly see him walking and working in the many navy worksites we have looked at.*’ [S1] Many praised the social history insights, gaining ‘*a much deeper appreciation of what life was like for some of my ancestors and the contribution mining has made to our society*’, learning that the people featured ‘*are not “just mill workers” now. They are real people leading a hard life to survive.*’ Many drew comparisons or parallels with the present, finding the course ‘*a real eye-opener and something that should inspire charity and kindness, and a real desire to eradicate terrible injustices*’.

Blair’s exhibitions on ‘Literature in the Factories & Mills’ and ‘Literature in the Mines’ consisted of 8 banners covering both general information on reading, writing and associations, and individual examples. The ‘Factories and Mills’ exhibition ran from August 2019 to January 2020 at Verdant Works, Dundee’s Jute Museum, then Dundee Central Library, with added material and artefacts owned by the venues (26,200 visitors in total) [S1]. ‘Literature in the Mines’ joined North Lanarkshire Heritage Centre’s local poetry exhibition, ‘Rhyme and Reason’, from August to November 2019, reaching 5608 visitors. The exhibitions were also scheduled to run in Stanley Mills, New Lanark, the Scottish National Mining Museum, the National Railway Museum, and the Mitchell Library from March to August 2020 but these were postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Accompanying the exhibitions were previously unseen archival material from project partners, free poetry booklets, public talks and musical performances, which drew in an even wider audience. Musical performances included songs from 19<sup>th</sup> century authors, including several works held in Dundee Libraries’ collections, which in some cases had not been heard sung for over a century. Feedback from the organisers at Dundee Central Library noted ‘*the strength that this approach has as a way of connecting with the city’s past*’ [S2].

To continue engagement throughout the Spring 2020 lockdown, the Piston, Pen & Press research team created an online discussion group modelled on Victorian mutual improvement societies, with 15-30 regular attendees [S3]. Short videos introducing the 4 sessions and reading materials were made available on the Piston, Pen and Press website. All materials read by participants were drawn from the research; some materials had never been publicly available before. Following the success of these sessions, a further 5 sessions ran in Autumn 2020, with guest hosts from the US and South Africa presenting their own materials focused on working-class experiences [S3]. Attendees have directly contacted organisers with positive feedback: ‘*I learned a lot from the poems and our discussions*’; ‘*the sessions have helped my own research*’; ‘*I’ll be checking back*

*over the previous sessions' sources and resources' [S1]. Further engagement is supported by the dedicated Piston, Pen and Press project Twitter account, through which the researchers share updates and insights from the project alongside archival material with their 600+ followers [S1].*

### **Influencing practice in industrial museums and beyond**

As a result of increased engagement with these resources, collaborating museums have benefited from increased interest and visits. The National Railway Museum was '*extremely pleased with the international reach of the MOOC*', which '*brought new members of the public to our Institute of Railway Studies group*' and increased traffic with learners visiting the museum in person [S4]. Stanley Mills were '*especially pleased that [the MOOC] is raising awareness of Stanley Mills... and have noted the high number of comments from learners who hope to visit the mills in future*' [S5]. The exhibitions in Dundee also brought '*substantial new audiences*' [S2]. The success of these activities demonstrated new ways of working for the museums involved, with Stanley Mills adopting '*a different focus for our learning programmes, namely poetry and creative writing for both young learners and older learners and [the] possibilities for online education*' [S5]. Another benefit of the collaboration for Stanley Mills was that it '*expanded our knowledge of primary source material related to Stanley Mills and the wider textile industry*' in their region. A Macclesfield Museums staff member wrote that, since taking the 'Factories & Mills' MOOC, they were considering adding poetry and song to their offering as a way of '*making sure that we connect with the people linked to the collections*' [S6]. Working on the MOOCs led the Railway Museum to begin developing plans for digitising archive material and research, which was then used '*by both visitors and staff working from home as a learning resource*' when mandatory home-working began in March 2020 [S4]. The Railway Museum are now planning a second MOOC. For the Dundee Central Library, the exhibition represented the first formal collaboration with Verdant Works and demonstrated '*collaborations between these and other organisations involved in safeguarding and sharing the city's heritage could be highly successful again in the future*' [S2].

A substantial number of Scottish writers identified by Blair have already been added to the Catalogue of British and Irish Labouring-Class and Self-taught Poets, the established resource in the field of working-class poetry. The newly released version states: '*We are also profoundly indebted to Kirstie Blair and her team, for kindly sharing their extensive report on a large number of poetry volumes from the Mitchell Library, Glasgow... We are privileged to be able to draw on some of the results of this extremely important research*' [S7]. Blair has also been commissioned to advise on and produce a number of new entries on Scottish and Northern working-class poets for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. In October 2020, Blair was elected Vice Chair of the Scottish Transport and Industrial Collections Knowledge Network – a Subject Specialist Network with the aim of promoting care, enjoyment and engagement with heritage collections [S8].

### **Increasing appreciation of local poetic productions of Scotland and the North of England**

In late 2019, Blair conducted 28 primary school workshops (P5–7; ages 9–12) on mining heritage and local poetry in Glasgow, Dundee and North Lanarkshire schools, all but one in an area of high deprivation. Adding 2 secondary school visits and work with 2 community support groups, a total of over 950 children and adults, primarily in North Lanarkshire, participated in poetry workshops [S1]. Teachers reported the children particularly enjoying '*the interactive aspects and the link to the local area*'; '*learning about people in different professions who wrote poetry*'; and '*the "auld Scots" language*', with one teacher pointing out that they '*loved speaking Scots and great to have it reinforced that it's not slang*'. They also said their pupils were '*inspired . . . to write their own poetry*', and it was a '*super experience . . . now they can relate this to their own area and history*' [S1]. Further engagement was planned through a programme of schools engagement but has been postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Feedback from the MOOCs revealed a similar trend, as one learner living in North Lanarkshire indicated that the course on Factories & Mills '*really made me appreciate local history*', while another realised '*what a hard life miners had*' and consequently felt '*very pleased to be of working class origin*' [S1].

### Inspiring the creation of new cultural artefacts

From 2018, Victorian song and other lyrics by miners and millworkers (from 'Piston, Pen & Press' and *Working Verse*) were shared with 3 professional musicians who wrote music for selected lyrics or set them to traditional tunes [S9]. Summarising the influence of the research on their work, the Musicians stated: *'Involvement in this project has deepened our existing strong interest in and understanding of Scotland's industrial heritage, and the culture of song in which industrial workers participated'* [S9]. Their collaborative performance, 'The Factory Muses', described by an audience member as *'a wonderful and completely unique event!'* [S1], brought together factory poems from Yorkshire, Lancashire and Scotland, and was performed at Verdant Works (September 2019) and in Glasgow (November 2019), with approximately 80 attendees. One mining song was taught to P7 students in several of the school workshops. Performances, recordings, exhibitions and other activities based around research materials scheduled between March and June 2020 yet cancelled due to COVID-19 were replaced at short notice by online offerings including song and poem recordings [S9]. The musicians created video performances, which were included in the Factories & Mills MOOC [S9]. One song broadcast via Twitter attracted over 2,000 views [S1], with 2 MOOC learners commenting that it was *'really good to be able to hear the rhythms of the music as it was sung'* and *'this brought what we've been learning alive'*.

An existing collaborative relationship between Blair, a playwright and a director from Citizens Theatre led to a script in Scots based on Blair's research on the poems and autobiographies of Lanarkshire miners. The script, *A Daurk Maiter*, featuring a group of young Victorian miners who participate in a 'bachelor's club' centred on poetry recitation and song, incorporated poetry recitations by known writers such as David Wingate and unknown poems uncovered during Blair's research. As above, new music was composed for these poems, bringing together creative partners who had not previously worked together [S9]. The Playwright indicated that *'Working on the project has been pivotal to my decision to actively work more in Scots going forward'* and that he was now *'determined to work with it creatively whenever I get the opportunity'* [S10]. Expected to be a major public engagement outcome of Blair's research, performances scheduled at Citizen's Theatre from late March 2020 were subsequently postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of rehearsals, in summer 2019, Blair led a workshop with the performers – drama students from New College Lanarkshire – and a first reading of *A Daurk Maiter* was performed at the North Lanarkshire Heritage Centre in September 2019. Workshop participants repeatedly described the session as *'insightful'* and *'engaging'*, with one reporting it helped him to *'really appreciate the characters in [the] play and... get into their mindset'*, and another that she was *'definitely going to do some more research'* and that it had *'thoroughly helped to build my knowledge on the mining working class'* [S1]. Local students said they learned more about their area: to one it was *'incredibly humbling and heart-warming, as though I had stepped into the shoes of my past relatives, who were miners in Dumfries during the later decades of the 19th Century'*; another saw it as a *'beautiful way to learn and perform the history of the places where I grew up'* [S10].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1** Collated feedback and figures from Massive Open Online Courses, museum exhibitions, reading groups, primary school workshops, and performances.
- S2** Corroborating statement from Service Manager Adult Library & Information Services, Dundee City Council (28/09/2020).
- S3** Piston, Pen and Press website. <https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/reading-project/>
- S4** Corroborating statement from Assistant Director and Head Curator, National Railway Museum (14/09/2020).
- S5** Corroborating statement from Learning Officer, Historic Environment Scotland (01/05/2020).
- S6** Corroborating statement from Education Coordinator, Macclesfield Museums (07/05/2020).
- S7** A Catalogue of British and Irish Labouring-class and Self-taught Poets, c. 1700-1900.
- S8** Corroborating statement from Chairman of the Scottish Transport and Industry Collections Knowledge Network (30/11/2020).
- S9** Corroborating statement from Musicians and Project Partners on Piston, Pen and Press (22/02/2021).
- S10** Corroborating statement from Playwright and Producer, Citizens Theatre (08/09/2020).