

# Marie Joussaye's "Labor's Greeting" (1901)

Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Carole Gerson

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As Canada's first female working-class poet, Marie Joussaye Fotheringham (1864?-1949) occupies a unique position in Canadian literary history (Gerson).<sup>1</sup> Best known for "Only A Working Girl," collected in her first book, *The Songs that Quinte Sang* (1895), she authored many uncollected verses, among them "Labor's Greeting." A document that never reached its original intended reader, this poem is of interest for its dissemination history. More importantly, in its presentation of the perspective of CPR workers, Joussaye's verse manifesto remedies the apparent lack of labour voices in Canada's poetic record, an absence revealed in Kevin Flynn's recent encyclopedic analysis of Canadian railway poetry.

A self-educated poet, Joussaye deliberately aligned herself with the popular tradition exemplified by Robert Burns. In "Two Poets" (*Songs*; rpt. Gerson and Davies, 320-21), she contrasts the obscurity of Browning with the accessibility of Burns. While admiring the brilliance of Browning, "Whose muse, arrayed in robes of misty light, / Soared high above the common herd of men," she finds his acolytes "pretentious" and "pedantic," and concedes that her failure "to grasp thy subtle thought" is due to her own inadequacy: "'Tis not in thee, but me, where lies the blame." Burns, however, "A hardy, humble ploughman of the soil / Who sang his heartfelt songs in simplest words," transcends social boundaries, admired alike "in palace and in cot." She finds him the truer poet for his ability to present "The grandest thoughts couched in the simplest words, / The lowliest mind could grasp the meaning plain."

Joussaye's approach to poetry reflects her origins. Born into a working-class Belleville family, Marie Josey (as her family name was originally spelled) became a servant at the age of ten and began to contribute poems to Knights of Labor periodicals in 1886. In the early 1890s she received attention in Toronto newspapers for her involvement in organizing domestic servants in the Working Women's Protective Association. She was also a vehement advocate of Sunday street cars to enable Toronto workers and [Page 87] their families to enjoy parks and outdoor recreation on their one day of rest. By the turn of the century she had worked her way west to Vancouver, where she was living at the time of the 1901 Royal Visit of the

Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York. The Duke, grandson of the recently deceased Queen Victoria and son of Edward VI, would be named the Prince of Wales on his return to London; in 1910 he was crowned George V.

In Canada as in other industrialized countries, the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the growing militancy of the labour movement. The Knights of Labor, founded in Philadelphia in 1869, became well established in Ontario and British Columbia during the 1880s. A general union, they admitted workers regardless of skill, race or gender; during the same period, other unions were established for workers in specific trades or regions. Across Canada, organized workers sought increased wages, a shorter working day, and improved safety and working conditions; in the west, the importation of cheap Asian labour generated additional rancour. Labour activism increased at the turn of the century—one source calculates that there were 726 strikes in Canada between 1899 and 1903 (Henry 154). Fearful of untoward demonstrations and cautious about security following the recent assassination of President McKinley, the organizers of the Royal Tour of Canada in the fall of 1901 took care to limit contact between the country's common citizens and the son and daughter-in-law of the King. Only the privileged were invited to receptions and militia reviews; general spectators at processions and public events were kept well behind security lines (Henry 197). Control was also extended to written texts. Lord Minto, Canada's Governor General, insisted that every address intended for the Prince be submitted beforehand for his approval. Not surprisingly, this move "caused the most consternation among democratically inclined members of the middle class and members of the working class who wished to present their grievances to the Crown" (Henry 195).

But Marie Joussaye was not one to be deterred by bureaucracy. A staunch imperialist as well as a committed labour advocate, she resolutely composed her address to the Duke, requesting royal attention to the cause of labour. At first she followed protocol by submitting the poem to Lord Minto, but when her composition was not approved for presentation, she attempted to deliver it personally to the royal visitors. While she succeeded in handing it to "a gentleman of the reception committee" at an exclusive Vancouver luncheon on September 30, the poem never reached its destination. An undated letter to Wilfrid Laurier voices her disappointment that the Prime Minister had not come to her assistance, and that his letter [Page 88] responding to her request to intervene was characterized by an "impatient tone." She informed Laurier that she had "paid fifty dollars for the engraving and binding of the address," the result of "much saving and self-denial." Moreover, she claimed that "The poem I addressed to the Duke of Cornwall had been praised by the pens of Goldwin Smith, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling and many others," as well as having been subsequently endorsed by the labour unions. Characteristically, she reproved Laurier's attitude, informing him that "a kindlier reception...would have pleased organized labor greatly." Although probably never read by royalty, "Labor's Greeting" appeared in at least two Canadian newspapers: Vancouver's *Daily News Advertiser* on 1 October 1901, and the Halifax *Chronicle*

on 21 October. The text reproduced here follows the Vancouver version (with its consistent spelling of the key word as "labor," Joussaye's own practice in her correspondence), with occasional recourse to the Halifax version to resolve typographical errors.

The declamatory style of "Labor's Greeting," with its long lines, insistent rhythm, and profuse capitalization of key words, suits both the momentous occasion of its composition and the seriousness of its content. Setting the cause of Labor against that of Mammon, Joussaye evinces considerable rhetorical power in her frequent use of parallelism, as in "honest Labor is ground in the dust, and Greed usurps the Throne" (12), and, more ironically, "The masters fought for millions, and the strikers fought for bread" (66). While her imagery tends to be conventional ("we will keep her memory green" [32]; "You will eat the bread and drink the wine bought with his ill-got gold" [75]), its very familiarity situates the poem within the context of labour anthems, church hymns, and old ballads that echo through oral culture. Repetition is one of her most effective devices, as in her description of workers' children as "half clothed, half taught, half fed" (51) and in her reiteration of "and another filled his place" (30, 42). While the antecedents of such allusions would have been clear to her audience of 1901, current readers require further elucidation.

Wade Henry points out that "Labor's Greeting," while a general call to mediate the plight of working people, refers to recent labour friction surrounding the CPR. During the summer of 1901 there was a bitter strike by nearly 5000 CPR men, some 700 of them in British Columbia. "Although the ten-week long strike ended a couple of weeks before the Duke and Duchess's landing in Quebec, tempers still ran high among track men and their supporters. Particularly galling to them was the way in which the CPR was showcased during the Royal Tour and its executives accorded prominent places in the Tour's programmes" (213). **[Page 89]**

Also galling to Joussaye's idealistic royalism were the knighthoods, baronetcies, and other honours heaped on the CPR magnates who had grown rich from the underpaid toil of the labourers who performed the tasks of building and maintaining the railroad. She argues that the royal honours bestowed on Donald Smith, George Stephen, William Van Horne and Thomas Shaughnessy (detailed in the notes to the poem) are as ill-deserved as their wealth, while true nobility resides in the unheralded knights of labour who laid the track and maintained the trains. However, she ensures that no blame attaches to the British royal family themselves, who are characterized as the heirs and custodians of the Magna Carta. Presenting the "toil-marked hand" (92) of Labor to the "honest, upright man" (101) on the British throne, the poem directly links loyal workers with their sovereign, side-stepping the "sons of Mammon" whose ill-gotten gold has earned them seats "at the King's right hand" (80). Insofar as social class is concerned, Joussaye's vision of the Empire is egalitarian: the citizens of Canada, "a free-born nation, where every man is a king" (90), have the right to meet their sovereign "with level glance, as man should speak to man" (104). However, her antipathy towards "alien labor" (58) reflects the racism exacerbated by the importation of Chinese workers, whose apparent docility

and willingness to accept lower wages angered Canada's unionized workers. While their presence in Joussaye's poem helps fill the absence identified by F.R. Scott in "All Spikes But the Last," his well-known critique of E. J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*, in which he asks, "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?" (Scott 64), her attitude is one which Scott would have found abhorrent. Speaking on behalf of Anglo-Canadian labourers, Marie Joussaye's combination of Imperialist loyalty and labourist fervour belongs to a long-lost era, when it was possible to declare faith in the nobility of work while idealizing the head that wore the British crown.

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## Note

1. I would like to thank James Doyle, Janet Friskney, Wade A. Henry, and Mark Leier for their advice and suggestions, and Nancy Earle for her expert proof-reading. [\[back\]](#) [Page 91]

# Labor's Greeting

To His Royal Highness, the Duke of Cornwall and York.  
Canada, 1901

GREETING!—

Great is the rule of the bondsmen, Great is the lord of the thrall,  
But first in an nation of free men, our King is greater than all.  
This is the word of our message to the heir of the British throne,  
A greeting from loyal hearts and true in the Land of the Northern Zone.  
When the Queen of the North stands ready to welcome her future  
King,                   5  
Make room in the ranks for Labor, let Toil her tribute bring.

We know that only the statesman, the soldier, the scribe, the priest,  
The high and rich and mighty may sit at the Royal feast,  
But we claim this right for Labor, the right to grasp your hand,  
To look in your eyes and speak to you as man should speak to  
man.                   10  
The right to tell of the struggle in the Land of the Northern Zone,  
Where honest Labor is ground in the dust, and Greed usurps the Throne.

On the Island of Magna Charta, near ancient Runnymede,  
A charter was signed by a British King that made us free indeed;  
Crumbled to dust is the Royal hand that signed the great  
decree,                   15  
Yet our Kings maintain unto this day that Britons shall be free;  
And we say to those who might make us slaves by the might of their  
gleaming  
gold,  
That the freedom given by God and King shall never be bought or sold.

Long have we bowed 'neath the terrible yoke of Greed, Oppression, and  
Wrong,  
And the cry of our souls went up to God, "How long, O Lord, how  
long?"<sup>20</sup>           20  
And sometimes we wondered if God was dead, or if He had refused to hear  
The prayers of the People; but God has heard and the hour is drawing near

When Greed and Labor shall strive no more, for Greed shall be  
overthrown,  
And the Scales of Justice shall balance at last, and Labor shall have her  
own.

It is barely a score of years ago in the history of our  
land, 25

Since ocean was wed to ocean<sup>26</sup> by the railroad's iron band,  
And cities sprang up like magic in the wake of the rushing train,  
And the master reaped the yellow gold as the husbandman the grain,  
Until, sated at last, he stepped aside to bask in the Royal grace  
Bearing his harvest of golden grain—and another filled his  
place.<sup>30</sup> 30

Think not that we breathe reproach or blame to that noble Mother-Queen;  
Ever within our loyal hearts we will keep her memory green.<sup>32</sup>  
God's eye alone is swift to see the blood on Mammon's hand, [Page 92]  
And our Queen was only human, she did not understand.  
She never knew of those free-born men slaving their lives  
away, 35  
Striving to live as best they could on ninety cents a day.

The years went by and the deed of shame was enacted once again,  
Years of hopeless and grinding toil to thousands of working men:  
Thousands of paupers throughout the land but the world had no need to  
care  
So long as Mammon could point with pride to one more  
millionaire, 40  
Until, at last, it came his turn to bask in the Royal grace,  
And stepped aside with his money-bags, and — another filled his place.<sup>42</sup>

Once more the shameful story as told in former years;  
But the toilers had grown weary of hunger, sweat, and tears.  
So they waited on the masters and told them in manly  
way 45  
They could not live on the paltry sum of ninety cents a day.  
And the masters ceased a moment from counting their golden store,  
Pondered awhile, and then agreed to give them ten cents more.

"Little is better than nothing," 'tis a bitter truth, we have learned:  
For a time they bend to the yoke again, but their hearts within them  
burned 50  
As they thought of their little children, half clothed, half taught, half fed;

Strong men toiling from morn till night, and their loved ones lacking bread;  
And they asked once more for a living wage, and another boon they craved:  
To be treated as British subjects and not as men enslaved.

It was little enough to ask for, but it roused the masters' wrath,  
55

And they sought to sweep the Unions forever from their path.  
The laws of the King and People they calmly set aside  
And flooded alien labor through the country like a tide.  
They filled the land with refuse, the scum of all the earth,  
And paid them more than they refused to men of British  
birth. 60

We swear we kept our good King's laws through all that bitter strife,  
When Labor grappled with her foes and struggled for her life;  
And Labor's strong arm conquered, and they tell us it is best,  
Since we have won the battle,<sup>64</sup> to let the matter rest,  
Yet one more truth stands out plain and clear when all is done and said—  
65

The masters fought for millions, and the strikers fought for bread.

They hold the country by the throat, men tremble at their nod;  
The King's laws have been set aside, even as the laws of God;  
They have trampled on your father's laws, broken them one by one,  
And now they stand, with outstretched hand, to greet your father's  
son. 70

Their chief will entertain you as you travel through the land,  
And there are none to warn you of the stain upon his hand.<sup>72</sup>

Prince! We have told our story, do you wonder that we frown,  
To see our King do honor to the hand that holds us down?  
You will eat the bread and drink the wine bought with his ill-got  
gold, 75

And your father's sword will dub him Knight, the same old tale retold.<sup>76</sup>  
We read the future by the past; he will bask in the Royal grace,  
Living at ease, while we starve, and slave for the other in his place. [Page  
93]

Have we no heroes, no statesmen, no genius in all the land,  
That only the sons of Mammon shall sit at the King's right  
hand? 80

Since we have sworn to give our lives to save the King and Crown,  
Why should the King heap favors in the hands that hold us down?  
Yet the favor of kings can not prevail against Labor's righteous ban



Whom the King delights to honor, we will honor — if we can.

Not that we grudge him his title; for such things we do not  
care. 85

Labor's true Knight<sup>86</sup> can afford to smile at the toy of the millionaire.  
Some souls are noble, some are mean, as Nature hath decreed;  
If King and sword can mend her work, we wish the task God-speed.  
Yet an empty title bestowed by man must count as a trifling thing  
In the eyes of a free-born nation, where every man is a  
king. 90

Prince! we are only the working-class, our ways and speech are plain.  
But the toil-marked hand we offer you is free from crimson stain.  
On the honest hand of Labor no Royal eye need frown;  
It has built up thrones and empires when Greed has pulled them down,  
And Labor's love and loyalty are offered with her  
hand, 95  
You will find no truer hearts than ours in all this goodly land.

And as for you, Dear Lady! True Princess and True Wife!<sup>97</sup>  
May Heaven's choicest blessings go with you all thro' life!  
And when you reach old England's shore a boon we ask of thee,  
Will you tell the King, your father, that his people o'er the  
sea 100  
Are proud to own as Sovereign an honest, upright man,  
And will serve the good King Edward with willing heart and hand!

Prince, will you swear an oath with us, pledging both heart and hand,  
Standing erect with level glance, as man should speak to man?  
As you to your people are true and just, as you to your oath are  
true: 105  
True to our heritage and your trust, so we will be true to you.  
But another oath we have sworn to keep in the Land of the Northern Zone  
—  
Mammon shall rule no more in the land, and Labor shall have her own.

Written in behalf of the Wage-Earners, by MARIE JOUSSAYE

## Notes



26 *ocean was wed to ocean* The Canadian Pacific Railway was incorporated in 1881 and completed in 1885. [\[back\]](#)

30 *and another filled his place* In 1888, William Van Horne became the second president of the CPR, succeeding George Stephen, whose founding presidency had commenced in 1880. Stephen was created a baronet in 1886; after moving to England in 1888, he was raised to the peerage as Baron Mount Stephen in 1891. Another imperial honour was accorded to Stephen's cousin, the financier and politician Sir Donald Smith. One of the chief backers of the CPR, Smith was chosen to drive in the last spike on 7 November 1885. In 1896, he was appointed high commissioner for Canada in the **[Page 94]** United Kingdom. [\[back\]](#)

32 *we will keep her memory green* After Queen Victoria died 22 January 1901, her grandson's Royal Tour the following autumn was modified to reflect a sense of mourning. [\[back\]](#)

42 *another filled his place* Sir William Van Horne, knighted in 1894, served as the second president of CPR from 1888 to 1899. He was succeeded by Thomas George Shaughnessy, who became vice-president of the CPR in 1891, and served as its third president from 1899 to 1913. [\[back\]](#)

64 *Since we have won the battle* "Among the earliest and most notable large-scale disputes in railways was the cross-Canada strike of CPR track maintenance workers, which at its peak involved some 5,000 men from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from June 17 to August 21, 1901. The main issue...was the refusal of the Canadian Pacific Railway to recognize the trackmen's union or to enter into any kind of collective agreement with it. The dispute was finally settled through the appointment of a board of conciliation" (Jamieson 77). [\[back\]](#)

72 *the stain upon his hand* In his public life, Governor General Minto (1898-1904), who organized the Royal Tour, was seen as a "stiff, arbitrary pro-consul intent on ruling Canada with an iron hand" (Millar 79). In his private life, he was "blazingly indiscreet" (Gwyn 296-7) about his six-year relationship with beautiful young Lola Powell. In contrast to the high-minded Aberdeens, whom they succeeded, the Mintos were perceived as a "glossy and worldly couple" (Gwyn 295) more interested in pleasure than in social reform. [\[back\]](#)

76 *the same old tale retold* Shaughnessy was nominated for a knighthood by Lord Minto in 1900, and was made a Knight Bachelor in October 1901 (Cruse and Griffiths 278). [\[back\]](#)

86 *Labor's true Knight* Founded in Philadelphia in 1869, the Knights of Labor soon spread into Canada. Unlike unions geared to specific trades or regions, it embraced all workers, regardless of skill, race, or gender, and emphasized cooperation and education. [\[back\]](#)

97 *True Princess and True Wife* Born as Princess Mary of Teck, the Duchess was well schooled in the graces befitting royalty. [\[back\]](#)

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