We Have Fed You All for a Thousand Years

Travels of a Protest Poem



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A Humble Reminder : To the Propertied Classes

(Slightly altered from Rudyard Kipling's Ode in praise of English Enterprise.)

We have fed you all for a thousand years,
And you hail us still unfed,
Though there's never a pound of all your pounds
But marks the workers' dead;
We have yielded our best to give you rest,
And you lie on a crimson wool,
For if blood be the price of England's wealth,
Good God, we ha' paid in full.

There's never a mine blown skyward now
But we're buried alive for you;
There's never a wreck drifts shoreward now
But it's we are the ghastly crew;
Go, reckon our dead by the forges red,
And the factories where we spin;
If blood be the price of England's wealth,
Good God, we ha' paid it in.

We have fed you all for a thousand years,
For that was our doom, you know,
From the days when you chained us in your fields
To the strike of a week ago;
You have eaten our lives and our babes and wives,
And we're told it's your legal share;
But if blood be the price of England's wealth,
Good God, we ha' bought it fair.

N.

In September 1893 the London anarchist newspaper *Freedom : A Journal of Anarchist Communism* published a poem called 'A Humble Reminder : To the Propertied Classes', credited to 'N.'[1] It's an anti-capitalist protest, lamenting the 'workers' dead' whose deaths enriched those 'propertied classes'. It rails at the rich 'We have fed you all for a thousand years, / And you hail us still unfed'. I do not know who 'N.' was, though they seem to be connected to the *Freedom* milieu. *Freedom* had published another poem by them, 'The Pet Voter', in August 1892.[2] Max Nettlau used the same initial when writing in *Freedom* in June 1891; the Fabian socialist Edith Nesbit had a poem 'A Word For The Children' in *Freedom* in February 1891 ('The right to give help is your own, / The right to claim it theirs.') Neither seems a convincing candidate for the authorship of this poem.

[1] https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/qrfmk0
[2] https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/31zfks

The Kipling connection

'N.' introduced their poem by saying it was 'slightly altered from Rudyard Kipling's Ode in praise of English Enterprise.' That's a reference to Kipling's 'Song of the Dead' published four months earlier in *The English Illustrated Magazine* (May 1893). 'N.'s address to the propertied classes 'For if blood be the price of England's wealth, / Good God, we ha' paid in full' rewrites Kipling's address to the sea 'If blood be the price of admiralty, / Lord God, we ha' paid in full!'.[3] The 'Humble Reminder' changes Kipling's poem – but leans heavily upon it. Mark Leier said 'strictly speaking the poem is not a parody of Kipling's poem but a re-working of the words based on the original verse and meter.'[4] It reminds me of Utah Philips' comment on IWW songmaking: 'The Wobblies liked to steal the hymn tunes 'cos they were pretty and change the words so they made more sense.'[5]

The connection to Kipling persisted. He was credited in many of the reprints (inevitable, perhaps, given that the author remained unknown and their debt to Kipling was clear). There were even articles discussing what it would mean if the poem were by Kipling.[6]

Reprinted and recited

Once printed, it was always possible for the poem to reappear, and this one spread beyond the anarchist press, becoming a standard of labour movement papers. The title often changed, varying from 'The Cry of Toil' to 'The Capitalist'. Just as the connection to Kipling is sometimes there and sometimes not, the text varies between the poetic 'ha'' to the everyday 'have'.

Apparently a version was published in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1895.[7] The Portland anarchist newspaper *The Firebrand* reprinted the poem (anonymously) as 'The Workers Outcry' in 1897.[8] Changes had been made to Americanise the text: instead of pounds the third line talks of 'there's never a dollar of all your wealth'.

Sometimes you can read about the poem's life off the printed page. In May 1897 Miss Olive Keep recited 'We have fed you all for a thousand years' at a gathering of the Socialist Labor Party.[9]. In August 1899, *The Carpenter*, a union journal for 'Carpenters, Stair Builders, Machine Wood Workers, Planing Mill Men, and Kindred Interests' reprinted the 'Firebrand version' (with credit).[10] In 1904 the poem reappeared as 'The Price of England's Wealth' in Glasgow's *The Voice of Labour*.[11] This version talks of 'sovereigns' rather than 'pounds' or 'dollars' but there are other changes: I can't tell if it's rewritten from the *Freedom* or *Firebrand* version.

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[3] See https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_dead.htm

[4] 'Kipling Gets a Red Card,' *Labour/Le Travail* n.31 (Spring 1993), 163–8.

[5] Utah Phillips, intro to 'Dump the Bosses Off Your Back' on his album *We Have Fed You All for a Thousand Years* (1983).

[6] See 'The New Kipling' in Brisbane's *Daily Standard* Saturday 2 May 1914. https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/178878885

[7] 'The Cry of Labor', Mar 24, 1895 in the *Sunday News*. Not seen, reference from: https://weneverforget.org/hellraisers-journal-from-the-spokane-industrial-worker-cry-of-toilwe-have-fed-you-all-for-a-thousand-years/

[8] *The Firebrand : For Burning Away Of The Cobwebs of Ignorance and Superstition*] March 7 1897. https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/v41r69

[9] *The times* (Washington [D.C.]), May 3, 1897 https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85054468/1897-05-03/ed-1/

[10] https://archive.org/details/carpenter19unit/mode/2up? Page 7

[11] https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/nk9c3s

The anarchist journal *Mother Earth* ('published every 15th of the month') reprinted 'The Cry of Toil' (credited to Kipling) in April 1908.[12] On April 18, 1908 it appeared in the IWW's *Industrial Union Bulletin* (also credited to Kipling).[13] Once the poem was reprinted in the IWW songbook, and was later put to music ('about 1916' by Rudolf von Liebich), it was firmly established as a classic of working class protest.

In November 1913 strikers in Auckland used a line from the poem on their banner during the 1913 Waterfront Strike: 'If blood be the price of your cursed wealth, good God we have bought it fair'.[14] It's not often we get the names of people who helped circulate the text but 'Gordon' suggested it (as 'The Workers' Answer') in the 1917 compilation *New songs for Butte Mining Camp.*[15]

As 'We Have Fed You All for a Thousand Years' this poem is possibly the most widely reprinted item from *Freedom*. In March 1969 it was reprinted (from the IWW songbook, credited to an 'unknown proletarian') on the front of the third issue of the *Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross*. The band Palm Ghosts released a version in August 2026. Questions remain: Who was N? How did it get into *Mother Earth*? If anyone sees any evidence, please let us know.

Image: A protest march in Auckland during Waterfront Strike; Price Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library by William Archer Price, (1866–1948) https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.125674

[12] https://archive.org/details/mother-earth/Mother%20Earth%20v03n02%20%281908–04%29%20%28-covers%20Harvard%20DSR%29/

[13] https://archive.org/details/v2n08-apr-18-1908-iub/mode/2up?q=%22we+have+fed+you+all+for+a+thousand+years%22

[14] https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22878480

[15] https://archive.org/details/newsongsforbutte00unse/

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KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library No. 122, October 2026

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