Between February 1903 and June 1906 William Anderson, a coalman with St Cuthbert’s Co-operative Society, Edinburgh, intermittently kept a journal. The final entries describe his voyage to Canada where he was to remain until his death in 1942. He and his wife Liz started a large family in Scotland. Their youngest daughter Miss Olwen Anderson has transcribed her father’s diary and has thus made available an important addition to Scottish working class literature. The title is her own. When a future professor at McMaster commented that ‘not many ordinary men kept diaries’ she replied ‘My father was no ordinary man’. The title is timely since, as these words are being written the British electorate has just returned for a third term a prime minister who continues to blether about ‘ordinary people’ without understanding that nobody is ‘ordinary’.

Bill Anderson was, unquestionably, a remarkable individual though ironically much of the value in his pages lies in the ‘ordinariness’ of his everyday life. He worked a 54 hour, six day week, 51 weeks of the year at a filthy and exhausting job which he clearly detested. The return to work after a holiday was ‘a very disheartening thought’ (p. 81). His employment receives little mention but he reveals problems with his foreman and he had a request to ‘go on the cart’ turned down. On a frosty morning the coal-bags ‘were like barrels’ (p. 167). An ironic but heartfelt entry celebrated his ‘beloved employment of coal carrying. What a glorious vocation and what a prospect – climbing stairs forever until laid aside in premature age and then after a life of industry’ (p. 106).

Not surprisingly Bill Anderson was a socialist, a member of the Social Democratic Federation whose meetings he regularly attended. His journal contains references to John MacLean of ‘Red Clyde’ fame though he does not appear to have made much of an impact (pp. 144–5, 153). The death of a child prompted the thought that there was no worthwhile future in any case for working-class children – ‘Nothing but misery, and hard knocks, and hard working for a living or rather a starving. Man’s life in the working classes is not enviable’ (p. 23). A different kind of depression generated an untypical outburst. ‘What a thankless task it is working on behalf of the working classes’ (p. 34). Apathy was, as ever, the greatest enemy of the subordinate classes.

Anderson could not be accused of being apathetic. He was an active member of St Cuthbert’s Young Men’s Guild which he attended on Sunday mornings for study of the scriptures and on Thursday evenings for literary debate. He belonged to the Ancient Order of Free Gardeners and he was a sick steward for the Sons of Temperance Friendly Society, a group which endlessly debated the relationship between drink and poverty. In the cause of self-improvement he joined night classes in French, economics, arithmetic and bookkeeping, at which two latter subjects he was a self confessed ‘duffer’. He won the poetry prize at Heriot Watt College where he studied literature and composition.

His busy schedule placed something of a strain upon his marriage particularly as both parents adjusted to the birth of their first daughter. He willingly did his share of the housework but occasionally tempers would flare. ‘I am under the rule of a stern feminine hand’ (p. 20). Anderson appears faintly embarrassed by these marital spats since he was clearly devoted to his wife. He also spent a surprising amount of time with his children. ‘When the Doctor broke the news to me that it was a boy, I ate my kipper as if it were a
beefsteak" (p. 125). That son was 4½ years old when he died in Toronto. One disruptive aspect of family life, briefly mentioned since no doubt painful, was that Anderson’s mother sued him for aliment, at the same time bad-mouthing his wife.

Like many active and productive people Anderson was obsessed about wasting time; he was deeply embarrassed by his own capacity for laziness. ‘I believe I have a good brain, but like the rest of my body it does not like to be harassed’ (p. 34). He successfully composed poems and essays for publication but was frustrated because ‘there are times when I feel as if I could write for a long time and times that I cannot write a bit’ (p. 46). Given his occupation, his commitments and his distractions it is truly a wonder that he wrote anything at all, but he produced pieces on William Cobbett and Robert Fergusson, among others. He was devoted to Burns and he enjoyed the theatre though he considered the new ‘animated pictures’ to be ‘poor entertainment’ (p. 91).

Entertainment otherwise involved browsing at the bookstalls though he was usually too poor to buy. He attended the odd football match — Celtic 4, St Bernards 0. He visited the carnival or ‘shows’ in Waverley Market at New Year. He and his family were among 1800 people who went to Arbroath on the Co-op day trip. At weekends he took walks with his family and friends.

At several points he notices beggars singing in the streets or in backyards for money. Anderson himself wrote songs and jokes which he sold to entertainers, notably the comedian Sandy Glen. But ever-present in Anderson’s journal is Death which constantly haunts his pages. Illness was everywhere (though doctors made house-calls on Sundays). Men were ‘done at 44’. Children and young adults followed the old to the grave. Funerals and cemetery visits were frequent enough to be considered part of popular culture at the time.

Bill Anderson mentioned the possibility of emigrating to Canada on the first page of his diary. An unfortunate gap for the first half of 1906 conceals his motives in actually making the momentous decision but he recorded his journey to the St Lawrence in June of that year. Thus at the age of 31 he found employment with Massey-Harris of Toronto. Miss Anderson has added a Canadian epilogue which indicates that her father’s life did not become much easier in his adopted country. His socialism remained with him to the end.

This is a fascinating book and Miss Anderson is to be commended for arranging publication. Edinburgh libraries, however, should be rapped for publishing a book which will become a bibliographer’s nightmare, without author, editor or, disgracefully, date of publication.

This publication gives voice to a section of Scottish society seldom heard. William Anderson’s journal is a little pretentious, mostly self-deprecating, but above all, honest; the essential decency of the man comes through in almost every entry. He could wax eloquent about his native city as he viewed from Braid Hill the ‘Old Town black with the stamp of many centuries’ (p.123). He could be mischievous. The Victoria Day holiday prompts the reflection — ‘We are celebrating the birthday of a dead queen ... If we must celebrate one why not the lot? That would run us in for a holiday nearly every day’ (p. 71). And he could be rather self-consciously reflective ‘Our lives are like one short year of time which flies past and is succeeded by another generation’ (p. 29). It is a pity that Anderson did not, apparently, maintain his journal in Canada but for what survives we should be grateful.

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