

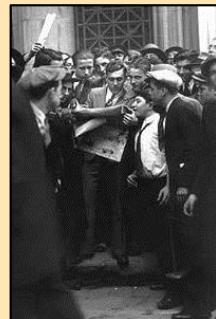


The Great Depression began in 1929 with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange. It is generally described as lasting until the onset of World War II, although much of the poverty persisted longer.

As well as the economic catastrophe, an ecological tragedy occurred because of the decision to promote grain-farming in the US Prairies. This made the land hypersensitive to drought, and resulted in crop-loss and dust-storms. Small family-farms were replaced by large conglomerates, but even they could not reclaim the land.

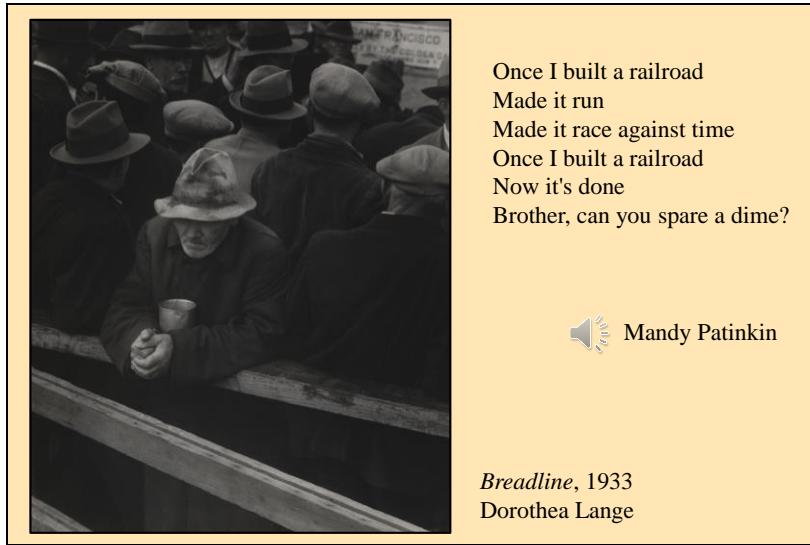
### Wall Street Crash

On October 24, 1929 (Black Tuesday), after a month of instability, the New York Stock Exchange finally showed a major drop in stock prices. Despite a brief rally, the Dow-Jones Industrial Average lost 89% of its peak value over the next month.



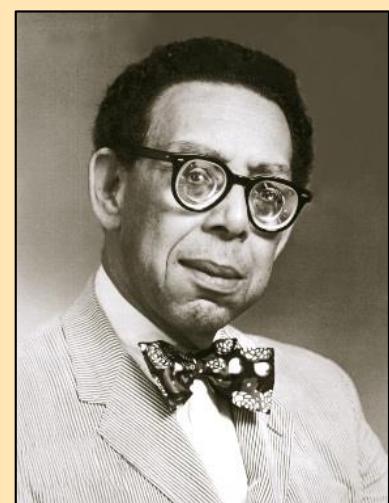
The causes of the crash were credit-based speculation which had driven the prices up and then panic-selling when the prices started to fall. Fortunes were lost, businesses became bankrupt, and mass unemployment ensued.

The Wall Street Crash occurred as a result of unrestrained capitalism. Convinced that invested money would just keep increasing, many people borrowed to invest. With the collapse of the market, the rich could ride out the economic downturn (and become richer).



This song was part of the 1932 musical review *Americana*. The melody is based on a Russian-Jewish lullaby. Republicans thought that the song was anti-capitalist propaganda and tried to ban it from the radio.





### Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

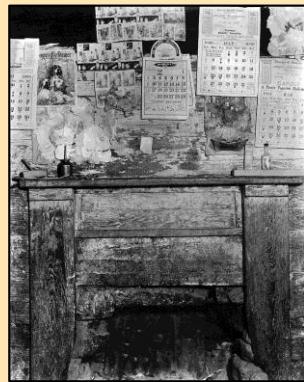
Hayden grew up in a Detroit ghetto area called "Paradise Valley." Since he was severely myopic, he was unable to participate in sports and other childhood activities, but he read extensively. He worked as a writer for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. He served as the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. In the early 1940s, he converted to the Baha'i faith.

Robert Hayden studied for his Masters' degree at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). He was significantly affected by W. H. Auden, who was a visiting professor there. Hayden was the first black US Poet Laureate (or consultant to the Library of Congress as the office was initially called).

Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueback cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?



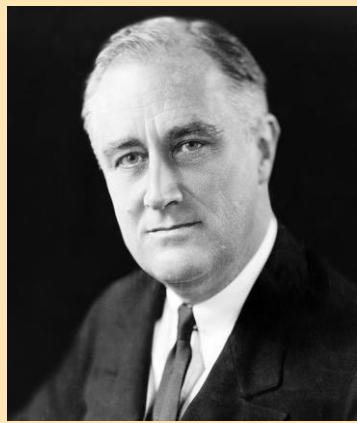
*Fireplace, 1936*  
Walker Evans,



Hayden's poem about growing up in poverty is one of the great poems. Despite troubles and fights, the family bond was the only way one could survive. "Love's austere and lonely offices" are the necessary things we do for those we love.

### Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945)

In 1921, Roosevelt became paralyzed from the waist down from polio. He never accepted this as a defeat. He served as Governor of the state of New York from 1928-1932. In 1932, he was elected president of the United States on the pledge of "a new deal for the American people." He was undaunted by the economic panic – "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." His policies of providing government jobs and loans for the poor acted as a priming pump for the economy.



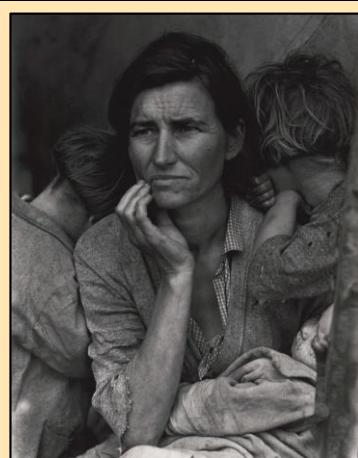
### Work Project Administration

Roosevelt set up the Work Project Administration (WPA) to provide government-paid work for the large numbers of unemployed. Most of the workers were involved in infrastructure projects such as the Hoover Dam.

Writers, photographers and artists were employed to document the state of the nation and its people.



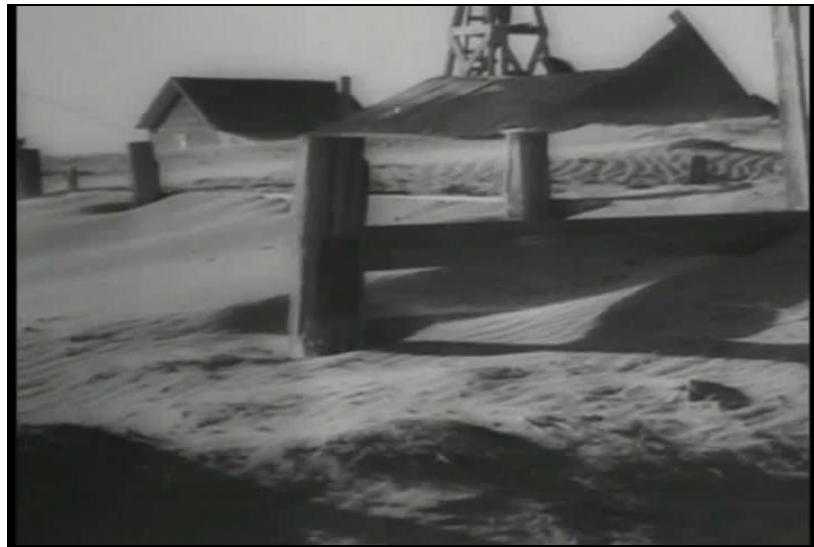
Ansel Adams, 1942



Migrant Mother, 1936  
Dorothea Lange

### The Dust Bowl

The prairie of North America was originally covered with grass and buffalo. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was used for cattle ranching. Then farmers began to plant wheat. World War I raised the price of wheat, and the government encouraged wheat-farming in the whole region. Drought came in the 1930s, and the whole of the prairies, no longer held together by the natural grasses, became desert. The farmers moved west to California. The 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* dealt with this huge exodus. A 1936 movie by Pare Lorentz *The Plow that Broke the Plains* documented the catastrophe.



This clip is from the 1936 Pare Lorenz movie *The Plough that Broke the Plains*. The movie was sponsored by the US Government. Some of the cinematography was by Paul Strand. Virgil Thomson contributed music. The recitation is by Floyd King. (Both music and narration have been re-recorded). The movie can be downloaded from [https://archive.org/details/plow\\_that\\_broke\\_the\\_plains](https://archive.org/details/plow_that_broke_the_plains)

The text of the commentary is strikingly poetic:

Baked out – blown out – and broke!  
Year in, year out, uncomplaining they fought  
the worst drought in history  
their stock choked to death on the barren land...

their homes were nightmares of swirling dust  
night and day.

And the movie uses poetic techniques – the cars turning into the camp are like a refrain.

A later movie, *The River* (1938), documented the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority to counter the tendency of the Mississippi River to flood.



This photograph shows one of the worst dust storms ever experienced.

### Dust Storm Disaster

On the fourteenth day of April  
Of nineteen thirty-five  
There struck the worst of dust storms  
That ever filled the sky.

You could see that dust storm comin'  
The cloud looked deathlike black  
And through our mighty nation  
It left a dreadful track.



Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) was named after President Woodrow Wilson. In the 1930s he became a travelling folk-singer. As well as traditional ballads, he wrote his own songs protesting about the conditions of the poor, and the exploitation of the workers. He worked with Pete Seeger in a group called the Almanac Singers. Guthrie was a Communist sympathizer – the

slogan “This machine kills fascists” was often affixed to his guitar. Guthrie’s most famous song *This Land is your Land* (1940) argued against the private ownership of land. Woody Guthrie died in 1967 of Huntington’s Disease, a degenerative neurological disorder characterized by dementia and movement disorders. His son Arlo became a folksinger in the 1960s.



The photograph shows the aftermath of a dust storm – this particular one in South Dakota in 1936. Unknown photographer working for the WPA.



**Donald Justice**  
**(1925-2004)**

Justice grew up during the Depression. He was initially interested in music and he studied composition at the University of Miami. However, he decided that he might be more talented as a writer and finally graduated in English. He obtained his doctorate at the University of Iowa, where he later became a professor. According to Richard Stern, his poetry is “faintly tropical, faintly melancholy, musical, affectionate, a fixity of evanescence.”

Several of Donald Justice’s poems are quoted in the 1981 novel John Irving novel *Hotel New Hampshire*. He was probably the only living poet to have played a significant role in a best-selling novel. Irving had studied with Justice at the University of Iowa.

### Pantoum of the Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy  
**Simply by going on and on,**  
 Without end and with little apparent meaning.  
**Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.**

**Simply by going on and on**  
**We managed. No need for the heroic.**  
**Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.**  
**I don't remember all the particulars.**

**We managed. No need for the heroic.**  
 There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.  
**I don't remember all the particulars.**  
 Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

read by  
 Kurt Milberger



Justice chose the pantoum form for his poem on the Depression. The pantoum originated in the folk poetry of Malaya. The form was introduced to European writing by Victor Hugo. Charles Baudelaire's *Harmonie du Soir* (1857) is a famous early example of the form in French:

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige  
 Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;  
 Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir;  
 Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;  
 Le violon frémît comme un cœur qu'on afflige;  
 Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!  
 Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

The pantoum is written in four line stanzas. The essential feature of the form is that the second and fourth line of one stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the subsequent stanza. Rhyming may occur (as in Baudelaire) but not always (as in Justice). The repeating lines may or may not be exactly the same.

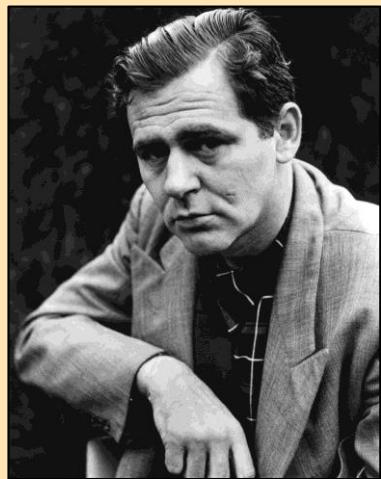
The repetition can have several effects. In Baudelarie, it seems like an incantation of the night. In Justice, it represents the way one survived during the Depression – “simply by going on”

There is a fine irony in the line  
 Thank god no one said anything in verse.

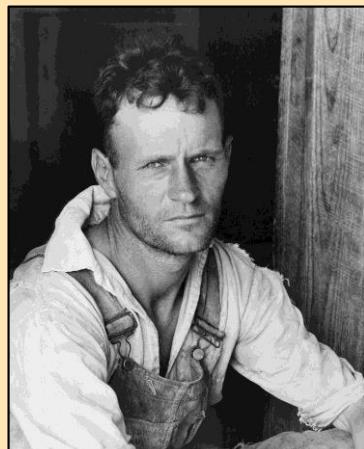
Poetry and verse are often considered the same. However, some people distinguish them using various contradictory criteria: verse is bad poetry; verse is poetry with rhyme; verse is popular.

### James Agee (1909-1955)

Agee was educated at various boarding schools, among which was the Saint Andrews School for Mountain Boys, where he began a lifelong relationship with Father Flye. After graduating from Harvard University, he became a journalist. In 1936 he accepted an assignment from Fortune magazine to document the lives of Alabama sharecroppers together with the photographer Walker Evans. This led to the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Afterwards, Agee worked as a novelist (*A Death in the Family*) screenwriter and a film critic.



Agee was a screenwriter on the movies *The African Queen* (1951) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).



Floyd Burroughs  
by Walker Evans, 1936

### Ecclesiasticus 44 (Book of Sirach)

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.

....  
And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.

But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.  
With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant.

The title of Agee's book comes from the *Book of Sirach Chapter 44*. This is one of the Apocrypha. It is not included the King James Version of the Bible but is in the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible (often under the title *Ecclesiasticus* – not to be confused with Ecclesiastes). The pertinent verses are 9-10 – they concern the men “who have no memorial,” but who, nevertheless, were “men of mercy.”

**Sirach 44:**

- <sup>1</sup> Let us now praise famous men,  
and our fathers in their generations.
- <sup>2</sup> The Lord apportioned to them great glory,  
his majesty from the beginning.
- <sup>3</sup> There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,  
and were men renowned for their power,  
giving counsel by their understanding,  
and proclaiming prophecies;
- <sup>4</sup> leaders of the people in their deliberations  
and in understanding of learning for the people,  
wise in their words of instruction;
- <sup>5</sup> those who composed musical tunes,  
and set forth verses in writing;
- <sup>6</sup> rich men furnished with resources,  
living peaceably in their habitations—
- <sup>7</sup> all these were honored in their generations,  
and were the glory of their times.
- <sup>8</sup> There are some of them who have left a name,  
so that men declare their praise.
- <sup>9</sup> And there are some who have no memorial,  
who have perished as though they had not lived;  
they have become as though they had not been born,  
and so have their children after them.
- <sup>10</sup> But these were men of mercy,  
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
- <sup>11</sup> their prosperity will remain with their descendants,  
and their inheritance to their children's children.
- <sup>12</sup> Their descendants stand by the covenants;  
their children also, for their sake.
- <sup>13</sup> Their posterity will continue for ever,  
and their glory will not be blotted out.
- <sup>14</sup> Their bodies were buried in peace,  
and their name lives to all generations.
- <sup>15</sup> Peoples will declare their wisdom,  
and the congregation proclaims their praise.



This photograph of *Alabama Sunrise* is by Frank Emory.

<http://www.frankemory.com/articles/cherokeerockvillage.html>

and casually, and with rending triumph, the signal is delivered on the dusk:  
the sure wild glittering yell of a rooster: light on a lifted sword.

... he is taken whole; he clenches the whole strength of his body and his  
fiery soul into one fist, and strives it at the sky, all his strength shuddering;

and it is heard: and distant though it is, it cleaves in its full fortissimo: so  
valiant a noise as rescuing bugle, or tenor broke his throat for: and no  
answer:



and then the answer: deep, steep back behind beneath my prostrated head:

(the violet grays; the gray walks through the walls) silence:

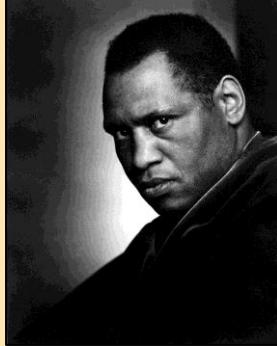
the whippoorwill; pleading; deplored:



The text of the book contains some of the most beautiful and passionate writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is nowhere more apparent as in the description of dawn as heard by those in the house of Floyd Burroughs in Alabama.



The Ballad of Joe Hill

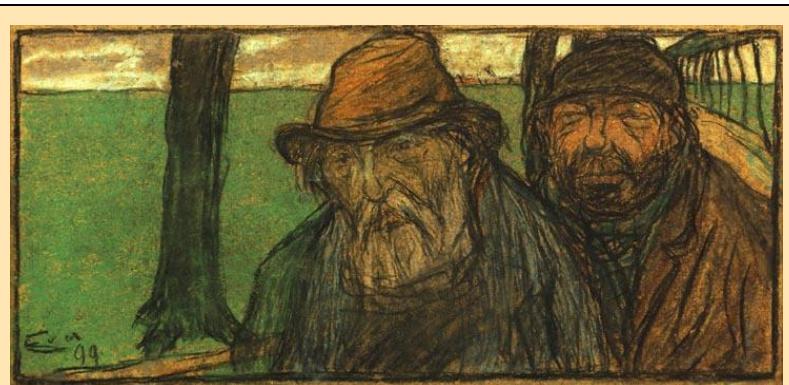


Born in Sweden as Joel Haglund in 1879, Joe Hill came to the United States in 1902. He joined the International Workers of the World (the Wobblies) and became a union organizer. In 1915, he was executed in Salt Lake City on a murder charge, that may have been a frame-up.

During the Depression there was a large effort by Unions to improve the lot of workers, as well as a pronounced determination by the rich to hold and increase their wealth. Industry was growing and it needed cheap labor. The owners pitted the poor against the poor and tried to defeat the unions. However, the Roosevelt administration was pro-labor and pro-union. Slowly the unions came to power. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) required businesses to bargain in good faith with any union supported by the majority of their employees.

One of the great songs used to rally workers was written by Earl Robinson about Joe Hill, who was a union organizer for the Wobblies. It has all the characteristics of an ancient ballad – a simple story, a touch of the supernatural and a sense of justice.

Probably the most famous rendition of the song was by Paul Robeson (1898-1976). He was an All-American football player, powerful actor and operatic bass singer. He is famous for his roles in *Othello*, *The Emperor Jones* and *Show Boat*. He was blacklisted in the McCarthy era for his Communist sympathies. The recording is from 1952. Another version is on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Kxq9uFDes>



Out of the mud two strangers came  
And caught me splitting wood in the yard,  
And one of them put me off my aim  
By hailing cheerily "Hit them hard!"

Robert Frost wrote his poem *Two Tramps in Mud Time* in 1936 in the middle of the Great Depression. Loggers typically worked in the winter and when spring (mud time) comes they were laid off. In the poem the narrator (one assumes it is Frost) is chopping wood and enjoying his exertions. Two laid-off loggers pass by and one suggests (though he is too humble to ask directly) that they should be given the job. Frost would really like to continue with his chopping. It is a wonderful April day, even though he notes that it could easily become cold again – the lurking frost might easily return. So he has to decide – should he give the work to the loggers or not?

The rest of the poem has been interpreted in two ways.

#### Malcom Cowley, 1944

In life the meeting may have had a different sequel. Perhaps the poet explained to the homeless men that he liked to split his own wood, but that he had other work for them to do; or perhaps he invited them into the kitchen for a slab of home-baked bread spread thick with apple butter. In the poem, however, he lets them walk away without a promise or a penny ... Instead of helping these men who wanted to work, Frost turns to the reader with a sound but sententious sermon on the ethical values of the chopping block.

#### Laurence Perrine, 1973

In the final stanza, however, Frost is no longer talking about chopping wood (he has resigned himself to handing this job over to the tramps); he is talking about writing poetry. ... Where love and need "exist in twain," need has the better right. The speaker therefore feels compelled to give up to others the task he loves but does not need. In choosing a career, however, he has determined to make love and need come together. Only when a man's avocation and vocation are one, he believes, can a man really fulfill himself in life or accomplish work of enduring significance.

Cowley believes that Frost did not give the men any work because he believed the chopping should be done by one who enjoys it for its own sake – not for pay. Cowley berates the poet for his lack of charity.

Perrine interprets the ending to the poem differently. He believes that Frost acknowledged that “need” had precedence and gave the work to the loggers. When he is talks about vocation (calling, originally in the sense of being called to the priesthood but now used for any career) and avocation (what calls one “away” from one’s career, such as a hobby or other enjoyable pastime) in the last stanza he is talking about his actual “work” as a poet, where he can get paid for what he loves to do. That is the way it should be for everyone.

The poem remains ambiguous. Perhaps Frost meant it to be so.

### Stephen Spender (1909-1995)

Spender was a colleague of Auden at Oxford. After graduation he began to publish poetry on social issues. He had several homosexual affairs before finally settling down to a conventional marriage. In 1936 he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, who sent him to report on the fighting in Spain. During World War II he worked in the London Fire Services. After the war he became disillusioned with Communism and worked for Encounter magazine (which was covertly funded by the CIA).



1933 Photograph

The Great Depression hit hardest in North America but was felt throughout the world. Everywhere the poor far more affected than the rich. The inequality cried out for governmental intervention but this. Some poets like Stephen Spender were drawn to social issues.



Boxing Match, Bethnal Green  
Bill Brandt, 1939

### Rough

My parents kept me from children  
who were rough  
and who threw words like stones  
and who wore torn clothes.  
Their thighs showed through rags.  
They ran in the street  
And climbed cliffs and stripped by  
the country streams.



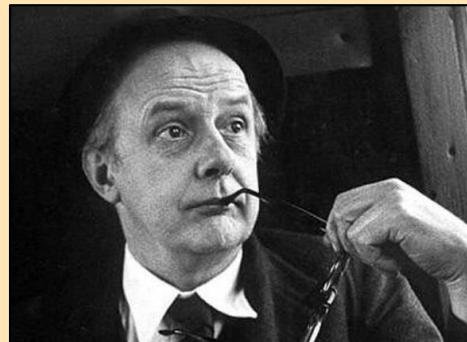
Spender wrote several poems about children in poverty. This particular poem is more about himself and how he could not communicate with the rough children. It demonstrates the tremendous gulf between the well-off child who can try to forgive and the poor children who have to be rough to survive. This may not be what Spender intended.



Throughout the years between the two world wars, industry progressed at an ever-increasing rate. Spender tried to give some sense of the force of this progress and the dangers it might lead to in his poem *The Express*.

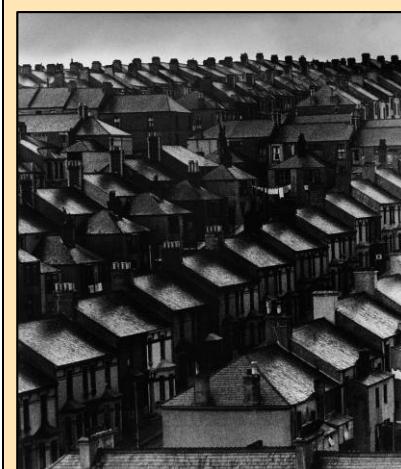
The photograph shows the *Flying Scotsman*. This train provided express service from London to Edinburgh for the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER). The steam locomotive, built in 1923, achieved a world-record speed of 100 mph in 1934. Retired from service in 1963, it was refurbished and in 2016 returned to provide short trips for steam-enthusiasts.

**John Betjeman  
(1906-1984)**



Betjeman attended Oxford University but never graduated. His interest was in poetry and in architecture. His witty satirical verse made him very popular and he served as Britain's Poet Laureate from 1972-1984. He also helped to develop the *Shell Guides to Britain*, and was instrumental in saving London's St. Pancras Station from demolition.

John Betjeman was a poet of the common people. His poems celebrated the small joys of life, poked fun at the clumsiness of human sexual interactions, and describe the beauties of old churches.



*Suburbs*, Bill Brandt, 1934

### Slough

Come friendly bombs and fall on  
Slough!  
It isn't fit for humans now,  
There isn't grass to graze a cow.  
Swarm over, Death!



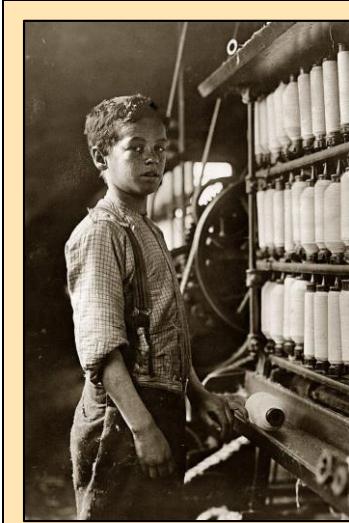
Tom O'Bedlam

The poem *Slough* is unusual in that it shows Betjeman as very upset by what was happening in England. It does not have his useful graceful charm. He felt menaced and he reacted angrily.

Slough was developed as an industrial centre after World War I. Various industries moved to the Slough Industrial Estate. Ugly depressing houses were built to house the workers. Motorways were built to transport goods to and from the estate. The photograph is not of Slough – the dreary and monotonous suburbs depicted by Brandt were actually far better than the jerry-built barrack-like housing in Slough.

Industry was proceeding without regard to the workers it required or to the countryside it inhabited.

Slough is the setting for the satirical British TV sitcom *The Office* (2001-2003) starring Ricky Gervais.



### Child Labor

One of the achievements of Roosevelt's New Deal was the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Among other things, this limited the employment of children. The actual use of child labor had declined during the Depression since adults were willing to work for the lower wages that children earned.



Billie Holiday

John Dempsey  
photographed by  
Lewis Hine, 1909

One of the great evils of social inequality was child labor. Poor children were forced to work rather than go to school so that their families could buy food. Lewis Hine (1874-1940) was one of the great photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His photographs of children at work were obtained at great risk to himself. The industries did not want the practice to be known and security kept people out of the plants. He documented the names of the children he photographed. They were real people (just like Drummer Hodge). John Dempsey was 10 years old. Hine's pictures were instrumental in getting legislation prohibiting child labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 prohibited child labor in many forms (but excluded agriculture).

The song *God Bless the Child* is a fitting tribute to children who lived in poverty and had not the chances that were due to them.

**Let us  
now  
praise  
famous  
men**

Dust Storm  
Oklahoma 1936  
Arthur Rothstein



Famous men who lived in poverty and survived, who made it through the dust storms with their dignity intact, who lived to bring about the benefits we now enjoy.