Patrick McGeown was born in 1897 in the industrial Scottish town of Craigneuk to immigrant Armagh parents. As the title of his autobiography suggests, his working life was spent in the steel industry, first in Craigneuk, where his father was a furnaceman, and later in Wigan and the Ancoats district of Manchester. He was also a keen student of WEA courses, which led him to the view that every steelworks should have a library, ‘as centrally situated as the work’s canteen, and used as frequently’. The documentary realism of his account of the different phases of his working life makes his memoir a valuable source for the social history of twentieth-century steel production, replete with insights into differential pay grades and occupational hierarchies. However, in contrast to Patrick MacGill and Alice Foley, McGeown does not represent industrial toil as a wholly alienating experience; to him, skilled labour can also empower: ‘To the first-hand melter there was great satisfaction as he watched the metal stream from his furnace into the waiting ladle. He had an awareness of creation; seven or eight hours previously this surging white-hot liquid had been one hundred tons of solid limestone, steel scrap, and hot iron.’

McGeown’s craft pride coexisted with a lifelong literary ambition: ‘For me there was no prouder title, nothing I wanted more than to be a writing man.’ He eventually realised his ambition by becoming a freelance writer for radio and magazines after his retirement in 1963. In a 1965 New Statesman article he characterised himself as a ‘wordster’ who ‘sits at his desk in a quiet room and chases every prize, no matter how humble, with his one-fingered, hammer-stroked typewriting’. Success proved elusive, however, as did stylistic mastery: ‘I have a habit of throwing a handful of commas in the air and letting them land where they may.’ While chapter titles such as ‘The Art in Manual Labouring’ and ‘Nightshift Moods’ signify the centrality of work to McGeown’s autobiographical self-identity, he also writes perceptively about his second-generation

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2 Ibid., p. 840.
Irish upbringing in turn-of-the-century Scotland in early chapters entitled ‘Where I was born’ and ‘School’, from which the following extracts are taken.

There was nothing lovely about Craigneuk. It was, and is, about twelve miles from Glasgow, and a centre of heavy industry.

Steelworks, ironworks, coalmines, are not beautiful but they have their moments. I liked Craigneuk, I thought it was a grand place and I liked the name of it too. I was sure there was a history in it but I never found out. I was sure too that it had been a beautiful place before the advent of slag tips and belching stacks. Even my uncritical eyes could see that.

That was before the Irish and the Poles and the Lithuanians arrived. Most of them penniless and none of them welcomed by the Scots. Only the most broadminded of heavenly beings could have welcomed that lot. I don’t know about the Poles and the Lithuanians but the Irish had been coming from the end of the eighteenth century. The first Roman Catholic church was opened in Paisley in 1808, and the first Roman Catholic school was opened in Glasgow in 1817. They were built by the pennies of the Irish immigrants. There were 120,000 Irish born residents in Scotland in 1841, and they were still packing them in, in overcrowded ships from Londonderry and Belfast. The ships Londonderry and Thistle, both less than 300 tons, often carried 1,700 people at a time. Even in good weather the journey would be uncomfortable. It was very cheap, sometimes as low as sixpence per head, and there was no Avilion at the end of the journey. Most of them landed up in disease-ridden Glasgow slums, where 60 per cent of the population lived in one-roomed homes, and where in 1832 more than 10,000 people died of Asiatic Cholera.

No wonder the Scots didn’t think much of the Irish, or their Roman Catholic religion. It was no consolation that many immigrants were not Catholics, but Orangemen. It only added to bloodshed and distress when the rival factions met on St. Patrick’s Day and on the 12th July, the celebration of the Battle of the Boyne.

Still they were there, and the Scots had to learn to live with them. They had even to tolerate a lot of inter-marrying. For it wasn’t unnatural for a Scots Jeannie to fall in love with an Irish Paddy, even if her Paw and Maw referred to him as, ‘That Irish Pig.’

Ah well! The Scots are no’ sae bad. No sae bad ata! I liked them fine and I was an Irish Paddy too, and a Catholic to boot. To boot? That rings a bell! By jings it does, as we used to say in Craigneuk long ago. […]

Craigneuk was just as good a place for a kid to find fun as anywhere else in Scotland. We played football all the year round, we knew no close season and we had never heard tell of cricket; we stole strawberries from the fruit

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3 St Mirin’s church in Paisley was the first Catholic church to be built in Scotland since the Reformation. A number of Catholic schools were built in Glasgow from 1817 onwards.