Reading by Glow-Worm: The Struggles of Labouring-Class Poets

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Forty years ago, writing my PhD on eighteenth-century rural poetry, I came across the poems of Stephen Duck and Mary Collier, then almost unknown labourer poets: I'll come back to them.[1] I also joined the John Clare Society, and soon realised that Clare – still an outsider to the 'big six' Romantic poets – had a groundswell of enthusiasm in the community. I think he always did, but it was almost an underground tradition back then. I could see that such poets were valued beyond academia and official literature, and I began to collect information about them – became a stamp collector, if you like, or a train spotter of labouring class poets. I felt they were neglected or – worse – treated as special cases – as freaks of nature (in the way that F. R. Leavis treats *Wuthering Heights* in a footnote to *The Great Tradition*).[2] I wanted to discover the extent of this neglected tradition, to bring it in, out of the cold. And to prove to those critics who (in Tom Sharpe's satirical phrase), praised the obviously great writers and damned the rest, that there were poems here – perhaps very many poems – that were worthy of our historical and critical attention.[3]

Forty years on, the *Catalogue of Labouring Class Poets* has well over half a million words, and 2,400 author entries, mainly from 1700-1900.[4] Thanks to the work of scholars like Andrew Hobbs and Kirstie Blair I came to realise that poetry was often not in dusty old books in the British Library, but in newspapers and periodicals, where there was more freedom and capacity.[5] Anthologies like Brian Maidment's *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (1987) were important pointers.[6] And forty years on, John Clare has now become one of the most researched and read figures of his century.[7] Speaking clearly to our anxieties about the destruction of the natural world, he is a pioneer ecological thinker, reflexly treating nature as an equal partner.[8] His struggles and his continuing to write during his long asylum years are also inspiring to many. If I say little more about Clare today, leaving him as emblematic of what this work of

rediscovery can do and can find, that is only because I have a lot of other poets to attend to in this hour.

As for the other 2,000 or more poets: well, there is still a lot of work to be done, in discovery, analysis and interpretation.[9] I shall look at a few of them today, and try and give some perspectives on both their struggles and their achievements. The glow-worms of my title allude to something that was said by the poet John Gregory (1831-1922). He was a Devon-born, Bristol poet, shoemaker, socialist, and a major figure in the birth of an independent working-class movement in Bristol. Near the end of his long life he earned an honorary Master's degree from Bristol University, but he had spent much of that life in poverty. This is from the Preface to his second collection, *Song Streams* (1877):

> Courteous Reader, by the dim glow of a few bottled glowworms I once saw a countryman reading the Bible. This anecdote I pen that you may comprehend the extreme difficulty a toil drudge has to overcome ere he accomplishes the feat of launching into the flood of literature such a volume as this (p. v).[10]

This nicely addresses a serious issue: just how hard it was for a worker to publish a volume of poems. It would be difficult in all sorts of ways. First you had to attain a level of literacy, and learn literary skills; you needed light, books, paper, pens, and especially time. These can all be taken for granted by a middle or upper class poet, but the history of labouring-class poetry is filled with instances of individuals battling for these basics. The Wiltshire farmworker and poet Stephen Duck (1705-56) borrowed books such as Edward Bysshe's *Art of Poetry*, a digest of useful quotes and snippets, and the *Spectator*, then a periodical that gave mainstream guidance on taste.[11] 100 years later John Clare, lacking paper, learned geometry by drawing triangles in the dust on a barn wall, and begged tea and sugar wrappers from his mother – you can still find these blue and brown papers among his poetry manuscripts at Peterborough, and some where his home made oak-gall ink has now burned right through the pages.[12] Or consider the brilliant coal-miner poet, Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), in the extreme darkness of a coal mine working as a trapper-boy, opening and closing ventilation doors as the coal trucks came through, who scrounged candle-ends from the older miners, and traced and wrote on old scraps of posters and bits of papers lying around – and also, crucially, listened to the snatches of ballads and songs he heard the older men singing.[13]

Some poets had no literacy skills, and could not write even if they got the materials. Neither Sheffield's radical filesmith balladeer, Joseph Mather (1737-1804), nor the Scillonian poet, Robert Maybee (1810-91)[14] who wrote about shipwrecks on the islands could write, but their compositions were valued in the community, so others wrote them down for them, and they got published. Edward Rushton (1756-1814), the Liverpool sailor-poet and abolitionist, was unsighted, but like a number of other blind and disabled labouring-class poets, found ways to express a radical vision and get into print[15]. So, resources of the most basic kind had to be actively sought. The countryman with his glow-worms is an image of real need – the words in the King James Bible he knows he has to understand, even risking his eyesight to do so.

Then there is the process of getting into print. By the time Gregory was writing in the late nineteenth century there were more options – most prominently, newspapers, all hungry for copy, and he made full use of them to spread his name and poems around and develop a reputation. This in turn won local support to publish volumes – although at least two of his were self-published, including *Song Streams*. But if go back earlier, say, to the eighteenth century, the only way to get a volume into print would be through the system of patronage, which invariably involved ideology. Labouring-class poets were always fetishized, and treated as special cases. They were never just poets: their class defined them, through an evolving series of stereotypes: the peasant poet, the uneducated poet, the self-made man, the heroic proletarian.

So the problems were not just practical: writing, patronage, publication, reception, were all dominated by specific ideas of what a labouring-class poet is and should be. And we can trace this right back to the beginning – because the first English poet whose name we know, is also the first labouring-class poet whose name we know. This was Caedmon (d. 680), a herdsman at Whitby Abbey, who later became a monk. His story is told, and his single extant poem, the alliterative 'Hymn to the Creator', which came to him in a vision, survives in a single source, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (*c.* 731). Caedmon's story is headed (in the Penguin translation), 'A brother of the monastery is found to possess God's gift of poetry' (p. 248). 'So skilful was he in composing religious and devotional songs that, when any passage of Scripture was explained to him by interpreters, he could quickly turn it into delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue'. So he was an oral poet who composed in his 'native English' – though since Bede writes in Latin, we have to take that on trust, from later back-translations.

We have to take other things on trust, too. Catherine Clarke begins her *History of England in 25 Poems* (2025) with a chapter on Caedmon's hymn, and she questions the reverential way modern editors have treated it, as a 'landmark moment for English history'. So for instance Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke in *The Map and the Clock: A Laureate's Choice of the Poetry of Britain and Ireland* (2016), begin their anthology with Caedmon's hymn, translated by Paul Muldoon. But Catherine Clarke sees the poem as a 'brilliant sleight of hand' by Bede, 'a beautiful and brilliant illusion, but an illusion nevertheless' (p. 3). This is a significant challenge to a 'carefully crafted myth', and it is important because the Caedmon story 'underpins ideas of English identity through the Middle Ages and beyond' (p. 3). It is the first poetic statement of English, Christian identity, given in the first history of the nation. She asks why should it be put 'into the mouth of the most humble, lowly figure imaginable' (p. 4).

Well, it is a good question, and I would say that this 'sleight of hand' is really about presentation – whether Caedmon existed or not, we cannot really answer: presumably he did – but he represents the birth of an idea of the labouring-class poet, cast in a specific way as a carrier of meaning. He is a plain, honest and unpretentious person, pious in very straightforward way, his poetry miraculously dictated from above; in short a perfect symbol in the idealised, patriotic view of the birth of a nation. It is the first sign, in the long history of England, that a labouring-class poet must be presented in a particular, special way, must fulfil a specific role.

* * *

We have to make a great leap forward to pick up the story, because we know of no other, named labouring-class English poet for a thousand years. Caedmon, if he indeed existed, is a lone figure – he is akin to Hrotsvitha (c. 935-973), the Abbess of Gandersheim who wrote plays in the tenth century, despite the fact that no other individual is known to have written plays for hundreds of years either before or after her.

As for poets, in the later medieval period, there is Blind Harry (1440-92) in Scotland, an essential figure in Scots literature. And there is the general sense of a class division between the two great fourteenth-century English poets – well-connected, cosmopolitan Geoffrey Chaucer, and modest, West Midlands-based William

Langland, who was possibly in 'small orders' or an unbeneficed clerk, the recognised ways a man from a poor background lifted himself up in society. But so little is known about him, and so dubious is the process of gleaning biographical information from his great work, *Piers Plowman*, that we really cannot say much more than that.

Challenging in a different way is the sixteenth century, the great literary age of drama and poetry, because the three most significant playwrights of the age were all from modest backgrounds: Christopher Marlowe was the son of a poor shoemaker who benefited from a local grammar school with a specific founding brief to take in promising boys from poor backgrounds.[16] Ben Jonson was apprenticed as a bricklayer, and served as a soldier.[17] And Shakespeare was the son of a small trader, a grammar school boy, the modesty of whose background has often been remarked upon, and has even been used against him by the conspiracy theorists who say he did not write the plays.[18] What this tells us most clearly is that the rise of the theatre, and of popular printing, and indeed the world of the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, gave new openings for ambitious writers of humble origin. Social mobility had increased exponentially, at least in certain ways, although formal class divisions were still rigidly enforced.

In this period there are some interesting if lesser known labouring-class and artisanal poets, too, such as the Protestant martyr John Careless (d. 1556), Thomas Deloney the balladeer (*c.* 1543-1600), Isabella Whitney (*fl.* 1566-73) who was the first English woman to publish original secular verse, and William Muggins, a London silk weaver whose wife had just given birth when the plague hit their household in August 1603. By the 29th his apprentice Mary Black had died; his apprentice Robert Redman died soon after; the Muggins's daughter Elizabeth died a week after that. And a third apprentice, Henry Beste, died two days later.

Muggins's response was far-sighted and courageous.[19] Quarantined and unable to leave the house, in the autumn of 1603 he sat down and wrote an extended original poem on the plague, publishing it as a pamphlet: *London's Mourning Garment, or funerall teares worne and shed for the death of her wealthy citizens, and other her inhabitants. To which is added a zealous and feruent prayer, with a true relation how many haue dyed of all diseases, in euery particuler parish within London, the liberties, and out parishes from the 14 of July 1603 to the 17 of Nouember, following* (London, 1603). This was not just a personal or pious literary response, written in grief for his daughter

and three other young people of his household. By including a set of London mortality statistics, carefully compiled by parish, it becomes a historical record, reflecting a recognition that his family is caught up in a larger historical horror, and that he must use his literary skill to document it for the future, for posterity.

A different sort of impulse governed the career of John Taylor (1578-1653), the Thames water-boatman and poet.[20] He is significant partly because Robert Southey made him the first main figure in his account of the lives of what he called the 'uneducated' poets. But there has also been scholarship recently that finds much of value in his writings, and even a symposium on him at Cambridge, a few years ago. The Thames watermen were the taxi drivers of their age, and because many of the playhouses and resorts were on the South Bank, out of reach of the city fathers, they plied a busy trade (also, east to west, as an alternative to bad, congested roads). Taylor knew and admired Ben Jonson, and will likely have known Shakespeare, if only as a 'fare'. I always wonder whether Taylor might have been the model for the garrulous waterman in the film *Shakespeare in Love*, who tells the bard that he is 'a bit of a writer myself', and is sharply told by Will to attend to his oars.[21]

If Muggins had a sense of his historical moment as needing to be soberly recorded, Taylor had a nose for what would be well-received by the popular readership that the rise of print culture had created, what the moment demanded, in terms of passing fads and fashions. So he specialised in gimmickry and novelty, self-publicising stunts and catchpenny titles and topics. He was a popular entertainer as much as a poet.

There is a lot more to be said about the seventeenth century, where the debates of the Civil War and Commonwealth period, perhaps for the first time, often included the writings of labouring-class or artisanal individuals. But I have found scant evidence of named labouring-class *poets*, at least until we come to the popular poet Ned Ward (1667-1732), who like John Taylor belongs in a long line of figures working in popular forms: the writer as entertainer.[22] He certainly merits attention, but I must skip on to the eighteenth century, for reasons of time.

If you have seen the book of essays I recently edited with Adam Bridgen, *British Working-Class and Radical Writing Since 1700*, you might wonder why the book begins with a detective story, a search for clues about how a poet's death occurred.[23] This poet was Stephen Duck, already mentioned twice, and he is important for two

particular reasons. He was the first labouring-class poet to achieve widespread public success and fame; I'll come back to this. The other reason is that he wrote a poem 'on his own *Labours*'.[24] This was *The Thresher's Labour* (1730), and it does something quite unique, in describing the hardship of fieldwork and the winter work of threshing in a dusty barn. Conventional pastoral and georgic poetry might portray the rural year as a journey to the triumph of harvest. But Duck portrays it in Sisyphean terms (he includes the image of Sisyphus pushing his stone endlessly up the hill), as an eternal torment, a wheel of fire, an endless repetition of chores. A key moment is the harvest feast when the farmer, portrayed throughout the poem as a grasping, hectoring figure who scrapes up excess grains of corn with his bare hands sooner than leave then for the gleaners, suddenly becomes 'too generous'. Why? To lull the workers: Duck calls this 'the cheat':

A Table plentifully spread we find,
And jugs of humming Beer to cheer the Mind,
Which he, too generous, pushes on so fast,
We think no toils to come, nor mind the past.
But the next Morning soon reveals the Cheat,
When the same Toils again we must again repeat,
To the same Barns again we must back return,
To labour there for room for next year's Corn.[25]

Now no-one, and certainly no labourer, had ever written like this about rural labour. And especially not in the polite neoclassical couplet form Duck adopted (though he was also a lover of ballads). Duck was a modest man, yet he sparked a revolution. Other worker-poets soon emerged, including Mary Collier, whose poem *The Woman's Labour* (1739) explicitly 'replies' to Duck, who had slandered women working in the harvest field as lazy and over-talkative. Collier sharply and wittily refutes this, describing the double and triple burden of working-class women's lives: labour, housekeeping, child-minding. And while Duck as a day-labourer has stable employment, these women must take on any work they can, harvesting, or gleaning with their children, which was back-breaking, hand-cutting work:

When harvest comes, into the field we go,
And help to reap the Wheat as well as you,
Or else we go the Ears of Corn to glean,
No labour scorning, be it e'er so mean,

But in the work we freely bear a part,
And what we can, perform with all our Heart.[26]

If Duck's survival strategy is competitive and grumpily masculine, Collier's women survive by taking pride in managing any and all work, however 'mean' – and in winter this means going out charring, cleaning and hand-washing clothes for middle-class households.

Another poem inspired by Duck is Robert Tatersal's 'The Bricklayer's Labours' (1734), interesting because where else might we learn of what life was like for an eighteenth-century builder? As with Collier and Duck, there is unique social and historical information encoded in these poems, which is one the ways in which they are valuable. Tatersal describes getting ready for work, at 6 o'clock in the morning:

Then hanging on my Thread-bare Coat and Hose,
My Hat, my Cap, my Breeches and my Shoes;
With Sheep-skin Apron girt about my Waste,
Down Stairs I go to visit my Repast;
Which rarely doth consist of more than these,
A Quartern Loaf, and half a Pound of Cheese;
Then in a Linnen Bag, on purpose made,
My Day's Allowance o're my Shoulder's laid:
And first, to keep the Fog from coming in,
I whet my Whistle with a Dram of Gin;
So thus equip'd, my Trowel in my Hand,
I haste to Work, and join the ragged Band.[27]

I find these details of food and clothing fascinating: and that morning slug of gin before he rushes off to work, trowel in hand. I wrote a piece recently about Black Sabbath as a working class band of factory escapees, and I had reason to quote another building worker, the bricklayer Reg Presley, singer of The Troggs in the 1960s who, the moment he heard on the radio that their song 'Wild Thing' had climbed the pop charts, turned to his workmates and said 'Share out me tools: I'm off'.[28] I feel sure Tatersal would have said much the same thing had his book started selling well, for the building site he describes is a rough, tough place of hard toil, and that morning nip of gin no doubt a necessary protective against it.

Many more poets would follow in the footsteps of Duck and Collier over the coming years. Collier may only really have well-known locally, but her poems were reprinted in the Romantic period, and re-discovered by second-wave feminism. So ‘The Woman’s Labour’ was reprinted twice in 1974, by Sheila Rowbotham in *Hidden from History* and Mary Chamberlain in *Fenwomen*, her Collier-like ‘reply’ to Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield*.

Duck himself never really disappeared, which brings me to the other reason he remained significant: his huge success, and the ideological problems this raised for labouring-class poets. For, Fairytale-like, Duck got summoned to court by Queen Caroline, who became his patron. Her husband, George II, famously complained, ‘Why will not my subjects write in prose’, but she liked poetry. Prime Minister Robert Walpole had a dozen tame poets – why shouldn’t she have one? But then, she did not really know quite what to do with Stephen Duck, and there was a period of uncertainty. But in due course, he trained as a parish priest, who became admired for his sermons. Why then is his death significant? Because the influencers of the age (as we would call them) were unhappy with his elevation. Wedded to a pre-Duckian view of rural labour as a healthy, happy, unproblematic sort of life, they saw his removal to court and to a clerical career as unnatural, and the ideology of rural labour as idyll here made class prejudice respectable. So when, in 1756, Stephen Duck died by drowning at Reading, while journeying home from Bath, and this was soon reported to be a suicide, the floodgates opened. You see! This is what happens when you take a worker out of his natural life – you make him unhealthy, you unbalance his mind! Two later examples of such frequently aired attitudes, are those of Horace Walpole, the PM’s son, who declared to Hannah More in 1784 that as a result of the queen’s patronage of Stephen Duck ‘twenty artisans and labourers turned poets and starved’.[29] And Samuel Johnson, who said of the shoemaker and poet James Woodhouse, ‘He may make an excellent shoemaker, but he can never make a good poet’.[30] Your class is thus your destiny, and your proper living. In his chapter in our book, William Christmas weighs the evidence, and finds it unlikely Duck’s death was anything more than the accidental drowning, at a notoriously dangerous waterway, of a man who had already had a stroke – he had been consulting doctors in Bath – and very likely now had a fatal one. Far from being a shoo-in for suicide, he was a contented man. Christmas both reveals and undercuts the ideological backlash against labouring-class poets.

Hostile or sneering early responses to the phenomenon of labourers or artisans becoming poets would never quite fade away, though by 1783 George Crabbe could write in his poem, *The Village*, about 'honest Duck', the poet who told the truth about common life, which would become Crabbe's own great theme.[31] But labouring-class poets were clearly under close scrutiny, and we can see this well in two poets who were servants in middle-class households, where scrutiny is always intense: Mary Leapor, best known for her mock country house poem 'Crumble Hall', and the Warwickshire poet Elizabeth Hands.[32] Domestic service brought some privileges, but also created psychic anxiety and claustrophobia, the sense of constantly being under critical surveillance, not only from employers but often one's fellow workers, jealous of small advantages. In her poem, 'The Visit', Mary Leapor wishes to slip away with her friend 'Artemisia', to where 'careless creatures such as I, / May 'scape the penetrating eye / Of students in physiognomy' – she means of course the male gaze, and the word 'careless' does double service – she wants to be free of care, but also laughs about not caring about the physical appearance on which women are routinely judged. In 'The Epistle of Deborah Dough' she rehearses anxiety about another kind of scrutiny. It purports to be a semi-literate letter written by a fellow servant, a comically named cook. In the letter, 'Mary' – i.e. herself – is compared unfavourably to the cook's daughter, who is not only 'taller by a foot than she' (Leapor was self-conscious about being short), but can 'knit a stocking in a day; / Make a pudding plump and rare; / And boil her bacon to an hair'. Poor, short Mary, on the other hand, 'they' say, 'Sits scribble, scribble all the day'.[33] Elizabeth Hands imagines hostile gossip against herself not just for writing, but specifically as a published worker-poet in this closed environment. But hers comes from upstairs, from the 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' in the parlour or around the dining table. Paired poems reflect the anxiety of a servant who composes: 'On the Supposition of an Advertisement appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poems, by a Servant-Maid', and 'On the Supposition of the Book having been Published and Read'.[34] Since these poems appeared in a volume, *The Death of Amnon* (1789) that had indeed been published and was now being read, the conversation but not the situation is fictional. She imagines the barbs:

> A servant write verses! says Madam Du Bloom;
> Pray what is the subject? – A Mop, or a Broom?
> He, he, he, – says Miss Flounce, I suppose we shall see
> An Ode on a Dishclout—what else can it be?

* * *

In the later eighteenth century the system of aristocratic (and royal) patronage began to give way to commercial and speculative publishing of a more recognisably modern kind, and middle class and rising figures, including women, tended to become the patrons and supporters of working-class poets. In another essay in our book, Tim Fulford shows how, in the Romantic period, labouring-class poets started to become a marketable phenomenon,[35] spearheaded by Robert Bloomfield (1766-1923) whose poem, *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) was a best-seller although, even more than Duck, he smuggled in a great deal of grim rural realism, which the readers didn't seem to notice – Ian Haywood has written about this very powerfully in his essay, 'The Infection of Robert Bloomfield' (2012).[36] This professionalization or exploitation of labouring-class poetry is especially associated with Robert Southey, who published and championed a number of poets – some posthumously, some living – and wrote the first real account of them, as such – which began as the introduction to one such poet, and evolved into an independent work, *The Lives of the Uneducated Poets* (1831). He sees it as a phenomenon that for reasons to do with developments in society and class, became visible in the early seventeenth century, especially in the person of John Taylor, the Boatman we have talked about. And he ends his catalogue with two late-eighteenth century Bristol poets, Ann Yearsley – now much studied – and John Frederick Bryant. He then specifically excludes Bloomfield, 'because his poems are worthy of preservation separately and in general collections'.[37] (John Clare is not mentioned.) What he means, I think, is that Bloomfield is a 'proper' poet – not in the special category of the uneducated poet – because for Southey, one type of poet is worthy of attention in a charitable spirit, the other for its literary merit. And what he calls the 'uneducated' poet is a specific phenomenon he sees as now fading from the world as education becomes widespread. It is a time-limited as well as a class-limited concept, and his term, 'uneducated', makes it so. It seems now an odd argument, because if we were to substitute for 'uneducated' Brian Maidment's term, 'self-taught poets' (in the sub-title of *The Poorhouse Fugitives*), we can see that what emerges especially in the nineteenth century, peaking in the Chartist and post-Chartist years, is a huge number of poets who were self-made and self-taught – whatever their formal education – and who successfully expressed themselves and published poetry, often of a very high order. I only have time to touch on one or two of them here, but the sheer richness of labouring-class poetry in the nineteenth-century is overwhelming.

Indeed, a major problem we had with the Pickering and Chatto nineteenth century labouring-class poetry volumes, twenty years ago, was which good poets to exclude.

I have already mentioned Joseph Skipsey, who emerged from dreadful poverty – a father shot dead by a policeman during a strike, the family reduced to eating nettles – who went on to become one of the most ambitious and impressive of all these poets. He had a special talent for ballads and work poems in plainly written, short verses, quatrains, recording the sense of daily hardship, as in the much-anthologized piece, 'Get Up!':

> 'Get up!' the caller calls, 'Get up!'
>   And in the dead of night,
> To win the bairns their bite and sup,
>   I rise a weary wight.
>
> My flannel dudden donn'd, thrice o'er
>   My birds are kiss'd, and then
> I with a whistle shut the door
>   I may not ope again.[38]

Not a word is wasted in this first-person account of preparing for pit work. Labour's aggressive daily intrusion into family life comes with the blunt cry of the 'caller', 'Get up!', murdering sleep in the unnatural 'dead of night' and leaving the worker a ghost-like 'weary wight'. (A 'caller' was a colliery official who roused up men for the fore-shift.)

The message of the third line is as uncompromising as the caller's cry: he must 'win the bairns their bite and sup', he must labour or his children won't eat or drink. The children are the key to this poem. First they are 'bairns' who must be fed, and in the second verse he uses the endearment, 'birds'. Having donned his 'flannel dudden', his working clothes, the miner kisses the children 'thrice'. Then he must 'shut the door' on them with a finality emphasised in the closing line, 'I may not ope again'. The whistle he makes as he shuts the door could be a nervous one, a whistling in the dark. But a possible reason for the sense of dramatic finality is that he knows he may never see them or kiss them again. Pit disasters – pitfalls, explosions, routine accidents – claimed many miners' lives in the period, and Skipsey himself wrote a fine, dignified poem on the Hartley colliery disaster of 1862, which also drew poems from the labouring-class poets Janet Hamilton, Joe Wilson

and Matthew Tate, the popular Liverpool-born Newcastle songwriter Ned Corvan, and the Cornishman John Harris. The fact is that no-one setting out for a shift in the mine could afford to feel safe. A.L. Lloyd's classic collection of mining songs, *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, includes 33 about mining disasters and the deaths of miners.[39] So I think that Skipsey's three kisses, and then the whistle, form a superstitious ritual – something common among men going on shift. Three last kisses maybe, or a triple kiss, as a superstitious insurance policy against never seeing his children again. It is a brilliant poem, a model of concision. And there are others Just as good, like 'Mother Wept', about a boy getting his orders for the first day down the mine, and his parents' deeply mixed feelings.[40]

The nineteenth century is replete with poems by labouring class poets who deserve any reader's attention. Let me select just one more. Fanny Forrester (1852-89) was a regular contributor to *Ben Brierley's Journal*, which was widely distributed in Manchester and beyond in the 1870s and 1880s. The daughter of Ellen Forrester (d. 1883), a poet and Fenian activist who served time in prison for her political activities, Fanny Forrester's own response to the crisis engulfing nineteenth-century Ireland emerges in poems of exile and alienation, such as the three-part sequence, 'Strangers in the City,' which documents the arrival, homelessness, severe working and living conditions and premature death of Mary, a 'timid fawn' exiled from her native land along with her mother, following a brutal land eviction which has split the family. This is serious material, but is cast in terms of sentimental melodrama which may not always evince a positive response in the modern reader. It may feel emotionally overladen, as in the description of Mary at her factory work, from the second part 'Toiling in the City:'

> O'er her work, from morn till evening, bends her sweet and saintly face,
> But her busy hands oft tremble, and the tears each other chase;
> For she thinks of pleasant rambles through the quiet lonely glen,
> And she wonders will she ever hear the birds' sweet song again.[41]

Tears are frequent in this poem, aa are the contrasts between Mary's 'sweet and saintly' demeanour and the deeply unsaintly world she is cast into, between the factory full of noisy, dangerous, belt-driven machinery and the 'quiet glen' she remembers, and between the factory noise again and the 'birds' sweet song' of rural Ireland, cast as a lost Eden. Melodrama intensifies as Mary nears her death, and the death-bed scene itself is echoed in other Forrester poems, such as 'In the Workhouse

– A Deserter's Story,' where the dying ex-soldier, like Mary in her garret, pathetically clings to a final vision of remembered beauty:

> Come nearer, nurse, come nearer, for my sight is growing dim:
> Just hold my hand and sing to me some simple vesper hymn,
> And I'll watch your kind eyes glistening, and my spirit shall rejoice,
> For I'll fancy I am listening to my Margaretta's voice.[42]

Our response to such writing is conditioned by an aesthetic that is weighted against displays of emotion or sentiment – with the melodramatic 'Victorian death scene' a special aesthetic taboo. But Forrester's poetry was hugely enjoyed by her contemporary readers – quite a lot of them being themselves emigrants from Ireland and elsewhere working in the cotton industry. Ben Brierley, the editor who most championed and published her (and was himself a significant labouring-class poet, later a Manchester councillor) is similarly enthusiastic, writing with paternalistic pride, of Forrester as one of his most successful contributors.[43] So I think we have to throw off our latter-day cultural prejudices, to understand what she is doing and why. Perhaps recent work in the field of Emotion and Affect Studies may help. I notice with particular interest that Simon Rennie's recent book on *Cotton Famine Poetry* (2025) is subtitled 'Functions of Emotion in British and American Verse, 1861-65'. I have not seen this yet, but can well imagine that it represents a more nuanced approach to poetry of this kind than is often applied.[44]

There are some extraordinary figures in the twentieth century, too. I think of the poet and chronicler Alfred Williams, relentlessly self-educating himself, rising at dawn to study before his morning shift in the Swindon railway factory, where every day he chalked on his stamping machine a different Greek word to learn, and every day the foreman scrubbed it out again, until one day Williams quit his job, and went on to write one of the great accounts of industrial labour, *Life in a Railway Factory* (1915). He left a single, final word chalked on his machine: 'vici' (Latin: I won).[45]

Or Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, the Lancashire textile factory worker, feminist and socialist who wrote poetry and journalism, and popular, intelligent novels of working-class life that kept her close to, rather than writing her away from, her fellow women workers. Kathy Bell has written eloquently about this achievement in her chapter in our book.[46]

Much more, of course needs to be said about all these poets, and others, but I want to round things off now with a poet who died only last year, after a long, productive and profoundly effective career as a poet, an occupation he was very proud to have written on his passport. This was Tony Harrison (1937-2025), a poet beloved of John Halstead, after whom the present lecture is named, and for good reason.[47] I am not suggesting, by the way, that labouring-class poetry ends with Harrison – far from it – there are very many active labouring-class and autodidact poets in Britain and all over the world, and may there long continue to be so – well, as long as society remains as stratified as it does.

As I have said in my extended entry for Harrison in the *Catalogue of Labouring Class Poets*, I think Harrison's poetry has done as much as any single body of writing in English to articulate the conflicts and complexities facing the working-class writer in the modern world. He dealt head-on with some key binaries: the threats to family and class loyalty, inevitable in his own emergence as a poet and bearer of literacy, articulated so strongly in the 'School of Eloquence' sonnets, on family, and on class, 'v.', the elegiac poem set in the Leeds graveyard where his parents are buried.

The implications of such divided loyalties, in terms of language and culture, he dealt with boldly, by being both a learned classicist with a head full of Greek and Latin – like Alfred Williams – and, also like Williams (a noted collector of folk songs), a champion of our common language, particularly northern, particularly Yorkshire speech forms. Not only did he adapt the texts of *The Mysteries* – popular religious plays originating with the medieval craft guilds – into a northern linguistic register, but he took one of the greatest works of classical Greece, *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*, and put that into a native, alliterative, and thoroughly northern English style too, using compounds and gaps between phrases, to adapt the complexities of the text to his style. Let me give a comparative example. The great anti-war speech of the chorus in the 'Agamemnon' in the standard, Richmond Lattimore translation, runs:

> The god of war, money changer of dead bodies,
> held the balance of his spear in the fighting,
> and from the corpse-fires of Ilium
> sent to their dearest the dust
> heavy and bitter with tears shed
> packing smooth the urns with
> ashes that once were men[48]

This is effective: dignified and slightly formal without being impersonal or losing impact. Whereas Harrison's version goes for compression, immediacy and bite, pressing the bitterness towards open anger:

Geldshark Ares god of War
Broker of men's bodies
usurer of living flesh
corpse-trafficker that god is –

give to WAR your men's fleshgold
and what are your returns?
kilos of cold clinker packed
in army-issue urns[49]

Harrison noticed early on the class implications of how comedy was 'low' and tragedy was 'high' – and remembers in the poem, 'On Not Being Milton' how 'I played the drunken porter in Macbeth'.[50] So he broke down this binary, restoring for example one of the comic satyr-plays that were performed after the tragic trilogies in the ancient Greek theatre, but had been obliterated, and he made from it perhaps his finest play, 'The Trackers of Oxyrhyncus' (1990), which among other things is an extended meditation on what gets saved and what gets left in the rubbish heaps, on value and on class.[51]

His lyrical works, from 'A Kumquat for John Keats' through to 'Fig on the Tyne', insist on the beauty and pleasure of human appetite, desire and joy for life, our common experiences that are so often effaced or censured in official culture. He had a humanistic love of life that also accepted its strict limitations: 'Life has a skin of death that keeps its zest', as he puts it in his dialogue with Keats across the centuries. Harrison wrote in rhymed and rhythmic forms, for as he said, 'The metre itself is like the pulse. ... I don't have the heart to confront some experiences unless I know I have this rhythm to carry me to the other side. It's an existential need, the metrical form, for me'.[52]

So let me conclude by reading an extract from his rhymed verses, one that I think nicely illustrates his valorising of unglamorous, common life, the ordinariness of love and loyalty, and an understanding that life is finite, and that we grow old and

infirm and should acknowledge and share our human vulnerability. This is from 'The Beast with Two Backs', in his later collection, *Laureate's Block* (2000), and I will end on it:

> Their sulks and marital misunderstanding
> were often healed by hot lumbago balm.
> I'd seen one or the other cross the landing
> To wash the pungent fire off a palm.
> What may have kept them coupled through such days
> was thinking that the worst of being alone's
> (though you can gratify yourself in other ways)
> you can't rub your own back with *Dr. Sloane's.*
>
> In the rheumatic North in icy weather
> dapper Dr. Sloane with waxed mustachios
> could keep my parents silently together
> touching the parts they'd sooner not expose.[53]

Note: in the discussion that followed the lecture, audience members raised a number of important issues. One individual reminded me of the key role in the development of Ethel Carnie Holdsworth's career of the Cotton Factory Times, *and how this periodical had also nurtured the career of Lancashire dialect poet and cartoonist Sam Fitton. Another individual raised a question about how far political movements and organisations nurtured such poets, and another expressed concern about the assumption made that labouring-class writers only wrote about their work. Another person was interested in how mainstream writers responded, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose* Lyrical Ballads *suggested a link.*

NOTES

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[1] John Goodridge, 'Rural Life in English Poetry of the Mid-Eighteenth Century', University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1990.

[2] 'That astonishing work seems to me a kind of sport', F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), quoted by J. F. Goodridge, 'A New Heaven and a New Earth', in Anne Smith (ed.), *The Art of Emily Brontë* (London: Vision Press, 1976), p. 160. Goodridge interprets the word 'sport' as being 'used in the old sense of *lusus naturae*', i.e. a genetic oddity or unexpected mutation or offshoot.

[3] Tom Sharpe, *The Great Pursuit* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), chapter 20.

[4] John Goodridge (general editor and principal writer), *A Catalogue of Labouring-Class & Self-Taught Poets & Poetry c. 1700-1900* (2000-2026 and ongoing), online at academia.edu and Knowledge Commons.

[5] Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900* (Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers, 2018); Kirstie Blair (ed.), *Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016); Blair, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[6] Brian Maidment (ed.), *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987). Other essential waymarks included: Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (Croom Helm, 1974); H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: Harvester 1985); Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[7] The MLA International Bibliography shows 145 articles published on Clare in the 1990s (exceeding the total output of the preceding four decades), with another 142 appearing in 2000-10 and a 34% increase to 190 articles in 2010-20 (figures courtesy of Tim Fulford). The largest John Clare Facebook group now has 2,600 members, and there is a guaranteed annual panel on Clare at the annual MLA conventions as well as a thriving John Clare Society, with its own annual festival. Clare's former home in Helpston is now a dedicated museum and events venue.
[8] See Simon White, 'The post-humanist John Clare', in John Goodridge and Adam Bridgen (eds), *British Working-Class and Radical Writing Since 1700* (London: University of London Press, 2025), pp. 65-80. For fuller guidance on modern critical responses to Clare see my online resource, 'Further Reading: A Year-by-Year Checklist of John Clare Criticism, 1970-2025' (via academia.edu).
[9] There are many editorial and critical projects completed or in progress, notably major new multi-volume editions of Robert Burns, Allan Ramsay, and (online) Robert Bloomfield; many single volume editions of poets including Henry Kirke White and Joseph Skipsey (listed below); and large-scale online and events such as the 'Cotton Famine Poets' and 'Piston, Pen, Press' projects.
[10] On Gregory see further, John Goodridge, 'John Gregory, St Mary Redcliffe and the Memorialising of Chatterton', in *Literary Bristol: Writing the City*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2015), pp. 101-24, and 'Three Poets of Labor in Radical Bristol, c. 1885-1939', *Philological Quarterly*, 103, nos. 3-4 (2025), pp 305-28.
[11] Jennifer Batt, *Class, Patronage, and Poetry in Hanoverian England: Stephen Duck, the Famous Threshing Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 28-30.
[12] See John Clare, *By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press, 1996), p. 7.
[13] Joseph Skipsey, *Selected Poems*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton, Chris Harrison and William Daniel McCumiskey (Newcastle upon Tyne: Rectory Press, 2024), third edition.
[14] These and other labouring-class poets lacking specific references here are all given entries in the *Catalogue of Labouring-Class Poets*, which also give further sources.
[15] See Edward Rushton, *Collected Writings of Edward Rushton*, ed. Paul Baines (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014); Franca Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics 1782-1814* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press: 2015).
[16] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Dark Renaissance, The Dangerous Times and Fatal Genius of Shakespeare's Greatest Rival, Christopher Marlowe* (London: Vintage, 2025).
[17] See Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson, A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[18] See James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London: Faber, 2010).
[19] See Scott Oldenburg, *A Weaver-Poet and the Plague: Labor, Poverty and the Household in Shakespeare's London* (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020).
[20] See Bernard Capp, *The World of John Taylor the Water Poet 1578-1653* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[21] See Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 67.
[22] There is a serious side to Ward, too: see Adam Bridgen, '"Where blacks and whites in scorching valleys sweat": The Infernal Anti-Imperial Satirist, Edward Ward (1667-1731)', *'Where blacks and whites*

in scorching Valleys sweat': British Labouring-Class Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1660-1800, PhD dissertation, Linacre College, Oxford, 2019.

[23] William Christmas, '"There is an End of the Thresher's Labours: Stephen Duck's enigmatic death', in Goodridge & Bridgen, pp. 15-29.

[24] This is how Joseph Spence describes it, adding that 'the Subject was given him by one of those that first encouraged him' ('*An* Account *of the* Author', in Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Occasions, 1736*, facsmile edition, with an Introductory Note by John Lucas (Menston, Yorkshore: The Scolar Press, 1973), p. xv.

[25] E. P. Thompson (ed.), *The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck, The Woman's Labour by Mary Collier, Two Eighteenth Century Poems* (London: The Merlin Press, 1989), p. 11.

[26] Thompson (ed.), p. 17.

[27] John Goodridge (general editor), *Eighteenth-Century British Labouring-Class Poets*: Volume I, 1700-1740, ed. William Christmas (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), p. 285.

[28] John Goodridge, 'Black Sabbath: Working-Class Radicals', *Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery* website posting, 19 May 2026. The Reg Presley story is frequently and fondly repeated, and the late singer himself told the story of the moment he heard that their song had jumped from 44 to 8 in the charts, and the workmate who had the transistor radio, a painter, swore that 'If that ain't No. 1 next week I'll eat my brush'; at which, Presley recalled, 'I threw my trowel down, and I looked round the shed and said "Share out me tools: I'm off"'. See Alastair McKay, 'The Making of "Wild Thing" by The Troggs: "It was raw"', *Uncut*, 143 (April 2009).

[29] Walpole-More, 13 November 1784; *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-83), Vol. 31, p. 220 (open access online edition, 2011).

[30] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, with an Introduction by Claude Rawson (NewYork: Alfred A. Knopf,1906, 1992), p. 395.

[31] George Crabbe, *Selected Poems*, ed. Gavin Edwards (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 3-4.

[32] See the fuller discussion of these poems in John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, 'Land, Labor, Literature', in Sarah Eron, Nicole Aljoe, and Suvir Kaul (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Literatures in Englis*h (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 144-56.

[33] *The Works of Mary Leapor: A Critical Edition*, ed. Richard Greene and Ann Messenger (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 186-88 ('Deborah Dough'), 222-3 ('The Visit'). See also Richard Greene, *Mary Leapor: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Women's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[34] Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 425-9. On Hands see, *inter alia*, Cynthia Dereli, 'In Search of a Poet: the life and work of Elizabeth Hands', *Women's Writing*, 8, no. 1 (2001), pp. 169-82.

[35] Tim Fulford, 'The rise, fall and revival of labouring-class poetry in the commercial market, 1800-1821, in Goodridge & Bridgen, pp. 49-64.

[36] Ian Haywood, 'The Infection of Robert Bloomfield: Terrorising the Farmer's Boy' (2012), online at 'Romantic Circles' and elsewhere.

[37] *Attempts in Verse by John Jones, an Old Servant, With Some Account of the Writer Written by Himself and an Introduction to the Lives and Works of our Uneducated Poets by Robert Southey, Poet Laureate* (London: John Murray, 1831), p. 163. See further, Robert Southey, *Lives of Labouring-Class Poets*, ed. Tim Fulford (London: Routledge, 2023).

[38] Skipsey, *Selected Poems*, p. 75.

[39] A. L. Lloyd (ed.), *Come All Ye Bold Miners: Ballads & Songs of the Coalfields*, revised edition (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).

[40] For a fuller discussion of this poem and related poems including 'Mother Wept', see Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge, 'Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-century Mineworker Poets', *Philological Quarterly*, 92, no. 2 (Spring 2013), pp. 224-50.

[41] *Ben Brierley's Journal*, April 1870, pp. 58-9.

[42] *Ben Brierley's Journal*, November 1872, p. 121.

[43] [Ben Brierley] 'Fanny Forrester', article with portrait, *Ben Brierley's Journal*, 23 January 1875, pp. 37-8.

[44] I discuss these poems more fully in my essay, 'Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry', *Criticism*, 47, Number 4 (Fall 2005; pub. 2007), pp. 531-47.
[45] See the 5,000-word entry on Alfred Williams in the *Catalogue of Labouring-Class Poems* and on my WordPress blog – hopefully a more adequate response to his extraordinary autodidacticism and writing achievements than the 500-word limit set for my Alfred Williams entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
[46] Kathleen Bell, 'Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and the Question of Audience', in Goodridge & Bridgen, pp. 175-87.
[47] See Mike Mecham, 'Remembering John Halstead', *Labour History Review*, 87, no. 3 (2022), pp. 321-2.
[48] *Aeschylus I: Oresteia*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 48.
[49] Tony Harrison, *Theatre Works, 1973-1985* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 200.
[50] Tony Harrison, *Permanently Bard: Selected Poetry*, ed. Carol Rutter (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), p. 120.
[51] Tony Harrison, *Plays, 5: Trackers of Oxyrhyncus; Square Rounds*, Introduced by the Author (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 1-148.
[52] Richard Hoggart, 'In Conversation with Tony Harrison', in Neil Astley (ed.), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1 Tony Harrison* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), pp. 36-45 (p. 43).
[53] Tony Harrison, *Laureate's Block and Other Poems* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 74.

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