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Send **SUBSCRIPTIONS** to *Victorian Poetry*—Subscriptions, Department of English, West Virginia University, PO Box 6296, Morgantown, WV 26506-6296; make checks payable to *Victorian Poetry*. Subscriptions are entered on a volume basis beginning with the first issue of the current volume.

Rates: \$30.00—Institutions, U.S. and Canada (plus \$5.00 foreign)
(U.S. \$18.00—Individuals, U.S. and Canada (plus \$5.00 foreign)
funds \$6.00—Students (three-year maximum—faculty-signed statement only) of student status required)
\$6.00—Single current issue (\$12.00 double issue)

Back issues are available in microform from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Dept. P.R., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106. Back issues through Volume 11 are available from Kraus Reprint Company, Route 100, Millwood, NY 10546. Back issues from Volume 12 through the current volume are available from the *Victorian Poetry* office, 421 Stansbury Hall, West Virginia University, at \$4.00 per issue (\$7.50 double issue).

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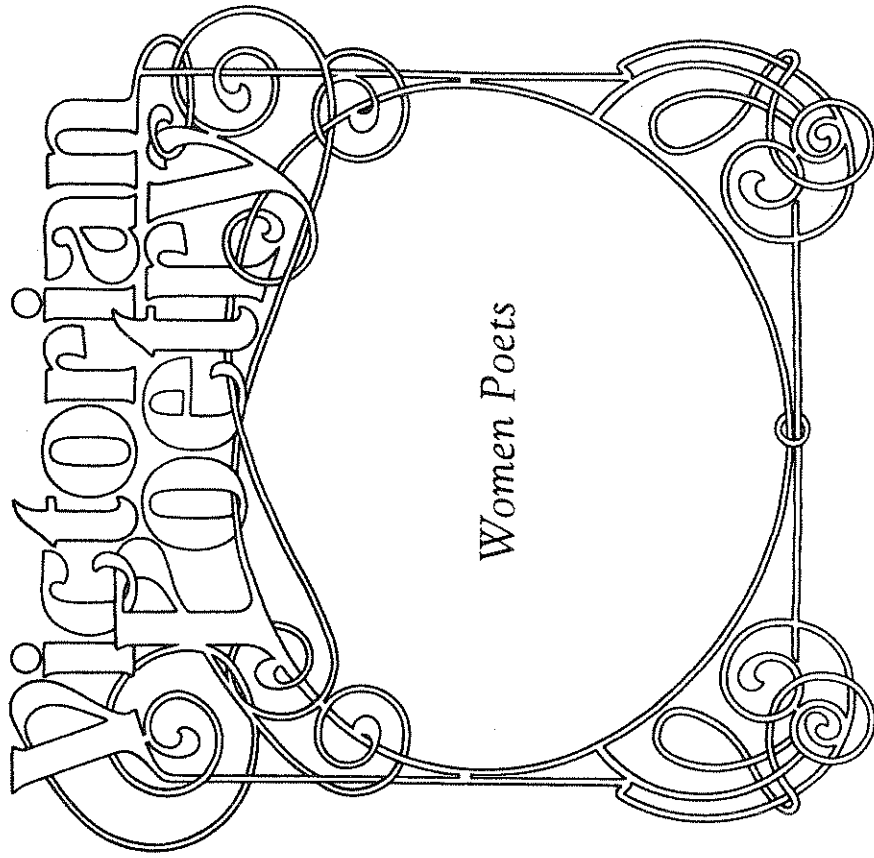
VICTORIAN POETRY

Series 05, No. 12-4, Spring, 1995

Victorian Poetry (ISSN: 0042-5306) is published four times a year in Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter by West Virginia University, Communications Building, 1 Ping Arts Drive, PO Box 6696, Morgantown, WV 26506-6696. Rates: \$30.00—Institutions, U.S. and Canada (plus \$5 foreign); \$18.00—Individuals, U.S. and Canada (plus \$5 foreign); \$6.00—Student; \$6.00 Single current issue (\$12.00 double issue). Second class postage paid at Morgantown, WV 26505. POSTMASTER: Send address change to *Victorian Poetry*—Subscriptions, Department of English, West Virginia University, PO Box 6296, Morgantown, WV 26506-6296.

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Printed in U.S.A.



Women Poets

Linda K. Hughes

Guest Editor

VOLUME 33 O NUMBER 1 O SPRING 1995

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

The Poetess's Birthday

How many Aprils since my birth
 Is this? How many since the mirth
 Of childhood? Nay! thou lovely Earth
 I will not count I do not care—
 Nor do I speak in proud despair
 Many or few, enough have been.—
 I see thee beautiful & green
 I see but with most care, less heart.
 I only feel that I depart.

I only feel I ne'er was fit
 To tread thee—thou so brightly lit
 With sunshine now!—I was not one
 To cope with thee as some have done:—
 Thou wert the conqueror. Be it so
 I leave my shadow here below
 And long as sunshine comes & goes
 That shadow shall be loved by those
 I would have loved.—But now I look
 On thee as on some ended book
 O shut the volume! spare my heart
 I am not sorry to depart!

I only know I loved I loved
 And other hearts to love I moved
 And for the sweetness of that thought
 I loved thee Earth! The all I sought
 I won from thee:—& for the cost—
 Why keep it! all I ever lost
 Was not worth one light passing sigh
 To the deep bliss it could not buy
 The memories that within me lie.
 I wielded woman's proudest art
 I reigned an empress o'er the heart
 Now I am willing to depart!

E.M.H.
 (Written c. 1845. Unpublished:
 Trinity College Library MS 2052
 f. 39.v.)

Cauld Engle-Cheek: Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Scotland

FLORENCE S. BOOS

WORKING-CLASS SCOTTISH WOMEN WROTE THEIR VERSES AT THE margins of nineteenth-century British literary history. Only a few working-class Scottish male poets enjoyed any name-recognition outside of Scotland, and two of the best-known—James Thomson and John Davidson—gradually leached Scottish language and referents out of their work after they emigrated to London. Later critics of nineteenth-century working-class poetry also tended to focus their attention on artisan poets, a choice which virtually erased women, who were excluded from most skilled trades, and eked out a marginal non-domestic work-life as textile workers and farm laborers. Finally, most anthropologists and critical expositors strongly suggested that few proletarian women of any region wrote poetry, and that the verses of those who did lacked “political” content, or added little to contemporary interpretations of working-class life.¹

In this essay I will dispute these commentators' judgments, and argue that Scottish working-class women's poems were important in several ways: as expressions of the observations and values of Scottish Victorian working-class women; as exemplars of a broad working-class women's aesthetic that cannot readily be categorized in reductive ideological terms; and finally, as testimonials of the efforts of hundreds, perhaps thousands of working-class women poets throughout Victorian Britain, whose verses have disappeared without trace.²

These writers were firmly reformist, class-identified, and concerned with the special heroisms and problems of working women—the need to confront drunken batterers, for example. Glaswegian and other Scottish working-class women poets may have been less animated by the Chartist and trade-union sentiments expressed by male artisans and industrial workers, but they published a substantial body of poetry in the 1860s and 1870s—after the rise and fall of Chartism, and somewhat later than the *flourish* of most of their better-known male counterparts. Their works also reflected slight political shifts

over time, of course: a growing awareness of women's issues as the century progressed, and the influences and nuances of their authors' temperaments, environments (rural as well as urban), and education (most women benefited from extensions of elementary education a generation after men).

What are the most salient aspects of their "working-class women's aesthetic"? Some will be familiar to readers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American women's poetry, who may recognize "womanist" parallels in these Scotswomen's blends of didacticism, appeals for self-help, revisionist uses of religion, direct use of non-"standard" speech, anger at internal family violence as well as external oppressors, and celebrations of female survival under stress.

Other aspects of this aesthetic are more autochthonous and idiosyncratic. All nineteenth century Scottish working-class poets worked in the shadow of Robert Burns—that great satirist and professed truth-sayer in eloquent but "ordinary" Scots. Beyond their desire to express personal pleasure and pain, inspiration and regret, most women working-class poets in Scotland wished to contribute something persuasive and emotionally compelling to common traditions of national poetry, literary self-improvement, and social solidarity of all sorts, in appallingly bitter times.³

Martha Vicinus devotes a chapter of *The Industrial Muse* to the near-insuperable problems faced by educated working-class English male poets in finding language and subject matter acceptable both to themselves and their middle-class patrons. Dialect poetry coopted into inoffensive commonplace invited condescension, of course; but more "elevated" efforts to rewrite long derivative lyrics or epics on Miltonic or eighteenth-century blank-verse models usually led to remoteness and lack of specific referents (Vicinus, chap. 4).

The working-class women whose works I have located did not, as a rule, fall into these patterns—in part, perhaps, because few suffered the temptations of cooptation brought by wide publicity, or felt pressure to exhibit an education they had not had, and in part, perhaps, because they felt deeper ties to an immediate regional audience. Unlike some of their more successful—and more cautious—counterparts among English working-class male poets, moreover, Jessie Russell, Ellen Johnston, and Janet Hamilton preserved their spoken "Doric" (Lallans Scots) without apology.⁴ The writings of these laboring-class women, therefore, like those of their male contemporaries, require special attention to questions of regional language and dialect, as well as audience, censorship, "authenticating" testimonials, and marginal transmission and publication, usually in periodicals and anthologies.

I have been able to locate roughly three dozen Scottish working-class poets who published at least a volume of poetry, though very few were able to publish more than one, or to benefit from the imprimatur of a better-known house. Of the three poets I consider here in some detail, one, Ellen Johnston, was forced to publish by subscription, and she and Jessie Russell each saw only a single book of poems in print before an early death. Janet Hamilton lived a long life, and managed to publish two volumes which her son reprinted in a single expanded volume after her death.⁵ Yet among these women's poems are several well-crafted examples of political satire, social criticism, and interpretive vignettes of daily life. Their expressions of griefs and hopes are clearly class-inflected—few of these poets' personae languish in the indefinite romantic suspension of Christina Rossetti's speaker in *Monna Innominata*, or grieve, as does Tennyson's persona, for seven-teen years over a friend's sudden death. In *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796*, Donna Landry concludes that her women poets were "neither abject nor silent," but offered chiefly a "discourse of muffled protest, of defeat and cooption" (p. 280). In characterizing their nineteenth-century descendants, Landry concludes rather startlingly that although

there would be many radical transformations of sexual relations, capitalism, Chartism, Owenism, socialism, and trade unionism proposed by laboring women, and with mixed success, . . . [these are] no longer proposed between the covers of volumes of verse bearing the class-specific signatures of laboring women poets. (p. 280)

The poetry of the nineteenth-century Scottish working-class women I have studied contradicts Landry's generalization, for there is little that is "muffled" in these women's sharply empathetic representations of their milieu.

The everyday speech of all classes of Victorian Scotland was probably some version of Scots, though many members of the upper classes spoke and wrote the "standard" English they had learned in school (or in the case of some men, university) on more formal occasions.⁶ All of the poets we will study also belonged to a culture which esteemed self-education and popular poetry, and valued the radical-democratic (if slightly sexist) strain in the folk-ballads and lyrics of Robert Burns ("The rank is but the guinea stamp / The man's the gold for a' that"). As nineteenth-century capitalism, finally, herded the rural poor into Glaswegian slums, most working-class poets lived in city-environments in which everyone else was also poor, and shared the life of the urban Scottish proletariat.⁷

The industrial revolution, indeed—driven in part by the inventions of Scottish engineers such as James Watt and Robert Napier—

had come early and with ferocity to Scotland, where industrial workers labored to make Glasgow a leading center for all the engineering and mechanized trades (Cage, pp. 1-7). An 1841 census characterized ninety-four percent of the population as working class. Edwin Chadwick's 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* identified Glasgow as "possibly the filthiest and unhealthiest of all the British towns of this period,"⁸ and the population surged from 200,000 to 500,000 between 1830 and 1870. As in third-world megalopolises now, little or no municipal planning or regulation channeled or buffered these increases, and some sections of Glasgow had a population density of 500 to 1000 per acre by 1860. No attempt was made to control the excesses of tenement housing or to provide new dwellings before the City Improvement Act of 1866,⁹ and ill-paid workers were crammed into overcrowded streets and poorly constructed, unventilated houses, without provisions for sewage or waste disposal, and ravaged by epidemics of cholera and typhus. Half of all children born in Glasgow died before their fifth birthday in the 1850s, and only in the 1870s did the death-rate begin to decline (Cage, p. 75).

Engels' *Manchesterkapitalismus*, therefore, might as well have been called *Glasgowkapitalismus*, but almost everyone poor Glaswegians met shared their poverty and speech patterns to varying degrees. In the rare and prized instances when workers could publish any poetry at all, therefore, they might hope to reach an audience composed of (literate) class peers, who would be receptive and friendly to the notion of worker publication, and concerned with issues of common survival. One might well trace oblique analogies here with situations of nineteenth-century African-American women poets such as Ann Plato, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and Clara Thompson.¹⁰ Some white abolitionists and post-Civil War opponents of "reconstruction" presumably read their writings, but these women essentially wrote for an audience of fellow African-Americans, and their intermittent uses of southern black dialect provided familiar marks of verisimilitude and solidarity to that intended audience.

Scots working class poets similarly wrote in standard English as well as Scots, and they expected their audience to appreciate both varieties of speech. Since most also expected no wider English audience, the putative obscurities of their use of Scots would have seemed less than urgent to them. Cooptation thus seems to have been a less pressing issue for these working-class women poets than for Landry's eighteenth-century English women, or for Vicinus' working-class men. Only the doughty and firm-minded Hamilton enjoyed a wide

circulation, and she was already over seventy and blind when her first volume appeared.

Actual censorship was a more obvious and immediate problem for poets who could only publish in periodicals or anthologies. Jessie Russell and Marion Bernstein, a radical feminist music teacher, complained bitterly of limitations imposed on them by the editor of the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, who exercised certain kinds of political censorship and refused—rather surprisingly, perhaps—to publish romantic verse.¹¹ Many women's poems have come down to us only through regional or annual anthologies. In 1881, for example, D. H. Edwards' *Modern Scots Poets* printed five poems by Effie Williamson, a resident of Galashiels, a wool-weaving center roughly twenty miles southeast of Edinburgh. The anthologized selections—"A Summer-Day Rev-erie," "Curly Pow," "My Native Land," "Falling Leaves," and "I Wish It Were Weel Awa"¹²—appreciate childhood and natural beauty, and look forward to the joys of heaven. These slight pieces look suspiciously like the sort of work a middle-class male editor would have found acceptable from a laboring woman who was "fated [as Edwards put it] to attend the loom" (p. 304). Edwards' passing citation of a small segment of a poem in which Williamson mentions her weaving prompts some questions. Did Williamson write other poems on less "edifying" topics, that Edwards and other editors declined to publish? Recuperation by such editors and anthologists may have partly stultified what it preserved.

I will turn now to three other identifiably working-class Scots-women poets, all of whom published within the period 1865-85, and lived in urban or semi-urban settings. Ellen Johnston, "The Factory Girl," was one of a very small number of Scottish women industrial workers whose verses have been preserved; she lived mainly in Glasgow, but worked for brief periods in Manchester, Belfast, and Dundee. Jessie Russell was a Glaswegian seamstress married to a carpenter. Janet Hamilton, a vigorous spinner and weaver, lived in the gritty Glaswegian exurb of Coatbridge, in her childhood a quiet rural village.

One might consider these poets' representations of their lives from several alternate points of view: politically, by temperamental or ideological allegiances; chronologically, by dates of composition and publication, or the ages at which they wrote; or socioeconomically, by occupation and familial role (Russell and her husband raised three children; Hamilton and her "gude-man" ten; Johnston was the single parent of a daughter). The first is perhaps the most rewarding and complex, for these defenders of family and motherhood also wrote angry critiques of marriage and bitter poems of social protest.

These poems also raise nuanced ideological questions. Are didactic poems, for example, or denunciations of drunken stupor or violence committed in alcoholic rage feminist and reformist, or parochial and conservative? I will try to answer these questions in the specific context of each poet's writing, in an effort to foster a measure of tolerance, and mediate a sense of the appropriateness of each woman's work.

I will also arrange their work to suggest a loose progression in assessment of the problems of women's lives. When Russell, for example, expressed solidarity with other members of a hard-working artisan class, wrote about the anxieties of orphanhood and unemployment, and criticized abusive working-class husbands, she did so both as a conscious apologist for family life, and one of its sharper and more concrete critics. More "romantic" than Russell, but also more mordant, Johnston recorded with bitter pride her stepfather's sexual abuse and her struggles as a single mother, celebrated the gratifications of survival, and decried economic injustice. The older, mellower, and more broadly reflective Hamilton was more didactic than her younger sisters, as she praised—and embodied—a tradition of survival under stress that she traced to the teachings and example of her rural grandmother. As I mentioned above, Hamilton and the "gudeman" she married when she was thirteen and he twenty, she a weaver and he a shoemaker, raised ten children, and her poems radiate confidence in the spiritual wisdom and intelligence women can bring to the common task of familial survival. A muted optimist, Hamilton mourned the vanished rural culture of her youth, and hoped that the loyalties that enabled her ancestors to endure rural famine would sustain her urban contemporaries and descendants.

Jessie Russell published *The Blinkin' O' the Fire* in 1877, at the age of thirty. Russell apparently began her life in lower-middle class circumstances, and her mother died when she was eight years old. In Russell's preface and autobiographical title poem, she describes her loneliness as an orphaned child, and her fear that she would be unable to marry. Other poems record gratitude for her husband's praise and her children's survival through epidemics of serious disease. The grim statistics on infant- and child-mortality cited earlier give bitter substance to her belief that working-class women's presence in the home might be beneficial to their children ("Keepers at Home"), but some of her poems were wryly comic ("Our Flirtin'," "The Dresser Drawer," "Gin Wullie was There," "An April Fool"). Others marked the anxieties of unemployment ("Passing Clouds," "A Domestic Dirge"), celebrated the "rational recreations" of working people

("The Carpenters' Spree," "Candleriggs"), or indicted heedless Glaswegian authorities for their connivance in the cities' corruption and pollution ("Signs of Our Times"). She shared other working women poets' loathing for substance-abuse ("Matrimony Made Easy," "A Temperance Lay," "First Fittin'"), in marked contrast to working class male poets who celebrated the mateship of their favorite pubs.

Several of Russell's most poignant poems recounted the loneliness of orphanhood and death of children ("The Blinkin' O' the Fire"; "Mitherless Jeanie"; "The Mother's Story: Wee Teenie, who died of hydrophobia, at Govan, after suffering great agony, May 15th, 1876"), but many of her poems bluntly addressed sexual-political issues: domestic violence, working-men's condescension to their wives, the inequities of female sweated labor, and the need for women to gain political office ("Our Side of the Question," "A Recantation," "Washing Day"). "Woman's Rights Versus Women's Wrongs" detailed several varieties of working women's ill-remunerated labor, inside the home and without, but Russell reserved the poem's sharpest language for physically abusive husbands:

And then there are slaves whom we dream not of, and many a drudge to be found
In our city gentlemen's houses, in those kitchens underground,
She may have a wage which is better than those [needleworkers], nor have

hunger or cold to bode,
But throughout the year she has seldom one of the fifty days of God.

But many a one bears a greater wrong who is called by the name of wife,
While the dogs which follow her brutal lord lead not such a wretched life;

But a life for a life, and the murderer's hung, and we think not the law inhuman,
Then why not the lash for the man who kicks or strikes a defenceless woman?

Demands for legal redress—not just moral condemnation—were rare in the work of Victorian women poets of any class or generation. Russell may have been influenced by contemporary press accounts of an 1875 Parliamentary Report which documented the pervasiveness of wife-beating, and advocated penal lashing for batterers.¹² Her high valuation of successful heterosexual and familial bonds made her the more critical of their dissolution in marital violence. As a woman with some formal education married to an artisan, Russell clearly shared many critical attitudes with committed middle-class reformists such as Joanna Picken, Agnes Mabon, and Marion Bernstein, whose works will be mentioned below.

Ellen Johnston published her *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* in Dundee in 1867, six years before her death in the Glasgow Barony Poorhouse at 38. Her work appeared by subscription, with a perfunctory testimonial preface by an established male literary figure, the Rev. George Gilfillan of Dundee, who found that "when subtracting all signs of imperfect education," her poems are "highly creditable to

her heart and head too." This sometime patron of proletarian poets also contributed a somewhat longer prefatory essay to Janet Hamilton's 1868 *Poems and Ballads*, reprinted in the 1885 memorial volume of her *Poems, Essays, and Sketches*.

Johnston labored in a series of large textile mills, in Glasgow, Manchester, Belfast, and Dundee, and was one of the very few Scottish working class women poets who did not work as a seamstress, domestic handloom weaver, or farm assistant. She fought labor injustices fiercely—suing, for example, one employer who fired her without the legally mandated two weeks' notice—and her reflections and poems expressed a strong sense of integrity and pride in her ability to adapt to difficult circumstances. Her premature death in the poorhouse was not for want of fierce resistance to her fate.

Johnston's poems also created and took explicit pride in an individual poetic persona, who enjoyed her roles as epistolary friend and subject of romance, and celebrated her poetic impulses and audience. They are also more bitter at the personal conflicts she experienced in daily life, more appreciative of rare instances of anomalous kindness, and enraged at employers' heedless greed. Johnston was above all defiantly and defiantly conscious that her publications were remarkable simply by virtue of their existence. Her assertiveness and anger—in marked opposition to the century's feminine ideal—reflected the tensions of that consciousness.

Many of Johnston's poems treat political topics, or narrate her experiences as "The Factory Girl" poet. Others reply to praiseful responses by fellow writers—to poems she published in the *Glasgow Examiner*, *Glasgow Weekly News*, and the *Dundee Penny Post*. When a male fellow-poet who had offered to marry her left the country, she mourned his perfidy in print. She also sent poetic messages of friendship to three fellow women poets, and one of these letter-poems (to "Isabel") included a long account of the circumstances of her past life. The flamboyant and highly charged qualities of her writings expressed the assertiveness and self-respect she needed to become an accomplished poet, and her obvious dependence on editorial and reader response for her work's circulation clearly heightened her anxieties as well as her pride.

I have elsewhere discussed in more detail Johnston's political poetry and her creation of a romantic and social poetic persona,¹³ so I will focus here more specifically on her fragmented experiences of familial life, desertion, and poverty. Johnston never married, but in adolescence bore a daughter, Mary Achinvole, by an unnamed and later absent partner (see below). Johnston's *Autobiography* reviewed

the bitterness and instability of her childhood and adolescence: her father deserted his family, her stepfather abused her sexually for several years, and her first lover left her alone with the severe social stigma of an "illegitimate" child.

This twelve-page *Autobiography*, in fact, is the fullest account we have of her life by a Scottish nineteenth-century working-class poet, and it dwells on the contrast between her fantasies and hopes, and her desperate attempts to escape the home she despised. After Johnston's father emigrated to the United States, Johnston's mother, believing that her husband was dead, married a power-loom tenter when Ellen was eight years old:

Alas! shortly after my mother's second marriage I was dragged, against my own will and the earnest pleadings and remonstrance of my maternal grandfather, from his then happy home to my stepfather's abode, next land to the Cross Keys Tavern, London Road. . . . My stepfather could not bear to see me longer basking in the sunshine of freedom, and therefore took me into the factory where he worked to learn power-loom weaving when about eleven years of age, from which time I became a factory girl; but no language can paint the suffering which I afterwards endured from my tormentor.

Like many girls in similar situations, Johnston could not talk about the "torments" "no language could paint." She fled her house one morning, determined to drown herself in the Paisley Canal, but drew back (she wrote) when she heard an imagined voice. She later escaped for a time to another workplace, but her maternal uncle found her and dragged her home. Her mother

first questioned me as to the cause of absconding, and then beat me till I felt as if my brain were on fire; but still I kept the secret [of her stepfather's behavior] in my own bosom. But had I only foreseen the wretched misery I was heaping upon my own head—had I heard the dreadful constructions the world was putting on my movements—had I seen the shroud of shame and sorrow I was weaving around myself, I should then have disclosed the mystery of my life, but I remained silent and kept my mother and friends in ignorance of the cause which first disturbed my peace and made me run away from her house for safety and protection.

Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, Johnston ran away "five times from my tormenter, and during one of those elopements spent about six weeks in Airdrie, wandering often by Carron or Calder's beautiful winding banks." Kindly strangers apparently helped her survive, but new circumstances brought new problems: "I was falsely accused by those who knew me as a fallen woman, while I was as innocent of the charge as the unborn babe. . . . For years I submitted to this wrong, resolving to hold my false detractors at defiance." A putative "first love" deserted her, and another "friend and protector," who soon afterwards "offered me his heart—without the form of legal protection," likewise defected, and Johnston in retrospect quotes Goldsmith, "When lovely woman stoops to folly, / And finds too late that men betray, . . . What can wash her guilt away?" At the age of seventeen, Johnston was left to give birth to a daughter.

Few Victorian scruples about this "guilt" seem to have troubled her at this point, whatever her contemporary audience's anticipated response. In the *Autobiography*, Johnston recalls her straightforward happiness at the time (reminiscent of the response of the raped and abandoned mother Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh*):

I did not, however, feel inclined to die when I could no longer conceal what the world falsely calls a woman's shame. No, on the other hand, I never loved life more dearly and longed for the hour when I would have something to love me—and my wish was realised by becoming the mother of a lovely daughter on the 14th of September, 1852. No doubt every feeling mother thinks her own child lovely, but mine was surpassing so, and I felt as if I could begin all my past sorrows again if Heaven would only spare me my lovely babe to cheer my bleeding heart, for I never felt bound to earth till then; and as year succeeded year, "My Mary Achin" grew like the wild daisy—fresh and fair—on the mountain side.

Yet significantly the second edition of the *Autobiography*, which incorporated a number of suggested changes, omitted all reference to her adolescent romance and the birth of her daughter.

Johnston seems to have been the only member of her family able to work during this period, however. She struggled to support her now incapacitated stepfather, invalid mother, and infant daughter: "As my circumstances in life changed, I placed my daughter under my mother's care when duty called me forth to turn the poetic gift that nature had given me to a useful and profitable account." She spent three months working in Manchester, and ill-health led to a long stay in Belfast, during which she yearned sadly for her child: "Thou'rt my star in the night, till daybreak begin, / And my sunshine by noon-tide—my Mary Achin" ("A Mother's Love"). Another poem records a reconciliation with the woman who had once beaten her ("To My Mother"), and Johnston notes with satisfaction that she was able to confide her secret about her "tormentor" to her mother before she died at 45: "My mother, after becoming aware of the mystery of my life, closed her weary pilgrimage on earth on 25th May, 1861. Thus I was left without a friend, and disappointed of a future promised home and pleasure which I was not destined to enjoy."¹⁴

After her mother's death, Johnston left for Dundee, home of her father's sister, where she and her child "suffered neglect and destitution for some time," but she eventually found work, and began to publish some of her verses in the Dundee *Penny Post*, whose editor Alexander Campbell later arranged for the publication of her volume. Johnston makes no further mention of her daughter in the *Autobiography*, and there is no way to determine whether "Mary Achin" survived her. She would have been twenty or twenty-one at her mother's death.

Johnston explicitly described the circumstances of her father's desertion and subsequent suicide, and obliquely referred to the

Autobiography's "dark mystery" in "The Factory Girl's Reply to Edith":

A father's love I never knew,
He left me when an infant child,
And sailed Columbia's shore to view,
And chase ambition's fancy wild.
.....
Eight years on Time's iron wings had fled,
When Hope's gold star began to wane;
My mother, dreaming he was dead,
Joined in wedlock's band again.
The grief that I have borne since then,
Is only known unto the Lord:
No power of words nor author's pen
My countless wrongs can e'er record.
Another dozen years had fled:
One day a startling letter came—
O God! my father was not dead,
But living in the State of Maine.
Edith, I scarce dare tell thee more,
Save where the Niagara's wave
Swells proudly o'er its pebbly shore,
And points a suicide's sad grave.
Conscience wrung with wild remorse
To hear his child, far-famed in song,
Wept 'neath a cruel stepfather's curse,
That he himself had caused the wrong.
.....
Such was my sire, and such his end,
And such an end was nearly mine;
But Heaven its mercy did extend,
And sent kind friends to save in time.

Political anger and personal disappointment—at the emotional damage she had suffered, at fellow poets' facile promises—alternated in Johnston's work with a sense of fellowship, shared struggle, and gratitude for readers' goodwill toward her poems. "The Factory Girl" fought inequities and injustices in her verse, but she also laid claim to the value of an expressive working woman's inner life, whose successes she celebrated in the volume's final poem ("The Maid of Dundee to her Slumbering Muse"):

Go, tell thy foes that 'twas the wrongs they've done thee,
That caused thy waitings in the Penny Post;
That crowned thee queen, and all those honours won thee,
And made thee dear old Scotland's favourite boast.
Then go, my muse, and don thy robes of honour,
Prepare to visit dear old Glasgow town,
Where thou shalt meet with many a noble donor
Of those bright jewels that sparkle in thy crown.
Go, tell the Penny Post to wave its banner,
And bid its minstrels sing that thou art free,
And they shall welcome forth in queen-like manner
Thy Factory Girl—the maid of sweet Dundee.

Johnston's independence and honest ambition shone through these self-advertisements, but her finest poem may have been "The Last Sark," a bitter dramatic monologue, written from the point of view of an embattled mother whose husband cannot find work. Unlike the persona of Johnston's autobiographical poems, this mother speaks Scots. Like the mother of Jessie Russell's "Passing Clouds," she has waited with her children for the return of her husband, to learn whether he has found employment. Unlike her counterpart in Russell's poem, she is disappointed. Johnston infused something of her bitter stamina, political acuity, and capacity for anger into the un-Victorian maternal character of the much bleaker "The Last Sark," who is both desperately devoted and resolutely angry:

The Last Sark, Written in 1859

Guidie guide me, are you hame again, an' ha'e ye got nae wark,
We've naething noo tae put awa' unless yer auld blue sark;
My head is rinnin' roon about far lichter than a flea—
What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!

.....
This is a funny world, John, for it's no divided fair,
And whiles I think some o' the rich have got the puir folk's share,
Tae see us starving here the nicht wi' no ae bless'd bawbee—
What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!

Oor hoose ance bean an' cosey, John; oor beds ance snug and warm
Feels unco cauf an' dismal noo, an' empty as a barn;
The weans ist greeting i oor face, and we ha'e nought to gie—
What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!

It is the puir man's hard-won toil that fills the rich man's purse;
I'm sure his gouden coffers they are hit wi' mony a curse;
Were it no for the working men what sad the rich men be?
What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!

My head is licht, my heart is weak, my een are growing blin';
The bairn is faen' aff my knee—oh! John, catch haud o' him,
You kne I hinna tasted meat for days far mair than three;
Were it no for my helpless bairns I wadna care to dee.

The last of this essay's Scottish working class women poets, Janet Thomson Hamilton, published *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character* when she was seventy, and another volume three years later. In response to her first volume, the reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* wrote that "the name of Janet Hamilton is one of the most remarkable in the history of Scottish poetry."¹⁵ A lifelong spinner, weaver, and tambourer, Hamilton learned to write after she had borne and raised ten children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. She had learned to read as a child, but began to write at age fifty-four, using an idiosyncratic lettering she invented for herself. She continued to compose poems in her sixties, dictating them to her son after she became blind (an affliction perhaps

hastened by long hours of close work at the tambour frame).¹⁶ The son reported that:

When her books were being printed, although unable from want of sight to read a line, she never would allow any one but herself to make any corrections on the proofs. I read them; she sat and listened, and an alteration of a word or a syllable from her own she would detect at once. She said if her writings possessed any merit, it would be her own; and if there were blemishes in them, they, too, would be her own.¹⁷

Hamilton's poetic reflections on the social evils and changes of industrialization were softened by the hope that the working poor might yet maintain their family continuity and cohesiveness in these grimly straitened conditions. She brought to her portrayals of Scottish life a strong narrative bent, a penchant for satire, and a grief at the destruction of the countryside, tempered again by meliorist hopes. She took a keen interest in European politics, criticized England's foreign wars, and expressed pointed opinions about trade, slavery, continental revolutions, English cultural imperialism, and commercial greed. Her tone is alternately genial and feisty, accusatory and unabashedly didactic. If Hamilton ever hesitated to express the views of an aged, blind weaver, there is little sign of it in her work. Secure in her late-found public voice and ability to contribute to her social world through her life and writings, she wrote singlemindedly for the members of her own class. Her values were historical, moral, and cohesive, and her satiric gifts suggest comparisons and marked contrasts with her similarly didactic, if more splenetic fellow countryman and near-contemporary, Thomas Carlyle.

Hamilton's poetry appeared with that of Jessie Russell and Ellen Johnston; she, however, was forty years older. Her hatred of alcoholism and her appeals to worker self-help partly reflected the Chartist sentiments of her generation, but she also denounced industrial pollution, European counterrevolutions, Scotland's colonial subordination, and declines in the customs she remembered from her youth. The following pungent lines from "Oor Location" make clear her reluctance to exempt drunken and neglectful working-class mothers from her polemic (compare the plight of the crack-addicted and their children):

Oh, the dreadfu' curse o' drinkin'!
Men are ill, but tae my thinkin',
Leukin' through the drucken fock,
There's a jenny for ilk Jock.
Oh, the dool an' desolation,
An' the havoc in the nation,
Wrocht by dirty, drucken wives!
Oh, hoo many bairnies' lives
Lost ilk year through their neglec'!
Like a millstane roon' the neck
O' the strugglin', toilin' masses
Hing drucken wives an' wanton lassies.
To see sae mony unweel mither
Is sure a shame that taps a' ithers.

Infanticide was common, and it horrified her:

my auld heart it wrings
To hear that sae many puir babies fm' death
At the mither's ain han', as sune's they draw breath.
("Rhymes for the Times," v)

Hamilton distributed the rest of her anger quite evenhandedly among heedless governments, pawnshop-owners, tavern-keepers, and commercial profiteers of all sorts. In "The Three Golden Balls," for example, the local sots return again and again to the pawnshop whose "groaning shelves are laden / With spoils of man, wife, child, and maiden." Like Russell, she repeatedly notes the devastating effects of paternal drunkenness, as in "The Drunkard's Wife," "The Contrast," and "The Plague of Our Isle." In "The Contrast," a child pleads for her mother to come home, for "father's come." When her mother arrives, however,

he waits for her returning,
Wrath and hate within him burning.
.....
Blows and shrieks and curses mingle—
Words of passion, fierce and wild.
Weeping girl and screaming child,
While the shades of evening close,
Cowering, sobbing, seek repose.

In "The Plague of Our Isle," the speaker recalls that:

We've seen, with her bright hair all clotted with blood,
Lie cold on the hearth—where at morning she stood
The wife of a summer—a babe on her breast—
The husband a drunkard—let death tell the rest.
("The Plague of Our Isle")

Several of her narratives retrace the effects of Scottish famines, immiseration, and forced emigration. One of Hamilton's ancestors, the seventeenth-century Covenanter John Whitelaw, was executed for his beliefs, and she devotes several of her historical narratives to courage under religious persecution. In "Scene II" of "Contrasted Scenes from Real Life" (based on an incident from Dickens' *Household Words*), Hamilton's speaker walks in the inner city on a winter night, and finds five "huddled masses" to whom the workhouse has refused admission—four destitute and of indeterminate occupation, and the fifth a prostitute, who "from the country came, / And found no choice of life but want or shame."

Hamilton's fondest personal memories were of girlhood visits to her grandmother, commemorated in poems such as "Grannie's Tale—A Ballad," "Grannie's Dream—A True Incident," and "Grannie Visited at Blackhill, Shots, July, 1805," in which "Grannie" blesses her little granddaughter after she has told her more stories of the past. Hamilton's memories of her storytelling predecessor are a virtual

paradigm case of feminist accounts of female identity-formation, for what her grandmother really imparted to her was a sense of kinship, love of old histories, and certainty of the spiritual meanings within them. These values Hamilton now offers sturdily to her present world, blending indignation at the evils of the city with belief in the healing powers of conscience.

Something of these values—Hamilton's views of women's joys and duties, for example—obviously draw on traditional assumptions about sexual divisions of labor, but she was no simple nostalgist. Hers were the tempered politics of an old woman who deplored wider patterns of abuse, but believed in celebrating instances of those virtues still possible in the harsh winter of her time. She balanced a quick sense of the evils of industrialism with memories of the past privations of rural famines (for example, in "Grannie's Tale: A Ballad o' Memorie" and "Grannie's Crack about the Famine in Auld Scotland"), and her blend of sentiment and didacticism has the power of reiterated and passionate engagement. Irritability gave her distance, and moral sentiment renewed her sense of purpose, while her preachments suggested the possibility of amelioration amid apparent despair.

Hamilton's sense of "mother-right" as well as her gentle humor appear with special clarity in "The Feast of the 'Mutches,'" in which she commemorates the annual supper given in the City Hall of Glasgow to poor old women, all of whom wore white "mutches":

There's mony a heid that was black as the crow,
Or broun as the berry, noo white as the snaw,
The speerit inside, that's the gist o' the matter—
The heid's the ootside o' the cup an' the platter.

God bless ye, aul' grannies! I wish ye a' weel,
Ye're wearin' awa' to the Lan' o' the Leal;
May ye in the Lan' o the Leal an' the true
Meet the aul' blin' grannie that sings to ye noo!

... O may it be given
To gentles an' grannies to meet yet in Heaven!

Many relatively poor Scottish women poets were not "working class," and other women poets who shared proletarian sympathies and interests wrote sharp criticisms of domestic violence and other social inequities. Joanna Picken, for example, published "An Auld Friend wi' a New Face" in the *Glasgow Courier*, before she emigrated for Canada in 1842 (Leonard, pp. 188-191, 371). This study in a minor genre—praise of the unmarried life—begins forthrightly with the observation that "A queer kind o' lott'ry is marriage—" and canvasses the harassments of the newly married wife:

She maun labour frae sunrise till dark,
 An' aft tho' het means be but sma',
 She gets little thanks for her work—
 Or as aften gets nae thanks ava.
 She maun tak just whatever may come,
 An' say nocht o' her fear or her hope;
 There's nae use o' lievin' in Rome,
 An' tryin' to fecht wi' the Pope.
 Hectored an' lectured and a',
 Snubbed for whate'er may befa',
 Than this, she is far better aff—
 That never gets married ava.

Agnes Stuart Mabon of Jedburgh, whose *Homely Rhymes From the Banks of the Jed* appeared in 1887, a decade after Russell's *The Blinkin' O' The Fire*, seems to have been an invalid with moderately strong laboring class and trade union sympathies.¹⁸ In her obligatory denunciation of "The Drunkard's Inhumanity," she pauses for a moment—like more recent analysts of the "battered woman syndrome"—to examine some of the psychological effects of physical abuse on its victim:

And she may count the bruises on her flesh,
 But there are wounds that God alone can see;
 He counts each pang that rends the bleeding heart.
 The disappointed love, the shame, the grief,
 She feels.

The most complex, directly political, and categorical Scottish poetic critic of nineteenth-century women's position under Victorian marriage law was probably Marion Bernstein, a sometime music teacher who published some of her verse in the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, and her only volume, *Mirren's Musings: A Collection of Songs and Poems*, in 1877, when she was still in her twenties. She almost certainly received some formal education, but was sufficiently poor in the 1880s to require loans from the Glasgow Hebrew Philanthropic Relief Society.¹⁹

Like Mabon, Bernstein also remembered an invalid childhood in which she sought diversion and solace in her ability to write, and like all the authors I have considered, she sharply criticizes marital abuse. At least eight of her poems—with clearly suggestive titles such as "Human Rights," "Manly Sports," "Women's Rights and Wrongs," "A Dream," "A Rule to Work Both Ways, Suggested by a 'Wife-beater's' Letter," "A Woman's Logic," "The Wretched Sex," "Wanted A Husband," and "Married and Settled"—attack marriage, male violence, gender inequity, and assorted forms of machismo with a certain radical-feminist acerbity, whose bluntness can startle as well as amuse. In response to a newspaper correspondent who suggested that a man should be able to kill an unruly wife, for example, "A Rule to Work Both Ways" offers a Modest Proposal:

If beating can reform a wife
 It might reform a husband too,
 Since such are the effects of strife—
 My sisters, I advise that you
 Should try it, not with fists—Oh, no!
 For that would seem like some weak joker;
 In husband-curing let each blow
 Be given with the kitchen poker!

 A wife or husband "in the way"
 You need but beat to death, or smother;
 And then you may at any day
 Find better fortune with another.

Anticipating the plots of several English utopian suffragist novels of the 1890s and early 1900s (such as Lady Dixie's 1890 *Gloriana*), Bernstein demonstrates kinship with later feminists in her emphatically utopian poem, "A Dream":

I dreamt that the nineteenth century
 Had entirely passed away,
 And had given place to a more advanced
 And very much brighter day.
 For Woman's Rights were established quite,
 And man could the fact discern
 That he'd long been teaching his grandmamma
 What she did'nt require to learn.
 There were female chiefs in the Cabinet,
 (Much better than males I'm sure!)
 And the Commons were three-parts feminine,
 While the Lords were seen no more!
 And right well did the ladies legislate,
 They determined to "keep the peace,"
 So well they managed affairs of State,
 That the science of war might cease.
 Now no man could venture to beat his wife,
 For the women had settled by law
 That whoever did so should lose his life, [!]
 Then he'd never do so any more.
 There were no more physicians of either sex,
 For the schools were required to teach
 The science of healing to every child
 As well as the parts of speech.
 There were no more lawyers—all children learned
 The code of their country's laws;
 There were female judges, and truth became
 The fashion in every cause,
 All the churches attended a conference
 At which every sect agreed
 That an erring opinion was not so bad
 As a false word or wicked deed.
 At this I felt sure there was some mistake,
 It seemed such a strange idea!
 My eyes opened wide, and that made me wake,
 Now was'nt the vision queer?

Aspects of Bernstein's vision in this poem are intrinsically counterfactual and hopelessly "essentialist," but her "queer" combination of eccentricity, impishness, sobriety, political idealism and rage made her one of the period's fiercer critics of Victorian marriage laws. A social-political order which evoked Marion Bernstein's verses contained some of the seeds of its own destruction.

The few Scottish working-class women poets whose poems survived thus wrote of situations of great stress, and decried social injustice, judicial severity, parental negligence, domestic violence, and "substance abuse" in terms that would not startle readers of any present day large city United States newspaper—the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*. Nor, for that matter, would most of their preferred strategies for survival or change. Only a few poets focused directly on underlying patterns of social and economic injustice—the laws which forbade a battered wife to escape, for example. Fewer still envisioned socialist or utopian remedies for these evils. What the Scottish laboring-class women poets did do was write poetic appeals to communal solidarity, whose humor, satire, linguistic immediacy, and appeals to shared memories expressed the enduring ideals of workers in a social order that might now be called "third-world" or "postcolonial." Russell, Johnston, Hamilton, and their sister poets struggled to articulate a balance of social empathy and outrage which they believed they and their fellow women of the laboring classes were best able to understand and express.

Notes

¹ The terrain of this essay has been turned over by several social historians, anthropologists, and literary critics. These include: Martha Vicinus, in *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-Class Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1974); Robert Colls, in *The Collier's Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977); Brian Hollingsworth, in *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1977); Billie Kay, in *Scots: The Mither Tongue* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1986); Brian Maidment, in *Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987); and Tom Leonard, in *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990). See also Lawrence McCauley's unpublished essay, "Language and Social Community in Working Class English Poetry," University of Iowa. Donna Landry has studied laboring-class women's poetry in *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), and Catherine Kerrigan's *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1991) is a pioneering resource in its neglected field.

Brian Maidment divides the poets and poetry (only one selection is by a woman) he includes in *Poorhouse Fugitives* into three rough categories: "Chartists and Radicals," "Parnassians," and "Lowly Bards and Homely Rhymers," and under "Lowly Bards and Homely Rhymers" includes dialect poetry and "local bards." These distinctions do not apply well to the Scotswomen I examine. They wrote poems in both Scots and English on almost all of the subjects Maidment canvasses, so that his separation of "parnassian" from "homely" becomes problematic. Women did write more memorial poems and bitter poetic denunciations of alcoholism than did men, however, and their political poems concentrated more on the individual effects of poverty. New categories—such as "working women," "marriage," and "mothers and grandmothers"—would have to be added.

² For a discussion of the barriers to publication Scottish women poets faced, please see my essay, "Oor Location: Victorian Women Poets and the Transition from Rural to Urban Scottish Culture," *Victorian Urban Landscapes*, ed. Debra Mancoff and Dale Trela, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995. For a discussion of the Scottish rhetorical tradition as a political effort to create a "standard" English which could aid assimilation, see Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

³ The high value placed on poetry as expression of national character is reflected in two books of the period, D. H. Edwards' *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets with Biographical and Critical Notices* (Brechin, 1880) and Henry Shanks, *The Peasant Poets of Scotland. And Musings Under the Beeches*, by Henry Shanks, *The Blind Poet of the Deans* (Barthgate: Laurence Gilbertson, Hopetoun Street, Edinburgh and Glasgow: John Menzies and Company, 1881). D. H. Edwards claims that "the dialect of Scotland lends

Sydney Checkland, *Industry and Ethos: Scotland 1832-1914*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1989); and Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England (1844)*, ed. W. O. Henderson and H. H. Chaloner (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), chaps. 4 and 6.

10 Joan Sherman, *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992). For Thompson's poems in southern black dialect, see *African-American Women Poets*, vol. 2 of *Collected Black Women's Poetry*, ed. Joan Sherman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).

11 Ellen Johnston, who published by subscription, includes, with many poems of working-class achievements and managerial injustice, two or three paeans to anomalously good employers, who provided better than usual circumstances, or encouraged her writing. These responses were no doubt sincere, but their juxtaposition with protest poems such as "The Last Sark" or "O Come awa', Jamie" is slightly startling.

12 Elspeth King, p. 86. She also discusses Bernstein and Russell, pp. 83-87.

13 "Ellen Johnston, 'The Factory Girl': Voices and Audience in a Glaswegian Victorian Working Class Poet," unpublished essay delivered at MMLA, November 1993.

14 The reference to "future promised home" is unclear, but may refer to her father's invitation to his family to join him in the United States. He had afterwards killed himself upon hearing of their unhappy situation.

15 This reviewer also singled out for special praise the "tenderness, simplicity, and beauty" of "Effe," one of the volume's most conventional sentimental lyrics, in which the young heroine pines away and dies after her lover deserts her for another woman.

According to the notices at the end of the 1885 new edition of the memorial volume, at any rate, other laudatory reviews appeared in the *St. James Gazette*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Scotsman*, the *Athenaeum*, and *Punch*; the latter had noted: "Punch passes on what he is glad to own as a debt, and not his debt only but all his readers', and all English and Scotch working men's, to an old woman—a poor old woman—Janet Hamilton of Coatbridge."

16 See her "The Lay of the Tambour Frame."

17 James Hamilton, *Poems Sketches and Essays by Janet Hamilton*, New edition, Glasgow: James Maclehose and sons, 1885, p. vii.

18 J. and R. Parlane, Paisley. Mabon's volume is introduced by the Rev. James King, M.A., Vicar of St. Mary's, Berwick-on-Tweed, who remembers that they were educated together as schoolchildren, testifies to her exemplary life as "daughter, mother, wife," and notes that she has spent many years "confined to a sick chamber."

19 Elspeth King, pp. 83-84. King notes that Marion Bernstein was listed in the Glasgow Post Office Directories as a teacher of piano and singing at various addresses until her name disappears after 1902.

itself so naturally and so easily to song, that the feelings of the illiterate, as well as of the educated, seem to flow more copiously into the lyrical expression than is the case in other countries. No nation under the sun has produced so many bards as Caledonia. They sing of the natural beauties that surround her people—her burns and heathery hills, the occupations that make up the routine of their daily life, and the joys and sorrows that chequer their experiences—till almost every town and hamlet, glen and stream are celebrated in song, and her scenery made familiar to the inhabitants of the remotest corners of civilization" (preface, p. ii). Similarly Henry Shanks asserts, "Poetry is the true salt of life, . . . and its influence in moulding the character of nations, and in elevating, refining and harmonizing the more crude and discordant elements of coarser natures, has been felt and appreciated, throughout all time, in every country and in every clime. . . . Scotland, poetically, has done nobly and well in the past. It makes one's heart swell with patriotic pride to think that out of a population so numerically inferior to many of the other civilized nations of the world, she has in her People Poets, but more especially in the number and quality of her Peasant Poets, excelled them all" (pp. 165-166).

4 Janet Hamilton and Ellen Johnston, for example, recorded concrete social situations and daily speech at least as successfully as did Robert Louis Stevenson—Victorian Scotland's major poet—in his four "Pieces in Lallan" and sixteen lyrics subtitled "In Scots" (in *Collected Poems* [New York: Viking, 1971], "Poems 1869-1879"; from "Underwoods, Book II: In Scots").

5 Jessie Russell, *The Blinkin' O' the Fire* (Glasgow, 1877); Ellen Johnston *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, The Factory Girl* (Dundee: William Love, 40 Enoch Square, 1867); Janet Hamilton, *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne, Sketches of Local Scenes and Characters, with a Glossary, by Janet Hamilton, Authoress of "Poems and Essays"* (Glasgow: Thomas Murray and Son; Edinburgh: William Ritchie; London: James Nisbet and Co., 1865); *Poems and Ballads* (1868); *Poems, Essays, and Sketches*, new edition (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1880).

6 Billie Kay, *Scots: The Mither Tongue* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1986).

7 R. A. Cage, ed., *The Working Class in Glasgow* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), chap. 1.

8 Cited in *Glasgow, Insight City Guides*, APA Publications (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991), p. 50.

9 Cage, ed., *The Working Class in Glasgow*, pp. 43-47, especially 45. For descriptions of Glasgow and Glaswegian women's lives during this period, see Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach, eds., *The World is Ill Divided: Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1990); Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Elspeth King, *The Hidden History of Glasgow's Women: The Thenu Factor* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1993); and T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People: 1830-1950* (Hammersmith: Fontana, 1987); Olive and