

**Functions
of
Victorian Culture
at the
Present Time**



edited by

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**“Nurs’d up amongst the scenes
I have describ’d”**

*Political Resonances in the Poetry of
Working-Class Women*

FLORENCE BOOS

How should we read poems by nineteenth-century working-class women in early-twenty-first-century political contexts? Many critics alert to the implications of class bias have nonetheless slighted the work of wives, mothers, and sisters of male Chartist poets.¹ Were these writings too meager, too rudimentary, or too sentimental to address significant political issues? Do they merit serious critical attention?² If we answer “no” to these questions, do we commit the theoretical error of “presentist recuperation”?

It will not be novel to observe that these women’s works seldom invoked “high” literary or historical archetypes. More surprising, I believe, is the extent to which they drew on complex regional and demotic contexts—contexts that were as resonant, in their ways, as Matthew Arnold’s public-school Greek and subsequent “classical” education were in theirs.

Most of these working-class women did not have the problems of their nineteenth-century middle-class sisters, who struggled throughout the century to gain access to

universities, the professions, and of course the vote. Generally excluded from “working-men’s” projects and organizations, working-class women were also not very likely to be found among Chartist and socialist “aristocrats of labor.” These women did, however, attend to their own reformist and sometimes “radical” muses. They defended separate sensibilities grounded in songs and spiritual traditions; in their experiences of (multiple) motherhood; and, most starkly, in the pain and endurance of prematurely severed family ties.

The social vulnerability and precarious survival of these Victorian women’s writings strongly suggest that class-based idealizations have also ill-charted the “other country” of the past, and their wide poetic range points to something parochial about traditionally credentialed interpretations of the British cultural past. If certain entitlements to define what we call “culture” have indeed been begged, broader interpretive schemata might do better justice to hybrid forms of poetic expression and deepen our hermeneutic understanding of Victorian subjectivity and complex anarchic aspects of culture itself.

Finally, such lines of inquiry and conjecture also seem to open up an unusually concrete historical *Neuland*, in that few feminist scholars had guessed that so many working-class women poets had written so much. My particular efforts to canvass extant texts in twenty or more Scottish and English repositories led me to poetry by more than sixty women scattered in forty books and several score periodicals.³ But despite this broad originary base, I sometimes held what appeared to be sole surviving copies in my hand.

Prompted by all these normative as well as theoretical incentives, I have tried to set out here four interrelated ways in which one might read politically as well as aesthetically the poems of ten of these Victorian “humble rhymers”—self-taught and self-acknowledged proletarian nursemaids, embroiderers, factory workers, farm laborers, midwives, itinerant poets, and ballad writers. More precisely, I will try to draw together aspects of their work under four rubrics: (1) explicitly political works; (2) “personal” forms of assertion, defiance, and solidarity; (3) “deeply embedded” political verse; and (4) poems of oral protest.

Explicitly Political Works (Often Sarcastic or Satirical in Tone)

Victorian working-class women began to publish poems in greater numbers in the 1860s, a full generation after their Chartist brothers. Most took for

granted the absence of the franchise that few Chartists had sought for them⁴ and decried the penury and industrial squalor that sometimes closed over them. They hungered for education and responded deeply and often bitterly to the obliteration of their regional languages and cultures, especially in Scotland. They often attacked slavery, as perhaps a limiting case of forms of de facto indenturement they well knew; espoused independence movements in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Spain; and mourned the dead—Britons and others—in the Crimean War.

Janet Hamilton

Consider, first, the work of Janet Thomson Hamilton, born in 1795, married to the shoemaker John Hamilton at thirteen, mother of ten children, and once one of the best-known working-class poets in Victorian Scotland.⁵ Janet Thomson never attended school, but her mother taught her to read (but not write), and she read avidly throughout her life. She began her work at the tambour-loom at nine, began to compose verses in her head in her teens, taught herself to write a semi-cursive script in middle age, was partly blind by sixty, and was completely blind at seventy-one. A mixture of high intelligence and agraphia may have sharpened her memory, for there is an oral quality to her work, and she knew a wide range of poems by heart. Quick dialogue, mercurial humor, and a sense of repartee sharpened her satiric gifts, and she eventually published four volumes of essays and poems in her lifetime (a unique achievement), aided in her last years by one of her sons.⁶

Hamilton’s first published works were poems in standard English and temperance essays, but she turned later to prose memoirs of early-nineteenth-century village life and poetic tributes to women’s insights in her beloved “Doric,” and she dedicated her third book “lovingly and respectfully . . . to her Brothers, the Men of the Working Class.” Her birthplace, Langloan (now a part of Coatbridge, a city ten miles east of Glasgow), evolved during her lifetime from a rural village into one of the most polluted areas in all of Britain, and some of her most bitter verse condemned the savage human costs of these changes.

In parts of “A Whene Aul’ Memories,” for example, coal dust and clamor in nearby Gartsherrie became a pounding, four-beat balladic chant:

Noo the bodies are gane an’ their dwellin’s awa’,
 | And the place whaur they stood I scarce ken noo ava,

For there's roarin' o' steam, an' there's reengin o' wheels,
Men workin', and sweatin', and swearin' like deils.

And the flame-tappit furnaces staun' in a raw,
A'bleezin', and blawin', and' smeeikin' awa,
Their eerie licht brichtein' the laigh hingin' cluds,
Gleamin' far ower the loch an' the mirk lanely wuds.

In "A Lay of the Tambour Frame," her speaker vigorously denounced male opponents of better pay for women:

Selfish, unfeeling men!
Have ye not had your will?
High pay, short hours; yet your cry, like the leech,
Is, Give us, give us still.
She who tambours—tambours
For fifteen hours a day—
Would have shoes on her feet, and dress for church,
Had she a third of your pay.

Ellen Johnston

Ellen Johnston, a self-described "Factory Girl," was abandoned by her father when she was two, and began work in a factory at eleven.⁷ Her stepfather abused her in her teens, and she bore a daughter at seventeen. She began to publish verses in local periodicals in her early twenties, and she later earned the support of Alexander Campbell, editor of the regional *Penny Post* and an old socialist, who energetically encouraged readers to subscribe to two editions of her *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*. She drafted fourteen of her poems in her native Lallands, the rest of them in standard English.

A few patterns in her work have no obvious link to class. Every woman slighted because she appears "slight," for example, will recognize her response to people who

At first . . . my name exalt,
And with my works find little fault;
But when upon myself they gaze,
They say some other claims the praise. . . .
But those who see me in this dress,
So small and thin I must confess, . . .

Well may they ask, dare I profess
The talent of an authoress?

("An Address to Nature on Its Cruelty," 141)

In "The Last Sark," Johnston's best-known work, an enervated Scottish mother cries out in rage to her husband:

Gude guide me, are ye hame again, and hae ye got nae
wark?
We've naething noo tae pit awa, unless your auld blue sark.
My heid is rinnin roond aboot, far lichter nor a flee:
What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir
wad dee?

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

(pp. 100–101)

Mary Smith

Mary Smith was a poor but intellectually ambitious daughter of "nonconformists" in Oxford.⁸ She spent most of her adult life in Carlisle, where she worked as a servant and school aide, and eventually opened a small primary school. She organized free classes for poor women, campaigned for women's suffrage and kindred causes, and published—with great effort—*Poems* (1860), *Progress, and Other Poems; The Latter Including Poems on the Social Affections and Poems on Life and Labour* (1863), and *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist: A Fragment of a Life* (posthumously, in 1892). As a poet, she indited her ideals in ardent periodic octameters:

"Women's Rights" are not hers only, they are all the world's
beside,
And the whole world faints and suffers, while these are
scorn'd, denied.
Childhood, with its mighty questions, Manhood with its rest-
less heart,

Life in all its varied phrases, standing class from class apart,
 Need the voice, the thought of woman, woman wise as she
 shall be,
 When at last the erring ages shall in all things make her Free.
 (*Progress*, "Women's Claims," 156-57)

Jessie Russell

Jessie Russell's parents were lower middle class, but she was orphaned, left school at twelve, became a carpenter's wife, and mothered three children. In *The Blinkin' o' the Fire* (1877), she denounced the sufferings of

. . . slaves whom we dream not of, and many a drudge to be
 found
 In our city gentlemen's houses, in those kitchens under-
 ground. . . .

but also of less obviously abused women, who were

. . . called by the name of wife,
 . . . 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 . . . strikes a
 defenseless woman?

("Woman's Rights *versus* Woman's Wrongs," 30)

Like several of her sisters, Russell wrote temperance poetry, in which she focused on the forms of *violence* working-class women suffered without escape or other recourse.⁹

"Personal" Forms of Assertion, Defiance, and Solidarity

Idealistic verse-tributes to the dignity of labor and expressions of pride in their poetic artistry appeared again and again in the work of women whose defiance helped them endure what they could not escape or overcome.

"Marie"

"Marie" (no last name known), for example, was a dye worker from

Chorley. She apparently published her work for the first time in William and Mary Howitt's *The People's and Howitt's Journal* in 1847 and placed other poems in assorted journals for several years thereafter (*The People's Journal*, *Eliza Cook's Journal*, *Cassell's Family Magazine*).¹⁰ Flashes of persuasive wit appeared in her cadenced expressions of ardent faith in her poetic vocation¹¹ and the dignity of all "Labour":

Thou who toilest, bless thy toiling!
 Not all nature sings
 Nobler anthem, than the music
 When thy hammer rings!
 Stroke by stroke, glad time [man] keepeth
 To his leaping heart;
 Who shall, scorning, call him *poor* man
 Having this rich part?
 He can boldly look existence
 In the very eye;
 Nor needs tremble when night whispers
 'Neath the starlit sky—

. . . .
 "Labour is the truest worship
 Any soul can bring."

("Labour," 62)

Epictetus might have admired her lyric variant of stoic self-abnegation:

Though ignored our lowly lot,
 Scornful glances harm us not;
 We accept our homely fate:
 And a beauteous life create;—
 From earth's bosom, brown and bare,
 Flowerets draw their colours rare;
 And, though we are seeming stinted,
 All our days are rainbow-tinted
 By our noble will!

("The Indomitable Will," 63)

Marie opposed "earnest hope" to the specter of death in "To Liberty" (1852), and her simple name or pseudonym disappeared from print in 1854.

Ellen Johnston

Ellen Johnston's own "earnest hope" was that an enduring audience of working-class readers would rescue her from oblivion, or at least remember her. She never escaped the grinding millwork a doctor had warned her would kill her, and she seems to have implicitly addressed a farewell in "The Factory Girl's Last Lay"—the last poem in fact that I have been able to trace—to her kindly radical patron, Alexander Campbell:

Stay; I will leave my fame's crown in thy keeping;
 Its gems may cheer thee at some future day;
 Adieu, my lov'd one, when I'm calmly sleeping,
 Sing to the world—"The Factory Girl's Last Lay."

She died in a poorhouse hospital four years later.

Mary Smith

Mary Smith, the reforming teacher, expressed her most ardent meliorist ideals in "Progress," a 116-page memorial to "spirits of dead centuries" (71) who "had no great name on the earth" but have made "things not so ill for you and me as they might have been" (in Eliot's words). Among the deepest ideals of her faith was a Carlylean/Morrisian belief that unremembered toilers—herself among them—formed a kind of community of secular saints. Indeed, this receding ideal seems to have become the animating radical-democratic ideal of her strenuous and self-sacrificing life:

Ye have no name nor place in all our lore,
 Forgot by e'en tradition's garrulous tongue,
 But ye—oh could we know you!—evermore
 War with us against evil foes of wrong;
 Your breath is still upon us, still we feel
 Faint whispers of your glories through us steal;
 Faint whispers of your thinkings; your great heart
 With time still blending, still its noblest part.

And when our hearts, unresting, seek pure peace;
 When the tide overflows them of pure thought;
 When the world's noisy tongues that hold us cease,
 And all the troubled soul to rest is wrought:
 'Tis then your spirit, greater than our own,

Which thrills us with a sense of things unknown,
 Which folds us in a glory, that makes bright
 Our fleeting moments, with Eternal Light.

(72–73)

Janet Hamilton

Janet Hamilton offered her most resonant homages to cultural integrity and working-class pride in her native Scots. In her "Plea for the Doric," her speaker apologized for previous "Parnassian" efforts "to busk oot my sang wi' the prood Southron tongue" and dismissed a long line of Scottish journalistic émigrés who went south:

I'm wae for Auld Reekie; her big men o' print
 To Lunnon ha'e gane, to be nearer the mint;
 But the coinage o' brain looks no a'e haet better,
 Though Doric is banish'd frae sang, tale, and letter.

I would like to believe that Hamilton's blunt defense of the vernacular helped encourage other Scottish working-class poets—Russell, Johnston, John Young, Joseph Wright—in their efforts to exploit the satiric and metaphorical possibilities of their native tongue.

"Deeply Embedded" Political Verse

Many of the women I have studied wrote verse that *embodied* some of the psychological and institutional constraints under which they "labored": in expressions of solidarity with refugees and outcasts, for example (slaves, prisoners, soldiers, "travellers," and even animals), and in their stark accounts of frequent and brutal early deaths.

Some of these humble verse allegories were literally broken, and others might be dismissed as "bad" or "incoherent." But the most moving cried out for contextual interpretation and a heedful audience. Among the latter were Fanny Forrester's fragmented narratives, Jane Stevenson's free-verse meditations, and Elizabeth Campbell's paper-covered pamphlets of angry and grieving verse.

Fanny Forrester

Fanny Forrester, a Lancashire dye worker, published sixty-odd poems in

Ben Brierley's Journal in Manchester between 1870 and 1876. Brierley himself published a well-intended but rather generic description of her on January 23, 1875:

Born in Manchester of poor parents, and parents whom misfortune seems to have marked for its own, the cradle of her muse has been in the nursery of toil and vicissitude, as may have been gathered by an observer who has noted the sombre tints in which most of her pictures of life are painted, and the deep sympathy with suffering humanity that breathes through every note of her music. (37)

Forrester's "sombre tints" seem to have contrasted rather sharply with Brierley's general tone of optimistic self-promotion, but he published tributes to Forrester by her fellow poets John Lawton Owen, Martha Harriet Smith, and Anna E. Fennell—analoguees, perhaps, of the epistolary responses to Ellen Johnston that Alexander Campbell had published in the *Penny Post*.

Forrester's diction was "elevated," but her work embraced painful flashbacks and a few curious gender-ambiguities and quasi-homoerotic interludes, and her poetic personae included poor orphans, handicapped children, dying soldiers, elderly parents, struggling Irish immigrants, "fallen" or abandoned women, and unwed mothers. Many seem exhausted, and most have suffered wrenching dislocations—from country to city, Ireland to the midland slums, hopeful youth to exhausted middle age, and life to death.

In "Toiling in the City," for example, an Irish immigrant factory worker

... is weary, oh, so weary! of the engine's deafening sound;
Though her head is dazed and aching, still the mighty wheels
go round.

"Will they never cease their grinding?" oft the wondering
maiden cries,
As the straps go whirling round her, then go whizzing past her
eyes. . . .

In "Saturday Night" (one of several "Lancashire Pictures"):

... many a woman, cold and stern, forgets her loveless life—
Its barren paths, so bleak so drear—its never-ending strife;
The ruined, lone, forsaken shrine within her empty heart—
The wound that bleeds for evermore—the pang that won't
depart.

(October 1873)

Introspective and brooding reveries punctuated by abrupt changes of register were staples of "high" poetry, of course—compare Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" or Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland." But Forrester's narrative voices also resonated with complex passions of cruel exhaustion and irretrievable loss.

Jane Stevenson

Jane Stevenson also wrote sympathetically about uprooted lives—those of poor emigrants, ploughmen, itinerant prophets, newly evicted Highlanders, and a stray dog among them—but she cast many of her *Homely Musings by a Rustic Maiden* in rather plain free verse. Of her girlhood "songs"—composed in defiance of her family's derision—she remarked that "I suppose it is not prose, and I am not such a judge of poetry as to know whether it may be called poetry or not, or some kind of a mixture of both" (5). We do learn that Stevenson began work tending cows in early girlhood, and that she and her six brothers and two sisters lost their small farm when her parents died. She later made a long foot journey to the site, and mourned the family's dispersal in "The Homes of My Fathers" and lines "Written on the Death of My Father, and the Prospect of Then Leaving My Birthplace."

Anticipating the judgment of a "cold critic" in another poem, Stevenson sought to probe the finality of her loss:¹²

... should this paper chance
To fall into the hands of some cold critic,
They may laugh and wonder why a girl
(Surely an enthusiast) should thus descant
Upon a spot wherein they saw no loveliness;

....

I may be prejudic'd, this is my birthplace,
Spot where I have spent my life from earliest infancy;
Nurs'd up amongst the scenes I have describ'd,

....

A wild and solitary thing have thus contract
A love for things inanimate;
Or like the Swiss or Laplanders who love their country
And their native hills, though wild and bleak,
And whether transplant[ed] to climes more warm and sunny,
Fairer far to other eyes than theirs,

Will sigh, and pine, and sometimes die
Of broken heart.

("Home," 29-30)

In her accompanying prose description of her journey, she remarked that she had lost contact with her brothers and sisters and did not expect to retrace her journey "home" again.

Empathy with other sentient beings also led her to find common cause with a lonely "Wandering Dog":

Poor dog, I pity thee,
A wanderer thou art;
And all may pity thee
Whoe'er have felt that loneliness of heart—
Will creep o'er those who once have had a home,
Where peace and plenty was;
And then are forced to roam.

....

Nor ever meet a face, but faces that are strange,
And find this world is but a place
Of never ceasing change.

(40-42)

Stevenson's gentle assonant cadences enhanced her "simple" style, and her volume's fate recapitulated the loss and dispersion she described. I have found no other allusions to her or to her "musings" on the beauty of ordinary landscapes, the irrevocability of loss, and the mystical interstices of ordinary life.

Elizabeth Campbell

Elizabeth Duncan (Campbell) was a ploughman's daughter, the sixth of eight surviving children. When a midwife's error led to her mother's early death, the three-year-old and her sisters "wandered like forlorn crows from morn to night" (*Songs of My Pilgrimage* [Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1875], ix, xi), and she began work as a cowtender and whingatherer at seven, after a single quarter-session of school.

More than sixty-five years later, she remembered clearly "how miserable I felt in that strange ugly hovel—me that had such a strange love for the beautiful" (xii), and the solace she found in natural beauty, animals of

all sorts (including insects), and her "strange" love of learning. By contrast, she had little desire in old age "to tell about my after life; it would take far too long" (xvi).

Her "after life" was dominated in fact by toil, poverty, many moves, and early deaths of most of the people she loved. She was twenty-nine when she married William Campbell,¹³ a flaxdresser, and had already worked as a cow- and shepherd, handloom weaver, farm servant, house servant, and cook. She moved with him to Brechin, where she worked "fill[ing] pirns to four weavers" (xvi), then to Arbroath, where she tried to bring in tiny bits of money from the sale of four verse-pamphlets. She eventually bore four daughters and four sons, but her husband's life was blighted by a long, debilitating illness, and all four of her sons died young, two in infancy and two in workplace accidents. In her preface to her poems she wrote that "my life has been full of toil and sorrows so many and so deep that I never could tell them" (xvii).

She was seventy-two when she managed to publish *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (1875), introduced and edited by George Gilfillan, who excised out of "her" book—in a small paradigm of the pattern of middle-class-patronage-cum-bowdlerization—much of the best work in Campbell's pamphlets: poems of anguish and social commentary, for example, denunciations of American slavery and the Crimean War, and criticisms of governmental ministers and the Queen.¹⁴

She had much to "tell" in her pamphlets, which included many poems about the agony and injustice of war.¹⁵ She was especially hostile to Britain's incursion into the Crimea—her son Willie had entered Sebastopol with the first British contingent—and she also went out of her way to express pointed sympathy with Russian soldiers and British deserters ("Bill Arden"). In other poems, she asked whether "[British commanders'] titles and proceedings [will] cover their sin" "[w]hen their hour comes to die," and "ranted" rhythmically against *all* the "murderous inventions" of war:

I think it's a pity that kings go to war,

....

I weep for those that's the victims of kings.
I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave,
I weep for the monarch, I weep for the slave,
I weep for all those that in battle are slain;
I've a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men.

(*Poems*, 4th Series, "The Crimean War")

The pamphlets also included ardent abolitionist verses ("Kidnapped Slaves," Francis the Slave"), a denunciation of unjust imprisonment ("A Prison Cell"), and a vigorous response to a local minister who had tried to interdict her tiny effort at self-publication.

As an old woman, Campbell too made a lonely pilgrimage to her rural childhood home:

There all I could see was an old ash tree,
 'Twas hallowed, 'twas gloriously green;
 Still as death as it stood, and no breath stirred the wood,
 As the setting sun brilliant did sheen.

I stepped very slow, with a heart full of woe,
 From wounds that death can but heal;
 I wept like the cloud, and praised God aloud,
 Who else would have cared for my tale?

I passed a brow that shut the scene from my view,
 And the glory that over it shone;
 Lit up every tree, and flower on the lea,
 All so calm, all so still, but my moan.

("A Summer Night")

Forrester's, Stevenson's, and Campbell's evocations of personal loss bore witness to the reflective dignity of "ordinary" people in a period of economic injustice and cataclysmic social change.

Poems of Oral Protest

Isabella Chisholm

A stray trace of a lost oral culture appeared in the gypsy curse recorded by Alexander Carmichael, a late-nineteenth-century folklorist and collector of Gaelic songs. His informant, the traveling tinker Isabella Chisholm, was "still tall and straight, fine-featured, and fresh-complexioned," and had "the gypsy language, variously called 'Cant,' 'Shelta,' 'Romany,' [and] rich fluent Gaelic and English . . . [along with] many curious spells, runes, and hymns, that would have enriched Gaelic literature."¹⁶

The itinerant British Rom roamed or were driven from place to place

and apparently focused anger at their enemies and attackers in "performative" maledictions such as the one Chisholm recited, a "curse" against "The Wicked Who Would Do Me Harm":

May he take the [throat disease,] . . .
 Be it harder than the stone,
 Be it blacker than the coal, . . .
 Be it fiercer, fiercer, sharper, harsher, more malignant,
 Than the hard, wound-quivering holly, . . .
 Seven seven times.

A dysentery of blood from heart, . . . from bones,

. . . .
 And a searching of veins, of throat, and of kidneys,
 To my contemnners and traducers.¹⁷

Chisholm herself may have had concrete "contemnners and traducers" in mind, but she may simply have intoned her rather inscrutable imprecations as a general protective charm. One can say little now about such chants' genesis, significance, or authorial intentions.

Mary Macpherson

Oral declamation in clear-text appeared in the work of Mairi Nic a'Phearsain (Mary Macpherson)—"Big Mary of the Songs"—a vigorous middle-aged Gaelic protest singer of the Highland Clearances. "Big Mary" could read English and Gaelic, but her "songs" were oral, and a sympathetic Skye landowner paid a transcriber to write them down.¹⁸ Only a few of her poems have been translated, but some were influential "curses" in their way: they helped elect Land Law Reform Association members of Parliament she supported. These in turn helped pass the 1886 Crofters' Holdings Act, which brought a gradual end to the notorious Highland Clearances.

Mary Macdonald was born in Skeabost on Skye in 1821, and never attended school, but Alexander MacBain, her editor, told his readers that she had "ample experience in the management of cattle and all that pertains to the conduct of a house in the olden days, from cooking to cloth making, and further, in storing her mind with the lays and lyrics of her native isles" (xi). She married Isaac Macpherson, an Inverness shoemaker,

in 1848, and moved to Glasgow to support herself and her four surviving children after he died in 1871.

At *fifty*, she then began a five-year course of study in the Royal Infirmary—a rigorous undertaking that would seem to belie claims that she could not write—and earned diplomas there in nursing and obstetrics. She worked thereafter as a midwife in Glasgow and Greenock until 1882, when Lachlan Macdonald, the patron who paid for the transcription of her verse, offered her rent-free use of Woodside Cottage in Skeabost, where she lived until her death in 1898. An 1891 frontispiece photograph showed her as a stout elderly woman in a feathered cap and long fur stole, and she appeared elsewhere in the volume carding, spinning, and “warping the Highland tatan.”

When anger at “certain miscarriages of justice” (xiii) roused her to denounce her people’s oppressors in 1872, Macpherson’s Gaelic songs supported the land reformer Fraser-Mackintosh in 1874, and helped elect Land Law Reform Association candidates throughout the Highlands in 1884. Lachlan Macdonald paid the Gaelic scholar John Whyte to transcribe more than eight thousand lines of her verse during the 1880s. In his introduction, MacBain remarked that she could recite “at least half as much more of her own,” and eight or nine thousand more lines of verse by other poets from Skye and the other Western Islands.

In “Incitement of the Gaels,” her best-known verse-condemnation, Macpherson memorialized the “Battle of the Braes,” an early incident in the “Crofters’ War” (1882–86). In this “battle,” local men and women had fought sheriff’s men sent to evict them, and the ensuing casualties included seven women of the Braes and twelve of their better-armed opponents. Macpherson also composed more traditional elegies, and at least one more poem of introspective return, “Farewell to the New Christmas.” This narrated the reactions of the poet, back for a time in Skye from Glasgow. She marked the enclosures and forced evictions that left “where once the honest people lived, / only the great sheep and their lambs” and

... reached the well of Iain Ban
That my beloved father named,
The stones whereon he laid his hands,
are left a legacy to me.
I stood a while above it there,
The tears came raining from my eyes,
As I recalled the dear-loved folk,
earthed now in their eternal sleep.

Then all my senses ebbed away,
Death’s pallor came upon my cheek;
But there I cupped my hand and drank,
and felt my being made anew.

(Watson, 491)

Afterwards, her “dearest people gathered, / [and] made for me warm welcome,” and she watched impromptu play with a meal-bag ball, admired “orchis flowers,” raised “a bumper lipping to the brim” (no temperance advocate she), and heard a voice “behind her” call “her people” to return, for

We would know again the fields,
The cornstacks standing in the yard,
If but the spirit of the folk
Could rise again in hand and heart.

All these images—healing wells, flowers, cups of liquor, and voices from the dead—were politically resonant as well as concretely evocative. They also evoked a crofter’s counterpart of Blake’s “Jerusalem,” and foreshadowed the populist faith of William Morris’s “spirit of the folk” and of Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Scots Quair*.

Another Return

The houses of Victorian working-class women’s poetry did *not*, it is true, have “many mansions.” But they *did* offer a variety of side rooms, cottages, and tenements, seldom visited by their more fortunate brothers. Most Victorian working-class women poets had little direct access to the Chartist movement and its cultural institutions, of course, and most were poorer and more rural than the male writers studied in Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts’s *The Victorian Working Class Writer*.¹⁹ The latter struggled to write and support themselves but could hope to become newspaper journalists, even editors (as did Thomas Cooper, John Bedford Leno, Ben Brierley, and Thomas Miller).²⁰ They could even hope to publish several books, an attainment beyond almost all of the poets I have discussed. (Smith and Hamilton were rare exceptions among the scores of working-class women poets I have found.)

The works I have discovered also seem to me to belie critical assumptions that Victorian women’s preoccupations with religion vitiated their verse.

The women whose lives and published works I have sketched clearly sought to solace the ravages of their grief and sustain their needs for minimal self-respect, but few wasted time or poetic breath on ritual, doctrine, or pious institutions. Confronted by their transience and insignificance, "Marie," Mary Smith, Jessie Russell, Ellen Johnston, Janet Hamilton, Jane Stevenson, Fanny Forrester, Elizabeth Campbell, Isabella Chisholm, Mary Macpherson, and their sisters found consolation instead in numinous Blakean-Wordsworthian visions and millenarian hopes. And only *some* of these hopes were conventionally religious.

These women's struggles to realize their hopes also bore immediate witness—in many of the "return" poems, for example—to the devastating effects of industrial exploitation on individual lives and families, and the successes they achieved sustained poetry's role as a preserver of an individual and collective inner life. Janet Hamilton's "Oor Location," Ellen Johnston's "The Last Sark," and Mary Macpherson's Gaelic "Farewell to the New Christmas" also recorded distinctive linguistic voices, inner lives, and outer milieus, in effect, of another country.

My "recuperative" aim in this overview has therefore been to offer some textual fragments and convey something of the mystery and fragility of these poets' lives and work. We cannot "know again the fields" from which we are separated by six generations and continental divides of hindsight and privilege. But we can suspend dismissive assumptions that the work of these "democratic subjects" was "nostalgic," "sentimental," and "conventional." For we have much to learn and understand from the ways in which these "simple" nineteenth-century women poets brought pain, humor, loss, reflection, political insight, and vision to their verses and lives.

Notes

1. Relevant anthologies from the 1970s and '80s included Peter Scheckner, ed., *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s–1850s* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1989); Brian Maidment, ed., *Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); and Brian Hollingworth, ed., *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977). Scheckner omitted all women poets; Hollingworth included selections by Mary Thomason, whose work appeared in print in the 1930s, and Maidment included selections by Marie, Ellen Johnston, and Janet Hamilton.

Among more recent anthologies, Catherine Kerrigan, ed., *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), reprints poems by Hamilton,

Johnston, and Mary Macpherson; Tom Leonard, ed., *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), reprints poems by Marion Bernstein and Jessie Russell; Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, eds., *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), reprints poems by Ellen Johnston; and Isobel Armstrong, Cath Sharrock, and Joseph Bristow, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), reprints poems by Ruth Wills, Ellen Johnston, "A Factory Girl," and Isa Craig-Knox.

2. General discussions of working-class writings have included Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (New York: Barnes and Noble; London: Croom Helm, 1974); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Only Swindells and Zlotnick examine the writings of working-class women in detail.

3. These included the British Library, the London University Library, the Working-Class Movements Library (Manchester), the Mitchell Library (Glasgow), the National Library of Scotland, the Edinburgh University Library, the Houghton Library, the Beinecke Library, the public libraries of Edinburgh, Manchester, Paisley, Airdre, Coatbridge, Motherwell, Springburn, Inverness, Aberdeen, and Dundee, the Kohler Collection of the University of California at Davis, and the University of Iowa.

4. Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London: Virago, 1983).

5. Of her ten children, seven reached adulthood. Discussions of Hamilton appear in Edwin Morgan, *Crossing the Border: Essays in Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990); Florence Boos, "Cauld Engle-Cheek: Working-Class Poets in Victorian Scotland," *Victorian Poetry* 33, no. 1 (1995): 53–74; Boos, "'Oor Location': Victorian Women Poets and the Transition from Rural to Urban Scottish Culture," in *Victorian Urban Settings*, ed. Debra Mancoff and Dale Trela (New York: Garland, 1996); Boos, "Janet Hamilton," in *Victorian Women Poets, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. William Thesing (Columbia, S.C.: Brucoli and Clark, 1998), 149–58; "Working-Class Women Poets and the Periodical Press: 'Marie,' Janet Hamilton, and Fanny Forrester," *Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 (2001): 255–87; and Boos, "Janet Hamilton," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Colin Mathews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

6. Janet Hamilton's books are *Poems and Essays of a Miscellaneous Character on Subjects of General Interest* (Glasgow: Thomas Murray; Edinburgh: Paton and Ritchie; London: Arthur Hall, 1863); *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* (Glasgow: Thomas Murray; Edinburgh: William Ritchie; London: James Nisbet, 1865); *Poems and Ballads* (Glasgow: James Maclehoose, 1868); *Poems Essays and Sketches. A Selection from the First Two Volumes, "Poems and Essays" and "Poems and Sketches," with Several New Pieces* (Glasgow: James Maclehoose, 1870), enlarged as *Poems, Essays, and Sketches: Comprising the Principal Pieces from Her Complete Works*, ed. James Hamilton (Glasgow: James Maclehoose, 1880), and republished as *Poems, Sketches, and Essays* (Glasgow: James Maclehoose, 1885).

7. Johnston's work is studied in Susan Zlotnick, "'A Thousand Times I'd Rather Be a Factory Girl': Dialect, Domesticity, and Working-Class Women's Poetry in Victorian Britain," *Victorian Studies* 35, no. 1 (1991): 7–27; Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial*

Revolution; Boos, "Cauld Engle-Cheek"; Boos, "Ellen Johnston," in *Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers*, ed. Abigail Burnham Bloom (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 231–34; Susan Alves, "A Thousand Times I'd Rather Be a Factory Girl: The Politics of Reading American and British Female Factory Workers' Poetry, 1840–1914," Ph.D. diss., Northeastern University, 1996; H. Gustav Klaus, *Ellen Johnston and Working-Class Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Peter Lang, 1997); and Judith Rosen, "Class and Poetic Communities in the Works of Ellen Johnston, 'The Factory Girl,'" *Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 (2001): 207–29.

8. Smith does not identify their denomination, but they were probably Congregationalists.

9. Only Janet Hamilton wrote explicitly for the temperance press, but other working-class women—Johnston, Russell, Smith, Jane Goldie, Agnes Mabon, Elizabeth Davidson, Elizabeth Campbell, and others—addressed cognate problems in their verse.

10. A more extended study of the work of "Marie," Forrester, and Hamilton appears in Boos, "Working-Class Women Poets and the Periodical Press: 'Marie,' Janet Hamilton and Fanny Forrester," *Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 (2001): 255–86.

11. For example, in "A Cuckoo," "Poet! Why Sing," and "Sweet Poetry" (all 1849), and "Sibyl, The Far-Seer" (1850).

12. Other poems on this theme are "Garnock Water" and "My Birthplace."

13. The register for Forfar/Brechin (vol. 275/8, p. 21, frame 2115) records a license granted to William Campbell and Elizabeth Duncan on January 5, 1833.

14. A few lyrics of grief and distress remained, among them poems on "The Graves of My Sons," "The Death of Willie, My Second Son," and "My Infant Day and My Hair Grown Gray."

15. These included "The Absent Soldier," "A Dream," "The Mother's Lament," "The Windmill of Sebastopol," "Bill Arden," "The Crimean War," "The Attack on the Great Redan, and Fall of the Malkhoff," "The Amber Cloud," and "Spring."

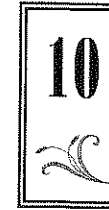
16. *Charms of the Gaels: Hymns and Incantations, with Illustrative Notes on Words, Rites and Customs, Dying and Obsolete; Orally Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland by Alexander Carmichael*, ed. D. J. Moore, intro. John McInnis (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1994).

17. The curse appears in *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*, ed. Alexander Carmichael (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), 2:155–57.

18. Mairi Nic'APhearsoin, *Dain Agus Oran: Ghaidhlig*, ed. Alastair Mac-Bheathain, intro. by Alexander MacBain (Inverness: A. Agus U. Mac'Coinnich, 1891). Translations appear in Kerrigan and in Roderick Watson, ed., *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots, and English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

19. Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts, *The Victorian Working-Class Writer* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).

20. Only Eliza Cook edited a journal. The poems of "Marie," Fanny Forrester, and the anonymous gypsy never appeared in volume form.



Revisiting the Serial Format of Dickens's Novels; or, *Little Dorrit* Goes a Long Way

DAVID BARNDOLLAR AND SUSAN SCHORN

Almost invariably when introducing a Dickens novel to modern audiences, a professor or editor makes mention of the phenomenon of serialization. Dickens's Victorian audience, we affirm, experienced his novels more intimately, poring over each few chapters for an extended period of time, and also more socially, sharing the narrative journey with many fellow-travelers. But rarely does anyone attempt to gauge how different an experience it is to read, say, *Our Mutual Friend* today as a fat trade paperback, knowing you can skip ahead to the end, hurry over some sections to pick up the thread of a confusing plot line, or put the book down and walk away from it for months, confident that friends and family are unlikely to spoil the ending by discussing it in your hearing. Although Dickens's novels eventually appeared in Victorian home libraries as impressive, weighty volumes, the initial physical experience of a Dickens novel was far different. *Little Dorrit*, for example, as it was first read, discussed, and celebrated, was a set of twenty unassuming blue paper-bound leaflets, crammed with advertisements for burial sites and outfitters offering gear to new officers bound for the Crimean War. Some of Dickens's most famous works, such as *Great Expectations*, became famous three chapters at a time, sandwiched