11
Working-Class Poetry

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Nineteenth-century working-class poetry comprised a broad range of verse written and read by 'the poor': manual labourers, autodidacts and other members of 'the working classes', as well as their natural political allies, radical activists and editors such as William James Linton and Ernest Jones.

This genre's forms and venues included songs, chants, ballads, broadsides, newspaper-poems and religious and political hymns, verse in dialects or regional languages, and works sold by subscription or for charity by their working-class authors, as well as books undertaken by publishers for sale to middle- and working-class audiences. Despite stultifying obstacles to publication and a near-universal absence of formal education beyond the earliest years until after the passage of the Education Acts of 1870 and 1872, many of these works are anything but formulaic, and a few manifest dramatic power, reflective complexity and haunting beauty.

A genuinely representative Victorian poetic 'canon' would therefore include a wide range of 'primitive' verse forms, as well as poetry in regional languages such as Scots, 'Doric', Scots Gaelic or Lancashire dialect, and other traditional modes of expression of the desires of everyday life and hopes for democratic 'reform'. In this chapter, I will survey some of these desires and their realizations under four (rough, and not entirely disjoint) rubrics based on genre, thematic preoccupations and modes of publication: 'Ballads and Broadsides', 'Dialect and Regional Language Poetry', 'Chartist and Other Political Poetry' and 'Introspection and "the Poet's Mission"'.

In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), E. P. Thompson characterized 'working-class' and 'class-consciousness' in terms of an evolving cluster of political attitudes. Subsequent revisionists, however, questioned whether such a consciousness could be identified by the 1830s, as Thompson claimed, and focused on more diffuse and apolitical continua of attitudes and motivations (e.g. Joyce 1991). Whatever the nuances and gradations of wealth, poverty, privilege and deprivation for those who experienced them, the view expressed in this chapter will be that 'working-class poetry' was a preferred literary form for the expression of collective protest as well as oral narration, humour, satire and individual inspiration, and offered as such a uniquely valuable mirror of the imaginative life and aspirations of 'ordinary' Victorian writers, as well as their often more middle-class readers, editors and potential patrons.

The boundaries between Victorian 'working-class' and middle-class literature were indeed shifting and sometimes traversable. Writers of middle-class origins could face distinctly 'proletarian' ends, and, conversely, rich, poor and middle class alike heard and transmitted rural and 'folk' ballads, edited by such conspicuously aristocratic patrons as Lady Caroline Nairne. Literary 'hacks' of working-class origins wrote a wide variety of original broadside 'ballads', but the printers of such works also bought and published the texts of music-hall songs, and pirated works by middle-class authors such as 'The Song of the Shirt' by Thomas Hood. Middle-class journal editors such as William and Mary Howitt and W. J. Fox printed the poems of many working-class poets, but so also did 'working-class' counterparts such as Thomas Cooper, John Bedford Leno, and (the only woman in this category) Eliza Cook. Middle-class patrons and anthologizers such as George Gilfillan and D. E. Edwards published hard-cover collections of working-class poetry (and sometimes straitened the gates of what they would collect), but so also did John Cassell, Ben Brierley and others who began their careers as artisans or factory workers.

Urban ballads, hymns and music-hall songs had an especially complex class audience, and dialect and Chartist poems were directed both to working-class audiences (who read them for the most part in newspapers) and their middle-class counterparts (who were more likely to encounter them in book form). Most working-class poets lived markedly uncertain lives. Not only did they suffer swift reversals when sales faltered or publishers refused adequate payment, but harsh responses to their political activities sometimes imprisoned them and destroyed their families' means of subsistence overnight.

Many were also driven in mid-career or old age to seek small grants of subsistence from the Royal Literary Fund, whose archives now contain some of the best records we have of the lives and fortunes of indigent authors and the families left even more destitute at their deaths. Almost all, once again, were (literally) self-educated, and most bore memories that made them critical observers of their peers and 'betters' – whose indulgence they often had to seek. These complex allegiances and cross-purposes merged into a vast continuum of individual fates that underlay the complex braid of nineteenth-century popular poetry.

These patterns also evolved, of course, over time. Traditional ballads retained their rural audiences throughout the century, and other forms of popular poetry flourished in ephemeral mass-press publications, but self-identified 'working-class' poetry began to ebb towards the end of the century, in the wake of the modest reforms effected by the Education Acts and the Electoral Acts of 1867 and 1884. This change was also accelerated by the rise of other, more manipulable forms of mass culture and entertainment in the decades that followed.

Ballads and Broadsides

The several attractions of 'folk' ballads included their rural origins, generally high quality, distinctive forms of musical accompaniment, and apparent capacity to transcend class divisions. Members of all social classes sang them, and their characteristic tetrameter/trimeter quatrains ('ballad stanza') provided a template for varieties of 'popular' literature that have

survived to this day. Prototypes of many well-known 'traditional' ballads dated from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, of course, but they continued to evolve throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and middle-class and aristocratic collectors, such as Thomas Percy (*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765), Walter Scott (*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 1802) and to a lesser degree Lady Caroline Nairne (*Life and Songs of the Baroness Nairne*, 1869), freely emended or 'improved' the versions they printed. Later collectors such as Francis Child (*English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1883–98) and Gavin Greig and James Duncan (*Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads*, 1925) sought to apply more scrupulous methods of reconstruction to the ballads' imaginative and linguistic origins, and Alexander Carmichael's ten-volume *Carmina Gadelica* (1900) carefully mined a well-preserved oral tradition of Gaelic lyrics, sung at birthings, marriages, cloth-softenings and funerals, which memorialized vanished love, wandering spirits and assorted acts of individual heroism and clan villainy.

For all their textual scruples, most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors of ballads tended to interpret away any political or social commentary they found. Despite their ministrations, however, class tensions continued to glow in the embers of the 'Robin Hood' cycle, for example, and in other works such as the macabre 'Lammikin', in which a mason murders an aristocratic family who refuse to pay him for the construction of their castle. Many other ballads – such as 'Lord Lovell', 'Sweet William', 'Fair Janet', 'Burd Helen' and 'The Brown Maid' – decried the ironies and hypocrisies of seduction, desertion, and marriage for gain across class divides, and racism appeared as an explicit plot element in 'The Brown Maid'. Critics interested in literary confrontations with gender, class and race have not yet given such works and their evolution the attention they warrant.

In 'Auld Robin Grey', for example, one of Nairne's dramatic monologues, the ballad's speaker is a young woman whose starving family has pressed her into marriage with a better-situated old man. When a former lover thought to have died at sea survives and returns hopefully to offer his hand, 'O sair did we greet, and meikle did we say: / We took but ae kiss, and I bade him gang away.' The woman's struggles to honour her love and dutiful intentions are unself-pitying and unadorned, and her stoic resignation expresses the transparent effects of rural poverty on the circumstances and emotions of 'ordinary' people.

More explicit forms of political advocacy appeared in the Gaelic 'songs' of Mary Macdonald Macpherson (Mairi Nic a'Phersain, 1821–98), who simplified and refined elaborate poetic formulae of traditional heroic Gaelic verse to protest the forced emigration of the Highland 'Clearances', of which she was a bitter opponent. 'Big Mary of the Songs' was born in Skye, and married and lived with Isaac Macpherson in Inverness until his death in 1871, then managed to train herself as a midwife and support herself and her four surviving children with this skill until she returned to Skye in 1882. She had already begun to compose and recite her oral denunciations of the 'enemies of her people' in 1872, and sang them on the stump in vigorous support of a local land-reform candidate in 1874. Her verse-chants and recitations helped elect land-reformers throughout the Highlands when the Voting Act of 1884 widened the franchise to include many crofters. 'The Incitement

of the Gaels', the best-known and perhaps the most widely circulated of her 'songs', celebrated armed resistance by Skye crofters in the 1884 'Crofter's War', and 'incited' her hearers to demand the return of their land. Among other things, she also declaimed her contempt for the 'turncoats' and traitors among her fellow Gaelic singers:

> I could name them one by one,
> who sang against the owners of the land
> and turned their coats upon their backs
> and ate the words which had been their art.
> (Kerrigan 1991: 93)

Macpherson claimed to be unable to write either English or Gaelic, but she is said to have composed more than 12,000 lines of Gaelic verse, about two-thirds of them preserved through the good offices of a scribe. (A brief description of her career appears in Boos 1998. A full edition of the 'Incitement' in the original appears in Meek 1977.)

Many shorter ballads appeared in 'broadsides', single sheets sold by printers such as James Catnach and John Pitts in the disreputable Seven Dials district of London, and hawked by charity-seekers, street singers and itinerant salespeople for a few farthings. Hepburn (2000) estimates that poor readers bought about 65 per cent of these urban broadsides, and he comments in detail on the desperation and deprivation that wove the ragged fabrics of their satiric and 'sensational' plots. Some published works also reappeared in broadside form, as I mentioned earlier (e.g. Henry Kirk White's 'The Wandering Boy' and Eliza Cook's 'God Speed the Keel of the Trusty Ship'), but Hepburn has identified many writers who wrote specifically for broadside publication, among them 'J. H.', Jane Harvey, George Brown and John Morgan, who devoted hundreds of ballads to issues such as bribed elections, ruinous taxation and workhouse labour. Morgan himself died in poverty sometime after 1876 (Hepburn 2000: 53).

One view of unequal justice appeared in the anonymous 'The Grand Dissolving Views':

> The next was a police court, two prisoners in were led,
> The one a well-dressed swindler, and a boy who was ill fed,
> He'd stolen food, confessed his guilt, for pardon did entreat,
> He said he was an orphan, and nothing had to eat;
> Three months hard labour was his doom, I thought it a disgrace,
> While he who swindled many got off with a good grace,
> He paid for counsel with the spoil, 'twas money pulled him through,
> And justice blind, in silence smiled, in that grand dissolving view.
> (Hepburn 2000: 139)

Other broadside parodies of the smugly callous appeared in 'The Women Flogger's Lament of Marylebone Workhouse!' and 'The Fat Old Parish Vestryman', and satires of sentimental and patriotic verse in works such as 'The Happy Land!! Comic Version'. The speaker of William Billington's 'Friends are Few When Foak are Poor' observed the soul-destroying effects of poverty on human ties:

even my own brother Jim
He swears aw'm nowt a-kin to him!
'Bi gum', thout aw, 'thad is a thower,
A mon's *a boggart* [ghost]when he's poor.'

. . .

Sooa, th' world wags on, fro' day to day,
An still it ses or seems to say, –
'This poverty's a deadly sin,
Wod banishes both friends and kin –
An stinks i'every nobel nooas!
(ll. 29–32, 41–5)

More widely circulated inexpensive newspapers, magazines and books gradually displaced broadsides over the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Dialect and Regional Language Poetry

As several of the examples already cited make clear, many working-class authors wrote in regional dialects or languages – partly because these were the natural vehicles of their everyday speech, and partly because they saw in them threatened embodiments of the independent cultures and intrinsic values of the working poor. Lancashire dialect poetry, in particular – unusually well-preserved and well-studied – flourished from the late 1850s to the 1870s in the published work of Samuel Laycock, Edwin Waugh and others, but Brian Hollingworth has observed that the oral antecedents of this phenomenon went back several generations (1977: 3). Like many of their exemplars and predecessors – Robert Burns, for example – mid-nineteenth-century dialect poets celebrated fairs, courting and other pleasures. But they also sought to find narrative frames for the hardships and beleaguered ideals of working-class life, battered and eroded in a new industrialized environment of alcoholism, unemployment, destitution and the gradual obliteration of extended family structures.

Many early dialect poems, recited or circulated in broadsides, bore no record of their authorship. John Harland, for example, remarked in an 1839 *Manchester Guardian* article that 'half literary, half oral' poetry was frequently 'exhibited in rows upon the dead walls of our large towns, where a few yards of twine, and here and there a nail driven into the mortar of the wall, form the bookstand and reading desk of the lover of song amongst our industrious population'. 'Th' Owdham Weyver', a durable example of this genre, reached a broader audience when Elizabeth Gaskell included it in *Mary Barton* (1847), but Gaskell purged several traces of class confrontation from her text for middle-class readers. In the anonymous original (preserved in Hollingworth 1977: 11–12), the Oldham weaver recalled his brutal reduction to near starvation, mocked clerical enjoinders to patience, and recalled his bitter response to a boss who withheld his already meagre wages ('In a mind as I'm in I'll ne'er pick o'er again, / For I've woven mysel' to th' fur end'). Later, when

the police had already carried away most of his family's furniture to pay his debts, they returned to snatch a final stool from under him and his wife:

> And we both went wack upo' th' flags . . .
> I sed to our Margit as we lay upo' th' floor,
> We shall never be lower in this world, I'm sure,
> But if we alter I'm sure we mun mend,
> For I think in my heart we are both at far end, . . .
> Our Margit declared if hoo'd cloas to put on,
> Hoo'd go up to Lundun an' see the big mon,
> An' if things didn't alter when hoo had been,
> Hoo swears hoo'll feight blood up to th' e'en.
> Hoo's nought again th' King, but likes a fair thing,
> An' hoo says hoo can tell when hoo's hurt.

It might have been a wise choice even for an anonymous author to have Margit, not the speaker, threaten to 'feight blood up to th' e'en' if her demands were not met, for the last six lines (modified to refer to the queen after 1837) evoked the Chartist movement's crushed efforts to present their Charter to Parliament. The original monologue's anger, raw misery, bitter sense of the grotesque aspects of destitution, and complete absence of 'edifying' or 'uplifting' sentiments effectively conveyed the stark indignities of the old couple's poverty, but Gaskell – anticipating perhaps her middle-class readers' reactions – simply glossed the expurgated version of the poem as an expression of 'that humour which is near akin to pathos'.

Samuel Laycock (1826–93), one of the best Lancashire-dialect poets, composed 'Lyrics of the Cotton Famine' when he was laid off work at a Stalybridge woollen mill in the early 1860s. In addition to several 'Owdham-Weyver'-like monologues ('The Shurat Weaver's Song', 'Aw've Turned my Bit o' Garden O'er' and 'It's Hard to Ceawer i' th' Chimney Nook'), he included in it a verse description of himself and the other inhabitants of his back alley in 'Bowton's Yard', part of a genre of expressions of local poetic solidarity which included Waugh's 'Eawr Folk' and 'Tum Rundle' and Samuel Fitton's 'Cotton Fowd'.

In 'What! Another Crack'd Poet?', another dramatic monologue, Laycock dramatized the marginal circumstances and demanding audiences working-class poets such as himself faced. Having learned that a younger friend writes verse, he advises him to try quack medicines instead:

> Heaw would t'loike goin' reawnd wi' a bag full o' books?
>   Heaw would t'loike to go hawkin' thi brains?
> Or, when tha's bin tryin' to do some kind act,
>   To be towd thar't a foo' for thi pains.
> Aw can tell thi this, Jim, it's aboon twenty year',
>   Sin' aw wur set deawn as a foo';

An', tho' it's a charge 'at one doesn't loike t'own,
Aw'm beginnin' to think 'at its true . . .

But aw'll drop it, owd friend, for aw'm gradely fagg'd eawt;
Booath mi brain an' mi hon 'gin to tire;
Iv tha loikes tha can stick these few loines i' thi book;
Or – iv tha prefers it – i' th' fire.

The poem's reflexive characterizations of the poet's lot prompt certain obvious questions – how its 'few loines' were preserved, for example; whether the poem originated in a phantom dialogue with a younger self; and what, if anything, made the speaker change his mind.

Strikingly many dialect poems memorialized personal or familial ties: parents' love for each other and their children (Joseph Ramsbottom's 'Sorrowin"; J. W. Mellor's 'Eawr Jack'); fond memories of other kindly relatives (Laycock's 'Mi Grondfeyther'); and the heavy burdens poor parents of many children assumed (Sam Fitton's 'Th' Childer's Holiday'; Joseph Ramsbottom's 'Philip Clough's Tale'; Joseph Burgess's 'There's Nowt Loike Spinnin' Shoddy'; and Laycock's 'Welcome, Bonny Brid!').

Edwin Waugh (1817–90), the best-known Lancashire dialect poet, also wrote one of the period's most popular 'sentimental' songs, 'Come Whoam to Thi Childer an' Me', widely promoted by the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts and circulated in thousands of broadside copies. In its internal dialogue, a wife and her children anxiously wait for her husband's belated arrival, and he responds to their anxieties in the poem's last stanza:

'God bless tho' my lass; aw'll go whoam
An' aw'll kiss thee an' the childer o' round;
Thae knows that wheerever aw roam,
Aw'm fain to get back to th' owd grown;
Aw can do wi' a crack o'er a glass;
Aw can do wi' a bit of a spree;
But aw've no gradely comfort, my lass,
Except wi' yon childer an' thee.'

Some contemporaries may not have credited the poem's facile assurances, for several wrote parodies (among them Ben Brierley's 'Go Tak Thi Ragg'd Childer an Flit'), and Waugh's readers may have been more moved by the poem's saccharine reconciliation because of its carefully glossed hints at alcoholism, desertion and other betrayals. Waugh himself separated from his wife and children, and his poems included verse reconstructions of bitter marital quarrels ('Dinner Time') and an angry wife's wrath ('Margit's Coming').

All the known Lancashire poets seem to have been men, but several went out of their way to write about the crushing labours of poor women (e.g. James Standing's 'Wimmen's Wark Es Niver Done [As if bi a Woman Hersel]', and Sam Fitton's 'Th' Childer's Holiday'). The speaker of Joseph Burgess's 'Neaw Aw'm a Married Mon' even expressed concrete intentions to help his new wife do the inevitable housework:

Soo aw'st help to mop un stone,
Help to scrub un skeawr,
Un do everythin aw'm shown,
If it lies within mi peawer;
Fur, neaw aw'm a married mon,
Aw'm beawn to be soa good,
Un do the best aw con
To be o'a husbant should.

In retrospect, Burgess's touchingly didactic and hortatory aims seem clear.

Other Lancashire dialect poems wavered between angry despair and impassioned appeals for resolution and resignation. Shame at his debts, dependence on charity and fear of the workhouse have driven the speaker of Joseph Ramsbottom's 'Frettin" to consider suicide ('A sudden plunge, a little blow, / At once ud eend mi care an' pain!'), but:

it ill ud tell
O' thoose wur left beheend, aw fear:
It's wrong at fust to kill mysel,
An' wrong to lyev mi childer here.
One's like to tak some thowt for them –
Some sort o' comfort one should give;
So one mun bear, an' starve, an' *clem* [go hungry],
An' pine, an' mope, an' fret, an' live.

Matthew Arnold's readers were unlikely to follow the example of 'Empedocles on Aetna' and throw themselves into a volcano, but readers of 'Th' Owdham Weyver' and William Billington's 'The Surat Weyver' had less 'philosophical' reasons to question the purpose of their existence.

At their best, these dialect poems preserved examples of regional speech the educational establishment sought to eradicate, and their irony, humour and transparent appeals for empathy and solidarity gave concrete expression to universal human desires for a modest measure of dignity and worth. The reflective equilibrium of poems such as Laycock's 'Thee and Me' or Richard Bealey's 'My Piece Is o bu' Woven Eawt' defied condescension, and their clarity and immediacy offered plain-spoken counterweights to the diffuse epiphanies and sublimations of middle- and upper-class Victorian verse.

As linguists know, differences between 'dialect' and language have no sharp boundary. 'Lallans', for example – lowland Scots – was the mother tongue of many nineteenth-century working-class poets. Janet Hamilton (1795–1873), born in Langloan near Glasgow, was a tambourer (embroiderer), shoemaker's wife and mother of ten children. She read poetry from early childhood, committed her own first poems to memory as a married teenager (her husband helpfully transcribed them), left off poetry for a number of years after the birth of her third child in 1814, taught herself to write around 50, lost her sight in her 60s, and continued to compose verses in her head and dictated them to

her son James until she died at 78. Quick dialogue, mercurial humour and a strong sense of satiric *réplique* characterized the distinctive oral quality of her work, and her publication of four volumes of essays and poems in old age (consolidated after her death in *Poems, Sketches and Essays* [1880]) was a doubly unique achievement for a woman of her class and time.

Hamilton published her first poems and temperance essays in standard English in the early 1850s, and later dedicated her third book 'lovingly and respectfully . . . to her Brothers, the Men of the Working Class' in 1868, when she was 73. She lived her entire life in Coatbridge, at mid-century one of the most blighted and polluted agglomerations in all of Great Britain, and she drafted poetic tributes to the neglected insights of older women, and detailed memoirs in 'Doric' prose of the early nineteenth-century village life she had known there as a child. Her 'Ballads of Memorie', for example, provide excellent evocations of the attitudes and aspirations of a lost early nineteenth-century village culture.

She was also a natural satirist, who could chronicle the moral and familial cost of these changes with swingeing force. In 'Oor Location', for example, she canvassed a grittily detailed cityscape of toiling workers and tavern-frequenters in a brilliant set piece of Doric rant:

A hunner funnels bleezin', reekin',
Coal an' ironstane, charrin', smeekin';
Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,
Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;
Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies,
Firemen, enginemen, an' Paddies;
Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin',
'Bout the *wecht* [weight] wi' colliers battlin',
Sweatin', swearin', fechtin', drinkin',
Changehouse bells an' *gill-stoups* [mugs] clinkin',
Police – ready men and willin' –
Aye at han' when stoups are fillin',
Clerks, an' counter-loupers plenty,
Wi' trim moustache and whiskers dainty,
Chaps that winna staun at trifles,
Min' yet they can han'le rifles . . .
Frae whence cums misery, want, an' wo
The ruin, crime, disgrace an' shame,
That quenches a' the lichts o' hame,
Ye needna *speer*[ask], the *feck* [bulk] ot's drawn
Out o' the change-house and the pawn.

In the midst of 'A Wheen Aul' Memories', a wistful late autobiographical poem in which she revisited the vanished precincts of her youth, she evoked once again the coal-dust, clamour and eerie sublimity of nearby Gartsherrie, this time in a pounding, four-beat balladic chant:

Noo the bodies are gane an' their dwallin'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', an' smeekin' awa,
Their eerie licht brichtein' the laigh hingin' cluds,
Gleamin' far ower the loch an' the mirk lanely wuds.

Contemporary reviewers predictably admired more conventional accounts of seduction and abandonment in works such as 'Effie, A Ballad', but these satirical poems revealed her deepest analytical gift, which also flourished in her defences of regional cultural integrity. In 'A Plea for the Doric', for example, she apologized for 'Parnassian' efforts 'to busk oot my sang wi' the prood Southron tongue', and heaped scorn on the long line of Scottish journalistic expatriates who had literally, as well as figuratively, *gone south*:

I'm wae for *Auld Reekie* [Edinburgh]; 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[whit; bit] better,
Though Doric is banish'd frae sang, tale, and letter.

These wonderfully blunt 'apologies' for the Scottish vernacular may have helped encourage later working-class poets – Jessie Russell, Ellen Johnston, John Young and Joseph Wright – to explore more deeply the tonal eloquence of their native tongue.

The span of Hamilton's preoccupations matched her chronological age. Like the Lancashire poets, she published her poems in the 1860s and 1870s, but she was born twenty-two years before Waugh, and thirty-one before Laycock. The Lancashire dialect poets, who wrote from the geographical centres of Chartism, northern industrial radicalism, and 'the Cotton Panic', naturally saw their fellows as members of a distinct class of suffering workers. Hamilton – who also developed strong interests in science, education and international politics – saw hers as fellow inheritors of a proud hyperborean culture of labouring Scots, whose fiercely independent traditions may have made them the more accountable for their faults. In 'A Lay of the Tambour Frame', for example, her speaker vigorously denounced working-class opponents of better pay for needlewomen:

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.

Contemporary reviewers tolerated Hamilton's mild feminism, appeals for women's education and celebration of women's roles as storytellers and co-curators of autochthonous Scottish traditions. Some of them may have done so because they could also find 'respectable' expressions of these attitudes in her religious poems and ardent support of temperance movements. Others may simply have been impressed by her unusual combination of wit, fluency, Scottishness, autodidacticism and great age:

> *Punch* acknowledges 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. After the stories (so well told by Samuel Smiles) of Robert Dick and Thomas Edwards, there are few records, even in the annals of the Scottish poor – so rife, to their honour, in lives of self-devotion and self-culture – than that of this poor old woman. (*Punch*, cited in the 1885 edition of *Poems*)

Hamilton's essays and poems deserved better than 'Lunnon''s faint praise, however sincere and well-intended it may have been, for they preserved the meditations of a trenchantly clear-headed working-class observer of the cataclysmic social changes in the Europe of her time.

Political and Chartist Poetry

The Chartist movement emerged from protest movements of the 1830s and the drafting of a six-point 'Charter' for electoral reforms by the London Working Men's Association in 1838, and survived through Parliament's many rejections of the Charter until imprisonment or transportation of many of its leaders obliterated what was left of the movement in the early 1850s. Even in betrayal and defeat, however, Chartism raised the consciousness of many working- and middle-class Britons, and a few aged survivors saw partial extensions of the suffrage they sought passed through Parliament in 1867 and 1884. Songs and poetry obviously provided Chartist public meetings with forms of expression and inspiration, but they also bore witness to the ability of working people to sustain an alternative culture. Chartist verse was indeed sung and recited as secular hymnody at meetings, demonstrations, marches and presentations of the Charter, but its calls for action, social criticism, and appeals to populist history and communitarian ideals also appeared in newspapers such as the *Chartist Circular* and the *Northern Star*. Chartist poetry evolved with the movement whose utopian aspirations it expressed, from early confidence to embittered revolutionary protest and final evocations of a still-visionary future. All these qualities may be traced in the work of the movement's best-known poets, among them Ernest Jones, W. J. Linton and Thomas Cooper.

Ernest Jones (1819–69) turned his back on an aristocratic ancestry and legal career to devote his life to populist and revolutionary causes, and published a number of novels, essays and books of verse, which included *Chartist Poems* (1846) and *The Battle-Day and Other Poems* (1855). His active work as an editor of Chartist newspapers and his public support of 'physical force' led to imprisonment for alleged sedition, and illnesses con-

tracted or aggravated in prison later contributed to his relatively early death. As co-editor of the *Labourer*, he vigorously defended the great tradition of honourable defiance:

> Chartism is marching into the fields of literature with rapid strides . . . Its poetry is, indeed, the freshest and most stirring of the age . . . Yet, from many we have expected more . . . What is Robert Browning doing? . . . Has he nothing to say for popular rights? Let him . . . ascend into the cottage of the poor. (*Labourer*, 1848: 96)

Jones's impassioned verse was enlivened by personal as well as speculative meditations and an exact sense of the political events of his day. In it he analysed the underlying motives of widespread social injustice ('Labour's History', 'A Song for May', 'The March of Freedom', 'The Age of Peace'); defended the ideals of political poetry ('The Better Hope', 'The Poet's Death', 'The Poet's Mission'); and blended acerbity with his own personal version of Blake's 'Jerusalem' ('England['s] Greatness', 'The New Moral World').

One of Jones's chants was 'The Song of the Low', sung at Chartist gatherings and the most openly parodic of several working-class hymns to 'lowness':

> We're low, we're low – we're very very low
> Yet from our fingers glide
> The silken flow – and the robes that glow,
> Round the limbs of the sons of pride.
> And what we get – and what we give,
> We know – and we know our share.
> We're not too low the cloth to weave –
> But too low the cloth to wear.
> (followed by refrain, 'We are low . . .')

In other stanzas, Jones indicted the theft of labour in all its forms – on the farm, in the mines, in domestic labour and in war – and culminated in a final call for revolutionary redress ('The thrust of a poor man's arm will go / Through the heart of the proudest king!'). As in all radical movements, the incantatory rhetoric of mass meetings clearly sharpened the 'tensions between verbal militancy and (usually) moderate behavior' Timothy Randall identified as 'a recurring feature of Chartist verse' (1999: 175).

Other, quieter poems bore immediate witness to the two years Jones spent in jail ('The Prisoner to the Slaves', 'Prison Bars', 'The Silent Cell'):

> Troublesome fancies beset me
> Sometimes as I sit in my cell,
> That comrades and friends may forget me,
> And foes may remember too well.
>
> That plans which I thought well digested
> May prove to be bubbles of air:
> And hopes when they come to be tested,
> May turn to the seed of despair.
> ('Prison Fancies')

'The Silent Cell' also concludes with a Lovelace-like exhortation and expression of hope that:

> [t]hey'll find me still unchanged and strong
> When breaks their puny thrall;
> With hate – for not one living soul –
> And pity – for them all.

Jones, like Hamilton, was interested in science and technology, and the benefits he hoped it might bring a more enlightened world. His epic *The New World: A Democratic Poem* celebrated in heroic, almost socialist-realist couplets the uncertain wonders of the balloon, the train, the steam-driven hammer and the telegraph:

> Then, bold aspiring as immortal thought,
> Launched in the boundless, mounts the aeronaut;
> While o'er the earth they drive the cloudy team,
> Electric messenger, and car of steam;
> And guide and govern on innocuous course,
> The explosive mineral's propelling force; . . .
> Mechanic power then ministers to health,
> And lengthening leisure gladdens greatening wealth;
> With steely fingers on twin dials placed,
> The thoughts of farthest friends are instant traced.

In other, comparably rhapsodic passages, he predicted cloud-seeding, efforts to formulate universal languages and searches for extraterrestial intelligence. The man who could write these lines deserves a twenty-first century literary biography.

William James Linton (1812–97) was a poet, journalist and engraver, who drew illustrations for Howitt's *People's Journal* in the 1840s and 1850s and published *Thirty Pictures by Deceased British Artists* (1860) before he emigrated to the United States in 1866. In 'The Dirge of the Nations', a series of *Prometheus Unbound*-like verses which appeared in the *Republican* in 1848, Linton deplored English workers' endurance of the 'peace of hounds in their kennel, awed / And scourged', and invoked a countervailing realm of democratic ends in Shelleyan cadences:

> Let us bear, and let us toil!
> Though the Future hide our spoil.
> We have wrung the secret out
> From the Inscrutable; our shout
> Hath o'er-ridden Fate's decree;
> And the thunder of our glee
> Yet shall roll through Heaven's gates
> On the western clouds of Doom:
> Lo! the morrow, past the gloom
> Of the midnight grief, awaits
> The clear dawning of our fame!

In *Rhymes and Reasons Against Landlordism*, first published in his journal, the *English Republic*, in 1851, Linton denounced state violence ('War! – War!'), espoused the cause of Irish labourers ('Landlordism'), and attacked the institution of private property both in practice ('Emigrants', 'Irish Harvest Song') and in theory ('Property'):

> But earth, its mines, its thousand streams,–
> And air's uncounted waves,
> Freighted with gold and silver beams
> To brighten lowliest graves, –
> The mountain-cleaving waterfall, –
> The ever-restless sea, –
> God gave, not to a few, but all,
> As common Property.

In other poems, he dramatized sporadic efforts at resistance by contemporary farmers. In 'Revenge', for example, bystanders who have refused to identify the slayer of a hated rent-collector have their reasons:

> Who sold the farm above his head?
> Who drove the widow mad?
> Who pull'd the dying from her bed?
> Who rob'd the idiot lad?
> Who sent the starv'd girl to the streets?
> Who mock'd grey Sorrow's smart?
> Yes! listen in thy blood. His heart
> Yet beats.

Two Chartist poets provided models for middle-class novels that later became part of the nineteenth-century canon. George Eliot took her prototype for the title-figure of *Felix Holt* from the life and career of Gerald Massey (1828–1907), a youthful revolutionary who later became a mystically inclined Christian socialist, and Charles Kingsley modelled the tailor-hero of *Alton Locke* on Thomas Cooper (1805–72), a self-educated shoemaker who later became a lecturer and journalist. Cooper's most ambitious poetic work was *The Purgatory of Suicides: A Prison Rhyme in Ten Books* (1845), which Martha Vicinus (1974) and others have criticized for its 'Parnassian' qualities, but he also wrote quite singable ballads ('The Lion of Freedom') and 'smaller prison rhymes' ('A Song for the Free', 'The Time Shall Come When Wrong Shall End'), as well as elegiac and dedicatory sonnets ('Sonnets on the Death of Allen Davenport', 'Dedicatory Sonnet to Thomas Carlyle').

In *Purgatory*, Cooper rewrote conventional history and religion in the service of agnostic idealism, Miltonic defiance, Dantean exhortation, and a deeply chiliastic vision of a secular paradise. Stephanie Kudick (Boos 2001:165–71) has observed that the poem's opening lines recapitulate the speech that led to Cooper's imprisonment in 1843–5:

Slaves, toil no more! Why delve, and moil, and pine,
To glut the tyrant-forgers of your chain? . . .
Shout, as one man, – 'Toil we no more renew,
Until the Many cease their slavery to the Few!'

In subsequent sections, Cooper brooded on poverty, class-exploitation, the execution of a fellow prisoner, his widowed mother's struggles to raise him, and the deaths of poor people in endless cycles of senseless wars, before he evoked a counter-vision of enlightenment and working-class autonomy – 'The Change', William Morris called it – that would surely come. Then at last:

The sinewy artisan, the weaver lean,
The shrunken stockinger, the miner swarth,
Read, think, and feel; and in their eyes the sheen
Of burning thought betokens thy young birth
Within their souls, blithe Liberty! . . .
Ay, they are thinking, at the frame and loom;
At bench, and forge, and in the bowelled mine;
And when the scanty hour of rest is come,
Again they read – to think, and to divine
How it hath come to pass that Toil must pine
While Sloth doth revel: how the game of blood
Hath served their tyrants; how the scheme malign
Of priests hath crushed them; and resolve doth bud
To band, and to bring back the primal Brotherhood.
(X: 16, 18)

The Purgatory of Suicides found its worthy place in a tradition of nineteenth-century radical epics which ranged from *Prometheus Unbound* through Ernest Jones's *New Moral World* and Mary Smith's 'Progress' (reviewed below), to William Morris's poetic tribute to the Paris Commune in *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1886). Cooper's intricate frame and wide erudition are as accomplished as anything one can find in other marginally canonical poems of the period (Swinburne's *Mary Stuart*, for example), and *Purgatory* is genuinely graced by its epic aspirations and vivifying democratic ideals.

The Wider Nets of Radical Verse

Chartists were of course not the only working-class authors of significant political verse, and many writers of such poems were anonymous. One of them was the 'Manchester operative' who assimilated textile-factory workers to 'nature red in tooth and claw' in sixteen concise and brilliant lines:

Keen hawk, on that elm-bough gravely sitting,
  Tearing that singing-bird with desperate skill,
Great Nature says that what thou dost is fitting –
  Through instinct, and for hunger, thou dost kill . . .

O, natural Hawk, our lords of wheels and spindles
  Gorge as it grows the liver of their kind:
Once in their clutch, both mind and body dwindles –
  For Gain to Mercy is both deaf and blind.
O, instinct there is none – nor show of reason,
  But outrage gross on God and Nature's plan,
With rarest gifts in blasphemy and treason,
  That Man, the souled, should piecemeal murder man.
('Just Instinct and Brute Reason', *Howitt's Journal*, i, 132)

William and Mary Howitt published this poem in 1847, but added the somewhat distancing gloss, 'Our operative is severe, but perhaps his sufferings are, and for misery we must make ample allowance.' The voice of the 'operative' was not heard again, to my knowledge, in the forests of mid-nineteenth-century poetry.

As I have already remarked, some of the period's best poetic accounts of deprivation were also the most concrete. Consider, for example, the spare, almost-Pre-Raphaelite concision of the following lines, from *Songs and Lyrics* (1892) by the coal-miner poet Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903):

'Get up!' the caller calls, 'Get up!'
  And in the dead of night,
To win the bairns their bite and sup,
  I rise a weary wight.

My flannel dudden [coarse clothes] donn'd, thrice o'er
  My brids are kiss'd, and then
I with a whistle shut the door,
  I may not ope again.
('Get Up')

Women were categorically barred from positions of active engagement or leadership in the Chartist movement, as they were from any such roles in the mass political movements of mid-nineteenth-century Britain (except the few focused specifically on women's causes). This did not mean, of course, that they were politically unaware. Ellen Johnston, for example, an impoverished Scottish textile worker, managed with help and great effort to publish her 1854 *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* by subscription in Glasgow in 1867, and one of the poems reproduced in this modest volume was 'The Last Sark', in which a distraught wife cries out to her husband in pain and helpless rage:

Gude guide me, are you hame again, an' ha'e yet 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 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?
>
> 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 ken I hinna tasted meat for days far mair than three;
> Were it no for my helpless bairns, I wadna care to dee.

Other working-class women poets vigorously advocated women's education (Janet Hamilton) as well as legal efforts to curb domestic violence (Jessie Russell, Agnes Mabon, Marion Bernstein) and 'temperance' – protest against what we would probably call 'substance abuse' (all of the above, especially Hamilton).

Mary Smith, for example, an ardently self-educated servant who became a newspaper contributor, school aide and schoolmistress in Carlisle, campaigned for many social causes – against the Contagious Diseases Acts, for example (laws which empowered police to pull women off the street at will and examine them for venereal diseases), and for the Married Women's Property Acts (which curbed husbands' 'rights' to their wives' earnings and property). In *Progress, and Other Poems . . . Including Poems on Life and Labour* (1863), Smith argued in periodic octameters that:

> '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 restless heart,
> Life in all its varied phases, 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.

Eliza Cook, the eleventh child of a tinsmith and brazier, published *Melaia, and Other Poems* (1838), *Poems, Second Series* (1845) and *New Echoes* (1864), and managed to find the financial and other resources to edit *Eliza Cook's Journal* as a penny-biweekly from 1849 to 1854. In didactic but broadly humanitarian poems such as 'A Song for the Ragged Schools', Cook commented on the factory conditions, the dignity of labour and working-class education ('Better build schoolrooms for the boy, / Than cells and gibbets for the man'), as well as the 'simple' democratic virtues of popular art:

> Who scorns the 'common' sculpture art that poor men's pence can buy,
> That silently invokes our soul to lift itself on high?
> Who shall revile the 'common' tunes that haunt us as we go?
> Who shall despise the 'common' bloom that scents the market-row?
> Oh! let us bless the 'Beautiful' that ever lives and greets
> And cheers us in the music and the flowers of the 'Streets'.
>
> ('The Streets')

Introspection and 'the Poet's Mission'

Driven by pressing needs for solace and consolation, many working-class poets wrote introspectively to recall joy, redress faults, assuage despair, and find some meaning in the omnipresence of death, especially the deaths of young children. I will focus in this section on working-class expressions of beleaguered hope, and countervailing assertions of pride in the poet's role.

'Marie', for example (her last name is not known), was a dye-worker from Chorley who published several poems in William and Mary Howitt's *The People's Journal* and *Howitt's Journal* beginning in 1847, and in assorted journals for a few years thereafter (*The People's Journal*, *Eliza Cook's Journal*, *Cassell's Family Magazine*). Flashes of persuasive wit appeared in her expressions of faith in personal autonomy, the poet's vocation and the dignity of all 'labour', and the stoic philosopher Epictetus might have admired her love of beauty and calm expressions of lyric 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')

One of her later poems set 'earnest hope' against the spectre of death ('To Liberty', 1852), and I cannot find her name or pseudonym in print after.

In her *Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistresss and Nonconformist: A Fragment of a Life*, published posthumously in 1892, the stalwart servant, schoolmistress and feminist activist regretted bitterly her failure to realize 'the inner cravings of my soul after literary pursuits' (1892: 192), and traced this failure to the constraints imposed on her as a woman as well as to her personal inadequacies and the meagre economic circumstances of her youth.

As others before her (and after), Smith sought solace in solidarity with other humble under-labourers of human history, who have struggled – perhaps in vain – to envision a kind of ethical and aesthetic kingdom of ends. In 'Progress', for example, a 116-page historical epic she may have modelled in part on Cooper's *Purgatory of Suicides*, she expressed this elusive ideal in an ardent memorial tribute to the myriad 'spirits of dead centuries' (p. 71) – a community of unremembered secular saints, whose struggles for solidarity and enlightenment might encourage us in our own:

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.
(pp. 72–3)

A distinct but related subgenre can be identified in working-class poets' expressions of pride in the fact that they *were* working-class poets. Comfortably situated Victorian poets also celebrated their craft, of course – in Tennyson's 'The Poet's Vow', for example, or Robert Browning's 'One Word More'. But their poorer brothers' and sisters' intensity and persistence bore witness to the strength of a sustaining but deeply threatened life-ideal. Examples of such tributes include Ernest Jones's 'The Poet's Mission' and 'The Poet's Death', Charles Cole's 'The Poet's Love of Liberty', Allen Davenport's 'The Poet's Hope', John Rogerson's 'The Minstrel's Lot', John Critchley Prince's 'To Poesy', James Waddington's 'Genius', Joseph Skipsey's 'The Brooklet' and John Nicholson's relatively conflict-ridden 'Genius and Intemperance', as well as Laycock's 'What! Another Cracked Poet?', quoted earlier.

Working-class poets also went out of their way to pay tribute (sometimes posthumous) to their fellows. Examples of such authorial solidarity included Cooper's 'Sonnets on the Death of Allen Davenport', Alexander Wilson's 'The Poet's Corner', William Billington's 'Gerald Massey' and Richard Furness's 'To the Memory of Ebenezer Elliott'. In his prose preface to *Hours With the Muses* (1841), the Manchester operative John Critchley Prince expressed the poet's pride in unusually pointed terms:

> It is almost impossible to take too extended a view of the nature and characters of Poetry . . . Above all, if [the poet] had the will to devote his God-like energies to the good of his fellow-men, his existence would be a blessing and a benefit to the age in which he lived . . . A few such mighty spirits would effectively regenerate the human race . . . I have been indebted to poetry, as a source of intellectual enjoyment, during years of many sorrows, many baffled hopes, and many vain endeavours to rise above the evils of my condition.

The city poet, deprived of appeal to a rural populist tradition, faced special problems and earned special rewards. In 'The City Singers' (1873), for example, the Manchester working-class poet John Lawton Owen claimed:

This dower of song is manna to the city,
  It is the dew upon a crowded field;
Broadcast it scatters life, and love, and pity,
  And e'en the reapers cannot tell the yield . . .
So shall street children, playing in the gutter,
  And toilers sweating at the busy loom,
Instinctively your lyric-lesson utter
  While they shall steal like fragrance through the room.

Other forms of gratitude were even more immediate and more intense. When Ellen Johnson thanked the socialist Alexander Campbell for his support for her work in the *Penny Post*, she drew on a personal history of discouragement, desertion, sexual abuse and numbing toil:

My life's young years were spent in dark repining,
  In persecution, falsehood, and envy;
But now a world of love is round me twining –
  My fame is soaring upwards to the sky.
('Lines to Isabel from the Factory Girl')

Fanny Forrester, a Manchester textile-factory worker and the last writer to be considered in this section, managed to publish her work in *Ben Brierley's Journal* for a few years in the 1870s. In one of these poems, 'The Lowly Bard', she portrayed the working-class poet as a harried and exhausted angel of mercy, who perceived and recorded human suffering and endurance in stifling factories and foetid slums, as well as chronic illness and early death. In the poem's final scenes, for example, a poet hovering in a garret at the side of a dying and delirious man hears his last anguished wish – to support and sustain his children:

'Mine, only mine, to toil for and to cherish!
  Lay your cool hand, sweet Mary, on my brow!
Children plead more, they must not, shall not perish!
  There, do not hold me – I am stronger now!
I've much to do, and precious time is fleeting.'
  The priest bends lower o'er the ragged bed –
No banner waves, nor muffled drum is beating;
  Yet, 'tis a hero that lies still and dead.

Such heroism was clearly one of the marks of Mary Smith's community of secular saints, who comfort the distraught writer, in turn, in the poem's conclusion:

The great may flaunt their pampered bards above him,
  But when *their* laurels shall be sere and brown,
Kind heaven will grant, because the lowliest love him,
  To the poor rhymester an *eternal crown*.

The resonance of this view did impel some of those who held it to 'rise above the evils of [their] condition', and make a unique collective contribution to an understanding of the sorrows of the dispossessed.

Conclusion

We have ranged briefly through some of the verse poor Britons wrote and sang in the nineteenth century, religious, anti-clerical, inspirational, instructive, humorous, meditative, reflective and reflexive poems in almost all their registers – 'traditional' and narrative ballads, urban broadsides, regional satires and political protests. Not all working-class literature was 'anti-establishment', of course, or 'self-improving', or oral and traditional in character, or composed in quatrains, couplets or Spenserian stanzas. But its allusions were 'political' in a wider sense as well as 'literary', and many of the registers and tonalities they found would resonate deeply if they could be seen and understood by writers in the 'third world' today.

That might in some cases be difficult, for as Martha Vicinus (1974) and others have remarked, Victorian working-class poetry also appealed to specifically *British* traditions, shaped by its public nature and antecedents in ballads and popular songs, and influenced by the eighteenth-century pastoralism of Cowper, Ferguson, Gray or Crabbe, as well as the reformist romanticism of Burns, Byron, Shelley and the early Wordsworth. The populist and reformist tradition these poets adapted and extended, moreover, has also estranged them from other paradigms that have generally guided *academic* taste, in the later twentieth century and beyond – *l'art pour l'art*, symbolism, imagism, modernism, 'new criticism', structuralism, deconstruction, 'postmodernism' and the like. Taken together, these divergences from nineteenth-century working-class poets' models and exemplars have ironically made their works less 'popular', for they have rendered their recovery and interpretation more difficult, more historicist and therefore more 'academic'.

Readers of nineteenth-century working-class poetry should also keep in mind that the extant works we have may be a partial and somewhat biased sample. The British class system was brutally effective, and the testimonies of almost all published working-class poets to the difficulties they encountered strongly suggest that it interdicted the 'Parnassian' and non-'Parnassian' efforts of many more unschooled manual labourers (see Ashton and Roberts 1999). What middle-class editors were willing to publish, moreover, was clearly constrained not only by their own personal canons of taste, and the forms and sentiments they deemed appropriate for 'humble' authors, but also by the more arbitrary preferences of middle-class purchasers and other market constraints. A good body of evidence, for example, suggests that many publishers and anthologists selected women poets' blandest effusions, and repressed aberrant expressions of inappropriately 'strong' thought.

Given these circumstances, it should be said that the preservation of the working-class poetic corpus we *do* have is a testimony to the dedication and (basically) good offices of William and Mary Howitt, John Cassell, Alexander Campbell, George Gilfillan, W. J. Linton, Ernest Jones, Eliza Cook, Ben Brierley and other committed working- and middle-

class editors, who printed and edited works most other editors refused to consider. Behind or at the side of every poor poet whose work has survived stood at least one more or less sympathetic patron or editor, a genuine blessing, occasionally mixed, which only a few aspiring poor writers could hope to have.

Finally, little or nothing is known about most working-class authors' lives. Very few posthumous manuscripts of poor writers have been preserved, and it is likely therefore that many poems and other writings left uncompleted or unpublished at death were destroyed. Not only they, but the contexts which sustained them, are now therefore irrecoverable.

Despite the distinctive contribution working-class authors made to mid-Victorian romanticism and reformism, it also became harder to identify a distinct body of working-class poetry as the century waned. In part at least, this diminution may have been an ironic consequence of improved educational and literary opportunities, as well as the expansion of mass culture into other channels (music-hall performances, fiction and eventually films). Be that as it may, it was still possible at the turn of the century to identify a few poets with clear working-class backgrounds (Fred Henderson, Ethel Carnie, Lizzie Smith and even D. H. Lawrence), and a few middle-class poets strongly identified themselves with radical-democratic and/or socialist ideals (William Morris, Edward Carpenter and, in some moods and periods of his life, Oscar Wilde). But conscious cultivation of working-class poetry as a category had begun to fade. The raw, early industrial rapacity that created some of its most anguished tensions had begun to recede, however slowly and painfully, and the passions and interest which sustained it in mid-Victorian Britain found new forms of expression – in radical political poetry, poetic indictments of the losses of two world wars, and fictional and memoir representations of settled aspects of working-class life.

A few characteristics of working-class poetry also found indirect or collateral descendants, sometimes in unlikely places: in certain aspects of aestheticism (especially its use of ballads, refrains and folk metres; consider D. G. Rossetti's 'The King's Tragedy', for example, or Wilde's 'Ballad of Reading Gaol'); in populist and reformist literature associated with the arts and crafts movement; and in folk accompaniments to political radicalism in various parts of the English-speaking world (one lineage might be traced in North America, for example, from the European prototype of Morris's 'Chants for Socialists' through Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson to Joan Baez, Bonnie Raitt and beyond). Still other linguistic and thematic registers of nineteenth-century working-class poetry have also found successors in the thematic choices, dialect usages and self-consciously demotic focus of British modernist poetry (Hardy's Wessex poems, for example; Edith Sitwell's 'bucolic lyrics'; A. E. Housman's 'A Shropshire Lad'; and the work of Jessie Anderson, Marion Angus, John Buchan, Violet Jacob and other poets of the Scots vernacular revival).

As a whole, then, Victorian 'people's poetry' in its many forms – ballads, broadsides, dialect and regional poetry, Chartist verse, and the vast array of poems on political and personal themes – responded in revealing ways to the conditions of its time, and served as the matrix of many dramatically rendered works of lasting merit. Its several facets there-

fore merit closer study, better preservation, and the benefit of modern reprints and scholarly editions, before their sources in manuscripts, historical records and copies of ephemera and periodicals are slowly but irrevocably lost. Many would still read the poems of Cooper, Hamilton, Jones and Linton, I believe, if editors made them accessible in critical and/or annotated form. Many more would gain a sense of the depth of working-class poetry if it were given the attention it deserved in anthologies of Victorian poetry, or better yet, a carefully edited anthology of nineteenth-century working-class literature.

In their thematic choices and affiliations, these works blended protest, reformist politics, self-assertion and moral reflection in complex ways. The ideals and aspirations which animated them could be integrated, up to a point, with generalized appeals to traditional faith, on the one hand, and with autodidactic variants of a classical or 'polite' education (as in Thomas Cooper's *Purgatory*) on the other. But the imaginative possibilities they sought were fundamentally opposed to many 'elite' traditions, and their oral, musical and affective roots neither needed nor would have been likely to bear an extensive admixture of artistic framing, textual ambiguity and high-cultural allusions.

Many imbricated intents and attitudes could nevertheless be found in the variety of working-class cultural expression, and the very complexity of these interrelations makes sense of a commentator's remark that it is 'the broad uniformity of condition and outlook in the culture of the labouring poor that is striking, [for] power and powerlessness, hope and fatalism, aspiration and accommodation, were not opposites but different sides of the same coin of poverty' (Joyce 1991: 228). Because of these complex interrelations, it would also be unreasonable if not impossible to try to separate 'political' from 'non-political' strands in working-class poetry, for the aims of literature are intrinsically aesthetic and expressive as well as argumentative. The deepest 'political' poetry may convey the world-view of an underclass more effectively than any sociological analysis, and politics and economics may inflect not only poetic subjects and forms, but the most fundamental imaginative conceptions of morality and emotion, pathos and transcendence itself.

Working-class verse, in short, was a repository of anger, humour and utopian hopes. It embraced individual poems which were sonorous, witty, trenchant, lyrical and reflective, and genres and traditions which were as complex, in their ways, as middle-class poets' and editors' elaborate framing devices and modes of collection were in theirs. It remains one of our most valuable sources of information about the nineteenth-century popular imagination, and the deepest hopes and unfulfilled aspirations of not-so-'ordinary' people.

See also: The Market; Anthologies and the Making of the Poetic Canon; Poetry and Science.

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