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Ellen Johnston (ca. 1835-1873)

Florence S. Boos

BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Johnston was one of very few Victorian women factory workers who managed to publish a volume of verse. In a fifteen-page autobiographical preface to the first edition of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* (Glasgow, 1867) and assorted poetic exchanges in the columns of the *Glasgow Penny Post*, she also gave us a rare glimpse into the views and aspirations of people who assumed they were too poor and ill connected to achieve self-expression in print and one of the more complete accounts we have of any nineteenth-century working-class woman poet's life.

In the *Autobiography* Johnston told her readers that she was born about 1835 in Muir Wynd, Hamilton, Scotland, the only child of James Johnston, a poetically inclined stonemason, and Mary Bilsland, a dyer and dressmaker. When Ellen Johnston was an infant, her father emigrated to the United States, but anxiety apparently overcame her mother at the dockside, and she returned to Glasgow with Ellen. After several years, Mary Johnston assumed that her husband had died in America and remarried. Ellen Johnston's stepfather put her to factory work when she was eleven and engaged in other actions that "haunted me like a vampire, but at least for the present must remain the mystery of my life." She fled from her "tormenter" repeatedly, considered suicide, then gave birth at seventeen to her own daughter, Mary Achenvole, in September 1852. Shortly thereafter, Ellen began to support her extended family of four.

Her formal schooling had ended at eleven, but she read Scott's novels, Wilson's *Tales of the Border*, Burns's poetry, and other works and published her first poem in the *Glasgow Examiner* when she was nineteen. James Johnston in Maine learned what had happened to the family he left behind and "drank a death-draught from a cup in his own hand." In 1861 Mary Johnston died, and

Ellen Johnston left with her daughter for Dundee, where she worked as a factory weaver and continued to submit verses to newspapers in her spare time.

In 1865, *The Penny Post*, a working-class newspaper with a circulation of about 30,000, began to publish her poems on a regular basis, either on the front page or in a "Notices to Correspondents" section inside. In January 1867, the reformist editor Alexander Campbell actively began to solicit subscriptions in the paper's columns for prospective book publication of Johnston's collected poems, and the volume was brought into print in 1867. But the proceeds were not enough to free Johnston from factory work. An 1869 second edition omitted all reference to her illegitimate daughter but added four new poems, including her moving valedictory "The Factory Girl's Last Lay."

In late 1868, Campbell retired from editorship of *The Penny Post*, and his successor scrapped the paper's poetry columns. A solitary *Penny Post* notice solicited contributions in January 1873 for the "very ill" poet, who was now in "very distressed circumstances." Ellen Johnston died in April 1873 in the Glasgow Barony Poorhouse or its infirmary, and nothing is known of Mary Achen-vole's fate. Johnston's poetry and brief memoir tell us all we know of her travails and accomplishments, but her impassioned lyrics recorded the complex blend of public introspection, active support, and stubborn independence that enabled her to bring her work into print.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Before she began her extended interactions with *The Penny Post*, Johnston had published a number of isolated poems and songs, including several in Scots. Some praised, celebrated, described, or denounced specific people or venues in her life—an employer, a workingmen's club, or her workplace. Others grieved the loss of childhood innocence and betrayals of adolescence, commemorated real or prospective romantic attachments, and satirized intolerant or exploitative people and patterns of behavior. In "O Come Awa' Jamie," for example, the speaker asked a foreman or employer to "gie us mair licht" in which to weave her quota of jute. In her best-known work, "The Last Sark, Written in 1859," a weary mother, whose husband again sought work in vain, made the time-less observation, "It is the puir man's hard-won toil that fills the rich man's purse. . . . Were it no for the working men what wad the rich men be?" After she began to write for *The Penny Post*, Johnston developed further the satiric, confessional, and performative manner of her dramatic monologues in extended dialogues, most of them with other poets—women and men—who inquired in its columns about her life. In these exchanges appeared her first direct allusions to her father and stepfather and concrete descriptions of the oppressive character of her everyday work:

It is within the massive walls of factory dust and din
That I must woo my humble muse, her favour still to win. . . .

It is amidst pestiferous oil that I inhale my breath,

'Midst pond'rous shafts revolving round the atmosphere of death.
(“Lines to Edith with G. D. Russell’s and the Factory Girl’s Cartes,”
Autobiography, Poems and Songs)

She took public solace in the consolations of art—her true companion (“my heart hath ne'er known gladness save when in fancy's dream”). In other, openly triumphal poems, such as “The Maid of Dundee to Her Slumbering Muse,” she exhorted herself and occasionally “boasted” in near-euphoric tones, “Go, tell thy foes that 'twas the wrongs they've done thee, / That caused thy wailings in the Penny Post.”

Ellen Johnston clearly achieved the brief flare of her success with the active support of a periodical readership, a helpful editorial patron, and epistolary friends. All those readers and friends expressed in clear material terms their conviction that her work was a heroic, even emblematic accomplishment. She also viewed her “wailings” as aspirations to overcome deprivation and isolation and wrote strong Scots verse and concrete social commentary. But her assertively “self-fashioning” efforts also reflected the very frailty and urgency of working-class poetic identity she decried. Her time was short and her “honours” transitory, but Ellen Johnston's melancholy self-awareness and performative introspection—traits normally found blended in the work of middle- and upper-class “romantic individualists” such as Byron or Emily Brontë*—were strikingly distinctive in the working-class writing of her time.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Most older studies of British working-class poetry focus primarily on the work of English artisans and Chartists, almost all of whom were men. Susan Zlotnick notes the uniqueness of Johnston's achievement in writing about her life as a mill worker, in contrast to a dominant male working-class tradition represented by dialect poets such as Edwin Waugh, which “effectively denied [women's] existence as workers.” Florence Boos examines some aspects of the complex “performative” interrelationship between Johnston's autobiography and her poems and contrasts her factory-floor radicalism with the preindustrial egalitarianism of Janet Hamilton and feminism of Marion Bernstein.

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