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PHILOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Volume 92

Spring 2013

Number 2

*Philological Quarterly* is published by the Department of English and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at The University of Iowa, in Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Subscription rate for institutions and libraries: one year, \$70. Subscribers outside of the U.S. please add \$10 for postage. Single back issues are \$10, and double issues \$20. The mailing address for subscriptions, renewals, and reporting address changes is *Philological Quarterly*, P.O. Box 0567, Selmer, TN 38375-0567. To contact customer service at our distributor, NCS Fulfillment, call 888-400-4961, or e-mail [philological@magcs.com](mailto:philological@magcs.com). New subscriptions and renewals paid by credit card are accepted on the Web at <http://philological.magcs.com/subscribe> and <http://philological.magcs.com/renew>.

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SPECIAL ISSUE  
  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
WORKING-CLASS WRITING  
  
Edited by Florence S. Boos

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## Introduction: The Literature of the Victorian Working Classes

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FLORENCE BOOS

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When, in 1850, the publisher John Cassell decided to issue a supplement to his one-penny weekly *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor*, to be comprised entirely of selections from working-class contributors, he styled it *The Literature of Working-Men*. Even allowing for gender bias in the title (and *The Literature of Working-Men* eventually did include seven contributions by a woman, Janet Hamilton),<sup>1</sup> this was a radical gesture by an editor who understood that the increasingly numerous early nineteenth-century publications directed to the working classes failed to provide for worker democracy in the crucial realm of literacy and ideas. For Cassell, a strong advocate of universal education whose magazines provided instructional materials at low cost, "the literature of working men" meant chiefly essays. Of these, the astonished editor received eight hundred submissions, from which he published one hundred and fifty selections in two volumes.

An even more striking case may be that of the *Northern Star*, a Leeds-based Chartist newspaper which published poetry between 1838 and 1852. As Michael Sanders describes in *The Poetry of Chartism*, successive editors struggled with deluges of poetic submissions, complaining rather unappreciatively that "we [are] glutted with poetry, [with] almost a jackass load of what claims to be original poetry waiting for insertion . . . the Poets must really give us a little breathing time. We have heaps and heaps accumulating which we cannot find room for."<sup>2</sup> Contributors to the *Northern Star* were not all members of the working class, but clearly thousands of nineteenth-century workers yearned to express their sentiments and aspirations in print.

As even these two instances suggest, the topic of this special issue of *Philological Quarterly*, "Literature of the Victorian Working Classes," comprises a great untamed land, as it were, surrounding more familiar studies of middle-class and formally educated Victorian authors. The topic includes

not only the better-known Chartist poetry, including such justly admired works as Thomas Cooper's *Purgatory of Suicides* and Ernest Jones's *The Revolt of Hindustan*, but also the many forms of political and non-political writing by working-class authors which flourished throughout the century. The forms in which working-class literature appeared included not only the argumentative essays and Chartist poems published by Cassell and the *Northern Star*, but a broad swatch of oral and written prose and verse—ballads and songs, broadsides, labor hymns, poetry in periodicals and bound volumes, memoirs, short fiction, novels, journalism, and other forms of nonfiction prose. In this issue, Gustav Klaus describes Chartist literary production in words which might well apply to other forms of nineteenth-century working-class literature:

To privilege (and unduly burden) poetry . . . is inevitably to downgrade the many other genres with which the Chartist press abounded. For they all worked towards that same goal, from speeches to essays, prison letters to dialogues, serialized fiction to historical treatise, trades' grievances to reportage. . . . [I]t is the ensemble of many forms of an at once oral and literary culture that fulfils the role [of making its social and political constituencies intelligible].

The outpouring of working-class writing in mid-nineteenth-century Britain was the direct result of the century's advances in literacy as well as the production and distribution of printed material. According to David Vincent's *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, among nineteenth-century European countries England lagged behind Prussia, the Netherlands, and its poorer neighbor Scotland. Even so, the century brought great progress; whereas in 1805 almost 40% of males and 58% of females were deemed illiterate by the lowest standard (ability to sign one's name), by 1900 this figure had declined to about 2% for males and 3% for females.<sup>3</sup> These advances prompted hope for the progress of an underclass; Vincent remarks that "children educated in the 1830s and 1840s were on average 20 points more literate than their parents' generation when they came to be married in early adulthood, and in turn lagged behind their own children by a similar amount a quarter of a century later."<sup>4</sup> Though "literacy" as measured by historians was much below the skill needed for interpreting, much less writing, poems or essays, even these crude figures record a sea change.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of who in fact can be properly considered "working-class" is a potentially vexed problem in dealing with authorship, for one class marker was education itself. Moreover, the proportion of the population which might be called "middle class" by one definition or another expanded during the century—increasing at least threefold.<sup>6</sup> In defining "working class" I have adopted a "broad church" approach, similar to that enunciated by

John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayell in the introduction to *The Autobiography of the Working-Class, 1790–1940*: "Our aim was to include those who for some period of their lives could be described as working class, whether defined in terms of their relationship with the means of production, their educational experiences and cultural ties, by self-ascription, or by any combination of these factors."<sup>7</sup> The writers discussed in the following essays were in most cases manual laborers and/or the children of manual laborers, and a major aspect of their deprivation was the difficulty with which they obtained access to education. John Mitchell began life as a shoemaker, David Wright was possibly a letter carrier, E. H. a factory worker, Elizabeth Storie a seamstress, Mary Prince a servant and former slave, Thomas Wheeler a former baker, gardener, woolcomber, and school teacher, John Harris a tin miner, and Joseph Skipsey a coal miner and later custodian. The dialect poets practiced several occupations, among them those of handloom weaver, furniture seller, and journeyman printer. In some cases, such as that of F. Saunderson, "a female cottager," and Mary Lahee, likewise a country dweller, class status is indeterminate. All of the writers discussed, however, share the trait that their writings could not be considered in any sense "canonical."

Long marginalized in English-language circles by the literary preferences which favored poetry and fiction of the middle and upper classes, Victorian working-class literature experienced a resurgence of scholarly interest in the second half of the twentieth century, encouraged perhaps by the re-emergence of radical social and literary movements which scrutinized the past for usable precedents. An English translation of a Russian anthology of Chartist writing first appeared in *Victorian Studies* in 1958, and Martha Vicinus's 1974 *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* provided an interpretive overview of several kinds of working-class writing, as did Gustav Klaus's *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working Class Writing* (1985). The texts themselves were made more available during the 1970s and '80s in such works as Louis James's *English Popular Literature, 1818–1851* (1976), Brian Hollingworth's *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (1977), Peter Scheckner's *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s–1850s* (1989), and Brian Maidment's *Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1987). Further anthologies of little-known materials have continued to appear, among them William Maurice's *A Pitman's Anthology* (2004), John Goodridge's *Nineteenth-Century Labouring Class Poets* (2005), and my own *Victorian Working-Class Women Poets: An Anthology* (2008).<sup>8</sup>

As shown by the bibliography at the end of this issue, the 1990s and early twenty-first century have seen many new interpretative studies, by Anne Janowitz, Patrick Joyce, Gustav Klaus, Ulrike Schwab, Susan Zlotnick, Timothy Randall, Kelly Mays, Ellen O'Brien, Owen Ashton, Stephen Roberts, Hugues Journès, Susan Alves, Michael Sanders, Meagan Timney, Margaret Loose, James Hepburn, and others. As previously mentioned, Anne Janowitz's 1998 *Lyric and Labor in the Romantic Tradition* postulates a continuum of the "communitarian lyric," as expressed in the poetry of Allen Davenport, W. J. Linton, and the middle-class designer and socialist campaigner William Morris. Michael Sanders's 2009 *The Poetry of Chartism: Politics, Aesthetics, History* postulates a "structure of feeling" for Chartist, and by implication, much working-class poetry, in a sequence of negation, opposition, and transcendence, fitting for writing designed to move readers from a sense of defeat to action and hope. In methodology, *The Poetry of Chartism* also departs from the study of representative individual figures such as "Labor Laureates" by examining *all* the poetry published in the *Northern Star* between 1837 and 1852. Viewing this body of verse by approximately 430 writers as a shared debate over the aims and methods of the workers' movement, Sanders sifts its metaphors and rhetoric for common features and tonal shifts as Chartism experienced advances and defeats. A third approach—neither centering entirely on "major figures" nor on a vast corpus of working-class writings as a whole—might be found in Gustav Klaus's essay in this special issue, "Moral Force and Physical Force in the Poetry of Chartism: John Mitchell and David Wright of Aberdeen," which closely examines the work of two lesser-known individual Chartists as they responded in contrasting ways to Chartist dilemmas.

Considering its scope, however, one could argue that the range of working-class writing is only beginning to be explored. The relatively lower esteem in which its authors were held meant that many primary materials—letters, manuscripts, contemporary recollections, and ephemera—more often preserved for writers of higher social classes, were seen as disposable. Many working-class writers published their works in regional or other periodicals now literally crumbling into decay undigitized, or in small pamphlets or limited editions of which few or, in worst cases, no copies remain.

In this context, the movement toward digitization, however mixed its blessings in other areas of life, has been a boon for working-class studies in making relatively obscure texts available, including hundreds of books or manuscripts once accessible only in specialized libraries or through inter-library loan. The *Northern Star* is now available online through the Nineteenth Century Serials Edition (ncse), and the contents of Brunel Univer-

sity's Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiographies are now available through the Internet. The Labouring Class Poets Online has been founded to extend the work of John Goodridge and his collaborators in their three-volume *Anthology of English Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1900*, and an umbrella Archive of Working-Class Writing, hosted at Liverpool John Moores University, is planned to include several Internet-based projects. Doubtless there are also hundreds of unexplored materials still waiting in local and regional libraries, often classified not as "working-class" literature but simply as documents of nineteenth-century life.

Some additional aspects of nineteenth-century working-class literature might reward further investigation. Most of what we think of as working-class poetry originated in Lancashire, southern England, or southern and eastern Scotland; but the literature of outlying and nonindustrial regions such as Wales and the Highlands has been often less examined, doubtless in some instances because of linguistic barriers (Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge's essay in this issue is unusual in considering a Cornish poet). As of yet little research has been done on possible working-class authors of drama—a form of entertainment much enjoyed by members of the working classes. In addition, attention to specific genres can deflect attention from the extent to which active working-class writers published in two or more forms: W. J. Linton, engraving and poetry; Janet Hamilton, poetry, essays, and memoir; Ernest Jones, journalism, poetry, fiction, and essays; Mary Smith, poems, essays, and autobiography; and Thomas Cooper, poetry, fiction, journalism, and autobiography. The discovery of a gay or lesbian working-class poet still remains for a future investigator, as does a further discussion of British working-class writing and race.

Working-class literature lies at the intersection of several academic fields or approaches. As commentary focuses on identifying details of publication and reception, the study of these writings moves toward the fields of literacy and cultural studies, and alternately, as matters of rhetoric, presentation, language and genre are seen as foremost, towards literary, aesthetic, and linguistic concerns.<sup>9</sup> The interrelationship of working-class literature with art, music, and theater suggests an interdisciplinary approach, and for some questions, regional or genealogical contexts provide some of the best sources—for example, descendants may know of the writer's later life or other writings. The search for such contexts for working-class writers is not merely "antiquarian," to use Frederic Jameson's classification,<sup>10</sup> but necessary to enable some critical distance on the claims and sentiments of the writers. Readers of middle-class literature have ready and automatic access, for instance, to the basic chronology of the lives of Tennyson or Dickens,

and despite occasional exciting discoveries, are able to respond to their writings without conducting basic research. For working-class authors, already subject to multiple forms of forgetfulness, the more which can be known of the circumstances under which they wrote or published, the less interpretations will be distortive, partial, or overly subjective.

Issues of mediation and reception are central in considering working-class writings, whose authors were seldom able to publish without some form of financial subvention or patronage—subscription, sponsorship by a political or religious organization, or the favor of an editor, often motivated by political concerns. Of the writers considered in this special issue, for example, Elizabeth Storie published by subscription, Mary Prince's *History* was printed and circulated by an abolitionist society; Thomas Wheeler's *Sun and Shadow* appeared in the *Northern Star*, as did E. H. and F. Saunderson, the dialect poets described by Brian Hollingworth were anthologized by the middle-class retired editor John Harland, and, in one striking case, Edwin Waugh's "Come Whoam to Thi Childer an' Me," the poem was distributed by a prominent aristocratic philanthropist on moral grounds.

Poems sung in pubs or music halls, distributed as broadsides, or printed in periodicals were doubtless shaped with immediate popular audiences in mind, and both editors and printers exercised the tacit censorship of selection, or in some cases, a more overt censorship. The latter occurred when Elizabeth Gaskell's rendition of "The Owdham Weaver" in *Mary Barton* excised the most militant stanzas. Similarly Thomas Pringle's edited transcription of Mary Prince's life emphasized her religious sentiments rather than the combative behaviors ascribed to her by others. A writer's lower-class status encouraged editorial interventions, even within books; when the former servant Elizabeth Campbell sold her poems in penny leaflet form during the 1860s, many selections expressed anger at the British government and others in authority, but when the literary patron George Gilfillan edited a collection of the then-elderly poet's works in 1875, the poems selected exhibit more standardized metrics as well as more acceptable sentiments such as gratitude for a royal visit.<sup>11</sup>

As important as the leap from speech to print, perhaps, was that from periodical publication to the issue of a bound volume; this necessitated sales, and thus the desirability of a "crossover" audience which included middle-class purchasers. The subscription list for Elizabeth Storie's *Autobiography*, for example, included several identifiably middle-class patrons (Alex. Montcrieff, advocate; Rev. Mr. Gilmour; Duncan Hilston, MD), and dialect poetry and fiction evoked the regional pride which sustained such local organs as *Ben Brierley's Journal*, with its genial, populist, but mostly apolitical

tone, and the somewhat later and wildly successful Dundee *People's Friend*. A high proportion of working-class literature appeared first or only in periodical form, in long columns of small type, mixed with advertisements, short news briefs, trial reports, and other miscellanea, a placement which favored short forms or serials, journalistic reports, and letters. As print became cheaper, fiction eventually came to predominate over poetry, and for reasons not entirely explored, few working-class writers seem to have entered this market.

On the one hand, the hybridity of newspaper publication can be seen as a kind of strength, encouraging a sense that the newspaper represented a community of readers; such effects are perceived in the many accounts of the reading of newspapers in pubs, workplaces, and other gathering places, followed by lively discussions, and in the excited response of readers to their fellow poets and contributors as manifested in *Ben Brierley's Journal*, Alexander Campbell's *The Penny Post*, and, as discussed by Meagan Timney in this issue, the readers of James Morrison's *The Pioneer*. In a world in which many remained semi-literate, access to literacy whether indirectly, through listening, or directly, through reading, granted a sense of inclusion.<sup>12</sup> And the miscellaneous nature of newspaper composition—with articles from many sources written in different tones—could mimic Bakhtinian "multi-voice" in its appeal to varied interests.

If those such as Marion Bernstein or David Wright felt some irritation when their selections were rejected or delayed, others such as Eliza Cook, Janet Hamilton, and Ellen Johnston were profoundly grateful for the editorial patronage which launched their careers as poets. Indeed, so significant was the social and communal function of early newspapers that David Vincent has hypothesized that one motive for the government's removal of the stamp tax was to limit the radical potential of communal readership: "Whatever its content, information absorbed at the kitchen table or on the front doorstep during the more sharply defined leisure time was less inflammatory than when it was read aloud to the company of a public house or artisan workshop."<sup>13</sup> Whether or not the reduction of duties on print was designed to encourage a less subversive press, the association of cheap print with discontent emphasizes how important access to newspapers was to working-class audiences, as testified by the literally hundreds of periodical poems which refer to recently published news, editorial comments, or other recent newspaper poems and articles.

In addition, the process of editorial mediation encouraged conformity to shared Victorian literary norms which crossed class boundaries—among these a preference for didacticism, sentiment, and realism. Instructional

articles were useful to a little-schooled audience eager to learn, sentiment helped in enduring the struggles of every day, and realism—that is, a description of familiar realities—attracted those who felt their own forms of knowledge were underrepresented in what they read.

Working-class culture was in large part oral, transmitted in distinctive language forms, songs, idioms, and oral recitations, and only partly tamed by the standardizing processes of a normalizing education. The interplay between oral and printed forms was reciprocal, nor did the former always precede the latter; Hollingworth describes a dialect singer, Joseph Coupe, who sang his wares by a crossroads, selling printed texts to those who had listened. Poetry volumes by working-class writers such as Ellen Johnston often included a section of “songs,” with tunes marked, and in case of Chartist hymns and the late-century socialist “chants,” these tunes were intended for communal singing.<sup>14</sup> Oral presentation encouraged humor, and the dialect poems described by Hollingworth often blended self-referential satire with pride in the use of idiosyncratic or clever turns of language.

Not surprisingly writings created with such different purposes in mind were heterogeneous, and, as with the writings of all marginalized groups, the impulses toward reflection, honesty, entertainment, political activism, self-presentation, and the valorizing of one’s culture or group could lead in conflicting directions.

The most immediate motive for working-class writing was to make an argument or support a cause; all of the writers discussed in this special issue, with the possible exception of Margaret Lahee, wrote in defense of proximate as well as long-term reforms. The Chartist poets, of course, advocated working-class political emancipation through moral and, on occasion, physical force; Thomas Wheeler wrote to encourage better-planned efforts at revolution; Elizabeth Storie wished legal reforms to enable a poor woman to redress, and even revenge, her wrongs; Mary Prince sought the end of slavery; the mining poets variously celebrated the inventiveness and courage needed for mining and lamented its dangers (a somewhat mixed message); and dialect poets, among other topics, dramatized the distress of Lancashire textile workers during economic downturns.

Working-class writing was uniformly reformist—and in some cases revolutionary—in its appeal for broad equality along lines of class, and, on occasion, gender, region, and race. Yet the extremely class-bound nature of their own experiences may have made it more difficult for working-class writers to imagine the details of a classless society, or even a substantially more egalitarian one. Moreover the immediate circumstances of publication—most often the broadside, periodical, or volume issued by subscrip-

tion—were not as conducive to extended thought experiments or unorthodox creative visions. With the exception of such works as Thomas Cooper’s *The Purgatory of Suicides*, Ernest Jones’s *The Revolt of Hindustan*, and Mary Smith’s *Progress*, most working-class writing of the period is thus not utopian in the full sense. Even when several hundred literary utopias appeared in the late nineteenth century, few of these were by working-class writers, and few attempted to think through the practical consequences or impediments to true classlessness. In 1887 William Morris explained why he felt impelled to imagine a “Society of the Future”:

One reason which will make some of you think [my utopian visions] strange is a sad and shameful one. I have always belonged to the well-to-do classes, and was born into luxury, so that necessarily I ask much more of the future than many of you do; and the first of all my visions, and that which colours all my others, is of a day when that misunderstanding will no longer be possible; when the words poor and rich, though they will still be found in our dictionaries, will have lost their old meaning.<sup>15</sup>

The obverse, of course, was that those less privileged could protest keenly felt deprivations, but the forms of fulfillment possible in the absence of such constraints seemed incomprehensibly alien.

In some broader sense, the literature of a disadvantaged class is always a political act, even if unconsciously so—evoking the possibility of self-stereotyping, or alternately, of presenting a sanitized image to the outer world. These tensions existed both in speaking to one’s own class, and to outsiders; if one flatters one’s audience by presenting a sanitized view of their emotions, will they be more likely to purchase one’s wares? And similarly, could one risk denigrating the behaviors of one’s own class—say through admonishing one’s fellow workers for ignorance, violence, or internal dissensions—without diminishing one’s cause to those eager to resist it? As a representative member of the working classes, one might wish to put forward the most exemplary image possible, buttressing claims for worker education and electoral rights; such an idealized image could be undermined by the satire, self-directed humor, comic stereotypes, and admonitions appropriate for an audience of peers. Moreover as writers sought to celebrate their own distinctive speech and culture, or working people’s powers of endurance, they might unintentionally confirm satisfaction with the status quo. Alternatively, without truthfulness of expression, could there be a worthwhile literature? A working-class writer’s achievements were themselves an argument for equality, yet no significant literature could result from formulaic oversimplifications, even in support of a cause.

Working-class writers negotiated the problem of a double audience in different ways. Janet Hamilton’s writings were un-self-consciously ad-

dressed to members of her own class, but their topics—education, the paradoxes of “progress,” a shared Covenanter past—were of broader and regional interest. Wheeler’s serial novel was addressed to his fellow Chartists and insurgents; Elizabeth Storie and Mary Prince addressed their appeals to those who might have power to influence public opinion or alter laws—that is, those of superior social status. Other working-class writers wrote to convey the habits and practices of a way of life and to increase respect for those, such as miners, whose courage and labor had been wrongly overlooked. Dialect and other regional writings looked both inward and outward, inwardly to foster a sense of identity and pride, and outwardly, to represent the historicity and uniqueness of their subculture. Despite these multiple audiences, most nineteenth-century working-class writers, though happy for any receptive readers, seem to have directed their writings first and primarily to members of their own class.

A second urgent motive for working-class writers was the desire to preserve “people’s history,” including customs, ideals, or viewpoints seldom validated in more hegemonic accounts. Victorian historiography tended toward political history, affirming “leaders” and “heroes”; to working-class writers, then, fell the task of documenting the social history of daily life—local speech, humor, hardships, and sources of pride. Thus Thomas Wheeler records the events in the last years of Chartism from the perspective of a frustrated participant, Janet Hamilton celebrates the stoicism of the rural Scots of her grandparents’ generation who survived the “great famine” of 1739–40, and the tin miner John Harris memorializes a miner who plunged to his death from a conveyer belt to enable his son to reach the mine’s surface. Working-class autobiographies contributed to “people’s history,” as Mary Prince’s story is that of many slaves forced to labor in Bermuda, Turks Island, and Antigua, and Storie’s tale of travails exposes the consequences of unchecked medical malpractice and a closed legal system. Dialect literature by definition preserved as well as parodied certain forms of speech and character, but it also recorded the history of mechanization and the cotton famine from the perspective of those who endured its downside. Its emphasis on family affection (“Welcome Bonny Bird”) and loyalty (“Come Whoam”) even in their absence affirmed the social cohesiveness which would remain needed even, or especially, under hoped-for better conditions. If there remains a tension between social critique and the affirmation of a present culture built in part from adversity, these two strains reinforce one another, as working-class writers discern Blochian “anticipations” in the present moment, heralding the day when England’s people may “toil no more.”

A third motive for working-class writing was the deep sense of power and fulfillment found in expression—a central impulse for all literature, of course, but especially prized in the face of attempted silencing. For the subaltern to speak was at once to affirm an individual, unique self of the kind exhibited by middle-class authors, and to attain the status of representative, as one able to speak for others who could not. Each of these writers affirmed kinship with a “fellowship of humanity” beyond class, formed through a sense of identity with other writers; Thomas Cooper recalled his first experience of Byron, whose poetry “seemed to create a new sense within me. I wanted more poetry to read from that time; but could get hold of none that thrilled through my nature like Byron’s.”<sup>16</sup> Sanders remarks that such accounts place “a much greater emphasis on the affective and sensual pleasures afforded by poetry. . . . The combined effort of these heightened emotional and sensual experiences is to effect a total, qualitative transformation of consciousness—Cooper’s ‘new sense’ of being.”<sup>17</sup> If humbler writers could scarcely claim a “transformation of consciousness,” their identification with the aesthetic values embodied in language brought a sense of transcendence; the elderly Campbell remembered that as a frightened seven-year-old she was forced to sleep in a dingy back corner, “me that had such a strange love for the beautiful.”<sup>18</sup> Drawn to Milton, the crippled Ruth Wills took pride in her experience of sublimity, as recorded in “The Seen and the Unseen.”<sup>19</sup> One of the more extreme examples of open pride in her compositions was Ellen Johnston’s self-fashioning as “Queen of the Penny Post”—the highest accolade she could imagine. Though working-class authorship served many ends, for many of these writers, at least, the Kantian imperative that the aesthetic must function as an end in itself affirmed their selfhood, calling them to a vocation beyond uncongenial manual labor and empowering them to use their linguistic gifts to proclaim personal and communal truths.

All of the essays in this special issue consider lesser-known or (in the case of dialect poetry) otherwise significant topics. The first three center on Chartist poetry and fiction, the next two on poetry written by miners and on early Victorian women working-class autobiographers, and the final two on dialect literature.

In “‘Moral Force’ and ‘Physical Force’ in Chartist Poetry: John Mitchell and David Wright of Aberdeen,” Gustav Klaus examines the careers of two poets well known in their day but not among the “labour laureates” most often considered by prior critics. He reviews some recent claims of such critics and tests their accuracy against the poetic output of these two writers from the same city, one a highly visible proponent of “moral force” (peaceful



reform) and the other of “physical force” (armed revolution). Interestingly he finds that few generalizations about Chartist poetry entirely fit the work of either poet, and demonstrates how their different intentions shape their representations of poverty, conflict, and a possible more egalitarian future.

In “Chartist Threads: Working-Class Women’s Writing in the Radical Periodical Press,” Meagan Timney examines several women Chartist writers who published in the *Pioneer*, *Northern Star*, and *People’s Journal* between 1834 and 1850. The “Bondswoman” urges women to demand “their long-suppressed rights,” the “Mechanic’s Wife” proposes a “Ladies Union” to enable women to uplift themselves and the nation, and E. H., Saunderson, and “Marie” variously support populist religion, affirm the views of working-class advocates such as Joseph Rayner Stephens, and employ poetic metaphors, as in “Marie’s” “The Tree of Liberty,” with clear revolutionary import. She finds that Chartist women poets represent themselves as maternal presences within the wider “families” of the Chartist movement and nation, thus buttressing their tacit claims for full inclusion.

In “Chartist Revolutionary Strategy in Thomas Wheeler’s *Sunshine and Shadow*,” Margaret Loose explores the political implications of Wheeler’s novel, published serially in the *Northern Star* in 1849–50, shortly after Parliament’s final rejection of the Great Charter. Wheeler presents the final stages of Chartism through the experiences of his protagonist, a militant Chartist who follows the movement to Birmingham and London. She discusses the purposes behind Wheeler’s creation of a mostly sympathetic hero, who nonetheless at one point commits theft, and who is admittedly an inattentive husband and father as he serves his cause. Interestingly, however, Wheeler’s novel includes a feminist episode in which the hero meets a titled woman who has been forced into a repellent marriage in order to enrich her brother, and his final remarks on Chartist tactics and organization, though disillusioned, contain the germ of hope that, with better preparation, a renewed people’s movement might seize their historical moment to achieve a successful revolution.

In “Modes and Methods of Mining Poetry,” Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge explore a subgenre of working-class poetry quite different from that of the Chartists. They contrast the poems of James Harris, a former Cornish tin miner who published prolifically between 1853 and 1884, and Joseph Skipsey, who spent childhood and adolescence working in the coal mines of northeast England, and whose 1886 *Carols from the Coalfields* explores the perils of a mining family’s life. Harris takes pride in describing the skilled labor needed for extracting tin, reminds his readers of the debt owed to their labor, and celebrates the courage of those who performed

feats of heroism to save others; Skipsey’s lyrics pay tribute to the miners’ song traditions while presenting the fear and physical need which drive them to send their children into hard labor. Both present “the need to have manual labor understood and valued, validating the lives and cultures of the laborers who produce it, who know all too well “what coals . . . cost.”

In “Under Physical Siege: Early Victorian Autobiographies of Working-Class Women,” I examine two of the earliest known memoirs by Victorian working-class women, *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Storie* and *The History of Mary Prince*. Both women wrote in response to violent assaults on their persons, and with a clear political purpose—in Storie’s case, the assault was more covert, medical malpractice followed by poisoning in order to conceal evidence, and, in the case of Mary Prince, enslavement, sexual assaults, physically taxing work, floggings, and beatings, limiting her capacity to work by her 40s. Storie, a seamstress, recounts in elevated and legally precise language her ultimately unsuccessful struggle to obtain compensation for her medical care, and Prince’s oral narrative emphasizes the emotional pain of her forced parting from her parents, her employers’ sexual, verbal, and physical abuse, and her loneliness and anxiety at her forced separation from her husband. Both women required and received the aid of others in bringing their words to the attention of a wider audience; and, to some extent, each achieved her purpose in exposing evil and, in the case of Mary Prince, in contributing to the publicity which forced the abolition of slavery in British possessions.

The final two essays discuss dialect writing. In “She’s a gradely cant owd lass’: Margaret Rebecca Lahee’s Dialect Writings,” Taryn Hakala explores the difficulties faced by the sole known female practitioner of this male-identified genre, excluded from the usual means of publicizing her work through recitations or membership in the Manchester Literary Society, and described by her fellow dialect poets and contemporary critics in gender-stereotyped language. She discusses Lahee’s “Betty O’ Yep” stories, featuring a lively old woman narrator whose tales of excess, trickery, and conviviality bring good cheer to her working-class audiences.

Finally, in “From Voice to Print: Lancashire Dialect Verse, 1800–1870,” Brian Hollingworth provides a history of the most prominent form of dialect poetry, detailing its origins, chronology, chief promoters, writers and publicists, and some reasons for its popularity. He points out common patterns found in its “greatest hits”—among them “Owd Ned’s a Rare Strong Chap,” “Jone o’ Grinfilt,” “Th’ Owdham Weaver,” and “Come Whoam to Thi Childer and Me”—and discusses the reciprocal relationship between oral and written dialect compositions, and the extent to which dialect verse still maintains its presence today.

## NOTES

- 1 Florence Boos, "The Homely Muse in Her Diurnal Setting: The Periodical Poems of 'Marie,' Janet Hamilton, and Fanny Forrester," *Victorian Poetry* 39.2 (2001): 262–69. Vol. 1 was edited by Benjamin Parsons and vol. 2 by James Ewing Ritchie.
- 2 Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Politics, Aesthetics, History* (Cambridge U. Press, 2009), 72.
- 3 David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 9, 10. Some of the few remaining illiterate in 1900 might have been older persons denied all formal education when young. In Scotland, the illiteracy rates for males declined from 12% in 1855 to 2% in 1900, and for women from 22% in 1855 to 2% in 1900.
- 4 Vincent, *Rise of Mass Literacy*, 14.
- 5 The literacy of the period was nonetheless limited; some could sign their names but not read, or read and sign their names but not otherwise write, or, in some cases, read but not sign their names. In the face of widespread limitations, each working-class writer was thus to some degree an exception, more educated, gifted, reflective, and/or ambitious than many of his or her fellows.
- 6 Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian Britain* (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996); J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning and the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).
- 7 John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class, 1790–1940*, 3 vols. (New York UP, 1984–89), I:xxx.
- 8 John Goodridge, *Nineteenth-Century Labouring Class Poets, 1700–1800*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005).
- 9 For a discussion of the history of ideas about literacy, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. (Oxford U. Press, 1985).
- 10 Frederic Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11.1 (1979): 41–73.
- 11 Elizabeth Campbell (1804–78) was the author of *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1875).
- 12 Vincent, *Rise of Mass Literacy*, 89–147, chap. 4, "Reading and Writing," and chap. 5, "The Boundaries of Literacy."
- 13 Vincent, *Rise of Mass Literacy*, 129. His further point is that as newspapers became more profitable, their proprietors were less inclined to court prosecution; he cites a Parliamentary Select Committee which noted that "Capitalists will not embark on an illegal proceeding."
- 14 Socialist song books often included suggested tunes. In "Morris's 'Chants' and Socialist Culture," Chris Waters records the practices of meetings of the Bristol Socialist Society, where "The Message of the March Wind" was sung to the tune of "Teddy O'Neill" [*Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, eds. Florence Boos and Carole Silver (U. Missouri Press, 1990), 142].
- 15 William Morris, "The Society of the Future," in A. L. Morton, ed., *The Political Writings of William Morris* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 190–91.
- 16 Cited in Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism*, 9.
- 17 Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism*, 13.
- 18 "I could not tell how miserable I felt in that strange ugly hovel—me that had such a strange love for the beautiful," Campbell, in Florence Boos, ed., *Victorian Working-Class Women Poets: An Anthology* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008), 137.
- 19 Ruth Wills, in Boos, ed., *Victorian Working-Class Women Poets*, 227–28: "So waited she yearning with boundless desires, / but for purer inspirings, for holier fires: . . . / Nor in vain was her quest, nor unanswered her prayer, / A Presence divine became manifest there; / The forest-boughs felt it, the silence around / Was broken by something far sweeter than sound . . ."