

Introduction

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This volume gathers new research from scholars investigating working class writing from the past three centuries, offering a sampling of 25 representative areas of study to give a conspectus of current critical thinking and research in the field. Perhaps the most straightforward definition of working class writing¹ is that it is writing produced by individuals who have not enjoyed social, economic, and educational advantages. By this reckoning the first English working class writer would also be the first English poet whose name we know, Caedmon (d. 680 CE), an uneducated stockman of Whitby Abbey whose vernacular “Hymn” to the Creator survives in Bede’s *History* (248–51). Class is of course an evolving and elastic concept, a moveable feast. Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* observes that the term first came into English in the sixteenth century in its Latin form, “classis,” as “a general term for a division or group,” and in its English form in the seventeenth century, when it “acquired a special association with education,” a significant association in the present context. Williams dates its modern usage, describing specific social groups including the working class, to around 1770–1840, “the period of the Industrial Revolution and its decisive reorganisation of society” (*Keywords* 60–61). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), defining “working class” as those who work for wages and “their families” and are “typically considered the lowest class in terms of economic and social status,” gives as its first usage example a disapproving comment from 1735 about the stage being “a very improper Diversion to be planted among the Working Class of people” (*OED*, “working class”). Definition and example both imply a patrician view, and this sense of a category being imposed from above remains a central one. But as almost every chapter in this book witnesses, such class labels may be self-defining as well as restricting, and can provide an individual or a group of writers with a potentially empowering sense of identity. Throughout the history of working class writing we can find individuals and groups “writing

back,” adapting given class categories and creating their own senses of class traditions.

We follow the *OED* definition in the present volume to the degree that we draw our texts and topics from the past three centuries, the modern period, although we recognize that there were writers of lower class origin in the medieval and early modern period, notably in the socially wide range of political voices that welled up during the brief life of the Commonwealth. We have divided our study into three sections, broadly representing the past three centuries (the third section ends with some twenty-first century, forward-facing perspectives on our field of research). However, we adopt a broader sense of what “working class” writing might mean than the dictionary definition might suggest, purposely casting our net wide. Thus the writers discussed range from the unknown, almost anonymous women whose appeals to the Foundling Hospital are the topic of Jennie Batchelor’s opening chapter, to figures like William Cobbett, famous and powerful enough to be caricatured and parodied, as closely examined by Ian Haywood in Chapter 11. The range of meanings in the floating signifier “working class,” evident in the contrast between patrician perspectives and “writing back,” is the central critical dynamic addressed by the volume.

A key issue in this dynamic is of course our own roles as readers, consumers, and mediators of this writing. The very act of assembling and critically discussing writers using a category such as “working class writing,” necessary as it may be to the task of recovering a still neglected tradition, colors perceptions of it, and also, of course, affects the writers themselves. To take a well-known example, how does someone who has been patronized (in the original sense of receiving the patronage of a powerful figure), published and presented to the public as “The Northamptonshire Peasant,” cope with the expectations and implications of such a role? The poet John Clare (discussed by Gary Harrison in Chapter 12), who was so-termed, found it very difficult to adapt to such a role. Clare was a gardener, a lime-burner, and sometime militia-man who found it extremely difficult to settle to a role in life before he became a poet. He was rather well-educated by the standards of village culture in his time, taught to secondary level at a generally progressive “church porch” school; later he taught local children mathematics. His recent ancestors included a schoolmaster and several parish officials, literate individuals (Bate, *John Clare* 9–30; Clare, *By Himself* 2–8, 73–5, 79, 93–6, 185). The shoes, then, did not fit, but Clare still had to walk in them to reach his readership. There were many others like him: the “Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1900” names

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over 2,000 published laboring class poets in the two centuries in which Clare lived (Goodridge, *Database*). How did he, how did they, cope?

Caedmon's hymn came to him, according to Bede, in a vision or a dream (248–50). Thirteen centuries later, the Leeds-born working class poet Tony Harrison (discussed by Jack Windle in Chapter 22) offered this short poem, "Heredity," on his own emergent "talent":

*How you became a poet's a mystery!
 Wherever did you get your talent from?
 I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry—
 one was a stammerer, the other dumb.*
 (Harrison, *Selected* 111)

The amazed interlocutor in these lines may stand for all the ideological and psychological pressures that warn the poet that by writing poetry he is stepping out of his class role and regarded as a sort of freak. The "mystery" begins the familiar process of othering, restriction, and exoticization that routinely afflicts writers of lower class origin. Merely asking the question of where the poet's "talent" comes from implicitly reduces what has invariably been a long, painful acquisition of knowledge and skill, to a matter of genetics, sheer luck. "A poet is born, not made," John Clare's grave-stone declares, regurgitating a debatable classical tag (Bate, *John Clare* 544). Harrison's poet-speaker's response is both defensive and defiant, matching mystification with paradox, puzzle for puzzle. Working class writing comes both from silence (dumbness), and from stammering, which Harrison in his poem "On Not being Milton," uses a medieval image to describe: "The stutter of the scold out of the branks of condescension." The *scald*, or poet, stutteringly struggles to escape the *scold's* bridle, breaking free of a device cruelly designed to silence women, here used as a metaphor for a mind-forged implement, an ideological restraint, a social silencing (Harrison, *Selected* 112). As Harrison's mordant lines suggest, working class writing is rarely received other than in partial or contingent ways, its mediators – patrons, publishers, consumers and scholars, even family and friends – repeating familiar patterns of limiting assumptions about what it is, and what its producers are and can be. Thus its recovery is not simply a matter of rediscovering and disseminating the materials in an accurate and accessible way (though this is certainly a vital task). It is equally important to seek nuanced understandings of the cultures, mechanisms, and ideologies of its production and reception.

The commonest modes of working class writing, poetry and lifewriting, evidence both patterns of limiting assumptions in their production, and

modes of resistance. From the early eighteenth century onward, poets of humble origin were encouraged to write about their own working lives, and were presented to the reading public by their patrons and publishers in ways that foregrounded a class-based biographical context. The phenomenon of the “peasant-poet” was perceived as a species of natural genius, a kind of home-grown noble savage, whose poetry miraculously emerged from a rustic lifestyle, specifically without benefit of formal training and thus untainted with classicism or learned sophistry. Steve Van-Hagen in Chapter 4 offers a typology and case study of this ideology of “natural genius” and its variants, closely examining its development through the eighteenth-century period. The archetypal figure was the Wiltshire farm worker Stephen Duck (1705–56), who was prompted by his early patrons to write a poem “on his own situation,” resulting in his famous poem, *The Thresher’s Labour* (1730). Thus was born the limiting expectation that working class writers wrote about work, although Duck also included much else of interest in his debut volume, and later. His fame and success, led by the patronage of Queen Caroline, inspired many other writers as well as a slew of parodies and opportunistic imitations of various colors. In Chapter 2 Stephen Duck’s biographer Jennifer Batt discusses these consequences, and the emergence of the “school” of Duck, while William J. Christmas in Chapter 3 puts Duck at the head of his analysis of genre and sociability.

To try and live out the fantasies of the reading classes was difficult, involving as it did a charade of unlearned innocence and a requirement never to cease being an unspoiled “peasant.” Clare’s patron Lord Exeter, for example, granted the poet a pension that was specifically designed to equal two days wages a week, with the implication that his “peasant” field-work would continue to balance and inform his poetic labors (Bate, *John Clare* 160). Merryn and Raymond Williams describe the cognitive dissonance involved in this, a “cultural model based on so deep a contradiction” (Williams and Williams, “Introduction” 5). Working class lifewriting emerged partly as a form of authentication for this poetical charade, though like the poetry that it often accompanied it also enabled self-expression, albeit of a sometimes cautious kind. Volumes of poems were often prefaced with brief autobiographical statements. Their focus on the simple, uneducated life the author had led signalled a further limiting assumption: that of the humble poet as a potentially deserving charity case. Jennie Batchelor in Chapter 1 and Scott McEathron in Chapter 10 consider what was involved in using written language to obtain such charity, in the areas, respectively, of child adoption and writerly financial support. Charity was very much the model Robert Southey used for the “uneducated poets,” as he called

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them in his account of his selection of them in 1832 (Southey, *Lives*). His unfair description of Ann Yearsley (a poet discussed by Steve Van-Hagen in Chapter 4 and Kerri Andrews in Chapter 6) as an impoverished and mentally unbalanced failure in later life, a picture much at variance with recent scholarly accounts (Waldron, *Lactilla*; Andrews, *Ann Yearsley*), reflects his horror at her “ungrateful” rebellion against her patron Hannah More in 1785, and seems designed to punish her rebellion and damage her reputation.

By contrast Southey seems to admire the entrepreneurial spirit of the “Water Poet” and boatman John Taylor, a contemporary of Shakespeare and possibly the model for the garrulous, opportunistic boatman in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999; Southey, *Lives*; Norman and Stoppard, *Shakespeare* 67). At the time Southey was writing we can detect a general change in the limiting assumptions of working class writers, from the “peasant-poet” and the charity case, to the Victorian ideal of the enterprising and energetic self-made man (Winks, *Lives*; Smiles, *Self-Help*). The “heroic workers” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century radical culture further valorized and gave voice to the working class writer, but the idealization and the co-option of their writings for specific political purposes, especially in the official culture of the Russian and Eastern European pre-1989 states, led to pressures against and consequent neglect of other kinds of working class writing, such as spiritual poetry and aesthetic concerns. And if British postwar culture, educational reform, and the welfare state, made it easier for working class writers to find success, acceptance, and increased freedom in subject matter, still the exceptionalist view, Harrison’s “condescension,” and limited expectations predominated. The “peasant-poet” model, Williams and Williams wrote in 1986, “did not end in Clare’s lifetime.” It remained, even “as we write, and even in some of its original forms, unfinished” (6).

A recurrent tension in much of the work discussed in the collection is between whether working class writers felt and represented themselves to be part of a community, based on occupation, habitation, or other categories of affiliation, or as isolated and apart from their social or cultural milieu. The burgeoning labor movements of the nineteenth century, especially Chartism, often provided writers the opportunity for explicit articulations of a “class consciousness.” We see in Mike Sanders’s discussion of Thomas Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides* (Chapter 14), that the best such writers saw their work as far from being simply propaganda. Indeed, if writers emphasized their affiliation with any occupational grouping, it was most often that of their fellow writers. The desire to understand themselves as

part of a broader contemporary community or historical tradition of artists is a thread uniting many of the writers discussed in these chapters. While the myth of the isolated, impoverished genius has continued to be pervasive, our understanding of the many varieties of networks in which working class writers participated continues to grow and is widely reflected in the contributions to the volume. Kirstie Blair's chapter on newspaper culture evidences some of the new resources becoming available to working class writers in the nineteenth-century period.

One way in which working class authors affirmed their fellowship as writers was through the exercise of formal skills and expertise, as well as explicit literary addresses and intertextual allusions, paying homage to esteemed forebears and demonstrating their artistic *bona fides*. Focusing on eighteenth-century writers, William J. Christmas in Chapter 3 considers how the use of the verse epistle helped to create and represent links among laboring class poets, while Kerri Andrews (Chapter 6) shows how Ann Yearsley used the more "elevated" elegiacal mode both to connect with and to differentiate herself from an esteemed English tradition harkening back to John Milton. Gary Harrison (Chapter 12) explores John Clare's engagement with poetic modalities to represent rurality, in particular the idyll, a recurring challenge for working class writers, especially those who knew something of the real rural world like Clare. While shorter lyric forms were often preferred for very practical reasons by laboring class poets, laboring class writers did not shy away from experimentation with longer forms, even the epic (as explored by Mike Sanders in Chapter 14), and more commonly the novel, which begins to overtake poetry as a preferred form for capturing working class experience in the modern period. The modern working class novel is examined in several chapters devoted to twentieth-century literature, including H. Gustav Klaus's study on tramp-ing (Chapter 18), Nicola Wilson's discussion of serial fiction by Ethel Carnie Holdsworth (Chapter 19), Anthony Cartwright's study of Alexander Baron and urban masculinity (Chapter 20) and Lisa Sheppard and Aidan Byrne's examination of postmodern experimentation in the contemporary Welsh working class novel (Chapter 23).

The question of form in working class literature extends beyond traditional genres, but may incorporate mixed media works such as song, discussed in Rod Hermeston's chapter on northeast music hall culture (Chapter 17), or film, which has profoundly influenced modern writing. Indeed, the role of film, and before that, of drama, in shaping working class identity could form the subject of an entirely separate collection of essays. Word limits precluded our ability to commission additional essays

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that would treat this area; nevertheless the essays in the volume begin to gesture toward the role of theater, film, radio, television, and new media.

One literary mode pervading both poetry and prose is lifewriting, especially autobiography of various kinds. Such writings often reflect the tensions and contradictions of writers whose writerly identity is always qualified by their class status and often other markers of social identity. This is especially prevalent for women writers, who navigate the triple stresses of an artistic calling along with inherited gender and class obligations. Mary Collier's elegant repartee to Stephen Duck's complaints about male worker's travails, *The Woman's Labour* (1739), vividly represents women workers' "triple shift" of caring for children, managing the home and housework, and laboring outside the family home. Men worked hard outside the home too, but could anticipate periods of rest and familial consolations that are, even today, unavailable to women who continue to be primary caregivers to children and perform the uncompensated work of cooking and cleaning for their families while men are "recovering" from a day in the fields or the factory. If it is remarkable that men who performed exhausting manual labor found the energy and inspiration to read and write, it is perhaps miraculous that women, who had to balance these further responsibilities, could do so, and did so with such skill and in such numbers. Kaye Kosick on the prodigiously talented, self-taught, tambour frame embroiderer Janet Hamilton (Chapter 13), Florence S. Boos on Victorian working class women's lifewriting (Chapter 15), Nicola Wilson on the achievements of Ethel Carnie Holdsworth (Chapter 19), and Sharon Ouditt on the lifewriting of Kathleen Dayus (Chapter 21), help to paint a fuller picture of the range of challenges that working class women writers powerfully overcame, vividly representing their realities and often building the groundwork for political change.

The expressions of identity generated from regional and national affiliations, and the linguistic manifestations of this variety, especially through dialect, are another unifying theme of the collection. The concept of "Britishness" may be as contested as that of "class" and, as we have discovered both through our own research and in working with the contributors, working class writing in Scotland, Ulster, and Wales could be regarded as traditions in their own right. While physical hardship and the "pursuit of knowledge under difficulties" might be common themes, the differences in history, economy, education, and language meant that the "transnational" Northern Irish writers considered by Jennifer Orr in Chapter 9, figures like Alexander Wilson (discussed by Gerard Carruthers in Chapter 5), Janet Hamilton (Chapter 13), and the modern Scottish writers of Corey Gibson's

essay (Chapter 23), often forged very different paths from their English contemporaries. Our contributors on Welsh traditions are also strongly alert to both the separateness of Welsh working class writing (emphasized by Mary-Ann Constantine in her discussion of Iolo Morganwg and his contemporaries in Chapter 7), and the need to combat limiting stereotypes and to acknowledge the new realities of postindustrial, bilingual Welsh writing (Aidan Byrne and Lisa Sheppard in Chapter 24).

One stereotype of working class writing is that it is fixed in its location and local in outlook. This can of course be true: John Clare, describing a visit to Wisbech for a job interview, notes that he had “never been above 8 miles from home in my life” (*By Himself* 70). But many writers traveled widely, including shipbuilders like the Scottish poet John Macleay Peacock, who lived and worked on Tyneside and Merseyside, in Ireland, and in Spain, attending the First Chartist Convention in London for good measure (Goodridge, *Database*); or sailors and migrants, like the two poets discussed by Franca Dellarosa and by Gerard Carruthers in Chapters 8 and 5, Edward Rushton and Alexander Wilson, both notably cosmopolitan and “transnational” figures, the latter indeed a major figure in American as well as Scottish literary history. The global dimension of working class writing is also apparent when we examine the complex intersections of race and class, evident in Rushton’s conversion from a sailor on a slave ship to a vociferous abolitionist, or the nuanced responses to race and society of the twentieth-century authors Sam Selvon and Tony Harrison, discussed by Jack Windle in Chapter 22.

The final chapter in this collection, by the young digital humanities scholar Cole Crawford, draws attention in its advocacy of new methods and opportunities to the question of theoretical approaches. On this subject we have no party line, the 25 essays each taking up their own position in order to offer what John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon characterize, in their collection of essays on *New Working-class Studies*, as an “intellectual meeting ground” for different approaches (1). The research is often grounded in archival studies, based on the recovery of often rare and fragile work, but the state of the archive and its digitization has had considerable impact, and Crawford offers new ways of working that are both enriching to our knowledge of these writers and this tradition, and – in their integral interactivity – widely democratic in character.

The recovery and reappraisal of working class writing is a large, complex, and continuing task, involving archival work, editing and explication, scholarly presentation of various sorts, and a critical evaluation and re-evaluation both of the material itself and of our own roles as mediators,

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readers, and consumers of culture. It takes on a special critical urgency in a period in which traditional working class cultures in Britain and the industries that bred them are rapidly disappearing. It is a bitter irony that while the widespread nostalgia for such cultures has become increasingly commodified, especially as an element of heritage culture, the contemporary working class itself has grown ever more culturally and politically disparaged and unvalued (as scorchingly exposed in Owen Jones's book, *Chavs*). The first responsibility of any history of working class writing, then, must be to recover these writings with a keen alertness to the politics of class and of cultural appropriation. The search for "authenticity" should not eclipse such important critical topics as self-presentation, patronage, the relationships between fields of identity such as class, race, region, and gender, the growth of writing communities and new publishing outlets, and (not least), more formalistic question concerning literary and cultural value in the texts examined. While the present volume cannot cover more than a fraction of the rich mass of working class writing, it has been shaped and developed with these critical questions very much in mind.

NOTE

1. Contributors use the terms "working class" and "laboring class" writing/writers flexibly throughout the volume.