A HISTORY OF BRITISH WORKING CLASS LITERATURE

A History of British Working Class Literature examines the rich contributions of working class writers in Great Britain from 1700 to the present. Since the early eighteenth century, the phenomenon of working class writing has been recognized, but almost invariably coopted in some ultimately distorting manner, whether as examples of "natural genius," a Victorian self-improvement ethic, or an aspect of the heroic workers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century radical culture. The present work contrastingly applies a wide variety of interpretive approaches to this literature. Essays on more familiar topics, such as the agrarian idyll of John Clare, are mixed with entirely new areas in the field, such as working class women's life narratives. This authoritative and comprehensive *History* explores a wide range of genres, such as travel writing, the verse epistle, the elegy, and novels, while covering aspects of Welsh, Scottish, Ulster/Irish, and transatlantic perspectives.

JOHN GOODRIDGE has been researching laboring class poetry, John Clare studies, and related fields for the past three decades. He is Vice-President of the John Clare Society and a Fellow of the English Association. He cofounded the Robert Bloomfield Society and the Thomas Chatterton Society, edits the Database of Labouring-Class Poets, and is the general editor of six volumes of laboring class poetry.

BRIDGET KEEGAN has worked on British laboring class poetry for nearly 30 years and has written and edited numerous publications on the topic. She is Professor of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University.

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JOHN GOODRIDGE
Nottingham Trent University
BRIDGET KEEGAN
Creighton University

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Contents

List of Figures *page* viii
List of Contributors ix
Foreword xvii
Donna Landry
Acknowledgments xxiii

Introduction 1
John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan

1 When "Bread Depends on Her Character": The Problem of Laboring Class Subjectivity in the Foundling Hospital Archive 10
Jennie Batchelor

2 "Stirr'd up by Emulation of the Famous Mr. Duck": Laboring Class Poetry in the 1730s 24
Jennifer Batt

3 The Verse Epistle and Laboring Class Literary Sociability from Duck to Burns 39
William J. Christmas

4 "But Genius Is the Special Gift of God!": The Reclamation of "Natural Genius" in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Verses of Ann Yearsley and James Woodhouse 55
Steve Van-Hagen

5 Alexander Wilson: The Rise and Fall and Rise of a Laboring Class Writer 70
Gerard Carruthers

6 Neither Mute nor Inglorious: Ann Yearsley and Elegy 85
Kerri Andrews

7 "British Bards": The Concept of Laboring Class Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Wales 101
Mary-Ann Constantine

8 "Behold in These Coromantees / The Fate of an Agonized World": Edward Rushton's Transnational Radicalism 116
Franca Dellarosa

9 Transnational Ulster and Laboring Class Self-Fashioning 130
Jennifer Orr

10 Working Class Poetry and the Royal Literary Fund: Two Case Studies in Patronage 149
Scott McEathron

11 The Life of William Cobbett: Caricature, Hauntology, and the Impossibility of Radical Life Writing in the Romantic Period 176
Ian Haywood

12 John Clare's Agrarian Idyll: A Confluence of Pastoral and Georgic 195
Gary Harrison

13 "And aft Thy Dear Doric aside I Hae Flung, to Busk oot My Sang wi' the Prood Southron Tongue": The Antiphonal Muse in Janet Hamilton's Poetics 208
Kaye Kossick

14 "The Guilty Game of Human Subjugation": Religion as Ideology in Thomas Cooper's *The Purgatory of Suicides* 226
Mike Sanders

15 At the Margins of Print: Life Narratives of Victorian Working Class Women 248
Florence S. Boos

16 The Newspaper Press and the Victorian Working Class Poet 264
Kirstie Blair

17 Tensions, Transformations, and Local Identity: The Evolving Meanings of Nineteenth-Century Tyneside Dialect Songs 281
Rod Hermeston

18 On the Road: All Manner of Tramps in English and Scottish Writing from the 1880s to the 1920s 296
H. Gustav Klaus

19 Ethel Carnie Holdsworth: Genre, Serial Fiction, and Popular Reading Patterns 311
Nicola Wilson

20 "The Young Men of the Nation": Alexander Baron and Urban Working Class Masculinity 327
Anthony Cartwright

21 Kathleen Dayus: The Girl from Hockley 339
Sharon Ouditt

22 "It Have a Kind of Communal Feeling with the Working Class and the Spades": Sam Selvon, Tony Harrison, and "Colonization in Reverse" 352
Jack Windle

23 Clannish Confines: The Folk, the Proletariat, and the People in Modern Scottish Literature 367
Corey Gibson

24 A Critical Minefield: The Haunting of the Welsh Working Class Novel 385
Lisa Sheppard and Aidan Byrne

25 Transforming Working Class Writers and Writing: Digital Editions, Projects, and Analyses 398
Cole Crawford

Afterword 413
Brian Maidment

Works Cited 419
Index 455

Figures

Plates 1 through 8: James Gillray, *Life of William Cobbett*, 29 September 1809. *page* 168

11.1 Front page of *Proceedings of a General Court Martial*, 1809. 179

11.2 James Gillray, *Smelling Out a Rat, or, The Atheistical Revolutionist Disturbed in His Midnight Calculations*, 3 December 1790. 183

11.3 James Gillray, *Search Night – or – State Watchmen Mistaking Honest Men for Conspirators*, 20 March 1798. 184

11.4 James Gillray, *A Peep into the Cave of Jacobinism*. Published in the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 1 September 1798. 186

11.5 Samuel De Wilde, *The Porcupine's Den*. Published in *The Satirist*, 1 November 1808. 187

Contributors

KERRI ANDREWS is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Edge Hill University. She has published extensively on the writings of Ann Yearsley, including a monograph (2013) and the first scholarly edition of Yearsley's works (2014). She is currently working on two book-length projects: one examining accounts of women's walking, the other considering representations of laboring class poets as poets of place. She is also leading a project to produce the first scholarly edition of the letters of Hannah More.

JENNIE BATCHELOR is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of Kent. She has published widely on eighteenth-century women's writing; representations of gender, work, sexuality, and the body; material culture studies; and the eighteenth-century charity movement. Her most recent monograph, *Women's Work* (2010; paperback, 2014), examined the relationship between manual and intellectual labor in women's writing across the second half of the eighteenth century. She is currently writing a book on the place of *The Lady's Magazine* (1770–1832) in Romantic print culture.

JENNIFER BATT is Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Bristol. She has published on laboring class poets, miscellanies, and magazines and is completing a monograph on the eighteenth-century laboring class poet Stephen Duck.

KIRSTIE BLAIR holds a Chair in English at the University of Strathclyde. She primarily works in the field of Victorian literature and culture, particularly poetry and poetics, and has an increasing interest in Scottish Victorian literature. She has published two monographs, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006) and *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012), and is currently completing a third, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community*, funded by a

Leverhulme Research Fellowship. She has published extensively on working class poetry and coedited *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1780–1900*. From 2016 to 2018, Blair is also CI on a Carnegie Collaborative Grant, "The People's Voice: Scottish Political Poetry, Song and the Franchise, 1832–1918," with colleagues from the University of Glasgow.

FLORENCE S. BOOS is Professor of English at the University of Iowa. She is the editor of *Working-Class Women Poets of Victorian Britain: An Anthology* (2008) and two special issues devoted to Victorian working class writings (*Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 [2001] and *Philological Quarterly* 91, no. 3 [2013]). The general editor of the William Morris Archive, she is the author or editor of several books on Morris, most recently *History and Poetics in the Early Writings of William Morris: 1856–1870* (2015). Her *Victorian Working-Class Women's Autobiographies: The Hard Way Up* is forthcoming in 2017.

AIDAN BYRNE is Course Leader in English at the University of Wolverhampton. He holds a PhD in Welsh literature and has published on masculinity and extreme politics in Welsh 1930s literature, Welsh travel literature in the nineteenth century, the uses of jazz in contemporary fiction, and philosophy in popular culture. He is currently working on politicians' creative fictions, Welsh Appalachia, and comparative modernisms in Irish and Welsh literatures. He tweets on academic matters as @plashingvole.

GERARD CARRUTHERS is Francis Hutcheson Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is General Editor of the Oxford University Press edition of the Works of Robert Burns (2014–) and coeditor, with Liam McIlvanney, of *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (Cambridge, 2012). With Catriona Macdonald and Kirstie Blair, he is an Investigator on the Carnegie Trust–funded project "The People's Voice: Scottish Political Poetry, Song and the Franchise, 1832–1918," which will run from 2016 to 2018 and produce a database, an anthology, and a series of essays based on the material disinterred.

ANTHONY CARTWRIGHT is a teacher and writer. He taught in secondary schools in London and in the Midlands for more than ten years and has lectured in the Creative Writing Masters course at Nottingham Trent University. The author of four novels, he is currently a First Story writer-in-residence in two schools and a visiting lecturer at City University,

London. His most recent book is *Iron Towns* (2016), and a novella, *The Cut*, will be published in 2017.

WILLIAM J. CHRISTMAS, Professor of English at San Francisco State University, is currently coediting, with Kevin Binfield, *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* for the Modern Language Association's Options for Teaching series. His most recent essay, "Lyric Modes: The Soliloquy Poems of Mary Leapor and Ann Yearsley," appeared in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (Spring 2015).

MARY-ANN CONSTANTINE is Reader at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. She works on Welsh and British literature of the long eighteenth century and has also written on travel writing, folk song, authenticity debates, and the Romantic movement in Brittany. Her book on the Welsh stonemason poet Edward Williams, *The Truth against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery*, appeared in 2007. With Dafydd Johnston, she is general editor of the multivolume Wales and the French Revolution series. She is currently leading a four-year research project on the Welsh and Scottish Tour, 1760–1820.

COLE CRAWFORD is completing a master's in English at Oregon State University. He received his undergraduate honors degree from Creighton University with a double major in British literature and computer science. He has created a digital edition of Robert Tannahill's poetry, which includes additional online resources to support the study of Tannahill's life and work. He is collaborating with John Goodridge and his research team to design the online platform for the Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1900. He intends to pursue a career in digital humanities support or software development.

FRANCA DELLAROSA is Associate Professor of English Literature at the Aldo Moro University, Bari, Italy. Her current research interests encompass Romantic drama and theater, laboring class writing, theater and poetry in the age of abolition. Her publications include *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics, 1782–1814* (2014); *Slavery on Stage: Representations of Slavery in British Theatre, 1760–1830s* (2009); and the edited collections *Poetic and Dramatic Forms in British Romanticism* (2006) and *Slavery: Histories, Fictions, Memory, 1760–2007* (2012). She is presently coediting a special issue of the journal *La Questione Romantica*, dedicated to Rushton's Bicentenary (1814–2014).

COREY GIBSON is Lecturer in Modern English Literature at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He was awarded his PhD from the University of Edinburgh in 2012 and is the author of *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics* (2015), which was nominated and shortlisted for the Saltire Research Book of the Year Award, 2015. In 2012 he was awarded the Ross Roy Medal for his research in Scottish literary studies, and in 2013–14 he was a US–UK Fulbright Commission scholar at the University of California, Berkeley.

JOHN GOODRIDGE, FEA, is Emeritus Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University. He has published widely on laboring class, pastoral, and georgic poetry, and his books include *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge, 1994) and *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge, 2013). He is the general editor of the two three-volume series, *English Labouring-Class Poets*, and is general editor and principal writer for the online Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1900.

GARY HARRISON, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of New Mexico, author of *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* (1994) and coeditor of the *Bedford Anthology of World Literature* (2004, 2009), has recently published several articles on John Clare's poetry and poetics, on teaching Romantic and world literature, and on the ecological implications of Romantic poetry. His most recently published essays have focused upon John Clare, William Wordsworth, and the "poetics of acknowledgment"; his chapter entitled "Writing Rural," on teaching the rural tradition in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry, is forthcoming in Christmas and Binfield's *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (MLA).

IAN HAYWOOD is Professor of English Literature at the University of Roehampton, Director of the Centre for Research in Romanticism, and President of the British Association for Romantic Studies. His research focuses on the literature, radical politics, and visual culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His books include *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People* (2004); *Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation 1776–1832* (2006); and *Romanticism and Caricature* (2013). He is also coorganizer of two research networks, "Romantic Illustration Network" and "Anglo-Hispanic Horizons 1780–1840."

ROD HERMESTON has taught English language at several UK universities, most recently at Sheffield Hallam University. He completed his PhD on linguistic identity in nineteenth-century Tyneside dialect songs at the University of Leeds. His research interests include the range of social meanings afforded by the Tyneside dialect in performance and print, with a strong focus on the varied responses of audiences and also readers. He is now extending his research beyond Tyneside song to the language of the wider British music hall. Rod is a former disability journalist and is also researching language and the representation of disabled people.

BRIDGET KEEGAN is Professor of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University. She is editor of volume 2 of *Eighteenth-Century English Laboring-Class Poets 1740–1780* (2003). She is the author of *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837* (2008) and has published numerous essays and edited essay collections about laboring class poetry in general and about individual laboring class poets, in particular, John Clare and Robert Bloomfield. She has collaborated with John Goodridge over the last 25 years on various projects, including a forthcoming monograph entitled *The Occupations of Poetry: Laboring-Class Writers at Work, 1700–1900*.

H. GUSTAV KLAUS is Emeritus Professor of the Literature of the British Isles at the University of Rostock, Germany. He has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century working class writing. His books include *The Literature of Labour* (1985); *Factory Girl* (1998); and *James Kelman* (2005) as well as the coedited collections *British Industrial Fictions* (2000); *"To Hell with Culture"* (2005); and *Ecology and the Literature of the British Left* (2012).

KAYE KOSSICK works for Action Language teaching English to refugees and asylum seekers. Formerly she was Senior Lecturer in English at Northumbria University. Her research interests focus on the task of recuperation and (re)presentation of work by writers hitherto marginalized by the literary hegemony. She has written on gender, class, and nation in poetry by English, Irish, and Scots writers from 1800 to the present moment. Her publications include works on Gerard Manley Hopkins, Scots writer Kathleen Jamie, and the first contemporary critique of the hitherto "disappeared" Irish poet Hannah Morison (fl. 1817). She also edited the extensive mid-nineteenth-century volume (1830–60) in the Pickering and Chatto English Labouring-Class Poets series.

DONNA LANDRY is Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Kent and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. She is the

author, coauthor, or coeditor of six books, including *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* (Cambridge, 1990, 2005); *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature, 1671–1831* (2001); and *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550–1850* (coedited with Gerald MacLean and Joseph P. Ward; Cambridge, 1999, 2006). Her most recent book is *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (2009). Landry is a member of the editorial board of the *John Clare Society Journal* and a founder-member of the Evliya Çelebi Way Project, a team of scholars and equestrians who rode across western Anatolia on horseback following the great Ottoman travel writer Evliya Çelebi, establishing a UNESCO Cultural Route (project website: www.kent.ac.uk/english/evliya/index.html).

BRIAN MAIDMENT is Professor of the History of Print at Liverpool John Moores University and Vice-President of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals. He has written widely on nineteenth-century mass circulation print culture with particular interests in periodicals and illustration. He edited one of the first anthologies of writing by laboring class authors, *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (1987), and has continued to write on related topics. His most recent books are *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order 1820–1850* (2013) and, coedited with Keith Hanley, *Persistent Ruskin* (2013).

SCOTT MCEATHRON is Associate Professor of English at Southern Illinois University. He has written extensively on the relationship between laboring class poetry and canonical Romanticism and, more recently, has published a series of essays on Romantic-era painters and paintings with links to Lamb, Hazlitt, and Keats. He is the editor of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Sourcebook* (2005); *English Labouring-Class Poetry, 1800–1830* (2006); and, with Simon Kövesi, *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community* (Cambridge, 2015).

JENNIFER ORR is Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature at Newcastle University, UK. She has published a monograph and several articles on Irish and Scottish Romantic-period literature, and her recent monograph *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture* (2015), supported by the Irish Research Council, has brought to attention the role of Dissenting literary networks in the conception of transnational identity, particularly the role of laboring class Romantic circles in Ulster (1790–1830). Her current research aims to offer insights about historical migration

across the Atlantic and its effect on national literary consciousness in the early American republic. She is a core contributing member of the *European Dimensions of Popular Print* project, which aims to create a pan-European taxonomy of popular print culture.

SHARON OUDITT is Reader in English at Nottingham Trent University. She has published widely on women writers in the early twentieth century and is the author of *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (1994) and *Women Writers of the First World War: An Annotated Bibliography* (2000). More recently, she has been pursuing an interest in travel writing, as seen in *British Travel Writers in Southern Italy*, and is presently working on an edition of Evelyn Waugh's travel book *Labels*.

MIKE SANDERS is Senior Lecturer in Nineteenth-Century Writing at the University of Manchester. He finds an endless source of fascination and inspiration in the Chartist movement and its literature. His publications include *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge, 2009) as well as articles in *Victorian Studies, Victorian Poetry*, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

LISA SHEPPARD is a Research Associate in Cardiff University's School of Welsh. She has previously worked as a Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol–sponsored Lecturer in Welsh at the School and has taught English Literature at Cardiff's School of English, Communication, and Philosophy. Her doctoral thesis, completed in 2015, examined the portrayal of multiculturalism in contemporary fiction from south Wales, and her current research contributes to a project titled "The Welsh Language in Cardiff," led by Dr. Dylan Foster Evans. Her other research interests include bilingualism in literature, literary production and translation, postcolonial theory, and multiculturalism in minority language communities.

STEVE VAN-HAGEN is Principal Lecturer and Associate Head of the School of Humanities at Coventry University, UK. He has published on eighteenth-century writers, including Stephen Duck, James Woodhouse, Mary Leapor, and Jonathan Swift, and also publishes his own poetry.

NICOLA WILSON is Lecturer in Book and Publishing Studies at the University of Reading. She is the author of *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (2015) and general editor of the Ethel Carnie Holdsworth series.

She has published essays on working class writing in the *Oxford History of the Novel in English* (volume 7) and *Key Words* 5 (2007) and has wide interests in the histories of reading and print culture. Her current book is on the literary and cultural impact of the British Book Society Ltd. (1929–69), the first mail-order book club to operate in Britain.

JACK WINDLE is an independent researcher with 12 years' experience of researching, writing about, and teaching British working class literature. His highly commended PhD thesis is about twentieth-century working class writing, with particular focus on its diversity of forms and its complex relationship to decolonization and the decline of the British Empire. He is currently working on a chapter about working class writing and literary theory, focusing on postcolonialism and the body, and projects to republish neglected working class texts by Jack Hilton and Len Doherty. Jack blogs about working class literature, history, and culture at proletics.wordpress.com.

Foreword

Donna Landry

It is a truth now universally acknowledged that there were English women writers before Jane Austen. Less well known is that there were laboring class writers before John Clare. Before the coming into being of the industrial working class, there were cottagers and agricultural workers, domestic servants and skilled artisans, who became published authors. Historical recovery work of the last three decades has uncovered dozens of such men and women throughout the British Isles, beginning circa 1700. The Cambridge *History of British Working Class Literature* testifies to this rich tradition. The place of working class writing in British literary history has always been marginal. Yet archival research has increasingly turned up numbers of English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish authors, principally poets. To read their writing is to experience the silent majority suddenly finding a voice, the shepherd or washerwoman or haymaker stepping forward out of the "dark side of the landscape" toward us with tremendous energy.[1]

That the pastoral is always political nobody knows better than the shepherds themselves. During the eighteenth century, there developed a taste for rural writing that captured the national particularity of the country, with vernacular figures replacing classical models in the poetry of John Gay, Alexander Pope, and James Thomson. The countryside of Britain contains pastoral but also georgic topography peopled by plowmen and threshers, washerwomen and dairy maids, shoemakers and grooms. The democratization of the literary marketplace that made professional literary livelihoods possible and allowed women to publish also benefited the lower classes. Even the rural poor might occasionally find a voice through networks of patronage and publicity.

The place of early working class writing in Britain finds visual analogy in Paul Sandby's pen, ink, watercolor, and bodycolor picture *North West View of Wakefield Lodge in Whittlebury Forest, 1767* (Bonehill and Daniels, catalog entry 87, 207; and detail 64). The Duke of Grafton's estate is shown as a pleasure ground replete with deer and horses grazing on close-cropped

lawns, a boating lake, a man and woman in an open carriage, and red-coated horsemen seeming to ask the way. At the center of the left-hand foreground of the picture, between the touristic gentlefolk and the livestock, a man and woman are collecting wood. The man has been halted in his movements by the appearance of the carriage party. He stands one-legged, having turned, one leg against the trunk, putting all his weight into stripping old wood or bark from a veteran ash tree. His body has the monumentality and sculpted form that will distinguish James Barry's 1790s figures (Kear and Thomas) and be experimented with so illuminatingly by William Blake. The woman is bending to tie up a bundle of neatly stacked wood, her back to the new arrivals. She is slight, pale, wearing a pale cap and short smock, her ankle visible, the foot encased in a black shoe. She looks beleaguered, weary, her shoulders hunched. Is she aware of the new arrivals yet? Would she take flight if she were, a huntress gathering her bag, about to flee the scene before anything untoward occurs? Although these wood gatherers might look out of place, laboring bodies exerting themselves in a pleasure park, they are emphatically *there*.

Why does Sandby focus our attention gently but inexorably on this working couple within an otherwise pastoral retreat? It happens that the Duke of Grafton was an agricultural improver, notoriously embroiled in disputes over Whittlebury Forest commoners' exercising of their customary rights, including gathering wood and hunting game (Bonehill and Daniels 206). Regardless of what Grafton might himself prefer, the location of Wakefield Lodge is enmeshed in forest custom and law, a field of power that exceeds the boundaries of the estate conceived as private land, constantly breeching them. It is characteristic of Paul Sandby to include such a reckoning of the infrastructural socioeconomic and human relations of the view portrayed. His pictures of Windsor, Edinburgh, and the military encampments that sprang up in and near London, attracting tourists, jostle the plebeian insistently alongside the polite. And the longer one studies this view of Wakefield Lodge, the clearer it becomes that the wood gatherers are its fulcrum, a darkly shadowed concentration of energy and interest, demonstrating boldly and publicly that there is a forest economy still, and one that entails arduous physical labor in the name of common rights.

So it is with laboring or working class writing. Despite the hierarchies of rank predicting and proscribing intellectual and creative achievement, exceptional figures since at least the early eighteenth century have made literary names for themselves in the British Isles. They have done so in diverse ways and by many different means and genres and, in doing so, have often

changed the terms of debate within literary culture and brought about formal and aesthetic innovations as well as contributed new content to enrich and trouble patrician bias within British literary history. The Cambridge *History of British Working Class Literature* is a salutary reminder of how crucial and sometimes pivotal have been laborers' contributions to literature in the British Isles. The arc from the poets Stephen Duck and Mary Collier, the "Wiltshire thresher" and the "washerwoman of Petersfield," to the twenty-first-century Welsh fiction writers Jon Gower, Niall Griffiths, Owen Martell, and Angharad Pr, or the digital project Laboring-Class Poets Online, sheds refreshing new light on familiar terrain. The question is always asked of working class writers, as of women writers, "They may have existed, granted, but were they any good?"

That aesthetics and politics can never be entirely divorced from one another is one of the truths repeatedly revealed by the study of laboring class writing. The first chapter of this Cambridge *History*, serving as a keynote setting the agenda for subsequent chapters, addresses this question explicitly. Today the canonical inclusion of laboring class poets such as Stephen Duck, Mary Collier, Mary Leapor, and Ann Yearsley is once again being questioned on formal and aesthetic grounds. Such gifted writers as these can readily be defended. However, is it enough to focus solely on such undoubtedly exceptional writers, who were celebrated during their lifetimes as geniuses? Investigating women's petitions to the Foundling Hospital from 1760 onward, Jennie Batchelor reflects upon whether such traces of women's literacy, but also their formation and formulations of sexuality and subjectivity, should be included as part of a literary history. Batchelor proposes that the Foundling petitions "offer a salutary reminder that in privileging certain kinds of textual work above others, we risk privileging elite discourses of value around aesthetics or sexual politics or class."[2] The Foundling Hospital petitions "are more than mere historical curiosities"; they are "skillfully crafted documents that reveal the tellers' ability to manipulate language and narrative in order to secure the best chance of a successful hearing and to reimagine class-based and gendered understandings of seduction, maternity, and illegitimacy."

The entanglement of more elite authors and genres with working class literature as it insists upon a certain dissonance from the mainstream can be analogized, as I have shown, with representations of class differences in eighteenth-century British landscape art. Barrell, thinking of John Clare and those who preceded him, writes of how, by the end of the eighteenth century, pastoral or pastoral-georgic conventions had fallen out of favor with the polite classes "to be appropriated by radical writers, and by the

humble poets of rural complaint, who demanded some of that leisure for the ploughman and thresher, which the shepherd and the gentleman-philosopher had long enjoyed" (Barrell, *The Dark Side* 81). These writers could in some sense give voice to those shadowy, enigmatic figures idling or laboring in the landscape – and more and more it was laboring, and looking cheerful while doing it, as the century wore on.

Thus, to find John Clare writing the following lines in "The Mores" early in the nineteenth century captures something of what was at stake in the increasing monitoring and extraction, including the extraction of grateful obligation, from the laboring poor:

> Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
> Nor fence of ownership crept in between
> To hide the prospect of the following eye
> Its only bondage was the circling sky
> . . .
> Cows went and came with evening morn and night
> To the wild pasture as their common right
> And sheep unfolded with the rising sun
> Heard the swains shout and felt their freedom won
> Tracked the red fallow field and heath and plain
> Then met the brook and drank and roamed again
> (ll. 7–10, 25–30)[3]

The pleasures of independence and of free time and movement across common land cannot be overestimated. For humans and other animals, the prospect of boundlessness is emancipatory, "a faint shadow of immensity" (l. 12). But nowhere in the country remains immune to the pressures of enclosure, privatization, and improvement:

> Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
> Of labours rights and left the poor a slave
> And memorys pride ere want to wealth did bow
> Is both the shadow and the substance now
> (ll. 19–22)

Clare's judgment regarding the actions taken in Helpston by agricultural improvers is as unequivocal as his joy had been in the unimproved prospect that "lost itself" and "seemed to eke its bounds / In the blue mist the orisons edge surrounds" (ll. 13–14).

Laboring class writing simultaneously benefits from new archival contexts through which to understand its genesis and reception and sheds fresh light on such contexts. Barrell has more recently traced an intricate web of

conspiracies of British state power and paranoia in the wake of the French Revolution and war with France that evolved to become ever more micrologically entwined with debates about what the imagination, or imagining, might mean (Barrell, *Imagining*). Eventually, by 1796, even "imagining the king's death" could be considered treason. Barrell mentions in passing the case of Margaret Nicholson, a domestic servant who, in 1786, accosted George III alighting from his carriage outside St. James's, presenting him with a blank sheet of paper instead of a petition and attacking him with an ivory-handled dessert knife. She was pronounced a madwoman, thereby posing no political threat (Barrell, *Imagining* 354). There seemed no reason to connect her with serious protest, let alone regicidal republicanism. The following year, however, the laboring class poet Ann Cromarty Yearsley, the "Bristol milkwoman," whose work is explored in this volume by Kerri Andrews and Steve Van-Hagen, not only names Nicholson but implies, however archly, that her attack on the king may have carried political meaning. In "Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman's desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients," a poem in her second volume, Yearsley ironizes her own supposed lack of education while exploring the theory of metempsychosis, whereby figures from classical mythology and history are reborn in contemporary England.[4] In a concluding twist, Yearsley substitutes an English historical figure for the ancients, with Margaret Nicholson reembodying the leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381:

> Wat Tyler, in Nicholson, dares a King's life,
> At St. James's the blow was design'd;
> But Jove lean'd from heaven, and wrested the knife,
> Then in haste lash'd the wings of the wind.
> (ll. 65–8)

To suggest the spirit of Wat Tyler was reincarnated in Margaret Nicholson may sound farcical, but the allusion also registers the possibility that Nicholson may have had a political point to make not unrelated to a venerable tradition of popular protest. As if to reinforce this reading of Nicholson, Yearsley ends the poem on a note that is both playful and defiantly personal, a defiance that also resonates politically:

> Here's Trojan, Athenian, Greek, Frenchman and I,
> Heav'n knows what I was long ago;
> No matter, thus shielded, this age I defy,
> And the next cannot wound me, I know.
> (ll. 69–72)

Fighting talk? Eight or nine years later, such an allusion to Nicholson might conceivably have been construed as a treasonable imagining of the king's death, but so far no evidence has emerged that anyone remembered it. Barrell's investigations shed retrospective light on the possible implications of Yearsley's poem. The poem itself offers new evidence of a laboring writer, however enigmatically, engaged in political comment.

Aesthetics and politics need to be understood as distinct categories of analysis and experience. Yet, that they can never be entirely severed from one another remains a lesson and a revelation delivered by working class writing.

NOTES

1. John Barrell adopted his title, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840*, from an unsigned review of George Crabbe's *The Village* in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Following a study of the laboring poet John Clare, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, Barrell in *The Dark Side* drew attention to how changing representations of the laboring class in eighteenth-century landscape painting might be understood as articulating tensions and conflicts registered also in contemporary writing about rural life, from John Gay's comic pastorals to the lament and loss of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) and the accounts of radical and "humble" writers (81).
2. A similarly powerful argument was mounted by Srinivas Aravamudan on behalf of the Sierra Leone settlers whose struggle has been obscured by scholarly fetishism of the literary genius of Olaudah Equiano; see *Tropicopolitans*, 253–88.
3. "The Mores" (written c. 1812–31), in Robinson and Powell, *The Oxford Authors: John Clare*, 167–9.
4. Ann Yearsley, Milkwoman of Clifton, near Bristol, "Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman's desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients," in *Poems, on Various Subjects*, 93–9; also Yearsley, *Selected Poems*, 23–5. See also Landry, *Muses of Resistance*, 164–5.

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