

Eighteenth century labouring-class writing

By Jennifer Batt

In 1758, Samuel Johnson noted that the itch of scribbling had seized the nation. 'The rage of writing has seized the old and young' across all segments of society, he observed, so that now 'the cook warbles her lyrics in the kitchen, and the thrasher vociferates his heroics in the barn.' Johnson's observation drew attention to an important development in the eighteenth century literary world: the emergence of the labouring class writer. Over the course of the century increasing numbers of agricultural labourers, household servants, bricklayers, shoemakers, milkmaids, soldiers and sailors not only took up writing, but also published their work, and, in some cases, made a significant impact on contemporary literary culture. Would-be authors from labouring-class backgrounds faced a particular set of challenges as they attempted to fashion themselves as writers, ranging from accessing education and books, juggling writing with work, managing their literary ambitions, and dealing with success or failure.

Education

The first challenge faced by labouring-class writers was acquiring a suitable education. Taught to read and write by their parents or at a local school, their formal education was often brought to an abrupt end at a young age. James Woodhouse, the shoemaker-poet, for example, was withdrawn from his school at the age of seven, while many others were sent to work by their early teens. Even when schooling lasted until the teenage years, these writers then faced the challenge of acquiring 'literary' books, from which they could start to explore what poetry was, what it might do, and how it was to be written. Books came to these writers in a haphazard, piecemeal manner, and often depended on luck and good connections. Stephen Duck, the agricultural labourer, was lucky in having a good friend who had worked in London and returned with a set of classic books, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *The Spectator*, and Edward Bysshe's *Art of English Poetry*. Other promising talents were spotted by local benefactors who opened up their libraries: the servant Mary Leapor was given access to the library at Weston Hall by Susanna Jennens, while James Woodhouse had similar assistance from William Shenstone at Leasowes. Bit by bit, these individuals made small forays into the world of literature, and what they found there inspired them to try their own hand at writing.

Work

The second challenge facing labouring-class poets was how to combine their working lives with their writing. The biographies of many of these poets contain anecdotes relating their success, or failure, in juggling these competing demands. Some writers apparently combined the two in an exemplary fashion: a contemporary biography of Stephen Duck noted how he worked extra hard in the fields, sometimes for overtime payments with which he could buy books, and at other times, so he could snatch a few minutes after completing his allotted tasks to sit down and read. A less flattering anecdote circulated about Mary Leapor, who reportedly neglected her work in the kitchen, scorching the meat that she should have been turning when she was distracted by writing verse.

While juggling work and writing was a challenge, it also provided an opportunity, giving these writers a

valuable perspective from which to write. Previous literary depictions of labour had often been sanitized or idealised, but these writers had actually experienced the world of work. Stephen Duck's 'The Thresher's Labour', which presented an account of a year in the life of an agricultural labourer, began a vogue for poems which focused on their author's working life. Robert Tattersall depicted life as a bricklayer in 'The Bricklayer's Labours' while Mary Collier wrote about the daily labours of working wives and mothers in 'The Woman's Labour'. Life in service was illustrated by Robert Dodsley's 'Servitude' and 'The Footman. An Epistle', and by Mary Leapor in 'Crumble Hall'. William Falconer, a sailor, depicted life onboard ship in 'The Shipwreck'. Yet though such poems offer a valuable insight into eighteenth century life, it must be remembered that they are literary works and not straightforward documentary fact. Labouring-class writers re-imagined the world in which they lived, sometimes radically, and their verse does not always reflect their immediate circumstances. Mary Collier wrote about the challenges of being a working wife and mother despite neither marrying nor having children. And though Robert Bloomfield, the author of the popular poem 'The Farmer's Boy', had worked on a farm as a youth, when he wrote the poem he was not an agricultural labourer but rather a cobbler by trade.

Ambition

The third challenge faced by these writers was how to juggle their status as labouring-class writers with their literary ambitions. Many of these poets were not simply content to write about their working life - they also wanted to participate in mainstream literary culture. Consequently they wrote verse in numerous genres and on numerous themes, ranging from biblical paraphrases to topical satire. Some wrote plays: Robert Dodsley had success in the 1730s with 'The Toy Shop' and 'The King and the Miller of Mansfield', the bricklayer Henry Jones' play 'The Earl of Essex' was well received in the 1750s, while the former milkwoman Ann Yearsley's 'Earl Goodwin' was produced in Bath and Bristol in the 1790s. Yearsley also wrote a novel, 'The Royal Captives'. William Falconer, meanwhile, channelled his knowledge of seamanship and his interest in language into 'The Universal Dictionary of the Marine'.

Success (and failure)

The fourth challenge for these writers was how to cope with success when - or if - it came. These writers typically began their careers by achieving local notoriety and attracting the attention of patrons, who could help - or hinder - their development. Stephen Duck was the most lucky of them all, winning the patronage of Queen Caroline and leaving his labouring life behind to become a clergyman. Rumours of his subsequent depression and eventual suicide are probably exaggerated. Robert Dodsley too, had spectacular good fortune: his early writings won him the patronage of the poet Alexander Pope. With Pope's aid, Dodsley set up business as a bookseller and soon became the most important literary bookseller in London. On a more modest scale, patronage enabled William Falconer to leave life as a sailor behind, placing him in a job which gave him more time for his literary interests.

Other poets were less fortunate. After the publication of a collection of her verse, Ann Yearsley's relationship with her patron Hannah More deteriorated catastrophically. The two women disagreed over what should happen to the proceeds from the book, and the result was a public and very bitter quarrel. Mary Leapor was much more fortunate in finding local patrons who nurtured her talent and encouraged her to publish her work. However, her premature death at the age of just 24 meant that she never saw any of her works in print, nor received the acclaim that would posthumously come her way. Mary Collier, meanwhile, did live to see her poetry in print, but she was later to lament that it brought her little reward, complaining 'I lost nothing, neither did I gain much, others [having] run away with the profit.'

Useful resources

Works by a range of labouring-class writers can be found on this site as ebooks, and to explore the subject further, check out [[Labouring-Class Poets Online](#) [1]], a database of almost 2000 writers from labouring-class backgrounds who were active in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*Note usage restrictions: "Information from this database may be freely downloaded and used for teaching and research purposes, but may not be published in any form without the written permission of the copyright holders."*)

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