

Stephen Duck

Briefly, in 1730, the most talked about poet in England was an agricultural labourer. The story of Stephen Duck (1705-1756) is a remarkable one, as the title page of the unauthorised collection of his verse, *Poems on Several Subjects* [1], explains. He was 'lately a poor Thresher in a Barn in the County of Wilts, at the Wages of Four Shillings and Six Pence per Week' until his poems

"were publickly read by The Right Honourable the Earl of Macclesfield, in the Drawing-Room at Windsor Castle, on Friday the 11th of September, 1730, to her Majesty. Who was thereupon most graciously pleased to take the Author into her Royal Protection, by allowing him a Salary of Thirty Pounds per Annum, and a small House at Richmond in Surrey, to live in, for the better Support of Himself and Family."

Among the poems that so intrigued the Queen and the court was 'The Thresher's Labour', Duck's account of a year in the life of an agricultural labourer. Presenting a more realistic account of agricultural labour than had previously appeared in literary verse, this is Duck's most important poem, and it proved to be a vital model for other labouring-class writers who wanted to write about their work.

Though Queen Caroline's benevolence towards the labourer transformed his life, her actions were not met with universal approval, as Jonathan Swift's 'Quibbling Epigram' suggests:

*The thresher Duck could o'er the queen prevail;
The proverb says, no fence against a flail.
From threshing corn he turns to thresh his brains;
For which her Majesty allows him grains.
Though 'tis confessed that those who ever saw
His poems, think them all not worth a straw.
Thrice happy Duck, employed in threshing stubble!
Thy toil is lessened and thy profits double.*

Duck ignored such mockery, and spent the 1730s in a succession of minor court positions, writing more verse, and learning Latin. In 1736, he published *Poems on Several Occasions* [2]. This contained 'improved' versions of poems that had been had appeared in the unauthorised *Poems on Several Subjects*, together with a range of new verse that reflected his transition from agricultural labourer to court poet. Duck followed this with poems which ranged from elegy (on Queen Caroline in 1737) and panegyric (*An Ode on the Battle of Dettingen*) to melodrama (*Alrick and Isabel*) but his poetic career was interrupted in the 1740s as he devoted his energies instead to training as a clergyman. After holding a series of temporary positions in the church, he became Rector of Byfleet in Surrey in 1752. In *Caesar's Camp, or St George's Hill* [3], his last major poem, he paid tribute to the community in which he then found himself.

Duck died in 1756, and though his death was initially ascribed to natural causes, rumours later circulated that he had suffered from depression and had taken his own life. It was alleged that the patronage he had

received was to blame for his depression, and that he had been unable to cope with the extraordinary transformation in his fortunes. Though such allegations do not seem to be supported by evidence, the myth of Duck's suicide has been remarkably persistent.

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