

WILLIAM J. CHRISTMAS, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730-1830*. Newark and London: University of Delaware Press and Associated University Presses, 2001. 364.

Although their works are largely neglected by literary history, the English labouring-class poets have themselves been subjected to intense scrutiny. Over-read as much as under-read, their story has always been freighted with ideological baggage of one sort or another. In the eighteenth century they were mocked by satirists from the Scriblerians onwards, fetishized by advocates of 'natural genius', and condemned and praised in equal measure by moralists who feared the bad example they might set to honest artisans, or saw in their conscientious strivings a model for self-improvement. As William J. Christmas emphasises in his excellent new study of these poets, honesty, industry and piety were their entrance ticket into literary publication, and they were often used in an exemplary fashion by publishers, patrons and critics.

Yet many of them had serious aspirations as poets, and some had talent, as the recent inclusion of Mary Leapor, Ann Yearsley, and the 'Labour' poems of Stephen Duck and Mary Collier in university English syllabuses acknowledges. These now-familiar names are seen in this study among wider circles of poets, including figures such as the bricklayer-poet patronized by Lord Chesterfield, Henry Jones, who is given a chapter of his own here as a fascinating case study in labouring-class Parnassian ambition. Two other chapters offer groupings of poets, and a sense of historical progression: Duck is set among his predecessors and his imitators; and after Jones we are introduced to the group of poets who emerged in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, bookended here by two witty maidservants, Mary Leapor and Elizabeth Hands. This is followed by a final chapter on the notorious dispute between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, and an equally valuable 'Epilogue' on 'Bloomfield, Clare and the Plebeian tradition', showing the ways in which labouring-class poetry was transformed in the Romantic period.

This study represents an advance on earlier work on the subject, from Robert Southey, Rayner Unwin, Donna Landry and others, in that it broadens the canon of labouring-class poets, represents both genders adequately, resists the habit (in Southey and Unwin) of dismissiveness or of patronising approbation, and generally offers an intelligent contextualisation of these poets, and a sense of their emergence as a developing tradition in the eighteenth century, linked to changes in education and the literary marketplace. It is underpinned by an attention to detail, and a scholarly thoroughness that complements the larger arguments and overviews well. Christmas is very good at appraising current scholarship on the subject, as well as making his own contributions.

I have one bibliographical quibble, and it relates to James Woodhouse's wonderful autobiographical account of the labouring-class poet's lot, *The Life and Lucubrations of Martinus Crispinus*, which is discussed (like so much else in this book) with a seriousness and depth it has certainly never received before. There is confusion over when and how *Crispinus* was published. A note on p. 325 says 1814 and 1816, but it is implied that these were incomplete or bowdlerised. The text at p. 186 says that it was not published in full until 1896, on p. 203 that it was finally 'publishable in 1896' and on p. 209 that Woodhouse had 'suppressed' the poem, 'in particular those sections of the poem chronicling plebeian servitude, upper-class oppression, and his own version of religious and moral truth'. How 'was it suppressed'? The author says he cannot find a copy of the 1816 edition, which is fair enough, but it would be helpful to know what is in 1814, and why this might not represent a 'true' publication, especially if this text is, as he argues, 'one of the most important literary records of plebeian social and ideological critique of the late eighteenth century'.

But this is a most welcome and useful book, a giant step forward for the study of the labouring-class poets, and a handsome replacement for Rayner Unwin's fifty-year old study *The Rural Muse*, as the standard account of these poets.

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