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Waldron, Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Bristol: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806*, University of Georgia Press, 1996, ISBN 0-8203-1801-9, £39.95

The story of Ann Yearsley offers some interesting parallels with Clare, especially for those interested in Clare's difficult relationships with his patrons, and his struggle to gain control of his money. A milk-seller from Clifton in Bristol, she was 'discovered' as a poet by the writer Hannah More in 1785, as many other such poets from Stephen Duck onwards had been 'discovered'. More worked hard to raise interest in Yearsley's first volume of poems, and raised a very impressive subscription list. But she also set up a legal agreement whereby income from the publication was to be held in trust by More and her friend Elizabeth Montagu. According to Yearsley's account, More presented this for signing in a way which left Yearsley with little choice, control or sense of trust. Yearsley, a fiercely independent woman, was insulted and distressed, and she turned on More, initiating a literary feud which, according to Mary Waldron in this first full-scale biography of Yearsley, had 'nationwide' reverberations. A 'peasant poet' had rebelled (though not *quite* for the first time--James Woodhouse, Elizabeth Montagu's own tame 'peasant poet' had, after 20 years as her land bailiff then house steward, fallen out with his patron and been sacked, just a year earlier).

Yearsley survived the inevitable subsequent wrath of More and her circle, acquired new patrons, and went on to publish two more volumes of poetry, a play and a novel, and to run a circulating library. The story of her life ending in unhappiness, isolation and growing insanity, perpetuated by Southey in his 'Lives of the Uneducated Poets', is one of a number of myths this biography creditably unravels. Waldron persuasively argues that the fetishising of the 'peasant poets' did enormous damage not only to their own independence and well-being, but also to the way they and their writings were perceived by critics, both in their time and later. Even the recent rediscovery of these poets, mainly by Marxist and feminist critics, is not immune from condescension and distortion. Waldron stresses the point that searching for specifically proletarian poetry may result in these writers being read in a very selective and reductive way. I think this is a fair and important point--certainly some recent writing on Yearsley and others has been wince-makingly reductive. But I am not convinced that Waldron has a solution, or is indeed herself any more immune from reductionism than the rest of us, despite the general sharpness of her analysis of the 'peasant poet' circus. She is adamant, for example, that Yearsley was not a 'working-class' poet, arguing that there was no such thing as a working class in the

eighteenth century, and citing E.P. Thompson and others in support of this position. I am not quite persuaded by this, which seems to me to hi-jack a complex argument about class and social history in the eighteenth century, and to use it rather narrowly. There is an important point, of course, and a good one: Waldron's argument that Yearsley sought independence and status is convincing, but her terminology is less so. Yearsley is described as aspiring to be a 'respectable self-employed trader and writer'. I fear 'self-employed' sounds even more anachronistic than 'working-class', and I have not found an instance of it being used before the mid-Victorian period. (E.P. Thompson himself, incidentally, was very interested indeed in Yearsley, and a chance encounter in the British Library a decade ago--we found we were both working on her poetry the same day--led to a memorable discussion about her.)

There are other troubling aspects to this biography. Yearsley is no more allowed to be a radical than she is to be 'working-class'. Thus we are told, for example, that when Coleridge came to Bristol in 1794, full of pantisocracy and political idealism, she 'might have' attended his lectures, and was 'in tune' with his ideas on contemporary events; but that just as STC 'eventually repudiated' the radicals, so 'Yearsley would have done the same'. Well, maybe she would--but then again, maybe she wouldn't. Those critics who like to amuse themselves by showing how unsympathetic John Clare was to radicalism at least cite evidence (however naively and one-sidedly) from his writings. Waldron cites no evidence of any sort to support the views given here, and it is not the only time in this biography that unsupported and sometimes rather biased opinions are allowed free rein.

There is also a distinctly old-fashioned tone to some of the critical writing. The eighteenth-century is a time of 'artificial', form-bound, public writing, whilst Romanticism is fresh, spontaneous, authentic, personal, etc. No prizes for guessing which yardstick is used to measure Yearsley: she must throw off the 'clog of classicism' (why? what is so terribly disabling about classicism?) and write more like Wordsworth, who indeed she 'strives towards' and occasionally 'anticipates'. By all means let us, as Waldron advocates and pioneers, introduce aesthetics into the study of writers like Yearsley, but please let us spare the poor woman from having Wordsworth peering back over his shoulder at her all the time (as if she didn't have enough troubles). She was born into the mid-eighteenth century, and should be judged accordingly.

Despite these reservations, though, I strongly welcome this biography. It is full, and uses well the available sources which are limited and uneven. It cuts through a lot of myth-making about Yearsley and about 'peasant poetry' and so makes a useful contribution to the discussion of the self-taught tradition (or non-tradition, as the case may be). It offers the fruits of much careful and valuable research (the very useful

bibliographical essay at the beginning is a fine example). Waldron analyses the writings as fully as she can without resorting to surveys, and is frequently perceptive and interesting, as for example when she notes the pervasiveness of 'coming to life' as a motif in the first volume of poetry. I was particularly interested to learn about Yearsley's *very* Clare-like identification with 'The harmless snail, slow-moving', the 'long-nosed mouse' and other unsung creatures, in her contemplative poem 'Clifton Hill'; about her unusual and bold ideas on religion; about her feeling (in her 'Address to Friendship') that as Waldron puts it 'she is forever barred from true friendship because she is always at risk from the pity that exposes and betrays'; and about her very considerable talent for poetry and--just as important for someone in her situation--surviving against the odds. This is a life we *need* to know about, and its re-discovery (like the re-discovery of Mary Leapor by Richard Greene a few years ago) deepens our understanding of literary history, and casts useful light on the traditions and problems inherited by Clare and the nineteenth-century self-taught and women poets.

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