

JVC Digital Forum - Radicalism and Reform

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[Re-]forming Cotton Famine Poetry – Some Implications

The square brackets beginning the above title deserve attention as an indicator of the instabilities which lurk at the edges of the Cotton Famine Poetry project, and which provide the slightly blurred focus for this article. They exist as an admission that Cotton Famine poetry has been neither reformed, nor re-formed. It was never formed as a body of work originally, unless some obscure Victorian bibliophile gathered thousands of local newspaper editions published between 1861 and 1865 in Lancashire and scoured them for verses relevant to the prevailing economic conditions of the day. The Cotton Famine was an economic crisis caused by the Union blockade of Confederate exports which lasted the duration of the American Civil War. Approximately 2000 mills worked cotton employing half a million people, and subsequent short time measures and mill closures affected not just textile workers but dependents and a variety of associated trades.ⁱ The resulting economic deprivation led to mass unemployment, hunger and disease. Put in simple terms, the ambition of the originally titled Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine project was to collate and interpret hundreds of poems on the subject found in the poetry columns of local newspapers from across the region. The project attempted to bring to public and scholarly attention something lost through a legacy of literary neglect common to many fields of labouring-class writing: first in the assumption that it does not exist, then in the dismissal of its perceived quality, or historical significance. In this case there was a further layer of inaccessibility in the poetry's dispersal across many newspapers, which served as a real logistical barrier. For this reason the original ambition of the project was not just to recover labouring-class writing, but to collate and interpret the poetic response of a particular region to a sustained global economic crisis, tracking the discussion of topics such as unemployment, hunger, charity, abolition, and war. But as the project progressed, receiving substantial funding from the AHRC, employing Dr Ruth Mather as a supremely able Research Associate, and engaging the unmatched expertise of Professor Brian Maidment as Co-Investigator, even the original 'Lancashire' was quietly dropped. Poetry undeniably relating to the dearth of cotton during the Civil War years was subsequently recovered from America, France, Australia and Ireland. A project which aimed to recover a forgotten regional narrative now looked outward, with new global reach. We began to view the events in Lancashire between 1861 and 1865 through the literature of the war-ravaged Union and Confederate organs of propaganda, or through poetry framed by the journalistic discourse serving the colonial territories of the British Empire. Poetry was now being sought from other regions which suffered or benefitted from the economic consequences of the Union blockade of Confederate cotton, such as industrial Rouen in France, or the Surat cotton-producing region in Gujarat. But if the original ambition of the project has been amended, has the integrity of the initial definition been compromised?

Searching more widely for unstable ground with a tentative foot, it might still be concluded that Cotton Famine poetry is not, as they say these days, 'a thing'. Scholars of northern English or labouring-class poetry might have used the specific phrase 'cotton famine poetry' occasionally, but there was precious little collection of it in the twentieth century.ⁱⁱ I have still only found one article in an academic journal even acknowledging the existence of the

phenomenon of Cotton Famine poetryⁱⁱⁱ prior to the publication of my *Journal of Victorian Culture* article in 2020.^{iv} The reification of the concept only really began in the spring of 2015, when I hit on the originally small-scale idea of examining the works of celebrated Lancashire dialect writers such as Edwin Waugh (1817-90), William Billington (1825-84), Samuel Laycock (1826-93), and Joseph Ramsbottom (dates not known) purely in relation to their poetic responses to the Cotton Famine. Dialect poetry had been popular in Lancashire in printed form since the end of the eighteenth century, but had recently gained national attention with the success of Waugh's domestic poem 'Come whoam to thi childer an' me' (1856). In many ways the Cotton Famine fell within the 'Golden Age' of Lancashire dialect poetry, as interest in the form waned after 1870.^v Reasoning that there might be further examples of dialect poetry on the subject in local newspapers, I investigated holdings at Burnley Central Library and found dozens of standard English and a few dialect works detailing the suffering working people underwent during the Cotton Famine. If there was one 'eureka moment' in the emergence of the project it was arithmetical, as I mentally extrapolated what I was finding to the dozens of cotton towns across the region, each of which usually had two newspapers (often one liberal and one conservative), usually containing a weekly poetry column. Conversations with Dr Merrick Burrow at the University of Huddersfield persuaded me to favour digital collection over a finite print anthology, and from that point on the concept became about numbers as well as words. Significant quantities of texts might have encouraged a data-crunching exercise without digitisation, but the very idea and then the particular practice of gathering the material for a database encouraged a quantitative approach. The eventual development of search functions, keywords, and a 'tagcloud' further emphasised the numerical aspect of the project as easily gathered statistics promised to translate into markers of literary and historical significance.

However, beyond 'counting poetry'^{vi}, what does it mean when one gathers verse, especially obscure verse, and gives it another status as part of a wider body of work? In the first instance, recent experience has suggested that the imposition of simple parameters on a body of literature results in complex compromises, incessant defending of boundaries, and occasionally the necessary elasticity of definition. Negotiating possible database categorisation choices with Dr Charlotte Tupman of the University of Exeter's Digital Humanities Lab, Ruth Mather and I briefly considered adopting a ranking star system. It is unlikely that this would have been even a consideration for a print anthology. In this subsequently abandoned system each poem would be awarded 1-5 stars depending on its relevance to the subject. For example, this piece, entitled 'A Plea for the Cotton District', would appear to be an easy contender for the full stellar treatment:

Stay not the rich stream that so nobly is flowing;
Up, up, to the rescue, and lend them a hand!
Oh, be not content with a pittance bestowing,
And dare not the promptings of conscience withstand:
But cheer them in darkness, in gloom, and in sorrow,
And save them from pestilence, pain, and despair;
Defer not the work of to day till the morrow,
Nor keep back the hand that may lighten their care.^{vii} (ll.1-8)

But this anonymous poem encouraging charitable acts to the poor (there are another two stanzas) was published in Stockport, which is not in Lancashire but Cheshire. Clearly, with Stockport neighbouring Manchester as a northern industrial town it would be ridiculous to exclude such a directly relevant poem on the grounds of geography. But what if this had been published in Adelaide, or Boston, Mass.? What if the Australian poem included a stanza on the benefits of emigration, or the American one contained criticisms of the British government's response to the cotton blockade? For the Cotton Famine poetry database the answer is that they would certainly still be included. And indeed, if the poems had been published during this period and only been about economic migration or the geopolitical implications of military restrictions on the textile industry then they would also probably be included. The database has become constituted by what we deem to be contextually significant to the broader story of the Cotton Famine, even if this might be difficult to quantify because of the complex of factors applied. Even so, an American newspaper editor pens an Anglophobic diatribe in verse, or a poverty-stricken Lancastrian mill-hand supports the cause of abolition in her stanzas: these are all, pardon the pun, grist to the mill.

But the newspaper editor and the working-class labourer are equally unlikely to attach their real name to poetic works, and individual texts more often than not fit into patterns which can be discerned across the body of work, especially when laid out in a spreadsheet. One of the most intriguing and frustrating aspects of building the Cotton Famine poetry database has been the lack of identification of individual authors. Few have names attached; more likely they are presented as anonymous, or appended with pseudonyms, or simply cryptic initials. The choice of anonymity in poetry publication was the default for a variety of social groups throughout the nineteenth century, but this was especially prevalent in occasional, 'amateur' verse commenting on the contemporary social situation. For this reason, determining whether authors of key texts were actually working class has often been impossible. Gender too, is an issue: poems written in the voice of women (particularly working-class women) were most often not by women, and poems by women were frequently disguised with pseudonymity or anonymity. And as we regularly remind students of poetry, conflating the poetic voice with the author is rarely a profitable strategy. Even when one knows who the author is, the fluidity of social class can cause problems of categorisation. There have been questions around the authenticity of Victorian Lancashire dialect poetry because it purported to reflect working-class culture whilst increasingly being written for a middle-class market hungry for tales of working life couched in tantalising linguistic obscurity.

The status of the Blackburn dialect poet William Billington altered markedly through the years of the Cotton Famine. Even as he became famous for embodying the suffering of his peers, he went from mill-worker to unemployed, and then from poet to celebrity. By 1865 Billington owned a successful public house in the centre of the town, and presided slightly unsteadily over an influential local literary coterie. And if Billington's case blurs the lines of social categorisation, then his Rochdale equivalent, Edwin Waugh, throws the subject of authenticity into further confusion. Waugh, a cobbler's son, was already a nationally famous Lancashire dialect poet by the late 1850s, and was working full time as a writer and journalist by the 1860s. His 1867 account of working-class suffering during the crisis^{viii} was substantially based on articles written for the *Manchester Examiner* in 1862, but its inclusion of an appendix of dialect poems on the subject, by himself and other writers, clearly sought to

associate the observer with the observed phenomenon. Even when we can identify the writer, the relationship between the text, the author, and the social situation defies easy definition.

The selection of poems by anonymous or pseudonymous writers, or those whose social status was fluid, is in itself not a problem. The problem comes when one's stated ambition to recover labouring-class writing becomes diverted by indeterminacy and supposition. I am confident that the project has recovered the voices of working people; it is just that in many cases I cannot identify these individual authors as 'working-class'. I have increasingly begun to refer to the writers collectively as 'ordinary people' to distinguish them from professional writers, but also to suggest the possibility of working-class status or origin without actually committing myself to an already increasingly controversial designation. Since the number of poems on the database was increased in late 2020 from one hundred to four hundred, it is now a relatively simple matter for any user to identify how many poems are in dialect, or mention the American Civil War, or were published in Bolton, and to therefore gain a sense of something like a representative dataset when searches are refined. But this quantitative methodology, when considered from all angles, only emphasises the impossibility of approaching a definitive categorisation of the whole. Collectively, Cotton Famine poetry resists anything but the broadest attempts at social or political definition. More troublingly, it lends itself through its appeal to different scholarly, public, and political interests to misinterpretations which may be benign or advantageous, but nevertheless creep further away from the 'true' (by which I mean truth as it is perceived by *me*) picture. I will proceed to give just one example of this.

Conversations with acknowledged experts of northern labouring-class writing including Brian Hollingworth, Brian Maidment, and the late Malcolm Chase led to the question: if, during the generation before the Cotton Famine, England was replete with radical poetry, where was the radical literary response to this crisis? The political context offers some possible answers to this conundrum. The economic crises of the 1840s, including the disastrous mismanagement of food supplies during the Irish Famine, were obvious domestic failures, and a focus of anger could be found in the British government. The American Civil War, however, was between two sides whose argument appeared remote to many ordinary Britons, even if morally engaging. In addition, the immediate necessity during the Cotton Famine for afflicted workers was food attained through charity and aid. Recipients of this were required to be docile, grateful, and certainly not radically critical of their benefactors. This social reality was reinforced by the general tenor of social interaction, commentaries in newspaper columns, and indeed in some of the poetry we have collected. Another more indirect context nevertheless relates directly to the (failed) Chartist struggle of the generation before. By the 1860s the consensus was prevalent that political change was most likely to be achieved through peaceful, democratic reform. The establishment of the Reform League, in 1865, the final year of the Cotton Famine, whose members were largely drawn from the middle class, led to the first working class voters in Britain in 1867, and was part of a momentum of political moderation.

These factors may explain why there was no substantial formation of radical movements during this period, but still, where were the individual radical voices as unemployment and hunger ravaged working-class districts for such a sustained period of time? The simplest and most likely answer is that they were probably suppressed. It is true that some anger slipped

through the editorial net, and indeed, occasionally Chartist era poems by radicals such as Gerald Massey were republished, but poetry columns of Victorian local newspapers are not generally the most politically adventurous. It should be recognised that in the Hungry '40s most Chartist poetry was published in the movement's own newspaper, the *Northern Star*. The most obvious evidence for editorial suppression of radical poetry during the Cotton Famine is the publication of four stanzas sent in to the *Blackburn Times*, accompanied by a sarcastic editorial piece entitled 'Dealing with Rejected Correspondents' explaining why the poem is representative of what would not be published in the newspaper's pages. The anonymous 'Food or Work'^{ix} feels Chartist in its directness, its poetic form, and in its emotional intensity:

Cotton lords! Lords of creation,
Feed the slaves which made your wealth;
Is not this a Christian nation?
Food's conducive to their health.

Tho' you shut your factory gates,
Sell your cotton, stop each loom;
Tho' war is raging in the States,
The cotton tree twice yearly bloom. (ll.1-8)

The poem is direct evidence of the kind of radical poetry which was being suppressed by newspaper editors, but also contributed in the twenty-first century to an understandable misrepresentation of the tenor of Cotton Famine poetry. Perhaps the widest popular exposure of Cotton Famine poetry has been through the music of the traditional music group, Faustus, who have been associated with the project from its inception. Their arrangement of this poem appeared on their 2019 'EP' CD whose title *Cotton Lords* referred to their renaming of the text. Other than consultation and writing the sleeve notes for this release, I did not influence the group's choices of text, but they naturally gravitated to the emotionally intense political examples out of the hundreds of verses I gave them access to. Another of the total of five Cotton Famine poems chosen by the group, a Burnley poem called 'Wrongs and Rights', by 'W. C.', is similarly direct in its political message:

Oh! shame on the man be him caitiff or lord
Who would have the borne Freeman to cringe at his word
And a man would degrade to a tool and a slave
To strut like a lordling would stoop to be knave

Oh! shame on the man though master he be
Who would steal from a workman his own liberty
Who would snatch from his mouth the bread of his toil
To starve out his conscience on free English soil (ll.1-8)

These are both fascinating texts, particularly as they are unusual examples of poetic radicalism published in Lancashire newspapers during the Cotton Famine, but their presence on Faustus's CD might skew the perception of the uninitiated listener given their prominence. Put in simple arithmetical terms, Faustus's *Cotton Lords* CD is 40% radical, whilst the

collected data suggests that the mass of Cotton Famine poetry is less than 2% radical. The quantification of poetry, even within admittedly unstable or arbitrary parameters, allows for broad-brush observations which give a sense of scale to an otherwise malleable literary historiography.

I use the above example not to suggest that Faustus's textual choices are in any way deleterious to the aims of the project, but rather to highlight the fact that with a dataset so large, with so many thematic and formal variations, misrepresentation is inevitable. I might just as easily have chosen the widespread popular inclination to represent the workers of the region as uniformly abolitionist as they suffered in heroic silence, or the myth of workers across the region 'refusing to handle slave-grown cotton', when in fact they had profited from it for decades. The problem is that the 'poverty-stricken Lancastrian mill-hand support[ing] the cause of abolition in her stanzas' I referred to earlier in this piece exists and can be produced as evidence of genuine Lancastrian Victorian working-class liberalism. But as I highlighted in my 2020 article, there are plenty of poetic examples which indicate less consensus, and some which suggest a conscious airbrushing of political history. Aiming to assemble and even loosely define a large body of work (we shied away from the term 'sub-genre' very early on) has situated us uneasily between the two academic cultures. We categorise, make boundaries, and quantify, even as we admit indeterminacy, and willingly refuse to answer some of the questions we set ourselves. Definition has largely become an unachievable ambition; form an even more troublesome concept than before.

But nevertheless, redolent of how technology democratised the access to knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century through advances in printing, rail, and telegraph, the digital age can be seen as enabling the public to engage much more deeply with history and heritage. The conceptual elements of the Cotton Famine poetry project were conceived in consultation with members of the University of Exeter Centre for Victorian Studies and its Victorianist contacts across the globe, but as discussed above, the technological requirements of the database were developed in conjunction with the Exeter Digital Humanities Lab. The technical expertise housed there was vital in order to create an accessible, comprehensive, and intuitively designed repository for the material which allows for academic engagement and input, but also works as a public-facing resource. The challenge of digitising and providing hyperlinks for hundreds of poems mostly gathered as grainy images from Victorian newspapers was considerable. For the most part it was found that Optical Character Recognition was unsuitable for reading 170-year old newspaper fonts, so transcription also became a challenge solved by the dedicated labour of project members and volunteer work by students and public groups and individuals. But the major decisions which affected the eventual functions of the database concerned the use of hyperlinks for historical and geographical allusions.

Ultimately, the ability to provide suitable context for a poem which serves both public and academic readerships was achieved through a variety of extra-poetic information attendant on each text. Links to Wikipedia and [Geonames](#) brought alive the sometimes obscure references within the texts, and an extremely advanced search function made it possible to identify, and just as importantly, quantify references across the whole body of work. In addition linguistic, prosodic and historical commentary was published alongside the vast majority of the poems and oral recitations and in some cases musical adaptations (both commissioned and volunteered) were also added through Soundcloud links. Finally there are a growing number of Resource pages where the impact, outreach, and academic life of the project is made

available, providing a variety of articles, links, videos, and images. Technology has enabled not just the collection of this poetry in one place for the first time, but a means to contextualise and provide understanding of its cultural and social significance.

So through the cultural response to the Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry has been revealed to be particularly reliant on technology for its production, reception, eventual recovery, and interpretation. The fragmentary publication profile of the vast majority of Victorian working-class literary production has been recognised for decades by scholars who study it, but beyond the challenge of recovery has been the question of how best to present material for public and academic consumption. In the past, print anthologies would have been assembled and edited, relying on the moment of publication (or rather the final draft) as a snapshot of discovery which did not allow for easily achievable update, expansion, or interactive engagement. The post-industrial digital age, like an echo of the technological advances of mid-nineteenth-century period of the industrial revolution, has accelerated the means of communication by which access to texts and information is distributed. Cultural access is being democratised again.

ⁱ Norman Longmate, *The Hungry Mills: The Story of the Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861–5* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1978) p. 43.

ⁱⁱ The only notable collection of Cotton Famine poetry through the twentieth century is a chapter containing eleven poems entitled ‘The Cotton Panic’ in Brian Hollingworth’s edited anthology, *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect poetry of the industrial revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ See F. Elizabeth Gray, ‘Poetry and Journalism in the Nineteenth Century: Calls to Action’, *Journalism Studies* Volume 18. 2017, Issue 7. 807-825.

^{iv} Simon Rennie, ‘This ‘Merikay War’: Poetic Responses in Lancashire to the American Civil War’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Volume 25, Issue 1, January 2020, Pages 126–143

^v Brian Hollingworth, Ed., *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect poetry of the industrial revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977) Pages 4-5

^{vi} Andrew Hobbs (University of Central Lancashire), author of *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900*. Open Book. ISBN 9781783745593 (2018), has claimed half-jokingly that much of his job consists of ‘counting poetry’. His work, along with scholars including Claire Januszewski, Brian Maidment, Kirstie Blair, has demonstrated the centrality of newspaper culture to Victorian poetry.

^{vii} Anon., ‘A Plea for the Cotton District’, *Stockport and Cheshire County News*, March 12th 1863.

^{viii} Edwin Waugh, *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk during the Cotton Famine* (Manchester, John Heywood, 1867).

^{ix} Anon., ‘Food or Work’, *Blackburn Times*, July 2nd 1864.