

# Cotton Famine Poetry: Technology, Trade, and Transatlantic Discourse

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## Summary

The Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861–1865 (also known as “The Cotton Panic” or simply “The Distress”) was largely caused by the Union blockade of Confederate goods, including cotton, during the American Civil War. The economy of the highly industrialized English county of Lancashire was heavily dependent on cotton. The poetry associated with this crisis represents a demographically diverse documentation of emotional response, commentary, and reportage. Almost four hundred poems have been collated and analyzed on the database developed at the University of Exeter, but it is known that there are hundreds more still to be added to this collection, which have yet to be processed or even discovered. The bulk of the poems were recovered from local Lancashire newspapers and other UK publications, but there is also verse published in Australia, France, Ireland, and dozens from publications representing both sides of the American Civil War itself. Almost all of the poetry first saw the light of day in newspapers, and in Lancashire these publications were local to each of the mill towns affected by the crisis. Towns such as Bolton, Rochdale, Blackburn, Preston, and Burnley had grown exponentially in the decades up to the Famine, and their populations, in many cases newly literate, were served by discrete periodicals performing important municipal services as conveyors of news, opinion, entertainment, and advertising. In addition, almost all British newspapers in the 1860s featured a weekly poetry or literature column, and though they sometimes included verse from classic living or historical authors, they often encouraged readers to submit poetry for publication. Cotton Famine poetry provides a window into the feelings and opinions of ordinary people in reaction to one of the most concentrated periods of industrial economic distress in the latter half of the 19th century.

**Keywords:** poetry, cotton, Victorian, laboring class, American Civil War, slavery, industry, newspapers, dialect, US–UK relations

**Subjects:** British and Irish Literatures, 19th Century (1800-1900), Poetry, Print Culture and Digital Humanities

## The Cotton Famine and Its Poetry

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When General Winfield Scott’s “Anaconda Plan” was adapted by Lincoln at the beginning of the American Civil War to blockade the Confederate states in April 1861, the economic consequences began to be felt across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere were these repercussions felt in a more concentrated way than in the geographically small but industrially significant county of Lancashire <https://www.geonames.org/11609047/lancashire.html> in northwest England. For this region, regarded as the cradle of the industrial revolution since the late 18th century, cotton was the economic lifeblood. When the source of 80 percent of its raw product was cut off at a stroke and remained unattainable for four years, the social consequences were profound. Approximately two thousand

mills worked cotton employing half a million people, and subsequent redundancies, short-time (reduced working hours) measures, and mill closures affected not just textile workers but dependents and a variety of associated trades.<sup>2</sup> The resulting economic deprivation led to mass unemployment, hunger, and disease. Huge local, national, and international relief efforts were eventually mobilized including, famously, a ship from the Union north (the *George Griswold*) in 1863 carrying barrels of flour into the Mersey for stricken workers. The history of this period has been well documented from a variety of different perspectives, but beyond the economic, political, and social historiographic approaches, the full extent of cultural production associated with the crisis has not been appreciated until very recently. The full launch of the University of Exeter's AHRC-funded Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine [\\_<https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/>](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/) database in 2019 made freely available hundreds of texts related to the crisis and provided contextual commentary, readings, and musical adaptations from some of the poem texts.

After briefly outlining the historical background to the phenomenon of Cotton Famine poetry this article will consider the contribution of dialect poetry to the overall body of work. Lancashire dialect poetry was an important part of British cultural production from the period, and had been part of print culture since the 18th century. This linguistically distinct subgenre was an integral element of the broader phenomenon of Cotton Famine poetry. Because the vast bulk of the poetry collected for the database was gathered from the poetry columns of newspapers, the burgeoning newspaper culture of the mid-19th-century period is significant (see section entitled "Newspaper Culture and Slavery Discourse"), especially in relation to poetic discourse on the subject of slavery during the American Civil War, which produced a moral fault line in British as well as American considerations. And the association of cotton with slavery led to some fascinating poetic explorations of the worth of alternative trade commodities, with fine examples coming from both sides of the Atlantic (see section entitled "American Cotton Poetry"). As the Cotton Famine poetry project expanded its searches, it was revealed that American poetry published during the Civil War commenting on the cotton trade and Anglo-American relations was effectively in dialogue with British poetry, and there are many examples of this body of work (see section entitled "Trade Alternatives"). Finally, the relationship between technological advances and cultural development and how this resulted in a democratization of knowledge exchange was very important not just in the Victorian period, but through recent efforts to digitize literary heritage (see section entitled "Technology and Democratic Access").

The study of Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry has increased the understanding of historians and literature scholars in relation to a particular socio-literary phenomenon in one of the most densely populated industrial areas of Britain. In cultural terms, a picture emerges of a region beginning to establish internal discourse through a network of newspapers newly enabled by technological, political, and social advances. By the time of the Cotton Famine in the early 1860s, this form of information exchange at this scale was still relatively recent, but it represented a vibrant cultural phenomenon, contributing to civic cohesion and the integration of policy at several levels. And in its way, poetry engaged with all of these innovations. The Victorian attitude to fit subjects for poetry was more liberal than some might imagine, and the ephemeral moment of the daily or weekly newspaper publication context only fed into this sense of authorial freedom. Poems published in local newspapers might well be lyrical and Romantic in tenor,

celebrating nature with references to well-known local beauty spots. But they might also as likely be occasional, commenting on perceived local government corruption, relief efforts, or broader political causes of poverty. The Cotton Famine was a crisis which touched the lives of almost everybody in the most densely populated nonmetropolitan region in the United Kingdom, just at a time when education and literacy rates were rising exponentially, and local newspapers were flourishing in their roles as the predominant media. At the same time, the brevity of poetry as a form meant that it was accessible as a cultural product in such a way as to provide an important agent of social and political representation. With popular traditions stretching back through broadside ballads, dialect poetry, and radical song and verse, such as the Chartist body of poetry from the generation before, Cotton Famine poetry—when collated and examined—represents a uniquely broad and deep expression of popular thought on a global crisis with particular regional effects.

## Lancashire Dialect Poetry

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Cotton Famine poetry, even in its apparently opaque Lancashire dialect forms, has resonated with later audiences because of the similarities between the Victorian crisis and the global Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. There are several resonances between the two in that in both global events bring industry to a halt and hasten mass economic distress, but some individual poems seem curiously relevant to recent *cultural* phenomena. Samuel Laycock was one of the big hitters of Lancashire dialect poetry during the 1860s, and his poem “Owd Barber Periwig’s Solilokwy [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=asr\\_1863-11-21\\_samuel-laycock](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=asr_1863-11-21_samuel-laycock)” is one of the poems which illustrate the effects of the crisis in the cotton industry bleeding out to reliant trades, in this case the male grooming industry. One section indicates that the character “Bob Travis” has opted for what many decades later would be known as “lockdown hair,” although clearly for economic reasons:

Aw know why Bob Travis ne’er gies me a co’,  
He’s lettin’ his beard an’ his mustashes grow;  
He’s tow’d me this week ’at he doesn’t intend  
To be shaved ony moor till trade begins t’mend.<sup>3</sup> (ll. 29–32)

This ventriloquizing of ordinary working people had been a common thread in Lancashire dialect poetry before the economic depression precipitated by the American Civil War, but the crisis provided an opportunity for writers like Samuel Laycock, William Billington, Joseph Ramsbottom, Edwin Waugh, and William Cunliffe to explore the effects of poverty and hardship from the perspective of the sufferers, rather than the sympathetic middle classes usually associated with literary production.<sup>4</sup> These poems attempt to invoke regional culture through a language that purported to be authentic, and although they might appear inward-looking in the exclusivity of their occasionally opaque language use, they were actually as likely to function in terms of multiple address—speaking to different readerships—as standard English poetry. Edwin Waugh’s 1856 “Come Whoam to Thi’ Childer an’ Me” had become nationally famous in the decade before the Cotton Famine as an example of poetry that appeared to open a window onto

northern English industrial working-class culture. Waugh was working as a traveler for a Manchester printer's firm at the time the poem was published. By the time the crisis had so deeply affected Rochdale-born Waugh's home county, he had begun to work exclusively as a writer and journalist, and later published one of the most famous accounts of the suffering of Lancashire people during the crisis. Samuel Laycock was a mill worker made unemployed by the Cotton Famine and similarly found fame and a living by exploiting his knowledge of local language and culture through poetry. Later in "Owd Barber Periwig's Solilokwy," the eponymous speaker dreams of changing location or profession in order to escape hardship, even considering emigrating and fighting for the Union:

Aw wish aw wur single, aw'd hook it fra' here,  
Aw'd sell o' mi razors, mi strop an' this cheer;  
Aw'd soon steer mi bark on the ocean wave,  
For aw'd go see iv the Yankees wur wantin' a shave.  
Iv aw didn't succeed, an' could get nowt to eight,  
Aw could list for a sodger, an' help 'em to feight. (ll. 49-54)

Even if Periwig's domestic arrangements precluded such a move, the suggestion is not as outlandish as it might sound. Many Lancastrians emigrated to America during the crisis, and several fought in the conflict. For linguistic, cultural, and increasingly political and economic reasons, the relationship between Britain and America changed considerably during the years of the American Civil War, and this is reflected in poetry published on both sides of the Atlantic. Maritime, rail, print, and communications technology reduced the cultural distance between the countries, but the conflict exposed Britain's tacit support of prewar American slavery through its reliance on imported cotton. The poetry of the period performs various functions but its concurrent commentary on local, national, and international conditions, events, and discourse provides important literary-historical evidence that has been previously overlooked. The wider reasons for this critical neglect are discussed further in the section on "Technology and Democratic Access," but for the moment it is important to recognize that linguistic obscurity is not the only factor.

## Newspaper Culture and Slavery Discourse

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Although the first attempts at a workable transatlantic telegraph had failed just before the American Civil War in 1858, its concept, and the hope it represented of instantaneous communication, remained prevalent and vital to Anglo-American relations. Just as the Vietnam War was recognized by the 1960s to be the first "Television War," the Crimean War of the mid-1850s had been viewed as the first war to be covered in what seemed like real time by the newspapers of the day. Because of telegraph technology, correspondents were able to post accounts of battles within hours of their occurrence, and the highly developed rail system in Britain distributed these accounts throughout the country at speed. However, telegraphy employed as a national network also undercut the large metropolitan newspapers by enabling the distribution of copy between regions within the United Kingdom, providing local newspapers

with a lifeline. Contrary to fears that technological advances in communication would result in a metropolitan cultural hegemony, regional and local autonomy burgeoned during this period. The distance between the global event and the local reception of it shrank, and it was this ethos of an accessible body of information and knowledge that permeated newspaper readerships and is reflected back through poetry often written by ordinary people. Although Lancashire dialect poetry might seem to be one of the most inward-looking of literary forms, using phonetic renderings of regional accents with often arbitrary-seeming orthography, even this very local verse was used to comment on global events. Characters in “Williffe Cunliam’s” “Settling th’ War” [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bfp\\_1863-08-22\\_williffe-cunliam](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bfp_1863-08-22_williffe-cunliam)” argue for either side of the American conflict on the streets of industrial Burnley; the speaker of William Billington’s “Th’ Surat Weyver” [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=sp\\_1977-01-01\\_william-billington](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=sp_1977-01-01_william-billington)” suggests that “Yankees” should be hanged by the threads of the Indian cotton variant (“Surat”), which Lancashire workers were forced to rely upon in lieu of the higher quality supplies from the blockaded Confederacy. At this period, certainly in the north of England, the term “Yankee” referred to all Americans, not exclusively those in the northern states. Frustration with the economic consequences of the war sometimes led to a reductive characterization of it as pointless internecine conflict.

In British Cotton Famine poetry, attitudes to the issue of slavery vary from abolitionist condemnation to willful lack of acknowledgment of its centrality to the cotton trade. For every poem condemning slavery in moral terms, there is another that simply calls for the end of the American Civil War and the return of cotton to the mills. But even poems that address the issue of slavery sometimes do so in unexpected or strangely indirect ways. Two poems published a year apart with the same title—“The Cotton Famine”—serve to exemplify the very different attitudes to the American conflict held in the northwest of England during this period. “The Cotton Famine” [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt\\_1862-05-17\\_a-blackburn-weaver](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt_1862-05-17_a-blackburn-weaver),” published in the *Blackburn Times* in May 1862, whose anonymous author claims to be “A Blackburn Weaver,” laments the suffering in Lancashire caused by the American Civil War but fails to mention slavery directly, though its message is deeply moral in relation to the industrial workers it represents. It is possible that this section refers to the plight of the African Americans whose suffering contributed to the industrial success of the British region, but if so it is an oddly coy reference:

Strong in morning, faintly nightly,  
 Ascends the parents anguish cry—  
 That from War’s red banner furling  
 Peace shall bless us by and by.  
 By the right that rules our conscience—  
 By the wrong which men proclaim  
 Through this suffering, Lancashire  
 Shall redeem her proudest name!<sup>5</sup> (ll. 34-41)

This may refer to the retrospective justification for stoic suffering in Lancashire in support of the Union abolitionist cause, even though Lancastrians had benefitted hugely from slave-grown cotton for decades. Certainly, Abraham Lincoln played upon this sentiment when he wrote an open letter [https://acws.co.uk/archives-misc-lincoln\\_letter](https://acws.co.uk/archives-misc-lincoln_letter) to the “working men of Manchester and all of Europe” in January 1863, thanking them for their support of the Union in spite of mass unemployment and hunger. Manchester had effectively declared its Union sympathies at a Free Trade Hall meeting the month before in defiance of the official British neutrality that Lincoln was attempting to undermine.

The second poem with the title “The Cotton Famine [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=wa\\_1863-05-02\\_senoi\\_trebor](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=wa_1863-05-02_senoi_trebor)” is remarkable in that although it was published in the Welsh town of Wrexham, it claims to have been written in Manchester in April 1863, just a few weeks after Lincoln’s letter. It was written by someone using the blatantly inverted pseudonym of “Senoi Trebor,” and takes a wholly different view of the situation. Even by Victorian standards, it is offensive and racist in relation to African Americans, claiming in its dehumanizing representation that they do not actually suffer through their mistreatment in the cotton fields of the American South:

For cotton like money is gambled and won,  
From the time when the blacks in the broiling sun,  
Pick it from plants as if it were fun,  
In spite of the driver’s whip, —  
Which ceaselessly plays about their backs  
As if they were only used up hacks—  
And so you might from the number of whacks  
Given every hour to these toiling blacks  
Who don’t seem to care for the strokes one flip.<sup>6</sup> (ll. 59–68)

The central moral concern of this work, as with the Blackburn poem of the same name, is the suffering of unemployed Lancastrians, but even at this relatively late stage of the conflict, when most commentators saw victory for the Union as eventually inevitable, the poem ends by looking elsewhere for raw cotton importation:

But the day will dawn for the factory hands,  
And the looms get to work with shuttles and bands,  
For cotton is coming from other lands  
Than America termed the South,  
India and Egypt have planted the plant,  
And until that day we’ll try if we can’t  
Fill every hungry mouth. (ll. 139–45)

While several Cotton Famine poems lament the stain of slavery on the product and view the American conflict as a means to morally redress Lancashire’s part in the trade, this work attempts to sidestep the American question by looking to the British Empire for raw cotton



replacement. In truth, Egypt's cotton production could not keep up with British demand, and most Lancashire mills were not set up to work the shorter, weaker fibers of Indian cotton from the Surat region, making the process relatively unproductive. This was the essential acknowledgment behind the prewar and later celebrations of the power of "King Cotton" <https://www.britannica.com/event/King-Cotton>," which the Confederacy had mistakenly believed would be enough to ensure official or at least tacit British support for secession.

## Trade Alternatives

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In other regions less exclusively dependent on cotton, the American Civil War appeared to offer an opportunity to concentrate efforts on other commodities in order to benefit from investment and future affluence. Some poems reflected this as they appeared to function partly as business proposals or prospectuses, suggesting new technologies, new uses of land, or alternative textile products to break the stranglehold cotton had on international trade. The advantage of linen over cotton was that its raw product—flax—was easily grown in colder regions and could replace some uses of cotton as a product. Ireland's flax-growing regions enjoyed a boost during the Cotton Famine, and this was celebrated in a poem written in the Irish county of Limerick but published in the *Irish American Weekly* in 1864. "Queen Flax" [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=ia\\_1864-02-20\\_t](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=ia_1864-02-20_t)," written anonymously by "T\_\_\_\_," predicts future prosperity for Ireland as linen goods replace cotton, and the figure of "King Cotton" is identified as stained by corruption and tied up with exclusively English fortunes. Again, this poem neglects to mention the issue of slavery, except perhaps where it celebrates Irish rural workers' satisfaction with their lot in relation to the production of linen's raw product. Like many Cotton Famine poems, there is a sense of region and place, but also an acute awareness of current international concerns:

Old Prussia is brave, but her King is insane,  
And, to hide her own faults, gone to plunder the Dane,  
In whose state just at present, there's something so rotten,  
It threatens to fall like the tyrant KING COTTON,  
Whose fall has occasioned the Lancashire tax,  
But also occasioned the rise of QUEEN FLAX.<sup>7</sup> (ll. 25-32)

The reference here is to the Second Schleswig War, between Prussian/Austrian forces and Denmark, which had only begun on February 1 of that year, just nineteen days before the publication of the poem. In keeping with the rather jaunty register of the poem, this conflict provides the writer with the opportunity to insert a *Hamlet* allusion. Unsurprisingly, this is not the only instance where a Cotton Famine poem rhymes the words "rotten" and "cotton." In terms of personification, however, this poem is interesting in its feminization of the figure representing the Irish resistance to British hegemony. Irish nationalist mythical figures such as Kathleen ni Houlihan or Roisin Dubh <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/roisin-dubh-micheal-ocleirigh> had long been used in literature as symbolizing the island as female, and the identification of the flax crop as female is an interesting extension of this tradition.

In America itself alternative products to cotton deemed worthy of investment and holding the potential to reinvigorate international trade were a variety of cereal grain crops, but particularly wheat, referred to by the general term “corn.” The poem published in the *Portland Advertiser* in February 1863 simply entitled “Corn [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=pa\\_1863-02-28\\_e-ross-white](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=pa_1863-02-28_e-ross-white),” similarly to “Queen Flax,” employs elaborate metaphors to set up its subject in opposition to the personified textile. This time, slavery (and possibly Lancashire suffering) is alluded to as the poem ends by investing the food crop with mythical status:

Nature herself doth take a smile  
When unto her are born  
(to feed a million starving men)  
So many grains of corn.  
The ill-fed serfs of Cotton King  
Fall down in conscious shame,  
And glorious paeans loudly sing  
Unto the Rescuer’s name.

All tongues, all nations, will be glad  
When Corn has come to reign,  
To spread his banners o’er the earth  
In Peace and Love again!<sup>8</sup> (ll. 25-36)

The significance of corn as a food crop in relation to the hunger caused across the globe by war is marked here, and the same association features in another poem celebrating corn’s predicted ascendancy as a morally preferable commodity. “A New King [https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=fc\\_1861-02-08\\_charles-l-porter](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=fc_1861-02-08_charles-l-porter)” was published in the *American Farmer’s Market* magazine in February 1861, just two months before the outbreak of the American Civil War. It was written by Professor Charles L. Porter and is even more explicit in its personification of its opposed subjects, deliberately associating the food crop with the cause of abolition:

“Cotton is dead”—how the echo rolls  
Over the hills and down the vales,  
And millions of faint and careworn souls  
Hail the coming of Freedom’s sails.  
Up with the banner! Swell the huzza!  
Spread, echoes, spread afar and afar!  
Shout the loud paeon, exultingly sing,  
Cotton is dead and Corn is King!<sup>9</sup> (ll. 9-16)



During a time of huge political tension and violent conflagration, it is tempting to see the use of personification in these poems, this apparent investment of agency in inanimate objects and entities, as part of a depersonalizing process that avoids offending political or social groups while still making forceful, often radical arguments. Poetry's function here, beyond that of journalistic reportage, political opinion, or prose rhetoric, is partly to persuade through "affect"—in this case referring to the potential emotional agency of the verse. The intent is that the emotional register of the text will be replicated in the reader and lead to a change in, or reinforcement of, opinion. Personified figures are useful avatars for political energy and expression, absorbing or expressing strong emotion in a discourse that often runs parallel to conventional political opinion and discussion in newspapers and elsewhere. This function of Cotton Famine poetry as an adjunct of conventional journalism in newspapers was discussed by F. Elizabeth Gray in her 2017 article, "Journalism and Poetry in the Nineteenth Century." Although Gray's piece focuses on the relationship between poetry and journalism and asks whether poetry can "do journalism," it also recognizes the distinctive complexity of poetry's social function when it states that "[i]n the particular case of the Cotton Famine, it contributed signally to the periodical circulation of particular messages, metaphors, and linguistic effects, helping produce a discourse of distress. . ." <sup>10</sup>

One of the more outlandish proposals to address the dearth of cotton referred to in Cotton Famine poetry is represented by the satirical verse "Harben's Love Song <[https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bq1862\\_1862-10-18\\_unknown](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bq1862_1862-10-18_unknown)>," published in the *Bury Guardian* in October 1862. Oceanic seagrass (whose Latin name is *Zostera marina*) was used in the textile industry in its dried form to stuff mattresses, but this poem pokes fun at an ambitious plan to use the product to replace cotton in mills in the northwest of England.

Zostera Marina, grim Manchester's shaking,  
One half of her steam-engines silent and still,  
No cotton's at hand, and we're all in a taking  
To know where to turn, for new grist for the mill.  
It seems to myself that the notion was clever  
(It came as I wandered by ocean apart),  
Thy fibre to take, and to make the endeavour  
To give drooping labour another fresh start. <sup>11</sup> (ll. 1-8)

Little is known about this doomed idea to attempt to replace one textile crop with another, but beyond the mocking register of the poem there is a deep sense of the frustration of Lancashire workers made unemployed by the crisis. Interestingly, another attempt to save the world via exactly the same plant was being investigated 179 years later, when a Spanish chef began to consider the implications of harvesting grain from *Zostera marina* as an environmentally sustainable food crop. <sup>12</sup> The final line of "Harben's Love Song" quotes a commonplace metaphor: "The proof of the pudding's in eating, my weed" (l. 16). Little can the anonymous writer have known that, even if the textile uses of the marine plant were limited, the final line of the poem would prefigure an ambitious culinary idea almost two centuries later.

## American Cotton Poetry

There are plenty of examples of English poetry published in newspapers in Lancashire towns, commenting not just on the effects of the American conflict but on the events associated with it. In turn, there are American poems—Union and Confederate—which comment on the British political stance in relation to the cotton blockade, and also the fate of its mill workers in Lancashire. American newspapers publishing poetry at this time tend to be municipal or state-wide, and therefore larger publications. It is partly for this reason that the American poetry associated with the Cotton Famine appears to be of a more consistently intellectual or satirical quality, often commenting directly on global concerns within particular political agendas. Both southern and northern poetry from America during this period is characterized by a suspicion of British motives in relation to the war. The United Kingdom was officially neutral in relation to the conflict, but the Trent Affair, the issue of blockade runners out of British ports, and strong abolitionist sympathies complicated this stance.<sup>13</sup> The anonymous “London Times on American Affairs” <[https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=cm\\_1861-11-30\\_unknown](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=cm_1861-11-30_unknown)>” is a satirical poem published near the beginning of the war in the *Charleston Mercury* in November 1861. The poem addresses early attempts at “cotton diplomacy” from the Confederacy and can be seen as a commentary on the misplaced confidence that economic reliance on the product would swing British sympathies toward the South. Much of the piece presents a conversation between the figure of John Bull and the *London Times* newspaper, apparently symbolizing the political discourse within Britain in relation to the American Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, to highlight the satirical nature of the text and to represent a view of the British that is both metropolitan and universal, John Bull as speaker displays an exaggerated Cockney accent, complete with the kind of bilabial fricatives used by Dickens for the character Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837). It is also possible that this working-class idiom is intended to suggest the nature of the British industry’s perceived pressure on the government to secure the return of cotton as a commodity. The final stanza is pessimistic:

Has Bull vos a valkin in London haround,  
 ‘E found the Times lying hupon the cold ground,  
 With a big bale hof cotton right hover ‘is side,  
 Says Bull: “Hi perceive ‘was by cotton he died!”<sup>15</sup> (ll. 53–56)

As is often the case with satirical poetry, there is a fascinating element of double address here, with the poem clearly playing to the sympathies of its Confederate demographic, while sending a message to a fellow newspaper across the Atlantic and by extension the British people and government. And given the nature of transatlantic exchange, even through the disruption of the conflict and the blockade, the editors of the *Times* would have read this satirical commentary at some point. Even without an effective transatlantic telegraph (the resumption of oceanic cable laying had to wait until 1865), the nature of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the two sides of the American conflict can effectively be read as a complex discourse, reflecting

political developments as it catches up with them. The frequent apostrophizing of distant entities in Cotton Famine poetry on both sides of the Atlantic maintains a rhetorical momentum, which at least becomes part of a network of discourse even if it is occasionally isolated geographically.

Another American poem, this time from the Union side of the conflict, which addresses Britain is “Mason and Slidell <[https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=ldc\\_1862-01-07\\_l-l-a-v](https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=ldc_1862-01-07_l-l-a-v)>,” by “L. L. A. V.,” published in the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* on January 7, 1862, barely two months after the notorious Trent Affair to which it refers. This time the address is more direct as the nation is referred to as “Old England,” long before Donald Rumsfeld’s 2003 “Old Europe” slight.<sup>16</sup> Mason and Slidell were the Confederate envoys arrested when the Royal Mail steamship *Trent* was intercepted on its way to Europe by the USS *San Jacinto*. The incident caused a major diplomatic rift between the nations, as the Union feared that Britain might formalize trade or military aid to the Confederacy. Cotton was perceived to be the central motivating factor, and the poem acknowledges this and the hypocrisy of the UK’s abolitionist credentials with a graphic metaphor:

Take them and welcome, Old England—the traitors!  
Tho’ a slave cannot breathe on your boasted free soil.  
Your arms open wide to receive their oppressors;  
Should any one hinder, the world you’d embroil!

Sit down at your ease with your ears stuffed with cotton,  
(Full long are they closed to your paupers’ sad wail!)  
You like the slave’s products, if others will keep him;  
You heed not the sorrows pressed down in each bale.<sup>17</sup> (ll. 1–8)

The phenomenon of transatlantic discourse through poetry during the American Civil War, and particularly that centering on the subject of the cotton trade, is distinctly revealing about the nature of “the special relationship” at this point in history. The UK’s trade interests ran counter to its professed abolitionist commitments, and the exposure of this during the diplomatic crisis in the early years of the war led to censure from both sides of the conflict, and nowhere is this more emotively expressed than in the literary frame of newspaper poetry.

## Technology and Democratic Access

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The phenomenon of Cotton Famine poetry, as a mass body of work distributed within and across dozens of newspapers published over half a decade, could not have occurred without certain historical conditions. Just a few years before, communications via rail and telegraph would not have been sophisticated enough to have enabled the growth of local newspapers and spread news across nations and oceans so rapidly. In the United Kingdom, print technology and liberalizing tax policies lowered prices and created the conditions for a proliferation of publications that celebrated local culture and included verse as part of the process of this celebration. From the perspective of the 21st century, technology has also enabled not just the initial creation of this

literary phenomenon, but its collection and interpretation more than half a century later. Although there was some critical and publishing recognition of the existence of Cotton Famine poetry during and immediately after the 1860s, the subject eventually fell into literary neglect. The only collection of poetry in specific relation to the Cotton Famine in the 20th century was in Brian Hollingworth's *Songs of the People*.<sup>18</sup> This book is an edited collection of Lancashire dialect verse, and the chapter entitled "The Cotton Panic" features eleven dialect poems from the early 1860s by writers such as William Billington, Samuel Laycock, Joseph Ramsbottom, and Edwin Waugh. Although the interest in Lancashire dialect verse was national in the mid-19th century, by the 20th century it was largely seen in popular terms as quaint linguistic conundrums, and in academic terms as problematic in relation to questions of authenticity. This neglect was only compounded by a general lack of interest in Victorian working-class cultural production, which only began to be rectified in the 1980s. As an example, the only substantial collection of British Chartist poetry produced through the whole of the 20th century was Y. V. Kovalev's *An Anthology of Chartist Literature*, published in Moscow in 1956.<sup>19</sup>

Though the lack of interest in historical working-class cultural production in the early and mid-20th century might have contributed to Cotton Famine poetry being left unexamined for so long, a huge methodological challenge lay in the fact that these poems were distributed across many different publications, many of which had been preserved at the local level in a variety of manners and conditions. Even before digitization was conceived of, many local libraries in the United Kingdom worked to photograph their crumbling paper archives and preserve them with microfilm technology. These efforts at the local level were vital to preserve a record of the vast numbers of newspapers published over the previous decades and centuries, and filled in the gaps where the British Library's holdings provided incomplete coverage. When it came to the work of collecting Cotton Famine poetry from newspapers on a small scale in 2015, and at the larger AHRC-funded scale from 2017, the flexible methodology reflected the heterogeneous nature of existing archives. Material was gathered from digitized newspapers where possible, but the bulk of it was retrieved by a painstaking trawling of microfilm copies in local libraries across Lancashire. It was occasionally necessary to examine physical copies of 19th-century newspapers and poetry collections, and visits to the British Library, Hartford Public Library in Connecticut, and the New York Public Library contributed to the collection of texts. In addition to this, archives and libraries in the South of the United States are being searched for more material from the Confederate side of the conflict.

Just as the conceptual elements of the Cotton Famine poetry project were conceived in consultation with members of the University of Exeter Centre for Victorian Studies <https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/english/research/centres/victorian/> and its Victorianist contacts across the globe, the technological requirements of the database were developed in conjunction with the Exeter Digital Humanities Lab <https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/research/digital/>. 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 digitizing 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 labor of project members and volunteer work by students and public groups and individuals. But the major decisions that 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 that 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 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 contextualize and provide understanding of its cultural and social significance.

So through the cultural response to the Lancashire Cotton Famine, poetry, the literary genre popularly associated with the aesthetic and the intangible, 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 recognized 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 or expansion. The postindustrial digital age, like an echo of the technological advances of the mid-19th-century period of the industrial revolution, has accelerated the means of communication by which texts and information are distributed. Cultural access is being democratized again.

## Discussion of the Literature

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The critical literary field relating to Cotton Famine poetry as a distinct body of work is limited because the subject is only recently established. After F. Elizabeth Gray touched on the subject of Cotton Famine poetry in her 2017 article, “Journalism and Poetry in the Nineteenth Century,” Simon Rennie discussed how the poetry reveals the attitudes of Lancashire workers to the American Civil War in his 2020 *Journal of Victorian Culture* article, “This ‘Merikay War’: Poetic Responses in Lancashire to the American Civil War.”<sup>20</sup> Drawing on hundreds of texts collected for the Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine database, this was the first scholarly publication dedicated exclusively to the subject, along with a blog piece published the same year for the same journal.<sup>21</sup> However, since the texts were made available in stages in 2018 and 2020, critical interest has burgeoned and several studies at postgraduate and scholarly levels are emerging.

However, in the meantime, it is worth placing Cotton Famine poetry within the broader subject of laboring-class Victorian literature, which has been particularly prevalent in Anglophone scholarship over the past half century.

Studies of British Victorian laboring-class literature such as Brian Hollingworth's *Songs of the People*; Brian Maidment's *The Poorhouse Fugitives*; or Mike Sanders's *The Poetry of Chartism* have long recognized the centrality of verse to the industrial demographic.<sup>22</sup> Long working hours and lack of education might have precluded the writing of fiction, but poetry's oral tradition and the accessibility of its brevity of form encouraged engagement and production. Working people read and wrote verse, and occasionally sought its publication. However, the field of periodical studies largely ignored poetry until the publication of Linda Hughes's 2007 article, "What the Wellesley Index Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies," and Natalie Huston's 2008 article, "Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere."<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, scholars including Andrew Hobbs, Claire Januszewski, Brian Maidment, Kirstie Blair, and Linda Hughes in Alison Chapman and Caley Ehnes's special issue of *Victorian Poetry* in 2014 helped to demonstrate the centrality of newspaper culture to Victorian poetry.<sup>24</sup> All of these experts have examined different aspects of the intersection between class, verse, and newspaper publication, with Blair writing about the poetic culture of Dundee through one newspaper, Sanders taking Chartist poetry from the *Northern Star* newspaper as his source material, and Hobbs revealing on a broader level the extent of the effect of newspaper culture on poetry in the 19th century.<sup>25</sup> Hobbs's 2017 monograph, *A Fleet Street in Every Town*, reveals that the number of provincial newspapers in the United Kingdom almost tripled from 224 in 1846 to 723 in 1866, and makes the point that as well as the abolition of Stamp Duty tax in 1855 boosting this trend, news and other content was distributed much more effectively by the technologies of rail and telegraph.<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, advances in paper production technologies during the 1840s and 1850s had reduced the costs of production, and this was passed on to newspaper customers. Reflecting the region's density of populations, Lancashire's entry as a discrete county in the 1861 edition of the *Newspaper Gazetteer* is the largest by some measure, listing seventy-seven daily and weekly newspapers.<sup>27</sup> Of this number, only twenty-four had been established before 1850, and significantly, of these older titles, thirteen were publications associated with the larger cities of Liverpool and Manchester. Most towns developed their newspaper cultures after this date, and most over a certain size had at least two publications, offering religious or political diversity to growing populations.

At the time of writing, the critical field of Cotton Famine poetry is still very new, with barely a year having passed since the eventual inclusion of four hundred poems on the database. However, this author is aware of several academic articles currently under consideration using the database as a primary source. For myself, I have an article forthcoming entitled "[Re-]forming Cotton Famine Poetry—Some Implications," in the Digital Forum of the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, discussing critical and digital methodology, and through 2022 I am working with a publisher on a monograph on the broader topic. There has also been substantial pedagogical interest in the subject at several levels, from primary and secondary school teaching packs, through Master's dissertations written on the subject, to inclusion on modules in Higher Education institutions such as the University of York and Boston College. Cotton Famine poetry appeals as a subject because it is broad enough to allow for interpretations that emphasize political, social, historical,



or literary elements. It helps to reveal the opinions of ordinary people to extraordinary events, and illuminates fascinating networks of discourse between social groups and classes and even nations. It also, by its very nature, sits at the intersection between the global and the local, with almost every poem being concerned with its own locality's social distress, even as this distress is demonstrably caused by geopolitical developments.

Cotton Famine poetry should be considered within the context of laboring-class Victorian poetry more generally, but also carries important links to journalistic practice, industry and trade discourses, and Anglo-American relations during this period. In addition, the extensive commentary it produced on the subject of slavery provides a window into the discussions ordinary people in the United Kingdom and the United States were having in relation to abolition.

## Links to Digital Materials

Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861–65 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/>.

For further information on Samuel Laycock, Edwin Waugh, and William Billington, see the Minor Victorian Poets and Authors <https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/> website.

For northern British laboring-class writing from the 1840s to the 1910s, see the Piston, Pen & Press <https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/> website.

## Further Reading

Blair, Kirstie, ed. *Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland*. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016.

Gray, F. Elizabeth. "Poetry and Journalism in the Nineteenth Century: Calls to Action." *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 7 (2017): 807–825.

Hobbs, Andrew. *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2018.

Hollingworth, Brian, ed. *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977.

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

Maidment, Brian, ed. *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1987.

Rennie, Simon. "Cotton Famine Poetry as Affective Commentary in Lancashire and Beyond <https://jvc.oup.com/2020/01/31/cotton-famine-poetry/>." *Journal of Victorian Culture Online*, 2020.

Rennie, Simon. "This 'Merikay War': Poetic Responses in Lancashire to the American Civil War." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 25, no. 1 (January 2020): 126–143.

Victorian Periodical Poetry, *Guest Editors: Alison Chapman and Caley Ehnes*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2014).

## Notes

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1. Winfield Scott (1786–1866) was a veteran general in the Union army who developed a strategy to surround the Confederacy with a military blockade to stifle import and export activity including arms and cotton. This was later referred to as the "Anaconda Plan."
2. Norman Longmate, *The Hungry Mills: The Story of the Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861–5* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1978), 43.
3. Samuel Laycock, "Owd Barber Periwig's Solilokwy," *Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter*, November 21, 1863. Poetic line references will be indicated by "l" for single lines and "ll" for multiple lines.
4. See "Links to Digital Materials" section for information on some of these writers.
5. "A Blackburn Weaver" (pseud.), "The Cotton Famine," *Blackburn Times*, May 17, 1862.
6. "Senoj Trebor" (pseud.), "The Cotton Famine," *Wrexham Advertiser*, May 2, 1863.
7. "T...." (Anon.), "Queen Flax," *Irish American*, February 20, 1864.
8. E. Ross White, "Corn," *Portland Advertiser*, February 28, 1863.
9. Prof. Charles L. Porter, "A New King," *Farmer's Cabinet*, February 8, 1861.
10. F. Elizabeth Gray, "Poetry and Journalism in the Nineteenth Century: Calls to Action," *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 7 (2017): 807–825, 807.
11. Anon, "Harben's Love Song," *Bury Guardian*, October 18, 1862.
12. Ashifa Kassam, "The Rice of the Sea: How a Tiny Grain Could Change the Way Humanity Eats," *Guardian*, April 9, 2001.
13. The "Trent Affair" was a major diplomatic incident at the beginning of the Civil War precipitated on November 8, 1861, by the Union arrest of two Confederate diplomats, James Murray Mason and John Slidell. They were traveling to Britain and France, respectively, on the British RMS *Trent*, and were intercepted at the Bahama Channel by the USS *San Jacinto*.
14. "John Bull" was the popular personification of Britain and British interests featuring in caricatures and poetry from the 18th century and throughout the 19th century.
15. Anon, "London Times on American Affairs," *Charleston Mercury*, November 30, 1861.
16. On January 22, 2003, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to France and Germany as representing "Old Europe," in a perceived attack on those countries' opposition to the impending invasion of Iraq.
17. "L. L. A. V." (Pseud), "Mason and Slidell," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News*, January 7, 1862.
18. Brian Hollingworth, ed., *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977).

19. Y. V. Kovalev, ed., *An Anthology of Chartist Literature* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956).
20. Gray, "Poetry and Journalism in the Nineteenth Century," 807; and Simon Rennie, "This 'Merikay War': Poetic Responses in Lancashire to the American Civil War," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 25, no. 1 (January 2020): 126–143.
21. Simon Rennie, "Cotton Famine Poetry as Affective Commentary in Lancashire and Beyond [\\_<https://jvc.oup.com/2020/01/31/cotton-famine-poetry/>](https://jvc.oup.com/2020/01/31/cotton-famine-poetry/)," *Journal of Victorian Culture*.
22. Hollingworth, *Songs of the People*; Brian Maidment, ed., *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1987); and Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
23. Linda Hughes, "What the Wellesley Index Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 40, no. 2 (2007): 91–125; and Natalie Huston, "Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2008): 233–242.
24. Special issue, *Victorian Poetry* 52, no. 1 (2014).
25. Kirstie Blair, ed., *Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016).
26. Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2018).
27. *The Newspaper Gazetteer and Guide to Advertisers: An Annual Register of Newspapers* (London: Newton & Co., 1861), 68–71.

### Related Articles

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