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‘This ’Merikay War’: Poetic Responses in Lancashire
to the American Civil War

Abstract

This article examines Lancashire commentary on the American Civil War during the Cotton Famine of 1861-65 through poetry which has recently been recovered from local newspapers. The complexity and variety of the often labouring-class subjectivities figured in the texts works to further disrupt the conventional historical view of a region united in moral and political sympathy with the Union cause, as exemplified by discourses surrounding Lincoln's letter to the region in 1863. Much of this poetry displays an acute awareness of its place in the world. Labouring-class Lancashire people were forced by economic circumstances to confront the nature of a Victorian globalisation which had proved its instability, and many began to see themselves in terms of a global subjectivity for the first time. This poetic discourse may have been materially and culturally adjacent to journalistic comment on the crisis, but poetry's imaginative freedom and ability to compress language and hence cultural meaning often represented an amplification, distortion, or even contradiction of implied editorial comment. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the sometimes febrile context of Lancashire commentary on the American Civil War and its domestic effects. Even when no particular resolution was offered as an option the ability of Lancashire poets to represent the voice of their fellow sufferers with some degree of authenticity served to reflect the ever more intimate relationship between the Victorian global and the local which the effects of the American war demonstrated in such stark terms.

Keywords

Lancashire Cotton Famine

American Civil War

Labouring Class

Poetry

Newspaper

History

The American war is still lasting;
 Like a terrible nightmare it leans
 On the breast of a country, now fasting
 For cotton, for work, and for means.
 And humanity is calling.

‘The Mill-Hand’s Petition’, ‘W. C.’, c. 1861

At the tail-end of the Lancashire Cotton Famine, in the summer of 1864, the metropolitan newspaper the *Examiner* reviewed a collection of Lancashire dialect verse by the Mancunian poet, Joseph Ramsbottom, describing the social effects of the crisis. This review of *Phases of Distress: Lancashire Rhymes*, a volume published simultaneously in Manchester and London, began with the following words:

A remarkable feature in this Lancashire cotton famine is the fact that it has left a memorial in many Lancashire songs, printed and diffused in broadsheets or collected into volumes, written by sufferers themselves or persons in close relation or accord with them. There is a great depth of feeling in them all, and of this comes not a seldom strain of true poetry. The poems collected in this book are by Mr Ramsbottom, one among several of these local poets, among whom the chief is Mr Waugh, and we believe that most, or all of them, first printed on detached leaves, had currency among the operatives during the days of their sorest trial.¹

As well as recognition of the grassroots provenance of this collection, and the formation of something like a ‘school’ of Lancashire Cotton Famine poets, this review recognises the aesthetic qualities and social function of this body of work. What is remarkable is that this contemporary analysis was barely followed up for a subsequent century-and-a-half of literary studies, and that this distinctly regional, but globally relevant, ‘memorial’ has not been critically remembered to any great degree. Such attention would have revealed that hundreds of poems dealing with the effects of the crisis, often written by ordinary Lancashire people, also featured in the many local newspapers published in the region during the period of the American Civil War. The complexity of these responses represents an important but previously unexplored indicator of labouring-class attitudes to their plight which further disrupts the popular historical view of a region united in moral and political sympathy with the Union cause.² It also provides a greater understanding of a moment **in history where**

¹ The *Examiner* (London, England), Saturday, August 13, 1864; Issue 2950. British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

² For example, Chris Aspin, in ‘Cotton’s Legacy’ 325-56, a chapter in *The Lancashire Cotton Industry: A History Since 1700* (Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1996), claims that ‘[t]he response of the operatives ... was of heroic proportions. There was much sympathy for the north in its struggle to abolish slavery...’ 341. Mark Krantz, in the pamphlet *The Cotton Famine: Lancashire Textile Workers, Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War* (RedRoof Publishing, 2017) 7, states that ‘...after much argument and debate, English textile workers – despite their suffering and hardship – sided with the American President Abraham Lincoln.’ 7.

poetry mediates the relationship between the Victorian global and local in particularly significant ways.

Contemporary popular alternative terms for the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861-65 – ‘the Cotton Panic’, ‘the Distress’ – emphasise its emotional impact on the people of the region. It therefore follows that poetry, the literary form perceived as having the most direct affective agency, might provide a useful re-reading of this extraordinary economic event from the perspective of those who suffered most.³ Moreover, in practical terms, poetry’s relative brevity provides the easiest creative access for working people. The Cotton Famine coincided with rising literacy rates in industrialised South-east Lancashire and the final phase of the ‘Golden Age’ of Lancashire dialect poetry centred on writers including the aforementioned Edwin Waugh, Samuel Laycock, and William Billington. However, although all of these poets detailed the effects of the economic disaster which befell Lancashire at this time, many occasional poets, often anonymously or pseudonymously, commented (in dialect and standard English forms) on the Famine and its effects and causes in local newspapers across the region. Patrick Joyce noted the cultural function of local dialect literature during the period in *Visions of the People* (1991):

Famine relief involved adult schooling, and street singing, increasing the audience for and the exponents of dialect. In the 1850s and 60s every town of any size gained its local newspaper, and often more than one, and these published large numbers of dialect sketches, poems and dialogues, often written by local authors, as well as the better known writers.⁴

Historians have long been aware of the phenomenon of the cultural response to the Lancashire Cotton Famine, and scholars including Andrew Hobbs, Claire Januszewski, Brian Maidment, Kirstie Blair, and Linda Hughes in Alison Chapman and Caley Ehnes’ special issue of *Victorian Poetry* in 2014 have demonstrated the centrality of newspaper culture to Victorian poetry. However, literature scholars have been slow to recover, gather, and interpret this important evidence of the working-class reaction to a local economic crisis with global causes.⁵ One of the few serious critical appreciations of the poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine has been undertaken by F. Elizabeth Gray in her recent article, ‘Journalism and Poetry in the Nineteenth Century’. Although this piece focusses on the relationship between poetry and journalism and asks whether poetry can ‘do journalism’ it nevertheless recognises 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

³ In *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spencer to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985) Peter M. Sacks suggests the elegy can be regarded as a ‘work, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience...’ This function is clearly in evidence in much Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry. 1.

⁴ Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the question of class 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 263.

⁵ *Victorian Poetry* 2014 52(1)

particular messages, metaphors, and linguistic effects, helping produce a discourse of distress...’⁶

At the time of writing, research has already uncovered hundreds of poems from local publications which refer directly to the ‘Distress’, the first one hundred of which were published with audio recitations and commentary on a publicly accessible database, *The Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861-65)*, on July 31 2018.⁷ Given the number of newspapers published in the region and the fact that most had weekly poetry columns, these numbers are sure to be in excess of a thousand as research progresses. The sheer scale of this body of work presents challenges, but also opportunities. Eventually, it will be possible to draw a map of the region’s published poetic response to the Famine, with shifts in topic and register following the fortunes of each town as it responds to the introduction of ‘short time’, the closure of its mills, the implementation of relief measures, and the crucial introduction of the Public Works Act of 1864. For now, enough material has emerged to give a good indication of the depth and breadth of feeling amongst the people of the region towards the American Civil War, when the Union blockade of Southern cotton greatly extended and exacerbated an already looming economic crisis caused by overproduction.

It has long been recognised that contemporary or historiographic characterisations of a generally uniform stoicism across the region in the face of severe economic hardship are countered by the results of closer attention to media reports of the time.⁸ The cultural resonance of Abraham Lincoln’s famous open letter to the region after the Union-supporting Manchester Free Trade Hall meeting of December 30th 1862 has undoubtedly skewed popular perceptions of the response of the region as a whole. When Lincoln declared that ‘I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working-men of Manchester, and in all Europe, are called to endure in this crisis...’, praising the ‘sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country’ he was not only grossly misrepresenting the gender balance in the cotton industry (men were outnumbered by women and children as mill ‘hands’) but was contributing to a deliberately reductive characterisation for political ends.⁹ And while Lincoln was responding to Mancunian support Manchester was only a part of Lancashire, and a part with a more diverse economy due to its relative size compared to towns such as Rochdale, Burnley, or Blackburn. Not only was there no broadly uniform response across the region to global issues affecting local industry, there was also no simple binary of support for one particular American side or another. In 1972 Mary Ellison observed that

⁶ F. Elizabeth Gray, ‘Poetry and Journalism in the Nineteenth Century: Calls to Action’, *Journalism Studies* Volume 18. 2017, Issue 7. 807-825, 807.

⁷ <http://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/> Database published by University of Exeter AHRC funded project, The Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine.

⁸ Mary Ellison, *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972); Janet Toole, ‘Workers and slaves: class relations in South Lancashire in the time of the Cotton Famine’ in *Labour History Review* (Maney Publishing). Summer 98, Vol. 63 Issue 2, 160-181.

⁹ Abraham Lincoln, ‘Letter to the Working-Men of Manchester, England’, January 19, 1863, <http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/lincoln/reply-to-workingmen-of-manchester-january-19-1863/>

[t]he large body of working-class and radical opinion in Lancashire that was in favor of mediating on behalf of or recognizing the South cannot be dismissed as fitting any one pattern. Radical and working-class support in Lancashire for Southern independence was too large and too diverse to be simply explained in any terms other than those relating to basic survival. That this pro-Southern support had no influence on government policy does not mean, as has been so often presumed, that it did not exist, but that it lacked political power.¹⁰

Whilst the Lancashire working-classes may have lacked political power they at least attained a measure of cultural agency through the vibrant newspaper culture of the time. Social and political discourse was reflected and generated in the news and comment pages of local publications, but also in their poetry columns, several of which were weekly and regularly placed. This poetry provides further evidence of the complexity of working people's political response to the crisis domestically, and the wider issue of the American conflict, the political and moral issue of slavery, and the transatlantic relationship. In 2016 Kirstie Blair published *The Poets of the People's Journal* (2016), an anthology of working-class newspaper poetry published around the same time as the Famine but across the border in Scotland. In its introduction she notes: 'While the newspaper press is a highly mediated form, it does give more, and to some degree unique, insight into what working people were writing and reading and why they were doing so.'¹¹ One might add 'experiencing' and 'thinking' to these areas of insight.

The extent of Lancashire popular and political engagement with the issues of the American Civil War was satirised by a poet calling himself 'Williffe Cunliam' in a dialect piece called 'Settlin' th' War!'¹² published in the *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, August 22nd, 1863. This poem plays on the comic juxtaposition of global discourse and regional dialect as it presents a picture of local Burnley bigwigs inflating their own importance discussing the fortunes of the American conflict. Even the exclamatory title serves to highlight the pomposity of the piece's targets.

Wot's the matter? – wot's the matter? –
 Wot's theas folks, all staning raond?
 Hez ther sum'uddy bin feightin,
 Ur ther's sum'uddy kill'd ur draown'd?

Oh! aw know, naoh, - aw'd forgettun –
 Welly¹³ six-months, fur ur nar,
 Heer aor parlyment's bin meetin,

¹⁰ Mary Ellison, *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972) 11.

¹¹ Kirstie Blair, editor, *Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), xviii.

¹² 'Williffe Cunliam' (William Cunliffe), 'Settlin' th' War!' *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, August 22nd, 1863

¹³ 'Well-nigh' (Lancs dialect).

Bizzy settling o' th' war.

Chaps wi' noddles¹⁴ full o' larning;
 Yeds¹⁵ ut's brasting wi' ther wit,
 Heer yo'll find, boath neet un morning,
 Gie'ing the world the benefit. (ll. 1-12)

The phonetic rendering of local speech patterns including exaggerated diphthong vowels and heavy glottal conjunctives combines with a complex mode of address to present a poetic voice which assumes a faux-naif persona. The speaker feigns ignorance while claiming to see a truer, wider picture than the local politicians and businessmen whose opinions counted for something in the recently prosperous industrial Northern town. The first stanza's representation of the apparent melee caused by the gathering, equated with violence or tragedy, sets an imagistic scene, establishes a conversational register, and suggests the chaotic powerlessness prevalent in the mood of concerned regions in industrial Lancashire. However these men's 'noddles' might be 'full o' larning', and their 'yeds' be 'brasting [bursting] wi' ther wit', intellect and articulacy fail in the face of global economics and international military developments. By the end of the poem it is also made clear that this paralysis is exacerbated by moral and political dichotomies:

This mon threopin¹⁶, all for Davis,
 T'other Lincoln, fair ur faol,-
 Tongs un poker, whang, bang at it,
 Spit un sputter, gern un groawl.

Well! chaps, hurry up the bizness,
 (Let's hoap th' end on't's getting nar)
 Spout away at Nuttall's corner,
 Finish th' job, un settle th' war. (ll. 37-44)

The poetic voice retains an observational political neutrality, but the discursive deadlock suggests that Union and Confederate sympathies hold equal sway in the town, at least within this local 'parlyment'. However, if the unlikely moniker 'Williffe Cunliam' is really a transposition of the more probable 'William Cunliffe' then there are indications that the author of this poem held sympathies for the South. There certainly was a William Cunliffe living in Burnley in the 1860s: successive census records track a William Cunliffe born in 1833, listed later as a blacksmith. This occupation is corroborated in Cunliam's poem 'Th' Petched Shirt', which begins 'One day, reight anenst aor smithy...' ¹⁷ In addition, the *Burnley Advertiser* reported that just four months before the above poem was published a young man

¹⁴ 'Heads' (Lancs dialect).

¹⁵ 'Heads' (Lancs dialect).

¹⁶ 'Arguing' (Lancs dialect via Old Norse).

¹⁷ 'Williffe Cunliam', 'Th' Petched Shirt', *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, June 20th 1863.

of the same name contributed to a similar kind of town meeting satirised in the work, though attended by working men rather than local luminaries:

A young man named William Cunliffe, who some time before had risen in the body of the meeting to object to what had been stated, now appeared on the platform. He said he was a working man like themselves. He had been in the United States. He had been West, and he had been South too. [...] When he heard these men speak as they did, his English blood rose in his veins. He was astonished at them. Evidently they did not want anyone to have an opinion contrary to themselves. They told them that this was a question of slavery; he thought it was a question of domination over the South. The South had a right to secede. They were told that the North had all along been struggling for the freedom of the negro. They might listen to their sentiments about the negro, but they kicked him out of the carriages in some parts, in others, however, he was suffered to ride with his master. One of the speakers told them that the negro had a right to vote in the free states; but he had to have a certain amount of property in order to acquire the right, which was not the case with the white man. He found in the Northern States the strongest prejudice against the negro.¹⁸

Evidently, William Cunliffe had more personal experience of American matters than the average Burnley resident, and based his political views on this, but from the evidence of his verse publication in his local newspaper this talented working-class poet generally employed his literary skills in less politically direct ways.¹⁹ He follows the dialect tradition of inhabiting the personae of quasi-fictional local characters when he writes in that mode but he also composes competent verse in standard English. However, the focus of most of his output is on the more conventional subject of the poverty caused by the ‘Distress’ and the necessity for charitable relief.

Most of the small number of Lancashire Cotton Famine poems which were anthologised in the twentieth century appeared in Brian Hollingworth’s anthology *Songs of the People: Lancashire dialect poetry of the industrial revolution* (1977), and the critical material in this book remains to date the most useful overview of this cultural phenomenon. William Billington, one of the poets featured in this volume, uses Lancashire dialect poetry to illustrate the breadth of opinion and strength of feeling prevalent in the county during the crisis. In ‘Aw wod this war wur ended’ the kind of stoic support for the cause of liberty celebrated by Lincoln’s letter is expressed as the moral baseline for discussion about the social problems caused by the economic situation. After six ballad meter octave stanzas detailing the social deprivation caused by the crisis, the final stanza urges its working-class readers to be patient by remembering the justness of the cause of the Union in its opposition to slavery:

¹⁸ ‘The American Question: Meeting in the Mechanics’ Institution’, *The Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser* April 11th 1863. The author wishes to thank Charles Priestley for bringing this article to his attention.

¹⁹ Records show a William Cunliffe, occupation registered as blacksmith, sailing to America in 1853 http://www.castlegarden.org/quick_search_detail.php?p_id=2325043

Some factory maisters tokes for t' Seawth
 Wi' a smooth an' oily tongue,
 Bud iv they'd sense they'd shut their meawth,
 Or sing another song;
 Let liberty nod slavery
 Be fostered an' extended-
 Four million slaves mun yet be free,
 An', then t' war will be ended.²⁰ (ll. 49-56)

The reference to '[f]our million slaves' here is particularly resonant because this was the contemporary popular estimation of the number of Lancashire people affected by the Cotton Famine when mill workers, dependent industry workers, and domestic dependents were taken into account. In America, approximately half of the slaves worked on cotton; in the UK, four million people represented almost a fifth of the mainland population. Sympathy for the Confederate cause in Billington's poem is associated with the industrialist class, despite there being plenty of evidence of working-class sympathy for the Southern rebellion. But this drawing of Lancashire support for either side of the American conflict along class lines is an attempt to simplify a complex set of opinions where association with a particular class, politics, or party were not sure indicators of where one's sympathies might lie. As Janet Toole has noted, where the issue of slavery intersected with British class politics moral imperatives were complicated, and this came to a head during the American Civil War and its attendant British economic effects:

The outbreak of the American Civil War brought out a range of opinion on its causes, focused largely but not exclusively on slavery. Working-class attitudes to slavery and abolition were only a part of broader debates concerning industrialisation and government, and were complicated further by the migration of political activists between Britain, Ireland and America. Thinking on slavery was conditioned by a tangle of related beliefs. There were those who considered that the industrial system was the greatest evil, greater even than slavery: for them, the abolition of plantation slavery should wait until wage slavery was overturned, because freed slaves would simply be delivered from one evil system into another. For others, nothing mattered more than their adherence to the political system of republican America as the model constitution for radical Britons. Upon this foundation, some argued that maintaining the right of states to decide their own internal systems meant that slavery must regrettably stand until the Southern states themselves agreed to end the institution.²¹

²⁰ William Billington 'Aw wod this war wur ended' in *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect poetry of the industrial revolution* ed. Brian Hollingworth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977) 112-13.

²¹ Janet Toole, 'Workers and slaves: class relations in South Lancashire in the time of the Cotton Famine' in *Labour History Review* (Maney Publishing). Summer 98, Vol. 63 Issue 2, 160-181, 161.

But Billington's appeal to his readers in 'Aw wud this war wur ended' is through poetry's affective agency, where political complexities might be smoothed out by direct petition to the emotional sensibilities of the reader. For this reason the domestic trade causes of the Civil War find little or no place in Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry, and if the causes of war are referred to the conflict is almost universally represented as a simple opposition between the supporters of slavery and its opponents. However, recent research to recover poetry on the subject from newspapers suggests that this final stanza, which Hollingworth took from Billington's own 1883 collection, *Lancashire Songs, with Other Poems and Sketches*, may have been a later abolitionist revision. In the Billington collection the work is dated 1863, but a version published in the *Blackburn Times* on October 10th of that year concludes with a much more ambivalent stanza:

Some tokes for t' North, an' some for t' South,
 Wi' o smooth an' oily tung,
 Bud iv they'd sense they'd shut their meawth,
 For boath on 'em's i' t' wrung!
 An' it's nooan reyt to let em feyt, ---
 If t' world hes wisdom --- lend id,
 To set these two crookt people streyt,
 An' then t' war ud be ended!²² (ll. 49-56)

If Billington did revise his poem in the last weeks of 1863, as suggested by the date he assigns to the piece in his 1883 collection, then research has yet to uncover its newspaper publication. However, it is possible that there were two simultaneous versions of the poem in existence for different publication contexts. Many working-class readers of Billington during the Lancashire Cotton Famine would have been familiar with Chartist rhetorical equations of the British worker and the American slave from the previous political generation in the works of William S. Villiers Sankey ('Men of England, ye are slaves')²³ or Ernest Jones ('He shall not be a Briton / Who dares to be a slave!')²⁴ amongst many others. Indeed Jones, who was living and working as a barrister in Manchester during the Cotton Famine after his imprisonment for seditious speech-making in the late 'forties and subsequent continuation of the radical cause, gave speeches in support of the Union to working people in Lancashire, using his former Chartist celebrity as validation.²⁵ And indeed, Lancashire newspaper editors, well aware of the politico-poetic associations of Jones's name, were not above extracting his Chartist verse when it appeared to comment on the contemporary political situation in their poetry columns. His prison-composed anti-imperialist epic, 'The New World, A Democratic Poem' provided a ten-line extract for the *Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter* on the 5th of July 1862 which was presented as a standalone poem under the contemporarily provocative title 'The Trade of War':

²² William Billington, 'Aw Wod This War Wer Ended', *Blackburn Times*, October 10th 1863.

²³ William S. Villiers Sankey, 'Ode' (l. 1), *The Poetry of Chartism* ed. I. V. Kovalev, 76

²⁴ Ernest Jones, 'Our Cheer' (ll. 21-22) *Northern Star* Aug 8th 1846 in Kovalev, 139-40

²⁵ See a lecture Jones gave at Ashton-under-Lyne Town Hall in November 1863 entitled, 'The Slaveholder's War' http://gerald-massey.org.uk/jones/c_slaveholder%27s_war.htm

Nations, like men, too oft are given to roam,
 And seek abroad what they could find at home.
 They send their armies out on ventures far;
 Their halt – is havoc, and their journey – war;
 Destruction’s traders! who, to start their trade,
 Steal, for the bayonet, metal from the spade.
 The interest’s – blood; the capital is – life;
 The debt – is vengeance; the instalment – strife;
 The payment’s – death; and wounds are the receipt;
 The market’s battle; and the whole – a cheat.²⁶

Despite the clarity of the anti-imperialist message contained in this piece, its explicit linking of war with trade cannot have failed to have significance to its readers in the context of Lancashire publication just as the economic effects of the Cotton Famine were beginning to be felt. It is also possible that this might be read as a caution against the UK’s debated intervention in the American conflict. Jones’s characteristic rhetorical method of simplifying in detail – here with a list of financial terms attached to military actions – works particularly well as it builds towards an unequivocal condemnation. However, while William Billington’s ‘Aw wud this war wur ended’ similarly appears to attempt to streamline Lancashire sympathies for its own political ends, his poetry was more than capable of reaching across the political spectrum to give voice to the opinions of a range of ordinary people. His most popular lyric of the time, ‘Th’ Surat Weyver’, inhabits a poetic persona whose opinion is formed purely by immediate financial circumstance. Here Billington uses the traditional Lancashire dialect monologue form to express the frustration felt by many mill workers forced to adapt to the use of Indian Surat cotton, whose shorter, weaker fibres tended to slow down productivity, particularly in mills where the machinery was least suitable for its use. Because weavers were paid on piece time, ‘Surat’ became a popular byword for the economic and social suffering caused by the Cotton Famine:

Aw’ve yerd fooak toke o’ t’ treydin mill,
 Un pickin’ oakum too;
 Bud stransportashun’s nod as ill
 As weyvin’ rotonn Su!
 Ids bin too monny for yar Bill,
 Un aw’m as thin as a latt,
 Bud if wey wi t’ Yankees hed ur will,
 We’d hang ‘em i’ t’ Surat!²⁷ (ll. 17-24)

²⁶ Ernest Jones, ‘The Trade of War’, *Ashton and Salybridge Reporter*, July 5th 1862. See lines 15-24 of Canto III of Jones’s ‘The New World, A Democratic Poem’.

²⁷ William Billington, ‘Th’ Surat weyver’, *Songs of the People*, Hollingworth (ed.) 98-99.

The seemingly hyperbolic conceit here is that the common working-class destinations associated with financial penury - transportation, debtor's prison (picking oakum was a common prison punishment), and the workhouse - are favourably compared with the industrial alternative to high quality cotton. However, this apparent exaggeration is justified by the poem's detailing of effects of real starvation caused by the difficulty of obtaining a living wage when working the Indian cotton variant. From this perspective, the return of American cotton is the only political imperative, and the lifting of the embargo by the Union could solve this problem within weeks. One of the features of the poetry from this period and region is its acute awareness of its place in the world. Labouring-class Lancashire people were forced by economic circumstances to confront the nature of a Victorian globalisation which had proved its instability, and for the first time many began to see themselves in terms of a global subjectivity. While in the twenty-first century Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify 'the triumph of neoliberalism and its crisis [...] fabricating new figures of subjectivity'²⁸, a similar claim might be made for the cultural effects of the Victorian cycle of trade's triumph and crisis. However, newspaper poetry's status as one of the few remaining vestiges of labouring-class cultural production represents our only extensive window into the resultant subjective identities and their figuring.

The objective statistics speak for themselves. Thirty miles south of Billington's native Blackburn, the Cheshire town of Hyde illustrates the extent of the famine's effects on industry. The Hyde Relief Committee's accounts for January 17th 1863 show that, of 8823 operatives formally employed full time, only 1143 remained so, while 3980 received 'short time', and 3700 were unemployed, solely dependent on Relief.²⁹ Not since the Hungry 'Forties had such financial desperation been prevalent, and though 'Th' Surat Weyver' represents the presence of a purely rhetorical lashing out rather than any direct political radicalism, something of the venom of the more vituperative Chartist poetry is echoed. Support for the South here is incidental, conditioned by the experience of hunger. Writing about the Irish Famine of the previous generation, Christopher Morash has claimed that 'famine does not sit comfortably in any of the established poetic idioms of the English tradition'³⁰, but the layers of distance created by the Lancashire dialect tradition of the dramatized poetic voice - which reached its apogee in the 1860s - was able to express, certainly to the satisfaction of its readers, the extremity of the social situation. According to a near-contemporary biographical list, when 'Th' Surat Weyver' was made available in Lancashire as a single broadsheet ballad, it sold an impressive 14,000 copies.³¹ Another poetic chronicler of the Cotton Famine, Samuel Laycock, claimed that his poems sold 40,000 copies during the crisis.³² Poetry, and in particular local poetry, was an intrinsic element of social discourse during the Lancashire Cotton Famine.

²⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (Argo-Navis, 2012) 9.

²⁹ Christine Clayton, "All work most harmoniously together": Hyde in the cotton famine 1861-1865', *Northwest Labour History Journal*: Issue 41, 2016-17. 32-37, 35.

³⁰ Christopher Morash (ed.), *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989) 18.

³¹ Walter W. Skeat and J. H. Nodal, *English Dialect Society: A Biographical List* (London: Trubner & Co, 1877) 57.

³² Hollingworth, 4.

Some Lancashire poets addressed the American people directly, although given the local newspaper publication context, ‘address’ here is an indirect, multi-layered effect. ‘Counsel to the Americans’ by ‘J. B.’ (possibly the popular local poet, James Bowker) was published in the *Preston Chronicle* on September 5th 1863. While it addresses the moral issue of slavery, its sentiments are expressed in wholly Christian pacifist terms, and with archaic diction and syntax redolent of the King James Bible:

“Abolish slavery!” - Well!
 By multitudinous murdering of brothers,
 Outrage and tyranny beyond all others,
 By sword and flame, by recklessness and ravage,
 By all that marks the fiend or moves the savage?
 There – these are works of Hell!
 Ye cannot wrest Heaven’s holy purpose so,
 God, Christ, man, mercy, charity cry No!
 Ye waste your wealth, ye maximise your woe!
 List to the teachings of the Saviour’s breath,
 Cease from these deeds of darkness and of death,
 Restore these bloody weapons to their sheath,
 And forward go!³³

There is a possibility that the poem’s sentiment is simply that war is a greater offence than slavery, or perhaps the speaker also subscribes to the ideas of self-determination and gradualism described in Janet Toole’s assessment above; but either way, the imperative here is clearly the cessation of conflict, presumably with the slavery system still in place. The poem does not refer directly to the effects of the American war on Lancashire, but its publication context – Preston was one of the worst hit areas during the crisis, with half of its population receiving relief by 1863 – means that it would have been read by many for whom the end of the war would mean the end of financial penury. Whether cynically or otherwise, various factions – religious, moral, political, industrial – used the Lancashire Cotton Famine to advance their causes, and poetry was no less susceptible to this kind of manipulation than other forms of discourse.

Lancashire writers who contributed their opinions on the American Civil War through poetry published in local newspapers undoubtedly came from all walks of life. Some labouring-class poets included their occupations, or indeed were known exclusively by their occupations, when they submitted poetry to local newspapers. A poet who signs himself ‘John Parry, Boatbuilder’ and writes from Bardsley, between Oldham and Ashton-Under-Lyne, addresses his nation in a patriotic piece called ‘A Briton’s Appeal’ which is unflinching in its condemnation of the British misery which the American war has caused: ‘Wilt thou not still

³³ ‘J. B.’, ‘Counsel to the Americans’, *Preston Chronicle*, September 5th, 1863.

uphold thy wonted place, / Nor let a Yankee sputter in thy face?' (ll. 35-36).³⁴ Another poet known only as 'A Blackburn Weaver', in a piece simply entitled 'The Cotton Famine', is more emollient in register:

Strong in morning, faintly nightly,
Ascends the parent's anguish cry ---
That from War's red banner furling
Peace shall bless us by and by.³⁵ (ll. 33-36)

But establishing the social class of many writers of Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry is not easy. There is no direct correlation between social class and chosen poetic mode. Labouring-class poets had been writing in 'elevated' forms with archaic diction since the Chartist generation and before, and written dialect poetry, in spite of its oral roots, is a distinct literary mode. We might perceive blacksmith William Cunliffe's dialect work as authentic bilingualism, or the middle-class doctor Adam Chester's 'Eawr Alley' as affectionate cultural appropriation, but both negotiate the relationship between vernacular speech and its arbitrary phonetic rendering.³⁶ In many cases the social class of the writer, or even their gender, is unknown. Of the first one hundred poems published on the *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861-65)* database, forty-two are either anonymous, signed with initials, or use an obvious pen name (one poet signs themselves as 'STARVATION'³⁷). Although a few identities might be uncovered through intensive archival research, it is likely that the majority of these unknown poets will remain so, and their social class will not be ascertained. 'R. R. B.', writing from Stand, near Whitefield, north of Manchester, exemplifies the kind of poetry which identifies global events as the cause of local misery, but ignores the principal *casus belli* of the issue of slavery in its implicit call for peace:

THOUSANDS of eyes look out into the west ---
Out into the west from village and town,
While the flowing tear, and the heaving breast
Are one with the heads that are all bow'd down.
For few can work, and many must weep;
There's little to do, and many to keep
While the canons still are booming.³⁸ (ll. 1-8)

Despite the publication of poetry which ignored the issue of slavery, or objected to war as a means of its abolition, explicitly pro-Confederate poetry in Lancashire newspapers is difficult to find. Nevertheless, some newspapers more subtly appealed to the sympathies of those readers who supported the South through their choice of texts to include in poetry columns,

³⁴ John Parry, 'A Briton's Appeal' *Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter*, July 26th 1862.

³⁵ 'A Blackburn Weaver', 'The Cotton Famine', *Blackburn Times*, May 17th 1862.

³⁶ Adam Chester, 'Eawr Alley', *Bury Guardian*, January 31st 1863.

³⁷ http://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt_1864-10-08_starvation.

³⁸ 'R. R. B.', 'Few Can Work and Many Must Weep', *Blackburn Times*, December 27th, 1862.

and by the deliberate manipulation of typography. Significantly, in one of the towns worst hit by the famine - Preston - during the season when the distress was at its height - winter 1862 - the *Preston Chronicle* published a poem by the Confederate General Thomas Jonathon 'Stonewall' Jackson (1824-63). The poem itself, 'My Wife and Child', is rather typical nineteenth-century sentimental poetic fare, but the publication context is significant. In the next column, forming an unavoidable visual association on the page, is a poem appealing for charity taken from *Punch* entitled 'Famine, Fever, and Frost' which is anonymous but explicit in its description of the famine's effects:

Who will open England's purses,
Till their golden stream
Flows where smokeless chimneys shadow
Engines lacking steam,
Where from million eyes is glaring
Hunger's wolfish gleam?³⁹ (ll. 1-6)

This is itself flanked in the third column by the regular weekly round-up of the efforts made to counter the social problems caused by the Famine entitled 'The Cotton Famine and the Distress in Lancashire'. The presentational layout implicitly appeals to Confederate sympathies by association, but the editorial introduction to the Jackson poem also praises its author's military prowess: 'The following exquisite poem is from the pen of the famous "Stonewall" Jackson, written while he was with the United States army in Mexico, of which army he was then, as he now, of the Confederate, a brave and efficient soldier.'⁴⁰ The publication of Jackson's poem here is more than just an excuse to remind readers of his former patriotic service or his continuing masculine attributes. If, as Kirstie Blair has claimed, the publication of poetry 'showed that working men and women were educated, thoughtful and intelligent'⁴¹, the same might be said of a foreign general fighting a bitter war of attrition on the other side of the ocean. The poetry itself is part of the argument here: that the ending of a foreign war can end regional distress, and that there is a counterargument to Union claims of moral and cultural superiority. Six months later the same newspaper published a poem entitled 'The Picket on the Potomac', which had been 'found in the pocket of a Confederate volunteer, who died in camp on the Potomac.'⁴² This poem, which has become more commonly known as 'All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight', was later revealed to have been composed by the New York poet Ethel Lynn Beers. But despite the poem's implicit criticism of Confederate military policy ('Not an officer lost, - only one of the men / Breathing out all alone the death rattle.' [ll. 7-8]), the sentimentally presented events in the piece, and its apparent provenance, reveal a broadly sympathetic stance at least in relation to individual soldiers fighting for the South.

³⁹ Anon. 'Famine, Fever, and Frost', *Preston Chronicle* November 22nd 1862.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kirstie Blair, editor, *Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), xviii.

⁴² *Preston Guardian*, April 18th, 1863.

Of course, just as newspaper editors attempted to influence opinion in the presentation of their poetry columns, and some Lancashire poets expressed equivocal attitudes to events across the water, there were also staunchly abolitionist voices represented by poets submitting to Lancashire newspapers during the war. The winter of 1862-63 saw the worst effects of the distress in many areas, as the cumulative effects of many months of unemployment combined with bad weather and relief efforts were yet to be organised well enough to cope with the scale of the deprivation. Unsurprisingly, there is a corresponding peak during this season in the publication of poetry relating directly to the crisis, and the following piece by Samuel Clarkson, published in the *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser* on January 3rd 1863, uses its title, ‘The Cotton Famine – Christmas, 1862’⁴³, to indicate that this is a ‘state of the region’ proclamation, addressing themes of poverty, religion, war, and slavery in its Petrarchan sonnet form:

England! thy Christmas mirth is mixed with tears,
 While pinching penury and want despoil
 Ten thousand homes, where dwelt thy sons of toil;
 Gone are thrifty fruits of struggling years.
 Against the brighter past, thy doubts and fears
 See future clouds that darken like a foil;
 Yet seeds of joy find root in sorrow’s soil;
 To Faith and Hope the coming dawn appears.
 Endure and trust, while Charity divine
 Thy hungry feeds, and clothes thy shiv’ring poor;
 Then, when the day of peace again shall shine
 With golden gladness o’er yon western shore,
 A nobler thrice bless’d commerce shall be thine,
 Stain’d with the guilt of slavery no more.

The poem is addressed to the whole of England in a ‘*toto pro pars*’ synecdoche which figures the crisis as a national rather than just regional issue and also acknowledges the considerable metropolitan efforts to alleviate the suffering through charitable relief. The continuation of this charitable relief is subtly encouraged by the phrase ‘thrifty fruits’ which effectively counters charges of economic wastefulness which might inhibit donation. In keeping with many Lancashire Cotton Famine poems which deal with domestic and international issues together, this work moves from description of the effects of the crisis to discussion of its causes. However, where the traditional Petrarchan volta occurs with the rhyme shift between the eighth and ninth lines, here the domestic description extends to the tenth line before the digressive ‘Then...’ at the beginning of the eleventh begins four lines which predict the end of the conflict and the end of the famine. Published two days after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, this poem does not countenance the possibility of a Confederate victory, and equates inevitable abolition with a final cleansing of domestic industry and trade, after

⁴³ Samuel Clarkson, ‘The Cotton Famine – Christmas, 1862’ *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, January 3rd 1863.

England's northern regions in the years after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 had enjoyed the largest industrial expansion the world had ever seen largely built on slave-grown cotton. Even in the midst of the widespread poverty in Lancashire caused by the American Civil War, abolitionists here, as much as elsewhere, saw it as an opportunity to unpin once and for all Britain's association with slavery.

Inevitably, when the relief effort was internationalised it became part of the propaganda narrative aimed at influencing Britain's wavering neutrality during the war. In order to counter the complicating factors of fall-out from the Trent Affair of November 1861, and continuing British industrial involvement in the construction of blockade-running steamships, the Union authorised the sending of provisions in much-publicised shipments across the Atlantic. The first of these entered the docks at Liverpool (the very port where most of the newly-built blockade runners sailed from) on February 9th 1863. The *Blackburn Standard* celebrated this event by publishing a poem by Adam Chester called 'The Coming Of The "Griswold."' ⁴⁴ In contrast to the affective register of the vast majority of Lancashire Cotton Famine poems this piece takes the form of a jaunty sea shanty:

Lo! on the main, from keel to spar,
 Among the thousand ships that are,
 One noble vessel, towering tries
 Her strength against the stooping skies;
 A land of peace before her lies,
 Looms in her wake a land of war.
 Yo, heave, ho!

May every ship her ensign dip
 In honour and in fellowship;
 And Mersey's guns, no longer mute,
 Her coming into port salute;
 Salute the seaman's piping flute,
 The whistle at the boatswain's lip,
 Yo, heave, ho!

Her memory, like a sweetheart's glove
 Wrapped with the lavender of love,
 Henceforward may our England keep,
 Till in the land beyond the deep,
 Ever-wakeful war shall sleep,
 And men shall work and shall not weep,
 And Peace shall settle like a dove,
 Yo, heave, ho!

⁴⁴ Adam Chester, 'The Coming of the "Griswold"', *Blackburn Times* February 18th 1863.

The themes again here are of war and industry, but there is an impression of relief not just in the material or emotional sense, but in the formal opportunity to employ the working song meter of iambic tetrameter followed by the emphatic three-syllable refrain. The longer final stanza extends the repetition of the enclosed rhymes from three to four in a way which in sung shanties is often accompanied by a comic sustain of the last rhymed syllable. In all the register is celebratory, but the emphasis on orality suggests memorialisation. There is actually no mention of the contents of the ship nor of its purpose of providing material relief to the people of Lancashire, and this in itself is testament to the familiarity of the readership with the ‘Griswold’'s function. But another part of the ‘Griswold’'s function was to inspire cultural productions such as this poem, and even its food containers were later inscribed with retrospective propaganda in order that its anti-Confederate message was echoed wherever its generosity was distributed. Some of the 15,000 flour barrels from the *Griswold* were retained as mementos; one of these remains and on it is printed the following statement:

I am one of the thousands that were filled with flour and sent by the Free States of America in the ship, George Griswold, to the starving people of Lancashire whose miseries were caused by the aggressive and civil war of the slave owners in 1862-3-4.⁴⁵

The synecdochic conflation of the confederacy with slave owners was a common trope in abolitionist circles, with the title of Ernest Jones's lecture, ‘The Slaveholder's War’ (see above) being a case in point. And the direct linking of the Lancashire misery with the slave owners and omission of the fact of the blockade suggests a desire to remember a complex situation in a deliberately reductive way. This false or altered memory is even more in evidence in the second stanza of the following poem entitled ‘England and the American War’⁴⁶ by Richard Rawcliffe, published in the *Blackburn Times* half a year after the celebratory sea shanty:

I.
 Where Sol sends forth his genial rays,
 Down from his throne in western skies,
 Dread Mars with gory sceptre sways
 And fills the land with groans and sighs.
 Alas! a lovely, happy land,
 Where dwells the free, the strong, the brave,
 Has, by an abject, rebel band,
 Been made a charnel-house to brand
 More deep the forehead of the slave.

II.

⁴⁵ Text printed on a barrel from the ship, the ‘Griswold’, held in Rochdale Touchstones Museum, Lancashire.

⁴⁶ Richard Rawcliffe, ‘England and the American War’ *Blackburn Times* October 24th, 1863.

Fair Albion, thou hast ever fought
 With wondrous power to rid the world
 Of slavery's curse; thy sword has smote
 Where freedom's banners waved unfurled.
 Slavemongers, human right ignoring
 Ask thee thy deeds to recognise
 As righteous; while clouds are lowering,
 Mercy from thee the slaves imploring,
 Ere their last hope of freedom dies! (ll. 1-18)

Clearly this poem aims to provide a counterargument to those whose sympathies might fall with the South or at least those who, for pragmatic purposes, are willing to countenance the idea of Britain's financial or military aid of the Confederacy. What is striking here though is the blatant re-writing of history in the idea that 'Fair Albion' has 'ever fought / With wondrous power to rid the world / Of slavery's curse...' given that slavery was only abolished in Britain's colonies in 1833, and one of the country's main industries relied on slavery's products until just two years earlier in 1861. There is the sense of being on an historical cusp in much Cotton Famine poetry, engendered not just by the momentous nature of the American conflict, but by Britain's helplessness in the face of its direction or effects. The American Civil War, fought ostensibly over a moral dichotomy which appears to have the ability to take humanity backward or forward, is a moment of global modernity, and Lancashire poetic responses sometimes grapple awkwardly with this realisation. Imaginatively, these poems attempt to will a resolution into being, and their occasionally fluid relationship with historical facts relates to this, but one of their real political functions is to express the multiplicity of opinions of their readership within a forum which allows for robust political declaration without the necessity of immediate contradiction. Couched within overarching political drives such as patriotism, anti-slavery, or just the basic relief of hunger, the full range of popular discourse is played out through these texts, ensuring that whichever side (or perhaps facet, given the complexity of the possible stances) of the debate the reader is on, they will always have the benefit of the adjacent or opposing perspectives.

As the war dragged on into its third year, and relief efforts struggled to alleviate the suffering caused by mass unemployment, there were renewed calls in some quarters for British military intervention in order to speed up what was seen by many as the inevitable resolution of a Union victory. For some, Britain's neutrality was viewed not in terms of its implicit comment on the issue of slavery, but as an effective prolongation of the economic hardship caused by the conflict. Samuel Laycock became a popular Lancashire dialect poet (though actually a Yorkshireman born in Marsden) after the Cotton Famine forced him out of his work in the cotton industry and he began writing and selling verses detailing the plight of his working-class contemporaries. One of these pieces, 'Aw've hard wark to howd up mi yed'⁴⁷, within its broader detailing of the social effects of financial penury, contains a stanza which expresses

⁴⁷ Samuel Laycock. 'Aw've hard wark to howd up mi yed', *Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter*, May 9th 1863.

popular frustration with the longevity of the conflict coupled with patriotic puffing of British military capability:

Yon Yankees may think it's rare fun,
 Kickin' up sich a shindy o'th' globe;
 Confound 'em, aw wish they'd get done,
 For they'd weary eawt th' patience o' Job!
 We shall have to go help 'em, that's clear,
 Iv they dunno get done very soon;
 Iv eawr Volunteers wur o'er theer,
 They'd sharpen 'em up to some tune. (ll. 25-36)

On the surface this reads as a call to action, but perhaps that interpretation misreads the particular relationship between the reader and the poem, particularly in the ephemeral and fluid literary context of newspaper poetry publication. Poetic statements are not always most helpfully read as direct reflections of intent, and this might be especially true when the formal mask of the Lancashire dialect poem, which aims to speak for a social group or a representative fictitious individual, is taken into account. In addition, it is also a possibility that this kind of poem achieves its purpose simply by its existence. Writing about the intensely political Chartist poetry of the previous generation, Brian Maidment has suggested that poetry's persuasive agency is sometimes undermined by the nature of its distribution and reception:

In my view, this close association between reading and doing was seldom properly established because the recitation of the poem often seems to have served a *cathartic* effect rather than a persuasive one, so that the social aggression in the poem was sublimated or acted out rather than developed into action beyond the poem. Reading became to some extent a substitute for action, a self-contained political act without further implications.⁴⁸

Although in the case of Chartist literary production this emotional displacement would represent a failure of the poem's political function, it may well be that in the context of the Lancashire Cotton Famine the sublimation of anger in the face of the contemporary political situation is a positive outcome. It was broadly accepted that, by this stage of the American Civil War, the financial and military cost of a British intervention would outweigh any strategic benefits, but perhaps poems such as Laycock's served to release some of the pressure built up by the ongoing sense of helplessness experienced by a suffering population. While some Victorian working-class newspaper poetry lacks the subtlety of contemporary canonical examples of the craft, its reception, social function, and publication contexts reward attention to their complexity.

⁴⁸ Brian Maidment, *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) 38.

It must always be recognised that, in common with any survey of a range of literary productions, the sample is selective; in this case subject to the editorial whim of local newspapers. Nevertheless, the diversity of commentary evident in the Lancashire poetic response to the American Civil War is remarkable, not just in the magnitude of the various spectra of opinion, but in the complexity of the discursive implications within individual elements. This discourse may have been materially and culturally adjacent to journalistic comment on the crisis, but poetry's imaginative freedom and ability to compress language and hence cultural meaning often represented an amplification, distortion, or even contradiction of implied editorial comment. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the sometimes febrile context of Lancashire commentary on the American Civil war and its domestic effects. Even when no particular resolution was offered as an option the ability of Lancashire poets to apparently represent the voice of their fellow sufferers with some degree of authenticity served at least to reflect the ever more intimate relationship between the Victorian global and the local which the effects of the American war demonstrated in such stark terms.

I will conclude with a return to the first poet quoted in this article, Williffe Cunliam, and his characteristically ironic dialect poem, 'Hoamly Chat'⁴⁹. Within its account of domestic woe presented in the form of a street-side discussion between two friends, this poem manages to reflect not just a prevalent local attitude, but British foreign policy and the diplomatic stance of much of the watching world. Despite the multiplicity of responses to its effects and possible outcomes and the intensity of emotions expressed, for many directly affected by the consequences of the American Civil War the only sensible response was observation, speculation, and patience:

“Un cotton, they seyn, ’s getting dar,
 Un sich stuff it is, raily,
 It’s all through this ’Merikay war;
 Aw wunther wot th’end on it ull be.” (ll. 9-12)

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⁴⁹ 'Williffe Cunliam', 'Hoamly Chat', *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, June 11th 1863.

