

The Newspaper Press and the Victorian Working-Class Poet

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In October 1863, a poem by “John Stargazer,” “My First Attempt,” appeared in the correspondents’ column of the Dundee, Perth, and Forfar *People’s Journal*, a newspaper that had rapidly and deliberately established itself as a major venue for working-class literature. It opened:

I lingered in the shady nook, beneath the spreading trees,
I wandered by the babbling brook and listened to the breeze;
I dreamed away the broad daylight, I “burned the midnight taper,”
In the high hope that I might write a poem for your paper. (2)

As the aspiring poet wastes away in his efforts at composition, he is finally driven to confess to his mother:

I knew her watchfulness would pry and worm my secret out.
So telling her my hopes I bade her let none other know it,
She shook her head, “Ah, John,” she said, “I doot ye’re nae a poet.” (2)

Undaunted by his family’s pragmatic diagnosis of an upset stomach, Stargazer completes his masterpiece and fantasizes about its rapturous reception in the press, eagerly awaiting its publication:

I bought the paper, inside out I laid its columns bare;
I looked – could I my optics doubt? – my poem is not there!
The reason why is told me soon, although I didn't ask it:
“Stargazer's ‘Ode unto the Moon’ has gone to the waste basket.” (2)

The correspondents' column, as I have examined in detail elsewhere, was the primary medium for discussing, with either mockery or encouragement, poems rejected as unsuitable for publication (see Blair “Let the Nightingales Alone”). This unidentified poem is a comic, self-reflexive study of the likely fate of a newspaper poem. It is one of a great many poems and prose pieces that satirize the intense desire of young working men (and, though less commonly, women) to see their poems in print in their local newspaper. Such poems themselves conform to generic norms. The would-be poet will have a comically inflated sense of his own self-importance, modeling himself on the literary image of the poet as a frail, delicate individual entirely dedicated to his craft: an image popularized a decade prior to Stargazer's poem by another Scottish working-class writer and newspaper poet, Alexander Smith, in his notorious 1853 “spasmodic” poem *A Life-Drama*. The aspiring poet also attempts – not always successfully, in such poems – high-class standard English (“optics” rather than “eyes,” for instance), providing a humorous contrast with the homely Scots of his family.

“My First Attempt” is an example both of the “literariness, the linguistic and formal self-consciousness” that Brian Maidment sees as characteristic of “writing by self-taught working men,” and, in its publication context, of what Michael Sanders calls the “dialectical interplay between readership and editor in the creation of the poetry column’s editorial policy” (Maidment 13; Sanders 71). It assumes readers’ existing knowledge of the contexts of the *People’s Journal*, of contemporary poetic norms, and of the usual standards and topics of newspaper poetry. Such “original” newspaper verse, as opposed to reprinted poems by established poets, has attracted little sustained critical attention.¹ As Maidment rightly notes in a seminal 1985 article on the verse culture of Victorian Manchester:

Newspaper poems have to appeal to a wide variety of readers and cannot be too controversial in their views. They have to be easily understood at first reading, and cannot afford to be formally or intellectually complex. They must be musical and melodious. Consistent and competent use of simple verse forms is a necessary adjunct to this need for immediate accessibility...Such constraints imposed by the newspaper locale suggests that most poems written in this genre will be little more than occasional verses using, without much thought about form or tone, the simple and conservative conventions of banal public utterance. (158)

No one could deny that newspaper verse leans towards the generic, embracing cliché and familiarity, nor that it is difficult to make a case for the significance of most newspaper verse on aesthetic grounds. But, as I suggest in this chapter, even the most standard or seemingly “occasional” poetry column provides valuable insights into why and how editors supported particular kinds of working-class verse culture. Newspaper poets wrote to order. Their ambition, like John Stargazer’s, was to see their poetry in print, and those who succeeded possessed a very clear and often cynical understanding about the best means to achieve this. The fact that the poems they tended to produce are lacking in formal and linguistic experimentation and aesthetically conservative does not indicate an absence of talent. It shows their understanding of the marketplace: a marketplace that we must also understand if we hope to revalue Victorian working-class poetics.

The relationship between the aspiring working-class poet and the newspaper press has always been crucial. Indeed, it is possible to argue that at least from the late eighteenth century onwards, every laboring-class or working-class poet had a significant relationship with the press. In the case of many, like Robert Burns, the relationship was vexed. As Lucyle Werkmeister’s detailed studies have shown, Burns sent a number of poems to London and local newspapers in the late 1780s and 1790s, both pseudonymously and under his own name, and developed relationships with editors like Peter Stuart of the *London Star*. “I would scorn to put my name to a Newspaper Poem,” he wrote to one friend; yet, in a letter to Stuart in the

same week, he observed that “I am charmed with your paper. I wish it was more in my power to contribute to it” and gave Stuart license to do what he wished with the poems Burns sent him, short of publishing Burns’s name with them (Burns 405, 407). Burns valued the press for its publication of political poems, though as a government employee, he had to be cautious, running into trouble when satirical poems on Establishment figures were wrongly attributed to him, or when editors were unable to resist adding his name to his own satires (see Werkmeister). John Clare, as Eric Robinson has shown, was also an avid reader of and contributor to the newspaper press, local and national, though the extent of his contributions has still not been fully traced. Burns and Clare, who was supported and championed by the London *Morning Post*, had a status that entitled them to consideration by the London papers. As the press expanded and expanded again in the course of the nineteenth century, however, and as the rise of literacy and the prior reputation of poets like Burns increased the number of would-be working-class poets, the primary relationship tended to be between a working-class poet and one or more of their local newspapers.

The Victorian provincial press offered, as Laura Mandell notes, “unexampled opportunities for publication by local writers who remained isolated from metropolitan literary circles” (314). It is an extraordinarily rich, and surprisingly under-examined, resource for the study of working-class verse cultures.² Andrew Hobbs has begun to reassess poetry in the Northern and English provincial press, as well as more broadly, and his recent article

with Claire Januszewski argues that the local paper “was the type of publication in which most Victorian poetry was published and – from the 1860s – in which most Victorian poetry was read” (65). Hobbs and Januszewski’s statistical analysis estimates that around four million poems appeared in the local press in England, of which “between a third and a half” were “original and locally produced” (65), which demonstrates the scale of this issue. For scholars of working-class literature, Sanders’s seminal work on the Chartist press has substantially established the importance of newspaper poetry in constituting and commenting upon a radical political movement. Yet, while most researchers in this field are doubtless aware of the existence of newspaper poetry, the scope of its importance for studies of working-class literature and culture has not always been acknowledged. The majority of poems we read in volume form by working-class poets from this period were first published in newspapers, and thus shaped, mediated, and indeed altered by the literary editors of those papers. Because it is rare for a poet to state where and when poems first appeared, however, this relationship is frequently rendered invisible – unless, of course, as is true for many volumes by working-class writers, the local newspaper was also the publisher of the collection. Of a small but lively group of mid-Victorian working-class poets in Airdrie, North Lanarkshire, for instance, at least four – David H. Morrison (miner and millworker), William McHutchison (stonemason), Frank Henrietta (hairdresser), and James Stewart (profession untraced, but presents himself as a railway worker) – had collections published at the office of the *Airdrie*

Advertiser with the help of the editor, John Baird. All had contributed substantively to its active poetry column. In addition, we need to be aware of what we are *not* reading, when we pick up a volume by any named Victorian working-class poet; we are not reading the newspaper publications that were deemed unsuitable for inclusion. In rare cases where scholars have compared the newspaper output of a poet to poems published in book form, as in Ed Cohen, Anne Fertig and Linda Fleming's recent edition of Marion Bernstein's poems, it is evident both that substantial numbers of newspaper poems were left out, either deliberately or because they postdated volume publications, and that newspaper poems can be more radical than the contents of a published volume would suggest.³

Moreover, newspaper publication was vital for drumming up patronage and subscriptions. A poet in a small rural community might, perhaps, be able to marshal enough support from friends and acquaintances to form a suitable subscription list, as Burns had done. In the larger, diverse communities of the industrial city, though, newspaper publication was a far easier way to acquire a fan-base of potential subscribers and admirers. For mid-Victorian working-class poets, the most desirable patron was a local newspaper editor, who would, for the right poet, advertise their forthcoming volume, publish other poems and letters in support, encourage subscribers, publish extracts from the book, and then review it in glowing terms on publication. They might even give the aspiring poet a job. A substantial number of newspaper employees started out as newspaper poets, like John Mitchell, assistant editor of the

Dundee Advertiser, who began his career “in a mercantile office” and “first made his mark as a contributor of poetry to the “Advertiser” columns” as “P.D.G.”; the editor, William Leng, was impressed enough to offer him a staff post (Millar 30, also cited Blair “A Very Poetical Town” 91). Newspapers and working-class poets had a mutually profitable understanding. A popular poet, who would supply his or her works for free, might augment the paper’s readership. In return, the paper would adopt the poet as one of their own, supplying cultural capital, an enhanced reputation among peers (and employers), and free publicity for future publishing ventures.

Studying working-class writers in the Victorian newspaper press can be problematic, both because of the vast scale of such an enterprise, and because of the practice of publishing under a pseudonym. Although diligent research can unearth the relationship between a named working-class poet and particular newspapers, such as Ellen Johnston and the *Penny Post*, Janet Hamilton and the *Hamilton Advertiser* and *Airdrie Advertiser*, Alexander Anderson or “Surfaceman” and the *People’s Friend*, or Marion Bernstein and the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, this ignores the thousands of other working-class poets who published only occasionally or whose pseudonyms were never publically linked to their real-life identity.⁴ And even in the case of these relatively well-known poets, it would be extremely difficult to state with authority that all their newspaper publications (and republications) had been traced. It is also impossible to identify how many anonymous or pseudonymous newspaper poets were “working-class.” Even with detective

work and the assistance of the tireless local anthologizers of the late Victorian period, working-class newspaper poetry poses a significant challenge to the traditional identification of working-class writers through details from their biography.

The great benefit of this, however, is that newspaper poetry offers an opportunity to study the *self-identification* of poets as “workers,” whether through signatures such as “A Voice from the Factory,” through the use of dialect, or through content reflecting working-class life. From this perspective, the key question is not whether “Tina, Blairgowrie,” author of “The Slatternly Wife” in the *Weekly News* (2 Nov 1874, 4) might be the real-life Tina Galbraith, a domestic servant later located in Lanarkshire, who “thought in verse, spoke in verse, and wrote in verse” and was a very frequent newspaper contributor around this period (Knox 228). The question is, rather, what the selected authorial persona of “Tina, Blairgowrie” tells us about the language, themes, and form considered appropriate for working women’s newspaper verse. Many pseudonyms, as in Anderson’s “Surfaceman,” identified the poet as a worker in a particular field, and some poets identified themselves by name and trade, like McHutchison, whose poetic signature was “William McHutchison, stonemason.” (This was also, of course, a useful means for poets to advertise the other services they might offer to local readers). The practice of identifying *where* the poet lived or worked equally served as a means for readers to assess the authenticity of claims to working-class status: hence Colin Sievwright, a well-known figure in the poetry columns of the

Weekly News, wrote in April 1867 that he had changed his profession from the “rural joys” of weaving to factory work “And now he courts the muse amid/ The factory’s whirling noise’.” His signature, distinct from his earlier and later poems in the paper signed “Kirremuir” or “Forfar’,” includes his new address “Don’s Factory, Forfar” (“Colin’s Reply to “J.G.,” Arbroath”, 6 April 1867, 4).

Poets like Sievwright were personalities in the newspaper press, and the sense that readers knew their real name and address was part of their celebrity status. Whether everyone who wrote as “A Factory Lassie,” “A Herd Laddie” or “A Barber’s Apprentice” genuinely pursued these occupations is, however, doubtful. Cross-class as well as cross-gender representations were common. John Fullerton, for instance, a poet local to Aberdeen who left school at ten to work in a mill (he eventually became a lawyer’s clerk and factor after attending night school) and began contributing to papers in his teens, was known best by the pseudonym “Wild Rose.” He also published, however, under the names “Alice Douglas,” “Robin Goodfellow,” “Rob Gibb,” “The Vicar of Deepdale,” or “J.F.” (Fullerton xi). The posthumous selection of his work is devoted to preserving a small selection of his most aesthetically pleasing compositions as “Wild Rose.” What he published under his other pseudonyms and whether his poems varied to suit the selected persona would be a fascinating study but virtually impossible to conduct. Many if not most of the newspapers patronized by poets such as Fullerton are

not digitized (and thus not readily searchable). Some only exist in limited runs of hard copy, and some are entirely lost.

For this reason, studies of newspaper poetry, such as Hobbs's excellent recent work or my own current research, tend to rely on either sampling from a range of papers or an in-depth study of one paper (see Blair "Let the Nightingales Alone," Hobbs 2012). My conclusions here, for example, are extrapolated almost exclusively from the English-language Scottish press in the mid-Victorian period. Scotland has a certain advantage over other working-class verse cultures in its education system and in the possession of Burns as a model, and for these and other reasons, a high proportion of Victorian Britain's working-class poets were Scottish by birth or adoption.⁵ It also possessed a particularly vibrant cheap newspaper culture, especially after the abolition of Stamp Duty in 1855 and the repeal of paper duties in 1861. But similar verse cultures centered around local newspapers existed in the industrial cities and regions of England, Ireland, and Wales, in colonial cities such as Delhi, and in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The briefest survey of the provincial press out with Scotland clearly shows that the interest in fostering a culture of local poetry was widespread.

In many papers, poems appeared wherever there was a small space that needed to be filled. The standard position, though, tended to be either on the top left-hand corner of the front page, beside the classified advertisements, or on the second or fourth page in an identified column. Correspondence columns, as noted above, would also sometimes contain poems, often with

editorial commentary. Most newspapers published both reprinted poetry taken from other papers, or, more rarely, from new volumes by established authors like Tennyson, Longfellow, or the Brownings, and poetry written specifically for the newspaper in question. The latter category of poems usually appeared under the heading “Original Poetry”: while reprints of “original” poems from other Scottish and English newspapers were common, these were generally identified as such. Papers also occasionally carried advertising poems, both from local companies and in advertisements syndicated across the British press, and frequently published poems in the forms of word-games – acrostics, riddles, enigmas, and other short verses centered on puns and wordplay. Local newspapers would, in addition, review volumes of verse published by local writers, often with copious extracts. And they reported on the presence of verse culture in everyday life by reprinting verses recited at and allegedly specially composed for celebrations, dinners, and assorted significant occasions in the region associated with the paper. In this way, the press remained, as Raymond Williams noted, “significantly interactive with a predominately oral culture, which in the development of the cities was itself assuming new forms.” (45)

Generically, it is possible to classify a huge mass of “original” newspaper poems as pastoral, elegy, or love-poems, predominately lyrical, and, with few exceptions, written in easily recognizable verse forms with predictable patterns of rhyme and meter. These stock poems should not be lightly dismissed, since uncovering the topics that were the surest hits with

newspaper editors and readers is vital to understanding what Victorian working-class poets wrote and why they wrote it. A typical example of editorial opinion on the function and subject-matter of newspaper poetry can be found in a September 1855 celebration of “Our Local Poets” from the *Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser*, a provincial newspaper serving one of the most heavily industrialized areas of Scotland and thus an excellent source for examining regional working-class verse culture. The author begins by acknowledging that “The cold and barren soil of a mineral district may at first seem uncongenial” to poetic composition, yet nonetheless “there are poets among us.” These local poets are firmly counseled “to fulfil their divine mission”:

[L]et them consecrate their verses to the social and moral elevation of their fellowmen, and they may rest assured that those who make the people’s songs have more power for good than those who make the people’s laws. (22 September 1855, 2)

This is a high – though by no means exceptionally high – valuation of the “people’s” poetry. Victorian newspaper editors and reviewers throughout Britain strongly agreed: poetry by working men and women had substantial power to “elevate” the thoughts of readers, inspiring them towards more moral lives and encouraging educational and cultural aspiration. This aim is both politically conservative – poetry helps working-class readers and writers to be more contented with their lot – and radical. In the hands of editors such as John Leng and William Latta of the *People’s Journal*, for instance, there was

a direct correlation between the ability of working-class writers to produce high-quality literary works and their fitness for the franchise. Promoting the “people’s” writings, in the Scottish press at least, was strongly associated with support for Liberal, reformist or radical causes.

In the *Airdrie Advertiser’s* “Local Poets” selection, the four poems highlighted are George Tennant’s “To the Patriots of Italy – an Ode” and “The Wee Beggar Wean,” A. McDougall’s “Farewell to Bute,” and “Lines by a Sentimentalist” by “Aliquis.” Only the first of these poets is identifiable. Tennant was the lesser-known brother of Robert Tennant, the “postman poet,” whose works appeared regularly in the Glasgow press in later decades, and thus part of a local working-class family of weavers with shared poetic interests. Several of Robert Tennant’s poems are epistles to his brother (Tennant 11, 23). George Tennant was a regular contributor to the *Airdrie Advertiser* and is a good example of a typical newspaper poet because his topics invariably embrace the most popular themes of the poetry columns from these decades. “The Wee Beggar Wean,” written in Scots, is one of many newspaper poems designed to provoke charitable thoughts in the reader by a focus on poor and helpless street children. Tennant’s poem opens:

O, ance to our door cam a wee beggar wean,
A’wearit an’ lorn leuk’t the laddie,
An sair the thing grat, whan I speirt ’im his name,
An what was the name o’ his daddie. (2)

Dialect is characteristically used by Scottish poets in this period for scenes from working-class life and culture and in poems spoken by the poet in the first person, whether humorous or pathetic. Poems like this one, in which the object of the reader's pity is unnamed, homeless, and without family, do speak obliquely of the injustices of mid-Victorian society, but their primary aim is less to criticize the rich for neglecting the poor than to invoke a sense of working-class community and solidarity. The weeping child finds a sympathetic listener and financial aid from the home of a working family.

Tennant's second selected poem, now in standard English, "Rouse! Italian patriots brace! / High your martial banners wave!" reflects the strong Scottish interest in Italian political affairs in the 1850s and 1860s. Janet Hamilton, whose political poems were a staple of the *Airdrie Advertiser* and were republished throughout the Scottish press, is perhaps the best example of a poet deeply and passionately engaged with European political struggles in Italy, with Garibaldi as hero, and in Poland, where Kossuth is the deliverer. But in adopting these topics, she was one of thousands of other minor poets. The author of "Our Local Poets" suggests that many of Tennant's lines are "not unworthy of a place beside "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,"" thus tying Tennant's poem to an existing tradition of laboring-class martial and patriotic verse and linking Scottish patriotism to the growing European nationalism. As indicated by very frequent comparisons between Garibaldi and William Wallace in newspaper verse, this was a commonly felt link. Connecting "Scotland's historical fight for freedom with the contemporary

Italian liberation struggles,” as H. Gustav Klaus comments on Johnston’s Garibaldi poems, “postulates a nation’s right to self-determination as a universal goal,” and is thus significant in fostering Scottish national identity (51). Tennant’s poems, here, are formally and linguistically undistinguished; in themselves easy to pass over, yet, as representative of two major themes in working-class newspaper verse, they are highly significant.

Even more representative is the third poem highlighted in this column, “Farewell to Bute.” With six stanzas in the most popular measure and rhyme-scheme (four-beat, alternately-rhymed lines), the poem in its entirety runs:

Adieu, thou green and fairest isle
 Arising on the western main,
Long may your flowers in beauty smile
 For me they ne’er may smile again.

The lofty mountains far away,
 With misty summits rising hoar,
Look on the billows, at their play,
 That wash thy sweetly bending shore.

Farewell the cool and calm retreat;
 Ye fragrant, leafy bowers farewell,
Where I have listened to the beat

And music of old ocean's swell.

I've seen along thy pebbly strand

The sons of labour rest awhile;

I've thought upon the better land,

Where men shall rest from sin and toil.

The autumn sunbeams linger yet,

But soon her leaves shall fade and die;

The summer scene I may forget,

When winter chills the cloudy sky.

But till my memory departs,

I'll cherish still, where'er I roam,

The warm and living, loving hearts

I met within your island home. (2)

The opening, particularly in "For me they ne'er may smile again," suggests that this could be an emigrant poem, in which the speaker laments a lost childhood home, either from his or her position with an industrial city or from the colonies. But as the poem progresses it becomes clear that its genre is the tourist poem. Only when we see the date on which the poem was published, the end of September, does its seasonal topicality become evident. Poetry

columns favored works in which the speaker celebrates a specific British or Scottish location but in highly standardized tropes of towering mist-covered mountains, rugged glens, crystal streams, billowing ocean waves, and “fragrant, leafy bowers” filled with wild flowers. Such poems are write-by-numbers and entirely, reassuringly predictable. There is no possibility, for instance, that “roam” will not rhyme with “home.” The author of this poem is unnamed, and whether he or she identifies with the holidaying “sons of labour” mentioned in stanza 4 is unclear. But the presence of these working men, their labor a contrast to the “play” of nature, disturbs the poem, emphasizing that the ability to access the beauties of nature and the pleasures of community, is temporary and limited (readers of the *Advertiser* would, of course, know that Bute is easily reached from the major industrial city of Glasgow and was thus a popular tourist destination). The poet’s immediate turn to the pleasures of heaven recognizes that on earth, leisure is a rare commodity. Poems in the “Farewell to Bute” genre have a strong tendency to acknowledge that rural delights are at best a brief respite from the standard working lives of poet and reader, just as the poem itself is a respite from the news and factual reports on the same page.

The final poem selected in this column is the most interesting, because “Lines from a Sentimentalist” acknowledges and parodies the sentimental style of many newspaper love-poems. After several stanzas celebrating the touching beauty of a weeping girl, the speaker begs her to “Unfold then, fairest maid, I pray, / The care thy troubled looks betray”:

Softened, then, she spake thus free –

“Last nicht I was on the spree,

I’m seedy noo, and no mistake –

I say man, chappie, lend’s a make.”

That the object of the speaker’s high-flown rhetoric (emphasized by the archaic “spake”) is a coarsely-spoken, hungover woman asking for a loan brings realism into sharp contrast with poetic flights of fantasy. This poem by “Aliquis” nicely indicates how very self-aware newspaper poets were of the difference between poetic rhetoric and reality. The author of “Our Local Poets,” however, seemingly does not approve. “Aliquis must purge and purify,” he concludes, commenting that the Scots lines are “too vulgar” compared to the “above tolerable” rhetoric of the rest of the poem. Given that the poem obviously *parodies* such rhetoric, it is possible that this commentary should be read as ironic, though it may also reflect the author’s assumption that if poetry is not improving, it is worthless.

Dwelling on this one column in some detail highlights the diversity of newspaper poetry and the ways in which even the most clichéd poem speaks to issues relevant to the predominately working-class readership of the cheap weekly press. All four poems selected for notice here are “political,” in the sense of dealing with issues of social concern to working people, and they are good instances of the way in which poetry columns negotiate between local, national, and international concerns, and, in the Scottish context, between

differing linguistic registers. Much newspaper verse, and indeed Scottish Victorian verse in general, has been heavily criticized for “distortion and avoidance of the real social and political conditions and issues,” in favor instead of escapism and romanticism (Gifford 324-5). Close study of poetry columns, however, indicates that this is not the case, and supports Andrew Nash’s revisionist claim that Scottish Victorian writers “addressed contemporary urban life more directly in poetry than they did in fiction” (145). Every provincial paper included numbers of poems that served as immediate commentary on topical local issues, though these are, of course, precisely the kind of poems that would never be republished should an author attain success, because their purpose was entirely context-dependent.

A good example of this is found in a poem on “The Udney Case,” by “Kenna Fa, Corbie Heugh,” dated 29 March 1850 and printed on 13 April 1850 by the *Aberdeen Herald* with a note that it had previously appeared in the *Banffshire Journal*. The “Udney Case” concerned Mr. John Leslie and an appeal that had been lodged against him becoming a Presbyterian minister in the small village of Udney in Aberdeenshire. The appeal, heard by the Established Church Synod and reported in the same issue as the poem, centered on whether Leslie was unfit to be a minister due to his association with the lower classes. It was thus a potent combination of religious and class issues. Servants testified, for instance, that Leslie had helped them with hoeing the turnips, and working in harvest... We addressed him “Johnny”; that he had been seen “ploughing” and “driving a cart at laying down the dung,” and

that he dressed like a working man (2). To the author of “The Udney Case” and presumably the readers of the *Herald*, which had moderate radical sympathies in this period, the appeal was an example of the wealthy persecuting a man for associating with the poor and an attack on the dignity of labor:

We a’ hae heard in ancient time
That labour wasna thocht nae crime
In them that brocht the truth sublime
Frae Heaven to man;
But, wiser now, we’ve chang’d our rhyme
For newer plan. (13 April 1850, 4)

The poet satirically notes the artificial distinction between approved upper-class leisure and rural pursuits such as hunting and shooting, and meaningful labor, and between the pleasures of the wealthy and the needs of the poor:

Or ye may spen’ half days at dinner,
An’ bandy jokes wi’ foul-mou’d sinner,
Or stap your painch wi’ flesh an’ finner,
Till near hand bokin’;
But help in hairst a weary bin’er,
Na, that’s nae jokin’

“Gin ye shak a corn-riddle / Fareweel the manse,” “Kenna Fa” notes with grim humor, concluding by hoping that in the modern world “The proud may yet to them be cringin’ / They noo ca “vermin””(CITATION). The fact that the poem is written in Scots, and in the habbie stanza, which was strongly associated with Burns’s satirical poems, helps to locate the author as one of the working people implicitly maligned by this case and aligns the poem with a tradition of satirizing the hypocrisy of the clergy, most famously seen in Burns’s “Holy Willie’s Prayer.” Like most topical newspaper poems, the author does not mention the key players by name and presumes readers’ familiarity with the fine details of the case. Every action referenced in the poem features in the *Herald’s* extensive report on the hearing. In the absence of editorial commentary on the case, the republication of this biting satirical poem indicates the *Aberdeen Herald’s* stance. The poetry column, as is not infrequently the case, is where the paper’s politics come through most clearly and are presented in a more radical light than overt editorial statements might suggest.

Poetry columns supported political action from those whose voices might otherwise get a limited hearing, including working-class women. In an example of a series of poems on the same issue, as opposed to the stand-alone poem on “The Udney Case,” poetry played a significant role in an ongoing dispute over female servants’ working hours in the 1860s. As Jan Merchant has discussed, the “insurrection of maids” in the early 1870s, leading to the formation of the Dundee and District Domestic Servants’ Association, was a

key moment in fostering a radical working-class women's movement and was largely supported by the *People's Journal*. Poetry had, however, been deployed to protest about servants' working conditions for at least a decade prior to this. A. M. B.'s "Song of the Servant Maid" was widely reprinted in spring 1860, appearing a week apart, for instance, in the *Aberdeen Herald* and the *Dundee Advertiser*. With a title deliberately recalling Thomas Hood's enormously influential "The Song of the Shirt," it opens:

Close the office, and shut the shop

And let the human machinery stop;

Toil is wearing, and life is sweet,

Toil and rest make life complete;

Stop the wheels of labour and trade –

But oh for the weary servant maid! (12 Aug 1860, *Aberdeen*

Herald 2; 17 Aug 1860, *Dundee Advertiser* 2)

Female servants, A.M.B.'s poem points out, do not even have access to the hours of leisure afforded to working men (and women) in industrial employment. Five years later, "The Grubses," by "Betty Martin" in Glasgow's *Penny Post*, is a scornful discussion of a proposal to set up a training institution for maidservants in the form of a conversation between maidservants in Glasgow's West End.⁶ The mistresses' "real wish," one

reports, is “that such as you and me / Be made still greater slaves for oor / Bit paltry penny fee.” She concludes:

And let us hear nae mair about
Their filanthrofick cry
For institutions to train us –
For that’s all in my eye. (25 February 1865, 1)

Like many political Scots poems, this is humorous and self-mocking in its misspelling of “philanthropic,” but also angry. By 1866, agitation for better holidays and working hours for female servants spread through the poems and letters pages of the *People’s Journal* and other Scottish papers, as a definite movement got under way to form a trades union. J. C., Elie, responding to a letter from “A Servant Maid;” asking men to join this cause, wrote:

Ye fathers, brothers, lovers all
Oh! Hasten to their aid
And brave the system that enthralls
The Scottish Servant Maid.

And when we have our nine hours gain’d
It never shall be said
That we have left in slavery

The Scottish Servant Maid. (17 March 1866, *People's Journal* 2)

This directly links the causes of working women and men. On 19 May “A Scottish Servant Maid” cited these verses and gratefully thanked J. C. “our noble poetic friend,” “whose name is immortalized in the memory of many of us,” for his support. In the same issue, A. L. B., Craigellachie, joined the cause with his poem “A Scottish Servant Maid,” in which “we” are working men, glad that women workers are joining their cause:

Come – for we thought that thou hadst slept
In ignorance, nor wished to raise
Thy voice o’er slavery, and protect
Sweet freedom’s sunny days.

But no, it is not so, for we
A Scottish Servant Maid can find,
To bear the palm of liberty
And lead fair womankind. (17 March 1866, 4)

A. L. B.’s poem was similarly greeted with enthusiasm by “An Aberdeenshire Lassie” in her letter of 2 June, “Cheer up my sisters, and let us all unite hands and hearts together. We are no longer to be mere walking machines, with no higher aim than to eat and sleep...I am much obliged to the Craigellachie

Bard, who last week cheered our hearts with his beautiful lines.” Poetry, here, is key both because it promotes affective investment in a political cause and also because the act of producing poems in itself demonstrates that workers are more than “human machinery,” displaying a level of cultural literacy that serves to advocate for better treatment.

This brief example also shows the regular level of interaction between poets and correspondents to newspapers with new poems and poets subjects of praise and commentary by readers and other poets. Sometimes these responses, as in Ellen Johnston’s long-running correspondence with a number of other poets in the *Penny Post*, could run over months and years (see Boos and Rosen). During the maidservant’s debate, to take only one further example, “A Factory Lassie’s Sang” by “Jessie Jimpwaist, Kenmiser Crescent, Aberdeen” – a poem which defends the author’s work in the mill and celebrates her unnamed young man – attracted an immediate response, “The Factory Lassie,” by “Jessie’s Sweetheart,” with the final line “Dear Jessie, in a week or twa I’ll tak ye frae the mill” (21 April 1866 and 5 May 1866 *People’s Journal* 2). Readers understood that such poetic romances and friendships were fictional, but this did not hinder enjoyment of the pleasures of serial reading, and the sense of community that the poetry columns could produce.

Local newspapers did not simply support existing working-class poets. They created them by providing an aspirational venue for publishing their works. They made the practice of writing poems, in the intervals of highly demanding labor, seem both exceptional, something to be lauded and

celebrated, and unexceptional, in that everyone was doing it. And they profoundly influenced what working-class people wrote, as well as what they read. In Victorian studies, book collections are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to assessing the influence of working-class poetics. Working-class readers were not, on the whole, reading these books. They were reading and discussing the poetry columns and then cutting their favorite poems out of newspaper columns and pasting them into scrapbooks or on the walls of their workplace. William Donaldson observes in his seminal study of popular prose literature in Victorian Scotland that the writers who operated “through the medium of the popular press” created “a cultural achievement of massive proportions; and it is still largely unexplored” (148). Only by undertaking the substantial labor of tracing both named and unnamed working-class writers through the columns of the newspaper press can we understand the relationship between their writings, their readership, and the print culture of their period.

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¹ On Tennyson, *The Times*, and the circulation of poems by established poets in the newspaper press see Houston.

² Working-class poets also published frequently in the periodical press, and their presence in this medium also requires further research. While the distinction between periodical, magazine, and newspaper is blurred in the nineteenth century, for the purposes of this chapter I consider only "newspapers," defining such as daily or weekly publications primarily focused on reporting current affairs.

³ For example, Cohen, Fertig, and Fleming note that poems such as Bernstein's "Oh! I Wish That All Women Had Power to Vote" and "The

Govan Riveter's Strike" appeared in the *Glasgow Weekly Mail* but have not since been republished (239, 247).

⁴ See Boos, Rosen, and Klaus on Johnston and Cohen and Fertig on Bernstein. Hamilton is discussed in this volume by Kaye Kossick.

⁵ Goodridge's "Laboring-Class Poets Online" identifies "well over half" of the named poets in the database as 'of Scottish origin or acculturation' ("Statistical Notes," <https://lcpoets.wordpress.com/introtobibliography/>, consulted 29.7.15).

⁶ "Betty Martin" is a Cockney slang term. In the 1830s and 1840s there was a running joke that it was short for "Harriet Martineau." It is not impossible that the author of this poem intends an in-joke about Martineau's study of political economy. See Pegge, 66 on the origins of the phrase and Maidment 2014, 35, for a poetic example of a working-class speaker referring to Martineau by this nickname.