

## *The “Uneducated Poets”*

Stephen Duck and  
Ann Yearsley

**I**n 1732, a London bookseller published an unauthorized volume of poems to which he gave the title, *Poems on several subjects/written by Stephen Duck, lately a poor thresher in a barn, in the county of Wilts, at the wages of four shillings and six-pence per week;; which were publicly read in the drawing-room at Windsor Castle, on Friday the 11th of September, 1730, to Her Majesty: who was there-upon most graciously pleased to take the author into her royal protection, by allotting him a salary of thirty pounds per annum, and a small house in Richmond in Surrey to live in, for the better support of himself and family.* The pensioned Duck complained about the piracy; he would have liked an opportunity to further revise the poems before publication.

In 1831, Robert Southey, then English poet laureate, published an introduction to a volume of “Attempts in Verse by an Old Servant,” John Jones. This introduction was later expanded and published separately as *The Lives and Works of the Uneducated Poets*, with an eight-page list of subscribers consisting mostly of nobles and clerics. Among Southey’s uneducated poets were the Thames waterman John Taylor; shoemaker James Woodhouse;

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pipe-maker and trumpeter John Frederick Bryant; the “Bristol milkwoman,” Ann Yearsley; and the “thresher-poet,” Stephen Duck.

When J. S. Childers edited a new version of Southey’s *Lives* another one hundred years later, he wrote that “probably no writer has ever disturbed the recognized *littérateurs* of his day as did Stephen Duck, who from being ‘a poor thresher in a barn,’ was, because of the favour of the Queen [Caroline], suddenly thrust into national fame.” Jonathan Swift resented Duck’s modest pension and complained strongly about it in letters to Pope and Gay. He was quick to deride the thresher in a characteristically cynical epigram.

The thresher, Duck, could o’er the Queen prevail;  
The proverb says, no force against a flail.  
From threshing corn, he turns to thresh his brains,  
For which his Majesty allows him grains;  
Tho’ ’tis confest, that those who ever saw  
His poems, think them all not worth a straw.  
Thrice happy Duck, employed in threshing stubble!  
Thy toil is lessen’d, and thy profits double.

(Southey, 109)

In his own letter to Gay, Alexander Pope approved of the pension; he had met Duck and judged him “an honest man.” But when Queen Caroline sent him Duck’s manuscripts for comment, Pope remarked uncharitably that “most villages could supply verses of equal force.” A contrary view was expressed by Horace Walpole fifty years later (November 13, 1784) in a letter to Hannah More: “When the late Queen patronized Stephen Duck, who was a wonder only at first, and had not genius enough to support the character he had promised, twenty artisans and labourers turned poets, and starved” (Southey, 183). Walpole’s estimate may have been low. Inspired by the story of Duck’s ample pension, a gaggle of brickmasons, carpenters, and

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other working men published manuscripts that failed to support Pope's judgment. Following Swift's example, a flurry of parodies also appeared, including *The Thresher's Miscellany*, which stated upon the title page that the author is "now a poor Thresher in the County of Suffolk, at the wages of Five Shillings and Six Pence per Week, though formerly an Eton Scholar" (Southey, 184).

What so riled and antagonized the English literary world of the 1730s? "The Thresher's Labour" was composed when Stephen Duck was twenty-five years old, supporting a wife and three children on the meager thresher's income announced on the title page of the pirated edition. As evidence that Duck deserved inclusion in *The Lives and Works of the Uneducated Poets*, Southey noted that Duck much admired Milton but read him with the aid of a dictionary, as "one would Latin and Greek"; that he was fond of Seneca and Epictetus but read them only in translation; and that he owned but one volume of Shakespeare that included only seven plays. Of course, Duck was also devoted to the *Spectator*, which he frequently took into the fields with him to read during work breaks. The *Spectator* published the most fashionable writers of the times, and today we might deem the combination of stylish coffeehouse prose, Latin philosophy, and the verse of Milton and Shakespeare sufficient education for a young poet, whether laborer or gentleman.

Even Duck's detractors admit the "charm and authenticity" of his most famous poem, and recognize its singularity as a "vividly realistic" portrait "from first-hand experience" of "the labourer's life." It is still included in anthologies of the era and can also be found in *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, edited by John Barrell and John Bull, though under the heading "Some Versions of Anti-Pastoral," where it is grouped with poems by Goldsmith, Crabbe, and John Clare—all poets distinguished from the pastoral company chiefly by their more intimate acquaintance with village life.

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The Birds salute us, as to Work we go,  
And with new Life our Bosoms seem to glow.  
On our right shoulder hangs the crooked Blade,  
The Weapon destin'd to uncloath the Mead:  
Our left supports the Whetstone, Scrip, and Beer;  
This for our Scythes, and these ourselves to cheer.  
And now the Field, design'd to try our Might,  
At length appears, and meets our longing Sight.  
The Grass and Ground we view with careful Eyes,  
To see which way the best Advantage lies;  
And, Hero-like, each claims the foremost Place.  
At first our Labour seems a sportive Race:  
With rapid Force our sharpen'd Blades we drive,  
Strain ev'ry Nerve, and Blow for Blow we give.  
All strive to vanquish, tho' the Victor gains  
No other Glory, but the greatest Pains.

Admittedly, the poet's point of view is part of the poem's attraction.

Week after week, we this dull Task pursue,  
Unless when winn'wing Days produce a new;  
A new, indeed, but frequently a worse!  
The Threshal yields but to the Master's Curse.  
He counts the Bushels, counts how much a Day;  
He swears we've idled half our Time away:  
"Why, look ye, Rogues, d'ye think that this will do?  
Your Neighbours thrash so much again as you."  
Now in our Hands we wish our noisy Tools,  
To drown the hated Names of Rogues and Fools.  
But wanting these, we just like School-boys look,  
When angry Masters view the blotted Book:  
They cry, "their Ink was faulty, and their Pen;"  
We, "the Corn threshes bad, 'twas cut too green."

The poem still sounds fresh and direct, and Duck brings a perspective to the literature found in none of his more famous con-

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temporaries. His poem arrived at a time when the most respected poets looked to classical sources, particularly Virgil, and the favorite form was a pastoral in which rustics enamored with the greenery of their surroundings declaimed like English gentry. The rural setting of Duck's poem found a responsive audience in readers attracted to pastoral verse, while at the same time complicating the landscape with a farm laborer who actually spoke as a laborer—who grew sweaty, thirsty, fatigued, and resented his demanding boss.

Nor yet, the tedious Labour to beguile,  
And make the passing Minutes sweetly smile,  
Can we, like Shepherds, tell a merry Tale;  
The Voice is lost, drown'd by the louder Flail.  
But we may think—Alas! what pleasing thing,  
Here, to the Mind, can the dull Fancy bring?  
Our Eye beholds no pleasing Object here,  
No chearful sound diverts our list'ning Ear.  
The Shepherd well may tune his Voice to sing,  
Inspir'd with all the Beauties of the Spring.  
No Fountains murmur here, no Lambkins play,  
No Linnets warble, and no Fields look gay.

His direct and economic diction bespeaks a sincerity and concision rare in an age of fussy ornament, extended metaphor, and stilted rhetoric. The realism in his verses was enough to inspire Crabbe a generation later to write in "The Village,"

Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains,  
Because the Muses never knew their pains:  
They boast their peasants' pipes; but peasants now  
Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough;  
And few, amid the rural-tribe, have time  
To number syllables, and play with rhyme;  
Save honest *Duck*, what son of verse could share  
The poet's rapture and the peasant's care?

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Or the great labours of a field degrade,  
With the new peril of a poorer trade?

(Barrell and Bull, 400)

One account has it that Duck's wife strongly disapproved of his versifying, even complaining to neighbors and parish authorities that he was bedeviled, because he would frequently sit by himself counting on his fingers and mouthing rhymes. Unfortunately, this wife never enjoyed the rewards from his vocation; she died at about the same time that Queen Caroline discovered the thresher.

The queen put Duck on salary as keeper of her library at Richmond, called Merlin's Cave. She approved of the recent widower's marriage to one of her housekeepers, Sarah Big, and encouraged him to study for holy orders. He spent the rest of his life studying theology and Greek, and writing on order and to occasion the society verse that was the mode of the day. A quick and able student, Duck continued to rise in station, even as his verse "degenerated into conventional pastoral and artificial diction" (Drabble, 304). In 1746, at the age of forty-one, he was ordained a priest; in 1750, was made chaplain to a regiment of the Dragoon Guards; in 1751, became a preacher at Kew Chapel, and in 1752 obtained the parish of Byfleet in Surrey. This last appointment was contended by those who argued that Duck lacked sufficient Latin to be entrusted with such an office, but his royal patrons stood by his appointment.

Despite the success of Duck's career as poet, scholar, and clergyman, the modest introductions that he devised for later editions of his poems suggest he was embarrassed by the parodies and attacks upon him by the very poets whose company he sought to join. In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams praised Duck's early poems for altering the English landscape by shifting point of view and particularizing the nature of rural

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labor. Williams added, however, that “within a few years Duck was writing, with the worst of them, his imitations from the classics, elevated and hollowed to the shapes of that fashionable culture which was not only a literary stance—the ‘high’ tradition—but, as always, a social ratification” (90). In the last years of his life he quit writing completely and in 1756 committed suicide by drowning.

The stratified society of eighteenth-century England allowed Duck to prosper, but never to sever the thresher from “thresher-poet.” Likewise, Mary Leapor remained the “Kitchen maid of Weston,” Mary Collier the “Washer-woman,” and Ann Yearsley the “Bristol milkwoman.” In each case the “uneducated poet” was esteemed not for the quality of her verse but the novelty of her origin, as if the mystery was that these creatures wrote poems at all. When their efforts were encouraged, it was as novelties, and it quickly turned to discouragement if there were any attempt to leap stations.

When Leapor’s verses were published, Duck was among the list of subscribers. But unlike the fortunate Duck, Leapor failed to attract a rich patron, was dismissed from her position in the kitchen (possibly because of her writing), and returned home to keep house for her father, who didn’t much care for the scribbling either. She survived at home for only several years before her early death.

Another contemporary of Duck’s, Mary Collier, objected to the portrait of laboring rural women in these lines from “The Thresher’s Labour”:

Our Master comes, and at his Heels a Throng  
Of prattling Females, arm’d with Rake and Prong;  
Prepar’d, whilst he is here, to make his Hay;  
Or, if he turns his Back, prepar’d to play:  
But here, or gone, sure of this Comfort still’  
Here’s Company, so they may chat their Fill.

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Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues,  
How nimbly then would move the Rakes  
and Prongs!

From our vantage, the women's greater sense of community, their scorn for the master's authority, and their playfulness are wholly admirable. But Collier was eager to prove the women more hard-working and obedient than the men. She responded in 1739 with "The Woman's Labour," a poem that disputes the thresher's portrayal, while flattering the poet by imitation. The advertisement to the poem stated,

Tho' She pretends not to the Genius of Mr. Duck, nor hopes to be taken Notice of by the Great, yet her Friends are of Opinion that the Novelty of a Washer-Woman's turning Poetess, will procure her some Readers. (Landry, 56)

As forecast, Collier did not gain a patron and apparently paid from her own earnings to publish her poem. Later in life, she complained that she had benefited little from it. She remained in her station, continuing to work as a washerwoman and brewer to employers who apparently little valued her verse.

Among other worker poets who gained public notice in the second half of the eighteenth century were two poets from Scotland, Janet Little and Robert Burns. Burns's origins would later endear him particularly to Walt Whitman. There was also Ann Yearsley, the "Bristol milkwoman."

Like Duck, Ann Yearsley was inspired by her reading of Milton and "a few plays" by Shakespeare. She also read Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*. And her success depended largely on the acquisition of a patron. But in that patronage, she was not so fortunate as to be linked to a queen. Instead she was championed by the philanthropic Hannah More, whose cook first tipped her off to Yearsley's poetry. Apparently More went to check out Yearsley and was appalled by the conditions in which she was living. According to More's

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account, the Yearsley family (including her husband, six children, and Ann's mother) were dwelling in a stable, on the verge of starvation, and More's intercession was life-saving (for all, that is, except Yearsley's mother, who took ill and failed to recover). In the middle of this extreme poverty, More found "a Milker of Cows, and Feeder of Hogs, who has never even seen a dictionary" (Landry, 130), but who composed stunning "untutored" verses.

More may not be an entirely reliable witness about the extent of Yearsley's poverty or her education, but Yearsley was grateful for the aid she provided to the family. Yearsley responded by addressing a number of conventional verses to "Stella," the name she chose for More, from "Lactilla," her faithful milkmaid.

Yearsley was not born into the laboring class. Unlike Duck, Collier, or Leapor, the Yearsleys had begun married life as small property owners, and it's unclear how they fell into the stable where More found them. More speculated that it was a combination of the husband's stupidity and, on the part of the wife, that "poetic vice," a lack of thrift. In any case, there was no doubt that the Yearsleys had fallen on hard times. More, with the aid of her friend Elizabeth Montagu, established a subscription to publish a book of Yearsley's poems. Worried that the Yearsleys would mismanage the funds collected by the subscription, More was determined that Yearsley's literary success not disrupt her barnyard labors. It seems that Yearsley was destined to pay the price for Duck's example. More wrote to Lady Montagu, "I am utterly against taking her out of her Station. Stephen was an excellent Bard as a Thresher, but as the Court Poet, and Rival of Pope, detestable" (Landry, 20).

Without consulting Yearsley, More established a trust to support the poet and her children (her husband was to have no access to the money), with More and Montagu as trustees. She also published a preface to the first edition of Yearsley's poems in which she embarrassed Yearsley by describing the impover-

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ished plight in which she found her and claiming to have corrected the “grossest” inaccuracies and offenses in the poet’s primitive art.

When Yearsley attempted to negotiate terms of the trust so that she might be one of the trustees, More became indignant. In her letters she complains about “that wretched milkwoman.”

Prosperity is a great trial, and she could not stand it. I was afraid it would turn her head but I did not expect it would harden her heart. I contrive to take the same care of her pecuniary interests, and am bringing out a second edition of her poems. My conscience tells me I ought not to give up my trust for these poor children, on account of their mother’s wickedness. (Waldron, 72)

Yearsley had a different version of the feud.

Miss More appeared to be greatly moved, and told me imperiously, that I was a “savage”—that “my veracity agreed with my other virtues”—that I had “a reprobate mind, and was a bad woman.”—I replied, that her accusations could never make me a bad woman—that she descended in calling me a savage, nor would she have had the temerity to do it, had I not given myself that name! (Landry, 152)

The timing of the incident was unfortunate for Yearsley. It was no longer the era of Queen Caroline, but the precipice before the French Revolution. The anxious English upper classes were not charmed by an ungrateful milkmaid poet who deemed herself the equal of her patrons. The determined Yearsley, however, self-published further editions of her poems, including *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (1788), *Stanzas of Woe* (1790), and *The Rural Lyre* (1796). In the reaction following the French terror, she composed sympathetic elegies for Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Mary Waldron’s excellent biography of Yearsley assures us that she earned enough from her writings to open a circulating library and to apprentice her sons to reputable trades.

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In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, one finds Stephen Duck cross-referenced to the entry “primitivism.” As the *Oxford Companion* describes primitivism, it was

an 18th century phenomenon that grew out of an interest in the educational and philosophic theories of Rousseau (and was accompanied by great enthusiasm for travel writings and for real-life South Sea Islanders, Eskimos, Laplanders, Negroes, etc. . . . Homegrown primitives were also in demand, and “peasant” poets such as Stephen Duck and Anne Yearsley (the Bristol milkwoman, who wrote pastoral verses to her patron Stella from her faithful Lactilla) were taken up by eager patrons.

The *Oxford* goes on to say that one of the most important figures in the movement was Thomas Gray, whose poems (especially *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, with its nod to the “mute inglorious Miltons”) “reflect his own feeling for the non-classical past and tend to connect poetic genius to liberty.” The entry concludes: “It was in the cause of liberty that writers such as Cowper and Day defended the Noble Savage and attacked the slave trade. The ideas embodied in Primitivism were in many ways continued in the Romantic movement, with its stress on Nature, freedom, and the natural man.”

In 1832, only a year after Southey’s *Lives of the Uneducated Poets* appeared, the vagaries of the era before copyright allowed a translation of part of his book into American. The Boston firm of Perkins and Marvin published a *Biography of Self Taught Men* by B. B. Edwards that included, in addition to chapters on successful American businessmen and politicians such as Henry Clay, chapters on John Jones and Stephen Duck. Edwards lifted these chapters verbatim from Southey’s book, except for the poetic excerpts, which were deleted. In crossing the Atlantic, Jones and Duck were transformed from “uneducated poets” to “self taught men.” As a woman, Yearsley was excluded. Ideas about nature, freedom, and the natural man that were by then in

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England associated with rebel Romantic poets were championed in the United States by prominent intellectuals such as Emerson and Margaret Fuller, and appealed to a people with the active confidence of enterprising pioneers and ambitious merchants. Though I have found no evidence that Walt Whitman saw the *Biography of Self Taught Men*, it typified the self-assertive spirit of the Jacksonian era and anticipated the calls of Young America to which he harkened.