

ARUNA KRISHNAMURTHY, Editor

THE WORKING-CLASS INTELLECTUAL IN EIGHTEENTH- AND
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN (Ashgate, 2009), pp. x + 257

Reviewed by Cassandra Falke

This essay collection is a welcome addition to the growing sub-discipline of working-class studies. Krishnamurthy has brought together a diverse range of scholars – some senior, some junior--- to examine a diverse body of work : poetry, autobiography, journalism, and music hall lyrics. While the quality of the essays varies, reading them all is both informative and enjoyable. The editor's introduction helps contextualize the emergence of working-class intellectuals, provides via footnotes an overview of criticism already available on the topic, and of course previews what readers may expect from the twelve essays that follow. The introduction seems somewhat discontinuous: after learning about the first three essays on page 7, we must wait until the final paragraph (20-22) for advance word on the remaining nine (20-22). Likewise a few of the essays seem to wander, with authors attempting to unite them through the repetition of key phrases rather

than through sustained arguments. Nevertheless, readers who press on will find their persistence rewarded, for each essay offers memorable insights.

Initiating the collection with an essay about the thresher poet, Stephen Duck, William Christmas questions a critical habit of looking back at Duck through the later history of politically engaged working-class intellectualism. Compared with the writings of Chartist intellectuals in the 1830s and 40s or of the London radicals in the 1790s, Duck's poetry appears quite conservative, a characteristic that has led some critics to "devalue, dismiss, or at best redefine" his work (26). Christmas, in contrast, argues that Duck's "talent, intellect, guile, sense and fortitude ... was disruptive to the contemporary literary establishment and paved the way for later forms of working-class expression" (27).

Examining what poet Ann Yearsley wrote about education, Monica Smith Hart links her writings to both the Sunday School movement and contemporary discourses about working-class education. Yearsley, Hart shows, managed to write about an inflammatory topic for a primarily middle-class audience by flattering her readers and also reminding them of their responsibility to the poorer classes, Yearsley thus "transforms middle-class desire for her own purposes" (57). Hart provides several close readings that support these assertions.

From Luke Maynard's essay we learn how poet Robert Burns represents a working-class life for leisure-class readers. According to Maynard, Burns's working-class background helps rather than hinders him because it offers him "a decentralized (and thus, a vastly expanded) perspective" (73). Maynard derives this theory from feminist Helene Cixous, who argued that women are aware of both male identity, which is central, and female identity, which is not. But Maynard contends that Burns reconfigured this contrast in terms of class. Knowing both the central discourse of the leisure class and decentralized discourse of the working class, he could manipulate the persona of "the Heaven-taught ploughman" (78) to his own ends.

With Aruna Krishnamurthy's essay, the book turns away from peasant poetry to working-class culture more broadly. Krishnamurthy argues that in shifting from the alehouse to the coffeehouse, working-class intellectual culture moves from spontaneity to political organization, from crowd driven working-class consciousness to something directed from above: it adopts features of bourgeois intellectual culture in order to control working-class consciousness and redirect it toward specific political ends. Focusing especially on the figure of John Thelwall, Krishnamurthy shows how the London Corresponding Society both accelerated and responded to this shift.

Scrutinizing genre in the Chartist periodical, Rob Breton documents Chartist attempts to reach a broad working-class audience through sensationalized fiction. In Chartist periodicals, he argues, the use of sensational elements results in “a various working-class aesthetic, not simply a sensationalized one” (112) because these periodicals continued to feature more sober rhetoric as well. Breton supports his broad claim by contrasting broadsides and books by prominent Chartists with non-Chartist working-class periodicals such as the *Penny Magazine*.

Also treating periodicals, Kathryn Prince shows how they took Shakespeare as “a model for the working-class intellectual, a representative of that class who had risen through the ranks simply by virtue of his own intellectual prowess and hard work” (130). In quoting lines from Shakespeare’s plays, they typically stripped the lines of their context so as to imply that Shakespeare’s characters expressed the radical sympathies of the bard himself. In theatre reviews, however, working-class periodicals such as Wooler’s *Black Dwarf* educated their readers about Shakespeare’s plays and helped their readers interpret the plays in light of their own political situations.

Moving from the periodical to the novel, Sambudha Sen tracks the influence of radical expressive modes such as caricature, inclusive language, and satiric

overwriting in novels by Thackeray and Dickens. Though both of these authors helped to produce periodical literature, Sen chiefly considers how their periodical writing affected the middle-class genre of the novel. He argues that the radical language that had originated in “the revolutionary political climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” remains influential through “the stability and prosperity of the mid-Victorian era” because of its effect on the novel (163).

In another essay on fiction, Richard Salmon shows how the working-class intellectual becomes “a distinctive modern cultural figure within the work of two influential middle-class writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Carlyle” (167). Carlyle’s popular conceptions of heroism and the process of self-formation, Salmon observes, shaped Kingsley’s autobiographical novel *Alton Locke* to such an extent that he has been faulted with forcing his working-class protagonist into a characteristically bourgeois plot structure. Salmon argues, however, that Kingsley mediated an historically accurate working-class experience, the struggle for self-improvement, by means of a novelistic form that helped middle-class readers sympathize with the protagonist’s plight.

Turning from autobiographical fiction, Julie Codell examines the actual autobiography of Alexander Somerville, who (according to his pseudonym)

“whistled at the plough” as a young man. He became a successful journalist in middle-age, and then died in poverty after moving to Canada. Although his autobiography and much of his writing about political economy date from the middle period of his life, Somerville draws much of his authority to write from his early experiences as an agricultural laborer. With a thesis similar to Maynard’s, Codell shows how Somerville combined working-class experience with middle-class discourse to shape a respected authorial identity.

Alice Jenkins examines a liminal figure for working-class studies, Michael Faraday. Like other artisans of his generation, Faraday sought to expand his education by working with a writers group. Jenkins “explore[s] the aims and practices of [this] essay-circle through an account of its intertextual relations with canonical writers” and polite rhetoric (221).

Examining the cross-class environment of the music hall in the final chapter of the collection, Ian Peddie shows how the representation of working-class characters changed as larger, national companies purchased small regional music halls. Increasingly, working-class characters featured in music hall performances came to express dominant ideologies and to re-enact stock working-class types (the coster, etc) rather than realistic working-class characters. Exemplifying the

balance that all of the contributors strive for and the best achieve, Peddie combines accounts of individual performers (or writers) with contextualizing information about the genre and culture in which they work.

As someone who shares the editor's goal of discovering a more nuanced narrative of the emergence of working-class consciousness, I found this collection a rewarding read. In her introduction, Krishnamurthy says that by focusing on the working-class intellectual, she hopes to draw critics' attention to the ways these intellectuals mediated between the public sphere, which was dominated by the leisure classes, and the cultures of workers' lives. All of the essays succeed in this goal.

Krishnamurthy also articulates a second goal for the book. She hopes that "the insertion of the figure of the intellectual into the larger story of the formation of working-class identity allows for a tripartite rendering of that history – the early eighteenth-century moment that saw the rise of a sporadic but comprehensible 'tradition' of working-class poets who wrote for a select readership and within conventional modes and genres; the 1790s era of the radicalized artisan who innovatively adapted the universalistic language of the bourgeois public sphere to the demands of a indigent and restless constituency of readers; and the Chartist era

of the 1830s, where the working-class intellectual consolidated the identity of the working classes within a multi-generic, counter hegemonic narrative that reinserted indigenous oral traditions into print culture” (4). This is clearly and concisely put. It does not, however, fundamentally alter the history of working-class formation that has already been written. The working-class intellectual has always been part of this story, and its chronological boundaries have always been porous. Although E. P. Thomson’s *Making of the English Working Class* focuses on the early 1800s, he refers to the eighteenth century, especially the 1790s. Other accounts of working-class formation such as Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Raymond Williams *The Country and The City*, or David Vincent’s *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* extend the narrative back farther than this, as do numerous single author studies. This book, therefore, does not rewrite the narrative of the emergence of working-class intellectualism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it certainly enhances our understanding of what individual authors and genres contributed to this emergence.

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