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THE WRETCH OF TODAY, MAY BE HAPPY TOMORROW: POVERTY IN ENGLAND,
C1700-1840

Sarah Lloyd

‘But think of this Maxim, and put off your Sorrow,/The Wretch of To-day, may be happy To-morrow’ ... so ended John Gay’s hugely-successful *Beggar’s Opera* of 1728 with a satirical display of familiar and slippery morality. Ten years earlier, Gay had supplied verse for Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*, in which ‘happy Nymphs and happy Swains’ brimmed with pastoral joy on the Arcadian plain.¹ But while he appeared to offer a glimpse of happiness among the wretched and the lowly, his works were more concerned with vulgar cant and aristocratic gambols, than with contemporary landscapes and labourers.² Gay’s philosopher cousin, a forerunner of utilitarian morality, argued that God had ‘no other Design in creating Mankind than *their Happiness* ... I am to do whatever lies in my Power to promote the Happiness of Mankind’. His own happiness may have been dependent ‘on others’, but in a period when poverty shaped the lives of millions, this talk made little connection with the predicament of the destitute, sick or hungry, in workhouse, hospital or cottage.³

The poor were everywhere: destitute or dependent on their labour to survive, vulnerable to changing circumstances. Nationally, poverty and its problems attracted social commentators and moral improvers. Poor relief dominated parish business and was a major focus of law and taxation.⁴ As fundamental principles of social organisation, poverty and labour were deeply implicated in eighteenth-century developments that drove and responded to material and ideological change: consumer goods, agricultural improvement, sentimental outbursts, popular religion, imperial expansion, novels and poems, the transatlantic slave trade.⁵ This chapter connects two eighteenth-century preoccupations: an expansive interest in

¹John Gay, *The Beggar’s Opera. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Lincolns-Inn-Fields*, 2nd edn (London, 1728), 76; [John Gay, John Hughes, Alexander Pope], *Acis and Galatea. A Masque* ([London], [1744]), 1. For a musical explosion of eighteenth-century happiness: ‘Happy we’, 3.

²John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980), 10-11

³John Gay, ‘Preliminary Dissertation’ in William King, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil ... translated from the Latin* (London, 1731), xix, xxiv. Jonathan Harris, ‘Gay, John (1699–1745)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10474, accessed 6 May 2016].

⁴Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c1550-1750* (Oxford, 2004); Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law 1531–1782* (Basingstoke, 1990) and *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (Harlow, 1988); K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985)

⁵Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009).

happiness and a pervasive awareness of the poor. It examines how people invoked happiness when considering issues that troubled them and that remain central to historians' accounts of the period. Happiness was not just a matter of individual feeling; it also described conditions of state and society, in which the poor figured instrumentally for good or ill. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, belonging to a powerful state was thought to bestow happiness, and power lay in population, material wealth and improvement. Later, the circumstances of the labouring poor provided a focus for empirical enquiries into national prosperity and progress.⁶

The first section below explores connections made in the eighteenth century between poverty and happiness, introducing the contexts in which such connections were made and the sources which document them. The second section expands on observers' discussions of inequality; these made questions about happiness relevant in settings ranging from salvation and strenuous labour to poor relief and emigration; investigations directing attention to the labourer's domestic situation gave happiness and misery new associations. A third section considers in more detail what happiness meant to poor women and men, whose lives, thoughts and feelings were scantily documented. The survival of particular types of evidence has opened plebeian experience to view, but in the process has privileged or naturalised a particular understanding of individual life, side-lining other ways in which people conceived of happiness. It is suggested that we should take into account, among other things, the process of remembering (or forgetting) happy occasions and places, and the significance of happiness as loss, absence or aspiration. In the form of nostalgia, comparisons of past and present happiness could have personal, social or political effects.

SOURCES AND DISCOURSES

As commonly invoked in the English-speaking world, happiness encompassed prosperity, harmony, satisfaction and contentment; it had religious, aesthetic and political imperatives, and roots in christian, folk and classical traditions.⁷ Across the social scale it was a simple

⁶ Paul Slack, 'Material Progress and the Challenge of Affluence in Seventeenth-Century England', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, lxxii (2009), 576-603; Slack, 'The Politics of Consumption and England's Happiness in the Later Seventeenth Century', *The English Historical Review*, cxxii (2007), 609-631; Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009), 111-12.

⁷ Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, *The Country Mans Delight. / Or, The Happy Joyes of a Countrey Life* (1681-4), Pepys Ballads 4.349, English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) 22013.

word applied conventionally to worldly and spiritual circumstances.⁸ For conscientious eighteenth-century Protestants, happiness was above all about recognising divine blessings, in this world and in the next. Religion and government were two of the major contexts for happiness; the third was a broad domain of personal experience – in family, marriage, comfort and pleasure. All three contexts were affected by interest in ‘sensibility’ or feeling which gathered steam over the course of the eighteenth century as a principle impelling moral and political action, as well as a physiological and aesthetic category.⁹ When the subject was poverty, what was meant by happiness varied according to situation, speaker and audience. While moralists, social enquirers and controversialists probed its application to the poor, it was often uncritically evoked through clichés and commonplaces.

Innumerable sermons and works of practical piety reminded the literate and comfortable across the long eighteenth century that happiness lay along a narrow path that everyone walked: ‘The holy inspired Writings inform us, and Nature and Reason say the same Thing, TO BE GOOD IS TO BE HAPPY’.¹⁰ For those living on shillings and pence a week or dependent on poor relief, the advice if not the tone was the same: ‘a Holy All-seeing God is your Governor and Judge; and ... his Favour is your only Happiness in both Worlds’.¹¹ Spiritual poverty was independent of material circumstances, as was the happiness of being close to god. This was an old point now favoured by evangelical preachers. It offered consolation for present suffering, which gave it particular application to the most abject. In 1737, John Wesley promised a slave in Carolina that in heaven ‘No one will beat or hurt you there. You will never be sick. You will never be sorry any more, nor afraid of anything. I can’t tell you, I don’t know how happy you will be; for you will be with God.’¹²

In terms of aiding the poor, those who talked of happiness were concerned with political, social and religious outcomes. On the voluntary side, charity campaigners made the

⁸ Many instances in the *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* refer to favourable circumstances, (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 08 February 2016), December 1772, trial of Edward Brocket (t17721209-99); ‘eternal happiness’ was a cliché of the Ordinary of Newgate.

⁹ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992).

¹⁰ William Balch, *Simplicity and Godly Sincerity, in a Christian Minister, the Sure Way to Happiness* (Boston, 1760), 37

¹¹ Josiah Woodward, *The Seaman's Monitor: Wherein Particular Advice is Given to Sea-Faring-Men*, 2nd edn (London, 1701), 4.

¹² Wesleyan Heritage Collection, *The Complete Works of John Wesley, Volume 1: Journals, Oct. 14, 1735 – Nov. 29, 1745* (Ages Digital Library Collections), 63.

poor into instruments generating happiness that extended beyond individual beneficiaries and benefactors, although they too gained spiritually and experientially in the process. Operating in a society suffused with providential thinking, campaigners asserted that their own, and other people's virtue had implications for happiness in national, occupational and localised communities.¹³ Circumstances, including national emergencies, shaped appeals. This is Jonas Hanway on the Marine Society, established during the Seven Years War (1756-63) to employ the poor and boost the navy:

We are now called upon to exert ourselves, not merely to guard these *fertile fields*, nor yet to preserve our *domestic joys*, but in defence of the honor and felicity of our Sovereign, with the support of our *happy constitution*. Reason and experience urge; *Heaven* itself importunes us to convert our *luxury* and *vanity*, our *puerility* and *effeminacy* into *pious, manly* and *martial* labors.¹⁴

For Hanway, national happiness was produced through good government; 'domestic joys' included the patriotic confidence that arose from knowledge that Britain was under divine protection. Sermons recommending charity often had a different emphasis to pamphlets, dwelling longer on universal moral obligations, when pamphlets had more to say about immediate social and economic effects. Around mid-century, sensibility coloured the language of virtuous happiness.¹⁵ Social distinctions conditioned expectations as to who would enjoy what happiness. Benefactors experienced 'the Pleasure of doing a kind Thing now, and the Glory and Reward of it hereafter'; beneficiaries were reminded that their happiness in this world and the next came through being 'serviceable and helpful'.¹⁶ Charities singled out groups within 'the poor'. Hanway focussed on productive labour. Hospital supporters pressed the claims of the distressed, sick and care-worn, familiar categories of deserving poverty. Charity schools claimed to bring the poorest back into the moral fold, while in fact catering for children from settled and therefore better-off labouring families.¹⁷ In figuring happiness, therefore, charity proponents took account of the material circumstances

¹³ Jonas Hanway, *Prudential Instruction to the Poor Boys, Fitted out by the Corporation of the Marine Society* (London, 1788), 5.

¹⁴ Jonas Hanway, *Motives for the Establishment of the Marine Society* (London, 1757), 2-3.

¹⁵ *An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Charity* (London, 1766), 106.

¹⁶ Thomas Alcock, *Observations on the Defects of the Poor Laws, and on the Causes and Consequences of the Great Increase and Burden of the Poor* (London, 1752), 51; *Twenty Five Sermons Preached at the Anniversary Meetings of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools in ... London and Westminster* (London, 1729), 217

¹⁷ Dianne Payne, 'London's Charity School Children: The "Scum of the Parish"?' , *Journal for Eighteenth-century Studies*, xxix (2006), 383-97.

and characteristics – actual or imagined – of beneficiaries, although rhetoric often diverged from practice.

Poor laws had long categorised the destitute as either deserving or undeserving of assistance. The distinction underpinned eighteenth-century strategies to aid the incapable, set the poor to work, reform the recalcitrant and halt the itinerant. By the 1730s, happiness was one criterion of success. Presented as both an objective measure and a subjective experience, it was at once open to interpretation and a tool of persuasion. One London parish reported that the helpless were ‘happily provided for’ with elderly inmates of the workhouse enjoying a ‘happy ... Retirement’, while the governors of St James Westminster opined that the poor in their area ‘ought to think it a happiness’ to be employed rather than starving and begging in the streets.¹⁸ The dynamics of poor relief created definitions and settings for happiness.

Social commentators and projectors also considered specifics, if rather schematically. Whether thinking about the state as a whole or examining its component parts, whether focussing on corporate life or on differences between people, they invoked happiness in taking stock of government and social relationships.¹⁹ The late seventeenth-century fashion for political arithmetic fuelled discussion of trade and incentives to labour. Some thought that plenty and even luxury promoted improvement and led to national happiness: they made individual pleasure a motor of collective prosperity and extended it across the social range. Others took a more austere approach. Recommending low wages and dampened expectations, they set labourers’ pleasures at odds with national power.²⁰ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, investigators explored social problems in more detail in the context of broader enquiries into human happiness: the plight of agricultural workers attracted considerable attention.²¹ Many assessments of wealth, population and human behaviour thus had general and localised applications to labour and poverty. Debate rumbled on with increasing technical

¹⁸ *An Account of Several Workhouses* (London, 1732), 73, 55; it is interesting to note that the 1st edn (1725) made no reference to happiness.

¹⁹ Ute Frevert, Christian Bailey, Pascal Eitler, *et al*, *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700-2000* (Oxford, 2014), 13-14, 137-8

²⁰ Slack, ‘Politics of Consumption’, 630-1; Slack, ‘Material Progress’

²¹ Innes, *Inferior Politics*, 142; Sarah Lloyd, ‘Cottage Conversations: Poverty and Manly Independence in Eighteenth-century England’, *Past & Present*, clxxxiv (2004), 89.

sophistication across the century, through Scottish moral philosophy, into Bentham's felicific calculus of 1789 and Malthusian controversy during the early decades of the nineteenth.²²

Across the eighteenth century, poets and painters represented happiness in rural poverty, but changing attitudes to the poor strained aesthetic and moral conventions. As wishful thinking was pitted against actuality, later-century viewers, including the middling sort, now envisaged the labourer as an industrious drudge, not a merry peasant. When the poor slipped into the background of nineteenth-century landscape painting, their lives receded from view in this genre.²³ But their experiences -- the groundwork of happiness -- acquired new significance during the politicized 1790s when an ideological battle targeted domestic life and the cottage.²⁴ Competing publications tapped into labouring culture with loyalist and radical messages about political rights, providence and individual happiness. Followers of Thomas Spence connected political and personal life when they proposed a radical redistribution of land in terms of a marriage with the earth sealed by happiness: 'do but wed *her* and you will have a happy family'.²⁵

While philosophical, literary and political canons dominate scholarly treatments of happiness, and eighteenth-century pamphlets and sermons invoked happiness to reinforce messages about the soul, government and charity, plebeian experience is audible too.²⁶ During 1744 Richard Viney, a Moravian staymaker, noted his inner and outward circumstances each day. Both rejoicing and 'cheerfulness' were religious states which he struggled to achieve.²⁷ Spiritual autobiography conventionally showed the false distractions of pleasure giving way to a true path. Labouring women and men persuaded by Methodism testified that they found happiness through anguish; they wept sentimental tears of joy. Mary Saxby, 'the female vagrant', 'ardently longed for the happy moment' of death.²⁸ The voices of poor people survive directly and indirectly through numerous letters, petitions, statements

²² Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789), ii; T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London, 1798): in that it deals with the perfectability of human society, the discussion turns on happiness.

²³ Barrell, *Dark Side*, 16, 21, 156-7.

²⁴ John Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford, 2006), 220-22.

²⁵ Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840*, new edn (London, 2010), 5.

²⁶ Nicholas White, *A Brief History of Happiness* (Malden MA, 2006); Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London, 2009).

²⁷ British Library: Add Mss 44935, 'Diary of Richard Viney, 1744', 3

²⁸ *The Arminian Magazine*, 3 (1780), 26-9, 8 (1785), 200-2, 404-7, 522-25; Mary Saxby, *Memoirs of a Female Vagrant, Written by Herself* (London, 1806), 36-7; Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford, 2015), 78.

and verbal responses generated by charities, courts and poor law. Late eighteenth-century strains on the parish relief system generated increasing quantities of paper, which an increasingly professional system then preserved.²⁹ Given the strategic purpose of many of these documents, it is hardly surprising that happiness was often absent or lost, rather than found; immediate material circumstances, not eternal considerations, predominated. Paupers and their intermediaries regularly complained of sickness, unemployment and hunger, the cold, leaking roofs, of lying huddled together in a bed and inadequate bedclothes.³⁰ ‘I am the father of five young children, and I should think myself happy, if I could get to my own country, I would go there to-morrow before to day, if I could’.³¹ Misery couched in a commonplace, ‘I should think myself happy’, expressed one man’s feeling, but larger notions and policy issues were at stake in his invocation of ‘my own country’. ‘Home’ and ‘belonging’ had profound significance in expressing social identities, relationships and a sense of place; they were concepts understood by the propertied and the poor. Their importance was reinforced by a system of legal ‘settlement’ which tied relief to a particular parish.³² Home and belonging put labouring happiness in a context that was enmeshed in memory, genealogy and ground.

Working-class autobiographies, which also survive in increasing numbers from the later eighteenth century, created new opportunities to reflect experience.³³ Their authors had functional literacy, a purpose in recording their thoughts and a compulsion to self-improvement, which was often associated with specific occupational and social settings.³⁴ Samuel Bamford – weaver, autodidact, radical leader and journalist – drew political conclusions from labouring life. Recollecting a journey on foot in the early 1800s, he associated happiness with a very specific scene. At Stoke Goldington in Buckinghamshire he found ‘a land where men and women know how to be happy and live at their own homes’ -- perhaps a little white cottage, with thatch, vine, pig, garden and fruit trees; happiness was

²⁹ Steven King, ‘Introduction’, *Narratives of the Poor*, 5 vols. (London, 2006), i, xliv; Thomas Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731-1837* (Oxford, 2001), 19, 23.

³⁰ Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 121-2, 131-4, 444; *Narratives of the Poor*, i-iv

³¹ *Old Bailey Proceedings*, December 1784, trial of Margaret Murphy (t17841208-8).

³² K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales 1700-1950* (Cambridge, 2006), 84, 87-9 and ‘Belonging and Community: Understandings of “Home” and “Friends” among the English Poor, 1750-1850’, *Economic History Review*, lxxv (2012), 9, 11.

³³ John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class: an Annotated, Critical Bibliography*, 3 vols. (Brighton, 1984-9).

³⁴ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven & London, 2001), 16-24; Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009), 104.

conjugal and settled.³⁵ Two other nineteenth-century authors, much less busy with their pens than Bamford, configured existing ideas to suit their own lowly circumstances, with effects that were simultaneously conventional and disruptive. William Tayler decided in 1837 to improve his writing by keeping a diary. Born in rural Oxfordshire but now in London, he mused that the life of a gentleman's servant was something like that of a bird shut up in a cage: 'The bird is well housed and well fed but deprived of liberty, and liberty is the dearest and sweetest[t] object of all Englishmen. Therefore I would rather be like the sparrow or lark, have less houseing and feeding and rather more liberty'.³⁶ Tayler's sentiments had deep roots in popular culture, in chap books and ballads, but in his mouth, the patriotism was rather more anarchic than when sounded by social conservatives.³⁷ George Coleman, one of the poor labourers sent by the Petworth Emigration Committee from the south of England to Ontario, wrote home in 1835: 'Oh, my brother labourers in England, how much do I feel for you ... I am now in my own log-house; a good cow of my own; a good pig put in the tub today'.³⁸ Published in the *Brighton Herald* as a testimonial to emigration, Coleman's letter is a glimpse of happiness on his own terms.

Prosperity, ease, contentment, comfort and felicity were concepts related to happiness. Each had its own history of development and contemporaries had specific ideas in mind when they used them.³⁹ Urged on the poor, contentment was a moral obligation; felicity might be a literary flourish or heavenly bliss; for political economists deliberating on wealth and social change, pleasure, ease and prosperity were central. The vast majority of sources that we have now originated from those who were not poor; where they did emerge from labouring hands, interpretation should take into account their possible rhetorical and strategic edge. Pliant contentment in one set of hands could metamorphose into a claim to lead a life of liberty and plenty in another. 'England', declared Samuel Bamford, 'Thou art in very deed the isle of the workers, of the bees who accumulate, why shouldst thou not become again the isle of plenteous honey for all who labour?'⁴⁰ Jollity and mirth could be innocent diversions, but broader social sensitivities could make them awkward or challenging in times of stress; by

³⁵ Samuel Bamford, *Early Days* (London, 1849), 254

³⁶ *Diary of William Tayler, Footman 1837*, ed. Dorothy Wise (London, 1962), 62

³⁷ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981); Hanway, *Motives*, 11.

³⁸ Wendy Cameron, Sheila Haines, Mary McDougall Maude (eds.), *English Immigrant Voices: Labourers' Letters from Upper Canada in the 1830s* (Montreal & Kingston Ontario, 2000), 189.

³⁹ John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and early America* (Baltimore, 2000).

⁴⁰ Bamford, *Early Days*, 255

the close of the eighteenth century, silent effort had displaced boisterous noise as the sign of rural productivity.⁴¹

Whenever rate-payers and social investigators worried about the burden of wretchedness, they linked misery and poverty.⁴² But equally a powerful set of ideas linked poverty and happiness. Happiness justified labour and charity; it ensured obedience; it could be found in individual and collective life. In the form of contentment, every poor man or woman was expected to see happiness as within their grasp. Just as it kept company in print with religion and patriotism, so happiness had personal, household, moral and national connotations, lending itself to attempts to use it to secure particular objectives. For that reason the historical traces of happiness were in context frequently instrumental to contemporaries' attempts to wrestle with social problems.

THE HAPPINESS OF INEQUALITY

Happiness was often tied to inequality. In a period of profound economic change, clerics and social theorists routinely asserted that subordination underpinned personal and collective happiness; the more analytically-inclined gave a psychological and political rationale.⁴³ Moral exhortation, whatever its religious temperature or assumed audience, taught the same lesson. Ordinary men and women were among those who found it difficult to imagine beyond current social arrangements. Let's go back to George Coleman, the Petworth emigrant who relished his cow, pig and log cabin. He had a sense of his place in the world and was correspondingly sensitive about dignity, noting his own escape from the label of 'poor pauper' and from the tyranny of the excise man. However, subsistence farming on another continent did not extricate him from labour relations. Coleman had found a good 'master' and characterised his working life as a mixture of independence and conformity: he could speak his mind without fear of dismissal, but cautioned his fellow labourer to 'be what he ought to be, or he will find want here as in England'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Barrell, *Dark Side*, 52-3; Peter Denney, "'The Sounds of Population Fail': Changing Perceptions of Rural Poverty and Plebeian Noise in Eighteenth-Century Britain", in Anne M. Scott (ed.), *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France* (Farnham, 2012), 297, 301.

⁴² Arthur Young, *An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor* (Bury, 1801), 5, 112.

⁴³ A.M.C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833* (Cambridge, 1991), 41-2, 73-6.

⁴⁴ *English Immigrant Voices*, 189-90; James Marr Brydone, *Narrative of a Voyage with a Party of Emigrants, Sent out from Sussex, in 1834, by the Petworth Emigration Committee* (Petworth, 1834), 41; Carolyn Steedman, 'The Servant's Labour: the Business of Life, England, 1760-1820', *Social History*, xxix (2004), 3.

From the pulpit or in print, eighteenth-century preachers reminded their audiences that the mightiest people depended for their ‘safety, comfort and happiness’ on the labour of the honest and industrious poor.⁴⁵ Inequality was natural, inevitable and beneficial, not least as the god-given motor that drove charity and, through it, the happiness of salvation: if property were distributed equally, so the argument ran, there would be no opportunities to practise complex virtues of giving and receiving.⁴⁶ A precautionary principle held too: without a prospect of heaven, there was little to reconcile the poor to their present condition or to prevent them from envying their betters.⁴⁷ And in a purely worldly perspective, subordination created mutual dependence and good order (which is why Coleman’s proud plain speaking represented a striking departure from copy-book morality). Pamphleteers and commentators addressed a reading public, and men like themselves in particular, in restrictive terms. In associating happiness with usefulness, they avoided any suggestion of plebeian leisure, or what they perceived as idleness. The poor were ‘the necessary Instruments of Ease and Happiness of the Community’; they were the most valuable members of society.⁴⁸ If ‘inured’ to labour, they would be both ‘more happy in themselves, and useful to the Community’.⁴⁹ The poor-relief system, whether in principle or practice or a combination of both, was widely thought to undermine this benevolent order, failing to relieve the destitute and to check disorder and immorality. But palpable pleasure arose from the prospect of sorting out the poor: thoughts of tractable labourers inspired feelings of joy and wonder in projectors and spectators alike, and prospects of happiness galvanised action.⁵⁰

In short, happiness was an objective, a sign and a tool; a collective and an individual benefit. When arguing about population or poor law, many could agree upon the necessity of inequality. William Paley covered familiar ground when he turned his attention in the 1780s

⁴⁵ John Allen, *The Ends of Providence in Appointing that the Poor We Should Have Always with Us* (London, 1741), 15-16, 27; Robert Potter, *Observations on the Poor Laws* (London, 1775), 1.

⁴⁶ William Pearson, *The Duty of Charity to the Poor Recommended* (London, 1708), 9; *Considerations on the Present State of the Poor in Great-Britain. With Proposals for Making the Most Effectual Provision for Them* (London, 1773), 1-2; Andrew Lothian, *Charity to the Poor and Afflicted, the Duty and Interest of the Prosperous* (Edinburgh, 1797), 25-6.

⁴⁷ John Sinclair, *Analysis of the Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1825), Appendix, Part 2, chapter 1, 42

⁴⁸ *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Lying-In Hospital for Married Women* (London, 1751), 2; Charles Davenant, *Essay upon Ways and Means of Supplying the War* (1695) quoted in Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: Or, An History of the Labouring Classes in England*, 3 vols. (London, 1797), i, 229.

⁴⁹ *An Account of the Corporation for the Poor of London* (London, 1744), 16; Alcock, *Observations*, 8.

⁵⁰ Sarah Lloyd, ‘Pleasing Spectacles and Elegant Dinners: Conviviality, Benevolence, and Charity Anniversaries in Eighteenth-Century London’, *Journal of British Studies*, xli (2002), 39-40.

to ‘promoting the happiness of our inferiors’.⁵¹ In the early nineteenth century, J.C. Curwen, Member of Parliament, colliery owner and energetic promoter of friendly societies, responded to the latest crisis of poor rates with an old argument about the relative merits of high and low wages. Separating out moral happiness (a state of mind) and philosophical happiness (contentment with little) from vulgar happiness (a worldly preoccupation with enjoying more), he explained that while national wealth and wages had increased, the poor had grown more profligate. As the ‘happiness of the inferior classes’ diminished, personal bitterness accumulated: this national disaster was an existential catastrophe too. Curwen proposed an insurance scheme that, with only a small sacrifice of present enjoyment (the labourer’s that is), would simultaneously increase independence and happiness by fostering economy.⁵² His recommendation typified rising concern about poverty towards the end of the eighteenth century. In a flurry of publications focused on lower-class life, observers variously blamed the poor law, overseers, employers and labourers themselves for increasing levels of dependence and demoralisation.⁵³ Quasi-sociological studies, often with an agrarian focus, re-configured misery as pauperism: a condition with psychological and social characteristics.⁵⁴ With an urgency stoked by revolutionary wars abroad and discontent at home, happiness was set to new work.

Security and pleasure were long associated with household and family: spendthrift men, who left wives and children starving, featured in early eighteenth-century discussions of poverty.⁵⁵ What is striking is the insistence with which commentators a century later set their hopes on ‘domestic happiness’ as an antidote to anti-social behaviour, high poor rates and lethargy.⁵⁶ Numerous expositions of the theory depicted one specific imagined scene:

I would always wish to infer from neatness in the cottage, the pig in the sty, and the store of vegetables in the garden, that the occupier has neither been inattentive to his own, or the general interests of agriculture ... His desire to protect

⁵¹ *The Works of William Paley D.D.* . . . , new edn, 7 vols. (London, 1825), IV, 153.

⁵² J.C. Curwen, *The Speech ... in the House of Commons, on the 28th of May, 1816. On a motion for a committee for taking into consideration the state of the poor*, 2nd edn (London, 1816), 6-7, 9, 24; Edward Hughes, *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century: volume 2 Cumberland & Westmorland, 1700-1830* (London, 1965), 179-83, 278-82

⁵³ David Davies, *The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* (London, 1795).

⁵⁴ Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on Indigence; Exhibiting A General View of the National Resources for Productive Labour* (London, 1806)

⁵⁵ Daniel Defoe, *Giving Alms No Charity* (London, 1704), 26-7.

⁵⁶ William Lisle Bowles, *Thoughts on the Increase of Crimes, the Education of the Poor and the National Schools* (Salisbury, 1815), 15-16; George Poulett Scrope, *Extracts of Letters from Poor Persons who Emigrated Last Year to Canada and the United States*, 2nd edn (London, 1832), 13

and improve his property, will also be increased by the recollection of the labour he has bestowed upon it; and when surrounded by his family, he can in truth admonish them to be attentive to their duties, in order to better their condition, not only by pointing out the evils of idleness and vice, but by shewing in his own instance the good effects of industry and prudence, cleanliness and virtue.⁵⁷

Poor people had long occupied cottages, but as moralists and commentators grew interested in everyday life, they invested indoor space and garden with explanatory power. Happiness and misery, which had long structured discussions of poverty and assessments of poor relief, were transposed to a particular late eighteenth-century setting. Inhabitants of the comfortable cottage and its antithesis, the shattered hovel, became stock characters.⁵⁸ Where once the cottage had been the plaything of poets and painters, it now featured in studies of pauperism and labour.

In the context of the French revolutionary wars, Paley drew on his widely-read *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) to preach contentment:

I have heard it said that if the face of happiness can anywhere be seen, it is the summer evening of a country village. Where, after the labours of the day, each man at his door, with his children, amongst his neighbours, feels his frame and his heart at rest, everything about him pleased and pleasing, and a delight and complacency in his sensations far beyond what either luxury or diversion can afford.⁵⁹

Paley's appeal to labourers attracted radical contempt, but in many ways he simply reframed that long tradition of sermons on inequality and its compensations, adding touches from pastoral verse and his own spin on natural law and utility (he had only 'heard it said' that happiness could be seen in a village evening).⁶⁰ Across the century, preachers had taught that poverty was a happy release from the burdens of wealth and that those who bore their

⁵⁷ Thomas Rudge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester* (London, 1807), 49 and also 196, 343-4.

⁵⁸ Lloyd, 'Cottage Conversations', 78-80.

⁵⁹ William Paley, *Reasons for Contentment; Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public* (London, 1793), 16-17

⁶⁰ James E. Crimmins, 'Paley, William (1743–1805)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21155>, accessed 29 Jan 2016]; Barrell, *Dark Side*, 67-8, 71-3. Poetic echoes include Thomas Gray's 'Elegy' (1751) and Oliver Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village' (1770).

sufferings patiently went to heaven.⁶¹ Now, however, humble happiness acquired a family.⁶² The politics of sensibility, which had invigorated subscription charity from the mid eighteenth century, can be seen here too, directing attention to feelings, expressive gestures and ‘natural’ instincts. Whether set in the context of schemes of agricultural improvement or in those of moral exhortation, these scenes depicted a form of labouring happiness that was energetic, domestic, comfortable and settled.⁶³

This worldly, often gendered scene evoked a form of happiness different from that conjured up in religious consolation. It responded to concerns over rising prices, war and revolution, spiralling costs of relief, and increasingly disputatious parishes (targeted by a 1795 law which stated that officials could remove only the currently chargeable poor).⁶⁴ Morality remained important, but it was rolled up in a type of social enquiry that fed off statistical evidence, including Parliamentary data on poor rates, investigation of household budgets, trade data and agricultural surveys. ‘National happiness’ remained intricately linked to poverty.⁶⁵ Had living conditions deteriorated; how large was the economy; were there sufficient resources to go around; was this a crisis of low wages, plebeian fecklessness, bad parish management, outdated laws, or unemployment? Ostensibly labourers’ own experiences were at stake, but actors elsewhere set the terms. Happiness was particularly open to (mis)interpretation. Nowhere was this pattern seen more starkly than on the American plantation. ‘Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy’, explained Frederick Douglass, but slave masters took the sound as a sign of contentment. Douglass found dignity in noiseless labour; slave overseers by contrast were unnerved by silence.⁶⁶

Paley’s *Reasons for Contentment* was addressed to the ‘labouring part of the British public’ but in effect presented readers with arguments to marshal against radical attacks on

⁶¹ Alured Clarke, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of Winchester, Before the Governors of the County-Hospital for Sick and Lame* (London, 1737), iv; Lothian, *Charity to the Poor*, 4; Paley, *Reasons for Contentment*, 8-9.

⁶² Paley, *Reasons for Contentment*, 18.

⁶³ Young, *Inquiry*, 118; John Clark, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hereford* (London, 1794), 10; William Marshall, *A Review of the Reports to the Board of Agriculture*, 5 vols. (York, 1808-17) i, 371. For a view that happiness was dullness and incompatible with sensibility, see: Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 213.

⁶⁴ Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*; Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 65-70.

⁶⁵ Davies, *Case of the Labourers*, 125.

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 11-12, 97; William Pooley, ‘Silences of the People’ in Mark Hailwood, Laura Sangha, Brodie Waddell *et al* (eds.), *The Voices of the People: An Online Symposium* (2015) [<https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/voices-of-the-people/>] (accessed 4.1.16). Preference for steady, quiet labour in Britain points to contemporary understandings of the differences between free and unfree labour.

the status quo. During the French Revolution, the shorter and plainer Cheap Repository Tracts, sold in bundles by the hundred for distribution to the poor and restive, urged moral lessons directly. One of these, Hannah More's 1795 'Shepherd of Salisbury Plain', considered a labouring life the happiest of all because it was exposed to least temptation. 'If King Saul had continued a poor laborious man to the end of his days, he might have lived happy and honest, and died a natural death in his bed at last'. Angels had visited shepherds in Bethlehem, a thought that had frequently 'warmed my poor heart in the coldest night, and filled me with more joy and thankfulness than the best supper could have done'.⁶⁷ It is easy to mock the Shepherd as a ventriloquist's puppet. The story's excesses were probably more reassuring to those who distributed the pamphlet than persuasive among recipients: a tasty supper was exactly what the poor lacked in the 1790s (it certainly interested those who were transported a world away).⁶⁸ Hannah More recommended what Curwen would call philosophical and moral happiness; by comparison, supper was *vulgar* happiness. However even those who campaigned against the devastating social effects of agricultural restructuring, and upheld the demands of the dispossessed, shared with their opponents a specific ideal: 'the man, who is doing well, who is in good health, who has a blooming and dutiful and cheerful and happy family about him, and who passes his day of rest among them'.⁶⁹

Over the course of the eighteenth century, therefore, happiness (along the correct lines) proved a useful and reassuring concept for those worrying about the poor. It drew colour from dominant values and could reflect immediate priorities. Whether approached primarily from a religious perspective, or in terms of national wellbeing, it was closely associated with ideas about social inequality: the poor were essential to the 'ease' of others, but their own happiness lay not in rest but in appropriate activity.⁷⁰ A striking development were those late-eighteenth-century discussions which took domestic happiness as both an incentive to good behaviour and a sign that social relations were in order. Working that proposition through, commentators created idealised scenes of cottage life in which the well-dug garden or the clean floor were tools against pauperism. This approach drew attention to the subjective experience of poverty. The man who stood at his door and took delight in his

⁶⁷ Hannah More, *Shepherd of Salisbury-Plain. Part I* ([London], [1795]), 7-8.

⁶⁸ James Boyce, *Van Dieman's Land* (Melbourne, 2008), 112; John Barrell suggests that the poor were more likely to accept an account that acknowledged privations: *Spirit of Despotism*, 237.

⁶⁹ *Cobbett's Cottage Economy* (London, 1821), 9; Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 221-4

⁷⁰ Isaac Leatham, *General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire* (London, 1794), 63.

children, or who reflected on his achievements, was assumed to have an inner life of a specific kind. The details were clearly fed by the fashion for sensibility, and were characteristic of another eighteenth-century innovation, the novel.⁷¹ Surviving plebeian autobiography and pauper documentation chimed with such talk. Although their origins lay in different cultures of literacy and they were often influenced by the operations of the parish poor law, their personal testimony about humble life was frequently infused with the language of feeling.⁷² At the turn of the nineteenth century, therefore, imaginative energy was directed towards individual, subjective experience.

In his retelling of the Grimm stories, Philip Pullman remarks ‘there is no psychology in a fairy tale’. The characters have no individuality and no interior life; motives are obvious; nothing is hidden. Far from being a defect, this feature intensifies the narrative. Events move at speed: what happens next drives things along.⁷³ The absence of information, which Pullman finds so striking, has its parallel in eighteenth-century representations of happiness. In the early period, sermons that referred to ‘eternal happiness’ saw no need to conjure up detail.⁷⁴ Later sentimental accounts and cottage scenes did; they suggested that lower-class happiness was a subjective experience, located in or produced by specific locations, and they focussed on the here-and-now. But these authors were not necessarily more perceptive just because they evoked quotidian experiences of happiness in these experiential and concrete ways. The earlier preachers had understood poverty through their own or others’ face-to-face dealings with the poor, whether in neighbourhood, employment, poor-law or charitable settings.⁷⁵ But in the language of religion, happiness was primarily a movement from one spiritual condition to another, an effect of time. Place and space – which so interested later social commentators -- were irrelevant.

By the opening decades of the nineteenth century, plebeian self-representation displayed an awareness of contemporary preoccupations; for example, when George Coleman recorded his desire to escape from the stigma of pauperism. As Samuel Bamford understood, when it resonated with top-down representations, happiness could gain a political

⁷¹ John Brewer, ‘Sentiment and Sensibility’ in James Chandler (ed.), *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature* (Cambridge, 2009), 32; Lisa Zunshine, ‘Introduction’, *Narratives of the Poor*, v, xi

⁷² Joanne Bailey, ‘“Think Wot a Mother Must Feel”: Parenting in English Pauper Letters c.1760-1834’, *Family & Community History*, xiii (2010), 13-14.

⁷³ Philip Pullman, *Grimm Tales: for Young and Old* (London, 2012), xiii-xvi.

⁷⁴ Samuel Chandler, *Knowledge and Practice Necessary to Happiness* (London, 1728)

⁷⁵ Hindle, *On the Parish*; Snell, *Parish and Belonging*.

edge. The well-established link between happiness and the state also offered distinct possibilities to those traditionally excluded from government; so, members of the London Corresponding Society sought to promote the ‘happiness of their fellow citizens’.⁷⁶

ASPIRATION AND NOSTALGIA

Was happiness a lived sensation or was it more often an aspiration, perhaps never to be realised, more powerful as hope than feeling? Did it lie in the present or the past? The words of the poor are in short supply compared with claims made on their behalf. Arthur Young reported that Suffolk labourers ‘almost cried for joy’ when allocated a few acres of land, but we have no direct testimony from them.⁷⁷ Plebeian happiness surfaces explicitly in relation to family life. From the confines of Tattingstone House of Industry, Ann Candler (1740–1814), ‘a Suffolk cottager’ and poet, looked (not very successfully) to her children for ‘substantial happiness and satisfaction as a parent’.⁷⁸ The radical tailor, Francis Place (1771–1854) anatomised the circumstances that made him and his wife ‘as happy as two persons ever really were’ during the 1790s: comfortable accommodation, regular work, absence of want, expectation of continuing to do well, mutual affection and ‘persuasion that our days of suffering were at an end’.⁷⁹ His list inverts those catalogues of hardship found in pauper letters sent to parish overseers. The traces of lived sensation remain generally elusive, and not only for the poor. But in their case, understandings of happiness were framed by apprehension of misery and the pervasive structures of the poor law.⁸⁰ Whether a poor person or a scribe held the pen, plebeian accounts were often shaped by tactics as well as psychological, social and cultural needs.⁸¹

What does stand out in the accounts that we have is the significance of recollected happiness. John MacDonald accompanied his employer to Madagascar: ‘I never enjoyed more happiness in my life than at this time, the walk was so pleasant, and everything

⁷⁶ *Memoir of Thomas Hardy: Founder of, and Secretary to, the London Corresponding Society* (London, 1832), Preface.

⁷⁷ Young, *Inquiry*, 113.

⁷⁸ Ann Candler, *Poetical Attempts by Ann Candler, a Suffolk Cottager with a Short Narrative of her Life* (Ipswich, 1803), 4.

⁷⁹ *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771–1854)*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1972), 124–5.

⁸⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2013), 122, 148.

⁸¹ Whyman, *Pen and the People*, 104–111; Peter D. Jones, ‘“I Cannot Keep my Place Without Being Deascent”: Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750–1830’, *Rural History* xx (2009), 32–3.

agreeable. We walked along where no white man living had been but ourselves'.⁸² Place's autobiography moved on to describe the fragility of happiness, hopes destroyed. Acts of recollection shaped an individual's sense of self and position in the world; when used to assert custom, they carried public weight. Commentators who urged labourers to remember their advantages acknowledged the power of memory, co-opting it, like happiness more generally, for their own purposes.⁸³ Present circumstances could make past happiness relevant or pressing. Reminiscence gave shape to aspiration: Bamford wrote of his walk through Stoke Goldington some forty years after the event. Emigrants' letters turned on the contrast between now and then, and simultaneously between here and there. Poor landless labourers and artisans, men like Coleman who were dispatched to Upper Canada in the early 1830s, were enthusiastic about their employment prospects, the freedom to hunt and forage, blazing wood fires, grog and access to land: 'I do not see anybody going from door to door, like in England'.⁸⁴ These were accounts of identity and belonging that were read aloud and passed around until almost worn out by labourers still in England.⁸⁵ Habits now established in the woods of Upper Canada or the Australian bush transplanted living traditions of commonage and popular rights.⁸⁶ Food and gardens were sensory markers of happiness and deeply embedded in memory. It is a 'pleasant spot' with a 'beautiful spring of water like your orchard water at Milton' wrote Charlotte Willard in 1832, orientating her sister through reminiscence. Coming from English contexts, where 'home' connoted belonging and entitlement, ordinary conversation could have social and political implications. George Coleman thought that potatoes grown in Canadian soil tasted better than those in England; William Phillips urged others to bring seeds and cuttings of gooseberries, apples and grapes.⁸⁷ It is not unusual to see in such descriptions, whether in England or abroad, the workings of nostalgia: 'home was a non-specific place, an alternative world of recollection and imagination'.⁸⁸

⁸² John MacDonald, *Memoirs of an Eighteenth-Century Footman: John MacDonald: Travels (1745-1779)* (London, 1927), 108

⁸³ Rudge, *Agriculture of Gloucester*, 49.

⁸⁴ *English Immigrant Voices*, 88

⁸⁵ Gary Howells, "'For I Was Tired of England Sir": English Pauper Emigrant Strategies, 1834-60', *Social History*, xxiii (1998), 190.

⁸⁶ Chase, *People's Farm*, 12-13.

⁸⁷ *English Immigrant Voices*, 23, 41, 189; David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca, 1994), 542, 565, 581; Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 166.

⁸⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, 615, 625; see also: *English Immigrant Voices*, xlii; E.P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 710

Nostalgia was first recognised in late seventeenth-century Europe. Initially identified in Swiss mercenaries and domestic servants, nostalgia was a diseased yearning for home; a century later it was an incurable longing for something that could never be found. A condition that began with the loss of a real place (that could be recovered) became an effect of time (that could not). Scholars now analyse nostalgia as a specific historical response to loss, upheaval and dislocation, to technological change and globalisation. As an experience that depends on self-reflection, on interiority, they link it to modernity.⁸⁹ The idea of nostalgia, like that of happiness, spread far and wide in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, although British natural philosophers associated nostalgia with foreigners before finding it in themselves.⁹⁰ A concept of ‘home’, so important to poor people’s well-being and identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is central in nostalgia; as we have seen, by the late eighteenth century, plebeian happiness was located in a specific scene of ‘home’ by many radical and conservative thinkers. It was then too that depictions of happiness, like nostalgia, began to work through evocative detail, memory and sensory landscapes. While the connections between nostalgia and assertions of happiness were complex, nostalgia’s successive frameworks – the spatial and the temporal – help us to imagine the many possible dynamics of labouring happiness. Can happiness be located in an actual place (yes, say the moral commentators and agricultural experts; yes say the labourers, although their picture is probably centred on food)⁹¹; is it lost in the past (yes says Samuel Bamford); can it be projected in the future (yes says Thomas Spence; only in heaven say the preachers); is it an effect of memory (yes say the poets); are we happy now (no say the inmates of the workhouse)? Stories of lost happiness, as well as George Coleman’s bracing refusal to miss England, take on significance and emotional charge. Bamford points the way to a radical tradition which mixed attachment, nostalgic longing, and rebellion.⁹²

From the sources we have, it is clear that labouring women and men did think about happiness in situations shaped by the poor law, sometimes claiming dignity in relief and

⁸⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 3; Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Discourse* (Evanston, Ill, 2012); Linda M Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917* (Charlottesville & London, 2007).

⁹⁰ Illbruck, *Nostalgia*, 82, 115.

⁹¹ Sarah Lloyd, ‘Joys of the Cottage: Labourers’ Houses,hovels and Huts in Britain and the British Colonies, 1770-1830’ in Joanne McEwan and Pamela Sharpe (eds.) *Accommodating Poverty: the Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, c1600-1850* (Basingstoke, 2011), 108.

⁹² Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London, 2010) and *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (Abingdon, 2016); Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1992)

sometimes evoking a collective memory of other times and places.⁹³ This could be a divisive process; the rules of parish settlement and belonging had as much to do with excluding other people, including their claims to happiness, as with creating solidarity.⁹⁴ Whatever their effect, these interactions are significant for historians keen to reconstruct the experiences of the socially marginal. William Hutton, who knew the poor law from both sides, opined in the 1790s that ‘happiness is more in our own power than we apprehend’.⁹⁵ With its clues to plebeian feelings and action, talk of happiness must intrigue those searching for the voices and determinations of the poor. But there is a problem. What lends itself to analysis in these terms is that specific late-century approach, which gave happiness an inner life and a detailed setting, and recollections which invoked prior subjective experience. Historical interest in pauper strategies or in plebeian ‘agency’ brings with it ideas about individuality, power, choice and the self, about human action. Later source material is much richer in all these respects, and not only for the labouring poor.⁹⁶ Searching for direct evidence of subjectivity underlying ‘agency’, or for pointers to motive, can privilege certain types of testimony which developed over the course of the early-modern period: forms of evidence which supply to us the kind of interior narrative characteristic of the novel, also conveyed by the autobiography and even the pauper letter.⁹⁷ Studies of emotion and scholarly commitments to empathy are similarly dependent.⁹⁸ It is no accident that so much ground-breaking work on ‘agency’ and ‘voice’ is located in the eighteenth century, or that historians of other periods find themselves re-working these concepts before using them.⁹⁹ The evidence of experience should be treated with caution.

CONCLUSIONS

As talk of happiness proliferated, the idea was made to do new work. Differences between commentators who looked on and labourers’ own views about what constituted happiness generated one of those force fields across which the poor law operated, in which varying expectations, convictions and actions around happiness (as well as survival) interacted around

⁹³ Barrell, *Dark Side*, 52-3.

⁹⁴ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 73-4, 125.

⁹⁵ William Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton, Stationer, of Birmingham ... Written by Himself* (London, 1841), 75.

⁹⁶ Steedman, *Everyday Life*, 25, 250

⁹⁷ Emma Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven & London, 2013)

⁹⁸ The History of Emotions blog, www.qmul.ac.uk/emotions (accessed 4.1.16); Tim Hitchcock, ‘Sources, Empathy and Politics in History from Below’, in *Voices of the People: An Online Symposium* (2015).

⁹⁹ Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge, 2008), 9-10.

incidents of everyday life: master/servant relations; poaching; roaming; rights and liberties. These tensions had historical effects in conflicts and compromises, but the challenge of understanding points-of-view is compounded by generic features of surviving sources. Evidence of what moralists or agronomists wanted is heavily skewed towards instrumental approaches, including levers for extracting good behaviour, whereas fragments from the poor themselves hint at subjective or communal experiences, as well as at strategic and rhetorical devices.

Languages of national and personal happiness resonated in many contexts. Just as liberty meant one thing in Spencean circles and another in a colonial one or in the mouth of a conservative patriot, so happiness crossed between registers, settings and genres. Was there a widely shared understanding of happiness? Autodidacts such as Francis Place or Samuel Bamford certainly participated in the emerging discourse of domestic happiness, although their language, politics and self-assumed roles as social observers gave them a distinctive perspective on the matter.¹⁰⁰ Other evidence from a labouring outlook, from the ‘inside’ – and that was a moving boundary – reveals uneven interest and, as in that masculinist talk of grog and hunting in Ontario, gender differences.

A desire for happiness might be quiescent or assertive, personal or collective; interpretations might be contradictory, depending on whether the picturesque landscape of the 1790s or the cotton plantation was its setting. If there was any temptation to take emigrants’ letters at face value, the paucity of references to the Ontario winter should make us think again. Was *talk* of happiness, which is all we can access now, a reflection of experience? Happiness might be embodied, as when Charlotte Willard drank from a spring. It might be experienced through the imagination (Bamford’s retrospective) or lodged in things, which as a result became particularly contested (pigs).¹⁰¹ In many of the snippets, it appears filtered through memory. While striking material emerges from later eighteenth-century labouring narratives, we should be cautious about recognising happiness only in the forms closest to our own expectations: we might heed Frederick Douglass’s account of the slave masters who, looking for reassurance, shouted ‘Make a Noise’.¹⁰² The very elusiveness of happiness may inflate the significance of ‘voice’ in helping historians to find its traces in the past.

¹⁰⁰ Lloyd, ‘Joys of the Cottage’, 113-4.

¹⁰¹ Jeremy Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873* (Woodbridge, 2002), 194, 260.

¹⁰² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage My Freedom* (New York, 1855), 75.

One of the places where emigrants' letters circulated was the Methodist Chapel, where reports of the satisfactions of land and food co-existed with other expressions of happiness, where its synonyms, such as joy, included spiritual life. Other, more opaque accounts travel light, without the detail of social commentary, without the fire in the cottage grate, food in the pot, spade or beer in hand.¹⁰³ When we lack that emotive baggage we should tune in to different formulations, notably religious ones. Conversely, we should be alert to new power dynamics and ways of writing in the later eighteenth century; nostalgic longing for lost places and times, for instance, emphasised inner life and recollection, and made ideas about happiness relevant in particular ways. Plebeians did not simply echo pamphleteers' discourse. In presenting their lives, writers drew on cultural reserves; discussions of what it meant to be poor or free or happy infused experience. A living stream of memory connected back in time. Songs compressed contentment and simplicity into the scent of violets, birdsong, hunting, eating wild curds; folk traditions promised that comfort and prosperity lay just around the corner.¹⁰⁴ The setting evoked in those letters from Upper Canada was rural rather than urban; even in Britain of the 1840s, urbanization had yet to block access to rural hinterlands or squeeze out activities based on land.¹⁰⁵ Popular memory could orient and empower.¹⁰⁶ One way towards a subjective history of happiness lies therefore in reconstructing patterns of everyday life in all their ordinariness: in working to understand how belief, felt experience and systems of law and economy intermeshed in individual, household and communal life.

¹⁰³ Pullman, *Grimm Tales*, xv

¹⁰⁴ EBBA; Howells, 'For I Was Tired of England Sir', 189.

¹⁰⁵ Chase, *People's Farm*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Olivia Angé and David Berliner (eds), *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (Oxford & New York, 2015), 5.