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Some Predecessors of Clare: 'Honest Duck'

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The Memorial in Helpston commemorates John Clare as 'The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet'. This label was attached to Clare from the start of his literary career, and it had important effects both on his life and on the critical reception of his work. This article inaugurates a series looking at the history of 'peasant poets', from their emergence in the 1730's through to self-educated writers in Victorian times. Here, I will be examining the life and work of Stephen Duck, the first 'peasant poet' to obtain widespread literary recognition.

The idea of a 'Peasant Poet', an uneducated, lower-class, rural figure who, through either a sort of miracle, or sheer hard work, becomes a poet, became current in the early Eighteenth Century. A number of cultural and social needs found expression in it. In particular, writers and critics of the period looked for ways to enliven pastoral poetry, which had become moribund. To have a real 'swain' writing pastoral poetry (rather than the usual convention, in which the poet pretends to be a swain) was one way of doing this, and in this respect the 'peasant poet' was a novelty. In addition, the 'miracle' of an uneducated poet excited those such as Joseph Spence, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, who were interested by the Addisonian idea of 'Natural Genius'. Others still were attracted by the idea of someone from the lower classes pulling himself up by his bootstraps: such a figure was potentially a moral example to others of what could be achieved by hard work, and could be conveniently and inexpensively cultivated as such by his patrons.

If society had an interest in the emergence of peasant poets, so did those among the self-educated poor who aspired to write. The expiry of the Licensing Act in 1695 allowed publishing of all kinds to proliferate to the extent that a commentator could write in 1732 that, 'The Authors of this Town [London] may be computed at 6000,' adding that 'Of these 6000, ten Men perhaps may have a tolerable Share of Learning' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1732, p.572). Even allowing for a certain amount of polemic exaggeration here, it is clear that far wider circles of people were now able to get into print than ever before, including some who were minimally educated or from humble backgrounds. This of course was the great period of 'Grub Street', when London teemed with hopeful writers. But many of these writers risked starvation; and only certain kinds of writing were readily saleable (political pamphleteering is an obvious example). Poetry was popular, but was also copiously available, as the poetry pages of contemporary magazines reveal. And poetry was what aspiring (and especially self-educated) writers wanted most to write, seeing it, as Martha Vicinus puts it in *The Industrial Muse* (1974), as 'the highest form of creativity...the ideal medium for personal thought'. To add to the difficulty, the self-educated poet was typically very far indeed from the madding crowd of metropolitan publishing, and even in the larger provincial towns, publishing was often in its infancy. He, or she, was dependent on a long chain of patronage, and an even longer chain of good luck.

In this light we may examine the career of Stephen Duck (1705-56), described in the sub-title of the 1753 edition of his works as a 'poor Thresher in a Barn at CHARLETON in the County of WILTS', the first Eighteenth Century peasant poet to

be 'discovered', and a seminal figure for future self-educated writers. We are fortunate that Joseph Spence took an early interest in him and wrote an 'Account' of his life. Spence was concerned to emphasise the 'miraculous' aspect of this 'natural genius'; however we now have Spence's jotted Notes from which the account was prepared, and together with the Account they give us a fairly credible picture of Duck's early career.¹ 'My friend Stephen', he writes in the Account, had 'originally no other Teaching, than what enabled him to read, and write English' (p. xii). 'About his Fourteenth Year' he was 'taken from School, and was afterwards successively engag'd in the several lowest Employments of a Country Life' (p. xiv). The Notes mention he was once a carter, and we know that at the time he was 'discovered' he was a thresher and general farm labourer. Duck languished for 'some Years', forgetting the little arithmetic he had learned, though he 'read sometimes, and thought oftener' (p. xii).

Spence dates Duck's decision to recommence his education as 'about Six Years ago', which would be 1724, when Duck was nineteen. Married, and 'at Service', he had 'little Time to spare; he had no Books, and no Money to get any' (p. xii). Somehow (and Spence stresses the heroic exertion involved) he managed to save enough money to buy an arithmetic book, and to learn 'in those Hours he could steal from his Sleep, after the Labours of the Day' (p. xiv). Duck had the advantage of a 'dear Friend', identified in the Notes as a farmer's son called Lavington, who kept a locked desk full of books, to which Duck was given access. Milton, The Spectator, and Bysshe's *Art of Poetry* are among the books named. His interest in poetry had begun in infancy: he 'delighted' in 'Verses, and in Singing'; and *Paradise Lost*, which he read 'twice or thrice with a Dictionary', moved him to try and write poetry. Like Clare, he destroyed his early attempts 'as soon as he had pleas'd himself enough in reading them' (p. xv).

As word got round of Duck's literary activity, potential patrons began to take interest. A 'young Gentleman of Oxford' (p. xv, identified in the Notes as 'one Gifford') requested and got a verse-letter from him. The local clergyman, Mr Stanley, and his wife, set themes for Duck, such as 'Poverty', the Bible story of the Shunamite, and, most importantly, 'On his own Labours'. At the time Spence sought him out he was receiving a great deal of this sort of attention. The Notes mention recent interviews with 'Lord Macclesfield & the Dean of Peterborough', and Duck is engaged in commissions for 'Mr Bathurst' and 'Dr Clark'. Spence quotes him in the Notes as saying

I have got my wish: I desired to please the Gentlemen yt set me about anything:
& have got beside abt 20 pound: & indeed it was bad with us.

To the detriment of Duck's integrity as a writer, literary and financial improvement had become clearly connected: he was in debt when his patrons found him; and his desire to 'please' his new-found patrons is already dominant.

The next step took him, amazingly, to the top. Stanley showed some of his verses to Lady Sundon, who showed them to Lord Macclesfield, who read them to the Queen. Queen Caroline promptly summoned Duck to Court. Within months Jonathan Swift was telling John Gay in a letter (19 November 1730) that Duck was 'absolutely to succeed Eusden' as Poet Laureate. He was wrong, as it happened, but he nevertheless conveys something of how far the thresher-poet had come. The *Gentleman's Magazine* chronicles the rest of Duck's story. In April 1733 it announced that 'Mr Stephen Duck, the famous Thresher and Poet' was 'made one of

the Yeomen of the Guard'. The Queen later made him librarian of 'Merlin's Cave', her grotto-library in Richmond Park. In July 1733 he married 'Mrs Sarah Big, House-Keeper to her Majesty at Kew-Green, who gave her a Purse of Guineas and a fine Gown'. (Duck's first wife died in 1730, on the eve of his success). In June 1746 Duck (now simply 'the poet') took holy orders. Ten years later, in April 1756, the death is announced of 'Rev Mr Stephen Duck, at Reading'. Tragically, Duck had drowned himself in the river. We have no evidence as to why he killed himself; but it is obviously tempting to see the ultimate cause in his social displacement and manipulation. Certainly the casualty rate, in terms of alcoholism, insanity and suicide, is remarkably high among later successful self-educated writers.²

He produced one important poem, 'The Thresher's Labour', which provides an effective antidote to the cosy images of rural work portrayed in such contemporary favourites as Thomson's *Seasons* (1726-30). The poem transforms the conventional seasonal cycle theme into that of an endless repetition of work, modulated only by brief pleasures. The tone is rueful and resigned, with a quiet humorousness, as when he describes the farmer watching the corn harvest, with a thrifty concern that not too much is left for the gleaners:

Behind our Master waits; and if he spies
One charitable Ear, he grudging cries,
'Ye scatter half your Wages o'er the Land.'
Then scrapes the Stubble with his greedy Hand.

This evocative caricature is typical of Duck at his best: but his best was brief. Ironically (for a poet who knew better than most the realities of rural work) his success led him to retreat into a turgid pastoral world of 'Nymphs and Swains'. One poem in the 1736 collection (to which a great number of the aristocracy subscribed) gives some hint that Duck has lost as well as gained by his success. 'A Description of a Journey' tells of a visit to his old Master, who takes him out into a field where mowers are at work. Duck's response is unequivocal:

Straight Emulation glows in ev'ry Vein;
I long to try the curvous Blade again.

But this world is no longer his, and as if to emphasise this, when he goes in search of his old patron Stanley, he cannot find him.

Duck also describes an ale-feast held annually at his old village in his honour, financed by Viscount Palmerston (the 'Temple' to whom the poem is addressed). The poet briefly regains something of his old descriptive power here. He also regains his quiet irony in order to comment on all the fuss that is being made of him. He imagines a father of the future telling his child:

'HERE, Child, a Thresher liv'd in ancient Days;
'Quaint Songs he sung, and pleasing Roundelays;
'A gracious QUEEN his Sonnets did commend;
'And some great Lord, one TEMPLE, was his Friend:
'That Lord was pleas'd this Holiday to make,
'And feast the Threshers, for that Thresher's sake.'

Duck comments:

Thus shall Tradition keep my Fame alive;
The Bard may die, the Thresher still survive.

He is emphatically aware here that his significance is as a 'thresher' and not as a 'bard'; and his preface to his 1736 collection confirms he has no illusions:

I have indeed but a poor Defence to make for the Things I have wrote: I don't think them good, and better Judges will doubtless think worse of them than I do.

He is only too aware of who really controls his writing:

I have not myself been so fond of writing, as might be imagin'd from seeing so many Things of mine as are got together in this Book. Several of them are on Subjects that were given me by Persons, to whom I have such great Obligations, that I always thought their Desires Commands.

Duck's literary activity was his own only for a very short time. Even 'The Thresher's Labour' was written to order, and we are lucky that Stanley, who commissioned it, had the intelligence to see where the poet's strength was likely to lie. Further up the chain of patronage there was little interest in 'real' rural life, and Duck was merely a briefly interesting 'wonder', to be patted on the head and given guineas. Duck's dignified response to this is perhaps the real wonder: as compared, for example, to the exasperation of a later self-educated poet, Ebenezer Elliott, who snaps:

Must I then conclude, that I owe the notice which has been taken of the Corn-Law Rhymes, to the supposition that they are the work of a mechanic?

(cited in Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, 1963, p.174). But this was written a hundred years later, and in the meantime many self-educated poets had been picked up and patronised, often to be later cast aside. Few of them managed to keep their lives, their sanity and their literary integrity. Fewer still escaped the duty of being constantly grateful in verse to their patrons, or of accepting the demeaning role of a literary novelty.

Duck was important in that he pioneered a poetry of realistic rural description, further developed by his admirer Crabbe, and brought to maturity by Wordsworth and Clare. He also set a precedent for other aspiring self-educated poets. In the years that followed many took his lead, often addressing their poems and title pages to the 'famous Thresher-Poet'. They range from opportunists attracted by his material success, to workplace poets who now felt they might be heard. One notable response was 'The Woman's Labour' (1739), in which Mary Collier, 'Now a Washer Woman, at Peterfield in Hampshire', admonishes Duck for the chauvinism of *The Thresher's Labour*, and tells the world that women work just as hard, if not harder, than men. I will be looking at some of these responses in the next article.

NOTES

1. Joseph Spence, 'An Account of the Author', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, by Stephen Duck, 1736, reprinted in facsimile by The Scholar Press, 1973. Spence's

Notes are published in James M. Osborn, 'Spence, Natural Genius and Pope', *Philological Quarterly*, XLV, I, January 1966, pp.127-8.

2. The short introduction by John Lucas to the Scholar facsimile (op.cit.) weighs the various views of Duck's suicide, and settles for John Butt's assumption of a 'fit of depression'.